Special Paper
Inside the Black-box of Journal Publishing:
An Interview with Professor Susan Robertson

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Abstract
When should I publish my work? How do I choose a journal to publish in? What counts as self-plagiarism? What actually happens to my paper after I submit it to a journal? How can I optimise my publishing strategy, while coping with the demands of thesis writing? In this special paper, Professor Susan Robertson responds to some of the most common questions postgraduate students and junior researchers ask, about the publishing and peer-reviewing process. While academic publishing is tightly connected to an academic career, it can also appear to graduate students like a 'black-box', with its own seemingly complex logic and unfamiliar processes.

　　　The CORERJ team collected questions posed by several PhD students at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education, and held an interview with Susan Robertson in August, 2017, to provide some answers to these questions. Susan Robertson is a Professor of Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She is the founding Chief Editor of *Globalisation, Societies and Education* and a member of the editorial board of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* and *Educational Researcher*. She has worked as a sociologist of education in different parts of the world, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK and her work draws on a range of disciplines (including geography, sociology, politics and economics) to help her understand transformations of the state and education in a global world. As an experienced editor, academic and researcher, she offers advice to postgraduate students and junior researchers on publishing and peer-reviewing. Amongst other issues, she discusses 'open access' and the value of personal websites and blogs.

I: Interviewer, SR: Susan Robertson

Introduction to Susan Robertson

I: **It would be helpful for the CORERJ readership to begin with an introduction to your academic career. What are some of the important events that have happened in your career so far?**

SR: I started life as a secondary school teacher in Perth, Western Australia, following graduating from the University of Western Australia with an Honours Degree in Education Sociology and Politics. I was barely drawing breath in the classroom, and the Ministry of Education's Research Division asked me to join them. So I found myself at 22 years old working on researching, writing reports and making policy recommendations for the Minister for Education. The timing is important. It was the early 1980s, and like many other parts of the world, we were engaged in

studying rising unemployment amongst youth, school to work transition, how to get girls into science programmes, gifted programmes, and so on.

But what was also interesting were the requests coming into the Research Division from the OECD[1]. And it was at this point in the early 1980s that one could begin to see the ways in which the international agencies, like the OECD and the World Bank were becoming very engaged in shaping the direction of national policy in national contexts, particularly in response to calls for education systems to respond to global competitiveness under the banner 'In the National Interest'! This is not unproblematic – an issue I have gone on to study more systematically. Why? Because education is a sub-national constitutional responsibility, and yet here we see actors on new scales – the national and supranational – increasingly determining and shaping education policy. So I found myself very young, right at the heart of politics, and those were highly influential in shaping my ongoing research and teaching interests in education.

Following several years in the Research Division I took up a post teaching sociology of education in a secondary teachers' college in Perth. It was clear, however, that I needed a PhD. I decided to do this in Alberta, Canada, arriving there in 1988. My project was an extension of my work in the Research Division, on the 1970s economic and political crisis and the restructuring of public sectors, labour unions and the state-citizen contract. In 1990 I returned to Australia, before leaving again – this time to take up a post at the University of Auckland. My experience there was highly formative; I could see the unfolding of neoliberalism as a reorganising project, but in the case of New Zealand, in a particularly aggressive way. In 1999 I again moved to take up position at the University of Bristol, UK. From the edge of the empire, I now found myself in its heart. I also found myself again studying rescaling projects as the UK negotiated its role within the European Union.

These different moves were hugely influential in shaping how I approach sociology and why I continue to find it a highly generative way of understanding the world. In thinking through all those different place-based experiences, it showed me the very different ways in which social and political institutions work – from a federal system in Australia, through to New Zealand, a small country, with a very specific set of indigenous politics. You find yourself thinking about the very different histories of countries even with some shared past (Empire), and the different ways in which they articulate with education. My experiences highlighted the value of thinking comparatively, as well as the ways in which governing projects strategically use space. How education is implicated in these dynamics has been a continuing interest.

I: **Great, thanks for that! You set up a journal while at Bristol. Could you tell us about this journal?**

SR: My colleague, Roger Dale, and I are the founders of the journal [*Globalisation, Societies and Education*][2] which we launched in 2003. We were both deeply interested in globalisation and world orders, and particularly the ways in which education was being drawn into these different projects and processes. So we put it to Routledge and they agreed to back it. Sixteen years on, and it continues to a great journal to work on. And whilst I work on other journals as either a consulting editor, or on their editorial board, starting your own journal and breathing life into it is something special. You are given the space to imagine the journal's mandate, to get the journal

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[1] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
[2] To view the latest articles in this journal, please see: http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cgse20/current

on the radar, and to engage researchers from different disciplines and related fields – from sociology to politics, anthropology, geography, economics and law – in thinking about the changing relationship between education and societies in a global, and globalising world.

I: What does your work as editor specifically entail?

SR: It entails a range of things. To begin, we try to go to different conferences to listen to papers and meet older and younger scholars. It is great to be able say: "we would really like to see that kind of work in our journal; would you think of submitting your paper for review". We are particularly keen to encourage and engage with early career researchers. As editors, we spend quite a bit of time with the authors, especially if it's the kind of cutting edge work we would like to see in our journal. Early career researchers are typically able to report on intensive work in the field, and this helps ensure papers are tracking the issues very close to the education and social lives and experiences of people around the globe.

We also get to imagine special issues, or encourage others to do so. Then there is the mundane, but very important work that happens every day: identifying reviewers for papers that have been submitted, asking reviewers to complete reviews, chasing the reviewers hoping to limit the delays, and then compiling the reviews together to send back to the author(s). And this is the trickiest part of running a journal; getting timely reviews in. This is the most frustrating part. I don't know any journal editor who doesn't find this part challenging. Anyone submitting a manuscript wants to know fairly quickly the state of play. What is the substance of the review? Is the paper to be accepted? And if so, what revisions are to be done, and by what deadline? As an editor, it is very nice to be able to receive very constructive engagement with a paper, and to be able to communicate this to the authors, even if the results are not quite what they wanted. We find authors value constructive comments. From there, we then review the revisions, agree to these (or not), and if yes, to then send the paper on to the publishers for further editing and formatting. As an editor it is so nice to see the paper become a timely and important contribution to respective debates on education, globalisation and societies.

Peer-Reviewing

I: That leads on nicely to our next question. In academic publishing, there are two processes that go on: on one hand, you have publishing your own academic articles, and on the other, there is peer-reviewing others' work for journals. How would you respond to a student who asks *why should they be a peer-reviewer for a journal*?

SR: Some journal editors say the only thing you should ask graduate students is to do is to undertake a book review. Of course they should be encouraged to do this, as a way of sharpening their research skills. But in my experience it is perfectly reasonable to ask a doctoral student to peer-review in an area they are acquiring a lot of expertise in. Then the issue is how best to help a doctoral student construct a useful assessment of the work, making explicit the basis of the judgement. As editors, we are always happy to walk alongside newer reviewers to help this process along. A graduate student is then able to make more explicit for themselves what a compelling argument, competent design, and convincing writing looks like. It can't be "this is rubbish" or "this is great". A good review is able to articulate these things and offer suggestions

as to what might be solutions to issues identified, what literatures that might help in this, and how papers might be better structured to ensure flow and readability by a global audience.

I: So typically, post-graduate students only become peer-reviewers by invitation?

SR: I think there are a number of ways in which post-graduates can become reviewers. For our journal we might invite a reviewer and they can't do it, and say could they suggest someone else. In some cases, this is a graduate student working on these issues. But we are also always looking for reviewers. Introducing yourself to the editors, for instance at a conference, a publishing workshop, a 'meet the editors' roundtable, or indeed writing to them with a brief CV is a second way of getting into the process. I am absolutely certain that most journal editors will take up this invitation, and this results in benefits all round.

I: Could you tell us more on what you think makes a good peer-review?

SR: I've already mentioned some of these elements earlier. But to be explicit. First, a good peer-review is being able to *reflect back* to the article author what the peer-reviewer thinks the core argument is, that is being advanced. This becomes an interesting exercise in that in this process because it will become evident whether or not it is possible to see the main argument, or actually whether there are 2 to 3 different arguments being put forward. The question then becomes, which is the central argument *for this paper*. This is often a problem when writing a paper from the complete PhD. A good peer-review will make these visible and perhaps suggest a focus for this paper. It will circle around and reflect back to the author what this paper tries to do.

Second a good peer-review will name the article's strengths – for instance, this paper makes a particular and important theoretical or methodological contribution to x, y, z, *because…*, and so on.

Third, a good peer-review constructively identifies this issues (substantive, methodological, writing style, referencing, structure, originality, significance, missing literatures) that might need to be addressed.

A *poor* review, by way of contrast, is a review that puts forward criticisms, but not in a constructive way. Stating that a paper is 'rubbish', or 'unfocused', is not helpful. What *is* it about this paper that makes it a poor? What would help the author(s) write a more compelling argument, or ensure that it meets the highest standards of rigour? Is it right for this journal? Does it say anything at all about the journal's broad interests? Are the relevant literatures consulted? Is the methodology clear, or is there a problem with the methodology and its methods? Does the paper show a good grasp of the key concepts? Do the conclusions follow? And why should we care about these issues anyway?

My hope is that in giving a constructive review to authors in this way, that even if the paper is being rejected, the authors can see why, and appreciate the reviewers' and editors' engagement with the paper. It might not be the result the author was hoping for, but now they have something to learn from. This is what if means to 'be a peer'; to be part of a community of scholarship where we review each others work.

Publishing in Academic Journals

***I*: PhD students are usually advised to try their hand at publishing at some point in their PhD. At what point do you think they should begin thinking about publishing in journals?**

SR: Increasingly I have found myself supporting PhD students to find ways of publishing their work from day one. Why? For one thing, the competition is are so much tougher now regarding getting a job. Having a portfolio of publishing as part of the PhD helps. But it is also the case that funders want PhD students to have work submitted to journals. Again, this means developing dissemination strategies as part of the PhD, and not afterward, as part of a post-doc or lectureship. So my view is very pragmatic. If this is the world that we live in, how can I help early career researchers develop and hone their writing for publication skills. A first-year doctoral student, for instance, might be well placed to do a very good paper on some of the controversies surrounding a key concept they are planning to use. Or they might have done a very impressive review of the literature on a topic and generated some interesting insights into how that literature could be categorised and what seems to be missing. A recent PhD student of mine, in looking at the creation of higher education markets, was able to categorise the literature on markets and show how much these categories were quite limited and limiting in the study of markets. She was able to write this up and publish in one of the leading journals during the second year of her PhD. And if publishing is important, then developing a range of different kinds of writing, including writing for journals, is a central skill to be developed and nurtured.

Having said this, I think it's important to not use publishing journal articles as a distraction – so the main aim for the doctoral student is to keep the PhD thesis going. So publishing should be a way of working out some of the core concepts that will end up in your conceptual framework in some way, rather than a means of distracting yourself from the main goal: completing a major piece of work that is rigorous, makes an original and important contribution, and is a great read.

Getting Started – Choosing a Journal

***I*: Let's talk about getting started on the process of publishing articles. What is a good thought process to have, in deciding on a journal to publish your work in?**

SR: I like to say to a student something like: *"what conversations do I want to be a part of"*, *"can I be a part of that conversation"*, and *"who do I see as my particular community"*. This ought to help you decide on the journal, and why it is important to be there and not elsewhere*?* Or perhaps you want to introduce a conversation to the journal, for example, post-colonial theorising into a comparative journal, knowing that comparative studies were typically the favourite approaches in studying empires.

Then, take a look at the range of papers a journal publishes, and the openness – or not – to different disciplines, to ideologies, to methodologies and styles of theorising. Look at the editors, and the consulting editors. Do you know some of the names? If not, why? Are you in the right place? It is also important, if you are hoping to put a paper into a different discipline-based or field-based journal, that you are familiar with the latest thinking and debates. What can I contribute?

I: The question of 'impact factor' is a question some postgraduate students have. How do you see the role of impact factors in choosing a journal to publish in?

SR: Impact factors are supposed to be an indicator of quality, though it is important to also reflect on the fact that publishers are pushing impact factors as they also help to sell more issues, or articles. The jury is out as to quite what impact factors are really measures of. However, there is no denying that appointment and promotions committees are encouraged to take notice of impact measures. So, should you take account of the impact factor for a journal? It would be wrong to say 'ignore them completely', but I also think that you need to try to publish your work in the best possible place that you can, to have the conversations you want to be part of, or to be able to inject something new into the debate. This may not be a journal that has a high impact factor. Further, the 'impact window' is not a long time window. For example, one of my papers on rescaling and education took more than 10 years to become the key paper to be referred to – way beyond the impact window. Did it have an impact? Yes, but not in the language of impact factors and how this is measured. So my advice is: take notice of impact factors for journals but don't let it over-determine your publishing strategy.

I: Sure, that's a fair comment. Any other words of advice on 'getting started' on the process of preparing your article for publication?

SR: Writing is a process; the more you write, the better you get. So in order to prepare yourself for writing articles for publication, give yourself permission to have a bad day, and to say: "well tomorrow it will be better" – and typically it is.

Often, I find blog-writing helpful, because I might work out little ideas in a blog that might turn up in a bigger piece of work. It's a freer writing style, at least I find it freer. I tend to write 800-1500 words, where I am working out something to do with knowledge economies or region-building or something like that. And because it is a public piece of work, it needs to be rigorous, it can't be what I call 'ranty'; it needs to be very clear about what the so-called 'facts' are. They should not be anchored just in opinion. That's also another place to start.

Try crafting an extended abstract, so that you really sort out the argument. What is the overall length of the paper; if you were to divide it into an introduction, a conclusion, to be able to say something about its location in the wider debates and methodology – what kind of wordage do you have left to develop themes in different sections? Sketch out the section headings, and list in a series of points the key insights, arguments and findings in each of the sections. Breaking the paper down in this way enables you to concentrate on sections.

Give yourself lots of time to review, and redraft. Ask friends and colleagues to read it for you. Put the paper to the side and come back to it. Also, remember, you cannot pour the whole PhD thesis into it. Less in this case is more. There will be other opportunities to share more of your research.

I: What are your thoughts on whether doctoral students should write with their supervisors? Do you think that is a good idea?

SR: My answer here is yes, this can be a really good way of learning to write with a colleague, of getting your research into the public domain, and also learning the ropes of academic

publishing. However, it is very important to establish, first, the rules of engagement between yourself and your supervisor. Sorting out these rules for engagement, of course, is not just something that you will do between you and your advisor; it goes for any writing relationship.

However, because the supervisor-supervisee relationship is one charged with asymmetries of power, one needs to be absolutely clear and up front about these. This means ensuring that you both agree as to the nature of the contributions you will both make, what data will be drawn upon, what is the ordering of the names that recognise contribution (in some cases alphabetical order will signal equal contribution), and whose career is to be advanced as a result. This means having an open and frank discussion with each other before the writing begins, and reviewing this decision when the writing has been completed. If you are unable to come to some kind of agreement around these issues, this does not augur well for the writing relationship. If this is the case, then you might decide to say no, and you should feel confident that you have made an ethical and moral decision that has to be respected.

Open Access

I: **In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about open access, particularly the last 5 years or so. The Higher Education Funding Council of Education defines open access as "*unrestricted, online access to the published findings of research*". What are your thoughts on open access, especially in terms of deciding whether you want to publish in that journal or not?**

SR: There are good open-access journals and poor open-access journals. An example of a good open-access journal in education is the *Educational Policy Analysis Archive* – it's rigorously peer-reviewed and thoroughly edited by the editors. There are also open-access journals that are not properly peer-reviewed. I am not convinced that this second model necessarily produces and disseminates good science.

But we need to make sure we are not confused by the difference between open access, and open access to a paper because the pay-wall has be removed (we often call this 'gold access'). An open access journal typically does not have any pay-wall. Gold access means that pay-wall has been removed as a fee has been paid up-front to the publisher. This can happen in several ways. You pay, or the institution you work for, or grant you are researching for, pays. Once your paper is ready to finally go out – assuming you are publishing with a big publishing house like Sage, Routledge or Elsevier, you get a question from the publisher asking: "Do you want Gold access or not"[3] and if you say "yes" to that, you are then being asked to find something in the order of £2,500. Now imagine yourself as a junior researcher thinking: "my goodness, where do I get £2,500". If you happen to be on a funding council grant, RCUK[4] will have allocated amounts of money for gold-, or open-access, and the first call on that money will be researchers with funding council grants. You can see how this immediately sets up all kinds of inequities between students who have research council funding or not, if you are on a salary or not, and so on.

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[3] To learn more about what the two routes to open-access (the 'Gold' and 'Green' routes), please see: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/oa/whatis/
[4] Research Councils U.K.

In theory, open-access does promise to democratise knowledge, but the situation is significantly more complicated than this promise. A popular means of disseminating work now is through sites such as ResearchGate, where you can list your papers and send requests to authors for a copy. You can also put pre-published[5] papers on your own website or pages in the hope that you can contribute in a timely way to debates. I know some graduate students worry others will "pinch my ideas" but if you have clear and explicit way in which the paper is to be referenced, in my experience, this is followed.

Copyright and Self-Plagiarism

I: **Apart from the anxiety of others pinching their ideas, some students are concerned about the issue of self-plagiarism. So, a student might say: "This is a chapter of my thesis that I want to make into a journal article – I'm worried that I might breach some copyright rules in that process", and same goes with conferences: "Can I present in a conference and use the same arguments and data in a journal article?" How would you respond to those kinds of questions?**

SR: I've heard that so often, and it almost discourages students from publishing their work along the way. The plagiarism software Turnitin is one of the pieces of software which checks for plagiarism in the university. My belief is that the journal writing genre is quite different to the writing style and weight of the PhD thesis, and that while the topics might be similar, the wording and writing style is not the same. And it is this latter issue, the same wording even, that plagiarism tools are seeking to identify and make an issue.

Preparing the CV

I: **On CVs, what are your thoughts on including papers in preparation or under review on CVs? Some students ask if that is cheating, or if that's an accepted practice?**

SR: Papers in preparation ought to go into a section on the CV called 'future publishing plans'. Papers currently in review can be listed in the relevant section, such as book chapters, refereed papers, etc. The most important thing you want to communicate is that these actually really do exist. Don't list something as a wish to yourself, that if you write it down in this way, it will somehow materialise magically. So if it is 'under review' it should actually be in review. The world can also be a small place. A CV stating that something is in this or that journal in review, can easily be detected and can come back and bite you if it is not true. So assuming that you are rigorous in the standards of your own practice, then indicating what work is coming through in the pipeline, or what work you are hoping to get out in the future, is of interest to a hiring or promotions committee.

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[5] Pre-published papers are earlier drafts of your article, prior to the version that is accepted for publication by the journal.

Juggling Demands

I: I suppose as a PhD student myself, I can understand that it can feel like there are so many demands on your time: juggling writing your PhD thesis (usually, this has a funding deadline), and then there are conferences, getting teaching experience, and publishing in academic journals. Do you have any words of advice on juggling those demands?

SR: It is quite a challenge to juggle all of the demands on your time, and make sure you complete the thesis, disseminate along the way, perhaps engage in some teaching, make sure your family and other relationships don't suffer too much, and also stay sane! It is a big ask.

It is worth talking to others – more senior colleagues, or PhD students like you – about how they manage and what you can learn from them. Think about how you can deploy your time well. To begin, ask yourself what tasks can you do when you are feeling as if 'the tank' is empty? Second, how can you link tasks – like conferences and publishing, and use one as energy for the other? For example, about when I was a young PhD student, a sage and senior scholar said to me: "…always go to a conference with your paper written." If you go to a conference with a PowerPoint presentation, in the swirl of life that happens when you get back from that conference, you are typically not going to take the time to turn the PowerPoint presentation into a published piece of work. And if there was a journal editor in the conference room and all you can give them is the PowerPoint [handout], that's less significant for what might happen later than if you can actually give them a copy or be able to send one immediately when you are back. Third, plan your chapters and some of the data analysis around relevant conferences, so the two events/activities are talking to each other. Fourth, set of reading groups and other presentational spaces to help you push your work along. Others engaging with your work is very motivating. And finally, a big dose of self-discipline helps – but that needs to be in relation to a realistic agenda for how long it takes to do things, and do them well.
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CORERJ – A Student Journal

I: CORERJ is a student journal and it's publishing its fourth volume in October this year. What is the benefit of publishing in student journals?

SR: I think it is terrific that you have a student journal here in the Faculty – congratulations. It teaches lots of the things that I have been talking with you about. As you will know first-hand as a student journal editor, whilst it is a huge amount of work, a huge amount of hard work – getting reviewers, asking individuals if they might make contributions, revising and even thinking about what an issue might look like, it is also very rewarding. And you learn a lot about the process.

As a producer of knowledge, whether as a PhD student and perhaps budding academic, or writer of reports for an organization, a student journal is an important interim space between your PhD work and publishing in the big journals. I don't want to say it's a safe space, in the sense that it should be very rigorous. But you will as a doctoral student be publishing from a different pool, so the competition stakes (if we can call it that) to get your work out and noticed is not as high.

Final Thoughts: On Personal Webpages

I: Right, so the last question I've just left open. Any final thoughts on academic publishing or reviewing? If not, something that came up in our conversation that I thought was interesting, was what you mentioned about blogs and personal websites. If you like, you could comment on your experience with setting up your own personal website and blog, and how that's helped you.

SR: I've been a great fan of personal websites. Done well, websites and blogs can help to democratise knowledge, and make it more open. In that sense it has a similar ambition to open access, but without the added issues of who pays. And it's quite motivating to see your work out there, and being used by others. Often, there is a lag-time in terms of knowledge production with journal publications. So why not create a middle space to share knowledge and ideas about research practices and findings. And in a world where *impact* is now the big buzz word, you can use blogs and personal websites to speak to different communities.

      I know there's a level of anxiety about whether someone *"is someone going to steal my ideas"*, but I have not seen this happen, really. I think you should just get in, get your work out in lots of different arenas, and be really proud of the ways in which your research can contribute to some of the big issues facing us in education specifically and the wider society more generally.

I: Sure – I think that's a great way to end the interview, on that note. Thank you so much for your time. It's been really helpful to learn from your thoughts and experiences!

SR: My great pleasure.