



## Critical review

## De-mythologizing the faculty–postgraduate writing experience in geography



Alan D. Ziegler, Jamie Gillen\*

Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, 1 Arts Link, Singapore 117570, Singapore

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 26 November 2014  
 Received in revised form 12 December 2014  
 Available online 8 January 2015

## Keywords:

Publishing  
 Writing  
 Collaboration  
 Postgraduates  
 Supervision  
 Postgraduate-Faculty Relationship

## ABSTRACT

Now more than ever postgraduate students in geography are expected to publish their research before they graduate. This work often occurs with their supervisors. We write this essay as a guide for students on the collaborative supervisor–postgraduate publishing relationship. We explore three aspects of the relationship where misunderstanding or miscommunication often occur: expectations arising during writing and publishing, the writing process itself, and fluctuating levels of supervisor engagement through the student's postgraduate period. Our intention in highlighting these themes is to help both supervisors and postgraduates engage in productive and collaborative writing.

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## Contents

Introduction . . . . .	129
Roles and expectations . . . . .	130
The collaborative writing process . . . . .	130
Fluctuating levels of engagement . . . . .	131
Conclusions . . . . .	132
References . . . . .	132

## Introduction

Publish or perish! More than ever this phrase represents a call for geography postgraduate students to publish papers that showcase their research interests and expertise. Regardless of whether postgraduate students pursue a career as a faculty member or a professional position outside of academia, writing and publishing are fundamental activities by which their potential will be judged (Solem et al., 2008, 2013). Rudd and Nerad demonstrate through surveying recent PhD graduates in geography that nearly two-thirds rated writing and publishing “very important” and their respondents “frequently encouraged (current) students to publish before PhD completion” (in press: 4). While solo authored papers are ideal, many students' first papers will be co-written with their supervisors. Despite the common importance of writing and pub-

lishing for faculty and postgraduate students, the rewards and difficulties of undertaking this journey together are rarely discussed outside the halls of departmental offices and student hangouts.

We use this essay to add to the recent literature on the features, trajectories, and critiques of the contemporary geography postgraduate experience (see Boyle et al., in press; Horner, 2014; Monk et al., 2012b) by exploring critical aspects of co-publishing between faculty and postgraduate students. We hope to provide a starting point for reflection on expectations, strategies, and power relations between the two groups as they navigate the writing and publishing process (for commentaries related to these issues outside of geography, see Moxham et al., 2013; Lindén et al., 2013). Pursuing this topic may seem self-indulgent to some readers. We believe it is not. We are inspired by real-life examples of how the co-publishing experience could have benefited from initial words of wisdom. In the future we hope to hear from postgraduate students about their own perspectives on collaborating with their supervisors (see Bartlett and Mercer, 2001).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [adz@nus.edu.sg](mailto:adz@nus.edu.sg) (A.D. Ziegler), [geomjg@nus.edu.sg](mailto:geomjg@nus.edu.sg) (J. Gillen).

From a supervisor's point of view this essay is intended to assist in improving the chances of achieving two primary goals: graduating students in a timely fashion and preparing them to enter professional worlds that seem to be "changing faster than (geography) programs are evolving" (Adams, *in press*: 1). We begin by recognizing that faculty and students aiming to become academics are playing a long game for which publications help define their place in the academic discipline of geography. Publication records are a fundamental indicator of productivity yet impact evolves over time as discoveries, citations, and collaborators unfold. In contrast, students who are not eyeing academic or research careers may have a more immediate vision whereby publishing is optional or akin to putting icing on the cake, for example when a published paper stems from a completed thesis. Thus, they may not share the same motivations or time horizons as their supervisor to get their work published. These examples lie at the heart of where incongruent goals or misaligned expectations arise when supervisors and students set off on the road to (co)publishing. Through a series of vignettes and experiences we explore roles and expectations between supervisors and students, the collaborative writing process, and fluctuating levels of engagement through the postgraduate period.

#### *Roles and expectations*

Students entering higher education should anticipate they will do more than simply acquire knowledge. They are also expected to create, shape, and convey it in novel ways and in both verbal and written form. For most, the expectation of publishing goes far beyond viewing the thesis or dissertation as the final product of the postgraduate academic experience. Students are expected to publish in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters—and in some cases they are expected to publish often. Although it is true that students have long been publishing in geography, we argue that there is now a sense of urgency in doing so as journal articles are the dominant currency when bidding for an academic or professional position. Here we are not simply reinforcing Adams' point that "what professors in doctoral programs know best is how to clone themselves" (*in press*: 2). We are highlighting the reality that publishing is a principal metric by which we gauge the trajectory and impact of potential colleagues inside and outside of the university. As postgraduate students are graduating at a higher rate than academic jobs are becoming available, the ability to produce high-quality papers is a crucial part in converting a postgraduate degree into a career.

Employers generally want to see a pithy product outside of the oftentimes sophisticated, lengthy, or turgid thesis that illustrates a job candidate's ability to authoritatively communicate on a subject to an audience of peers. Again, while solo authored papers are ideal, co-authoring with a supervisor is a common way of producing early (particularly in the science sub-disciplines) and to "learn on the job" about publishing norms (see Bauder, 2006). The journey by which a co-authored work is written and accepted in an academic journal varies from one student-supervisor relationship to another, with each having different sets of expectations, strategies for task allocation, and timelines for completion. Some students will lead the process. Most, however, will follow supervisor overtures.

From our perspective, the key in developing a successful co-writing relationship is for both partners to agree on a set of goals and expectations from the outset. This "common sense" declaration may not seem like a particularly insightful suggestion but it lies at the core of the supervisor-student writing relationship where problems of misaligned expectations most frequently occur. We find when writing with students that the easy part of the relationship is dividing up the labor along respective research

strengths and weaknesses. The more challenging aspect is centered on our (in)ability to discuss openly the broader personal implications the paper carries—in other words, how the paper is expected to serve each party beyond its publication. Mismatched expectations arise when the supervisor (for example) envisions the paper as one of many that will be written over time with several students, possibly within the framework of the supervisor's research agenda (i.e., it will help build her CV, disseminate results of funded research, or demonstrate the productivity of a lab). Meanwhile, the student may have a more personal vision, one that sees the paper as the ultimate product of an exclusive collaborative relationship. We use this example to demonstrate how tensions may arise if expectations are not aligned, not necessarily because this example is a common occurrence.

Occasionally there are guide posts that frame expectations before writing begins. For example, students whose research is funded by their supervisor should expect to co-publish, often with a larger team of collaborators. The student's research may be an integral component of a larger body of work and on a knowledge base or research framework that has been established by others. A multi-authored published paper is a key performance indicator by which the success of the project is in part judged. This format is particularly suitable for physical geographers but it is also used in multidisciplinary projects in which human geographers are increasingly participating. Regardless of the discipline, faculty today should be more aware of the potential rewards and advantages of co-publishing with students.

Some students will find supervisors who provide feedback on their writing but who have little or no interest in publishing together. This is a model that can generally be applied to human geographers because "value" in the sub-discipline continues to lie in single-authored publications. In contrast, some students will encounter supervisors who aggressively push to be included on any paper by virtue of the student-supervisor association. This situation can happen if, for example, the student receives a stipend that is somehow tied to the supervisor. An even more predatory example occurs when a supervisor usurps a student's work. This is not simply a case of a faculty member lacking adequate supervisory skills but an unethical manipulation of the mentor-student relationship. While we do not address this situation explicitly here, we mention it as an extreme case of misaligned expectations that may be avoided if the supervisor and student clearly outline the roles, expectations, and goals of their research and writing collaboration at the outset.

Other anecdotal (and almost legendary) situations that are worth mentioning include supervisors who are so-called "paper machines" or who have "pipelines" that necessitate high student turnover to sustain publishing performance. Such settings carry the overt expectation that the student will publish not only with the team, but for the team. In these relationships points of friction occur at the intersection of (a) a student's ability to carry out his or her role effectively and in a timely manner and (b) the level of support a supervisor is willing to provide to an individual student. Obviously, students who write well tend to thrive in these situations. Others may excel because they possess advanced analytical or problem solving skills that supplant the initial pre-condition that strong writing ability is expected. In cases like these, co-authors and/or the supervisor usually step up to support the writing effort.

#### *The collaborative writing process*

Writing is a humbling experience. Many students find it difficult to engage an academic audience or use specialist terminology appropriately. Some find it difficult to write period (this also holds true for faculty!). Exceptional student writers often rise quickly

within a cohort—building a strong portfolio needed for the next step as a professional, post-doc, researcher, or a junior faculty member. Most, however, find writing to be a painstaking process requiring endless practice, guidance, and exhausting feedback. Few of us, including supervisors, have the motivation to endure this process alone. Although writing support staff and resources are available at university libraries, on the internet, and sometimes within faculties at individual universities, most postgraduates look to their supervisors for tips and cues on how to write and publish effectively.

The time spent between faculty and student in understanding how a particular piece of writing contributes to broader geographical ideas can be lengthy. In some cases the writing process can be stimulated by “priming” students. For example, in lab or team-research settings students can be given smaller roles such as writing up part of the data analysis. They are then drawn into co-authoring the paper without performing the role of primary architect. Although their ideas and efforts feed into the storyline, senior authors are there to maintain the structure, make decisive points, and/or provide the confidence to challenge existing theories—i.e., to do the work that often makes a paper novel, exciting, or convincing. Later, as students become stronger writers, they can take on larger roles in the construction of a paper.

Another form of priming is encouraging students to create an annotated bibliography or literature review for a collaborative piece of work. This situation represents an ethical grey area that should be handled responsibly and fairly with student and faculty expectations outlined clearly. The idea behind this task is to “train students for writing” by confining their role to one manageable part of the total manuscript package, not passing an inordinate amount of work on to a junior colleague. We also point out that assigning a student to “do the literature review” risks directing too much attention to the review as a standalone piece when in fact it should be viewed as tool for learning, uncovering information, and providing breadth and context to a research problem. As supervisors we ultimately want students to “engage the literature” and not to simply provide a summary.

Just as getting the initial words on paper can be difficult so too is fine tuning a work before submission. To the detriment of the overall quality of the paper, most writers overcommit to some passages they have written and see no value in being “overruled” by a collaborator. Rewriting is as crucial to the writing process as editing. In the process of trimming collaborative work it is important for both parties to understand that no word or phrase is “sacred”. Achieving this disposition is challenging: most of us do not have the ability to view our own work objectively. We often require blunt-force feedback with sufficient substance and details to convince us to edit, synthesize, contextualize, or delete. For the collaborative writing process to be a success feedback should be a two-way street. Students need the freedom to challenge the ideas of their superiors while supervisors need to make time to provide useful feedback that is tailored to the writing level of a particular student. In both cases a thick skin is needed.

Geography is in the midst of dramatic changes occurring to the postgraduate degree: (a) there are fewer tenure-track jobs available in geography after finishing a PhD (Monk et al., 2012a); (b) emphasis is increasingly placed on practice-based degrees that concentrate on techniques like geographical information systems, remote sensing, computer modelling, and laboratory analysis; and (c) postgrads are increasingly interested in balancing academic work with community participation and activism. In recognition of these “signs of the time” we as supervisors must now assist students in developing writing styles that are appropriate for publishing both inside and outside of geography. This task may require mentors to think broadly and not simply encourage publications stemming from their own research interests. In some cases a

faculty member will not find the time or see the merit in working with a student in developing their writing if it addresses a topic outside their own narrow research agenda. This attitude must change if faculty are to continue being leaders in generating knowledge and training postgraduates effectively.

#### *Fluctuating levels of engagement*

Mutual respect and a diligent commitment to writing are ideals that require expectations between supervisor and postgraduate to be aligned. Without them, the writing process may not be effective and rewarding. Faculty and postgraduate lives are shaped by work and personal changes that catalyze and disrupt writing activities, transform agreed-upon roles, and upset levels of faculty–student interaction. As such, students should anticipate supervisor attention to fluctuate as they advance through their degree programs. This may be truer with respect to writing than for other aspects of supervision, including formulating a research idea or conducting a component of data collection, because writing is often a protracted process and punctuated by fits and starts.

For example, early in the student’s apprenticeship it is likely that a supervisor will attempt to get a feel for their writing aptitude and their potential to (co)author papers. Attention in the first year or two may therefore be given to bringing budding writers up to speed while more experienced or fluent writers are left alone to work independently. The decision to focus on one student over another does not necessarily reflect unfair favoritism toward certain students at the expense of others—although it may be interpreted as such. Further, students generally encounter a break in hands-on attention until work has progressed to a point where a final product is in sight. It is easy to view this late interest as selfishness on the part of the supervisor—i.e., interest re-emerges only after a project is deemed suitable to be published and thereby valuable for her CV. In some cases this might be true, but it is often a function of time allocated to students at different levels of ability (as mentioned above) and who are at different stages of their degree. This said, we appreciate that some students do not get the amount of direction they need nor do they receive it when they need it.

Like faculty, students work at different speeds and incur individual challenges and breakthroughs during their postgraduate careers. Supervisors should be continually reassessing student progress, attempting to spot strengths and weaknesses that will influence their trajectory and dictate their progress. Despite the rigid structuring of most postgraduate programs students frequently race to meet thesis submission deadlines and correspondingly tax the time and patience of supervisors who vet the thesis. This situation can be especially awkward if a supervisor has a number of students who are pushing to finish at the same time or if numerous collaborative papers are in process.

Again, tensions build further if the supervisor begins pushing for publication at a time when student interest may be waning because of burn-out or because they are focused on new challenges (finishing up their thesis and job applications perhaps chief among them). We have seen cases of supervisors not signing off on student theses until research papers have been written. This brings us back to our first point: if goals and expectations are clearly articulated and accepted, an unfortunate ultimatum like this should not occur. This example also illustrates why it is important to establish how a student’s publishing goals fit into their overall postgraduate trajectory.

In another scenario, this one now increasingly adopted by human, physical, and techniques-based geographers alike, students shape chapters into separate publishable units. We see theses that are essentially collections of journal article drafts that are bookended by introduction and conclusion chapters. Some

supervisors encourage this model because it organizes student research into publishable units, which not only helps them build a stronger CV but provides a general metric for judging the amount of work completed for the degree (as well as its potential impact). For some students this approach results in a steadier level of supervision, but it should only be adopted on a case by case basis. These days there are postgraduates who do not even attempt to tie their work together into a bigger “story” because a rising number of universities are rewarding PhDs on the basis of publications only. Thus, the type of dissertation or thesis that will be written in part dictates the level of supervisor–student interaction needed during writing.

## Conclusions

We hope the reader realizes our (not so) hidden goal in this essay is to help students publish with supervisors by discussing some potential fault lines in the faculty–postgraduate student writing relationship. Throughout we have emphasized the importance of communicating about individual expectations and roles, mutually agreeing on end products, and visualizing the pathway to completion. We recognize that even the most carefully laid plans can be derailed by changes in personal and professional situations. These changes must be communicated effectively as well. In a healthy co-authoring relationship there will not always be two sets of “footprints in the sand”. Sometimes the student and supervisor may feel as though they are walking alone. More likely, however, is that each partner will be required to carry the other at

times. If this can be achieved—and more importantly, if its likelihood of occurring is recognized at the start—the co-publishing experience should be a productive and rewarding journey.

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