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Group-based journal review: opportunities for researcher development and enjoyment

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ABSTRACT

The availability of expert reviewers, essential for academic publishing, is increasingly under threat, due to workload pressures and lack of development pathways. This inquiry, undertaken by the editors of an emergent higher education journal, draws on reviewers' experiences as articulated in 'reviewer stories' and examines key questions around reviewer experiences and development pathways as well as the role of reviewing in the development of research skills and academic identity formation. This article shines a light on the elusive practice of journal reviewing and confirms group-based review as a successful approach for supporting researcher development and bringing enjoyment into academic practice.

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Background and rationale

Journals play an essential role in disseminating research and peer review is a central component in deciding which articles are published. In higher education research double-blind peer review is the dominant form of peer review. Our lived experiences as journal editors and reviewers suggest critical challenges. Traditional review processes are slow, and reviewer and review quality cannot be assured due to a shortage of experienced reviewers and the challenges of assuring review quality. In addition, while reviewers make an essential contribution to academic publishing, there is no clear pathway to becoming a reviewer and to learning about the intricacies of the process.

In response to these challenges around journal reviewing practice and reviewer development, the lead editor of a new higher education research journal, *Advancing Scholarship and Research in Higher Education (ASRHE)*, instigated a group-based peer review process. The journal's focus is on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), by publishing 'research on learning and teaching related to all levels of study provided by education institutions offering degree-level courses, from preparation to doctoral studies' (<https://asrhe.org/>).

Group-based review begins with an initial screening by the editors. After screening, a group of reviewers, led by one of the journal editors, meets virtually to discuss submitted articles. Review decisions are made, feedback is collated, and shared responses

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compiled. The process is open, with reviewers knowing the authors' identities and the review group members being named in the response to the authors. The aim is to connect reviewers with each other enabling them to see and respond to different viewpoints, address differences in conversation, learn from each other, model good review practice, and enjoy the process. The editor guides the decision process, aiming for well-founded and coherently argued review decisions, while at the same time integrating and nurturing emerging reviewers.

In this article, we share our research-based explorations of the group-based review process after the first year of the journal's operation. We present literature on journal reviewing and group-based academic development approaches before giving voice to the experiences of our reviewers.

Literature

Review history, processes, and characteristics

Academic publishing has remained unchanged for a long time (Kelly et al., 2014). Principles of journal reviewing are universal and described across a range of readily available resources, including research articles (e.g. Kelly et al., 2014), invited commentaries or editorials (e.g. Voight & Hoogenboom, 2012), journal websites (e.g. <https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/review-higher-education>) and for-profit publishing houses (e.g. <https://authorservices.wiley.com/Reviewers/journal-reviewers/index.html>). At the heart of the peer review process are expert reviewers – academic domain experts who evaluate and comment on submitted manuscripts. The process is facilitated by journal editors who initially examine a manuscript for minimum quality standards and suitability for the journal. Submissions are either 'desk-rejected' or passed on to typically two expert reviewers on whose judgments and feedback the editor bases a decision to reject the manuscript or require specific revisions before acceptance. In open peer review, reviewer and author identity is known; in single-blind peer review, author identity is known to the reviewer, but reviewers are anonymous; in double-blind peer review authors and reviewers do not know each other's identity. Objective, instructional, and informative reviews are important to effect improvements from initial submission of a manuscript to publication (Voight & Hoogenboom, 2012). Peer reviewers require expertise in the subject area of a submitted manuscript and developing professionally into an expert reviewer can be a challenging process (Janke et al., 2017). Good peer reviewers are described as responsible and reliable, as polite, honest, and strong communicators (Mavrogenis et al., 2020). Learning the nuances of a particular field of research is essential, something of relevance to the field of SoTL which sees the transition from disciplinary to higher education researchers (Paltridge, 2015). A typical pathway for reviewers is learning on the job and drawing on reviews received as authors (Paltridge, 2015). The experience of receiving bad or even rude peer reviews can have lasting negative effects on aspiring researchers and authors (Mavrogenis et al., 2020). Reviewer development requires a joint effort between educators and editors (Janke et al., 2017).

While reviewing is regarded as a professional responsibility, journal editors struggle with identifying peer reviewers (Janke et al., 2017). Systemic challenges, with experienced academics having increasingly less time to give, make it necessary to draw on newer

academics (Martín, 2016). Additionally, pressures to publish mean that more manuscripts are submitted (Kelly et al., 2014; Martín, 2016). Recent systems of providing recognition to reviewers via quantitative measures raise the danger of receiving reviews of lower quality and care towards assisting anonymous colleagues (Martín, 2016). New approaches to peer review have been suggested, including open reviews, interactive reviews, post-publication reviews and reviews transferable between journals (Kelly et al., 2014). Alternative models, following Fitzpatrick's (2012) agenda for changing the role of peer review from gatekeeping to making recommendations have been promoted in platforms such as F1000Research (<https://f1000research.com/>) and Research Square (<https://www.researchsquare.com/>).

Group-based academic development processes

Kumashiro et al. (2005) called for a rethinking of 'the collaborative potential of the peer-review process: as constructive, as multi-lensed, and as situated' (p. 259). He requested feedback born from a collaborative approach, presented in humane and encouraging ways, representation of multiple viewpoints and more openness to alternative approaches. He asked researchers to be aware of personal research perspectives and open to new perspectives, allowing new directions to emerge instead of reproducing established ways.

The advantages of connecting and collaborating with others in the pursuit of academic development, teaching and research focused, have been well documented. For example, Remmik et al. (2011) focus on the development of teaching skills linked to a community approach and emphasize the importance of interacting with and being guided by experienced colleagues, may it be informally or in defined mentoring relationships. Kornhaber et al. (2016) report on the role of writing retreats in developing academic writing, and state beneficial effects in areas like confidence development due to collegial work on specific tasks. Kim et al. (2021) write about gaining research skills required for SoTL via shared learning in a year-long course and highlight the impacts of community approaches on support, motivation, and connections across disciplines. This insight is mirrored by Sheffield and Timmermans' (2021) call for working towards a 'collaborative community spirit' (p. 119) in all academic development endeavours. Khoo (2021) writes about the importance of being 'part of reciprocal and generous scholarly networks' (p. 8) to combat feelings of isolation or non-belonging, to identify shared challenges and to provide support in addressing those. These are strong indications to why group-based approaches work and what important effects they have in addition to the development of specific skills.

Collaborative group processes also feature in discussions on academic identity development. Lee and Boud (2003) highlight the central roles group mentoring and collaborative processes around writing play in assisting researchers in academic identity development. Inouye and McAlpine's (2019) review of 20 years of researcher development literature identified that doctoral writing and feedback were central to the growth of academic identity and that this was best formed within productive discourse communities. However, while research has emphasised the role of writing and writing discourse communities in identity formation, the researcher and academic development literatures provide limited focus on the value of reviewing in academic identity formation.

Reviewing activities are informally an important part of academic identity development, but not necessarily formally seen as part of researcher development (Sutherland, 2018).

Research objectives

Higher education research journals are firmly invested in double-blind peer review and challenges with reviewer availability and development are well documented. Despite the success of collaborative approaches in academic development in areas such as academic writing, community building and identity development, Kumashiro et al.'s (2005) call for collaborative peer-review approaches has not yet been answered by higher education research journals. The group-based review process employed in the new higher education research journal we are editing, builds on the collaborative approaches praised in the literature. The objective of the research presented in this article is to illuminate this process by drawing on editor and reviewer perspectives.

Methodology

As is evident from the literature review, article reviewing is an unexplored practice and has maintained that perception since Sonnert (1995) used the term 'black box' to describe article reviewing. This feature of the discourse makes practice-led inquiry (Gray, 1996) a viable inquiry framework and includes the adoption of practitioner stories as our data in line with Reason and Hawkins (1988) storytelling as inquiry. Practitioners are identified and their stories invited. Our paradigm adopts an epistemological position or view that knowledge emerges from reflection on practice (Schön, 1983) and an ontological position or view of multiple truths (Kelly, 2017). The impetus for our inquiry is not so much an articulated question as a 'troubling' (Schön, 1983) that promoted a desire to better understand the experiences related to group-based journal reviewing from the practitioner perspective of our reviewers. Hence our invitation to write a story was quite general:

Your experiences over the past twelve months (and indeed our own as editors as well as reviewers) are important stories for the life of the journal as well as for the broader higher education agendas of how to develop reviewing practice for a journal. We would like to tap that knowledge and initiate research into the reviewer experience for this journal by asking you to tell us (write us) your story of the past twelve months. This story can involve whatever you want to tell us, so that the stories themselves are opening up the range of sub-categories that such data might provide.

Participant selection

All 13 reviewers for *ASRHE* in 2021 were invited to participate, regardless of the number of review groups in which they had participated. We received six stories. We, the authors of this article and the editors of the journal, also wrote our stories (Story 2, 3, 6 & 9). We regarded it as important to include our experiences. First, while experienced reviewers, we continue to develop our academic identities and skills and while we are leading the review group sessions, we are also participants who learn and grow with and from others.

Second, we want to do our part to shed light on the ‘black box’ practices of reviewing. We all have rich experiences on how we entered the world of academic reviewing, what obstacles we faced, what helped us to get established in this area of academic life. Sitting back and deliberately reflecting on the impact the group-based review process has had on each of us is a valuable exercise with the potential to add to the insights gained from our reviewers. The collection of stories represents reviewers attending between one and seven review meetings. Together, all ten stories spanned 8,300 words, with an average length of one-and-a-half single-spaced pages per story. Several of the stories are from emerging reviewers (Story 1, 7 & 8). This is in line with the expectations for the group-based review process that deliberately creates space for reviewer development.

Ethical considerations

Ethics requirements for this project focused on identity protection and mitigating power disparity. The *ASRHE* reviewer community is sufficiently numerous to provide anonymity. Only one of the researchers had direct contact with the participants and assigned the story codes. While we acknowledge the potential to identify participants based on contextual knowledge we regard this as acceptable as the relationships between editors and reviewers are not power based such as in academic supervision or employment relations. Based on these considerations, we used the ethics notification process at Massey University. Following data analysis, the designated researcher contacted each of the authors to seek permission for quoting specific sections from their stories.

Data analysis

In line with our individual research backgrounds, there were variations in our approaches, including noting ‘interesting’ elements for each story, inductive coding, structural narrative analysis with an emphasis on the turning point of each narrative, and the creation of word clouds. We each worked from the full dataset to independently develop themes. We discussed analysis directions, iterating our discussions with further independent analysis, ultimately leading to consensus on three overarching groupings and sub-groupings. The literature referred to in the discussion emerged from the data. Although the project was grounded in the broad field of group-based academic development as highlighted in the literature review section of this article, literature categories were refined through a ‘reflective’ and ‘constant comparative’ thinking process where we iteratively explored how ‘extant knowledge and collected data [could] be integrated into the emerging grounded theory’ (Dunne, 2011, p. 118).

Findings

The analysis of the stories identified three broad themes, looking at the landscape of journal reviewing and personal experiences before establishment and involvement with *ASRHE*, at the effects experienced as part of the participation with *ASRHE*’s group-based review process, and at thoughts related to the future of *ASRHE* (Figure 1). Story 2, written by *ASRHE*’s lead editor, outlined the thought processes leading to the design of the group-based review process. We used this material to influence the initial literature

Themes derived from the stories	Derived from Story 2 (lead editor and founder of the journal)	Derived from stories of reviewers and editors
The reviewing/reviewer landscape	<p><i>Systemic issues with becoming a reviewer</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Journal and review processes and practices Lack of training and development opportunities Need for improvements <p><i>Inputs into the design of group-based review process</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prior experience with group-based review Positioning reviewing as shared activity Creating opportunities for reviewers and editors Improving outcomes for authors and the sector 	<p>Challenges from an editorial perspective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal challenges in becoming a reviewer Growth by trial and error Depending on self-education Seeking the help of others Chicken and egg scenario
Effects of participation in the group-based review process		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic identity trajectories Professional learning trajectories Emotional trajectories Appreciation
Looking into the future		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time required to grow the journal Fine Tuning the review process Confidence in providing opportunities for growth
↓		↓
Used to shape the literature review		Detailed under findings

Figure 1. Themes arising from the stories at ASRHE and their flow into the literature and findings sections.

review, helping us to identify the importance of areas such as review practices and collaborative academic development approaches for this study. We did not include the material in the findings or discussion sections to keep a clear focus on thoughts triggered by having been part of the group-based review process practised in *ASRHE*. While this included reflections on the times before participation in *ASRHE* reviews, these are retrospections and therefore different from the thoughts leading to the journal's establishment.

Before ASRHE

Challenges from an editorial perspective

A theme which was repeated in all four editors' stories was the problems inherent to traditional double-blind peer review practices. Selecting reviewers on the quality of their past reviews or time they had taken to respond to invitations or deliver were viewed as imperfect measures of potential review quality. Story 6 stated that finding *good and timely reviewers* had become *almost impossible* due to Covid-19. Story 9, expressed concern regarding *paradigmatic dogmatism and culturalist behaviours . . . rife in academic publishing*. Concern about reviewers' lack of ability to see beyond traditional formats is implicit in Story 3, which emphasized the need to *challenge the hegemony of academic writing and be open to alternate ways of presenting a research article*.

Personal challenges in becoming a reviewer

The participants noted personal challenges that negatively impacted their ability to become a reviewer and develop expertise. A key theme expressed was discomfort and anxiety due to a lack of training for reviewing and a consequent lack of confidence in their own expertise.

I learned how to be an academic on the run initially, without any formal training or guidance . . . But truthfully, I did not really know what I was doing. (Story 1)

The first few individual reviews I did, both articles and conference papers, caused me great angst. I second-guessed most of my observations and comments, particularly those giving critique. (Story 7)

Over the years I have reviewed for other journals related to my field of research and I still find the challenge of being a solo reviewer uncomfortable. I try to select the papers I undertake to review with care. I aim to delve into the references cited and give reviewer feedback which will improve the manuscript under review. I try to acknowledge my own limitations. (Story 10)

Growth by trial and error

The process of learning to review is described as both *serendipitous* and as *by trial and error* in Story 1. This sense of learning to review by accident was expanded on.

Again, not dissimilar to how I began my academic journey, I was not entirely sure if my comments and feedback were either correct or well formed . . . but I did my best and as no one stopped or questioned me, I kept going. (Story 1)

I have been told throughout my early research career that the best way to learn what journals want is to review papers, particularly those that align with my own research interests. Yet, I felt that my expertise was not developed enough to critique or offer advice that would support the publication of quality research. (Story 7)

Depending on self-education

Reflecting on and learning from reviews they had received themselves as authors, learning from co-reviewers and progressing building up expertise from reviewing conference papers and reviewing for less prestigious journals were all described as ways in which our participants employed *self-education* (Story 1) in review practice.

I've never had any 'real' training, I've never had a mentor working with me on becoming a reviewer. I have learned from the reviews I have received as an author and from looking at other reviews for work I have reviewed. (Story 2)

My review efforts steadily improved through practice, as I followed conference or journal guidelines for reviewers and learned what to look for. I also collected what I considered exemplary reviews – mostly reviews of my own research papers – and tried to model my comments on them. (Story 6)

Seeking the help of others

Some participants described how they actively sought feedback on their reviewing from co-authors, editors, and other colleagues:

I followed each review decision with an earnest email to the editors, requesting they check my comments and send back for revision if they did not meet expectations. (Story 6)

I called on my more experienced colleagues asking if they would review my review before I submitted it. I was aware that this was additional work for them in their already busy schedules, but how else was I going to learn? (Story 7)

Chicken and egg scenario

Joining the field of SoTL required developing new knowledge and links into a new disciplinary community. Story 4 spoke of the challenges of joining review panels and gaining confidence in higher education research reviewing due to coming *from a very science background with comparatively little SoTL experience* (Story 4).

Story 8 highlights more fundamental difficulties of becoming a reviewer.

I am an early career academic/researcher, and I have always wanted to be part of a journal reviewing process so that I can better understand the process when one of my articles goes through it. Prior to joining the *ASRHE* reviewer group, I had tried to join other journals as a reviewer, but they had never accepted me because I didn't have experience. It was like a chicken and egg scenario – how could I get experience if I can't get on a journal review panel? (Story 8)

Effects of ASRHE

Academic identity trajectories

Reviewing is one of many tasks expected of academics and can be considered an integral component of academic identity. It is closely aligned with authorship (contributing to

a body of knowledge) and the role encodes a responsibility to ensure that knowledge proposed for publication is expertly and reliably assessed.

Many participants' comments revealed an initial deficit perspective when making self-judgements of reviewing capability in the context of their academic role as highlighted in extracts like, *I felt that my expertise was not developed enough to critique or offer advice that would support the publication of high quality research* (Story 7). Concomitantly, reflections and comments on the effects of the journal's group-based peer review design focused on professional growth overall and, specifically, growth trajectories of skills and knowledge in their reviewer role. The stories highlight the process of participating in group-based review for *ASRHE* as an ongoing learning experience.

From the outset, this has been a team that has not only offered a pastoral and nurturing environment, in which to learn how to value and to add value to the work of others, but it has also been a team that has offered much encouragement and courage. (Story 1)

Throughout this process, my confidence has grown, to the extent that I was recently comfortable to take on the lead reviewer role for one submission. (Story 7)

Professional learning trajectories

Participants also reflected on changes to their own reviewing practices directly due to engaging in a group review process. Story 3 understood they had developed facilitation skills to support others' development:

I noticed my own reviewing practice change from providing an extensive review of an article myself to encouraging the other reviewers to articulate their concerns and holding my own views back until a consensus was agreed. . . . I thought that this was empowering other reviewers rather than just getting compliance or agreement to my own. (Story 3)

Participants perceived they develop a range of academic capabilities through their engagement in the group review process, further developing their understanding of research and publishing processes, both disciplinary research and scholarship of teaching and learning.

What this year has shown me is that there are fundamental requirements for 'research' that really is independent of discipline and once I had realised that I felt far more comfortable in my role. Indeed, seeing how the SoTL authors have gone about developing their research question and highlighting the significance has made me reflect on how I write my disciplinary papers (and made me better in articulating those aspects). (Story 4)

This reflection is complemented by Story 8 expressing a sense of personal benefit and growing knowledge and development of skills required for publishing research:

I still sometimes feel that I don't contribute as much as I gain from the [group review] process, but I really feel that the process itself is invaluable and a great way to learn more about research, academia, publishing, and all that it entails . . . I think that this is preparing and supporting me so much for my own publications. (Story 8)

ASRHE has provided a safe space for inexperienced reviewers unsure of their competence to participate in the review process and has explicitly facilitated their confidence. *I have lost the fear I used to have about making mistakes or not knowing how to do something* (Story 1). Part of this is being able to hear the views of others:

I realised that my thoughts were held in common with the thoughts from other reviewers (Story 5) and it was comforting having people agree with observations (Story 7).

Growing relationships with fellow reviewers contributed to the confidence-building process. As editors, we encouraged polite, respectful, and constructive contributions because we believed the nature of review discussions was critical for a safe process.

Admittedly, it was a bit intimidating at first, but as I got to know a few of the reviewers that I saw regularly, it became easier to present my ideas about the papers we were reviewing. (Story 8)

Responsibility to synthesise the group review consensus into the feedback letter for authors is a challenging task, an opportunity welcomed by review-group members: *I was challenged as to how to synthesise all comments into a coherent format without missing out on key points/essential points for the authors (Story 5).*

Overall, participants reported on their development nominating a range of areas: skills to help others grow, understanding of the research process, skills required for publishing research, understanding of writing, understanding of nuances in formulating feedback, understanding nuances of communication in research discussions, understanding of publishing processes, understanding how to review: *I feel like I've grown so much through this process . . . being part of the ASRHE reviewer group has really strengthened my understanding and capacity in reviewing journal articles (Story 8).*

Emotional trajectories

The stories contained emotion-laden words, for example *angst* and *honoured* (Story 7), which reflected trajectories from anxiety and unhappiness with reviewing pre ASRHE towards positive emotions post involvement. Significantly, no negative feelings about the journal or the group review process were expressed, either explicitly or indirectly. Descriptions of fellow members of the ASRHE team embedded in the stories included, *professional, varied, experienced, generous, committed, passionate, compassionate*. The stories included references to review meeting experiences as *pastoral, nurturing, refreshing, positive, supportive, collegial, and collaborative*, describing an environment and membership of a team in which participants experienced a *safe environment in which to learn, to grow, to collaborate and to experiment* (Story 1).

Appreciation

Story 1 powerfully expresses the excitement of joining ASRHE:

Then one day, there was a call for expressions of interest to join a new team, led by a group of experienced and generous academics, who were keen to share of their love for and commitment to the scholarship of learning and teaching. Wow, I thought . . . others who feel the same way as I do about education and teaching and learning, but others who have more experience and are willing to show me how to do this properly!

This sense of excitement was also present in the stories of other participants when they described the early effects of ASRHE. Participants described their group reviewing experiences as *intensely enjoyable* (Story 6), and *really excited to be part of this unique review process* (Story 8). Story 9 summarised the experiences:

I have loved learning from my fellow reviewers and appreciated different approaches from detailed fine-grained reading to broader approaches. How wonderful it would be if all of academia was like those meetings! (Story 9)

Future ASRHE expectations

Several participants expressed a desire to refine the ASRHE review process in the future. For example, Story 5 has suggestions for efficiencies with the words, *I wonder whether it would be useful to limit the numbers of reviewers in the panel – more effectively using everyone’s time – for example, having a minimum and maximum number set up which meets the review standards*, while Story 4 cautioned against *groupthink* in the open review process and noted that there could be an

unintended consequence of the review panel, we’re all trying to find the flaws that make it rejectable rather than finding the strengths that make it potentially publishable. Maybe it is a group mentality? Once someone says they don’t like it for X reasons then everyone else tends to agree and it is hard to come back from that. (Story 4)

Story 7 expressed a desire to receive more submissions of varying standards including those in non-traditional formats with statements like *I would like more experiences of reviewing the articles in the range of being accepted with major/minor revisions only or being accepted (be able to write a congratulation letter)*, while Story 4 wanted stronger submissions using alternate formats:

I am really intrigued to see how people respond to this journal and the possibilities it offers for publishing their work. Given I have only seen fairly standard format contributions I think it may take a little time and possibly marketing work before we start seeing submissions in alternative format. (Story 4)

Overall, the stories overwhelmingly suggested positive expectations and enthusiasm for the future of the review process and signalled their own continued participation in the *collaborative and collegial* (Story 8) process. Others showed a strong sense of ownership:

It is our aim to help build the reputation of the journal as a place where both experienced and new researchers can share their work and gain experience as academic writers . . . I am honoured to have been given this opportunity. (Story 7)

There was also a sense of continued personal growth as noted by Story 3, *I watch my skill set as a reviewer expand* and a sense of contribution to the field,

I think that what we are doing is working well, for the journal, for our reviewers, for our authors. I suggest that we are making a contribution to research and journal publishing, by developing researchers and reviewers, and by counteracting the managerial approach to higher education. (Story 2)

Discussion

Double blind peer review is established as a mechanism for safeguarding the quality of knowledge dissemination. It depends on sufficient numbers of academics able and willing to expend expertise as a voluntary service. Our research on group-based peer review,

an alternative approach to safeguarding quality of knowledge dissemination, analysed stories written by 10 academics who joined *ASRHE* as reviewers or editors.

We looked at the experiences with traditional peer review, with group-based peer review and the self-reported perceived effects on academic identity, knowledge, skills, emotions and hopes. Experiencing group-based peer review had noteworthy and positive impact on our research participants.

Our participants' reflections on their review experiences prior to the group-based approach align with what we found in the literature (see [Figure 2](#)). For example, the editors who had served as editors before *ASRHE* reported struggling to find appropriate peer reviewers as reported in [Janke et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Martín \(2016\)](#). Participants reflected on difficulties with becoming reviewers, struggling to counter feelings of isolation and non-belonging, as reflected in [Khoo \(2021\)](#), having to learn to be reviewers on the job as highlighted by [Paltridge \(2015\)](#) and finding the only solution in seeking out mentors and hands-on experience themselves, as suggested in [CARMA \(n.d.\)](#).

Our research provides evidence that participating in a group-based peer review process has potential to improve a researcher's identity as an academic and be a fruitful context for professional learning, developing review-specific knowledge and skills. This relates to the broader literature on academic communities of practice (e.g. [Lee & Boud, 2003](#); [Inouye & McAlpine, 2019](#)) and the role of writing communities in forming academic identity ([Sutherland, 2018](#)).

Our reviewer stories highlighted strong emotional trajectories. Negative emotions due to rude and dismissive reviews and rejection as reviewers, experiences highlighted by [Mavrogenis et al. \(2020\)](#) changed to emotions reflecting well-being, empowerment and appreciation following the group-based reviews, effects noted by [Kim et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Sheffield and Timmermans \(2021\)](#) in group settings not related to reviewing.

The post-*ASRHE* reflections show that the group-based review process provides a promising direction. Interrogating editor and reviewer stories for challenges posed by a group review process identified suggestions for minor process adjustments. Participants looked forward to reviewing a wider variety of manuscripts.

Conclusion

Our research confirms the challenges around peer-review stated in the literature. The literature on traditional peer review suggests a professional development gap, indicating the value of exploring new approaches to peer review. Our research makes a contribution by linking opportunities identified from general group-based academic development approaches to a group-based peer review approach. We have demonstrated the value of such an approach for the development of reviewer skills, academic identity development, and academic wellbeing.

We suggest that a group-based review approach would be valuable in many discipline areas, assisting both in reviewer development and contributing to balanced, thoughtful and kind reviews. As SoTL is characterised by researchers moving into the field from their base disciplines, often having to adjust to new research paradigms and lacking departmental support, we see *ASRHE*'s group-based review process as particularly valuable in this area. Although other review methods such as interactive reviews and discussions could also prevent paradigmatic biases and support author and reviewer learning,

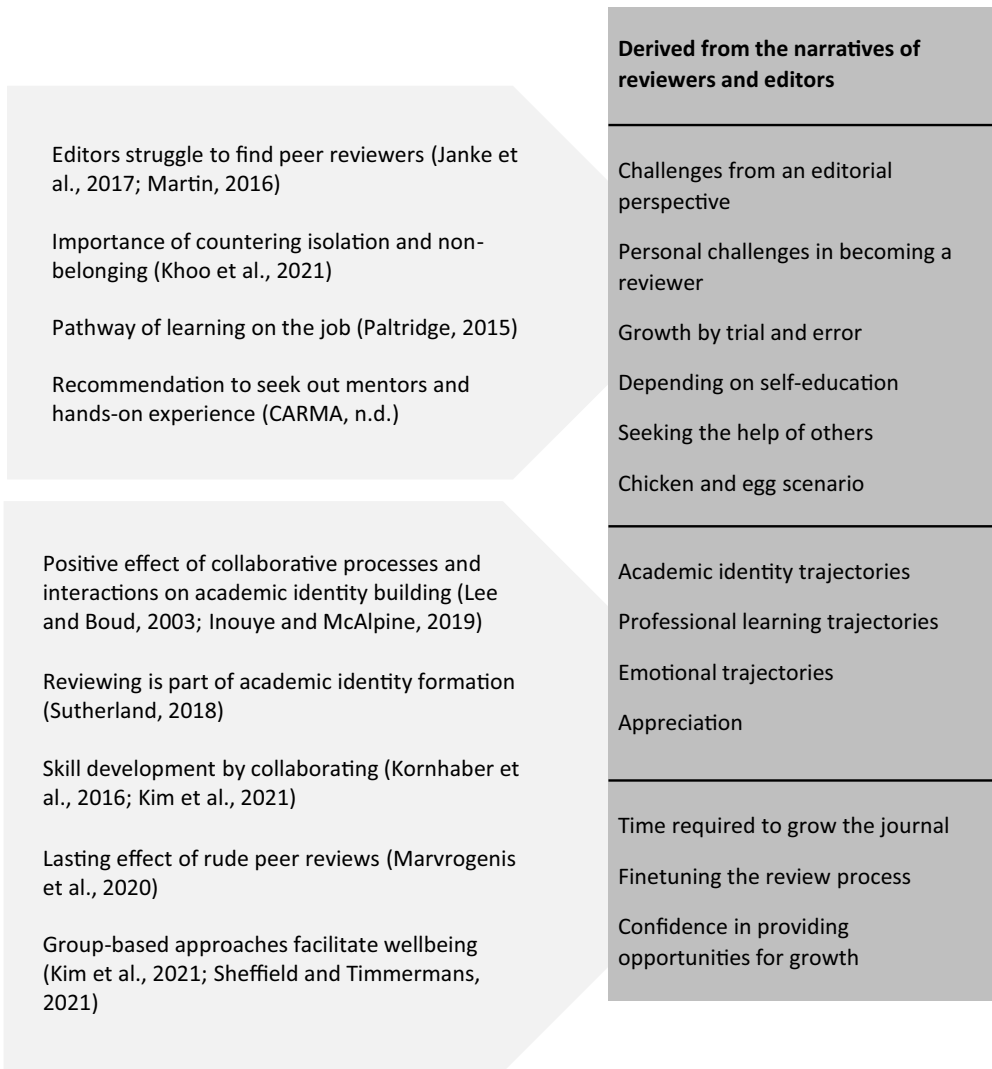


Figure 2. Links between literature references and findings from the stories.

these methods lack the scaffolding for reviewers and do not ensure respectful and high-quality review processes and outcomes.

Our research highlights the challenges, stress, and uncertainties academics experience related to their development as researchers and reviewers. We encourage academic developers to integrate this insight into their practice, acknowledging that the pressures experienced are common, counteracting the isolation and feelings of inadequacy experienced by both novice researchers and experienced researchers moving into SoTL.

Limitations and future research

The limitations of our research lie in the small scale of operations experienced in the first year of *ASRHE*'s existence which limited the pool of potential research participants. Just under half of invited reviewers provided their stories. We do not know why the others did not participate. While general time pressures might have played a role, other reasons could lie in feeling uncomfortable with the open-ended invitation to write a story, a lack of insights after possibly only a small number of review group meetings, or a negative view of the new group-based review process one was not willing to share.

Looking ahead we are firmly of the opinion that a group-based review process, as modelled by *ASRHE*, makes a valuable contribution to reviewer development and publishing in higher education. Since the data collection for this research, we have seen further growth in our reviewers and have experienced the strengths of group-based review processes in other areas, such as in reviewing abstract submissions for a conference. As we talk to others in the higher education research area, we repeatedly hear of experiences like those our research participants have shared – developing one's identity as a reviewer, and more generally as a researcher, leads along a difficult and lonely path. Working with others in a review group means faster progress, richer insights, and valuable emotional support.

As *ASRHE* grows, new challenges will arise. Selecting review group members to create balanced panels and provide comparable opportunities, scheduling of meetings, or arranging access to submission details can be time-consuming tasks that presently are not well supported by journal management systems. Leading the review group meetings requires specific facilitation skills – skills we as editors continuously work on in shared facilitation, discussion and reflection. Over time, we will need to expand the number of facilitators, providing challenges of quality assurance but also new growth opportunities for members of our reviewer community.

In conclusion, we suggest that academic publishing in higher education needs fresh approaches to safeguard the quality of research publications considering ever-increasing pressures on academics and scholarly teachers. While the traditional peer review approach should retain its importance, new models, such as the collaborative process we have discussed, are necessary to nurture the reviewers required for the traditional approach.

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