

## “Dear Diary” revisited: reflecting on collaborative journaling

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The genesis of this article was a request from the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* to provide a reflection piece about our article ‘Dear Diary: Early Career Geographers Collectively Reflect on their Qualitative Field Research Experiences’ (2011) that won the journal’s biennial award for 2009–2011. This request has afforded us the opportunity to reconnect as a team and, through self-directed interviews, to reflect upon how writing ‘Dear Diary’ continues to influence our current perceptions of journaling in qualitative research. More specifically, we focus here on the relationships between journaling and our approach to research, team-based collaboration, and our current teaching and mentoring practices. We all continue to keep fieldwork journals and perceive reflexive journaling as a crucial tool for qualitative methods and other collaborative ventures.

**Keywords:** reflexive journaling; diaries; collaborative writing; fieldwork; critical reflexivity

### Introduction

It has been five years since we embarked on our project to keep reflexive field journals for our first qualitative research field season; an endeavour that culminated in our article “Dear Diary: early career geographers collectively reflect on their qualitative field research experiences” (Heller et al., 2011). We are all honoured that the article has been awarded the biennial prize by the *Journal for Geography in Higher Education*.

The original article was written after completing a graduate-level qualitative methods course in geography in the winter of 2008, when we moved classroom discussions into practice. While undertaking fieldwork in sites across the globe, we participated in critical, reflexive journaling. Whereas journal writing is often private, we shared our entries, aiming to facilitate rigour while concurrently exploring similarities and differences. We quickly became conscious of common themes including ethical dilemmas, power relations and researcher fatigue. In the original “Dear Diary” article, we critically analysed these experiences, examining the strategies implemented to resolve such predicaments. We argued that reflexive group journaling during fieldwork was a valuable learning tool which could be introduced into many research-active curricula.

Given that the original article was written when most of us were completing master’s and doctoral dissertations, we thought it would be valuable to reflect here on the “Dear Diary” experience three years after publication. Together, we developed a set of questions aimed at documenting, via self-directed interview, how writing “Dear Diary” influenced

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our current perceptions of journaling in qualitative research and our approach to research, especially through collaboration. Where applicable, we also discuss how the original article has been integrated into our current teaching and mentoring practice. Excerpts from our individual responses are featured throughout our discussion below.

Our paths have gone in very different directions since the writing of “Dear Diary”. Back in 2008 when we entered the field for the first time, Catrina, Julia and Philip were starting data collection for their doctoral dissertations. Today, all three have completed their Ph.D.s. Julia is a postdoctoral fellow in Geography at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and a Research Fellow at the Institute for Circumpolar Health Research in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, and continues her qualitative research on housing and homelessness in the Canadian North. Philip is a freelance consultant on biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation, evaluating the effectiveness of a non-governmental organisation project on biodiversity, integrated water management and climate change implemented in Kenya’s arid and semi-arid lands. Catrina guest lectures at McGill University, Montréal, and the University of Vermont, Burlington, but spends most of her time as a collaborative researcher studying conservation policy and the influence of protected areas on local community livelihoods in Uganda.

Britta, Elizabeth and Lindsay were entering the field in 2008 as master’s students. After completing their degrees, Britta chose to continue in academia, and is now pursuing a Ph.D. at Simon Fraser University, focusing on the use of tablet computers to gather spatial information for injury surveillance. Elizabeth is running a cooperative organic farm and works as a project coordinator with the Canadian Association of Midwives and the National Aboriginal Council of Midwives. Lindsay moved to Washington, DC to work with Handicap International, a French-based non-profit that works with vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities, across the globe. Emily, an undergraduate student in 2008, is now a transactional lawyer focusing on insurance regulation, mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and healthcare. Sarah, an associate professor at McGill University, continues to enjoy teaching the qualitative methods course (GEOG 509), where the co-authors of “Dear Diary” started their original reflexive journey. In partnership with graduate students, her recent qualitative research in socialist countries has included solicited diaries with street vendors in Hanoi, and Photovoice with ethnic minority youth in the northern Vietnam uplands.

With such a divergence of career paths, one might expect the co-authors to have very different reflections about journaling and the “Dear Diary” collaboration. However, we all remain supportive of journaling as a reflective methodology and feel there is strength to be gained from collective learning, from the sharing of varied experiences and the inevitable work that comes from finding common ground between these experiences.

### **Perceptions about journaling and qualitative methods**

Through time and experience, our understandings and execution of qualitative research methods have evolved, particularly in relation to journaling. Each of the authors continues to promote the practice of journaling from the varying perspectives of divergent career choices. Julia refers to her research journals as living texts that serve as reminders of our constant transition and intellectual growth.

My skills improve as I gain experience, but because qualitative research involves so many relationships it is never something one can become truly expert at. The only thing a qualitative researcher can ever hope to control or to truly know is herself and how she engages with a world in constant motion. (Julia)

The majority of our reflections emphasised the importance of journaling for documentation purposes and providing valuable insights, particularly during the write up portion of research (cf. Ortlipp, 2008). Indeed, we repeatedly refer back to our journal entries as we continue to analyse and write up results for publications:

Reading the journal allows me to mentally return to the field, reminding me of subtle nuances of the season not necessarily captured in the transcribed data, providing a deeper and more descriptive context within my writing. (Catrina)

I have been amazed to see that still today I am gleaning ideas and insight from that same journal. Because I documented my experiences, thoughts, and concerns, I have a concrete record of that time in my life, and it continues to provide me with material for further work as well as a reference point for research experiences and queries that I have today. Without the journal, I would have memories, but those fade with time, or change shape and focus. (Julia)

Rereading journals from the field has often sparked a new enthusiasm for writing, helping us reminisce about both the positive and negative experiences of fieldwork, reminding us why we are doing this research and why it is important to share with others through our writing. Elizabeth believes journaling remains at the heart of how a researcher, or any human being, may best sift out what is useful in order to push one's understanding of the world. During her master's research, Elizabeth used both qualitative and quantitative methods, and journaling helped her to see the links between the methods and reflect on their failings, flaws and gaping holes (cf. Ortlipp, 2008). As such, Elizabeth was better able to see what results could be usefully and appropriately incorporated and published:

At the time, I felt frustrated with both types of methods; I found the remote sensing to be almost comical in the variance of results I would get, depending on seemingly arbitrary thresholds and parameters and I found the qualitative interviews to be limited and frustrating, due to language barriers, my lack of cultural proficiency, etc. However, even at the time, I felt that the qualitative interviews were integral to any validity of results from the remote sensing, because without those interviews, there was no way to understand the human implications of the remote sensing results. (Elizabeth)

Through the "Dear Diary" experience, Sarah has become acutely aware while teaching qualitative methods of the lack of attention journaling continues to receive as a technique for field researchers. Sarah reflected:

I don't think journaling is given nearly as much attention as it should be given in textbooks on social science fieldwork. While 'memo-ing' or 'keeping a diary' are often noted in passing, there's seldom more discussion. This underplays the strengths of this technique; while group journaling can take support mechanisms to a whole new level, as our project clearly demonstrated. (Sarah)

This realisation has led Sarah to be more attentive to literature regarding this fieldwork technique and she feels better equipped to present the strengths of journaling to students. Despite this, some students may initially question the value of reflective journaling: "at the time I felt journaling was pointless and narcissistic. I did not understand why it was important or why we were discussing rigour, reflexivity, and positionality" (Britta). In Britta's experience, however, her initial hesitation quickly gave way to an immense appreciation for journaling as her research process progressed:

Journaling may provide memory anchors, which then trigger recollections of relevant information for the data analysis and write up phases of research. Journaling has helped me in the process of reflexivity... and made positionality become less ambiguous to me and hopefully to my readers. (Britta)

Emily and Philip, both now working in the private sector, noted that the value of journaling transcends well beyond the academic milieu. Both have found journaling to be very useful in the various sorts of documentation required in their respective fields.

Although I continue with the journaling process, especially when working with clients, the focus and approach is somewhat different from a research journal. My diary entries focus much more on the client needs, perspective, and orientation as opposed to myself. (Philip)

The reflexive journaling we engaged in over our graduate fieldwork, coupled with the experience of collaboratively writing the journal article, made an indelible impression upon us. The practice of keeping a journal has become habit, to the benefit of our careers in not only academia, but also in the non-profit and private sectors, where research, mentoring and collaboration are equally as important. Furthermore, in all our areas of work, journaling has proved useful in providing a record of our own personal and professional development, and a means by which to go back and continually process and re-process those early career experiences for the betterment of our work today.

### **Research practice and collaboration**

Team-based research and writing have been criticised as lacking reflexive attention (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008), but we found our collaboration led to exactly the opposite: improved qualitative practice and deeper reflections about our own subjectivity. Catrina noted the positive impact the experience of group journaling had on her critical reflexivity:

Immersing myself within the project required me to be more open about my feelings with my co-authors than I typically would have been. This openness led to a far richer reflection on my own subjectivity by allowing me to juxtapose my experiences against those of my co-authors. (Catrina)

In turn, Elizabeth commented on the importance of having a “safe space” in which to reflect carefully upon events:

Having a safe and structured space to share reflections can often lead to deeper reflection, can allow a wider opening and sharing. It was clear that the structure of the journal and the themes we collectively decided to code for, allowed us to share often scary and troubling reflections, that were invaluable learning for all of us. (Elizabeth)

So much of the “process of knowing” is rooted in the situated understanding of our research context (Rose, 1997), and developed from sights, sounds and even unconscious clues collected as we travel through the field experience. The discipline to reflect and capture these keys to unlock the meaning within the data we collect is a critical skill to develop for the novice qualitative researcher. The collective commitment to keep a reflective journal for our project entrenched the habit of recording our thoughts into our qualitative practice.

Without the peer pressure of writing this paper, I likely would not have kept a journal during my first qualitative research fieldwork season. Now while I do qualitative research I journal each evening because I remember how grateful I was to have the diary during the write up portion of the research process. (Britta)

Then, to read the reflections of our collaborators allowed us to learn from each others’ practice (Seale, 2004), especially field ethics, dealing with gatekeepers and researcher fatigue (Johnson, 2009). Once learnt, these lessons have served us well in our latest endeavours, as Sarah notes:

I am more vigilant now during fieldwork to reflect daily on my perceptions of how work is progressing. I question how I categorise gatekeepers more regularly, as well as being slightly

better at recognising the warning signs of my own fatigue. I am certainly more vocal to students prior to their own fieldwork about the downsides of fatigue and the importance of “down-time”. (Sarah)

Our collaborative experience broadened our understanding of qualitative fieldwork, but above all else, we found working as a team to be creative, productive and fun. We do recognise that our positive collaborative experience was realised because “our chemistry together as collaborators was a very special, very particular thing, and something that allowed us to each feel comfortable sharing with one another in such an open way” (Julia), and was easier because “collaborative work that involves people with similar interests... is perhaps smoother than one that involves people from different sectors and or interests” (Philip). Sarah added:

The unique partnership we built during this project brought together seven thoughtful and outstanding junior scholars with whom I had the pleasure to work. The experience of being part of this project made me more aware of the positive energy that can come from teamwork and the fun to be had along the way. I am not naïve enough to think that group work will always go this smoothly, as we had an excellent group dynamic, but I would certainly encourage like projects for the positive rewards and reflections they can bring. (Sarah)

Collaborative or team-based research is increasingly common as an academic mode of knowledge production, either due to the need for multi-disciplinary inputs, partnerships between academia and industry or non-governmental organisations, or for community-based participatory research (Cahill, Sultana, & Pain, 2007; Mauthner & Doucet, 2008). On the other hand, graduate research tends to be conducted in relative isolation. Therefore, the collaborative experience of “Dear Diary” early in our careers provided a unique preparation for future collaborations in research and in life.

All my current research and work are collaborative in nature. In one way or another, the process of writing the Dear Diary article contributed to the way I approach some of my collaborative work in terms of task allocation, respect for alternative/different opinions, maintaining the focus on objectives, among others. (Philip)

This has carried through into the very difficult work I have been doing of running a cooperative business with friends, in which we are dependent on finding safe structures to share our reflections that can often be painful and divisive if not given a place to be collaborative. (Elizabeth)

Our group collaboration facilitated the development of team member skills and allowed each member of the team to put forth their best skills.

Working with such a large number of collaborators on Dear Diary, communication and understanding was sometimes difficult but proved to be pivotal in the success of this paper. Now, in an effort to better understand what a collaborator is trying to communicate, I try to remember that each individual has a different worldview and may be in a different phase of their intellectual journey. (Britta)

The “Dear Diary” experience has made us enthusiastic to embark on new collaborations with others, which in turn has opened doors to many exciting opportunities. In one way or another, all of us are now involved in collaboration, and the ease with which we have transitioned into today’s team-based environment can be attributed at least in part to our collaborative reflective journaling endeavour.

This experience has led me to actively pursue opportunities for collaboration in my research and writing. It does not have to involve writing papers, but can be as simple as co-organizing a conference session together. Collaboration has challenged me and has made me a better researcher and writer. (Julia)

### **Teaching and mentoring with “Dear Diary”**

Finally, we want to reflect on what our “Dear Diary” experience has contributed to teaching and mentoring for four of the original authors of our article who have gone on to use the piece in this role. Catrina has returned to guest lecture with Sarah and Julia on field ethics, gatekeepers, and research fatigue in the graduate course where “Dear Diary” began, with our article assigned as a reading for the class. Catrina has also assigned the article for a field research preparation course at McGill University given to both human and physical geography students. Although both class discussions about the article are animated, she believes the real benefit of the article lies not in class, but in the field where theory crashes into reality (Kleinman, Cope, & Henderson, 1997). During continuing field seasons in Uganda, she also mentors graduate and undergraduate students, whom she suggests read the article. In relation to all these situations she notes:

Reading the “Dear Diary” paper has helped these students cope with the challenges of field research, allowing them to realize that their experiences, although their own, are not completely unique. They find comfort realizing that others have travelled a similar path and that the emotional rollercoaster they are feeling is normal and part of growing into the role of researcher. (Catrina)

While Julia is teaching at UBC in her post-doctoral position, she has yet to teach a methods or fieldwork course. Still, she has prepared reading lists for graduate students preparing to do qualitative fieldwork, including our article. The general response to the article has been incredibly positive. Similar to the students who Catrina interacts with, the article seems to calm anxieties that some new researchers have about taking their methodology or proposal from the classroom to the real context of field research.

I believe it does this in large part through our honest approach to our experiences, and the fact that we explicitly highlight aspects of our fieldwork experiences that did not work out as we had originally planned. I also think our openness about the fact that fieldwork was an on-going process of negotiation, change, and reflection, puts to rest the students’ expectations that a researcher can possibly be 100% prepared for what lies ahead in the field. (Julia)

Again, taking a key mentorship role, Philip has shared the article to date with six Ph.D. students enrolled at the University of Nairobi, and Maseno University in Kenya, having realised that some universities in Kenya do not delve as deeply into qualitative research methods as we did in our graduate course. The students appreciate and have benefited from some of the insights from the article, even though the context is different; Global South students approach fieldwork in their own country with some similar, but many different, concerns and apprehensions (cf. Rubin, 2012).

Finally, as well as the graduate qualitative research class where Catrina guest lectures (along with Julia in the past), Sarah assigns “Dear Diary” for a course taught to undergraduate students completing an honour’s degree in geography at McGill University. For these honour’s students, in a class entitled “Fieldwork practicalities – what if it all turns to custard?” it is clear that students enjoy and directly relate to the article since they are learning about student experiences rather than those of “seasoned professors” (cf. Kuh, 1995; Seale, 2004). In all classes where the article has been assigned, it sparks lively discussions. Through the focus on student experiences, the honesty in relating both successes and failures in the field, and the breadth of themes covered, the article has remained firmly on the agenda for the original authors involved in teaching and mentoring processes.



## Conclusions

Our lives after “Dear Diary” have diverged in discipline and place. However, we all still perceive reflexive journaling as a crucial skill for negotiating human interactions, not only when undertaking qualitative methods in academia, but also in a broad range of other collaborative ventures. Collaborating in order to collect, analyse and document our experiences has been valuable preparation for the team-based world we live in. Furthermore, the process of writing the article has boosted our confidence and gave us valuable publishing experience as we move on to publish our own dissertation results (cf. Walkington, 2012). Revisiting the “Dear Diary” experience, through this collective reflection, has awakened memories of laughter, pain and growth shared with a positive and supportive team of scholars. We would like to thank *The Journal for Geography in Higher Education* for affording us this opportunity to reconnect as a team.

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