

portal at 25: Celebrating our Legacy

Kate Johnson Okayasu and Marianne Ryan

Introduction

This year, we celebrate *portal*'s 25th anniversary and a quarter century of its work as a scholarly journal focused on academic librarianship within the broader context of higher education. In preparation for this milestone, the *portal* Editorial Board reflected on what the journal has come to represent and its legacy. *portal* is an access point for innovation, both as a journal and as a print representation of the field and its forward trajectory. Academic libraries serve as a knowledge gateway for scholars and students; as librarians we serve as guides to help our users navigate and maximize dynamic information collections. *portal* as a journal has shared new knowledge, ideas, and the challenges of our collective profession while also seeking to reimagine the academic publishing process with collaboration and mentoring at its center.

Mentorship is at the core of *portal*'s identity and values, and is personally very important to me. As a *portal* Editorial Board member and reviewer, I appreciate our deep dedication to providing quality content for our readers, and striving for a high standard in our authors' publishing experience through positive and constructive support. That dedication is the reason I said "yes" to the invitation to serve on the *portal* Editorial Board.

Given that focus, it was no surprise that mentoring and paying it forward became reoccurring themes in my conversation with Past Editor, Marianne Ryan, interviewed over Zoom through our initiative to collect oral histories from *portal* editors and Editorial Board members in recognition of our 25th anniversary celebration. Marianne served as *portal*'s Editor from January 2015 through December 2022, and continues on the Board as our current Past Editor.

What follow are extracts of Marianne's interview, edited for clarity and concision, in which Marianne shared her perspectives on the journal, its legacy, and her personal takeaways from being part of its history.

The “What” and the “How”

How did your experiences as an author inform your approach as an editor?

Marianne: I think there are a couple of things about editorial work, and the same can be said about most things, that there is a “what” and then there’s a “how.” I’m always big on both the “what” and the “how,” which means the way you get to the finished product rather than just what it is.

As Editor, I certainly was interested in ensuring that we would have a quality publication, which I understood I would ultimately be responsible for even while working with a team. I was also looking at ways that I wanted to expand the vision for the journal and see it develop further, as well as uphold the values of foundational elements that the journal was created for. Those pieces were all important to me as well.

But the “how” was also important and I wanted to go about addressing that, as they say, by remembering where you came from. I got my first opportunities to publish through the kindness of strangers, those random connections of being in the right place at the right time. People giving me a nudge and believing in me. So, it became important to me to pay that forward and to make sure that we, the journal, were doing what we could do to invite people into the circle. Not just by publishing, but also through participation on the Board, which of course aligns a lot with *portal*’s commitment to mentoring.

What Makes *portal* Special

What do you think is special and unique about portal as a publication that allowed that philosophy to flourish?

Marianne: What *portal* was designed to be was something that, first of all, encouraged not just established authors, but novice authors as well. To expand viewpoints and the landscape in ways that a lot of other journals did not and thereby make a difference in that sense.

Another was that it would be affordable, a departure from some of the pricing conventions that were emerging at that time. I think those two things in and of themselves are very impactful.

I know that in an early editorial within the first year or two after the journal was launched, the then editor wrote words to the effect of what a waste it is for journals to pride themselves on rejection rather than on acceptance. I’m paraphrasing broadly, but the article noted the damage that practice does by undercutting the goal, which is to bring something good to fruition.¹ Instead, what you’re conveying is that you [the prospective authors] are not good enough. It’s not a message that we [as *portal*] want to send.

And so, I think how we mentor and cultivate and kind of walk alongside the person—if they need it, not everybody does—is special and unique. I think that it is something that makes a difference in the publishing arena.



Expanding Perspectives

What is one of your proudest accomplishments with the journal?

Marianne: I feel that we made great strides in the arena of inclusivity. I think that happened in ways ranging from vehicles [such as new features, including “Global Perspectives”] that allowed a broader audience to contribute different types of content. We also made a real effort to diversify our board. Not just in terms of racial and ethnic diversification but also geographic distribution, things that brought different viewpoints and vantage points into what we were doing.

Then we established a number of policies and practices that reinforced that commitment, such as a diversity statement that we jointly authored. That was a first for *portal*, that an entire editorial board endorsed something in writing. Other things, like implementing the use of the singular “they” and supporting preferred names to help people feel more comfortable and that they are part of an enterprise, have been very important.

Kate: Something that you didn’t just mention but I was thinking about in terms of diversifying the Board is inviting people to serve on the Board at different levels of their career.

Marianne: Thank you for mentioning that because that was my first effort when I joined the Board. At that time, it was almost all deans, but no one who was more “boots on the ground.” I felt strongly that that was disadvantaging the journal because the further removed you are from what people are writing about, the less likely you are able to give them what they need as part of the process and understand it. I don’t mean that we don’t understand things when we become administrators, but we understand them differently. Our lens is different, and we are more at an arm’s length from some things, which makes a big difference in terms of what we can give back as commentary or feedback. I think another challenge for administrators is that we may not have as much time. The way that that tends to play out is that reviews are delayed, which adds to an author’s anxiety.

Advice to Those Interested in Publishing

As part of our conversation, I asked Marianne what advice she would give to our colleagues interested in publishing and being part of the publishing process. I asked her for specific advice for the various levels of opportunity.

Becoming an editor:

Marianne Ryan: I know I have said this at our Board meetings in the past, being *portal*’s editor was the most meaningful and most rewarding extracurricular experience that I have had. Really, the one that I felt was most valuable to me and the one through which I most felt I made a difference. I am so fortunate to have had that chance that I can’t say enough about what it has meant to me. So, I would encourage anyone who is interested in that area of contribution, editorial work, journal administration, and the overall process, to go for it! There is a learning curve, but it is one that can be bested in fairly quick fashion, and the benefits and the rewards outweigh the trials.

I would encourage anyone who wanted to give it a try not to shy away from it. But with that said, as with anything that matters, it's important to realize that a substantial workload goes with it, and there's no choice but to do it. Journal editorial work is very deadline driven, very production driven; it waits for no one. The same is true with publishing deadlines. You can't go halfway; it's in for a penny, in for a pound. It is something that requires significant investment, but the return on that investment is what makes it all worthwhile.

Kate: Jump with both feet then?

Marianne: Absolutely! And there's such great satisfaction with seeing an issue come out—that tangible output. We all work in libraries and a lot of our work is very abstract. I found it very, very significant to be able to see the fruit of the labor.

If you already are an editor:

Marianne Ryan: The one thing that I would say explicitly to Editorial Board members is to put themselves in the shoes of the authors because they've all been there. By that I mean just understand that people are putting themselves out there and making themselves vulnerable. It's a balance, because you want to appreciate that, but you also want to ensure that you're contributing to something that is excellent and impactful.

Going back to what I said earlier about the "what" and the "how", you can give feedback, but you can give it constructively or you can give it in a way that's harsh. And nobody needs that, nobody benefits from that. Nobody deserves that. Nobody's going to take much from that. I think it's important to try to treat people the way you would want to be treated.

If you are an aspiring author:

Marianne: As they say, you can't win if you don't play. And so, I think that no one should feel hesitant to write something if they feel they have something to say. My best advice would be to find your voice and share it and not let "the perfect" be the enemy of "the good." I think sometimes the idea of writing becomes more daunting than the writing itself. Or maybe the idea of it makes the writing itself seem undoable. I think just keeping that in perspective is important.

Conclusion

While the anniversary and commemorating the journal's history was the impetus for writing this editorial, after speaking with Marianne and reflecting on our conversation I realized I wanted this piece to share the future of *portal* – for the students in graduate school who will one day be its authors; for the early career professionals who may feel that they need many more years of experience before they can consider being on an Editorial Board; and for those who have long been contributing to our published shared knowledge and one day might be asked to step into a position of leadership. I wanted to share some of the insights I learned from Marianne about publishing and what it takes behind-the-scenes, as well as to share the encouragement she communicated about putting yourself out there and trying to do what might initially seem daunting.



I have the privilege to be writing this as a member of *portal's* Editorial Board because of Marianne. We met when I was a graduate student and as I went on to pursue a career in academic archives she remembered and believed in me and then invited me to bring my perspective to the Board, even though I felt entirely intimidated by the responsibility.

It is my hope that by sharing these excerpts I can pass on to our readers a little of that inspiration and knowledge she gave to me and that I know she gave to all the contributors to the journal during her eight years as Editor. It is a privilege to be able to highlight and share in this small way the wonderful work of *portal* and its 25 years of serving our profession.

Kate Okayasu is the university archivist in the University of Northern Colorado Libraries and is a member of the portal: Libraries and the Academy Editorial Board, email: kate.okayasu@unco.edu.

Marianne Ryan is the dean of university libraries at Loyola University, Chicago, and Past Editor of portal: Libraries and the Academy, email: mryan21@luc.edu.

Notes

1. "Information for Contributors," *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 3, no. 4 (700), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pla.2003.0080>

This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 25.1.

This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 25.1.