

# The Changing Teacher-Disciple (Guru-Shishya) Equation in Modern Times

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## ABSTRACT

Guidelines for authorship have been outlined by various international bodies like Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). However, instances do arise where these guidelines fail to resolve authorship conflict. A common example is when an article based on a thesis/PhD work, is submitted with the name of the guide or the student (principal investigator) missing from the authors' list.

It is expected that the guide as well as the principal investigator are among the authors in thesis articles. On the contrary, a displeased guide may choose to publish the thesis, omitting the student's name, stating that the student did not work hard enough to gain authorship. The student might also consider not providing authorship to the guide believing that the guide did not appropriately 'guide' him during the research. After completion of the degree, the student might lose interest in publishing his work. The guide therefore may decide to unilaterally publish the thesis for dissemination of knowledge. However, the fact that the student has actually collected the data cannot be denied. The true contribution of the student or the guide in the thesis work as well as the manuscript preparation, to merit them as authors, remains debatable.

In this paper we present a series of cases where we had to face student and guide authorship issues. Further we discuss the literature on such issues and the steps that were taken by the editorial for resolution of these disputes.

**Keywords:** Authorship, Co-guide, Guide, Postgraduate

## INTRODUCTION

Since the time when publishing article has become a necessity for a researcher, multitude of related issues have taken birth that have negatively impacted the field of research. In this heap of issues, authorship conflicts take up a substantial segment. Numerous articles have been documented on 'ghost authorship', 'honorary authorship', 'gifting authorship' etc. Also, the code of conduct laid down by organizations like COPE and ICMJE, are in place. Nonetheless, the burden of authorship conflicts is growing. One of the reasons is the guidelines set by the medical bodies wherein the 'number' of publications is given undue importance.

Authorship in an article which is a thesis work, is the article's bone of contention. Hence, the aim of the present article is to discuss the authorship conflict that arise particularly in articles which are thesis or PhD work. However, we would like to stress upon the bitter truth that, in any such situation, the journal has to bear the brunt in terms of resources and time. It is common for the editorial to face unprofessional unbecoming emotional outbursts from complainants and even legal threats. It is also imperative for an author to know that, in case of change in authorship, post-publication, the online version of an article retains the previous version too for archiving purposes. Hence, it remains on record and might do more bad than good, to the author's image in the long run. Hence, such issues should be resolved before the articles are submitted to any journal for publication.

Thesis works which are conducted as a part of degree to be conferred to a student, is understood to be majorly done by the student himself. As an example, it is accepted that a PhD student in his project has played the most important role and has contributed to the 'intellectual development of the project' [1].

Equally true is the fact that the guide and co-guide also lend their contribution to a thesis research, though the extent and nature of same varies. A journal has to consider two aspects when issues on student-guide authorship conflict arise - firstly, what was the role played by the team members during the research and secondly, the role played by these people (and new members, if any) during drafting of the same.

In a country like India, since ages, the concept of 'guru-shishya' has predominated the field of education. A 'shishya' (disciple) definitely should be credited for his work but the 'guru' (teacher) also has to be provided with a noteworthy stature in the publication. The bitter truth, at the present times, is that not all the guides play an imperative or beneficial role during a study. Similarly, post research, a student might not be dedicated enough to get the research in print. Kwok's 'white bull effect' might be used to refer to these students too and not only to the greedy seniors [2].

What pains is that such issues add to the existing mountain of an editor's work load. The journal inadvertently falls into the soup and is tossed between playing the role of an investigative officer and also that of a mediator.

We are unhappy to admit that within a decade old journey, since Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research (JCDR) inception, we have come across plenty of such conflicts between a student and his guide. We have made a lot of effort in searching took lots of effort to search guidelines for resolution of such issues and concluded setting up our own 'court room'. ICMJE and COPE guidelines are transparent enough relating to authorship matters but we found them to be ill suited for the myriad issues that exist.

## CASE SERIES

We hereby present a case series of ten such incidences :

- 1. Thesis without the name of the guide:** Three original articles from the same institute were received, peer reviewed, revised and published. Three months post-publication, we received a letter from the Dean of the institute stating that those three publications should have included the name of the guides and head of the department. When we called up the corresponding author, they vehemently refused to add the guide's name stating that the guide never helped during the research and so does not deserve authorship. They informed that the most senior among the authors was the co-guide, who actually had helped during the thesis. To our surprise, they sent a mail as well as a signed document by post. The mail from the corresponding author was forwarded to the Dean of the

institute, who never replied. On the other hand, the guide too wrote to us demanding authorship, also stating that he had indeed worked on the thesis conceptually. Since, the Dean did not further communicate with us, no change in authorship was done.

- 2. Thesis without the name of the Postgraduate (PG):** Against a published article, we received an e-mail from a postgraduate student stating that this was the thesis work submitted by him during his post-graduation. On retrospectively analysing the submissions against this article, it was found that the first copyright had the name of the PG student but not signed, the guide being the corresponding author. We asked for a signed copyright against which a new copyright was received, excluding the PG's name. We moved ahead with the publication considering the second, signed contributor's form, thus the PG did not receive the authorship (at that time we were not aware that the article was a thesis work). Responding to the complaint mail, we asked for proof from the PG and received a scanned copy of the thesis. Complaint was forwarded to the corresponding author, in response to which he agreed and provided authorship to the deserving PG.

- 3. Guide claims data fabrication:** We received an email from a senior faculty commenting vaguely, on data of a published article. As we discussed the matter with the corresponding author we found that the complainant was the thesis guide. The author further claimed that he kept on requesting the guide to allow him to write an article on the thesis and get it published (providing authorship to the guide also) but the guide, for some unknown reason, kept avoiding him.

We wanted to check if the research was indeed fake and so asked for the original data. In response to which the primary author promptly sent us the thesis copy. We found that the study was genuine but in the draft all values had been doubled. Surprisingly, the author claimed that the guide (who had first mailed us) had prompted this doubling of data saying the author that with the current number of cases the article will never be accepted by any journal; hence, he should double the numbers, before submitting it for publication. Later presumably they had a fall out. So, this case had both authorship and publication ethics issues. Had we gone not got the mail, we would have been a party to deceit inadvertently. Our final decision was to swiftly retract the article.

- 4. Co-guide not among the authors:**

We received the following blatant email –

"I am a co-author for the above mentioned article published in your journal. Kindly inform the authors to add my name as co-author or further action would be required.

Thanks"

Professor, XXX, Medical College.

The article was published with the name of PG and the guide as authors. On probing it was found that the claimant was the co-guide. We replied saying that such issues should be resolved among the authors and the journal is not an arbitrator. Moreover, adding authors post-publication is not a norm. A copy was also sent to the corresponding author. We received more such emails with emotional outbursts for the next few weeks, which subsequently stopped. No further action was taken by us to change the authorship

- 5. Department faculties not among the authors in thesis:**

Against a published article we received a mail stating that the thesis was guided by seven faculties of that particular department. Among them, the guide and the co-guide were authors of the article, and the complainant wanted inclusion of the other five names in authorship. The dispute was left to the

authors for resolution and we refused to arbitrate. The journal however felt that such claims amount to 'authorship gifting'.

- 6. Co-guide among authors but not the guide:** In another incidence, a head of the department cum guide wrote to us demanding authorship in a published article, reasoning that the study was a thesis work by one of his student. The corresponding author accepted that the article was his thesis work and that the mailer was his guide. The hitch was, when he said that the guide was an absentee in the department and the research was completed under the supervision of a co-guide, whom he has already named in the authors list. On forwarding this message to the complainant, he did not reply and thus the authorship was not changed.

- 7. Part of thesis published without the guide's knowledge:** A thesis guide mailed us complaining that a published article was based on a part of a thesis guided by him. Neither the student asked for his permission nor an authorship was provided to him. He wanted the article to be retracted. Following a telephonic conversation followed and he agreed that the data was not fake but he was aggrieved and felt cheated even after being a dedicated teacher to his students. The matter was taken to the Principal's desk and the principal requested the guide not to take it further and resolve the issue amicably, the institute being a private one. Then he decided to stop pursuing the article and demanded a written apology as compensation from the student. In the process, the loss was to the teacher-student relationship, as the distressed guide took a resolution to be 'just a teacher'. The guide is a close associate of the journal and so later called up feeling sad about the present state of research and its ethics (or the lack of it).

- 8. A squabble between the guide and PG student:** A feedback was posted on an article, based on a thesis. After a week we receive a phone call from the corresponding author (the guide) telling us bluntly that the changes/recommendations by the reviewers are too many and that he will be unable to revise it. He wanted the article to be accepted as such. We suggested that the other authors can also help him in revising the article, more so, the PG student, whose thesis it was. Then the caller confessed that he had a major disagreement with the student on some matter and they are not in talking terms now. He does not have enough time to dedicate to this article and hence cannot revise it himself. We decided not to be a peacemaker and just stopped working on the article further. After the stipulated time for revision was over, the article got rejected on its own.

- 9. Legal threat to the journal by a student as he was not among the author:** Few months after the publication of an article we received a mail stating that an article was published by us which is the mailer's thesis work and the corresponding author was the guide. He was neither informed nor provided any authorship. He threatened us with legal action if the article was not retracted. We had a telephonic conversation and told him that even if the article is retracted he would not be able to get it published elsewhere without the guide's name who was officially designated to be the PG – guide and had signed the document in the binded thesis book. We advised him with this present fall out, there are chances that the guide would refuse to sign the authorship form and thus not let the student ever publish the thesis. Finally, the journal was forced to play the mediator and made the guide add the student's name in the article.

- 10. Corresponding authorship:** We received a call complaining that in his published thesis, he was made the last author. The corresponding/first author was the Associate Professor (AP) while the caller was a PG student. We looked into the authorship form and found that the signatures of all the authors were there.

On mailing the document, the caller said that his signature was forged. Meanwhile, he had also complained the institution authorities. We communicated with the corresponding author and the first authorship was transferred to the student, with a new copyright and authorship form. We sighed relief, but it was not to be so, yet. Within a few days, the student again called us, informing that the AP has been sacked by the institution. Now, he wanted us to negotiate with the authorities and get him his job back. The student was depressed as he found this too harsh for the AP. This was followed by a lot of editorial mails and conversations with the institute, which finally, made them reinstate the AP.

## DISCUSSION

It is understood (although less followed), that all the authors in an article should have 'intellectual contribution' and not only 'substantial contribution' towards the paper. Every author should follow his submission through publication and take responsibility of the research work. The ones which might have joined the team only during drafting, are also responsible as they have been considered intelligent enough to be a part of the research (even if only the draft) by the other members. They have to 'understand' and 'know' the research in order to write about it. So, no blame game can exist later when questions arise regarding the scientific content of an article. Moreover, writing an article also requires a considerable effort, nevertheless not on the same scale as collecting the data for the research.

As a helping hand to the authors who have to answer their colleagues (peer or senior) when they ask for authorship while an article is already submitted, Sokol DK suggests that they can inform the colleagues about signing a form (journal's requirement) wherein one should declare the role and take responsibility of the research as well as the draft [3]. This might 'scare' away the non-contributing colleague.

## Proposal to avoid post-publication authorship conflicts –

During the submission of a research article, journal can make a

policy for the corresponding author to declare whether or not the study is a post graduate/PhD thesis work. If yes, to provide the scanned copy of the first page where the guide declares that the research was guided by him. The fact that the guide might not have actually 'guided' during the research needs to be burdened upon the student himself, as the role of a journal is limited. Unfortunately, there exists no authority to look into the guide's role in a thesis.

Further, we believe that the principal investigator must be the first/second author, as the thesis is principally his own research.

If in a declared thesis work, either the student or the guide is not among the authors, the corresponding author should provide a signed document specifying that the individual has no objection for not being provided any authorship.

Besides this, during the process of publication, if a third member comes up who has a significant role, he must also be provided authorship, owing to the ICMJE guidelines. This stands true for a co-guide also, who is often God sent for a student, when left alone with an absentee guide. The sequence of authorship must be resolved before the article is submitted to a journal.

## CONCLUSION

The intention behind the editorial was to underline the fact that the disputes related to authorship are better resolved amongst the authors themselves, and then the article should be submitted to any journal. The editorial should be left to assess the content of the article only. Also that, associations like COPE and ICMJE should be very clear on authorship issues so that an editorial can fall back on them, whenever conflicts arise.

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