

Academic blogging and collaboration make demonstrating pathways to impact an easier matter

by Blog Admin

November 3, 2011

Academic blogging can provide a forum to engage with new ideas and to critically analyse research, but can it help researchers win vital funding? [Peter Matthews](#) doesn't know yet, but here he details the benefits he has achieved by publishing his impact funding statement and inviting feedback from colleagues online.



I was inspired to start [my blog](#) when I began my first lecturing post back in January and now I'm thoroughly embedded in the web generation. One of the main reasons I blog is just because it's a nice think space. The process of writing for me is very helpful in engaging in new ideas, critically analysing subjects, and just venting steam. I'm not pronouncing on great research findings, but just being able to put my ideas out there is very useful. I don't know if its REF-worthy, but I can spend focused time on journal articles while enjoying spouting off on topics as diverse as impact, cycling and Edinburgh's history. The chatty, journalistic style of blog writing suits me as I find it easy and I also find it enables greater engagement with yourself as a person and an academic.

I also see my blog as a useful teaching tool for engaging students in ongoing news stories. My subject area is spatial planning and if I had been teaching down in England this semester then my blog would have been full of the to and fro-ing around the [National Planning Policy Framework](#). In a subject such as planning that is responding to ongoing political change then blogging is a great way to keep teaching material more alive.

As an active social scientist in a policy-focused subject I do maintain my blog with an eye on engagement with my research interests, particularly with policy makers. I don't think I'll ever be the civil servants' first port of call for policy advice, but it has got me noticed in policy and practitioner networks. It seems that journalists and policy-makers are 'googling' when looking for expert advice and academic analysis. I was gobsmacked to receive an email from Scottish Television's local Edinburgh news team, who had found me through my blog, during the height of the Edinburgh Trams fiasco for a [comment](#) on what was happening.

As part of this larger engagement, I decided to write the role of my academic blogging into my recent ESRC funding application. As part of my Pathways to Impact statement, I detailed the role of my blog in disseminating research, and how I plan to use it to push out my findings to an unsuspecting public of policy makers. But, while I know people are reading my blog, I had absolutely no idea who my online audience was made up of. So in the nature of open research and collaboration, I decided to publish my [Pathways to Impact statement](#) on my blog and invite feedback from my audience. I asked readers for comments and their opinions on my statement and, most importantly, whether the impact activities I listed were viable and whether the impact on policy making that I envisaged was realistic at all.

To my surprise news of my post spread pretty quickly through Twitter and remains my most viewed post. Alas it only generated a few comments but they were very useful, and ensured that the statement I submitted was quite different from my original draft. The main criticism was that the draft was too vague and too much like many other Pathways to Impact statements. The insights from and the RCUK [pathways to impact model](#) was a much more focused statement. After all, in public policy as in many other areas, impact is a bit hit-and-miss. Much as I would like to influence policy makers, the academic research that my research was coming out of, on spatial inequalities and policy responses, began in the 1970s and really only started having impact in the late 1990s. The impact I could foresee and also evidence was activities such as seminars to specific groups of policy makers in local authorities, such as customer service managers; or a focused research findings briefing distributed through online communities of practice portals. The eventual submitted Pathways to Impact Statement was very different to the one I blogged and

included responses to all the comments, so I can say it was a very useful exercise in opening up my work, and improving it through online communication. And, of course, thanks to Tony Bovaird, who was especially helpful in his suggestions.

What really did surprise me was quite how quickly my project took off and that its still proving interesting reading for those clicking on my statement now.

However, the instrumental question is did the blogging of my statement not only mean I received thoughtful, helpful feedback but does it also mean I was successful in my ultimate aim for funding? I don't know yet and won't know until next year. When I do, I'll open up my updated Pathways to Impact statement and allow my readers to give their thoughts on it. For now however, another good academic blogger, Adam Goldberg at Nottingham University Business School, [points out](#) that research councils are so financially constrained at the moment that funding allocations can be little more than a lottery. Hopefully my application will fall on the desk of reviewers who are sympathetic to blogging!

Peter Matthews tweets at [@urbaneprofessor](#) and blogs regularly [here](#).

Related posts:

1. [Academics and universities should embrace blogging as a vital tool of academic communication and impact](#)
2. [From blogging to print: My journey to creating impact](#)
3. [Continual publishing across journals, blogs and social media maximises impact by increasing the size of the 'academic footprint'.](#)
4. [Academic tweeting: using Twitter for research projects](#)
5. [Follow the electronic footprints: how to track impact without asking scientists to lift a pen.](#)