

Writing for Impact: How can we write about our research in a way that leads to meaningful change?

*Academic work may have impact in a variety of ways, depending on purpose, audience and field, but this is most likely to happen when your work resonates in meaningful ways with people. **Ninna Meier** encourages a more systematic investigation of the role of writing in achieving impact. Impact through writing means getting your readers to understand and remember your message and leave the reading experience changed. The challenge is to make what you write resonate with an audience's reservoir of experiential knowledge. If the words do not connect to anything tangible, interest can be quickly lost.*



I am currently finishing a three-year impact study and I have so many things I want to share from this and other projects: in short, I am an impact geek. But whenever I started writing this text, I stopped; I wasn't satisfied with what I wrote, it never came out right, and I didn't know quite why. Why is *writing* about impact hard, while *researching* it or *talking about* it comes much more natural to me? Could it be something in the nature of the concept or phenomenon itself? Or is it just me? Once I start reflecting on the impact of my work, my usual academic language does not suffice. Sure, I can write the academic paper presenting the theoretical framework, the method and data analysis and share the results, but the really interesting questions of impact escapes this kind of writing to some degree. And I think *writing as a way of impacting* holds some of the answers.

I first started thinking about this back when I was 'writing up' the results of my PhD and I had what I then thought of as surplus material in the lots and lots of field notes and my interview material from the study of clinical managers in different types of bed units. 'My' managers were often not involved in the clinical work with patients, but they were managers of people, who diagnosed, treated, cared for and comforted very sick people. And although the relational nature of clinical managerial work made it in to the PhD as an important result, I was never completely happy with the way I wrote about it. A crucial link was not unfolded sufficiently explaining the potential effects of how a certain local context could impact work and vice versa. In short, what impact a certain place and practice had on the work and people who performed it and how I managed to convey this in order to impact research and practice.

One of my units was a stroke unit and I was dissatisfied with the way I wrote about the connections between this unit as a place, the type of patients that were there, the rehabilitation and care they needed, the way work was organized and politically governed, and the kind of clinical managerial work that was practiced there. The texts always seemed devoid of the life, the physical bodies, the complexity and pace of work, the *urgency* felt when an alarm rang, or the genuine welcoming atmosphere the place had.

I started experimenting with how to write as to include the messy world of context, an advice one of my committee members gave me at my defence. I wrote to let readers experience the impact of *being there*, detailed sensory laden accounts of the sights, smells, noises and impressions I had experienced. But these kinds of text were not entirely right either. What is it, then? In my current project, I use drawings, I experiment with composite characters, and I build stories in which the small, almost unnoticeable, yet immensely important details can be included, because I can show them as *possible* experiences: 'this is how it *could* happen', as examples of experiential knowledge for the reader to relate to.



The Wall of Love in Paris by Britchi Mirela (CC BY-SA, Wikimedia)

But I still struggle, even with writing this text. It is as if the words themselves, for writing about this in an academic text, are not there; as if the vocabulary belongs to real life and seemingly small lived experiences and not academia. It is the language of *particulars*, of everyday life with patients and colleagues, where impact might mean you help someone regain the ability to speak or shower. And then again; although these are important aspects, they cannot stand alone in our world: for academic work to have impact, we usually aim to reach people *beyond* the particular setting and share the results much more broadly. Impact through writing means getting your readers to understand and remember your message and leave the reading experience changed. *Real* impact, the kind we academics dream about, means that other people take your work/message/results and change something because of this.

And one of the main points arising from my work is that this is most likely to happen when your work resonates in meaningful ways with people. This leaves the challenge of making *what* you write resonate with them through how it connects to their reservoir of experiential knowledge (which you cannot know in advance, only offer the possibilities for). As [Wikan \(2012\)](#) points out, this kind of writing is connected to your methods and the things you've seen, learned and engaged in during your research. For me, being there in person is an indispensable part of the process and it is tied to *how* you write and which possible connections you offer your reader to latch on and relate their own experience to. Writing that is too 'far' from life makes it difficult for me to 'see' what this means in practice. Papers can be abstract, philosophical or theoretical in nature, and remain 'attached' to the concept or phenomenon they are about. But if the words do not connect to anything I can picture and understand, I quickly lose interest and have a hard time remembering the paper.

I am not done thinking about and writing about impact in practice, but it all comes down to this important part of the process: what happens *after* the reader puts down the paper or leaves the auditorium? Does she use your work in her own research? Does he tell his colleagues about it over lunch or share it on social media? Will it become part of the theoretical foundation on which future impact studies build? Our work may have impact in a variety of ways, depending on purpose, audience and field, but I would like to encourage a more systematic investigation of and attention to the role of writing in achieving this!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Ninna Meier is a postdoctoral fellow at Department of organization, at Copenhagen Business School. She has researched organization and management practices in health care work since 2009, currently exploring what it takes to achieve coherency in patient pathways. How to impact in practice, specifically the role of writing in this, is one of her main interests

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