

The “long tail” of research impact is engendered by innovative dissemination tools and meaningful community engagement



*Research impact often tends not to happen in one emphatic, public moment but rather at more discrete points of the “long tail” of a research project. Achieving this depends largely on the tenacity of the research team but also on key allies such as the community members and service providers who have become energised by the work and inspired to continue it. Taking their own research as a case study, **Kip Jones** and **Lee-Ann Fenge** discuss what it takes to create meaningful community impact, highlighting a commitment*

to inclusive co-production and public engagement and the use of participatory research to create innovative dissemination tools.

If we are really serious about impact, it is important to remember that it is not always a moment in the sun; an explosive, public scientific breakthrough that quickly becomes yesterday’s news. Good research has a “long tail” (in statistics a large number of occurrences far from the “head” or central part of the distribution).

To achieve this first takes tenacity on the part of the research team, or an ability to be a bit blinkered about its work, and also a willingness to stick to the team’s goals and commitment over the long term. Secondly, it takes allies; often community members, service providers, and so forth, who are energised by the work and take up the mantle. Finally, to create real impact requires resources to carry out the work—not necessarily of the size or scope of the original research funding, but just as important to success. For this reason, funds raised by universities from successful REF outcomes should be put to work and managed directly by the researchers creating the impact. These are the scholars who are aware of the potential of their outputs and its connectivity with community partners.

[Our recent article](#) in the *Qualitative Research Journal*, written with input from Camilla Gibson, Strategic Equality and Inclusion Manager at Hampshire County Council’s Adult Services, discusses what it takes to create meaningful community impact with academic research and outputs, when used in a very pragmatic way by community organisations.

A body of research and dissemination activities on older LGBT citizens that spanned 14 years, our work had at its heart a commitment to inclusive co-production and public engagement. The plan was always that participatory research would be used to create innovative dissemination tools, including an award-winning film ([RUFUS STONE](#)) and a deck of cards (“[Methods to Diversity](#)”). These tools were shared with local community organisations and used to develop awareness of the needs and experiences of the older LGBT people within them. Patience and perseverance remained the watchwords. Locating, then nurturing, community partnerships was key to the success of this kind of approach.

It is the dissemination of engaged learning tools built from the research that contribute to the long tail of research impact. This is illustrated by the case study described here, and specifically how the tools were used successfully with adult services staff in Hampshire. Initially, Gibson’s team developed a survey of staff attitudes towards sexuality and sexual orientation in their local authority. The response rate to this survey was low (just 300 of a possible 4000 responses). This raised concerns about lack of responsiveness to inappropriate care and potential homophobic behaviour amongst the staff themselves. In order to address these findings, the team delivered workshops to staff in local authorities throughout the county. The workshops were centred around the Bournemouth-produced learning tools.

The training events included a joint conference for practitioners, including the police and fire and rescue services; community learning events open to the public, which included a screening of *RUFUS STONE*; workshops within the residential care home sector; and workshops for operational managers, also including a film screening and with further learning based on the “Methods to Diversity” card deck.

Managers found these refreshing opportunities to think beyond the confines of budgets and to embrace creative responses to older LGBT needs and a recommitment to their values. Gibson recalls:

“One older person at a community event said, after seeing RUFUS STONE: ‘that’s my story.... I’ve just got back together with my teenage sweetheart’. Another guy came up and said: ‘this is miraculous! This is exactly my story! Thank you for this, putting on this event because I thought I was the only gay in all of Winchester!’ It is so wonderful when you can see someone realise that they are no longer alone with their story. Nonetheless, there’s still just so much work to be done in the area.

I think the Methods to Diversity deck of cards is absolutely amazing and I’ve really been impressed with how you can use them with people who have practiced for 30 years and still get something from them. Then you’ve got someone who’s just newly qualified using them and they contribute in the same discussion.”

The fact that Gibson took on this effort with such enthusiasm and energy in the face of initial obstacles reinforces our belief in the importance of getting well-developed research out into the community via innovative methods, and enlisting passionate, committed community members and service providers.

This case study provides just one example of the possibilities of creating impact through public engagement. It highlights how research projects that include in-depth outputs and dissemination plans can contribute to social engagement and “impact” for social benefit.

The fact that the underpinning research began almost a decade and a half ago attests to the principle that research that is meaningful is never really finished, and that dissemination is more than simply a few academic journal articles. In this project “community”, in the guise of co-researchers (the research project’s advisory committee and community service providers), was pivotal in providing feedback, momentum, and expanding the audiences for our efforts. We were mindful that learning occurs throughout the research and dissemination process and we, therefore, learned from all aspects of our own journey.

Our approach demonstrates how participatory research which embeds public engagement at its core can help to demonstrate the long tail of impact through myriad collaborators. This is particularly important when working with marginalised groups whose voices may be seldom heard, where changing hearts and minds about them is key.

*This blog post is based on the authors’ article, “[Meaningful dissemination produces the “long tail” that engenders community impact](#)”, published in the *Qualitative Research Journal* (DOI: 10.1108/QRJ-D-17-00037). A postprint of the article is also [available to read](#).*

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Lee-Ann Fenge is Professor of Social Care at Bournemouth University. She is a qualified social worker and has worked in settings with both adults and children. Her research interests concern inclusive and creative research methodologies for engaging with seldom heard groups, and she has an interest in arts-based methodologies. Fenge was Lead for the Big Lottery-funded “Gay and Grey” project and Community Organiser for the “Gay and Pleasant Land?” project as well as involved in its dissemination activities.