

From Research to Reach: A doctoral researcher's experience in engaging the public through accessible research communication

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on my experience organising an international public engagement festival as a doctoral researcher specialising in interactional research, sharing my observations and insights on accessible research communication strategies. Initially immersed in producing academic outputs and assuming that engaging with potential users was not part of my role as a doctoral researcher, my experience of organising the Pint of Science festival shifted my perspective on the societal relevance of my work. Central to this reflection is the importance of fostering a cross-disciplinary, cross-level team environment that encourages diverse perspectives and collaborative decision-making. Another key takeaway from my involvement in the festival is the power of accessible communication strategies, like multimodal metaphors, in making complex research comprehensible and engaging to a non-specialist audience. This reflection also touches upon my preliminary thoughts on the need for a creative and transdisciplinary approach to research communication, where knowledge and research communication strategies are co-created with non-academic stakeholders. Ultimately, I allude to how research culture can evolve to be more inclusive and participatory, ensuring that research is communicated in a way that leads to a tangible societal impact beyond academia.

Keywords: public engagement; research communication; accessible communication; research impact

When Research Meets Reality

A confession from an interactional researcher

I would like to begin this reflection with my personal journey as an interactional researcher. Pursuing a PhD in Applied Linguistics, I have been driven by one question: 'How do humans interact?'. For the first two years, my days were consumed by analysing transcripts, deciphering the nuances of conversation, and uncovering interactional patterns. Immersed in my work, I rarely engaged with colleagues or considered the broader purpose of my research beyond academic outputs, feeling intimidated by the prospect of discussing my research publicly.

In my third year, I ventured outside my comfort zone to deliver a public talk on one of my findings: how shared laughter helps cope with relational challenges in group interactions. The audience consisted of non-specialists, including professionals from various fields. During the Q&A, someone asked: 'How do you view group work in workplaces where people may rarely laugh, even during moments of tension?'. Although the question initially felt unrelated, it became a turning point in my work. I realised how unprepared I was to connect my research to practical concerns beyond academia. This wake-up call highlighted my oversight in bridging academic findings with real-world needs.

As a researcher studying human interaction, I was struck by the irony of my inability to connect and interact meaningfully with those who might benefit from my work. This realisation prompted me to reflect critically on my research communication and to explore how academic knowledge could be disseminated more effectively. This reflection also led me to organise public engagement (PE) events and seek strategies for accessible research communication.

A growing awareness of research impact and public engagement

The concept of 'impact' has gained prominence in UK academia. The 'Guidance on submissions' for Research Excellence Framework 2021 emphasise on producing research that realises 'the effect on, change, or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond academia' (**Research Excellence Framework, 2019: 68**). My understanding of this concept deepened as I became involved in organising the Pint of Science festival (see section below). Initially, terms like 'impact' and 'stakeholder engagement' seemed distant to me as a doctoral researcher. Still, their increasing significance in assessing scholarly work and researcher performance pushed me to reconsider the societal relevance of my research and explore ways to extend its influence beyond academic publications.

PE has emerged as a vital tool for achieving impact, with organisations such as the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement underscoring its importance in driving transformative changes in research culture (NCCPE, 2023). Emphasising mutual relationships between research and society (Burchell et al., 2017), PE should not be regarded as a one-way transfer of knowledge but as a dialogic, participatory process that fosters mutual understanding. By engaging with stakeholders in accessible, inclusive settings, researchers can make their work more relatable and applicable to real-world contexts.

This reflection is grounded in my experiences with research communication to the public and my growing awareness of the importance of impact and PE as embodied in my PE event organisation. It will proceed by sharing insights from leading a cross-disciplinary, cross-level team for an international PE festival, followed by observations on accessible research communication strategies, and concluding with thoughts on fostering an inclusive research culture that transforms the public from passive observers into active participants in the research process.

Sipping on Science in the Pint of Science Festival

A platform fostering scientific exchange and public engagement

NCCPE (n.d.) suggests that PE fosters trust between universities and the public, enhances relevance between research and real-world issues, and enables universities to enact their social responsibility by making research more accessible and inclusive. Realising impacts and promoting PE are therefore crucial for ensuring that universities remain open, transparent, and connected to the communities they serve. Having established the necessity of PE and impact, what comes next? Creative, non-academic conversations, such as those over drinks, can be powerful in connecting researchers across disciplines and engaging with the public beyond academic settings.

I began volunteering for Pint of Science festival (PoS) in 2023 and later led the 2024 festival across Coventry, Leamington Spa, and the University of Warwick campus (Figure 1). Founded in 2013, PoS is a global PE initiative fostering meaningful exchanges between researchers and the public. Typically, these events are hosted in cosy bars, pubs, and cafes, where audiences can enjoy the richness of scientific knowledge while sipping on their choice of alcoholic or non-alcoholic drinks. Interacting over a pint to discuss research stands in sharp contrast to the way we traditionally learn in school classrooms.

Figure 1: Pint of Science (PoS) 2024 event snapshot taken by Yanyan Li

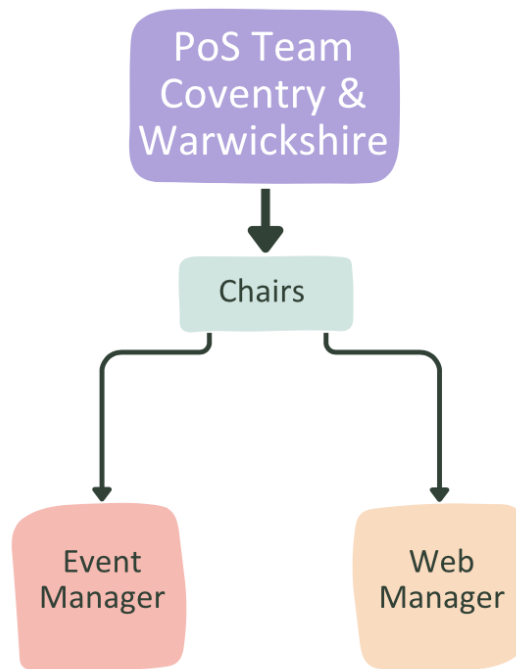


PoS stimulates equitable interactions between researchers from all disciplines and the public alike, aiming to spark interest in a wide range of scientific topics, from those close to home to those with global significance. The conversations it empowers are inherently cross-disciplinary and cross-level, shaping not only the event itself but also its organisation and execution (see section below). By amplifying public voices, the festival takes the first step to integrate them as active contributors to research impact. Researchers are encouraged to communicate their work as approachable disseminators and educators rather than distant experts, using methods that engage attendees in shared learning experiences. This inclusive ethos reinforces the relationship between science and society, turning academic findings into relatable and actionable knowledge (Paul & Motskin, 2016).

A cross-disciplinary and cross-level dialogue in festival organisation

My foray into organising PoS involved multidisciplinary and multi-level teamwork, uniting researchers from diverse disciplines and degree levels. The 2024 team (Figure 2) included 13 undergraduate (UG) and PhD students spanning sciences and social sciences, offering complementary perspectives that enriched the festival. Our team worked with 18 speakers from the social sciences, arts, and sciences at the University of Warwick and Coventry University. Our events engaged over 200 attendees, with a small portion being academics from the two universities, while the majority were local residents and non-academic professionals from various sectors.

Figure 2: PoS 2024 team structure



By ‘multidisciplinary’, I here refer to leading a team of student researchers who contribute their ‘different modes of expertise to bare on the decision-making process of a team working within a community-based setting’ (Housley, 2003:15). ‘Multi-level’, as suggested by the name, means the inclusion of student researchers from diverse degree levels in my team, overturning the assumption that only students enrolled in research degrees are eligible for research communication events. As the team leader and a doctoral researcher, I observed numerous benefits of intentionally nourishing such a multidisciplinary and multi-level environment .

The first benefit was that working in a multi-level team enhanced members’ ability to navigate power dynamics arising from perceived knowledge gaps. One of my UG teammates shared her initial fear of being overshadowed by PhD students and believed her contributions might be undervalued. She thought that undergraduates were seen as less experienced and knowledgeable in research. However, as the team collaborated, she gradually gained confidence. She became proactive in contributing to decisions about speaker rehearsals in her sub-group, which included one UG and two PhD students. She also valued the communication ground rules I set, which emphasised equality within the team. These rules made her feel comfortable communicating with her PhD teammates, openly sharing her thoughts, and seeking their advice on improving the presentation from a layperson’s perspective. The PhD students actively sought her input, building on each other’s ideas for better collaborative decision-making. She did not feel marginalised by the

PhD researchers despite their greater experience in research and communication with academics. Instead, she felt she had an equal role in the team, especially when reviewing the presentation and liaising with the researchers. She expressed that she felt a sense of ownership in organising the festival rather than being subordinated to the PhD researchers. This experience boosted her confidence in navigating multi-level teams in the future.

Her candid reflection gave me a sense of pride in coordinating the team but also led me to reflect on how participation in a multi-level team can help student researchers connect across different academic levels, creating an environment where everyone feels empowered to collaborate confidently. Her insights highlighted the key benefit of joining a multi-level team for a public research communication event: it can help mitigate perceived inequalities and prevent negative interpersonal effects that might stem from differences in degree levels, knowledge, and resulting power hierarchies. As a team leader, this experience reinforced the critical role of fostering an inclusive environment, where power dynamics based on academic level or perceived expertise are consciously minimised. I learned that by co-developing communication rules that affirm the equality of all voices, regardless of experience or degree status, team members feel valued and respected for their unique contributions. This approach does not just create space for diverse ideas to be heard, but it also actively cultivates a culture of mutual respect, where each member feels confident and responsible for the team's success. It enhances team cohesion, collaboration, and nurtures a sense of ownership, allowing each member to thrive, regardless of background or expertise.

The second benefit was that immersion in a multidisciplinary setting encouraged us to challenge established disciplinary boundaries, step out of our comfort zones, and apply our expertise to unfamiliar fields. This not only exposed us to new knowledge but also proved relevant in various aspects of our lives. As mentioned earlier, the cross-disciplinary nature of PoS required me to move beyond my usual social circle of Applied Linguistics PGRs, recruiting researchers from different disciplines. This helped ensure my team represented a diverse range of fields, mirroring the cross-disciplinary nature of the event itself. It also enabled us to effectively tackle specific organisational tasks, such as liaising with speakers from different fields and reviewing the accessibility of their presentations before the event.

For example, during rehearsal sessions, presenters received feedback from one or two organising team members outside their respective fields. This allowed presenters to refine their language and presentation styles to make the information more relatable and engaging for a diverse audience.

In one instance, a psychologist presenting on the connection between sleep quality and self-harm received valuable input from Life Sciences teammates, who suggested including practical tips on improving sleep quality to make the presentation more accessible and sensitive to the potential emotional triggers for the audience.

In another case, a data scientist gained insightful feedback on effective storytelling from an applied linguist teammate. She had initially presented a dense quantitative analysis on refugees' access to AI technologies, but the linguist suggested replacing part of this with a narrative about her personal motivations and the research process, which made the information more engaging and relatable. Similarly, a social scientist received input from a medical teammate on how to use metaphors to present the stigmatisation of endangered and minority languages. The medical teammate, drawing from her own experience in presenting complex material, suggested using food metaphors to make the topic more accessible and engaging for the audience.

Ultimately, through keen observation of my teammates' performances and the feedback gathered during our monthly meetings, I realised a striking benefit of being part of a multidisciplinary team: it immerses researchers in a dynamic exchange of perspectives, allowing them to explore new intellectual territories and engage in cross-disciplinary dialogues. This process not only enriches their own knowledge but also prompts the integration of different disciplinary viewpoints, enhancing our understanding of research communication (**Borrego & Newswander, 2010**). By embracing these intellectual collisions, we researchers transcend the boundaries of our immediate expertise and forge meaningful connections between disparate fields. These connections have the potential to foster future collaborations, ignite transformative ideas, and nurture a platform for ongoing exchange. In fact, some student researchers went on to form lasting connections, develop projects together, and continue supporting each other through the remainder of their university journey.

By promoting both multidisciplinary and multi-level teamwork, as well as cross-disciplinary and cross-level dialogue, the PoS festival evolved beyond a mere event. Consistent with Winter's (2019) conclusion of multidisciplinary teamwork, this was an opportunity to unite individual researchers who had not previously met or worked together. From my perspective, it became a cradle for inclusive and collaborative research communication and dissemination that began within the team and expanded outward to effectively engage with the public.

An Inclusive Research Culture

Accessible research communication: a case of multimodal metaphor

Since becoming involved in various events organised by the Warwick Institute of Engagement, I have increasingly been confronted with the term 'accessible' in relation to presenting research. This has led me to reflect on what accessibility means in communicating with non-academic audiences, inspiring me to observe the communication strategies that foster research for all and to consider how researchers can better understand and support the public (**Mahony & Stephansen, 2017**). Apart from communicating insights into how to present research to lay audiences based on our own disciplinary expertise and research experience, another pivotal takeaway from the PoS festival was the crucial role of accessible communication strategies. These strategies, internalised by presenters during pre-event layperson review and deployed in real time, were indispensable for effectively conveying their research to the public. They not only augmented public understanding but also emphasised how research can be visible and comprehensible to the public as an initial step to incorporate non-academic stakeholders into the process of applying research and realising its impact. By deliberating on these issues related to the operationalisation of accessible research communication, I therefore embrace my identity as an applied linguist and reflect on how my expertise informs my understanding of how communicative resources can make a difference in representing and transferring knowledge.

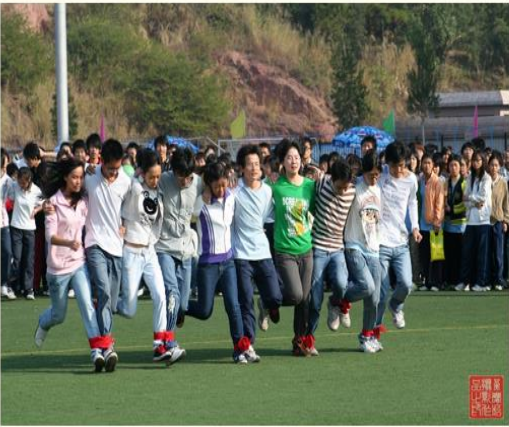
Specifically, as an applied linguist specialising in multimodal communication, I have been captivated by how language and other semiotic resources are configured to create meaning and achieve specific communicative purposes in particular social contexts for intended audiences throughout my research journey. This core focus of my intellectual curiosity resonates deeply with what stood out to me during the festival. By 'semiotic resources', I refer to 'a set of resources, shaped over time by socially and culturally organised communities, for making meaning' (**Jewitt et al., 2016:15**), with language being one of the informative resources. Besides language, other semiotic resources encompass nonverbal elements, such as visual aids, which were among the resources most frequently utilised by presenters. These resources were skilfully orchestrated to substitute for unnecessary jargon, avoid inaccessible abstractions, and illustrate terminology and research concepts in an engaging, relatable, and captivating manner.

One particularly effective and widely adopted strategy by presenters during the festival was the use of multimodal metaphors as a means of accessible research communication. It is a property of human thought that

aids us in interpreting the abstract and obscure through reference to something concrete and familiar (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). Metaphors, such as sub-technical metaphors mentioned by Cameron (2003), provided presenters with an instrument to mediate between everyday language and technical terminology. In Figure 3 (below), for example, is a slide from a presentation on managing group relationships through shared laughter, where speaker A employed the pictorial metaphor 'Ten People, Eleven Feet', a recreational sport, to vividly depict the dynamics of group relationships. The relationship being examined was conceptualised as a rope binding the feet. The delicate moments of interaction, where relationship work required attention, were compared to the strategic elements of the game, specifically when one partner stumbled or when the rope loosened. Because the metaphor clarified the equipment requisite and the process for the sport in detail, it assisted the audience in comprehending the interactional phenomena where relationships got ruptured and remedied within a group of people and the significance of managing relationships for group work.

Figure 3: Screenshot of speaker A's slides (included with permission)

Ten People Eleven Feet



How can this team succeed ?


1. Heights
2. Running ability
3. Shoes
4. Identical departure time
5. Smooth ground
6. Tightly tied rope on the ankle
7. ...

Bind the feet of an array of ten people

Run together to the destination

What if...

1. one member falls over?
2. one rope gets loosen?



Furthermore, the metaphor was not only instrumental in facilitating knowledge transfer but also in constructing a shared understanding, a neutral third space for alignment among event participants (**Drew & Holt, 1988**), including presenters. As Cameron (**2008**) highlights, metaphors can promote sustained alignment that transcends both spatial and temporal boundaries, while simultaneously reducing the social distance between participants. Since the metaphor used by speaker A, drawn from everyday recreational sports, was less technical and cognitively demanding than academic terminology, its familiarity and relevance to daily speech and life may have left a lasting impression on the audience. This familiarity stemmed from the fact that the audience likely encountered similar scenarios delineated in the metaphor with some frequency in their own lives.

Additionally, metaphors carry affective impact and transmit the speakers' values and attitudes (**Graumann, 1990**), mediating their relationships with the audience in terms of doing research. This metaphor in Figure 3 is organised in a culturally familiar imagery, accompanied by additional words to enlighten further thinking. By occupying more than a quarter of the slide space, the image delineating the metaphor became prominent to the viewers, enhancing the accessibility of the content and focusing their attention on the message it communicated about the presentation topic. The use of visuals was an effective strategy for capturing attention and enhancing engagement, particularly when conveying potentially technical research content. More importantly, through this metaphor, the speaker moved away from the moment-by-moment analysis of interactional research and instead highlighted the broader implications of her work. She encoded and implied why understanding relationship dynamics in interaction is important and how the audience can apply these insights to improve their daily relational interactions. In doing so, the distance between the presenting researcher and the audience could be decreased, as the knowledge was presented in a way that was not meant to be solely owned or understood by the researcher but shared and comprehended by everyone present.

At first glance, I observed that multimodal metaphors are powerful tools for connecting complex concepts with everyday experiences. On a deeper level, they highlight the importance of reconceptualising knowledge to make it down-to-earth, building relevance between research and lived realities, and delivering content in an engaging way. This approach helps demystify potentially opaque topics for the public, amplifies the relevance and impact of research for its stakeholders, and paves the way for tangible, meaningful changes of our society. Such accessible research communication techniques can be deemed invitations from researchers to

the audience to join the research journey, constituting a welcoming and inclusive research culture.

Towards a creative and transdisciplinary approach to research communication

The PoS Festival demonstrated the potential of cross-disciplinary and cross-level collaboration in making research accessible and meaningful among researchers and to the public. However, reflecting on its outcomes, a critical question sprang to my mind, 'How can such events spark sustained, transformative societal impact?'. My thoughts lingered on the potential of a transdisciplinary and more creative approach to research communication, which offers a compelling path forward by building on the inclusivity and dialogic principles discussed in the previous sections.

Some argue that creativity in research does not necessarily require being unprecedented, but it can often be unlocked by refining and innovating upon conventional methods (see **Kara, 2015**). This perspective holds particularly true for how research is represented and communicated, which is an integral part of the research process itself. Such an approach aligns with the growing call to transcend disciplinary boundaries, equipping us to tackle complex challenges that surpass the limitations of traditional disciplinary approaches. In this context, achieving transdisciplinarity emerges as a promising path forward.

Transdisciplinarity embodies the highest level of cross-disciplinary integration, prioritising the translation of research findings into actionable solutions for social problems (**Hall et al., 2019**). This approach is characterised by the active engagement of real-world actors, such as community stakeholders, throughout the research process (**Pohl & Hirsch Hadorn, 2007**). In the realm of research communication beyond academic audiences, transdisciplinarity and creativity emphasise the inclusion of non-academic stakeholders in both the design and implementation of research communication strategies.

While the festival brought together researchers from varied fields and levels, the focus remained on facilitating knowledge sharing within academic and public spheres. A transdisciplinary and creative approach can extend this by actively integrating non-academic stakeholders, such as community leaders, policymakers, and industry practitioners, into the research communication process. This inclusion would enable researchers to craft research dissemination and co-create solutions with non-academic stakeholders that reflect diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

As I continue organising the PoS 2025 and exploring how language use and communication strategies facilitate the spread of research into public domains, I find myself asking: 'Could communication methods incorporate

public narratives and cultural knowledge?'. By fostering an equitable, two-way dialogue where the public shares insights on how they prefer research to be communicated, we can shift research communication from a unidirectional act of dissemination to a collaborative process of co-creation.

The festival's informal atmosphere and salient use of accessible communication techniques, like multimodal metaphors, underscored the importance of accessibility and relatability in research communication. However, for me, embracing transdisciplinarity and creativity require reimagining how we present and demonstrate research, as well as how the public can participate in it. This involves prioritising the formats that propel sustained engagement. This reflection resonates with my perspective as an interactional researcher who values the transformative power of facilitating interaction. Incorporating more interactive designs, potentially enhanced by technology, and initiating long-term engagement projects can tackle real-world challenges. I suggest, for example, that an engagement project designed to enhance migrants' interactional competence in their second language, specifically within the Coventry community, could be a potentially impactful project. These efforts can hopefully strengthen the public's agency to effect meaningful changes in their lived realities through research while also vitalising their role as disseminators of their own research. In the meantime, this would empower participants to actively shape solutions, envision pathways for addressing these issues, and transition from passive listeners to engaged, active contributors in the research process.

Concluding Remarks

Looking back on my journey as a doctoral researcher, I now realise how much my perspective has evolved. Initially, my goal was simple: to contribute to my field through rigorous academic research. I immersed myself in data, analysed interactional patterns, and aimed to make academic contributions. While valuable, I soon noticed a gap – my work had academic merit, but I had not given enough thought to how it connected with the real world.

This became glaringly clear during a public talk on the role of shared laughter in group interactions, when an audience member asked why it mattered to them. It struck me as a call to action. Despite my academic rigour, I had failed to make my research accessible and meaningful to non-academic audiences. I had been so focused on academic discourse that I overlooked the broader conversation my research should be a part of.

It was through my involvement in initiatives like PoS that I began to reconsider what research communication could and should be. As a team leader, I realised the significance of fostering conversations across disciplines and levels, where research becomes a shared space, accessible to all. This journey of turning complex scientific findings into relatable, accessible knowledge mirrored the very challenges I faced in my own research. My experience indicated that translating interactional research into meaningful dialogue requires more than just simplifying language. It demands creative, inclusive communication that invites diverse voices and ensures that research is not just for the academic community but also includes the wider public. To move beyond the episodic nature of events like PoS, I advocate that researchers must envision research communication as an iterative, participatory process. Transdisciplinary, creative and accessible research communication is not just about breaking down silos but about creating spaces where knowledge is co-produced, shared, and applied to address societal challenges.

This realisation deeply impacted how I now view my work. Rather than limiting research to academic outputs, I have begun to appreciate its true value when it sparks dialogue and fosters cross-disciplinary, and cross-level collaboration. By shifting the focus from exclusive academic discourse to accessible, engaging conversations, whether at a festival like PoS or in everyday interactions, research takes on new relevance. It becomes actionable; it connects and becomes a tool for societal transformation.

Looking ahead, I am determined to continue evolving my research with this mindset. Reflecting on my experiences with the PoS festival has solidified my commitment to ensuring that my research speaks to people's lives and shapes the world around us. These reflections have also reinforced the understanding that research is most impactful when it engages both the mind and the heart and invites diverse voices. By embracing collaboration, inclusivity, and accessible communication, research has the power to break down barriers and ignite impactful progress. By embedding transdisciplinary, creative, and accessible principles into future research communication initiatives, I hope we doctoral researchers can help cultivate a research culture that is not only inclusive but transformative, ensuring that tangible research impacts are engendered and extend far beyond the confines of academia.

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