



## **Teaching embodied dissemination: enabling doctoral students to have authentic impact on their field**

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### ***Abstract***

Teaching embodied dissemination techniques to doctoral researchers is an essential part of a contemporary doctoral degree. Embodied dissemination recognises and engages the involvement of the physical body in the sharing of research work. Trainee researchers need to be able to identify the users of their work and how they might be reached. Yet more could be done to provide students with experience of and instruction in such approaches. This paper explores potential embodied dissemination methods and how we, as teachers in this space, might encourage students to connect with such approaches. To achieve this, three research-active teachers provide a reflective case study each considering the embodied dissemination techniques they adopt and, perhaps most importantly, how and why they came to use them. It is hoped that, by providing these examples alongside suggestions on how to get started, other teachers might consider how they could adopt such methods into their own repertoire and in so doing lead by example.

**Keywords:** doctoral students; embodied research; research dissemination.

## ***Introduction***

This article aims to make the case for teaching embodied dissemination methods to doctoral students. With many doctoral programmes now in professional or practice facing disciplines, researchers should be given the opportunity to explore more varied ways of meaningfully disseminating their work. We recognise that ‘embodiment is an integral aspect of all research processes’ and that the level of awareness of this amongst researchers remains varied (Ellingson, 2017, p.1). In the reflections below it is the researcher’s body that has held the artist’s materials, typed, and spoken the words (Ellingson, 2017). Thus, embodied dissemination is the adoption and recognition of the integral nature of bodily engagement in the expression of any research processes. As such, here we wish to depart from research dissemination that remains focused on, indeed prioritises, the traditional academic paper. We draw upon the enhancing roles embodied dissemination methods can play in relation to authenticity, connectivity, rethinking, and community: ‘For many researchers it makes no sense to privilege conventional forms of research presentation. The quest now is to find methods of presentation that will do as much justice as possible to each individual piece of research’ (Kara, 2020, p.195). For us, the questions then become: 1) what embodied dissemination methods could doctoral students use, and 2) how do we support our students to engage with these forms of dissemination? We seek to answer the former by drawing on the immediate experience of three research active teachers who work with different embodied dissemination methods and the latter by providing space for the teachers to articulate how and why they adopt such methods.

These reflective pieces were open in relation to how they were developed. However, the writing was prompted by a desire to highlight the case for teaching embodied dissemination to doctoral students keeping in mind the importance of these types of dissemination in relation to academic identity. Each reflective piece was to focus on the writer’s area of respective expertise, and they were shared amongst the authors as part of developing the work.

We argue that doctoral students need to be given opportunities to engage with a wider variety of dissemination techniques. Practices that, rather than being led by research as a product of an institution, are led by accessibility to the community the research is for. Current adjunct debates in this area, such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research

Assessment (DORA), make this a ripe topic for discussion as institutions are being asked to 'consider a broad range of impact measures including qualitative indicators of research impact, such as influence on policy and practice' (San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, 2012). Such debates are, in many ways, asking academics to think more broadly about the value of particular dissemination contexts.

Other authors suggest researchers might consider trying embodied forms of expression for the purpose of communication (see for example, Leigh and Brown, 2021). A key consideration are the aims of the research and the 'roles their bodies and the bodies of their audiences play in making sense of research findings' (Leigh and Brown, 2021, p.90). A further important feature for Leigh and Brown (2021) is planning ahead to ensure the right parties are engaged early on. If supporting doctoral students to take such steps then we, as teachers in the doctoral space, need to be part of this early interaction and assist in providing access to the possibilities available to them.

We argue that the pathway to supporting teaching in this area is to encourage more research active teachers to engage with such embodied practice. In reading these reflections we hope to provide teachers with an opportunity to expand their self-concept or 'to widen the palette of [their] possible selves' (Harrison, 2018, p.222). The passages below honour the voices of the authors, as such readers will notice shifts or 'gear changes' as they move through the pieces. The reflections provided come from different higher education contexts and interact with the doctoral space in different ways.

***Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas. Graphic social science and performed research poetry: affective and position dissemination an affective space***

This case study provides examples of mark making, language, voice and gesture as forms of embodied dissemination creating space for emotional engagement on the part of researcher and audience.

My work in creative methods and research dissemination has developed along two intersecting paths: graphic social science and performed research poetry. Both involve an extended process of analysis and representation, explicitly draw on and draw in the affective, and position dissemination as a fluid space in which a research enquiry

continues to be under construction, rather than a formal conclusion of a research endeavour. Here, there is the potential to rethink and develop. Both demonstrate, in distinct ways, a practice of embodied dissemination. In my practice as a graphic social scientist (Carrigan, 2019), I distil data through working directly with marks, materials, and text as a means of communicating research and meanings on the page, board, screen, or wall. In performed research poetry, I use language, body, voice, and gesture to authentically express and communicate aspects of research.

How did this begin? In 2017, I sketched four scrappy figures while considering the findings of my post-doctoral investigation into gendered experiences of work and career trajectories in higher education. These evolved into a set of cartoon human figures each representing an archetypal and architectural workplace metaphor: the glass ceiling (see Figure 1), glass cliff, glass escalator, and glass closet. They in turn became the centrepiece of an extended 'graphic essay' in the form of a hand-drawn comic strip entitled 'My brilliant career? an investigation' (Carruthers Thomas, 2018b) in which I also featured as bespectacled researcher with a clipboard, navigating the research landscape. The theorists whose work underpinned my data analysis appeared as a set of talking heads. The essay was printed on four large panels and submitted as a conference 'paper'. Exhibiting my work over a period of days was a strikingly different way of communicating research than a rushed 20-minute PowerPoint presentation. It offered opportunity for embodied interactions or connections with others as they paused, photographed, and questioned me about both medium and data. The piece later featured as part of a 30-stop 'tour' around UK universities and led on to a set of workshops for doctoral students and academic staff entitled Getting Graphic, encouraging experimentation with a range of visual approaches to teaching and learning.

**Figure 1. The glass ceiling.**

The previously mentioned ‘tour’ also included a second experiment in creative criticality, a performed research poem focusing on the same findings, featuring participants’ words and original poetry. Entitled ‘Glass’ (Carruthers Thomas, 2018a), it comprised four sections – ceiling, escalator, closet, and cliff – and was deliberately written to be performed, including speech and movement. I disseminated my gender research via poetry in university classrooms, scientific research institutes, and hotel ballrooms, to academics, professional services staff, managers, and students. On the feedback forms, ‘individuals wrote of the affective impact: of “goosebumps” and “triggers”; about their surprise and pleasure at the use of creative media to present what some called a “dry” or “boring” subject’ (Carruthers Thomas, 2020a, p.305).

More recently, two different research projects have underpinned another cycle of embodied dissemination. A large (n=550) online survey, *Living and working in lockdown: what’s gender got to do with it?* (Carruthers Thomas, 2020b), focused on the experiences of UK university staff living and working through the first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. *Dear Diary: equality implications for female academics of changes to working practices in lockdown and beyond* (Carruthers Thomas, 2022a) investigated UK female academics’ experiences of working practices during and post-Covid-19 lockdowns. In a self-published graphic novella, *Five ‘survive’ lockdown* (Carruthers Thomas, 2022b), I revisualised

findings from both projects as a visual narration of the stories of five fictional female academics, including a doctoral student, during the first lockdown of 2020. The graphic novella was not only a creative way to record an extraordinary time, it was a channel for the expression of the emotionally-sensed knowledge (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001) I employed as a researcher.

Emotion is also, literally, centre stage in a second performed research poem *Poetry in emotion: writing up emotional labour* (Carruthers Thomas, 2023) which gives voice to my authentic experience of researching those experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, while living and working through it myself. These are research findings of a different kind, often sidelined or ignored. Crafting and performing the poem, with stage, audio, and visual elements, extends the way in which we imagine research can be communicated.

These forms of embodied dissemination, graphic social science, and research poetry, celebrate connections between researcher, data, and audience and further the creative potential of research dissemination. Both bring the potential for human emotion: surprise, humour, anger, and pain into the research arena. Both require me to be vulnerable to audience resistance, discomfort, and critique, and questions of academic validity. They offer valuable insights for doctoral students at all stages of their study, to consider research dissemination differently.

### **Two things to try**

- Involve others' voices in the presentation of your data, for example, asking audience members to read aloud short extracts from interviews or case studies you might otherwise quote from as part of a standard PowerPoint presentation. Introducing a performative element and different voices enlivens data and disrupts a sense of authoritative transmission.
- While presenting your own data, invite audiences to work with it visually – for example, generating images or maps – whether individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Then invite the audience to share the materials produced. What does the 'visual' bring to data, the discussion, the interpretation – which may not have been obvious before?

## ***Dr Suzanne Albary. Podcasting: widening my own understanding through conversation***

Through the use of spoken word and crafting conversations that communicate not only ideas, but our feelings of joy, frustration, confusion, and excitement, this case study outlines how podcasts exemplify embodied dissemination.

In 2022, podcasts in the UK had an estimated 21.2 million listeners, with 48% indicating they listened to podcasts because they wanted to learn something new (Götting, 2023).

In my podcast, 'Do better research', I talk to researchers across disciplines about their work with a focus on the methodologies they use. In speaking to researchers, I quickly realised that these conversations were purposeful for everyone involved – my students and listeners, those I was interviewing, and myself.

### **The host**

For me, podcasting was initially an opportunity to share conversations about doing research between students and practitioners. But it became much more about having conversations, about being social with researchers I would never have had the opportunity to meet. Being a doctoral student can be isolating. You are dedicated to a singular independent project. You spend hours poring over the literature, your data, your analysis, and findings. You write, and your writing is 'for the academy'.

Through podcasting, I have more informal conversations with researchers about their work, and through those conversations widen my own understanding of ways of being a researcher and doing research. I share in solidarity with the audience community, the challenges, small victories, and the moments of clarity within the isolation of doing a PhD. These conversations helped me 'learn, feel good, be moved, entertained [and] motivated' (Harter, 2019, p.127) in my own research, rethink and build the confidence I needed to pursue alternative and creative methods elsewhere in my work, and embody my own ways of dissemination.

## **The co-host**

Podcasting is another way of bringing the researcher's voice back into their work (Albary, 2022). We are vital parts of the research we conduct, and traditional academic publications often try to diminish that input in favour of the 'objective observer'. Podcasting gives us the opportunity to convey the authentic passion and dedication we have for our research, to embody the work we do, better promoting the potential impact of our findings. Hearing someone talk about their research, listening to their 'intonation and cadence' helps 'convey meaning' (Harter, 2019, p.127).

The researchers I interview, my 'co-hosts' for each episode, are placed back in control of the stories they want to tell and how they want to tell them. Some of my guests went onto develop their own podcasts. Some wrote about the experience as liberating, giving them more confidence in articulating their work for a wider audience.

## **The audience**

Traditional forms of research dissemination are constrained by the rigid structures of academic journals. While these may be valuable (career progression and REF, and publishing to specific audiences), for the range of doctoral students we work with (for example, professional or practice-based doctorates, such as DProf, DBA, and EdD), these may not be the most accessible places for them to share their work and have impact on their communities of practice. Podcasts have the potential to reach far beyond an academic audience, to practitioners and the public who can directly benefit from new and innovative knowledge, and can apply that knowledge immediately in new contexts. Disseminating knowledge in this way can help develop, and build new, communities of practice (Zumach and Portillo, 2020), help 'translate research into practice' (Naff, 2020, p.7), and demonstrate the tangible benefits of UK higher education across society. As Zumach and Portillo put it, the 'inclusive nature' of how podcasting content can be presented, and 'being publicly available allows audience members to participate both inside and outside of the academy and globally' (2020, p.1).

## **How to get started**

Start by freewriting – the process of writing, uninterrupted, and with a freeform structure, without references or any kind of editing. Spend five minutes, and answer the following:

- Briefly, what your research is about using as little jargon as possible, as if explaining it to a friend with no experience of your field or academia.
- What is the purpose or impact of your results; who will your research benefit most?
- What story do you want to tell? What is the main 'hook' to draw people in?

Once you have your story, you can think more specifically about the kinds of questions you want to ask and answer as part of your discussion (even if that discussion is just you): these questions will form the structure of your podcast.

### ***Dr Sam Illingworth. Embracing poetry as pedagogy: carving out a unique academic identity through creativity***

This case study exemplifies embodied dissemination by demonstrating how the physical presence and interactive engagement of poetry workshops foster deeper connections, transforming both teaching and research through lived, participatory experience.

For the past decade, my academic career has been fuelled by a passion for poetry, particularly its use as a research methodology to bridge diverse communities (Illingworth 2022). However, when it came to incorporating poetry into my teaching practice, I hesitated. Transitioning from a background in Physics to the Humanities, I worried about being taken seriously by my academic peers and students.

This uncertainty persisted until a transformative event provided me with the opportunity to rethink. I was invited to participate in the Cell Block Science initiative (Heron, 2019), conducting poetry workshops with prisoners at HM Prison Shotts in North Lanarkshire, Scotland. These sessions, part of a wider initiative that aimed to engage prisoners with STEM subjects were revelatory. The engagement and enthusiasm of the participants in discussing science through poetry gave me the confidence to begin to incorporate poetry into my teaching.

Initially, I introduced poems related to the subjects I taught, such as science communication and environmental science. This approach gradually evolved into developing writing exercises for students (undergraduate, taught postgraduate, and doctoral), enabling them to explore both their learning journeys and their sense of

belonging within the university community. For doctoral students in particular, these poetic exercises facilitated reflection on their research processes and also demonstrated how embodied dissemination methods can enhance their academic engagement and communication. This highlights the broader potential for dissemination approaches that move beyond traditional textual formats. This experience marked a significant shift in my teaching practice, highlighting the power of poetry to foster deeper connections and reflections on academic subjects.

To my surprise, these initial exercises were very well received, leading to the creation of more comprehensive workshops focused on the reading, analysis, and creation of poetry. This positive reception, particularly from doctoral students engaging with these methods as part of their research journeys, reinforced the value of embodied dissemination, highlighting its potential as a meaningful and reflective academic tool. It has resulted in the publication of research articles (Illingworth and Grimwood, 2024), securing grants, contributing to book chapters (Illingworth, 2023), and even co-authoring a book on the pedagogical use of poetry (Illingworth and Jack, 2024).

I share this not as self-promotion but to highlight the vast possibilities and opportunities that an embodied dissemination approach to teaching can unveil. Poetry has empowered me to carve out a unique academic identity through creativity. My path has involved pushing the limits of how poetry can be used and who it can reach. Ironically, despite my initial reservations about integrating poetry into my teaching due to concerns about being taken seriously, the transformative experience at Shotts was key in dismantling those fears, reinforcing my conviction in the value of poetry in education. For doctoral students, engaging with poetry as an embodied dissemination method can provide an alternative means of sharing their research, fostering deeper connections with their work and audiences beyond conventional academic structures.

In a surprisingly lucid moment of metacognition I only really recognised this turning point in a recent poetic reflection exercise (see below), underscoring the power of poetic reflection in personal and professional development (Shapiro, 2010). By embracing poetry as a vital component of my educational practice, I have not only expanded my own horizons but also opened new avenues for my students and colleagues to engage with complex subjects in a more meaningful and connected way. This realisation underscores the transformative

power of giving oneself permission to explore and innovate, thereby enriching the academic environment for all involved.

### **Exercise: reflecting on your academic identity through poetry**

Start by creating a list poem to explore your academic identity. Think about your own academic or research journey, including the challenges and achievements you have faced. Consider these prompts to guide your reflection:

- Subjects or concepts that captivate you.
- Moments of uncertainty or success.
- Influential mentors, peers, or literature.
- Dreams for your academic future.

Set a timer for 60 seconds and write down everything that comes to mind, allowing your thoughts to flow freely. Use your list as inspiration to draft a poem that encapsulates your academic identity, offering a reflective glimpse into your experiences, influences, and aspirations in academia and beyond.

## ***Conclusion***

Despite the different experiences explored in these reflective pieces there are four key connecting themes which we wish to conclude with. First, authenticity: the methods seem to 'chime' or 'work' for that individual or there is a reflective sense of knowing which embodied dissemination method(s) they may want to engage with. Authenticity does not just sit with the teacher; embodied dissemination methods can more readily allow for other voices to be brought into the data (as Kate suggests) or bring the researchers voice back into their work (as Suzanne mentions). Second, connection: adopting embodied dissemination may also offer an opportunity to broaden one's own understanding through the connecting practice of dialogue and exchange. Connections can be brought into sharper focus between the various parties of the work. Both inter- and intra-connection may be at play here. Each teacher has engaged with processes that have offered an immediate sense of connection between themselves and the embodied dissemination methods. Third, community: through such connections we can build community linking

diverse groups together (as Sam explores) in their authentic presentation of findings. In keeping their embodied practice close to the self, authenticity, connection, and community may develop as a result. Indeed, it is our hope that through voicing our own experience that those teaching doctoral students may be able to more readily engage with the communities upon which their work could impact. Finally, rethinking: embodied dissemination methods can provide the opportunity to explore new ways of thinking about a problem and engaging with complexity in a free and open manner. Rethinking has been experienced in each of the three pieces above often as a moment of transition or shifting into embodied dissemination. Our suggestion is to let this article be the shift other practitioners need to engage in embodied dissemination so they might model it and inspire its use in their own students.

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