

### Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement

Vol. 18, No. 1 January 2025



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Citation: Malone, M., Davis, J., Muecke, S., Schwartz, K., Trudel, C., Weaver, L. 2025. Editorial: Writing Research Differently. Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement, 18:1, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v18i1.9579

ISSN 1836-3393 | Published by UTS ePRESS | http://ijcre. epress.lib.uts.edu.au **EDITORIAL** 

### Writing Research Differently

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**DOI:** https://doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v18i1.9579

Article History: Received 17/12/2024; Revised 28/01/2025; Accepted 29/01/2025;

Published 01/2025

#### Abstract

This themed volume explores writing research differently: both the *social* practices that might foster experimentation and participation and the *semiotic* innovations needed to articulate knowledge plurality in our published scholarly texts. This collection of community-based research articles explores the many ways in which the standard genre conventions of the research article – order, structure, headings, images and quotes – can be creatively called upon to make visible on the page other worlds, other futures, other ways of knowing and being. Together, they demonstrate that coherence and cohesion – clarity – come in more shapes and forms than generally admitted, and can be welcoming frameworks for the rarely admitted: hope, sustenance, complexity, conflict and change.

#### **Keywords**

Community-Based Research; Research Writing; Journal Practices; Social Semiotics; Experimentation



#### Introduction

There is a norm, and both writers and reviewers are conditioned toward that norm. But it begs the question that, outside of academic circles, how much of this research informs practice and why not?... There should be a research/practice/ learning/research/validation through publishing/practice improvement continuum of sorts but in each there are exit points which prevent continual improvement toward better outcomes for research and for communities. Sigh. And so, we reinvent practice and research over and over again – all with the hope of improved outcomes. [Liz Weaver, co-editor]

Writing research differently responds to the idea that research is a process, and that the 'output', the finished research article that is published, has mostly deleted what went into making it: conversations, fieldwork, searches for data, readings, negotiations, first drafts, and so on. This is the stuff of community-based research and engagement – knowledge democracy, participation and collaboration – but is rarely acknowledged within traditional publication processes. So, once the manuscript is submitted to the journal in response to the Call for Proposals, the process goes on: more reading, peer review, editorial consultation, revisions and resubmission. If 'the thinking is in the writing', as is often said, then it is also in the collaborations, the thinking together that both community-based research and journal production foster.

There is also an epistemological perspective to 'research as process' that interrogates the communicative framework. In the natural and social sciences, the idea of 'writing up' research has come to been seen as some sort of neutral, unengaged act of transcription, the transparent representation of the object. This epistemological framing sets up an artificial divide between the subject position of the writer (and reader) over here, while the object lies at some distance over there, a divide that is properly bridged through the orderly, linear, disinterested use of language. As if in writing there were not a constant zig-zagging, with detours and corrections, as a pathway is found for the writing to follow. The object – be it research findings, methodology, partnerships, theory or much else besides – has to be represented in some way in the writing, certainly. But we should not forget how the subject is also constructed as relatively distant or engaged, masterful or modestly unknowing; in other words, as a subjectivity that engages (or not!) the reader's interest from the moment they open the journal to read the articles.

Establishing, justifying, stabilising the multiple relationships in a text, any text, is hard work. This is especially true in texts where much is at stake, such as in peer-reviewed research articles. Here, social, epistemological and material goods such as legitimacy, credibility and authority are very much at play (Gee 2014). This is the critical work that authors of community-based research and practice engage in when they share their collaborative efforts in an academic journal. We can think of this as the *rhetorical* work of communication, occurring within - and against - an institutionalised genre, with its particular rules of the game. Charles Bazerman (1988, p. 6) gives a helpful definition of rhetoric, as 'the study of how people use language and other symbols to realize human goals and carry out human activities. Rhetoric is ultimately a practical study offering people greater control over their symbolic activity'. He goes on to make plain the connection between rhetorical strategies and genre writing: 'As these solutions become familiar, accepted, and molded through repeated use, they gain institutional force. Thus, though genre emerges out of contexts, it becomes part of the context for future work' (Bazerman 1988, p. 8). A very good example of this is the standard organisation of the research article: Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion. Evolved over time as a means of organising and prioritising different elements of an experiment in the natural sciences, it is now a widely used and expected feature of the scholarly communication of research that emanates far from the lab, including much social science and community-based research (Malone 2024).

Yet these same conventions can also be viewed as a 'way in', the tangible means by which we can challenge habitual routes or explore alternative communicative pathways for sharing new and diverse knowledges and practices. Following understandings such as those proposed by social semiotics and critical



discourse analysis, this volume examines the research article as a specialised genre, whose development over time emerged as part and parcel of *language-use-in-the-world* in specific, recurring contexts for specific social purposes (Atkinson 1999). Moreover, the genre continues to evolve, shaped by and constitutive of larger, ongoing, contested worlds. By this understanding, genre conventions are resources to be grasped, not rules to be adhered to. At least, not in this volume. As Norman Fairclough (2003, p. 69, italics in the original) noted, genre should be understood as 'a *potential* which is variably drawn upon in *actual* texts and interactions'. This volume sought to experiment with this inherent potential in order to make more visible on the page the values, standards and methodologies of engaged research and practice: participatory practices, reciprocity, knowledge democracy, shared authority, relevance and accessibility. Anna Tsing (2015, p. vii) puts it well:

Humans cannot survive by stomping on all the others ... The time has come for new ways of telling true stories beyond civilizational first principles. Without Man and Nature, all creatures can come back to life, and men and women can express themselves without the strictures of a parochially imagined rationality.

This Editorial thus works as we hope to carry on: by valuing transparency, accountability and experimentation. The following discussion features some of the many written contributions to this volume, including quotes from external reviewers, participating authors and some of our own reflections on the process and outcomes. Together, we hope they give a sense of the thoughtful and generous zig-zagging undertaken by the various interested and invested parties to this volume, keen to help clear new rhetorical pathways that rigorous, critical and relevant writing might adopt. We highlight some of the important solutions and innovations that authors developed, and finish with a few reflections by the editorial team.

#### The process, and some early reflections

This themed volume was co-led by an editorial team of Margaret Malone, Jourdan Davis, Stephen Muecke, Karen Schwartz, Chantal Trudel and Liz Weaver. Of the 20 proposals submitted to the Call by late January 2024, we invited 15 of them to submit full manuscripts by June of that same year. In the intervening period, across March, April and May, the editorial team held a series of voluntary online writers' workshops for all to collaboratively support manuscript development. Given the geographic spread, we split into two teams, roughly breaking into one group for those in the Americas (nine author teams, with Karen, Chantal, Jourdan, Liz and Margaret), and another group with those from Europe, Africa and Australasia (six author teams, with Stephen and Margaret). Each group offered three workshops, to allow for differences in availability. Most authors and editors attended two workshops.

The workshops were loosely but intentionally structured. The first workshop was a place for all attendees to introduce themselves, their partnerships/collaborations and the focus of their work. We asked: 'What is it that you want to talk about in your manuscripts? What do you want to make visible in the text that might normally be excluded? How might you do it?' In the second, we focused on the research article as a form of genre writing, concentrating on its 'top-level' conventions: authorship, the organisation, introduction and sub-headings, and emphasis on the written word and archives (as opposed to images, speech, art, movement, memories, for example). We discussed the potential impact and (ir) relevance of these features for communicating community-based research and practice, and ways they might be used, modified or replaced with alternatives. In the third workshop, we focused on authors developing their manuscripts and sharing their approaches, insights and challenges. Following are some quotes from submitting author participants about writing research differently, its relevance to their work and the workshop process:

It's been a huge challenge in allowing the traditional system of ethics approval to make space for communities to generate their own frameworks of knowledge production ... so, in terms of how our methodology informs writing research differently, it begins with this ethical stance.



In these communities where the walking happens, small torches will light the way when they have to walk in the dark, which was one of the main findings from the study about the perils of walking at night and during load shedding. So, literally, starting the paper with a walk, where we're brought along this journey.

You know, [it's been] eye opening. And I think I've learned so many lessons now with understanding this field that I've been working in for so long, and actually not really knowing it, to be honest. I had to be very frank and honest with myself, just viewing it from an academic lens ... reading what you shared on the screen now, just shows the transformation of doing and writing research differently.

I kind of feel that what we did today was a bit of peer review in a very non-traditional, non-structured, unstructured, or differently structured sense. In giving feedback that was conversational and engaging. Which is often not the way the peer review is done ... but [here] doing it in very much a collaborative sense, which is in the spirit of this special volume.

Of the 15 accepted proposals, we received 11 full manuscripts. Each submission was read by two editors, who then shared their assessment with the full editorial team. Assessment focused on the following key questions:

- Does it respond to the focus of this themed volume to 'write research differently'?
- Is it an example of community-university engaged research and/or practice?
- Is there a clear and compelling focus and purpose to the manuscript?
- How might it be strengthened or improved?

Editors could choose from the following recommendations:

- · Accept for external peer review
- Request revisions (ranging from minor to major be specific)
- Decline (consider whether a general volume of *Gateways* would be suitable)

Each editor took responsibility for particular manuscripts, seeing them through all the subsequent stages of reviews and revisions. Not all have reached publication, for a whole range of reasons. Even at launch, two were not quite ready, and will be added soon (we hope). Finding the time and resources for writing, editing and reviewing is getting harder and harder. This is another reality of research that is too often left up to individuals to somehow grapple with. We designed the collaborative editorial processes and workshops for this themed volume as integral elements of writing research differently. Although as yet only small steps, they signal important alternative approaches to traditional journal operations.

# Experiments in writing research differently: What the reviewers pondered

My review relies on two sets of criteria: the Reviewer Guidelines for Gateways and the criteria implied in the Call for the Special Issue on Writing Research Differently. ... if the theme of the Special Issue is 'Writing research differently', then I expect the writing itself (the style of writing, if you like, not just the processes of research and collaborative writing workshops) to exemplify difference. [reviewer 6, emphasis in the original]

This paper is a creative essay that intentionally departs from academic writing standards. Both the summary and the introduction are very clear about this and the reader is gently encouraged to accept these



premises ... I'm not entirely sure what 'reviewing' this kind of paper might mean and overall recommend to accept this submission as it is. [reviewer 3]

Seventeen external reviewers participated in this volume, based in Angola, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA. In all, they contributed just over 13,500 words. As shown above, reviewers were attentive to the specific theme of this volume. Some key themes emerged in their recommendations regarding writing research differently but still persuasively. The work of social semiotician Gunther Kress is useful here. Kress (2010, p. 148) writes:

[A] text is a multimodal semiotic entity, seen as 'having completeness' by those who engage with it. Its sense of completeness derives from a (shared) understanding of the social occasions in which it was produced, in which it functions or to which it alludes. The text has features of internal and external cohesion and, as an integrated meaning-entity, of coherence.

Cohesion and coherence were repeatedly central concerns of the external reviewers. The key marker they used to assess these qualities was 'clarity': what's going on here, where are we going, and why? The traditional linear, orderly structure of the research article – Introduction, Literature Review, Method, Results, Discussion – goes a long way to settling in advance questions related to what should be included, where and with what prominence. Moving away from this conventional framework throws the burden of finding credible alternative rhetorical solutions onto the authors. This is not easy work. How do we differently maintain and communicate clearly and coherently all the elements that are part of participatory research and practice?

Because this is a different kind of approach than a conventional KM paper, the demands for clarity in explaining things and organising the text are higher... What's missing is the connective 'tissue' that brings the story together in a way that someone can better learn from as a whole, not just the parts. [reviewer 11]

At the end of section 4 [you write]: 'The process of writing this article has allowed us to reflect over time and to make the emerging community build up slowly' – maybe show this more explicitly in the structure of the article: maybe explain a bit more in detail what the emerging community of practice looks like or in what ways relationships 'have taken on a life beyond the initial meeting'. [reviewer 2]

Using the figure elements as the central coherency thread would provide a touchpoint for the reader to orient and reorient with the paper's purpose as they progress through the narrative. This could perhaps be achieved by simply using the same category names throughout the descriptive content ... [reviewer 9]

It was especially important for authors to establish clarity of direction and purpose in the Introduction section. This is true for any research article: research has long shown that an article's Introduction is often the most contested, revised and commented-upon section (Knorr-Cetina 1981; Latour 1987). Perhaps not surprisingly, a very dominant genre convention has emerged to respond to this need, first described by genre analyst John Swales as a three-step move to 'create a research space'. This rhetorical strategy is commonplace in social science research articles, including (with modifications) in community-based research. The three-step move involves: one, establish a research territory through reference to the literature; two, find a gap; and three, fill the gap with your present research (Swales 1990, 2004). It is responsible for setting up all that follows, balancing the tension between novelty and recognition.

First of all, I think the article would benefit from a more 'standard' Introduction section. While the very comprehensive introduction of the [project] is interesting, I am not sure whether ... it is the focus per se. An Introduction would also be useful to clarify a bit more specifically, what the purpose/s of the article are. [reviewer 2]



I am also curious how research 'gaps' replicate a colonial perspective. 'Oh, look at the gap I found; I think I'll set up my homestead', the settler in my head murmurs when I hear someone telling a student to find a gap. Meanwhile, the 'gap' is teeming with growth and movement. Your paper captures this – but I think a bit more unsettling the gap could add more poetry and play to your creative and curious writing style. [reviewer 8]

Reviewers also drew attention to the occasional loss of material, both theoretical and 'real world'. This was particularly true for references to the literature. Authors were perhaps unsure of how and where to include it, if one no longer had recourse to, or wanted to separate it within, the 'Literature review' section. The result was that previous scholarly work was sometimes left out. A number of reviewers urged restitution: its involvement *in dialogue* with other expert contributors was a crucial way to make visible on the page the epistemological and methodological framework of the research being described. Its situated inclusion actively contributed to the authors' objectives.

Further work is needed to put the article into dialogue with existing scholarship, as citations are light and could be engaged with more thoroughly ... Further theoretical engagement with the collaborator statements will also address this concern. [reviewer 5]

I appreciate you are trying to circumvent traditional academic conventions (for example Literature Review) but, at the same time, this literature is actually highly relevant to your argument ... I think this sustained 'academic advocacy' is crucial to the point you are trying to make and needs to be acknowledged to develop your argument wholly. [reviewer 7]

Other missing details also concerned the very real world of context and collaboration, as well as manuscript co-production:

My first suggestion would be to help us [the reader] get a more precise idea of the 'kind of research' the authors are usually doing ... I was left with a sense of intangibility that contrasted with the importance given to actual commitment to communities in their own environments and political struggles. [reviewer 3]

I missed a discussion on the production of the manuscript. Was this a collaborative effort? If so, what was the process, who was included and in what roles? [reviewer 6]

### Innovations in writing research differently, and why this matters

Charles Bazerman (1988, p. 62) argues that the traditional scientific research article has only one 'accountability': 'Scientific discourse, therefore, is built on accountability to empirical fact ... over all other possible accountabilities (such as to ancient texts, theory, social networks, grant-giving agencies), and must subordinate other forms of accountability ... to the empirical accountability'. Community-based research and practice, in contrast, seeks to uphold multiple obligations – to subject (author and reader), to the object, to context and history, and to reciprocal and respectful relationships, both human and more-than human.

The task we have explored in this themed volume is how to communicate in writing those multiple, diverse and complex accountabilities. This volume contains at launch five experiments in doing just this, plus a final article that critically and comprehensively examines the pressing reasons for doing so. We are thankful to Baptiste Godrie for this contribution; he has done much of the heavy lifting required to put this volume in its wider context. Below are our small descriptive impressions of the five experimental research articles, stepping stones into the volume.

Individually and as a whole these contributions show how we can engage more vigorously with the conventions of scholarly writing and experiment with alternative rhetorical strategies as rigorous elements



in communicating new knowledges and important practices. They use movement, space, different notions of time, voices, stories, transcripts and anecdotes, drawings, photographs and graphs, metaphors, the seasons, the sharing of food and much more besides to record research differently. The result is a noticeable absence of hierarchy; instead, a sharing of this space. These articles are not predicated on scarcity and competition – as commodities are in the market economy – rather, as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020) writes, they are explorations of abundance and reciprocity, in which 'all flourishing is mutual'.

#### The articles

## EXPERIMENTING WITH TWILIGHT LEARNINGS AND TWILIGHT WRITINGS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We were charmed by the *character* of the Tiny House on Wheels. It was like a travelling diplomat, moving from place to place engaging different kinds of people's interest in living differently. The tiny house thus seemed to create its own mobile alternative 'network', as the writing made good use of the insights of Actor Network Theory. The process of writing and the article itself made space for the hidden and 'marginal' stages of a research project – sometimes troubled, more often hopeful. In doing so, the authors were able to bring together a 'community of actors', including the tiny house as a very active object, to assemble ways of making and knowing 'different kinds of worlds'.

## A CURATED WALK WITH PEER RESEARCHERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES: ENGAGING A RESEARCH JOURNEY TOWARD MEANINGFUL IMPACT

Using an honest and refreshing royal 'we', the author collective demonstrates how writing with peer researchers can build important reflective bridges across geographies and lived realities. Providing a curated narrative of how young men from low-income communities in London and Cape Town experience walking in their respective cities, they trouble the conventional thinking about young men as 'invulnerable and walking without concern'. While showing that peer researchers are indeed experts of their own lives who provide pivotal first-hand data that should – ideally – be central to any progressive urban mobility policy worth its salt, the authors also give a detailed account of what it takes to practically steer a meandering 'walking-writing' process. As they argue, positioning curation as an ethics of care and act of solidarity is premised on mutual but differentiated lines of accountability. While being mindful of the multiple power imbalances – between center and periphery, North and South, young and old – and mitigating them wherever possible, the authors are also transparent about the specific allocation of research and writing tasks and how these were woven together in the vignettes shared. In combining the actualities of walking with the possibilities of informing future mobility policies through a collaborative writing process, the authors offer new pathways for propositional community-based research.

## CURATING LIFE IN VACANT SPACES: COMMUNITY ACTION RESEARCH AND REVERSING THE PROCESS OF ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE-MAKING

Broken spaces, such as those that resulted after the earthquakes in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2010 and 2011, create powerful opportunities for renewal, reconnection, innovation and action. The authors of this article identify that broken spaces don't benefit from frameworks and research but rather from the immediacy of action and response. They invite readers to join them on a backwards journey, from immediate action, through impact, clarifying results through organising frameworks and finally to consider the research question. During this backwards journey, the authors ask compelling questions about impact, sensemaking and academic research. They also consider how the use of a 'thinking framework' to organise the research may actually hinder the results. In this article, the authors describe their research as a curation and narration



approach. The actions speak first, the impact follows. This approach enables action and emergence in generative and compelling ways.

#### REFLECTIONS ON MULTIMODALITY: MAKING THE MOST OF KAIROTIC MOMENTS

This article is in one sense about letting go – letting go of prosaic written language privileged in 'traditional' academic writing which, by and large, can't convey experience. To do this, the authors embraced a multimodal approach to explore possibilities for sharing insights with friendship groups of people living with dementia. This involved drawing on visual communication and creative approaches to knowledge mobilisation. The authors also let go of conventional research schedules in adopting a kairotic methodology. Serendipitous occurrences in the research process – a chance meeting or a new experience – are unpredictable but potentially transformative.

# PARTICIPATORY ESOL AS PROCESS AND PRODUCT: COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH REFUGEE ENGLISH LEARNERS

This article intertwines two types of stories. The first story is that of the researchers as they engaged with and adapted the curriculum of an English as a Second Language (ESOL) program to be more relevant and engaging for the students and themselves. Inviting students to write and share their stories of experience created deeper connections, understanding and language competency. The article also provides a theoretical context for this curriculum adaptation. Participatory practice is not new to the community sector: sharing its insights in the scholarly literature in ways that do not 'filter' the students' insights through scholarly expertise is important. In the classroom, teachers and students collaboratively build and interpret the curriculum; in the article, the participants' voices and lived experiences are weaved with theory. In both spaces, the ESOL program participants bring rich cultural histories which, when explored, create bridges to their new country.

#### SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS, FROM THE EDITORS

I guess the insight for me is, it went beyond the how to write research differently, to how to review, how to review research differently. And then how do you talk about that?

So basically, I'm saying that I think that there's several different conversations that came out of this experience. So, like, do we need more discussions about the methodologies? Do we need more examples of how research could be done differently? Do we need more examples of how [research could] be written up differently? Do we need more discussions about peer review? And so, I think that that's something that we could talk about ... because the idea is so different that every aspect of the process needs to be reevaluated.

I think it's moving towards a greater transparency about process, that [in] the traditional production of an academic article, all the peripheral stuff falls away, and you're left with a beautiful, finished product. But we're trying to be transparent about all the other bits and pieces that unnecessarily get removed in the process.

I think the spark for me [is] that the innovation is actually the fact that we have a journal coming out. That's the innovation. All the articles that appear in this journal, because, like, we could have had 30 people doing the training and all that kind of stuff, and ended up with 0 right? And it might not be cohesive, might not be comprehensive. It might not be all the things we had hoped it would be. But we're starting a journey. And this is the first step of the journey. So, the innovation is the fact that we actually have something at the end of the journey.



And I think, you know, from my perspective, not being an academic or in the academic realm, it's felt a little bit like I've been a fish out of my water that I swim in. So yeah, so that's always kind of like weird.

So, like, even though the whole point of this was to make it more accessible, the fact that you still felt like a fish out of water might be worth noting in our editorial about how, even when we put in this effort, there's still so much work to be done.

I wonder what might be done differently, should a second edition of writing research differently be done?

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