

In search for creative and embedded research impact

*Funding agencies are increasingly seeking to promote more non-linear developmental approaches to research impact. In this post, **Natalia Kucirkova**, discusses how her research on children's story making apps presents a useful way for thinking about research impact that is embedded within the communities where it will be most beneficial. Highlighting the particular challenges and opportunities presented by this type of research, she suggests that work remains to be done to support such research sustainably.*

Pathways to impact can quickly become formulaic gestures: same old research with some bolted-on engagements activities. However, the new UKRI application and assessment process implies that impact needs to be '[centrally embedded](#)' into the application and assessment process. The change is part of a broader shift from thinking about set pathways towards socially embedded research. What does this mean in practice?

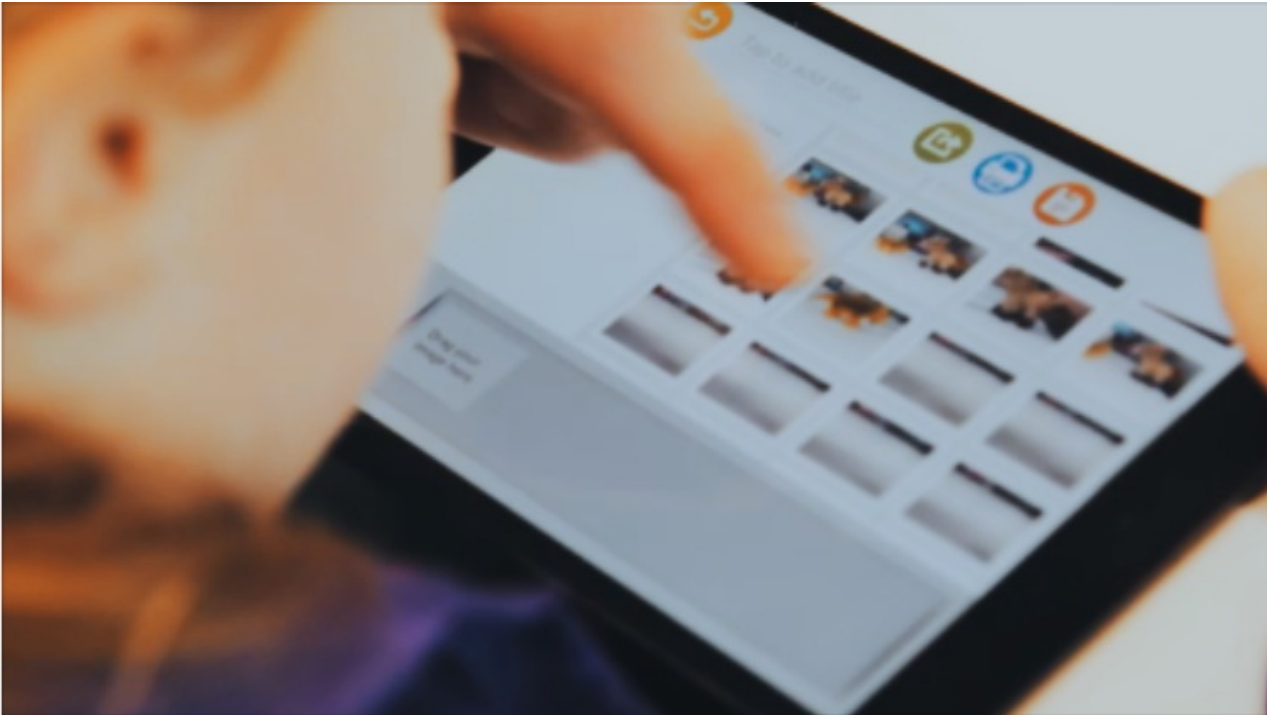
Many funders and academics feel the need for more creative impact agenda, one that does not simply translate [research to practice](#), but that [transforms practice through research](#). Embedded impact happens when research is produced in dialogue with the research recipients, who can embed and expand the knowledge through their networks and everyday practice. It is this kind of impact that major funders now rightly expect from financed research projects. In the book [The Digitally Agile Researcher](#), which I co-edited with Oliver Quinlan, we discuss various strategies that researchers can follow to achieve embedded impact. One of them is co-production.

Co-production in social sciences

Co-production is often perceived as a method to produce new 'intangible' knowledge in the social sciences. For example through the organisation of [participatory workshops](#). However, an equally important and often neglected impact strategy is the co-production of research-based products. Research-based products are typical end-product results of business and medical research, but they are less common in social sciences. In my own field, education, the pathways to commercialisation are often opaque and difficult to navigate. However, once overcome, there are unique benefits for both the academics and non-academics involved.

An example

Embedded research impact is highly contextual, so my example here is purely intended to prompt some thoughts and inspiration as to the kinds of relationships and dynamics that might work in your own fields.



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I study children's reading and use of technologies. The combination of the two interests has given rise to my niche interest in children's e-books, especially those that are personalised and uniquely created for and by individual children. Given the seamless and society-wide use of tablets and smartphones, a story-making tablet/smartphone app seemed like a good idea.

The first stage of the app's (called "[Our Story](#)") production required negotiating time of the university-based app designer and estimating costs for the app's iterative improvement. Numerous and regular meetings with the strategic development office team, heads of department and dean were necessary for presenting the case and making it part of my own research impact strategy. There were no previous examples to draw on or procedures to follow, so I was unsure of what to ask or expect. What I was sure about was the need to directly engage the app's end users.

The app's development was undertaken in close conversations with local teachers, parents and children. Had it not been for these collaborators, we would have missed important design features. For example, it was the teachers who suggested adding the option of printing out small booklets, an option that proved popular in other schools. It was the participating families who told us to use large colourful icons for the app's navigation. The iconic design proved to be very popular not only with young children locally, but also with children from Japan, Spain and the USA.

Participatory research-design

Participatory research is sometimes used as a throw-away idea to involve research beneficiaries into a cycle of extractive knowledge production. However, to achieve sustainable and meaningful impact, participatory research based on mutual trust and the commitment of researchers and research users is vital. As mentioned, research is impactful when it moves through different networks and everyday practices. In my case, such research impact spiralled out from a seemingly self-contained product in the form of an app.

The participatory process positioned teachers and parents and their children as co-researchers and app co-designers. These relationships developed further over time. Some teachers [co-wrote articles](#) with us, which widened their writing experience and our understanding of the reported issues. Some practitioners undertook action research with the app in their classrooms, which enriched their understanding of the research process and professional development. Some teachers decided to use Our Story with populations we would have not considered ourselves (for example with [elderly adults with dementia](#) or [young adults with special educational needs](#)). These initiatives enabled new research and small-scale projects that transformed the study participants' as well as my own understandings of what personal digital stories mean in diverse contexts.

Further, positioning [children as co-researchers](#) meant that the traditional adult-child hierarchy was disrupted and the children could use the app in ways adults would have not anticipated. For instance, although I had initially planned to focus on text-based stories and targeting reading as the key outcome measure, the children expanded this scope to other meaning-making modes. Instead of focusing on letters and several book pages, they preferred to use one-page audio-recorded stories, or to create short videos that they embedded into their storyboards. Capturing children's voices in a multimedia and multimodal way, had opened a new branch of research for me that focuses on the whole body and all senses in the reading process.

Forging links in a research network

Participatory research was essential in the app's development and design iteration phases, but it was the close connection to the research community that enabled Our Story's use in other projects and thus to scale up its impact nationally and internationally. For example, Drs McPake and Stephen used the app in their [research with Gaelic pre-schools](#) and children's language learning, while another research team led by Dr Canning used the app together with English childminders with the aim of [supporting children's creativity and imagination](#). The fact that the app has always been offered open-access and for free has facilitated its adoption by other research teams. It has also enabled other researchers to modify the app in ways relevant to their individual funded projects, such as for example [food-related stories in a healthy eating intervention](#).

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My involvement in the app's initial design and research enabled me to better understand the challenges faced by commercial producers of children's apps and this has proved invaluable in connecting the project to the children's app industry through consultancy and collaboration. It has also facilitated government-funded research focused on children's apps more broadly, which have enabled new interdisciplinary connections.

I believe that embedded research impact is possible to achieve with any disciplinary background, key target group or researcher portfolio, but it is a slow process that requires a significant commitment and resources. My example is illustrative – the sort of engagement in impact I describe might not be possible for others and not all research lends itself to being embedded into products in this way. When I embarked on this journey, embedded research impact was not standard in funded projects. I needed to dedicate many extra nights and weekends to honour my commitment to the community. With funding agencies' more concentrated focus on research that grows organically, I hope that such research becomes a standard and sustainable way of upholding the unique human connections between research and practice.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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