

Excursions

Volume 11, Issue 1 (2021) | (Re)Connect



Cover Photo: (Re)Connect by Charlotte Esposito

Essays: *(Re)Connecting Academia*

Sophie Milbourne
How Science Communication Helped Me
Find my Identity as a Scientist

www.excursions-journal.org.uk

How Science Communication Helped Me Find my Identity as a Scientist

Sophie Milbourne

Science Communicator

What was life as a scientist like? As I started on the first day of my four-year PhD program, this was one of the questions I was excited to answer. I had always loved learning about more and more things, so I was ready to get my teeth stuck into my stem cell research project, as well as what scientists actually do day to day. It is safe to say that I quickly fell in love with doing experiments. I was even revelling in the failed experiments and jumped at the chance to try and work out what needed to be fixed. Perhaps somewhat naively for a first year PhD student.

As each result came in, and the next experiment designed and set up, I was high on discovery – even if it was only within my tiny niche area. But then a course assignment cropped up. As second year PhD students, we needed to compete in the 3 Minute Thesis competition. We had 3 minutes to explain our research using a single slide for a non-scientific audience. I could not see the value in this at all. When would I ever need these skills again? I wanted to be a credible scientist so I would only be talking to other scientists whether that was at conferences or through publications and such. I could not get out of the assignment, so I did my prep. The perfectionist in me still wanted to do well, so I spent hours creating the best script I could and then made use of the hours I spent in the darkroom developing my Western blots to rehearse.

What I started realising while I was preparing was how narrow minded regarding what a career as a scientist would look like I had become. Having to translate what I was doing in the lab for a non-scientific audience forced me to stop, take a step back and look at the big picture. Why was I doing this research? Why should anybody care? It was not just about churning out results and moving onto the next question.

The day came and it was my turn to take the stage to deliver my talk. To my amazement, I managed to win the prize. I even got a few laughs along the way from my audience who were engaging with me. Something so simple and something I was dreading doing had actually opened my eyes up to a completely new world. A world of researchers doing science communication. Something it turns out I was actually good at. Something that I realised I enjoyed so much more than just being in the lab and doing yet another Western blot. It made me remember that there were others outside of my tiny research bubble. Other scientists and non-scientists, all who may be interested in learning more about my research.

That night after my victory, I was doing my usual scroll through Instagram. As I scrolled past photos of friends getting engaged, their latest meal and fluffy pets, I wondered if anyone was using social media to share more about science. After a quick search, I found a handful of PhD students from across the world who wrote blogs and shared posts on their Instagram about their research but also about their lives as scientists. I instantly knew that I wanted to be a part of their gang. I connected with them, launched my science blog (<https://sophtalkscience.com/>) and wrote my first few posts to share on my own Instagram (@soph.talks.science). This was the moment that changed my career ambitions in a heartbeat.

This made me realise that there was so much more to being a scientist than churning out research. What did the publications and conference talks even mean if you could not communicate it well – whether that was to other researchers or not? I made it my mission for the rest of my PhD, not just to

train how to become a researcher, but how to become a better communicator and share science with various audiences. Since then, I have written blogs and articles. I have used social media to build a community. I have given career talks at schools and within local communities. I even stood on a soapbox on the Brighton seafront and used Marvel characters to share more about my research with the public. I had truly propped the lab door wide to let others into my little research bubble.

So, what is life as a scientist like? For me, it is about connecting discoveries with the world outside your lab. No matter what kind of career you have, as a researcher you will always need to communicate it in one way or another with someone. While you might not want to be giving community talks or creating an Instagram post, getting that communication experience and training is vital for a successful career as a scientist.