

The EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation (EUCI)

Reflective Portfolio by Yiwen Gao (University of Warwick)

## Cover Letter

Effective communication with the non-academic audience about scientific research is a challenge. Many scientific findings seem daunting with their professional terms and complicated sentence structure in the written form. Besides, the findings might not necessarily bring good news and could potentially make people more nervous about certain issues. For example, general climate anxiety is widely affecting our society with more publications released by IPCC. Despite the fact that the scientific research is revealing humanity's urgent situation in taking action, it also provokes other social issues in this case.

So how can researchers deliver the most up-to-date message while creating a positive cycle for changes? This question was first time presented to me in one of the modules in term 1 of my postgraduate study and has stayed in my mind since then. In that class, eventually, we chose to use the form of documentary to deliver the message, as more people would watch videos online during the pandemic, which could be seen as a new approach for scientific communication.

However, I have found more effective communication approaches by participating in diverse activities on campus. For the EUCI submission, I have chosen my experience in the [Resonate Festival 2022](#), a festival that combines science and art organised by the University of Warwick to increase people's knowledge and awareness of real-life issues, to explain how this experience has met the four learning outcomes in the workshops delivered by EUTOPIA.

As a reflective personal experience, I have described two performances I watched in detail during the whole festival and reviewed my learnings and thoughts about them. Although the performances' themes are simple, both triggered my deep thinking related to my academic study, cultural background, and inspirations in event organising. I have also analysed my learnings from the event from different positionalities, such as a student in Global Sustainable Development, Chinese and art-lover, all of which could show my active attempt to be reflective. At the end of the article, I briefly discussed the limitations I found about the festival and myself. The experience made me realise my shortage in being critical and providing suggestions for further improvement. Although I couldn't express more my appreciation for the festival design and the majority of my experience was highly positive and beneficial, I realise that reflective thinking should go beyond one side of the storytelling and touch the other side.

Being an international student myself, the intercultural element not only presented in how I built my personal understanding from such an experience but also in how the festival welcomed people from diverse backgrounds of all ages to participate and create shared knowledge during the event. From the second shared performance in the article, interculturalism is a crucial element in its creation. 'Say My Name' is about building an inclusive community by starting to read each other's names correctly. The name has special meaning to individuals and can be seen as an essential part of one's identity. It reveals much information about a person, such as where they come from and what the name represents in different cultures. I hope to share this project to present my understanding of interculturalism not only limited to participants' composition but also the message delivered by each performance.

The intersectoral feature in this experience focuses on how art and science could combine to better communicate with the audience and educate people. This is also the section I hope to emphasise the most in my writing, as it is my most significant learning from this cultural event. It is well-known that art could have a powerful impact by reflecting on real-life issues and be a strong statement other than sole enjoyment. Yet, in this shared experience, art has gone further and become an approach to promote scientific knowledge and serve science in a way. Besides, the wide range of topics touched and diverse stakeholders for each performance have also shown intersectoral cooperation. Academics from different disciplines were not working isolated. They actively searched for a chance to translate academic language into various types of art so that people of different ages and from different educational or cultural backgrounds could easily understand, potentially triggering more intersectoral and intercultural communication in the future.

Last but not least, the challenge-based element I have identified in this festival is that the performances were combined with ongoing studies in a timely manner. In addition to personal challenges such as indigenous community stories, the festival also includes projects that touch on challenges at the local or global level, such as inclusive community building and how people can adapt to the pandemic. Although I only explained two performances, more meaningful activities were briefly mentioned in the article, such as making reusable sanitary items, local history study, sex education and many more. All the activities seem random but contain a significant meaning behind them. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, how to effectively communicate with the general public is a challenge for academia as well. The unique design for the festival content seems like an excellent response to this challenge, which I hope will add more layers to the challenge we are expected to discuss in the article.

In my reflective writing, I adopted a casual writing style that allows me to explain

my experience in a communicative way. Pictures are also included to increase the visual interest of the reader. Besides, I also attached the reference list in the end so that people could direct themselves to the article mentioned, which I think is also an important part of transparent communication. The article ends with an open question and welcomes people to express their thoughts after reading my work, which I think was also my main takeaway from participating in Resonate Festival.

Resonate festival is the activity that has influenced me the most in my one-year study so far. From participating in and summarising my experience, I have not only deepened my academic understanding of sustainable development studies but also gained practical life skills. I see it as a perfect fit to be the topic of my reflective writing for EUCI.

## **A reflective essay on my experience participating in Resonate Festival 2022**

After graduating from a law school in China, I spent four years working on different cultural projects and travelling to figure out what I wanted to do in my life. Although my undergraduate degree provided me with a great chance to meet many hardworking cohorts, the robust study environment focused on the legal subject made me feel somewhat restricted. No matter whether it was in class or student societies, everything was related to the law major. Compared with other students who were determined to work in the legal system, I knew I wanted something else.

In the summer before COVID broke out, I started my work holiday year in New Zealand. While immersing in another culture fully, I also discovered my strong interest in nature and decided to apply for a postgraduate programme. Apart from the attractive setting of Warwick's PGT programme in sustainable development, another determinant for me to come here is because my friend strongly recommended its vibrant campus activities and renowned Art Centre.

I am a person who loves to visit art exhibitions and theatre performances and tend to believe that I have a good eye for finding inspiration from such activities on a regular basis. Even though I still remain highly curious about checking all the activities related to art that interest me, it is genuinely not easy to feel enlightened anymore.

However, in spring 2022, before the third term of my postgraduate study started, I participated in one of the most eye-opening festivals in my life on the Warwick campus. As I am typing down the word 'eye-opening', I can still remember how I marvelled at the ingenious combination of academics and art at that moment, which is why I want to write it down and share my thoughts with you here. I will talk about two impressive performances and explain how they have guided me to think about the role of cultural activity in communicating important messages on global challenges.

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## Scientific Knowledge about COVID-19 + Dance = Transmission: The Next Variant



Performers simulate a fight between two COVID variants, showing how the new variant beats the old one, thereby successfully infecting more humans.

Source: Highly Sprung Performance

This performance is co-created by academics from Coventry University and the University of Warwick and the artists from Highly Sprung to use the form of dance to tell the scientific understanding of COVID-19 and how we can adjust to life alongside it (1). I have seen dance shows as well as listened to public speeches delivered by university professors. But both in one performance? It was never a combination that crossed my mind, yet it made perfect sense and was so relevant to delivering the message.

Within an hour, researchers from universities use simple language to tell the virus's origin, how it evolves and creates variants, and what people can do to prevent getting infected. Meanwhile, the two dancers would use their bodies to imitate the virus's DNA double helix structure, the competitive relationship between different variants, or simply to fill the gap on the stage to enhance the visual enjoyment of a dance performance. At one point, they even utilised the four seating sections of the audiences and asked them to cheer for the variants' fight, which not only broke the 'fourth wall' (2) to interact with audience, but also added a touch of interest to this slightly heavy theme with dark humour.

As a Chinese person, I have experienced the strictest quarantine and lockdown policies in my country. Although people know a lot about the virus itself and related precautions through the news and official press conferences, their attitude towards the pandemic is still related to many negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. Such emotions cannot help people to understand the virus rationally, which leads to an unequal relationship. In an environment where everyone still has to sacrifice their plans more or less because of the virus, to 'tell the stories through movement,

gesture and dance' (3) seems simply at another level.

The first performance I watched at this festival immediately made me think. Art is not just a luxury way of relaxing and communicating personal experience. It can also reflect a social issue and increase people's awareness, which we have often seen in modern arts that use real-life issues as the theme. Moreover, there is a great potential to combine science and art. On the one hand, science provides rigorousness in the art creation and makes the information shared more reliable. On the other hand, the art form brings science closer to the general public and draws people's interest in understanding the scientific message. What a win-win combination!

### Use Poetry and Music to explain the importance of research: 'Say My Name'



Performers The Pips who performed their individual work on the importance of names  
Source: Resonate Festival 2022

Before I could get over my excitement about the combination of science and art shown in the dance performance, I quickly found another fantastic chance to understand research through art. 'Say My Name' is a project that 'explores and promotes respectful interactions around the name' (4). People who join this project would be guided to record an audio message where they could read their own names. By showing people how to correctly read their names themselves, the project tries to create a culture of inclusivity within a diverse learning community.

I have heard about the project from the first term studying at Warwick, as many lecturers would attach the audio message to their default email signature. This level of understanding made me so confused when I read the performance description and found it categorised as music and poem. Yes, again, as you would have guessed after reading about my experience watching the last performance, this is another combination of research and art which totally blew me away.

This performance includes three sets of performers, the Pips, Luisa Chumbinho and Siana Bangura, who have created songs and poems to honour the significance of names in shaping our sense of identity and connecting us to our family, culture, and ancestry (5). After the researchers' introduction, the three performances interpreted the importance of name and research from another perspective. The stories shared through melody and poetry effectively drew the audience to focus on the message and meaning behind this project. It was also a beautiful summary for the researchers of their achievements.

Compared with the feeling of being enlightened, this performance brought me a kind of warmth rarely seen in scientific research or social campaigns. Even if the research topic comes from daily life, academic research often has a high understanding barrier because of the complicated professional terms and long academic sentence structures. People also give up easily when it takes a lot of effort to understand. But how can research make a significant contribution to changing people's behaviour if people don't even want to spend the time knowing what the study is about? From this perspective, how academic research can communicate more effectively with ordinary people is an important topic.

I saw from this performance an artistic approach to interpreting the meaning of research and gaining more attention and support from the non-academic audience, which is a scarce storytelling ability in the academic world. What's more valuable is that this performance employs an optimistic narrative that allows people to understand and be proud of their contribution to the community. Through this positive emotional cycle, people are also more willing to participate in the study and change their behaviour.

#### Some further insights from my experience

During this three-day festival, I have also participated in talks, theatre, photograph exhibitions and many other kinds of activities designed for people of different ages and who come from different cultures, which reminded me a lot of the module content in my major, Global Sustainable Development.

Using my disciplinary knowledge, we are in a risk society, where elites don't have sufficient knowledge to tackle all the new challenges brought by anthropogenic activities, and the knowledge is also frequently questioned by the public and the experts themselves (6). Therefore, effective communication to inspire people to think and encourage individual responses is very important in such a background.

The language used in this festival is English, but its audiences are from diverse backgrounds as it was held in an international university. No doubt English is a global language linking many different cultures, especially when people meet

because they live or study in an English-speaking country. Using a language that everybody can understand is a must at a festival that aims to deliver knowledge and information. Moreover, people from any discipline, culture and age are equally welcomed to participate, which is the accessibility and diversity we always emphasise in sustainability.

I have read an article about how modern science was not developed in a single area but emerged as a result of the worldwide interchange (7), which shows the significance of diversity in generating new knowledge. A festival, as a platform where people meet and communicate, should be designed in a more inclusive and interactive way to better utilise participants' experience, knowledge and expertise, to co-create something new there. Because of their unique background, it is also worth believing that what they gain from the festival is also personalised. This asynchronous learning experience could potentially have a longer-term influence on the individual.

As a global sustainable development student, this festival helped me deepen my understanding of my study. I have also gained practical skills such as sewing and gardening, which are all essential for a more sustainable lifestyle.

As an individual who comes from China and never experienced similar festivals organised by a single university and open to the public, I am so inspired to see how the university could extend its impact to ordinary people by organising such events. A university has many recourses, cutting-edge ideas and research projects, making it a perfect place to design cultural activities at a higher level. It is just wonderful to see how the university is open to inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation to increase people's awareness of social issues.

And as a person who loves art and wants to work in related sectors, I am delighted to realise art can be practical and serve real-life topics rather than a luxury lifestyle. So many sensitive topics have been touched on in an interactive way, such as climate change comedy, sex education and LGBTQ de-stigmatisation through group discussion, making reusable period pads, a photograph exhibition about lockdown, and many more. It is fascinating to see how cultural activities could efficiently deliver the most up-to-date message by inviting people to participate. Individuals don't have to be experts in performing to initiate a performance, and the idea is what matters the most.

#### Some reflective thoughts in the end

Although I love the festival as it was presented, I also found the performance description could sometimes be as hard to understand as scientific research. There were some pages I read, and genuinely still felt lost and had no idea what to expect after all. It seems like a problem for the art industry in general and creates an



unnecessary sense of distance, which I guess could be a potential direction for improvement.

From a personal level, I realised that I have difficulties finding problems and providing suggestive options to evaluate the performances further. Many performers or researchers would mention that they are open to suggestions in the end and I always find this is a hard question. I believe that being critical is a trained ability to provide guidance and suggestion. It is interesting to realise this problem of mine since I have arrived in the UK and never noticed it before in my own country. I guess this is rooted in the education difference, as reflective and critical thinking are designed to be systematically trained in the UK university while memorising and comprehensive output were the focus in my previous study. As a person who grew up in an environment where people are taught to appreciate knowledge and its creator, developing critical thinking skills will be a long journey that I have to take alone from now on.

Ok, that is everything I want to share today and hope you had fun reading about my experience participating in this British festival organised by my university. What do you think about it?

Reference:

(1) Highly Sprung. Transmission: The Next Variant [online]. 2022 [cited 2022 Jul 29] Available from: <https://highlysprungperformance.co.uk/production/transmission-the-next-variant/>

(2) Lannom SC. Breaking the Fourth Wall: Definition, Meaning and Examples [online]. 2020 [cited 2022 Jul 29] Available from: <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/breaking-the-fourth-wall/#:~:text=The%20fourth%20wall%20is%20an,the%20screen%20we're%20watching>

(3) Highly Sprung. Home [online]. 2022 [cited 2022 Jul 29] Available from: <https://highlysprungperformance.co.uk/>

(4) CVEP. Say My Name [online]. 2022 [cited 2022 Jul 29] Available from: <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/dean-of-students-office/community-values-education/saymyname/>

(5) CVEP. Understand My Name [online]. 2022 [cited 2022 Jul 29] Available from: <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/dean-of-students-office/community-values-education/saymyname/understandmyname/>

(6) Jabareen Y. The Risk City. Dordrecht: Springer; 2015.

(7) Poskett J. We must recognise science's unsung global pioneers to alter its future [online]. 2022 [cited 2022 Jul 29] Available from: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg25333792-500-we-must-recognise-sciences-unsung-global-pioneers-to-alter-its-future/>