Drawing from your Research

A NABS+ CREATIVE WORKSHOP

In February, NABS+ hosted a half-day creative workshop designed to support researchers in communicating their work more clearly and accessibly. The session, led by Rebecca Stevens (Communications Director at CREST and NABS+) and supported by Simon Wells (NABS+/CREST Research to Practice Fellow) and Andrew Darby (CREST Content Producer and Research Associate in Speculative Design at Lancaster University), focused on creative techniques to help research travel beyond academic settings.

The workshop explored three connected ideas:

- Identifying the core message and potential impact of a piece of research
- Using analogy to explain unfamiliar concepts through familiar ones
- Structuring research as a narrative and making that narrative visible through simple visual storyboarding

WHAT IS AN ANALOGY?

An analogy is a way of explaining something unfamiliar using something familiar.

It allows an audience to borrow an existing mental model rather than build a new one from scratch. Analogies can reduce cognitive load, clarify reasoning, and make complex ideas more accessible.

Participants brought live research projects to ensure that exercises were applied directly to their own work.

The workshop began with a presentation highlighting how modes of communication influence whether information is understood, remembered, trusted, and acted upon.

STRUCTURE OF THE DAY

The session ran from 10:30am to 3:00pm and was divided into three main activities.

1. Draw Your Research

Participants wrote a one-sentence summary of their research and exchanged prompts between groups. Each person then produced a quick visual interpretation of someone else's research, with original groups attempting to match drawings to researchers.

The exercise demonstrated how easily meaning can shift between sender and receiver. It also encouraged participants to think visually rather than relying solely on technical explanation.

One participant reflected:

"Really helpful to loosen up thinking and consider from audience interest."

2. "Nan Says: Explain It Like I'm 5"

In small groups of three, participants rotated through three roles:

- Researcher
- Character (a curious "nan" or a five-year-old child)
- Observer

The Researcher explained their work as they normally would. The Character interrupted with simple, persistent questions. The Observer noted what became clearer over time and captured emerging analogies.

The focus was not on simplifying content for its own sake, but on identifying where assumptions, jargon, or skipped reasoning created barriers to understanding. Participants then experimented with analogies (prompted by both the cards and the character) that could act as a bridge into their work.

> **HOW something is communicated, affects whether it's understood, remembered, trusted, and acted on.**

As one participant summarised:

"It's not dumbing down ideas, it's evolving them!"

Another reflected on the broader implications:

"I've never considered before how relevant it is to communicate your research to lay people in an effective and simple way. This may mean the difference between impact and just dissemination."

3. Storyboarding Research

In the final session, participants developed either four- or six-panel storyboards based on the analogy that had proved most effective.

These were shared in new groups for structured peer feedback, focusing on clarity, coherence, and what made the research compelling.

For several participants, this process sharpened their understanding of their own work:

"Creating visual stimulation not only excites the listener, but also the researcher!"

"I have a story to share when talking about my research."

CONCLUSION

Across the session, positive feedback highlighted several shifts in confidence, audience awareness, and perspectives.

Clarity and Confidence

- "I feel more confident with my topic after the exercises."
- "The session was really useful in understanding different ways of communicating our research."
- "I have more clarity about what is the important message of my research after the analogy exercise."

Audience Awareness

- "Thinking about an analogy to use for my research helped me realise how easily many people could miss out on important research because they just don't understand or can't relate."
- "My key takeaway would from this workshop is having an increased consideration of different audience perspectives."
- "I have learnt to practise communication with a wide range of people."
- "I've never considered before how relevant it is to communicate your research to lay people in an effective and simple way…This may mean the difference between impact and just dissemination."

New perspectives

- "Thinking out of the box is necessary even in academic rigid environments."
- "Today I have learned how to be flexible when receiving feedback – my ideas are not the only ideas!"
- "Creating visual stimulation not only excites the listener, but also the researcher."
- "I have a story to share when talking about my research."
- "I will spend some time thinking about better analogies to use and will definitely take on board all the feedback I got so, thank you!"

The workshop demonstrated that relatively simple, low-risk creative exercises can meaningfully shift how researchers frame and communicate their work. By focusing on clarity, analogy, and narrative, participants left with practical tools they could apply immediately to help better translate their research.

The session forms part of the ongoing NABS+ Creative Workshop series, which continues to explore creative approaches for strengthening research communication across disciplines and audiences.

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