

Editorial: Writing Off the beaten track

Laugesen, Martin Hauberg-Lund; Wegener, Charlotte

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Editorial

Writing of the beaten track

Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen ¹  &
Charlotte Wegener ² 

¹University of Southern Denmark, The Department of Media, Design, Education and Cognition,
University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, 530 Odense, Denmark

²Aalborg University, Department of Communication and Psychology,
Teglårds Plads 1, 9000 Aalborg, Denmark

1. Why ‘writing off the beaten track’?

Even if you are not an outright bibliophile, you (and many other avid readers of learned books) may have experienced the serendipity involved in walking down an alleyway in a new city and finding an antiquarian bookshop, pushing the door open and entering the shop, savouring the unmistakable odour of pre-loved, aged books, letting your eyes wander from shelf to shelf and, suddenly, stumbling upon a book that for some (perhaps unconscious) reason sticks out and beckons to be read. You take the book from the shelf; you open it, skim the table of contents, move quickly to the opening page, and start to read. The book instantly enthral you with the wonderful magic that only words can conjure; you forget about time and place and vanish into the well-phrased investigation that the book generously offers. Not rarely do such experiences come about due to kinds of writing that one has not hitherto encountered – that is, *writing off the beaten track*.

On the other hand, and in stark contrast to the romanticised opening of our editorial, we all know the feeling of reading an academic text that drags us down and gets increasingly boring. We invariably zone out, become unfocused and gradually lose interest in the text at hand. Perhaps we become frustrated and disappointed at having spent

well over an hour of our finite life on such uninspiring and non-urgent writing. Perhaps we push stubbornly on and finish the text because we are intrigued by the content – the theoretical observations, the empirical findings and/or the practical implications of the work. Perhaps we read the piece to the very end because we want to make use of it in one of our own writings, even if the reading experience is itself uninspiring. Under different circumstances we all react differently, but one thing we must all be presumed to have in common: we would all like always to be reading *good* academic texts (see Caulley 2008). The big question then becomes: what constitutes *good* academic writing? For one thing, the goodness of academic texts can stem from various sources. It can stem from the quality of the content of the text: “These findings are so exciting!”. It can stem from the quality of the writing itself: “This article is a real page-turner!” or “This chapter really gets me thinking!”. Or it can stem from a third, fourth or fifth source. What we want to emphasise, initially, is that good academic writing does not follow automatically if authors stick to a given list of pre-defined, universal rules of thumb for success in writing academic texts. Good academic writing can be as different in methods, styles and final appearances as species are different from one another in a healthy and biodiversity-rich environment, and as quality-conscious readers we often seek out singular flavours, styles and voices in the texts we trawl for in the ocean of publications – be it in online databases or in physical antiquarian bookshops.

As editors, we called for writing *off the beaten track* in order to declare that the kind of writing and theorisation of writing that we wanted to include and exhibit in the special issue is writing that strays from the well-trodden paths of standardised academic writing. Standards exist for a reason: they have proved to work well, and there is nothing wrong with standards when used wisely and in ways that assist what we want to say. However, these standards can be too rigidly applied, they differ greatly from field to field, and they do not always support (or might even contradict) *what* the authors want to convey and *how* they wish to convey it. The title of the special issue also draws meaning from the call for radical thinking contained in German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s 1950 essay collection *Holzwege*, which in its 2002 English translation bore the title *Off the Beaten Track*. According to Heidegger, genuine thinking (*Denken*) entails radical questioning of the most basic assumptions about what we take to be true and real. Thus, we would like to think that many of the contributions to the special issue do just that: they

radically question what constitutes good academic writing – either implicitly, in a performative manner (showing it) and/or explicitly, in a reflective manner (telling it). Most of the articles do both, but some fall more clearly into one or the other of these two categories. There is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, showing how academic writing can be done differently and what the value thereof might be and, on the other hand, discussing theoretical and methodological questions as to what academic writing is and can be. In contrast to Heidegger’s way of thinking, most articles in the special issue draw on empirical investigations using qualitative methods such as ethnographic observations and/or semi-structured interviewing. We hope that readers of the special issue will find the many empirical illustrations to be valuable as tangible examples of how writing can be done differently and, ultimately, expand the playground of academic writing itself (Wegener, Meier & Maslo 2018).

a. Badley’s call for post-academic writing: for and against?

Our initial decision to publish a special issue of *Qualitative Studies* focusing on different and creative approaches to academic writing stemmed from our collaboration on a PhD course back in 2020. We had named the course “Style and Voice in the PhD Thesis: Between Conventions and Creativity”, and it was designed to inspire and support emerging researchers to undertake rhetorical and stylistic experiments, taking back control over their writing and relying to a greater extent on their own modes of expression instead of (simply) reproducing a generic and impersonal academic style and voice. One of our sources of inspiration was a generously provocative 2019 article by Graham Francis Badley entitled “Post-academic writing: Human writing for human readers”. In this article, Badley calls for a renewal of academic writing and presents his readers with an initial seven-point programme for writing post-academically. Amongst other things, he emphasises the need for and value of telling stories with rich narratives, of being authorially present in one’s text as a recognisable human voice, of adopting first-person perspectives be they one’s own and/or those of others, of taking a human stance focusing on issues, dilemmas, worries, wishes and longings of real human beings of flesh, blood, and bone and not just of some theoretically constructed *subject* floating in the element of abstract thinking (see Badley 2019: 182-187).

While we sympathise with many of Badley's recommendations, we hesitate to jump on the bandwagon of overly critical researchers wanting to reject the whole damn tradition of *academic writing*. Ongoing experiment and dialogue regarding the style, voice and format of academic publications are indeed crucial to high-quality, creative research. There is, however, much to be gained through the study of the treasure chest of the academic canon. Immortal writers such as Plato, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Arendt, Heidegger, de Beauvoir and Murdoch all drew their excellence in part from their exceptional abilities as *writers*. But it is important to add that for newcomers they are in no way easy to read: they are subtle, complex, at times convoluted, obscure, enigmatic and riddlesome. They devise hitherto unheard-of concepts, and they use ordinary, well-known words and phrases in extraordinary and singular ways to name and refer to un(der)disclosed things, ideas and other aspects of reality. None of these linguistic masters, these wizards of the written word, conformed to accepted standards of how one *ought* to write – they were all dissidents, innovators, originators of style and, consequently, of singular modes of thinking, knowing and experiencing the world. And in this radicality they gained their special status as true knowers, giving rise to whole schools of thought and/or influencing the disciplines and debates that their writings concerned themselves with. It was thus *not* because of their immediate clarity and transparency that they gained historical success and influence; it was always because of their initially cryptic voices and the untapped wisdom they were able to utter that they came to prominence (see Lather 1996: 528).

A vivid example to illustrate this homogenising and standardising 'development' in academic writing is the appearance of a whole literature on how to write academic texts. Like an armada of academic self-help books, this ever-increasing literature on how to succeed – and survive! – as an academic writer seems to block the sun of knowledge and wither the otherwise sprouting seeds of academic curiosity in young researchers especially. Many of these (perhaps) well-intended guidebooks potentially do more harm than good. As evidenced by Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson, overly technical, complex and generic guidelines on how to succeed as an academic writer may, in many cases, do "disservice to students while positioning them as obedient rule followers" (2008: 511). By framing every challenging aspect of academic writing "as a problem that can be solved with a universalized solution", the academic self-help books often "work paradoxically

both to assuage and to heighten students' anxieties" (2008: 511) because the readers of such books might internalise a discourse about academic writing that has as one of its central dogmas the implicit decree that *good* academic writing is *generic* academic writing. But the truth of the matter is that, when it comes to academic writing that ends up meaning something important both to individual readers (be they students, researchers or generally interested lay people) and to whole research communities, good does not equal generic – quite the contrary, as reflected in Badley's energetic plea for post-academic writing. It is our hope that the special issue will illustrate many aspects of writing off the beaten track and thus spark dialogues on where and how to wander off the beaten track and when the beaten track is in fact the most appropriate and proper road to travel by.

b. Surprising level of interest in contributing to the special issue

We have received surprisingly many and surprisingly diverse and enthusiastic pitches for article contributions for the special issue. All in all, we arrived at a line-up of 14 international contributions with wildly different takes on the meaning of *writing off the beaten track*. We could not have been happier, with authors from almost literally all over the world: from the USA, from Lagos in Nigeria, from New Zealand, from Bangladesh, from Denmark, from Norway, from Canada, from Australia and from the UK, including a multimodal piece by internationally eminent writing research expert Helen Sword. We take this to be tangible evidence that there exists an internationally widespread interest in exploring *different* ways of writing within academia, *different* ways of doing academic writing and *different* ways of being an academic writer, and we hope that the special issue can nourish the further growth of this interest in time to come.

Despite the many different geographical, linguistic and cultural contexts of the contributors to the special issue, they all engage in bold explorations of what writing off the beaten track might entail. Whether the context is cultural studies with a focus on the history of African-American folx or literacy research with a focus on Danish schoolchildren's creative writing, researchers from across a range of fields are in unison when it comes to the value and urgency of exploring alternative theories and creative practices of academic writing. We therefore hope that the special issue will be relevant to

students and researchers from many different disciplines across the boundaries of faculties, countries and cultures around the world.

2. How we write matters substantially: good writing is a *need-to-have*, not just a *nice-to-have*

That how researchers write matters significantly to research is not a surprising claim, much less a controversial one – at least not to those who have, at some points in their lives and careers, thought deeply about their own writing experiences and about what writing is in general. As Laurel Richardson has put it: “No textual staging is ever innocent” (Richardson & St. Pierre 2005: 1412). That being said, there exists a widespread folk-theoretical assumption in society at large and within academic institutions (perhaps especially in natural science environments) that writing is to be considered as no more than a neutral vehicle for information dissemination. If the craft of writing is perceived as something that it is not important to develop intentionally and continuously, one’s writing risks halting and getting stuck at a novice level, subsequently inhibiting the researcher or student in question in his/her intellectual pursuits (see, for instance, Sommer & Salts 2004). To cultivate curiosity and experiment as part of one’s writing practice is crucial to gradually becoming a *good* academic writer, whatever that concretely means in the context of one’s work. Without wanting to sound overly mystical, when thought about attentively, different subject matters demand to be dealt with in different styles of writing. Sometimes it can even seem necessary to write off the beaten track so as to respect the integrity of the subject matter under scrutiny. And if the researcher does not possess a relatively wide range of ways of expressing him/herself in writing, he/she will probably not be able to hear the nuances in the call of the subject matter itself. It is, therefore, worthwhile for academics to rehearse different styles of writing by wandering off the beaten track, at least once in a while...

3. Flavour, style and voice: setting researchers free to experiment

It is our hope that the special issue will inspire academic writers to free themselves from the shackles of genre convention that their writing might be inhibited by. It is not that we

claim to be able to point to *a* style that is better than others, or *a* kind of writing that is superior to all others. The point is simply that we want to celebrate the (epistemological, methodological and ontological) value of experimenting with modes of written linguistic expression that stray from academic writing's well-trodden paths. We would thus like to think of the special issue as a platform for the scrutiny of the modes, limits and boundaries of academic writing. Partly based on Badley's case for a revision of academic writing practices, we called for contributions off the beaten track to encourage researchers to push the boundaries, and maybe even go beyond them to explore new territory and inviting dialogues about what academic writing currently is and what it might become in the future. What, in the end, can be recognised as genuinely academic writing? And why do we accept the rather few literary *personae* that rule the discursive kingdom of academic writing (see Becker 2007: 33)?

All this is also a question of *writing with pleasure*, to use Helen Sword's expression (see Sword 2023: 3ff). A lot of academics do not particularly enjoy writing their books and articles. Some might even say to you with a sceptical demeanour that there is something amiss with one's writing if you happen to enjoy it. Many students and researchers experience writing as tiresome, boring, difficult and generally *unpleasurable* – which it need not be if writing is approached differently. As one of the contributors to the special issue wrote to us towards the end of the editorial process, reflecting the invitation of the initial call for papers to be creative and playful: "It is one of the funniest articles I have ever written." Another contributor wrote to us that writing her article was very much about "finding my own voice or, perhaps more precisely, using my own voice with more registers, also in an academic context". Many of the contributors to the special issue have written to tell us how they feel that their writing process has been enjoyable, interesting and insight generating in a different way than their usual writing aimed at other, more standard journal publications. As editors of the special issue, we are most happy with the fact that our contributors have found their writing to be both personally engaging and professionally enjoyable and rewarding. That writing should be both engaging and enjoyable for writers and readers alike is a central tenet of the special issue. We are pleased that "Writing off the beaten track" has sparked accounts of the value of approaching academic writing differently.

4. Presentation of the articles

As editors, we would like to encourage all readers approaching the special issue to lose themselves in the labyrinth of contributions. There is no obvious or rational chronology to follow, and as a reader one should not feel obliged to read all the articles from A to Z. Instead, we would like to imagine the ideal reader of the special issue as someone who dares to follow the wise advice of Joseph Campbell: “Follow your bliss!”. Whatever strikes your eye as interesting, as appealing, as provocative, as intriguing, check it out and see whether there is gold to be found at the end of the text’s rainbow rays. Personally, as well as professionally, we got something of great value out of reading every single one of the publications included in the special issue, and we both found it a joy to give the authors continuous feedback along their respective journeys towards finalising their manuscripts and having them published. So, we encourage you to use whatever entry point you find most appealing and from there to follow your interest to perhaps yet another article in the special issue. In any case: welcome to the maze!

What now follows is a brief presentation of all 16 contributions to the special issue: 14 peer-reviewed articles, one review (with permission from both sides) and 1 invited piece.

1. **Helen Sword** and **Selina Tusitala Marsh** have contributed a comic strip accompanied by an abstract that invites their readers to contemplate the treasures, pleasures and potential serendipity of collaborating with others on multimodal academic writing. Their contribution simultaneously functions as an appetiser for Sword’s 2023 book *Writing with Pleasure* (Princeton University Press). Make sure to check it out – as well as Sword’s other insightful publications! We would like to think of Sword and Marsh’s joint contribution as a fitting and aesthetically enthusiastic opener for the special issue, and we have therefore placed it at the very top of the table of contents.

2. How may the art of music contribute to the understanding of writing as a phenomenological act? This question sparks **Bo Kampmann Walther’s** article. In reply to his question, Walther introduces parts of the vocabulary, theory and practice of *flamenco* to investigate the musicality of the handwritten personal signature. Rather than using the “language” of flamenco as merely a metaphor for the pre-reflexive production of meaning in writing as such, he exploits specific skills and features of flamenco in a

direct and bodily fashion and this way critically discusses how certain combinations of motor actions (fingers and hands) and operative knowledge (mastery of *palos*, genres and modes, scales, cadences etc.) resonate in writing as a praxis-form. He thus finds that the rhythmic and sonoric faculties of flamenco may shed light on vital aspects of the phenomenology of writing.

3. **Britton Williams** has written a personally generous and performative article on the importance of broadening the epistemological standards of academia to include, for instance, Black culture, Black people and the cultural history of Black folk in general. Like (for example) Gripsrud's piece, Williams' article is visibly off the beaten track, and we cherish her contribution for that reason. She has included poetry to a large extent – both her own and that of important canonical voices in the history of African-American poetry. Williams has also included an image from the family archives to show the intergenerational bond between her mother and herself as a beautiful illustration of the importance of cultural roots and a deepfelt sense of belonging. Williams uses as her point of departure her research on a project known as the *Black MAP Research Project*, and her article also contains more standard or recognisably academic passages that reflect on the epistemological implications of including and excluding voices and people from the academic conversation in society.

4. **Marianne Høyen** has written a self-reflective article on the value of new journalism and portraiture as writing strategies for qualitative researchers. Using an analytical exposition of one of her own qualitative research publications as her point of departure, Høyen shows both the academic value of the methods of new journalism and portraiture and how her readers can themselves go ahead and craft portraits of their own. Høyen's article thus both reflects on and showcases the epistemological value of what Badley would call post-academic writing, where the researcher makes use of rich narratives, first-person perspectives and human issues, and draws on his/her own engagement in the topic(s) and people at hand. In other words, Høyen shows the value of taking a human stance as a (qualitative) researcher.

5. **Hazel R. Wright** has creatively found a way to revitalise the figure of the flâneur/flâneuse as ethnographic character. In her well-crafted article, she explores how one might see, hear, observe and write as a flâneur/flâneuse and how this

character/figure might contribute to our understanding and practice of academic writing – especially in the context of ethnography and/or other qualitative methods. Her article is yet another demonstration of how taking a human stance as a researcher can enrich one’s research itself as well as one’s communication of the results thereof. Take a walk with Hazel as she traverses the local footpaths, alleyways and marketplaces during Covid lockdown and conjures lively writing to tell tales about the manifold manifestations of the human condition.

6. **Stine Heger’s** contribution to the special issue is a lively, historically insightful and empirically generous piece that offers timely and original perspectives on writing pedagogy for children. The crux of her argument – that children become better at writing in school settings if they engage in free creative writing on a regular basis – challenges fundamental and widespread beliefs about writing pedagogy. Reaching back to the ancient rhetorical training programme of *progymnasmata*, Heger shows how contemporary pedagogies of writing have lost (or perhaps actively repressed) the intricate connection between creative writing and academic writing – as well as how the former can enrich the latter and allow more and different types of pupils to learn and thrive in L1 contexts.

7. **Nathali Solon Herold** and **Heidi Philipsen** explore the value of practice-led research for students of creative writing. Through systematic and facilitated self-monitoring, students of screenplay writing can refine and develop their writing practices. Herold and Philipsen show convincingly how such an approach can be generalised and put to good use within a higher education setting – also outside of screenwriting programmes specifically. They thus challenge the damaging public narrative of the isolated genius conjuring artistic writing out of thin air and instead show how there is a craft behind creative writing and one that can actually be taught and developed.

8. **Birgitta Haga Gripsrud’s** writing is made of the stuff of life itself. Her article is many things: a gripping personal narrative about her relationship with her breast cancer-suffering mother, a sharp intellectual reflection on the impetus(es) of writing itself, a phenomenological exploration of intergenerational bonds exemplified through her own mother-daughter relationship and a courageous experiment in writing off the beaten track, merging different styles and voices, weaving a mosaic tapestry of insights

and perspectives on *life pushing through*, as her title goes. Her article is furthermore accompanied by a telling photograph from the family archives that supplements Gripsrud's writing and adds biographical depth to her narrative. Like (for example) Williams's essay, Gripsrud's contribution is demonstrably and courageously off the beaten track, and we are thankful for her contribution for that reason.

9. **Bukola Aluko-Kpotie** contributes an article that demonstrates why it is crucial that we, as academics, write about marginalised people in society who would otherwise not have a (legitimate) voice in the public sphere and would thus be politically non-existent. Aluko-Kpotie shows concretely how writing off the beaten track can serve the noble purpose of standing up for those who are positioned in a socially, culturally and economically precarious manner. Aluko-Aluko-Kpotie's is an empowering piece of writing that very aptly showcases how important it is that we intentionally choose the/a proper way of writing about certain human issues, topics and questions – in her case, female carpenters in a discursively gendered and prejudiced market and cultural context.

10. **Cee Carter, Mariam Rashid, Benjamin D. Scherrer and Korina M. Jocson** are wandering beyond the beaten track, “prompted by collective engagements that unsettle knowledge, methods, analysis, and ideas shaped by the western canon in the neoliberal academy”. Their text moves toward freeing blackness from a captive position. Through fragments, pauses, vignettes and notes they offer living curiosities, unanswered questions and poetic lines. A method in progress.

11. Their contribution is followed by a review we consider to be *off the beaten track* as well. **Lisa Grocott's** *A Goat Track Review* is so well written, poetic and personal that we felt it deserved a broader audience. Thank you to Grocott for the review and to Carter, Rashid, Scherrer and Jocson for your consent to publishing the review. Peer review comprises many hours of academic writing, triggers emotions and guides the hard work of revising manuscripts. Yet very few people read each other's reviews. If we want to encourage writing off the beaten track, we may need to pay more attention to the ways in which peer-review practices can both support experiment and ensure quality.

12. **Lisa Grocott, Stacy Holman Jones, Anne-Lene Sand, Helle Marie Skovbjerg and Shanti Sumartojo** report and reflect on a writing workshop entitled

Wandering Feasts in which 16 PhD students were invited to experiment with genres in academic research and writing. The authors engaged in exploratory exchange with their PhD students and each other. In this article, as a continuation of the workshops, they reflect on their stance toward *Wandering Feasts* and find that the performatively layered approach to writing the article afforded them a space in which to conjure freedom and surprise on the page and to respond to each other's accounts in creatively constructive reciprocity.

13. **Dan Hvidtfeldt's** article discusses the difficulties of and ideas for methodologically exploring and writing about musical creative processes. Drawing on his work with music, musicians and music festivals, he develops a broader and more general definition of musical creativity, one that extends beyond the practices of musicians. Performed music and other forms of "emergent phenomena", he says, are fundamentally social and ephemeral: they exist only in the moment and depend on the involvement of and relationship between the specific social elements participating in the process. Yet they hold material qualities for the creative processes that initially and continuously create them. Through a socio-material take on creativity in explorations of work processes underlying musical practices, he looks for "languages for musicality" and their relevance for qualitative written studies of creative emergent processes. He thus reflects on the immanent demand of music research to wander off the beaten track to find language(s) that resonate with music as subject matter.

14. **Elliott Kuecker** promotes the *list* as genre. The list, he argues, is:

- a mutable yet sturdy form of writing,
- finding its way into many genres,
- adapting quite easily to them.

Lists are, however, often integrated into academic writing as organisational paratext such as:

- bibliography,
- table of contents,
- index.

Perhaps the list has been neglected as a core form of academic expression because it:

- lacks most of the fundamentals we associate with long-form academic writing,
- often contains fragments of sentences,
- has its own ordering systems and categories,
- is lawless in terms of length and the use of punctuation.

Kuecker loves lists, and so do we after reading his paper. We simply had to include a list in this editorial.

15. In a contribution presented largely in dialogue form, **Shona McIntosh** and **Sarah Ruth Lillo Kang** reflect on the editorial challenges and pleasures of fostering dialogic, collaborative writing for equity. Drawing on their experience of creating an innovative co-edited book, they consider the risks and possibilities of experimentation in high-stakes writing and editorial work. To foster connection, academics, educators, practitioners and alumni were grouped to undertake dialogue-centred collaborative writing about equitable engagement in global citizenship education. The authors argue, and demonstrate, that this dialogical way of writing (and editing) has potential to include knowledges that are less commonly visible in academic publications, and they invite us to find spaces for equitable collaborative writing in our own fields.

16. **Farrah Jabeen** and **Susan Carter** show how using lively, provocative artworks can spark emerging researchers' development as academic writers learning to master the craft of arguments, evaluations, analyses and personal accounts in their doctoral writing. Jabeen and Carter illustrate how Banksy's street art can be used in workshops to facilitate important and learning-furthering dialogue between doctoral students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds – different, also, from where they conduct their doctoral research. The article tells an important story about how to teach academic writing based on art, aesthetics and mutual dialogue accessible to all. Their article thus exemplifies a writing pedagogy off the beaten track.

Now, the only thing left for us to say is: enjoy! We hope that reading some of the contributions to the special issue will inspire you to experiment with alternative approaches to academic writing and also to teach writing to your students off the beaten track, encouraging them also to engage in experimentation whenever the situation invites

it or perhaps even calls for it. In any case, taking a road “less travelled by” can turn out, retrospectively, to have “made all the difference”, to borrow a couple of phrases from American poet Robert Frost (Frost 2001: 105). We wish you a good journey off the beaten track...

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About the Authors

Martin Hauberg-Lund Laugesen is postdoc at University of Southern Denmark. His research focus is wide and promiscuous, and he has taught and published on a large array of topics throughout the years: Speculative realism, new literacy studies, dark pedagogy, German Idealism, psychoanalysis, (late) modern sociology, Capitalocene/Anthropocene, cosmic pessimism, and more. He does not like to get caught up in academic niches for too long, practices a proud nomadic life as a brutally curious scholar and tends to think of the breadth of one's knowledge as the central source of academic profundity. He completed and defended his PhD thesis *Written Engagement* in 2021. His thesis focuses on emotional, psychological, and existential aspects of the relationship between undergraduate students' exam writing and their learning and disciplinary identity development. Martin is also a passionate university teacher and an avid speaker at conferences. He also often participates in the development of educational practices through research-based collaborations with schools and educational institutions.

Charlotte Wegener is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Denmark. She researches social innovation in elderly care across care practices and vocational education. She is passionate about writing and writes in various genres and genre blends. She also acts as a writing coach, runs writing workshops and retreats, and is involved in researcher-practitioner collaborations with an interest in dissemination of research to diverse audiences. Charlotte is co-editor for the journal *Qualitative Studies*.