

[You win some, you lose some]

A failed experiment, an error in your model, a rejected article: in academia such things tend to be labelled failures. As for talking about failure? Not done! But that is just what WUR co-workers do in this regular feature 'You win some, you lose some'. Because failure can be useful. In this instalment, we hear from Bram Büscher, professor of the Sociology of Development and Change. Text and illustration Stijn Schreven

One of the first articles I wrote was really bad. My PhD research was about a 'trans-frontier conservation area' in Lesotho and South Africa. In the article, I wanted to revise the theory of anti-politics, a well-known theory in my field, according to which conservation organizations present themselves as neutral, whereas there are always political interests at play. In the trans-frontier park, the Lesotho organization was engaged in a new form of anti-politics: they didn't present themselves as neutral but as the voice of the community, and therefore considered themselves above criticism.

That form of anti-politics was an innovation in the field, I thought. But when my wife read the text, she stopped after two pages, it was so badly written. That was rather sobering, but it was also motivating. I adapted the article and submitted it to a journal.

The reviews were unanimous: unreadable. It was so frustrating. I was so eager to share my idea with the world, but I had failed to put it across on paper.

There was work to be done. I took a course in Academic English and became aware of the huge importance of language, details and nuances of meaning. And my manager was

English.

After that first review, I asked him to look at my texts

'The reviews were unanimous: unreadable'

much more carefully, and he coached me over the following few years. I got many a report and article back from him covered in red ink. It was tough, but it was incredibly good for me. I resubmitted the manuscript a year later and it came back with major revisions. I made a third attempt the next year, and eventually, after four years, my article was published. I learnt an awful lot from the writing process. And to this day, I pass on the lessons I learnt to my students.

