

The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003

Closing Remarks

Professor Helen Haste, Department of Psychology, University of Bath

First a very big thank you to all our speakers who have been exciting, exhilarating and provocative and highly amusing in most cases as well. Thank you also to the Royal Society, especially David Boak for supporting this meeting, and to the British Association, particularly Jill Nelson, Fiona Barbagello, Nick Hillier and Ruth Colebridge who have been the people who really made it actually happen in the last two days.

I think this has been a very exciting two days. I think that the two particular organisations who have run it reflect a powerful potential for partnership in the public discourses we're talking about. It just happens that the Royal Society and the British Association have run this, but everyone in this room is associated with an organisation or institution which is in the business of science communication. I have a very strong sense from the meeting that there is a terrific good will to develop the leadership and collaborations that will enable us to move forward on the kind of common front that we have identified over the last two days. So it has been exciting from that point of view.

Things have converged here. In earlier conferences people tended to stand up and make speeches about 'what we do is this and it's the best way to do it', or 'the problems are these, and no one can solve them'. Either very positive or very negative, and rather narrow. What I see here is a kind of coming of age. People are beginning to identify shared definitions, shared assumptions, shared goals and recognition also of what we can do. We are at the point where we can actually start saying 'Where can we go next? What can we do next? What is the next step?'. We don't want consensus. Consensus can be rather debilitating, we want lively controversy, lively discussion, and I think we now have the forum where this kind of lively discussion can take place. I heard that all three workshops this morning agreed that we should have much more

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collaboration, much more support for networking. Much more sharing of resources.

Two agendas that have come out from this meeting which do overlap but are distinctly different. One agenda is to expand the number of young people going into science, *increasing the population who are professionally involved in science*. This has enormous benefits for our economy, our culture broadly. The other agenda is to enhance culture through more effective communication between scientists and the public. *This is the dialogue element*. It is about enriching the culture, making the culture not necessarily more scientifically *literate*, but more scientifically *aware*, more scientifically engaged.

The first agenda, expanding the number of children doing science is about science and literacy. An extremely desirable goal. But the issue of scientific awareness isn't quite the same as scientific literacy, and I think we should bear in mind that these two agendas are both goals that we as science communicators want to achieve. There are some aspects where a common course will achieve both goals, but sometimes we have to concentrate on different aspects. This parallel, converging but not identical agenda has come up again and again. I would like to see us, as science communicators, taking on the implications of this.

Within the framework of what more effective science communication would be, some key points have come up. One is, *who* should be communicating? Should we be enhancing the role of the science communicator profession, with better status, better resources, better visibility and better training? Or should we be increasing the skills and training of scientists to become more effective in communicating their expertise? Obviously both are desirable, but we have constantly hit the question of what do we have to do to make our scientists more effective communicators. Do we start in the primary school, in making everyone more effective at communication? Do we start at the graduate level? Do we ask all the Research Councils to require grant-holders to write good

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press releases when they report their results? Where do we intervene in the system? These are all questions that have been raised.

Another theme of this meeting is how to increase the accessibility of science to what we would call diversity communities. I was particularly struck this morning by Trevor Phillips' comment that an organisation, or a society which is only concerned with being nice to its minority members is not a good institution. An institution must *respect* its employees, respect its clients. And an institution that discriminates or harasses minority members is a bad institution for all kinds of reasons; it is neither a flourishing and nor a healthy institution. Healthy institutions move towards greater diversity and greater health. Dealing with diversity, dealing with minorities isn't just about including a specific group of people who have been left out, but making a culture shift in how we view the larger culture and all members of it.

There is the question of particular targets. Trevor Phillips identified a particular group, Afro-Caribbean boys between the ages of 7 and 14, but other examples have been identified over the last two days. A number of specific problem centred questions, problem areas, problem groups, problem issues have been highlighted, which we could begin to address as part of our agenda of improving science communication and the accessibility of science to a wider population. There are a number of things that we can practically do over the next few years, under the leadership of what ever collaborations emerges from this conference. I think we can move forward on practically- oriented as well as visionary perspectives.

It was suggested that next year we might want to share best practice. I think most people in this room have very good experiences of best practice and some fairly painful experiences of bad practice. I think if we could perhaps next year talk about sharing those experiences. How can we dialogue about these issues, how can we share, how can we benefit from our vastly rich expertise and experience?

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I mentioned dialogue. Dialogue has been a key word throughout this conference. It is clear that for some people - no one in this room of course! - dialogue is used to mean listening politely while somebody speaks. As somebody said 'its rather like listening to a difficult teenager. You don't "dialogue" with difficult teenagers, you listen to them and then you just hope that they will go and do something sensible next time'. Dialogue is more than just about listening. Dialogue is about listening and discussing, moving forward beyond our pre-conceptions and actually collaborative working to a new understanding. That's what dialogue is about. It helps to start by listening, and I think we've certainly been listening. We've seen some great dialogue and some nice confrontations as well, some very amusing, in the last two days.

So I would like to thank you all for engaging in dialogue, as well as engaging in listening and for being so vigorous and energetic. Thank you so much.

And thanks again to our final speakers who've brought our conference so elegantly to a close.