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Review

PCST 2014

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ABSTRACT: *The PCST conference attracts a substantial number of science communication academics and practitioners from all over the world. The conference is stimulating and refreshing but the size of it means that quality control is challenging for the organisers. This review highlights areas of both strengths and weaknesses whilst also making recommendations to the PCST committee for PCST 2016. The committee are encouraged to further strengthen the academic/practitioner combination and the international nature of the event. However, they are also recommended to ensure that work presented is of high quality with clear purposes and strong evaluative evidence presented.*

This was my third PCST conference, each time I've gone I've presented some element of my current research and/or practice. From early findings of my PhD in Malmo, Sweden, to the role of knitting as a place for meaningful conservations about science in Florence, Italy and this year we discussed changing cultures in U.K. universities to support engaged research in Salvador, Brazil. It is this blend of research and practice which makes PCST a unique and valuable conference.

This is a big conference by science communication standards with over 500 delegates representing nearly 50 countries. The sheer size of it, and the way that PCST committee is structured, means a wide range of participants are present. We see practitioners and researchers at all stages of their careers presenting and participating. Bringing these groups together is something we've been recommending should happen in the U.K. for some time. Bringing these perspectives together can only improve the quality of science communication through including the lived experiences of the practitioner in research and incorporating academic insight into the fast-moving world of practice (see our chapter in the 2013 Science Communication Conference ebook http://www.britishscienceassociation.org/science-communication-conference/reporting-2013-conference). PCST has tried to be a bridge between these two communities for some time. Nevertheless, these still feel like divided communities, with academics pre-

senting their work and practitioners presenting theirs separately. Perhaps it was the sessions I chose to attend but I didn't see work that highlighted practitioners and researchers working together. We've recently seen the WT/NSF Science Learning+ grant scheme announced which supports this kind of collaborative approach and I look forward to some of the work from this scheme being presented at the next PCST in 2016.

Understandably, in such a large conference, with so many countries represented there was a hugely diverse range of experiences presented. This is one of the great strengths of the PCST conference, but is perhaps also a challenge for the organisers. From work that analysed press releases to projects discussing the value of community-developed radio in Malawi; comics and theories of science communication; artistic and creative devices for presenting science to audiences, and tools for assessing social media were all showcased. The plenary panels were thought provoking and inspiring while the shorter parallel sessions allowed bite-sized coverage of practice and research.

The challenge for the committee is to ensure quality in what's presented. There was still a lot of work presented that seemed naïve or poorly evaluated. All conference organisers face the challenge of choosing the most stimulating material from the huge mass of abstracts submitted, but it was disappointing to find a plenary speaker presenting a picture of a smiling woman with a solar panel whilst asserting that the smile demonstrated she was feeling empowered because she was able to connect the panel to a device. A smile, as any parent of young children knows, could easily as much be an indication of wind as happiness, or in this case the result of having a camera pointed at her. Careful listening and analysis techniques should be used to understand if the woman did, indeed, feel empowered and that perception actually translated into changes in her life.

Work that targets specific audiences, while generally recommended as good practice, should acknowledge that adopting this approach will result in exclusion for other publics. For example, art/science collaborations are often lauded (as they were at PCST) as opening science up to new audiences, but the evidence presented was not powerful and there seemed little appreciation that art is also exclusive. The risk of combining two exclusive practices (science and art) can easily result in a closing down, rather than opening up, of either realm. Presentations of art/science work often showcase the process of the collaboration and clips of the resulting artwork, but where is the public voice? How do we know how the art/science work was received? This is an area ripe for exploration and one I hope to see addressed at the next PCST meeting.

The range of motives for communicating science were extremely diverse but often implicit rather than explicit in the topics discussed. Behaviour change, discussing the future of society, gaining public acceptance of science, including the lived experience in scientific research, and improving scientific literacy all featured as purposes behind the science communication initiatives. Clarity on the purpose of the communication activity can really assist a judgement of quality. You want to raise awareness of a particular area of research and can demonstrate you've done it. But what will that achieve? A change in behaviour? Increased acceptance of a new technology? Empowerment of previously

disempowered groups? Again, the PCST organising committee could do well to prioritise proposals which are clear on their purposes.

There were wider issues raised. While one person praised the prevalence of women at the conference others worried that this was because science communication was becoming a ghetto for science-trained women. This returns us to the topic of who attends PCST. As I've already described, it seems to be a place for practitioners (from press officers to gallery enablers) and academics to come together. However, there was another contingent, one which I suspect is only going to grow: the third space professional. I've moved into this role myself, which is perhaps why I was more alert to our presence. We are a group who work in liminal spaces. We translate for different groups, understand the areas of fruitful collaboration and work to change conditions for this to happen. There weren't many sessions where we discussed our work. The Catalyst session on supporting culture change in U.K. universities was one such session. Perhaps PCST 2016 will see more such sessions. Another group in the minority at PCST were scientists who communicate. Considering the push for scientists to be more personally involved in the communication around their work, it is perhaps surprising not to see more scientists at PCST. Saying that, it is clear that public communication is still a minor element in the life of a scientist which goes some way to explain their lack of participation and perhaps why third-spacers like myself are present. We attend so we can distil, digest and share the material presented in our day-to-day work.

In this commentary, I've tried to set out some themes that might be pertinent to take forward for PCST 2016, from observations of what was missing or issues that appear to be emerging. PCST is a great place to hear current thoughts and ideas from leading academic thinkers from all over the world and passionate practitioners who are pushing the boundaries of high quality work. Where else do you get that opportunity, to see, hear, share and reflect on the relationship between academic understandings of science communication and the on-the-ground experiences? Combine that with fabulous locations, amazing organisation and you come away from a PCST conference invigorated, refreshed and full of new ideas.

I'm challenging you to address the issues raised here. You have two years.

Author

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For 3 years (2010–2013), Helen was Chair of the Visitor Studies Group. The group for audience researchers in non-profit visitor centres such as museums, galleries and botanic gardens. The VSG advocates putting visitors at the heart of cultural experiences.
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