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Review

Observations of PCST2014

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ABSTRACT: *Attendance at any large conference is highly personal and every registrant has a unique experience. The value to the individual depends on which sessions they attend, whom they connect with and what outcomes eventuate from what they learn and the networking they do. The networking and feedback can be life changing as it was for me when I attended PCST in 1996 in Melbourne. PCST2014 was a successful conference that provided many options for delegates. This was my fifth PCST and I was glad to have made the long trip to Brazil. One of the most successful aspects of PCST2014 was the opportunity to hear voices that I had not heard at previous PCSTs. The opportunity to hear about interesting work and different perspectives is one of the main advantages of this large, diverse, international network. Some reflective presentations eloquently articulated the familiar but evolving framework of the science communication discipline. Some provocative presentations pushed me to consider new and different perspectives or methodologies. Some case study presentations illustrated that good science communication is happening around the world. All types are particularly useful to those of us at a crossroad in our career, considering where to invest our energy, expertise and time.*

PCST2014 in Salvador was a valuable conference experience In putting together this overview, I considered what it was that made PCST2014 special. Was my positive perception enhanced by the Caipirinha and fabulous music at the welcome reception? By the perceptive and attentive local committee? By the Bahian food in Pelourinho at the conference dinner? Yes to all of these. In addition, PCST2014 offered the substance that underpins what makes it worthwhile to go long distances for a conference.

PCST provides a valuable opportunity to catch up with friends and colleagues. At PCST2014 there was interesting and useful reflection. Sporting a shirt from the South African conference, Bruce Lewenstein gave an account of the history of PCST. Toss Gas-

coigne organised sessions about development of science communication in different countries with a plan that these contributions will form the basis for a book to document the evolution of the discipline.

Susanna Priest presented an authoritative articulation of some of the tensions in science communication. She revisited and refined a definition of *critical* science literacy in terms of what people need to know to navigate and make sense of messages that we as science communicators produce and provide. Among other things, she included familiarity with what constitutes expertise (fertile ground for robust discussion) and considerations of why peer reviewed knowledge is privileged.

In addition to seeing familiar faces, one of the best things about Brazil's PCST2014 was hearing from new and diverse voices. The program appeared to have been refreshingly created with diversity in mind. This was achieved with consistently high quality plenaries. The first session, organised by Marina Joubert provided an excellent example, with three speakers talking about social inclusion and political engagement. Elizabeth Rasekoala's passionate talk was a great way to kick things off making the point that the way to get political engagement is to include the citizenry.

One challenge of presenter diversity was the need for translation. Those of us who don't understand Portuguese or Spanish had the opportunity to use headphones for plenaries. While the translators did a good job, they struggled to keep up with some speakers. The English words coming from the headphones were sometimes out of sync with the slides and I felt that I probably missed some excellent points.

As with all conferences, there is guesswork and luck involved in picking good individual talks from parallel sessions. Either I was lucky or the parellel sessions were consistently high quality and well run. Moderators kept sessions to time, allowing for smooth transitions and plenty of opportunities between sessions for networking and sharing of insights and ideas.

Placing speakers who would benefit from hearing each other's talks and from getting informed feedback into separate parallel sessions was one of the less successful aspects of PCST2014. I was frustrated that many of the people I particularly wanted to hear or talk to were scheduled at the same time as me but in different rooms. Ample time at lunch and other times provided some opportunities for catching up but this is difficult in a short time period, especially if you don't know the person whom you are looking for.

One highlight of parallel sessions for me was hearing Yurij Castelfranchi present on behalf of Bárbara Magalhaes and other coauthors about a study in which they delved into what children know about science and scientists. Castelfranchi is well versed in the history, use and shortcomings of the 'Draw a Scientist Test'. The methodology he described at PCST2014 (a version of 'Think alouds') in which children were asked to tell a story provides a richer understanding of the complexity of what children really think. This reminds us to take care in interpreting what we are told by participants as they can tell researchers what they think the researcher will understand.

Science communication is diverse; performances in the first plenary and later on Days 1 and 2 underscored that diversity and added to the PCST2014 experience When I looked

for a performance from the program, I found something different. The film of a performance by a U.K. theatre group was compelling and I stayed even though it wasn't what I'd come to see. As with all conferences, it was challenging to integrate the posters and performances with sessions. Hats off to the organisers for some success. If anyone has suggestions for a better mechanism of integration of diverse types of presentations at conferences, please share them via the PCST e-list or offline.

Stimulating discussions — both individual and in sessions — are what make a conference truly worthwhile. Bruce Lewenstein provoked thought with questions such as 'Is science communication a ghetto for women?' This made me reflect on my experiences. In both undergraduate and graduate programs that I have been involved with, female science communication students greatly outnumber the males. When I had access to membership statistics of the professional association, Australian Science Communicators, membership comprised more women than men. It would be interesting for a researcher to examine whether that is similar in different countries and if so, what it is that makes science communication a particularly attractive study and career option for women. And is there a relationship between this gender (im)balance and the lack of prestige or power generally afforded communicators in scientific organisations?

Some memorable take-home points from PCST2014:

- It is important for PCST to provide opportunities for early career science communicators (Germana Barata, Day 1).
- We know we're 'doing it' when we start to feel uncomfortable (Elizabeth Rasekoala, Day 1).
- Aesthetic science communication can contribute to community and culture (Ildeu Moreira, Day 3).
- Practical science communication tools are being produced with a range of positive outcomes; some can even save lives (Isaac Kerlow's Earth Girl, Day 1).
- The purpose of science communication is to build the kind of society that we want to live in (Alan Irwin, Day 3).
- What we communicate should empower people (Yurij Castelfranchi, Day 3).

PCST2014 reminded me why I love being a science communicator. The community of practice includes people who are creative, passionate and want to make the world a better place. PCST2014 provided evidence that the discipline is evolving through critical reflection, robust discussion and constructive activity.

Author

Nancy Longnecker has recently joined the University of Otago's Centre for Science Communication as Professor of Science Communication. Prior to her move to New Zealand, Nancy developed and delivered the science communication undergraduate and graduate programs at the University of Western Australia between 2002 and 2014. Her previous experiences as an agricultural research scientist and as a professional science communicator

in a large, multiorganisational research centre, have influenced her approach to development of academic Science Communication programs. Prof Longnecker's research examines factors that affect peoples' attitudes towards and understanding of science-related issues and whether information can be used to change attitudes and behaviour while respecting values and different sources of knowledge. Much of her group's research relates to environmental issues, and sustainability E-mail: nancy.longnecker@otago.ac.nz.

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