

Philosophy of Science Communication

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To me, science communication is about engaging in a conversation with your audience that allows you to provide information that is relevant to them, couched in language they can appreciate. It's *not* about just talking or writing about what's interesting to me and what I find important. This can be challenging. No audience is homogeneous, and finding what topics make an audience sit up and take notice (or pay money for an online course or webinar) isn't always straight forward. Even when my audience's interests are clear, the topics they are really interested in aren't always the topics I want to talk about.

Finding that common ground is essential, however, because science communication is important. Done well, it increases support from the general public for science, provides your audience with tools to understand how the world works, and gets information out of the ivory tower and into the hands of the people who paid for it and the people who will benefit from it. My audience of dog-crazy people is overwhelmingly already on board with the importance of science, so this part of my job isn't something I spend much time on. And they often really like learning about bits of information seeping out of the base of the ivory tower. Where we disagree is on the middle bit, where I think gaining some fundamental tools (basic biology, understanding how to approach a scientific study critically) is essential, whereas many of them are much more interested in information that will directly help them in their practice or their everyday life, or feel that they already possess the tools they need to tackle complex scientific topics.

Who is this audience of dog-crazy people? I imagine they are people with an interest in how dog brains function. This includes dog lovers who don't work with dogs professionally, but the preponderance of my audience do appear to make money from working with dogs or other animals. Keeping the lines of communication open and resisting the urge to just preach is a large part of my job as a science communicator, and something I certainly still fail at frequently. Practically, it's simply difficult to find a venue for keeping communication

flowing both ways. In my online classes I make conversation on the discussion forum a central part of the class by making asking questions a requirement. I try to be very present in these discussions and to answer every question (though I give other students an opportunity to answer first if I feel the question is one they may want to weigh in on), and I do my best to be friendly and approachable. I maintain a presence on Facebook and Twitter for the purpose of building my audience and having a forum for conversation. Facebook has proven the best way to do this, and I've made several new friends there. I also read and post regularly to professional fora related to animal behavior consulting, in an effort to hear what the community finds interesting and relevant, and to give back to the community by answering questions that fall within my area of expertise. To be honest, free advertising of my brand is another part of my presence there. This is a facet of science communication I find frustrating – that if no one knows who I am, my words are a tree falling in an empty forest, but in order for people to recognize my name, I have to market myself, which feels self-serving and dishonest.

Aside from the practical issues of keeping the lines of communication open, I struggle with remembering that members of my audience have their own perspectives and that my perspective is not the most important one in the room. Presenting material that is relevant to my audience, and that they can perceive as relevant to them, is essential if I want to truly engage with them, and this is difficult when I teach about basic science concepts. I have considered piggy-backing concepts I think are important onto topics that my audience finds compelling, so that they come as a package: if my audience wants their dessert, they will have to eat their vegetables first. If it's a well structured package, the connections should make sense and the audience should appreciate them. But I wonder if the answer to this problem of providing compelling reasons to learn basic science is that I'm failing to really listen to what members of my audience find relevant. Am I forgetting my own philosophy, that the audience and I are partners in science communication? Or should I just offer the basic science courses for the much smaller number of people who find them compelling? It turns out that having a philosophy of science communication doesn't always provide all the answers to how to do your job.

This partnership with the audience is the essential part of my philosophy that I learned during my time with 21sci. But I still struggle with wanting to tell my audience that they have to eat their vegetables before they can have dessert, with wanting to act as a parent or authority figure rather than as a teammate in the game of figuring out how best to manage the dogs we all love so much. Science communication is not a skill I will ever finish acquiring. Figuring out how best to relate to my audience will still be part of my life as I move into my new home and new job and gain new perspectives and new audiences.