Science Talk 2019 - Talking Science in Portland

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Science Talk (#SciTalk2019) is an annual two-day conference that brings together scientists and science communication professionals to improve scientific communication. I was there to talk about the work the UNCG University Speaking Center is doing to improve scientific communication, and to promote this type of work at other universities. In the afternoon of the second day I met Jon Wagner, who was documenting the conference with drawings and agreed to co-author this review, as the illustrator.

Science talk began with Joe Palca, the science correspondent for NPR who introduced an important theme for the conference, building relationships. “We have to build relationships so that when we talk to people, they will listen to us.” As Maryam Zaringhalam explained, scientists often operate from a knowledge deficit model. For instance, they often assume that people who do not believe in global warming do not understand the facts. Survey’s of climate change skeptics tell us otherwise. Climate change deniers have just as much factual knowledge as those who accept the human origins of global warming. The difference only appears when you ask them if they accept the reality of climate change. Their “no” answer is based on their identity, not their knowledge. The question they answer is about how they see themselves, not about what they know. It is as if you asked them “Are you a good conservative.” By denying climate change, they affirm their identity. This is why Joe Palca, and many others, emphasize relationships, not facts, as the force necessary to change peoples’ opinions. Competence and warmth are the two most important things in science communication.
After breakout sessions and a networking lunch, there were a series of short presentations. Susanna Harris from UNC-Chapel Hill told us about her work forming a depression support group for Ph.D. students. Susanna is the founder of @Ph_D_ression on Twitter and Instagram and described what it
takes to form an online community: (1) have a clear purpose you want to address, (2) find an online vehicle that is suited to your purpose, (3) expand to other vehicles slowly, (4) create community guidelines to make sure the members feel safe, (5) be sure that you want to be a long-term member of the community as you will be spending a lot of time there.

In the afternoon panel Sarah Myhre spoke passionately about her experience as a female climate scientist and the need to speak out in the face of the forces that seek to silence our voices.

The poster session at the end of the day provided my opportunity to promote the work of the Speaking Center in teaching good science communication. For the past two years Kim Cuny and I, often assisted by other Center staff, have offered Three Minute Thesis (3MT) and poster presentation workshops sponsored by the Graduate School. Some of these were directed specifically at students in the Joint School of Nanoscience and Nanomaterials, and some were open to all graduate students. In the fall of 2019 we will offer our next 3MT workshop, and have been invited to work specifically with students in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry to prepare them for the 3MT competition. At Science Talk 2019 I advocated for this model of collaborative work between graduate schools, communication centers, and science faculty in order to train the next generation of scientists.

The second day began with break-out workshops. I met Jon at the workshop run by Compass. Begun as “Communication Partnership for Science and the Sea” Compass has grown into a mature organization that helps scientists communicate their science to the public and to decision makers without compromising accuracy. The workshop led us through one of the exercises that Compass facilitators use when they work with their clients.
A series of short talks followed the coffee break. Great science books, storytelling for science in Puerto Rico, Space in your Face (Google it), communication in medicine, and the excellent work of the National Center for Science Education. Throughout the presentations we heard again and again that the best way
to communicate science is to be yourself and relate honestly to your audience. Data does not convince, but personal connections can.

The conference ended with a keynote presentation by YouTube’s Physics Girl, Dianna Cowern. Dianna gave an engaging, enthusiastic presentation punctuated by clips from some of her videos. Her message was that to create interest in science you need curiosity, novelty and excitement. Although her venue is YouTube, these principles apply to any type of science communication, as Dianna showed so well during her talk. It encouraged me to know that one of her two most important influences was her high school science teacher, who was at Science Talk to see her presentation. We should never underestimate the difference we can make in people’s lives.

The dates for Science Talk 2020 have been set for March 26 – 27 in Portland, OR. Maybe I will see you there!