

Parallel session 7: PCST as a performance: looking for a new audience?

USE OF COMEDY TO TRIGGER DISCUSSION OF HOT SCIENCE TOPICS

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Abstract

Science communicators in the UK are making increasing use of drama to promote engagement with issues raised by science and technology for society. This project used a comedy sketch based on a reality TV show to promote discussion amongst 16-19 year olds of the issues raised for them by advances in genetic screening. The results showed that the event succeeded in raising awareness of key issues but also raised questions about how to ensure that discussion is effectively facilitated and the most effective means of disseminating the project.

Key Words: Comedy, Genetics, Discussion

Context

The science communication community in the UK has been urged to move from one way communication to two way dialogue models, and project funders like the Wellcome Trust and the Research Councils now expect that projects submitted to them be designed to promote public engagement with science and technology, rather than simply understanding of it.

A consequence of this shift in emphasis has been an upsurge in the use of drama by science communicators since it is seen as having considerable potential to trigger responses from an audience. Also scripts can include explanatory elements as well as sections designed to provoke discussion.

Ground breaking work in this area was produced by Y Touring who, in 1996, were commissioned by the Wellcome Trust to create plays aimed at young adults that used hard hitting methods to generate debate. Amongst the issues chosen were stem cell therapy [*Learning to love the grey*], genetic selection [*The Gift*] and mental illness [*Cracked*]. The approach was to commission a script from a professional playwright and have it performed by a group of five professional young actors. An innovation was that the play which ran for about 40 minutes was followed by a facilitated discussion during which the

actors remained in character and the audience was drawn in to expressing opinions on key issues raised by the drama.

This approach proved very effective in stimulating discussion but was vulnerable to the criticism that it was top down, and did not allow young people to devise and perform plays that raised issues of greatest importance to them. This latter approach was the starting point for *Science Centrestage* once again the Wellcome Trust in 2001/2002 in which the science and drama teachers within secondary schools across the UK were encouraged to work with their students to devise dramas scripted and acted by them.

Both these initiatives were evaluated, although not all the evaluations have been placed in the public domain.

An independent evaluation carried out on “Cracked” concluded:

“The play had a demonstrable and significant impact on student attitudes to mental health. The index scores for students who have seen the play are 28% higher for an index based on knowledge and understanding of mental illness”ⁱⁱ

Objective

To build on previous initiatives by devising a low cost, easy to mount and disseminate event that used a comedy sketch to promote debate about how individual’s genetic information should be used.

Method

The Graphic Science Unit devised a performance that used elements of theatre and television to draw the target audiences into engagement with the issues raised by advances in gene technology. The event called “Meet the Mighty Gene Machine” was originally devised for Czech Science Week with funding from the British Council and was first performed in Czech at the Czech Academy of Sciences in November 2003. The event began with a 12 minute comic mini-drama set in the future when a reality TV show has been based on live disclosure of individuals’ genetic profiles and their implications. It then became an opportunity for the audience to discuss their attitudes to the use of their own genetic information in a number of contexts including, diagnosis of disease susceptibility, solving crimes and buying insurance. This discussion was facilitated by the performers one of whom invented the machine and the other who has just been embarrassed by its disclosures on his own TV show.

Results

In Prague, the event was targeted at 16-19 year olds and the discussion, which was prompted by questions posed by the facilitators, continued for over 30 minutes at every performance. Subsequent evaluation using questionnaires showed that reactions of the target audience were positive with 62% of the participants reporting that the event had stimulated them to think about the issues raised by the human genome project and genetic screening. A full

evaluation is available from http://www.uwe.ac.uk/fas/graphicscience/projects/evalgene_machine.htm. However, some of the scientists who attended the event felt that it should have focused more on explaining the science behind the technology.

Conclusions

Comedy can be used as a way of drawing young adults into discussing issues raised by science and technology within society and the stimulus piece of theatre can be short and simple to stage and perform. Discussion following the stimulus is extended by the use of two facilitators, who mix with the audience, and use a series of prompt questions to initiate discussion. Further issues that now need to be addressed are who are the ideal performers in such an event and how to construct an effective dissemination strategy.

Notes

ⁱ The Wellcome Trust (2002, September) Retrieved May 5,2004 from <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/scs/home.html>

ⁱⁱ Evaluation Associates (2001, June) Retrieved May 6 2004 from <http://www.evaluation.co.uk/library/c&c/cracked.htm>

