13. Listening to change: children as change agents for science in society


Author for correspondence: secretariat@groupe-traces.fr

The project

SiS Catalyst (www.siscatalyst.eu) is a four-year project supported under the Mobilisation and Mutual Learning action plan of the European Commission’s Science in Society programme. It is coordinated by the University of Liverpool, and it involves 34 partners and advisors from 20 countries.

SiS Catalyst aims at building a culture of engagement and listening. The approach is based on the simple idea that today’s decisions in science and education are significant for tomorrow’s citizens, students and researchers who are children and young people at this time. The project is about the global change in education culture that we need to embrace for our future, through addressing the fundamental question of how we include children in the dialogue between society and the scientific and technological communities.

SiS Catalyst supports science organizations to engage better with young people and to successfully establish strong ties from the earliest age possible - in particular to target those who are currently unlikely to progress to higher education because of their social, cultural or economic background.

The experience that children have of society is hugely valuable in developing outreach and awareness programmes delivered by universities, schools, science festivals, museums and other science in society intermediaries. SiS Catalyst creates awareness among institutions of learning that young people are a relevant audience to be listened to. This engagement must also be reflected within the governance and institutional development in order to be sustainable. SiS Catalyst promotes the overall understanding that we need to treat young people not only as consumers of educational programmes, but as contributors as well, and acknowledges the role that young people have in the modernisation in all spheres of science education: they are Agents of Change!

One of the work packages of the SiS Catalyst project is devoted to the development of the ergonomics of listening for young people, and how this listening can be transformed into institutional change. In the following, we present some of the initial actions of this work package.

General principles

The relationship of young people to science and higher education institutions is a very complex one. In the last decades, there has often been a tendency to oversimplify this relationship. For example, the (presumed) disaffection of young people for scientific careers was often
reduced to a matter of image, implying that if young people are turning away from science, it is not because they analysed what a scientific career would represent for their future, but because they had a “wrong” image of science. According to this approach, a correction of the public image of science, rather than a concrete change in scientific institutions, is supposed to generate a more positive attitude to scientific higher education.

Another example are the programmes promoting “science is fun”, reducing the disaffection to the fact that science mistakenly appears as boring in the eyes of young public, and therefore neglecting the very complex set of social, economical, familiar, personal values that trigger a young person’s choices concerning her future position in society. Or again the emphasis given to “positive role models strategies”, typically adopted to attract young girls to science, that unavoidably tend to apply a flattened, massified vision of what a “role model” is.

This reflect a vision derived from commercial marketing that works very well in that context, but that does not necessarily apply to the context of a life-choice. (The criteria that teenagers apply to choosing a pair of shoes are not the same as the criteria they apply to choosing their educational and professional future.)

This is not to say that these approaches have systematically failed, on the contrary. But their interpretation of the reality they address risks oversimplifying the target audience (and in some cases “stupidifying” it). In doing so, while possibly solving an attractiveness problem for science, they tend to create hidden forms of exclusions. The main drawback of these approaches is that they are mainly centered on values carried by the organizers of the activity, rather than starting from those carried by young people themselves, taking into account all their diversities.

One of the actions of the SiS Catalyst project is aimed at identifying ways in which the voice of young people, and their vision of science as part of their own future, can be at the heart of science in society activities.

Methodology

Step 1: semi-directed interviews

A first step was a field exploration consisting in semi-structured interviews with eight European institutions (universities, museums, CSOs, media centres, etc.) organising science in society activities involving children. The interviews focused on the general principles and the practical actions put in place in order to include the voice of children before (the planning and design phase), during (execution) and after (evaluation and refinement) the activity. A series of videos were realised following those interviews, where each of the institutions reported on a particular case in which they were successful in listening to young people and acting consequently. These can be found on the SiS Catalyst You Tube channel (www.youtube.com/user/siscatalyst1).

Step 2: workshops

The second step was the organisation of a series of pilot workshops involving teenagers, in which a “listening and empowering” approach was adopted. The workshops were held in
Paris, Liverpool, Ankara and Bucharest. The Liverpool workshops, led by Raul Araujo, were based on the forum theatre approach, and focused more specifically on social exclusion aspects. They involved a group of teenagers coming from underprivileged areas on the outskirts of Liverpool. The Ankara workshop involved a group of teenagers participating in the Eucu.net annual conference. It was based on the dreams of teenagers about the key values for tomorrow’s education systems.

Two workshops were organised in Paris: a first one reconfiguring the scientist-teenager interactions in a programme of exploration of fluid dynamics research; a second one, in collaboration with KiiCS FP7 project, based on the interaction among research scientists (on brain-machine interface), teenagers and a professional scriptwriter, developing the young people’s vision of the future starting from new perspectives opened by research. They both involved a group of teenagers coming from underprivileged areas on the outskirts of Paris.

The Bucharest “We are the future” workshop coincided with the 2012 Ministerial Conference and Third Bologna Policy Forum of ministers of education from Europe and beyond. It involved 20 young delegates coming from 13 countries and 4 continents.

We will report on the Interviews, and the Ankara, Liverpool and Paris workshop in forthcoming publications. We will include here a more detailed description of the Bucharest workshop.

**The Bucharest workshop**

A delegation of 20 young people from 13 countries, four continents and very different social and educational backgrounds, was given the opportunity to go to Bucharest alongside the Ministerial conference to take part in a two-day workshop to prepare themselves as junior advisers to the ministerial delegations. The workshop was particularly organised by KinderuniWien, the European Children University Network (Eucu.net), Traces, Paris Montagne and University of Liverpool (Raul Araujo).

The young people prepared questions they wanted to ask the ministers and decision-makers and designed business cards with their personal advice from their experiences of education as junior advisers. The workshop was designed in order for the young people to openly set the agenda and the rules of the actions to come. Although the official protocol of the ministerial conference imposed some strict rules (e.g. only four delegates were allowed on the conference site within the Romanian parliament house), the level of freedom given to the teenagers allowed an empowering approach, avoiding the obvious risk of instrumentalisation associated with this type of actions.

All the 20 young delegates got the opportunity to offer their advice to the Austrian Federal Minister for Science and Research, a high representative of the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research and the Rector and Vice-Rector of the University of Bucharest. A key element was the set-up of eye-to-eye, in-depth conversations between official representatives and young people. Such conversations took place around tables, giving the possibility to each young delegate to express him or herself, and “obliging” officials to a moment of real listening, as they had to provide clear answers or reflections to a very attentive and well-prepared audience of five or six teenagers looking directly into their eyes.

The four delegates allowed to enter the conference site were able to distribute the messages...
prepared by their colleagues, written on specially prepared “young advisor” business cards and distributed to several official delegations visiting the SiS Catalyst stand on the conference venue.

A full report of the workshop outcomes, including all statements by the young advisors and their “message business cards”, can be found on the website: wearethefuture.siscatalyst.eu.