

**The EUROPEAN NETWORK OF SCIENCE COMMUNICATION TEACHERS
(ENSCOT)**

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Introduction

The European Network of Science Communication Teachers (ENSCOT) was established in early 2000, with the support of European Union funding. In this early developmental phase, ENSCOT comprises six active centres (or in EU terminology, six *nodes*), covering five Member States of the EU. Such a make-up allows us to draw on a wide range of experience and materials relating to the teaching of science communication and to the issues surrounding the public understanding of science.

Our aim is to provide a unique European dimension to the issues we cover, tailoring our approach to respond to what we perceive as an increasing interest throughout the EU in teaching science communication.

What is ENSCOT setting out to do?

One of our aims is to promote and exchange good practice throughout the EU, both with respect to teaching methods and materials. We recognise the impracticality of producing a narrowly defined European syllabus, equally suitable for all teachers, nations and contexts. We see advantages in over-providing materials, to allow those responsible for delivering courses to select from or add to ENSCOT materials, and so deliver courses of their own design that reflect local needs and interests.

The initial focus of our work is to produce a European Science Communication Module (ESCM), drawing together materials from science communication courses across the EU. The intention is to explore the European dimension of public understanding and awareness of science, which we do by comparing and contrasting social, cultural and media treatments of a range of current (or historically important) scientific and technological issues. Six themes or 'strands' have been identified, viz, media case studies, political issues and initiatives, cultural and historical issues, models of communication and the professional culture of science communication. Each strand team has multinational representation, charged with the task of identifying suitable sources and producing especially-written linking material that will help provide the coherence and structure that is essential for successful study.

During the second year of ENSCOT's funding, we'll be producing a prototype European Science Communication Workshop (ESCW) to help train scientists to discuss their work with various lay audiences and to work constructively with the media. The intention is to accentuate the European dimension of scientific research and our target audience comprises scientists working on projects funded by the EU, or other European science organisations. The intention is that the Workshop materials will show the relevance of contemporary research into models of communication and public perception, for example in relation to risk assessment and the perceived reliability of scientific and technical information. There will also be an emphasis on the feasibility of developing genuine dialogue with the public and how emerging technologies and innovative forms of face-to-face meetings might make this more possible than hitherto.

Producing our materials

At the time of writing (February 2001), we are not yet half way through our initial funded period, so what is reported here is very much 'work in progress'. The Module and Workshop materials will not be handed over to the EU as the required 'deliverables' of our work until early 2003, though a lot of our material will be going through trialling phase, using prospective and current students in science communication. All the materials will be subject to close scrutiny and comment from within the ENSCOT group, with additional input from colleagues who work within the EU but in countries not currently represented on the production team. In terms of study mode, ENSCOT material will comprise newly-written teaching texts, scholarly reviews, newspaper articles, 'time-lines' that provide a historical account of key events within particular countries, stories, photographs. We also think it important to encourage innovative learning styles, including group project work in media analysis and the use of drama and role play in historical and cultural contexts.

In our view, opportunities for creative study and delivery will be maximised if our materials are provided on CD-ROM, for ease of student use. Extensive guidance is a key part of our provision, for student and teacher, identifying a range of potential study routes through the supplied sources, with opportunities for greater or lesser degrees of engagement. Such a teaching tactic provides ample opportunity for creative input from the teachers who will be there 'on the ground'. Our efforts are geared to ensure that involvement with science communication becomes a richer, more stimulating experience for teacher and student alike – and that the focus of study can go far beyond a narrow national perspective.

Creating something new – or more of the same?

Although existing courses and approaches to science communication are our inspiration, ENSCOT materials will offer the ‘added value’ of a fresh European dimension. The network draw its strength from the differing cultural perspectives represented round the table - and yet we are constantly reminded of the common problems and interest that teachers of science communication share. Establishing a European identity is helped enormously by the huge range of sources and contacts at our disposal. Differing national priorities relating to raising science awareness can be compared; tracking case studies in the press and TV of different countries reveals both similarities and diversity of media practice and challenges some of assumptions built on narrower national experience. Different rates and directions of progress towards genuine dialogue between science and its publics become evident once differing national strategies are compared. The robustness of theoretical models that underpin communication studies is seen in sharper focus amidst our diverse historical and social contexts; a picture of the professional culture of science communication is enriched by knowledge of how professional societies differ.

The challenge we face is to capture this freshness and enthusiasm in the writing tasks ahead, such that diversity of viewpoint and of experience becomes our strength.

A continuing role

In the longer term, an enlarged ENSCOT aims to be act as a key resource for the entire community of science communication teachers throughout the EU. It can be a ‘first port of call’ for offering and receiving expertise and practical assistance. It can be a focus for sharing common experiences and best practice. The report we produce at the end of the first phase of our activity will therefore argue for the enlargement of the network, mindful of the continuing importance of science communication within an expanding European Union.

If you would like further information about ENSCOT or to make contact with the administrator or chair, use <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/enscot>