50. What Does Quality Mean in Public Engagement with Science?

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Background

What DOES quality mean in public engagement with science? This was a question which we in the Edinburgh Beltane, Beacon for Public Engagement explored. The Edinburgh Beltane is one of six beacons for public engagement which were established in the UK from 2008. The Beacons were “university-based collaborative centres that are working to support, recognise, reward and build capacity for public engagement”¹. The definition of public engagement which has emerged from the Beacons project is expressed in terms of three purposes for engagement: informing, consulting and collaborating².

![Diagram of three overlapping circles labeled Informing, Consulting, and Collaborating]

We would place ‘knowledge’ at the centre i.e. the purpose of public engagement is the sharing and co-creation of knowledge.

Although the Beacons culture change project and indeed our project on quality encompassed public engagement across all disciplines, we believe the findings from our work are relevant and significant for science engagement. It is often the case in universities, certainly in the UK, that science engagement is more established than engagement with other disciplines.

We perceived that in the early stages of Beacons, there had been a focus on increasing the quantity of public engagement in universities without necessarily paying so much attention to the quality. We were reminded of an old comedy series on television in the UK about
a tailor’s shop. The title of the series was ‘Never Mind the Quality, Feel the Width.’ There could be a danger that by increasing the quantity of public engagement without due attention to quality, public engagement itself is not embedded in the culture but instead becomes another perceived hurdle or tick box exercise to be completed without regard to the effect of the science engagement on the publics engaged, on the reputation of the university or the subject or research area.

But what does quality mean in public engagement with science? We considered this question of quality in public engagement from three perspectives: at institutional level, at practitioner, and at activity level. This paper represents our reflective journey and arguments from our own experiences.

Our approach was to gather together practitioners in public engagement to discuss the concept of quality. As a starting point for discussions, in the first workshop (in Edinburgh) we looked at quality and quality assurance in other areas of practice-based, engagement type work. We considered the Quality Assurance process for teaching and learning in universities, the quality framework in Museums in the UK, a funder of UK-wide community based projects and an organisation which benchmarks informal education in the UK.

The common denominator for each of the frameworks described above is the enhancement of quality practice through evaluation, with monitoring and review taking place as close as possible to delivery. Each is a process for enhancing the quality of the experience and not merely for generating metrics for external validation. The concept of evaluation can often been seen as something to add on at the end of a project, as another hurdle to navigate, particularly for those new to public engagement (which is true of many researchers in universities). However the main learning point is that the process of evaluation should feed back into enhancement of the delivery and be part of a reflective cycle. Evaluation is an enabler of quality engagement.

Quality Public Engagement at Institutional Level

So what should we do at institutional level to embed quality public engagement with science and to move away from the perceptions of public engagement being a ‘Cinderella’ activity which does not have the rigour of teaching and research in universities?

- Align public engagement with university strategy (if public engagement is seen to be contributing to the success of the institution’s strategic vision then it is more likely to be viewed as a core area of work and therefore will encourage capacity building.

- have a professional approach with organisation-wide policies and processes e.g. Health and Safety, copyright, ethics.

- demonstrate the value (internally) show how public engagement with science contributes to the strategic vision of the organisation social capital is important and relevant.

Professionalising public engagement as a valued area of practice in a university which generates social capital as a valued output.
What does quality public engagement mean at practitioner level?

We found very interesting parallels between our findings and those of a JISC 8,9 funded project outlining Continuing Professional Development framework for engagement. This project identified core personal attributes: honesty, integrity, empathy, together with core abilities: networker, facilitator, reflective practitioner, oral and written communicator, influencer, strategic planner.

Our findings were very similar:

*Communications skills*

- Publics – effective engagement skills
- Internal – influencing (being an ambassador, encouraging and enabling others to participate)
- Leadership – being able to make the case for public engagement and secure funding and time

*Management skills (networking and collaborating)*

- Effect project and people management
- Building and contributing to a supportive network and collaborative projects.

*Attitude (respectful, reflective and proactive)*

- Respecting colleagues and audiences and their background and experiences/sources of knowledge
- Reflective – learning from the experiences and changing practice appropriately and innovatively
- Proactive – reflection in practice, recognise and respond to opportunities, risk assessment/analysis

These parallel projects identified core skills and a clear set of behaviours for effective science engagement and an ethos of practice which encompassed a 360° vision, i.e. not blinkered or constrained.

What defines quality public engagement practices at activity level?

We have summarised our findings as a set of guidelines and indicators.

*Guidelines for quality in PE activities*

- Use the process of evaluation as a planning tool while embracing and valuing the unexpected.
- Ask the who, where, why, what, when questions before designing an activity.
- Identify the community to be engaged and define the purpose of the activity.
- Work with the community to develop the engagement i.e. listen I would argue there is another deficit model which is characterised by NOT listening to audiences, stakeholders.
• Identify resources and additional expertise required within and beyond the institution.

**Indicators of quality in PE activities**

• Evidence of legacy beyond the activity for engager and ‘engaged’ which could be knowledge, different way of thinking, behaving.
• Continued relationship with community/audience
• Good feedback and word-of-mouth recommendations

The primary author’s own experience as a public engagement practitioner, and as a trainer and enabler for researchers to become involved in public engagement is that although there is potentially an infinite number of different methodologies and approaches possible in science engagement there are generic guiding principles\(^1\) which underpin effective science engagement. These sit alongside cornerstones of effective practice. These guiding principles are:

• Accuracy in the representation of the science or issue
  i.e. whether you are informing about an aspect of science or discussing issues arising from the implementation of science, an accurate representation is essential. The model/description may be simplified but analogies and comparisons should be accurate, and the relative importance of information should be transparent.
• Neutrality: Public engagement is the sharing or creation of knowledge, not PR.
• The engagement is considered from the audience’s perspective. If one is designing a presentation, a workshop an exhibit, think what might be interesting from the audience’s perspective not what you as a scientist find interesting. If it is a consultative or collaborative activity think about the points of common interest and goals.
• Clarity of purpose
• Enriching experience (net gain for all participants)
• Creativity

The cornerstones of effective practice are as follows:

Professionalism (respectful behaviours, consideration of legal constraints, ethics)
Flexibility (teamwork, resourcefulness, adaptability, imagination, problem-solving skills)
Reflective practice (evaluation used as a tool for continual improvement)
Quid pro quo (collaborative working, belonging to a community of practice)

I would add to these: vision – seeing the bigger picture, strategic thinking.

**Conclusions**

Public engagement revolves around knowledge. Quality in public engagement with science can be defined in terms of key guiding principles and behaviours in practice. Achieving qual-
ity is an ongoing process rather than a goal and the aim is one of continual improvement through reflective practice. Public engagement practice is a learning journey for each practitioner.

Quality practices should be embraced by both new and experienced practitioners alike. What emerged very strongly from our project, from concurrent work and personal experience is that there is certainly an ethos in public engagement practice which is perhaps not always evident in other areas of academic work in universities. Quality is an enabler and should encourage a 360 degree perspective of the engagement experience and of behaviours. We can all strive for Quality, Honesty and Beauty in science engagement.

References