

## Parallel Session 21: Science week: evaluating experiences

### CAFÉ SCIENTIFIQUE MANCHESTER: SEASONING A MEAL WITH SCIENCE.

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#### Abstract

This paper will describe the benefits of the development of *Café Scientifique* Manchester as part of a worldwide movement. *Café Scientifique* is an informal discussion forum giving people the opportunity to gather in bars and cafés all over the world to discuss the great topics in science. The format allows individuals with a curiosity about science research to meet other people over a meal. The watchwords are informality and democracy: the professional scientist describes the issues which stimulate research in their discipline, and the predominantly amateur audience are considered as equals

**Key words:** informality, science, café meetings

#### Text

Once a month Café Muse<sup>2</sup>, on Oxford Road, Manchester, becomes *Café Scientifique*. It opened in March 2003 with a discussion about “those manipulating molecules” led by Professor Helen Gleeson<sup>3</sup>. The 50-strong audience were nano-curious people from inside and outside the University. By September, working with the North West Science Alliance<sup>4</sup> we hosted an all-day *Café Scientifique* at the Museum of Science and Industry<sup>5</sup> for the opening of the British Association’s Science Festival<sup>6</sup>

My colleague, Lita Denny, Community Support Manager<sup>7</sup> in the Regional Affairs Department<sup>8</sup> and myself established *Café Scientifique* Manchester, but of course it was not our invention. The ‘brand’ began in 1998 when former science broadcaster Duncan Dallas, inspired by the biography of Marc Sautet, the founder of the French Café Philosophique, decided to experiment with the idea of bringing science back into café culture<sup>9</sup>. Dallas was not aware at this time that what he chose to call *Café Scientifique* had also begun in France with

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wun.ac.uk> – part- sponsors for this paper

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kro.co.uk/museum/index.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.cafescientifique.man.ac.uk/2003\\_js.htm](http://www.cafescientifique.man.ac.uk/2003_js.htm)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ccl.ac.uk/Home/WEBNAME=ScienceAlliance>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cafescientifique.man.ac.uk/2003\\_js.htm](http://www.cafescientifique.man.ac.uk/2003_js.htm)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.the-ba.net/the-ba/Events/FestivalofScience/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.man.ac.uk/community/staff.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.business.man.ac.uk>

<sup>9</sup> Bringing science back into culture, Nature volume 399, 13 May 1999, page 120. Copyright 1999 Macmillan Publishers

the Bars des Sciences.<sup>10</sup> His first café was a great success and more followed. Support from the Wellcome Trust<sup>11</sup> funded two part-time co-ordinators and helped spread the model across the country and beyond<sup>12</sup>. Now *Café Scientifique* exists in thirty towns and cities in the UK, seventeen across Europe<sup>13</sup> five in America, two in Canada, one in Brazil, one in Australia, and one in Singapore,<sup>14</sup> see Figure. 1

At *Café Scientifique* Manchester<sup>15</sup> (see Figure 2.) no formal ‘lecturing’ takes place, the emphasis is on developing a discussion. The purpose is relaxed communication between an expert and an involved audience who want to listen and debate, while relaxing in congenial surroundings. Topics covered during the past year include reintroducing wolves to Britain; brain disease; e-Science; genes, evolution and psychology; time psychology; levitation, and sunburnt DNA.

We identified potential benefit to the University in the areas of interdisciplinarity and public understanding. The meeting of nanotechnologists and poets, philosophers and chemists is the sort of cross-disciplinary activity which does not always happen naturally. A new route of access to the University is enabled which allows ordinary tax-payers to engage with contemporary research.

We found a venue which had the right ambience and good catering, and which, importantly, wouldn’t charge us anything. We then asked around, locally at first, to identify academics who are comfortable talking about their work to non-academics. When we had 20 ‘possibles’ we asked them a) would they speak in an open bar, using minimal aids and b) would they do it for free! A challenge, but 90% of the people we approached said YES. Stage one was complete.

Next we had to find the audience. Using every community and business e-mailing list we could find, we sent flyers to libraries, the local media, youth clubs, schools, professional groups, church clubs, the WI, ‘urban village’ web-sites, and of course to University staff and students. We asked people intending to come to confirm by phone or e-mail, so that after the first event we had a mailing list of seventy names. Now we send details of forthcoming topics and speakers, with a link to our online booking system, to everyone who has expressed an interest, creating a *Café Scientifique* network that grows monthly.

Our expert speakers can be understandably keyed up about speaking to such a broad audience, but so far all have said that the evening was stimulating and worthwhile. Afterwards presenters provide us with some follow-up details to put on our web-site along with contact details and links.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bardessciences.net/une.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/1/pinpubact.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cafescientifique.org>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cafescientifique.org/europe.htm>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cafescientifique.org/world-links.htm>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.cafescientifique.man.ac.uk>

The Manchester café is of course modelled on Duncan Dallas' original<sup>16</sup> From 6.30pm people arrive, order food and drinks and find a table the presenter then talks for about twenty minutes. There's a natural break then to allow visits to the bar and discussion of issues raised. The presenter then takes questions (in Manchester we provide slips for people who prefer not to ask direct questions) and discussion takes place for as long as it does, we finish and several people stay afterwards to talk to the speaker.

In 2004 *Café Scientifique* continues to develop. Duncan Dallas has built on an existing French model to develop Junior science cafes.<sup>17</sup> The British Council brought together groups in Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Belgrade and Kuala Lumpur<sup>18</sup> via web-based *cafés scientifiques*. In Manchester we may use Access Grid<sup>19</sup> technology to host virtual cafes across the 18 international research-led partners in the Worldwide Universities Network<sup>20</sup>, following the British Council model<sup>21</sup>. *Café Scientifique* Manchester has contributed to a University drive to make public engagement with science more cohesive across campus, and the building of a Public Engagement Portal<sup>22</sup>. *Café Scientifique* takes the public understanding of science and makes it comfy, convenient and tasty.

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<sup>16</sup> Café Scientifique, Duncan Dallas, Bars des Zincs Conference, Paris 2003

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.cafe-sci.org.uk/jun.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/science/cafesci/documents/KLCreport.doc>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.sve.man.ac.uk/Research/AtoZ/AccessGrid/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.wun.ac.uk>, see fig. 3

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/science/cafesci/videoconf.htm>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.business.man.ac.uk/public/>

## Illustrations

Fig 1.

<http://www.cafescientifique.org>



Fig.2

<http://www.cafescientifique.man.ac.uk>



