

To the AllerGen NCE,

Sometimes we scientists suffer from what The Captain from Cool Hand Luke states, as “failure to communicate”. Hopefully, in my writing below, I am clear and concise, but also passionate and energetic. I am striving for the balance of these feelings to describe my experiences recently in Banff.

I would first like to begin by emphasizing the genuine appreciation that I have for the AllerGen Research Skills Acquisition Award that I received to attend the 2014 Banff Centre Science Communications Workshop from July 27th to August 9th. I have recently returned from the 2wk program and have been blown away by the quality of instruction, content, environment, and fellow participants that I am getting the opportunity to work with. It was a truly transformative experience.

My primary objectives for attending the workshop were to learn advanced level science communication skills that will be required for i) optimized public dissemination of research findings (use of multiple media formats), ii) influence on public health policy (interact with decision makers), and iii) creation and execution of scientific and general audience meetings (local, national, and international meetings).

One of the most important messages I have taken from the workshop is the importance of identifying your target audience up front. The type of audience dictates the shape of the message and therefore the media type, level of detail, and creative alternatives that may be useful. Without careful attention to defining the specific target audience up front, the message, no matter how professionally done, may be lost and not taken up. An extension of this concept is that the same message should not be used for different audiences, even if it was very effective on past occasions. A quote from the workshop outlines this concept “If you give the same talk in Edmonton and Calgary, then you don’t know your audience”. This is a valuable message because scientists will often use the same slide decks for research seminars, public talks, and perhaps educational lectures. Scientists that do this may therefore not be efficiently and effectively communicating their message.

The take home message of identifying your audience up front is not a grand epiphany per se, as I have always been tailoring my writing to specific grant review panels and journal editors, etc. The nuance of the epiphany is that we scientists cannot use the same communication tricks we have refined tirelessly over the years to connect to the public, decision makers, or economists – they just operate on different levels. As a result of the workshop, I’ve realized that I need to understand the motivations and the language/media formats that other stakeholders are familiar with, so that I can more effectively communicate the findings of my research, that of colleagues, and that of AllerGen NCE. As a real-world application of this idea, I am working with Dr. Chris Carlsten to secure funding to host an international forum of scientists, clinicians, policy makers, economists, lawyers, and the public to discuss the motivations and biases of each stakeholder, to find the common ground between us, and to focus on the common ground to create sound policy to benefit all stakeholders. We may employ the deliberative democracy system to work through various stakeholder differences.

Additionally, there is a GRAND NCE competition that is designed to link scientists with artists that is due December 1, 2014. Following the Banff workshop, I feel I can apply to this opportunity and attempt to use my communication skills. I plan to submit an application to this competition that will involve the creation of a short graphic novel/comic, targeting youth populations, to communicate in relatable terms, the impact of climate change on human health. This will use online media to spread the content and involve animations with a past Banff Science Communications graduate, Ben Paylor, who has founded infoshots.com, an award winning animation production house. I have also aligned myself with two graphic artists from my previous network of colleagues, and while at the Banff Centre discussed this idea extensively with Ronald Wimberly (<http://d-pi.com/>) a cartoonist I met in the student residence. He may collaborate, although the GRAND NCE requires artists to be Canadian, and Ronald is from Brooklyn, New York.

On a networking level, during the 2wk Science Communication workshop I have established friendships that I anticipate will long outlive the summer of 2014. I had the opportunity to work with individuals that were clinicians, graduate students, government and non-government employees, and industry players. Beyond these limited descriptors, the participants of the workshop were positive, creative, and genuine people that helped created an atmosphere where building something not possible individually became achievable in a group setting. Specific examples of individuals I will be working with include the following:

David Sauchyn: Professor – University of Regina – Prairie Adaptation Research Collaborative

Meagan Hainstock: National Conservation Biologist - Ducks Unlimited

David Secko: Professor – Concordia University – Department of Journalism

Kamala Patel: Professor – University of Calgary – Associate Dean of Faculty Development

With Drs. Sauchyn and Secko I will be consulting with them on their experiences with policy maker interactions for the forum that Dr. Carlsten and myself are proposing. Both David's have offered their assistance in constructively critiquing any proposals I put forward that will involve engaging politicians. Mrs. Meagan Hainstock has also provided her support, but that from the perspective of an individual working in the non-governmental organization field. She has experience with documents reaching all the way to the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. Lastly, Dr. Kamala Patel a professor of physiology at the University of Calgary that performs lung research has extended an offer to collaborate with me by using my existing mouse models of airway disease.

A simple goal of mine for the workshop was to more effectively communicate my research to specialist, generalist, and lay audiences. I accomplished this goal and much more. I realized that refining a pitch so that it is tailored to a targeted audience, carefully personalizing the story, and building from group ideas, could create a communication strategy far superior to what I previously thought possible. I plan to incorporate these many of the new, fresh, and innovative ideas I learned at the Banff Science Communications workshop into my work and personal life.

Sincerely,



Jeremy A. Hirota PhD
Canadian Banting Postdoctoral Research Fellow