

Advice you wish you'd been given when starting out as a STEM communicator

Q: What happens if you ask an email discussion group of STEM communicators (BIG chat, www.big.uk.com) what advice they wish they had been given when they *started out* presenting interactive shows and workshops?

A: This treasure trove of wisdom.

The work of face-to-face communicators obviously depends crucially on context and concision always carries with it the increased risk of misinterpretation, so feel free to use these aphorisms to stimulate reflection and discussion with other STEM communicators. The suggested advice is listed in the order of replies received.

“Volunteer selection zen - if you "ask" someone older than 12 to volunteer as if you have *absolutely* no doubt they will comply, they almost always will. Really.”

Paul McCrory, learn differently, www.learn-differently.com

“No matter how vulnerable you feel, they can't read your mind and they can't read your body language half as well as you fear they can.”

Paul McCrory, learn differently, www.learn-differently.com

“Occasional presenting mistakes are priceless moments of peak audience attention to exploit, not embarrassments to be covered up. The audience will only be concerned if you show your concern.”

Paul McCrory, learn differently, www.learn-differently.com

“As a new presenter, if you don't *feel* as if you're being sickeningly enthusiastic, then you're not doing it enough.”

Paul McCrory, learn differently, www.learn-differently.com

“Back your own authentic style and put effort into developing it; don't feel you have to present like everyone else.”

Dr Graham Walker, Australian National University and www.scienceshowoffs.net/blog

“I started by trying to emulate others who I admire but I just felt like a fake. My style is now quieter but more genuine to my personality. It took a while to find it.”

Dr Sarah Bearchell, Sarah's Adventures in Science, www.bearchell.co.uk

“Don't be afraid of audience silence - allow them to express awe and give them time to think. I think when they make the connection for themselves they learn differently.”

Dr Sarah Bearchell, Sarah's Adventures in Science, www.bearchell.co.uk

“Never say "Does anyone have any questions?" to young children. You'll be asked about baked beans, Jesus or a comet which they have read is hurtling towards earth.”

Dr Sarah Bearchell, Sarah's Adventures in Science, www.bearchell.co.uk

When you've asked them where they think blood is made and they've said "In your heart?" ... "In your brain?" ... "In your tummy?" ... then a child pipes up (in total seriousness) with "In your testicles?" remember to repeat the whole question for everyone else to hear so that no-one feels compelled to ask it again.

Dr Sarah Bearchell, Sarah's Adventures in Science, www.bearchell.co.uk

“Do your best to bridge the gap between you on stage and the audience and make them feel like part of the show. Look each and every one straight in the eyes, if you can.”

Marilena Pace

“Enjoy the audiences enjoyment.”

Noel Jackson, Life Science Centre, www.life.org.uk

“Find way of bringing excitement down as well as bringing it up, so that there is ebb and flow.”

Caroline Ainslie, Bubbly Maths, www.bubblymaths.co.uk

“Just because it works with 16 year olds, doesn’t mean it will work with 5 year olds.” [It didn’t take me long to figure it out. About 3 minutes.]

Dominic McDonald, Royal Society of Chemistry, <http://www.rsc.org/campaigning-outreach/outreach>

“You're not expected to be fantastic the first time.”

Rowena Fletcher-Wood, Science Oxford, www.scienceoxford.com

“Find the part of the experience you’re most looking forward to... then give it to your participants.”

Jonathan Sanderson

“Nail your boots to the floor.”

Jonathan Sanderson

“Emotion is good. Don’t limit yourself to just the ‘positive’ ones.”

Jonathan Sanderson

“Signposting: help your audience orient themselves by periodically reminding them where they are, how they got there, where they’re going, and roughly how far is left to travel. The best signposting is usually subtle and integral to the flow of the delivery.”

Jonathan Sanderson

“ ‘Tell them what you’re going to tell them / Tell them / Tell them what you’ve told them’ – is *terrible* advice.”

Jonathan Sanderson

“A paragraph, we are told, should have five sentences. The first, the 'topic' sentence, introduces the idea or concept of the paragraph. The second expands on that point, offering additional evidence or explanation. The following two sentences typically offer evidence for or expansion of the central point. Then the concluding sentence wraps up a neat summary: here, that paragraphs should have five sentences.

— is also terrible advice, since it leads to formulaic, lifeless writing.”

Jonathan Sanderson

“The more you fail, the better it gets.”

Debbie Syrop, Science Made simple, www.sciencemadesimple.co.uk

“You cannot see what the audience sees, you cannot hear what the audience hears. So record and watch back your rehearsals, record and watch back your performances. It doesn't need to be fancy, any phone will do it. It doesn't even need to be video, a voice memo is useful too.”

James Soper, www.thejugglingscientist.com

“Silence can be an incredibly powerful tool if used at the right moment.”

Brian Mackenwells, Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, <http://www.well.ox.ac.uk>

“Every volunteer should leave the stage feeling like they’re a hero.”

Brian Mackenwells, Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, <http://www.well.ox.ac.uk>

“Don’t ask for the volunteer’s name unless you’re sure you’re going to remember it...”

Brian Mackenwells, Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics, <http://www.well.ox.ac.uk>

‘You don’t have 30 secs to make them love you...You have 30 mins not to piss them off.’ Audiences are nice and (mostly) want you to succeed.

James Piercy, Science Made simple, www.sciencemadesimple.co.uk

“Smile.

Know EXACTLY how you are going to begin, with no dithering.

Smile.

Make it a conversation, not a lesson.

Smile.

Your demonstrations are the performers, not you. You are part of the audience, sharing and enjoying the experience with them.

Smile.

Take care that you truly are enjoying the experience and they will too.

Smile.

Take care to feel that you love your audience and they will warm to you.

Smile.

Keep asking friendly-sounding questions. Listen to verbal answers and respectfully acknowledge ‘show-of-hands’ answers.

Laugh out loud when something goes wrong.”

Ian Russell, www.interactives.co.uk

“Repeat, take risks, make mistakes, reflect, repeat all again and you never know in 3 years you could go freelance.”

Dr Ken Farquhar, Inspirational Science Theatre Company, www.dodifferent.co.uk

“Practice, practice, practice, then practice a bit more. Give yourself enough time and space to get good, then use that time effectively.”

David Price, Science Made Simple (North), , www.sciencemadesimple.co.uk

“Have things you can squeeze, things you can add in - depending on what you are doing, timings may be slightly different with each audience so plan in places where you can adapt. Never miss your ending, and don't stop with "I wanted to do this, but we don't have time..." because they might feel they have missed out. Instead tell them it is something they can do at home!”

Samantha Durbin, Royal Institution, www.rigb.org

“Remember - remember your own experiences, remember what excited you, what excites you - share your excitement.”

Selwyn van Zeller, www.mathsinasuitcase.co.uk

“It can be scary and it's OK to be scared.”

Selwyn van Zeller, www.mathsinasuitcase.co.uk

“When you have screwed up - it's in the past, but take time to reflect and let it go (easier said than done!)”

Selwyn van Zeller, www.mathsinasuitcase.co.uk

“Take all the stuff you don't need out of your pockets. It's more comfortable for you and potentially less distracting for the audience.”

Alexander Brown, www.AlexanderBrown.info

“Learn how to use a microphone - handheld, tie-clip, and Madonna-style. Learn how to put them on other people.”

Alexander Brown, www.AlexanderBrown.info

“Use movement as a tool - don't pace around unnecessarily, use each step to make a point.”

Alexander Brown, www.AlexanderBrown.info

“Don't commit to doing too many shows in a row. It's exhausting and requires practice to maintain a heavy schedule.”

Alexander Brown, www.AlexanderBrown.info

“Yes, you really can do a show in two languages at the same time, you'll just have to be very careful about your timing. (Admittedly this one's a bit niche.)”

Alexander Brown, www.AlexanderBrown.info

And finally,

"Join BIG and sign up to BIG chat"

James Soper on behalf of www.big.uk.com

Collated by Paul McCrory, learn differently
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