

## Finding Your Scientific Voice with Itai Cohen, Melanie Dreyer and Susi Varvayanis

### *Science meets Theatre*

by Dumi Tembo

“Scientists are not terrible communicators. They are just focused on other important things; the science.” Melanie Dreyer says.

I find this statement very true just by listening to my peers explaining their research at the “Finding Your Scientific Voice” workshop. The first thing I hear is the science. Big words and scientific names of viruses and bacteria and their processes and counterparts I cannot pronounce, let alone spell. Although some words swoosh past my brain into the atmosphere, what I hear the loudest is the passion.

Science matters. People vote or make a purchase based on science. That is why it is very important that scientists communicate the right information in such a way that it does not get misunderstood and misinterpreted. Say what you mean and mean what you say.



When I asked some of my peers why they decided to attend this workshop, the most common response was “I want to improve my communication skills”.

A two half-day workshop sponsored by the BEST Program, “Finding Your Scientific Voice” is geared to teach students and post docs theatrical and performance techniques to create amazing



beginnings to different forms of presentation, whether it’s an elevator pitch, a 10 minute presentation or 1hr seminar.

During this workshop you learn how to find the core of your message and present it in such a way that you are “unafraid to be interesting and connect with the audience at an emotional and personal level” as Melanie puts it. The exercises are structured to enable students to use each other for peer critique of each other’s work and technique.

Most scientists exhibit “the curse of knowledge” syndrome. They have a deeper understanding specific to their area of study such that they often unintentionally disregard the need to simplify information for others. The audience is the major determining factor of how much your message needs to be simplified so that you are fully understood.

Whatever the case, the strategy is to shape your message into a story. You want to make sure that you keep your audience engaged so that they don't have to work hard at getting what it is you are trying to tell them.

How you begin matters. You want your beginning to be so good that "if someone was standing in the doorway they will decide to come in, if they were about to leave to go the bathroom they will stay." Itai further explains, "Remember that the introduction to your research is the entry way into your talk. In cases of presentations, the first slide is what people will be looking at a good number of minutes. Therefore it should contain the main message."



While it may appear to happen magically for others, mostly it requires work. The good news is that whether on camera or with an audience, the more you practice the easier it becomes. Performing for the camera is different from performing for an audience. Don't be shy to record and watch yourself on camera if there is that opportunity. Just like a good movie, create and structure your scenes in such a way that will build the story and keep the audience engaged. You can incorporate props, add humour or use a personal story. As you continue to increase and

build your confidence feel free to change things that are not working but make sure to keep what is working.



Warm up is essential in sports as in speech, whether you do the haka, scrunch your face, or use a tongue twister. When you have delivered your message, how you finish is also important. Signal that you are ending. Give a cue by subtly changing your voice tone, or use body language and/or hand gestures. Take care that your last sentence is very positive and final. It is OK to be memorable.

The class is very participatory and exciting. You will learn the importance of breathing in speech, how to project your voice as required by your audience and surroundings. This is just a glimpse of what the "Finding Your Scientific Voice" workshop offers. Plan to add this activity to your course list and join Itai and Melanie the next time they advertise through the BEST program or other means.

Like the godfather said "you do what you gotta do" to help you take that stand in fearless confidence or at least fake it to make it. But when you are done knowing you gave it your best, the only feeling left is that your audience was lucky to have you.

