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Dennis Meredith makes a strong case for why scientists need to do a better job of talking in terms non-scientists can understand. (“Please Explain,” Chronicle, May 16, 2010) Mr. Meredith, who has written an excellent book on this subject, *Explaining Research: How to Reach Key Audiences to Advance Your Work* (Oxford University Press, 2010), argues that science and engineering, unlike law and medicine, place little value on explanation aimed at people outside their own discipline. Moreover, he notes, scientists may overestimate their communication skills or feel that public communication will consume time they need for primary production: doing experiments, publishing papers, securing grants.

At Stony Brook University’s Center for Communicating Science, we have heard these explanations, along with others – the so-called Carl Sagan phenomenon (scientists who become too popular may risk being punished by their colleagues); defeatism (how can science compete with *American Idol?*), and personal preference (if I’d wanted to talk with lay people, I wouldn’t have gone into science.)

But we’ve also seen a hunger to connect with the public among some scientists, especially younger ones, and enthusiasm when opportunities for improving communication skills are offered. This spring our multi-disciplinary Center ran all-day workshops for 190 students, postdoctoral researchers and faculty at Stony Brook, Brookhaven National Laboratory and Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, and turned away dozens of applicants. On exit surveys, participants were eager and appreciative. Most said that the experience had left them both more interested in communicating with the public and more confident of their abilities to do so. The most common comment could be summed up in a word: More.

These events featured small-group workshops called “Distilling Your Message,” in which participants worked – wrestled mightily, in some cases -- to come up with short, clear, conversational statements about what they do and why it matters. We also are trying less conventional approaches. Last year, Alan Alda, an ardent advocate for public understanding of science and a member of our National Advisory Board, led a series of workshops for science graduate students that used improvisational theater games to help them connect more directly with listeners. The goal was not to make them actors, but to help them become responsive partners in a conversation, rather than presenters to an audience. The results were striking; a short video is posted on our website at [www.stonybrook.edu/journalism/science](http://www.stonybrook.edu/journalism/science). Students told us it helped them with teaching, defending a thesis, and simply explaining themselves to friends and family. Now we are working toward offering other opportunities for improving skills, including credit-bearing courses in Communicating Science to the Public.

Clearly, some scientists will never be open to this approach. Our experience, however, has left us optimistic that many young scientists do want to communicate better and would welcome help with this challenge.

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Thank you for publishing Dennis Meredith's compelling commentary about why scientists need to do a better job of talking in terms non-scientists can understand. ("Please Explain," Chronicle, May 16, 2010) At Stony Brook University, the new Center for Communicating Science is working to help them do that. We began last summer, working with Alan Alda, an ardent advocate for public understanding of science. Alda led a series of workshops that used improvisational theater games to help science graduate students connect more directly with listeners, to become responsive partners in a conversation, rather than presenters to an audience. The results were striking; a short video is posted on our website at [www.stonybrook.edu/journalism/science](http://www.stonybrook.edu/journalism/science). Students told us it helped them with teaching, defending a thesis, and simply explaining themselves to friends and family.

This spring, the Center ran all-day workshops that reached 190 students, postdoctoral researchers and faculty at Stony Brook, Brookhaven National Laboratory and Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. These used a range of approaches, including improvisation. At the heart of each event were small-group workshops called "Distilling Your Message," in which scientists worked – wrestled mightily, in some cases -- to come up with short, clear, conversational statements about what they do and why it matters. On exit surveys, participants were enthusiastic and appreciative. The most common comment could be summed up in one word: More.

Meeting this request won't be easy, but we think it can offer opportunities for fruitful collaboration across disciplines and institutions. At Stony Brook, the Center is co-chaired by the Dean of the School of Journalism, Howard Schneider, and the Dean of the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, Dr. David O. Conover. Its steering committee includes faculty from five science departments, the School of Medicine and the Center for Science and Mathematics Education, as well as from Brookhaven National Laboratory and Cold Spring Harbor National Laboratory.

The Center plans to offer a range of instructional opportunities, including credit-bearing courses in communicating science to the public; to develop and rigorously assess curriculum, and to serve as a clearinghouse to share what works. We'd be delighted to hear from others who are working in this field.

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