

“Learning from Small Talk”

Hosted by Nick Hillier, The BA

Attendees: Savita Custead (ecs-site-uk), Rosalind Mist (ecs-site-uk), Nick Hillier (The BA), Alex Garlick (@Bristol), Adam Nieman (Thinklab), Melanie Smallman (Thinklab)

What are the challenges of running a nanotechnology activity with young people?

Although not comprehensive, a short discussion on challenges brought out the following ideas in the group:

- Nanotechnology is a very broad issue, so it is necessary to choose certain elements to discuss. Such choices require a common set of criteria to be used.
- Choosing certain issues in nanotechnology means that different students will engage in various issues, and this can be unpredictable.
- Participants are often “blank slates” with little to no prior knowledge or views
- Participants need to receive the key information points, which requires a suitable introduction. In creating such an introduction we have to look at content, delivery style, and length, etc.
- The “timescales” involved in nanotechnology research and applications can lead to further difficulties in working with the topic. This may be a phenomenon common to other upstream topics, for further discussion.

What are some important questions to ask?

The following questions remain unanswered, but may be worth asking in preparation for further events:

- Should a nanotechnology event be process or conclusion driven?
- What is the best way to work with visiting experts?
- Are experts more likely to perceive their role as ‘teaching kids’ rather than ‘learning from kids’ if the event is in a school rather than another venue or science centre?
- What aspects should a policy statement, created by participants, cover?

What was @Bristol’s experience?

Alex Garlick from @Bristol shared with us some particular lessons that were learned during the nanotechnology debate day at the science centre:

- On prior knowledge: low awareness amongst participants – to the extent that existing knowledge didn’t affect learning
- On using visiting experts: asking two experts to have a “head-to-head debate” for hypothetical funding was most engaging activity
- On outputs: a video report was produced by each group with policy statements and shared with the other groups
- On consultation: participants were told that their opinions would be ‘published’ on the Small Talk site and European ‘Nanologue’ site
- On outside resources: the group used the Democs policy statements as starting points for discussion and to frame their own policies.

How do we bring in students?

There was a short discussion on the general issues surrounding the marketing of the events to students and teachers:

- As with any programme, clear communication with teachers is crucial – both about the content of the debate and the links to the national curriculum. It is key to show both the learning involved and the benefit for the students. Participating in a ‘national programme’ may add an extra incentive. Some organisations are further able to offer funding and teacher cover. “We have to give teachers the means to take kids out of classes.”
- ‘Gifted and Talented’ days are a possible way to market the events.
- Holding events in schools will inevitably make them more like ‘lessons for students benefit’ and less like genuine dialogue.

On "framing the debate"...

A further discussion was held on means to frame the debate, where the following issues were raised:

- One method of framing the debate could be posing the overall issues as "what if this were an issue?" rather than saying: "This is an issue, now what do you think?"
- Perhaps there is an opportunity for debating the issue from an ethical point of view without incorporating the associated science with it.
- A possible starting point could be to ask participants about their general tart hopes for the future, then to link to what kinds of things people want, and then to link these to current and possible nanotechnology applications.
- We want to be honest with participants about their input to consultation processes, and one method of doing so is informing students that their views will be used to shape future events, not necessarily future policy.

Other ideas...

- It would be interesting to split a group and tell one half that their opinions were of interest outside the event and the other half that everything was contained within the event to see the difference this made.
- Use of target device for collecting opinions: participants place opinions on a large target, close to the bull's-eye if it's a coherent clear idea, further away if not.
- Use of personal meaning mapping (like mind-maps)
- What would someone aged, 14, 16, 18, 30, 60, 80 think? Quality of life
- Collecting questions on the Small Talk website may be more useful than collecting answers
- Using NMSI list

Where do we go from here?

The discussion, as well as the evaluation of prior events conducted by Laura Grant, will be used to inform the planning of the upcoming nanotechnology events hosted by ecsite-uk at the Brighton Science Festival.

The lessons learned through these events will then be shared with Thinktank, who is currently planning an nanotechnology activity with the Young People's Parliament.