

Rough guide:  
running training for public engagement



There is no simple answer to this question. When planning some training take the time to think about: the learner, the trainer (you) and the format.



# The learner

What do they need from the training? Are they running a stall at a festival next week so need to upskill quickly? Do they want to think whether public engagement is something they could / should be doing? These require vastly different types of intervention. The former is going to be deeply practical and probably rushed, while the latter is more reflective and discursive. Can you involve the learner in developing the intervention?

What do they already know? They may already have skills and experiences from other aspects of their lives that could readily translate to a public engagement or science communication setting. Don't assume a deficit that needs correcting. Have they done a lot of public engagement and are looking to really advance their practice, or think more critically about their work?

What is the culture for professional learning within their department or research group? It's common in academia to not place a high priority on professional development. There is an overarching perception that simply doing a PhD is training enough for a lifetime career in academia.

How will the participants find out about the training? People don't look for / notice adverts unless it's immediately relevant. Place your advertising where academics go when they want to know something. This might be a departmental intranet, newsletter or a person.



# The trainer

Do you have the skills and qualities to run a training intervention? If you are running a group-based training session you need to have the fundamentals of group facilitation under your belt. Being a skilled and confident facilitator will ensure you and your trainees have a much more productive time. You will need to establish a rapport, build trust and know when to support and when to challenge. For example:

- Be approachable so the trainee feels comfortable asking questions and clarifying information.
- Be honest so the trainee does not feel misled and can trust you further.
- Be empathetic to support the trainee in their learning.
- Be non-judgemental and avoid judging or comparing trainees.
- Be patient.
- Have integrity so that needs are not compromised by hidden agendas.
- Be trustworthy and do not deceive the trainee.
- Have a sense of humour to help the trainee enjoy the learning.

Know your limits: you don't need to know everything. A well facilitated intervention will enable the participants to make sense of the agenda / topic for themselves. There will be aspects that you don't know about which is fine, as long as you didn't claim to be the expert when you advertised the activity. Encourage peer comments and review – it's what academics are used to.

Could someone else say it? Having external speakers / contributors can be a real draw for researchers. It's sad but true – people outside your institution are frequently perceived as more credible than those from within the university. If you can afford it, then consider external speakers for important training sessions but do make sure they are on message with what you want them to say. You can always trade your time with someone in another university.



# The format

Training doesn't always look / feel like training. A key learning point might not be a training session at all. When planning what your learner needs, the format should emerge from that (take the time to do some formative evaluation by asking colleagues what they would like). Would a quick chat over a coffee be enough or does the person need a sustained, cohort-based programme? Could you provide an article to read, or a video to watch?

Lead by example. Your training interventions should demonstrate good public engagement and science communication practice. It can be daunting to run a highly interactive, practical session when academic colleagues are used to experiencing and delivering powerpoint-led lectures. If it's the right thing to do – then be dynamic. You can't run a workshop on effective presentation skills if the participants don't stand up and say something in front an audience.

What's in a name? Think carefully about what you call your training. Training can be perceived negatively, but so can the term professional development. People don't want to be labelled as a 'beginner' and you will find that complete novices will come to your 'Masterclasses'.

Did it work? Having planned learning outcomes is important. Evaluating the activity can help you understand which sections to change and what other aspects were of value. For example, many PhD students value group-based learning that provides them with the opportunity to meet others from outside their lab and do something different. However, it's worth noting that assessing the long term impact of a training intervention is (really) hard...



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