PEP NETWORK EVENT: 15TH NOVEMBER 2020 – ‘SPOOKY’ TALES OF ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

This session focussed on sharing examples of engagement practice that had not gone as originally planned, or involved personal challenges and therefore was run under Chatham House Rules. Some really interesting themes developed from the discussion and this brief summary captures these important topics, ensuring that learning emerging from our PEP community are not lost.

Four speakers kindly shared their ‘spooky’ tales, which involved:

1) An experience of getting completely covered in cornflour and water gloop live on stage at a Schools Science Engagement event at the Royal Albert Hall!
   
   Learning point: always expect the unexpected

2) Difficulties in managing expectations across a project which sought to bring community and academic sectors together, including:
   - Members were viewed externally as having a collective view, whereas internally community sector representatives had many perspectives and were hoping to gain very different things out participating.
   - There were capacity challenges in terms of the amount of work required to change academic thinking, which many felt was better done by and with more resource from the Universities themselves.
   - A commitment to community partners presenting about the network, and the reluctance of host organisations to fund their participation.
   
   Learning point: emphasises how messy and challenging it can be bringing people from different sectors together, although rewarding and full of learning

3) Challenges with different approaches to engagement work from PEP’s, Academics and Schools relating to a school and community engagement project.
   - Interest and motivation to come together to engage around air quality outside a local school with lots of good outcomes for pupils, school, community members and the University.
   - However many rocky peaks to scale on way, partly down to assumptions made by the different partners, and subsequent mis-communications. The management of expectations
was particularly key when engaging with the local community on designing and delivering solutions.

Learning points: to be more actively involved in relationship forming with all partners directly, agreeing shared expectations and recognising when the academic and school needed more support. Also being realistic about what can be achieved in the context of a short term engagement project, when the challenges are bigger and require a longer term commitment and approach.

4) **Film (no) show** a planned film screening, inspired by science engagement. However, despite checking everything several times and being assured that the chosen film would screen perfectly, it did not work on the night due to a technical hitch. Many different approaches were tried but in the end the audience watched quite a different film from the one originally intended!

Learning point: have a checklist and run through it yourself, but also ask someone else who has run similar events to check it as well. If possible plan a technical rehearsal in advance.

5) **International cross-cultural projects** can be challenging due to language and cultural differences. New ways of working, reputational risk, language barriers and being reliant on researchers and partners local knowledge around political sensitivities made for a scary project. Overcame fears of project going wrong through reaching out to critical friends, researchers, people in the host countries and the communications team at the host institution, and in the end the project was highly successful.

Learning point: sometimes need to push through barriers and work intensively with partner organisations to have faith in achieving a successful outcome.

6) **Mental health and wellbeing challenges**; these can be especially prevalent in our sector, where there may not be full or even partial understanding of our roles, and where line management and support for our work may be limited. We may also not be clear on what the expectations are of our role or outputs, leading us to drive ourselves too hard and deliver more and more engagement activities.

Learning point: trying to be kind and supportive both to ourselves and others

If you are interested in participating in a conversation about mental health and wellbeing join Helen Obee Reardon and Kirsty Ross at their Engage conference session on Monday 30th November from 3:15pm - 4:15pm. This will be a chance to hear how Helen is spearheading changes to wellbeing policies and procedures at Cardiff University, to share and crowd-source ways of looking after our own wellbeing as public engagement professionals, and identify what practical support we need as a community going forward.

[https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/engage-2020](https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/engage-2020)