



Science Night at the Improv

COMEDY HELPS WHEN YOU HAVE THREE MINUTES TO EXPLAIN YOUR SCIENCE.

AS A GRADUATE STUDENT PRESENTING HIS research at a national science meeting, Ben Dubin-Thaler was a little nervous. After all, more than 300 people were spilling out the door and into the hallway to hear about his work on cell migration.

Dubin-Thaler had a brief three minutes to give his talk without slides or laser pointer. Instead, he had to rely on his wit and the power of spoken words:

*You see, we take a balled up cell and
then we drop the ball,
Onto a sticky lawn of matrix what-
chamacall.
It could be fibronectin, or laminin,
Or it could be collagen, like the lips of
Pam Anderson.
But the cells, you know, they aren't really
that picky,
They start kissing those lips, integrin
binding makes 'em sticky.*

The crowd was amused and the 28-year-old won third place in the first-ever CellSlam event, a contest that drew eight scientist communicators and took place at the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) meeting in San Diego, California, December 9–13, 2006.

The event gave scientists a chance to use humor, rhythm, song, or skit to communicate a scientific concept. University of California, San Diego (UCSD), geneticist Amy Kiger proposed the idea after she attended a similar contest in the United Kingdom called FameLab.

“We really need to be training the troops to think outward about how to communicate science to the public,” says Kiger, a former HHMI predoctoral fellow who judged the contestants with colleagues including Elias A. Zerhouni, director of the National Institutes of Health.

Zerhouni says he enjoyed CellSlam and thinks it should be held every year. “Never take yourself too seriously in science,” he advises practitioners. “Humor, wit, and simplicity in explaining your work is a common attribute of the very best scientists.”

A fan of poetry slams, Dubin-Thaler says he drew inspiration from one of his classes

at Columbia University with neurobiologist and HHMI professor Darcy Kelley, who belts out mating calls of the South African clawed frog to make her point during lectures. He says her “willingness to be bizarre gives people that little nudge that says, ‘Hey, this is cool and exciting and worth your time to stop daydreaming!’” He and other slammers say that, while it may be hard to teach a complete science lesson to any audience in three minutes, it is enough to spark a desire to learn more.

Kirsty Roach, a doctoral student at the University of Manchester in England, won CellSlam (whose official prize was “glory and an ASCB T-shirt”) with her engaging skit about how cells repair wounds. The audience roared as she instructed her blindfolded friend Mark, playing the role of a disoriented cell, to “protrude” and “detach at the rear.”

Kiger says Roach won because she used humor, props, and audience participation, all squeezed into three minutes, to convey a tiny bit of her own research. Blindfolding her assistant, Roach explained, was like knocking out a cellular receptor called syndecan-4, which the cell needs to find its way along the extracellular matrix. Roach explains her research to schoolchildren much the same way, by letting them act out the different cells and molecules needed for tissue repair.

“Every scientist has a responsibility to convey research to the public,” says Roach. She notes, however, that many scientists fear looking silly or simplistic in front of their peers if they engage in less-than-serious educational efforts.

So as role models, several top scientists let down their guard and joined the fun



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SANDRA SCHMID

at their own expense. Randy Hampton, a professor of cell and developmental biology at UCSD, exhibited his “street cred” as the night’s emcee. A stand-up comedian in a previous life, Hampton loosened up the crowd with political gags, some off-color humor, and jokes only a scientist

could love: “Everyone take a deep breath,” he instructed. “Now, just breathe out the nitrogen. [Laughter] I love collecting data, and this is a huge amount of proof that scientists are desperate for entertainment.”

Sandra Schmid, chair of cell biology at The Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, had the audience clapping and singing along to her entry, “Ode to NIH”—a shameless plug for more grant money sung to the tune of “Let It Snow.”

Schmid, who has taught HHMI workshops, says that part of giving any scientific talk is “putting on a good show.” She knows that students often feel stressed out by the competitive nature of research and believes events like CellSlam can help lighten up the pressures of scientific discovery. “You can’t be creative unless you are relaxed and having fun.” ■ - KENDALL POWELL