Share your science with a story | Science

By Karin BodewitsJun. 5, 2019 , 10:00 AM

"Honestly, you all bored me." Twelve Ph.D. students stare at Sam, the workshop leader, in disbelief. "Every one of you. I didn't hear a single thing that will make me remember any of you tomorrow."

Eyebrows are raised. Lips are pressed together. Some students look as if they want to run out of the room.

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Sam's expression softens. "And worse ... you have bored each other," she continues.

The group had just finished introductions in Sam's self-presentation and networking seminar. "Tell me something about yourself," she had urged the students. "What are you working on and why does it matter? And, please share something that helps me remember you tomorrow."

"I'm Lizzy," the first person said. "I'm a second-year Ph.D. student in the Baxter group working in the field of material sciences." She came to the seminar because she struggles with small talk and keeping a conversation going, and she hopes that Sam can help.

"I am Mark, and I'm currently doing a postdoc in the Chen group," the next person said.

Sam raised her eyebrows. "The Chen group?" she asked, digging for more information.

"Yeah, organic chemistry," Mark added, as if this was all that anyone needed to know in order to understand and appreciate his work.

And so they had fought through 12 short introductions.

"We've spent 20 minutes of our lives trying to get to know each other and we still know nothing of importance," Sam says. "You've told me that you are Ph.D. students working for big-cheese supervisors no one outside the ivory tower has ever heard of. I still have no clue what you are really working on. I don't know what drives you. These were 20 lost minutes, never to be seen again."

About half of the participants nod in agreement—yes, they were bored as well. The others look curious, awaiting what comes.

"Add a narrative," Sam continues. "Make us curious. Share something with us that makes us crave a coffee break so that we can continue talking about it with you! Get us hooked!"

From the back of the room, one of the young scientists speaks up. "My research topic is not entertaining. It is kind of exciting to people in my field but boring for outsiders," he says, sighing, as if the task Sam has asked him to accomplish is as impossible as counting the stars in the sky.

"I bet your supervisor did not get grant money based on a proposal that said her research questions are dead-boring," Sam responds.

He grins. "Probably not."

Sam tells them about the oceanographer who, in a past seminar, drew the audience in by painting a vivid picture. "Imagine you are walking on the beach in Hawaii," he started. "There are lots of surfers. The waves are big. You see them? Those waves are chicken feed compared with the waves I am working on. I am investigating monster waves. They can be as high as 100 meters and can make cargo carriers disappear. Imagine the effects these waves could have on the oceans—and on our climate. That is what I am trying to understand."

"But that one might seem too easy," Sam continues. "Anyone can tell a good story about the beach, right? What if your topic is dull as dishwater and wouldn't make for a good narrative?" Most of the students nod in agreement.

"Let me tell you about a theoretical physicist I worked with in one of my previous courses," Sam says. "She said she was working on the gravitomagnetic clock effect. I had never heard of it. I asked a few probing questions, but I still felt lost. After 10 minutes, I decided the situation was hopeless and had become embarrassing for all parties involved, so I moved on with the seminar."

"But over dinner that evening, I decided to give it another shot and asked her what this whole clock thing is all about," Sam continues. "She told me, excitedly, that you can do a lot with it. One application is accurately measuring land elevation. It turned out that this is quite useful if you want to build a new train track through the Alps. I finally felt like we were making headway. I told her to come up with an example of how inaccuracy from current methods can create problems and to make that her narrative. She smiled and said, 'Sure!'"

Thus inspired, Sam hopes, she tells the participants to come up with a narrative, a concept or real-life implication of their research that the entire audience can relate to. "Are we ready to try this again?"

Again, it's Lizzy to start. "We have all been in airports: check-in, passport control,

security check, waiting to board. It can easily take an hour or two. Now imagine an airport where you can just walk straight to the gate because your body, face, and luggage are scanned without you even noticing. Wouldn't that be amazing? Crucially, all the data has to be collected safely, securely, and accurately. This is what I am working on: new methods for data storage and translation."

The response was as different as night and day. The other students ask questions about how the technology works and how she approaches certain challenges. A lively discussion follows.

After a few questions, Sam tries to break in to transition the group to the planned coffee break, but she can't get in a word edgewise.

And the moral of the story is:

We all enjoy a good story, whether it's during a scientific presentation, a coffee break with colleagues, a job interview, or simply when a colleague comes to our office to share their latest results. Why? Because it activates part of our brain that would be activated during the actual event. For a moment, we saw the surfers on that beach in Hawaii, we watched a train-line construction in the Alps, we ran through an airport to catch a flight. The stories weren't overly technical; they offered analogies and gave us questions to think upon. We felt engaged!

Now the ball is in your court. Build a narrative about how you chased down that gene, why you picked your research topic, or how you got stuck in a swamp in Africa. Share your science with a story.

Philipp Gramlich (NaturalScience.Careers) and David Giltner (TurningScience) contributed to this article. Philipp combines industry and academic experience in his workshops and talks for scientists. David teaches scientists how to design and build rewarding careers in industry.