

Alan Alda Center discusses communicating science at USU

By Kevin Opsahl staff writer Oct 3, 2016



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Anne Machalinski, workshop instructor for the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science, gives a talk on Monday at Utah State University.

When it comes to learning how to explain scientific research, asking USU faculty and students to provide a simple description of a play from former New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter might not be the first thing you think of, but that's the example that was used in an engaging plenary session at Utah State University on Monday.

"These two teams have hated each other for decades, so the stakes are always high," said Victor Lee, an associate professor at USU, during the discussion in the Eccles Conference Center, referring to the rivalry between the Boston Red Sox and the Yankees.

The discussion was the beginning of a four-day conference at USU in which members of the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science brought their expertise to the campus community on how to effectively communicate scientific research to the public, the media and others.

Mark McLellan, USU vice president of research and dean of the School of Graduate Studies, talked about the importance of communicating science clearly in introductory remarks for the conference.

"There's no shortage of subjects to talk about, even right down to the beginning of life — 'What is life?' — or how about the beginning of time, try explaining that one," McLellan said. "Scientists often have their heads focused on the laboratory, and we often leave society behind. We don't take the time to take our heads out of the sand and make sure the discoveries being communicated are explained."

The Alda Center's staff included people with diverse backgrounds, including acting, dancing and playwriting. Based at Stony Brook University in New York, the Alda Center — named after the famous actor — works to "enhance understanding of science by helping train the next generation of scientists and health professionals to communicate more effectively with the public, public officials, the media, and others outside their own discipline," according to the center's website. To do that, the center offers lectures, workshops, conferences and coaching.

Alda was not at the USU conference, but Anne Machalinski, workshop instructor for the Alda Center, gave the opening plenary session Monday.

“You have to get out there,” Machalinski told USU faculty and students. “Talk to people, get the community engaged, get people to understand why your work is interesting and important.”

Tatiana Soboleva, a graduate student studying chemistry and biochemistry, told Machalinski during the discussion she agreed with her.

“If you can’t communicate science, it’s not alive,” she said.

One participant during the discussion invoked a quote from former U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt:

“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

During her talk, Machalinski presented two sentences of a bottom-of-the-ninth inning play by the New York Yankees’ then-shortstop, Jeter. The two-sentence description of Jeter’s play containing lots of sports jargon is used at all of the Alda Center’s conferences, Machalinski told the newspaper.

“There’s the most jargon and background knowledge needed to understand the sports section of the newspaper,” Machalinski said. “The baseball analogy is all about, ‘Tell a story, stress the meaning, not the details.’ You should do the same thing with your science, using clear vivid and conversational language.”

Mary-Ann Muffoletto, a public relations writer for USU colleges of science and natural resources, knows well how to communicate scientific concepts to the lay audience. Muffoletto was at the conference on Monday and spoke with the newspaper afterward.

“I’m not a scientist, so I think I’m reflective of a lot of the audience members I write for,” she said. “So if I don’t understand what’s going on, I know my audience won’t understand.”

Several USU graduate students and faculty The Herald Journal spoke with after Monday’s session said it’s hard for them to communicate their research to non-scientists.

Like Lee, a USU associate professor, engaged in Machalinski’s baseball description.

“Part of the luxury of being in a university is you spend a lot of time working with other people on these topics in detail, but we don’t always come up for air and talk with everybody else who doesn’t spend every waking moment of their lives going into this like we do,” Lee said.

“Thinking about what makes us passionate about the topic and distilling the really essential ideas is important.”

Lee thinks if scientists learn how to communicate science effectively to the general public, it will break down a comprehension and lack-of-appreciation barrier.

“It’s a work in progress,” Lee said. “We’ll have a lot more productive dialogue and more interest from the public about issues that affect them now and down the road.”
