LIZ NEELEY: STORIES OF DISCOVERY

Liz Neeley is the executive director at The Story Collider, a web platform that hosts "true, personal stories about science" to bring them to life. She is a marine biologist by training, and studied the evolution of the eyes and colour patterns of tropical reef fish.

Her initial passion for marine biology, corals and tropical fish evolved, early in her career, into a passion for science communication and social media. Neeley was at the 2016 AAAS-TWAS Summer Course on Science Diplomacy, where she outlined the practices that turn an ordinary message into one that makes a deep connection with the audience.

The following Q&A is drawn from TWAS staff writer Cristina Serra's interview with Neeley on 15 July in Trieste, Italy.

▲ Liz Neeley in Trieste, at the AAAS-TWAS Summer Course on Science Diplomacy.

When you teach scientists how to communicate, what is the first and most important recommendation that you offer?

● What I often tell them is that it is a myth that scientists are bad at communicating. This is a stereotype, and it's damaging. I think the truth is that we have been trained to communicate with our peers in ways that are counterproductive when we are trying to talk to the public or to funders or other groups. So, first I remind researchers that they suffer from what we call "the curse of too much knowledge". They have forgotten what it feels like not to be an expert. What I suggest is that they start with asking, "Why should people care about this? What's important?" I tell them: it's not only about reducing the jargon and technical language that you use, but also about learning to think about your audience, and understand that the questions they have are just as important as the things you want to say.

Quite often scientists avoid public communication, thinking that doing science is much better and important than talking to journalists. How do you persuade them about the importance of scientific outreach?

● In science, we often say "publish or perish", and I think it's true also in a broader sense: that if we don't share our knowledge, it is as if we have never created it. So whether it's basic science findings, or the latest medicine or environmental research, getting broader support from people who are funding your research is just as important as pushing forward the boundaries of that knowledge.

During interviews, scientists often tend to use jargon and explain technical details that are difficult to understand. What's your advice on this tendency?

● I think it is always important to be transparent, and be willing to go as far down into data analysis as is appropriate. But I don't think they should start with this, even with journalists who are very technical. This is where it is important to gain communication skills. In both scientific conversations and interviews, it may happen that people are unfamiliar with technical terms – and if you pay attention, you see that people send all sorts of verbal and nonverbal signals about their comprehension and interest levels in a conversation. This is why listening is perhaps the most important communication skill. In addition, even when they are talking to journalists, the final audience is who the journalists are writing for, and so if they can deliver a clear message in their own words, that's still better than leaving it to someone else. ◘

Read the full interview: www.twas.org/node/11858