

BRIGHT CLUB

'It's so much fun – does it count as work?'

(Bright Club speaker)

Bright Club is an exciting, creative and innovative model for public engagement focused around popular entertainment. It is where researchers become comedians for one night only.

Bright Club provides a creative platform for staff and students to perform short sets about aspects of their research or teaching, all with a single unifying theme. Themes explored so far have been: Time, Space, Light, Food, Books, Power, Connections, Bodies, Noise, Craft, Building, People.....and many more.



Background

The Public Engagement Unit at UCL identified a key challenge: many university staff and students struggle to take the first step into public engagement. Bright Club is designed to be a 'continuous start up,' a fun place for people to have a first positive experience, from which to build their public engagement practice.

Bright Club is a novel model of public engagement for UCL. It breaks new ground in terms of combining research, entertainment, comedy and music, and also through the diversity of themes, academic disciplines and a variety of career levels of staff and students involved. It is not simply an event, but a distinct model of public engagement and raising awareness of research.

The target audience for Bright Club are 20-40 year olds who are not linked to UCL, but who take part in cultural events. This is an audience historically under-served by the university. The project also seeks to engage with an audience of potential Bright Clubbers, including performers and practitioners.

Bright Club aims to:

- Raise audience awareness of science, research and the role of higher education institutions (HEIs);
- Influence the attitudes and values of audience members towards, science, research and the role of HEIs;
- Develop researchers' skills, enhance knowledge and increase their understanding of public engagement.
- Exchange information, share learning and inform culture change across the sector.

Description

Bright Club has four interlinked areas of activity:

- Monthly comedy events. These take place in a comedy club in London. A professional comedian comperes the evening, and staff and students perform short sets about aspects of their research or teaching, all with a single unifying theme.
- Training programme. Staff and students are trained in performance skills and how to communicate their work in an engaging and entertaining way that puts the audience at the centre of the experience.
- Podcasts. 60 Bright Club podcasts have been produced featuring some of the staff and students who have performed at live events, alongside comedians.
- Replica Bright Club models. These are events organised and held outside the regular London-based monthly events. Currently there are regular Bright Club events in the following cities:
 - London
 - Manchester
 - Newcastle
 - Guildford
 - Cardiff
 - Edinburgh
 - Bristol
 - Glasgow
 - Cambridge
 - Belfast
- There have also been one-off bright club events in:
 - Sydney
 - Norwich
 - York
 - Leeds

Successes

There have been 37 Bright Club events in London up until December 2011, attended by 3933 people, which equates to approximately 106 people per event. There are also 60 podcasts available with an average rate of 1955 downloads per podcast. In addition to these outputs, the following outcomes have also been achieved:

1) Providing opportunities for creativity. The speakers (predominately UCL staff and students) are trained to communicate their work in an engaging and entertaining way. Both speakers and audience members commented on the model of public engagement offered by Bright Club:

“Well you come to a comedy night and you expect to be entertained and amused, but you don’t expect to learn anything! I really liked the mix of science and comedy.....it’s a fantastic concept.” (Audience member)

2) Raising awareness and changing attitudes. An intended outcome of the project was to raise awareness of, and influence audience attitudes, towards science and research. The findings confirmed that this outcome has been achieved:

“It opens your eyes up to the types of subjects and the types of people involved in research. There is the subject, but there is also the person. I think Bright Club is as much about the subject as it is about the people.” (Audience member)

The Bright Club podcasts, which feature some of the researchers that performed at the evening events, extend this learning to a wider audience both in terms of numbers and location, as anyone anywhere can listen to Bright Club. Speakers mentioned that Bright Club has assisted them to raise awareness of their research:

“People engaging with science and research is really good, not just in terms of people knowing facts, but the point of view in understanding how research works.” (Speaker)

An unintended outcome was the perceived effect Bright Club has on the institution (UCL) in terms of raising awareness of public engagement, as noted by a member of the project team:

“It has changed the way people think about engagement and the Public Engagement Unit at UCL. It helps us to put into very visible practice the principle of good engagement, and it helps us to communicate what public engagement can be.” (Member of the project team)

3) Personal and professional development. One of the project’s main impacts is on the speakers, who develop skills and learn new things. The learning outcomes include developing subject-specific knowledge, learning about public engagement (e.g. methods to engage) and/or the development of skills (e.g. communication, time management). This is illustrated by this quote from a speaker involved in Bright Club and the podcasts:

“Eight or nine months ago I hadn’t really presented or tried to explain my work to the public. Now I have, and it has been a lot of fun. Now, I’ve started to learn those skills of how to make my work interesting and accessible.” (Speaker)

4) Acting as a catalyst. Many of the speakers have been involved in other public engagement projects or activities since performing at Bright Club. Bright Club gave speakers a starting point for a whole range of public engagement activities, events and funding applications, aimed at different audiences and addressing different topics

5) Stimulating conversations and developing relationships. The output from Bright Club is a group of researchers (UCL staff and students) who have increased skills in discussing their work with non-specialists in a friendly and approachable manner, and are able to relate their research to that of individuals in other disciplines. As intended, a ‘Bright Club community’ has emerged from this project – made up of a variety of researchers, speakers and audience members. Networks have been established within and across institutions, departments groups and individuals.

The way forward.....

As there are replica Bright Club models that have been set up in other cities, it would be useful to have some formal co-ordination of these under one single Bright Club umbrella. The Bright Club website achieves this to a certain extent, however, to have a forum as a first point of contact for Bright Club organisers in order to ensure alignment of activity, sharing of contacts if relevant, and to assist systematic evaluation taking place would be an ideal next step. In Scotland, the ‘Social Enterprise Scotland’ organisation provides support for Bright Clubs, and a similar setup in the rest of the country is an area to be explored further.

Resources:
Bright Club Website:
www.brightclub.org

Bright Club Podcast:
<http://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-bright-club-podcast/id368949295>

