Makes Sense

Overview and Context

This case study outlines the learning from the public engagement project "Makes Sense". The project was run by Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE), UCL Institute of Education. They organised a public engagement stall on 'neurodiversity' - the idea that everyone's brain is different – and how neurodevelopmental conditions, such as autism, are part of this diversity, demonstrated by highlighting differences in how we all experience the world around us through our senses.

The stall showcased in Einstein's Garden as part of the Green Man Festival over four days between 18th - 21st August 2016. This project was funded under the UCL Public Engagement Unit and Volunteering Services Unit Step Out funding scheme. This case study identifies key findings from the project and highlights learning for any similar projects of this nature.

Project aims:

1. Create and develop a stall-based model that could be used and adapted for future public engagement events;
2. Create activities that convey the complexities of the human brain; emphasising how everybody's brain is different;
3. Encouraging audience members to think about the number of connections in their brains, their possible function and whether this might affect how we think and feel.

Who was involved?

The stall was led by CRAE PhD student, Lorcan Kenny and CRAE Public Engagement and Communications Officer, Dr Mel Bovis who together recruited four additional volunteers from different UCL Departments (Division of Surgery & Interventional Science and Institute of Neurology), other London Universities (Birkbeck University) and volunteers external to academia, to help co-ordinate and run the stall.

What happened?

The activities encouraged festival-goers to play fun, interactive games to explore their own sensory likes and dislikes (i.e., smell of paint, taste of lemons, feel of grass) using a 'Guess Who'-like board game filled with visual images of sensory stimuli. They could create a personalised 'sensory profile' board of their preferences and use this to decorate a paper brain hat - 'Thinking Caps' - with craft items to reflect their sensory profile. The brain hats created were a visually powerful way of demonstrating neurodiversity, as no two were alike! Festival-goers also had the chance to build their own brain cells from simple craft items (pasta, ping pong balls and pipe cleaners), which could be added to the 'neuron network' by connecting their neuron with others made by stall visitors to form a web of brain cells across the stall; demonstrating the enormous number of connections in our brains. This visual network grew over the festival duration.

Facts and Figures

Over 700 people took part in the activities, with around 150 people visiting the stall each day over the 4 days

The project was led by Lorcan Kenny at the Centre for Research in Autism and Education

Total project value was approximately **£750**

Emerging themes from the evaluation

Making Sense was a pilot project using public engagement to explore 'neurodiversity' and how neurodevelopmental conditions, such as autism, are part of this diversity by demonstrating differences in how we all process information coming into our senses from the world around us.

Monitoring and evaluation was incorporated within the stall and activities. For example, the team wanted to evaluate what stall visitors had learnt from 'Makes Sense' and also create a way to test their prior knowledge around neurodiversity. Through the UCL Institute of Making, the team created 'brain tokens', which were a highly effective, fun and tangible way to answer daily questions put forward to festival-goers. Each day we set a new question with a 'yes' or 'no' token box. Festival goers had to answer by dropping a token into either (or both or neither) boxes. This immediately sparked dialogue, as participants were curious to speak to stall volunteers to know the answer and more. Especially, as some questions posed were intentionally controversial, i.e. does the MMR vaccine cause autism? This was also a great way to collect quantitative data, whilst providing an estimate of the number of people who had visited the stall each day. The team also created a mini post-box to capture short evaluation questions on paper strips, which they could 'post' into the box, to measure whether we had fulfilled our aims.

The project succeeded in its aims to increase visitor's knowledge and understanding of the brain and differences that may exist between people, as highlighted by direct quotes, lifted from evaluation question strips, and featured in the video compilation of the Makes Sense stall: https://youtu.be/Zm8ACna_dDs

Further reflections from the team include:

- The activities were effective at engaging people. The team have re-used all the stall elements, including the brain token system, brain hat crafting, board games and neuronal network in a wide variety of events. From similar stalls at the UCL Festival of Culture 2017 and Diggin' The Gallery event at the Tate Britain, to using elements in schools and at our Brain Detectives public engagement workshops hosted at the Institute.
- We had a number of people and families sign-up to our mailing list sheet we had at the stall, who have since received our biannual newsletter, research news and invites to our latest events.
- Some autistic people who visited our stall and were from London, volunteered to participate in our research.
- The experience gave the researchers confidence, equipped them with skills, wider perspective and motivation for their research whilst giving them the opportunity to further meet many autistic children and families.
- Images of our neuron network now sit as a permanent feature on the Einstein's Garden section of the Green Man website: http://www.greenman.net/explore/areas/einsteins-garden/

Learning from the Process

What worked well?

-Learning from past experiences. Prior knowledge, from those who have taken part in the Green Man was extremely useful, as typically the most stressful elements relate to logistics outside of the stall or unfamiliarity.

-Having long (game and crafting hats) and short (building neuron) time stations worked very well. Both activities were visually engaging and simple. Neuron building was fun and accessible, particularly for very young visitors, and was a great way to engage with them around more complex science and allow them to contribute to the conversation.

-Collaborating with the Institute of Making at UCL to create brain tokens and brain badges highlighted this free and fantastic resource for UCL staff and students.

What could be done differently?

- The weather was the biggest challenge but the team catered for this as much as possible, ensuring everything was weather-proof and that stall elements could be bought inside and out, quickly and easily.

-Underestimated the popularity of the stall and the paper brain hats ran out on day two of the festival

-The marquee was red, with many festival-goers commenting on the brightness once inside – this was a particular cause for concern, as the stall was around sensory sensitivities in conditions, such as autism, where red can also be experienced as an 'angry' and uncomfortable colour.