

Chapter 9

Issues with Water Quality: How Do We Get Our Fellow Citizens to Care?

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ABSTRACT

Research in how people attend to, process and recall information tells educators that there are better ways to present the case for clean aquatic environments so citizens will understand, appreciate, and care for water resources. Gone are the days of shocking the public with photos of dying fish or burying them in mountains of scientific facts. From creating a story to using tangibles and intangibles to weaving explanatory chains with appropriate metaphors, this chapter presents thirteen components of a well-designed message to present to an audience, a board or a grant provider.

INTRODUCTION

Formal education is different from non-formal or informal education. Formal educators have a captive audience, one that could be subject to subsequent tests of covered concepts. Non-formal educators do not have that advantage. Their audience, by definition, is there by choice and could leave at any moment. Non-formal educators are employed at cultural and natural history sites like parks, zoos, aquaria, and museums where they provide instruction through presentations, referred to as non-formal education. These professionals also produce displays, handouts or other materials as informal education. These educators are often called interpreters as they interpret the resources of their sites to visitors of many ages and abilities. Interpreters must use a variety of techniques to capture and hold the attention of an audience while furthering the mission of their site. The objective of this chapter is to present several such interpretation techniques.

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Background

One goal of interpretation is for the audience to understand the meanings and workings of a resource. Interpreters also strive to develop an emotional connection between their participants and a resource. They cultivate this appreciation through interpretive techniques. It is hoped that through this developed emotional connection that these citizens will take steps to preserve the resource in question for future generations. Interpreters are an integral bridge between science and the general public in the efforts to encourage citizens to understand and appreciate clean water and to take necessary steps to improve and maintain water quality in their neighborhoods and beyond.

Armed with important, timely information on the issues and causes of water pollution, how does an interpreter encourage his fellow citizens to care? Flood them with horrifying facts of imminent death if current water issues are not solved? Appeal to their love for aquatic animals? Tout the potential, undiscovered medicines and food supplies that these aquatic environments may hold?

Research in how people attend to, process and recall information reveals that there are better ways to present the case for clean aquatic environments so citizens will understand, appreciate, and care for water resources (Bales, 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to present information to enable speakers, whether interpreters or private citizens, to better inform their audiences about environmental concerns like water quality. Here are fourteen techniques shown to be successful in helping an audience achieve positive engagement with presented scientific information.

HIGHLIGHT LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO LOCAL PROBLEMS

There may be other places in this world with water issues that dwarf local concerns but in order to work toward a more engaged citizenry, momentum is needed on a local level. Find those groups that are solving similar problems and learn what makes their solutions successful. Did they start with educating the children in local schools about nearby water resource issues? Did that strategy bring the adults in these youngsters' lives to the issue, too? Or maybe the successful group took the political route and encouraged government entities to find reasonable solutions which worked for their community. Was it a locally generated movement or did they tie in with a national organization which already addressed local issues? These successful groups might be from a region, a state, a municipality, or even from a nearby neighborhood.

While doing this search, look for other groups in the area doing similar work. It might be possible to team up for a bigger impact. Maybe one organization could focus on efforts that involve children while the other group puts their weight behind adult issues. One group could work to affect change in public policy while another conducts educational programs with constituents. Find ways to work together to maximize efforts and generate more success within the community.

Showing an audience how neighbors within a community, state or region are working together to make positive changes can tie in with the values of interconnectedness, resourcefulness and ingenuity. These values, discussed later in the chapter, were identified to be key ingredients toward encouraging people to want to care and to keep caring after the passionate pleas have faded (Bales, 2009).

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