



**27-28 May, Budapest**

**PRE-CONFERENCE: THE Group Training Workshop for Explainers  
“Dialogues: learning through discussions and conversations”**

**A training workshop on dialogues**

One of the idea of THE group is to organize regular meetings and workshops for, by and with explainers.

Following discussions which took place in Lisbon during THE 2007 pre-conference, it was decided to concentrate the 2008 training workshop on the following topic: “Dialogues: learning through discussions and conversations”.

The fact that explainers listen to and talk with the visitors, and can help promoting conversation among the visitors, place them in a key position in the process of renovating the way science communication occurs in science centres.

The training workshop was aimed at exploring in more depth this consideration and at providing some practical tools.

**What happened – Day 1**

57 people participated, evenly distributed among explainers, ex-explainers with management role, museum staff interested in explainers, and the speakers and facilitators who in some cases are or were explainers.

At the end we were all very satisfied, except for the Italians who complained about the coffee (but this is no news...). A full evaluation report based on participants judgements – were also the few negative aspects are listed - is available for the very curious (write to [info@dotik.eu](mailto:info@dotik.eu) to get a copy).

We started the workshop by listing the variety of names used to define explainers in the participants countries. This simple exercise help pointing out that there is at the same time a strong shared identity and a great diversity in the roles and actions of explainers.

Paola Rodari exposed some of the research results aimed at better defining who is an explainers and what he/she does throughout Europe.

A practical workshop led by Antonio Gomes da Costa and Miha Kos helped us diving in the topic. Divided in two groups, we had to solve a mathematical problem. One group was given the instructions to solve it: they just had to do it. The second group was just given the problem: they had to figure out a strategy, through

discussion within the group, and then deliver the solution. It was striking to notice how the first group was bored and a bit frustrated, while the “dialoguing” group was enriched and satisfied by the experience... and it performed better! Several engagement tricks were also presented by Miha Kos.

After a quick lunch, Bronwyn Bevan, Sheena Laursen, Maria Xanthoudaki and Paola Rodari animated a round table to reflect about what does it mean to learn through conversation, and in particular what can be the role of explainers in that context. A very interesting set of questions emerged after an exercise in working group. You can find [HERE](#) the full list.

Here are 5 of the most challenging, which we would like to take forward:

- Isn't dialogue sometimes against the visitors will? How can an explainer know when a group of visitors is willing to engage in dialogue, and when they just want to listen?
- How do we manage to engage in dialogue with very different age groups and with different cultures?
- People who are coming to the museum with very different purposes and agendas: how can we identify these to better tailor our actions?
- What type of training is required for dialogue events? Psychological skills should be valued, but aren't we asking too much to explainers?
- Are explainers enough trained in those aspect of science which are crucial in dialogue and science in society perspective (ethical, economical, political aspects of science)? As current university courses do not provide this, who should do it? Maybe science centres?

For the trip and trick session we had several presentations:

Luka Vidic and Miha Kos showed how to “warm up” a tired and/or passive audience (it was 17h already...) Andrea Motto showed us a collaborative game (you can find the background [HERE](http://www.nap.edu/html/evolution98) [<http://www.nap.edu/html/evolution98>] and the actual tool [HERE](http://www.nap.edu/html/evolution98/page72.pdf) [<http://www.nap.edu/html/evolution98/page72.pdf>] ), which beside being fun and instructive, is used to recruit explainers at the New York Hall of science. Bob Ghattas demonstrated how you can explain maths just using your body, but also that being very confident on the scientific topic allow the explainer to let the visitor the maximum freedom to lead the learning pathway.

## **What happened – Day 2**

On Day 2, Frank Burnet introduced with extreme clarity the basic concepts – too often too blurred – of dialogue, conversation, participation, etc. And demonstrated in practice how to spark in the public the need to express themselves through drama technique. More details on the “Gene machine” play can be found [HERE](http://www.scu.uwe.ac.uk/projects/events/meetthegenemachine.htm)[<http://www.scu.uwe.ac.uk/projects/events/meetthegenemachine.htm>].

Participant were then asked to develop their own play in groups, focusing the attention on how to ask to the public a “killer question” that would spark dialogue. While doing this, a group of observer were analysing the process: how to evaluate

dialogue events? What is the importance of knowing if and why things work? It was the core of the workshop led by Sally Duensing and Katharine Lee.

Finally, Frank Burnet, Guglielmo Maglio, Mikko Myllykoski, Matteo Merzagora and Sara Calcagnini led a general discussion on some of the critical elements of the “dialogue” approaches.