

# **ECSITE interest group: THE group**

## **Thematic Human Interface and Explainers group**

### **2008 rationale and report**

#### The rationale

Explainers (animators, guides, pilots, etc.) are the main direct, people to people interface between science centres and their public. The relevance of explainers in the communication quality of a science centre can hardly be questioned. For many centres interactive humans are as crucial as interactive exhibits in providing a high quality experience to the visitors.

Yet, there is a lack of shared knowledge about the roles, tasks, professional status, etc. of explainers in different European science centres; very little structured research exists about explainers (with the exception of their educational role); little shared information is found on training schemes for explainers; very little occasions exists for explainers of different science centres/countries to exchange ideas and best practices.

The on-going transformation of science centres from expository and interactive to participatory, i.e. moving from only exhibition-centred to a more active role of the public in the science centres as well as public engagement of science ethical issues, involves new roles also for the explainers. There is a need of understanding of this evolution: the role of explainers in science centres needs to evolve together with the evolution of the role of science centres in society.

The interest group aims at monitoring, promoting and where needed steering this evolution, relying on the successful experience of the DOTIK project and the informal network which started forming in the sessions devoted to explainers in the last two ECSITE Annual Conferences.

The interest group acts for the benefit of the explainers, involving them as much as possible with an active role, but the group is open for the contribution from all ECSITE members.

The interest group are closer to an *action-research* project. That means that it will pursue our objectives through concrete actions, but with a constant attention to the evaluation of those actions. Actually the interest group cannot directly achieve all the goals (that would need more human and financial resources), but can individuate directions and typologies of activities, test them, promote them and act as fund raisers and information sharing agent.

#### The objectives

The over arching objective is the building of a learning community, starting with the following tools:

- Performing a pre-survey on the **role of explainers in European science centres** (subdivided into survey on communication practices and professional/institutional status), as a first step (and useful background) for deeper studies;
- Monitoring and promoting **best practices in the training of explainers** (focusing on specific issues such as: facilitation of science and society dialogue, dealing with diverse communities and disabilities, science shows, etc.);
- Setting up a **reference and interactive website (<http://medialab.sissa.it/THE>)**, where all relevant material can be collected (bibliographies, case studies, relevant examples, and

results from the interest group itself) but also where the group can discuss, exchange information, professional tools etc.;

- Promoting **exchanges of explainers** among European science centres;
- Organising **meetings and events, starting from the ECSITE conferences**. Two pre-conferences have been organized in 2007 and 2008, with approximately 60 participants each. Many sessions have been organized also during ECSITE conferences.

### The organization

The 2008 Ecsite steering committee has been chosen in Budapest, during the ECSITE annual conference. It is composed by Antonio Gomes da Costa (Ciencia Viva, Lisbon), Sally Duensing (King's College, London), Miha Kos (The House of Experiment, Lubiana), Matteo Merzagora (ICS-SISSA, Italy, and TRACES, France), Maria Xanthoudaki (Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnologia, Milano, Italy) Paola Rodari (Sissa Medialab, Trieste, Italy). Paola Rodari ensures the link with ECSITE's executive office.

During the 2008 ECSITE conference it has been also decided to establish "national connectors", i.e. THE group members who will ensure the flow of communication between THE group and national communities (experiences, institutions, projects, etc.). More than one national connector for a country is also possible.

THE national connectors are at the moment:

Country	Lastname	Firstname	Institution
Portugal	Machado	Maria Adelina	Centro Ciência Viva da Amadora
Netherlands	de Jonge	Renske	Science LinX - University of Groningen
Denmark	Tønnersen	John	Experimentarium
Austria	Hossein	Sara	Science Center Netzwerk
Poland	Fikus-Krynska	Marta	Copernicus Science Centre
Norway	Ødegård	Ove	Vilvite, Bergen Vitensenter AS
Malaysia	Baharom	Saiful Bahri	Petrosains - The Discovery Centre
Belgium	Ginckels	Walter	Technopolis, the Flemish Science Centre
Italy	Abbamonte	Massimo	Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnologia
Slovenia	Vidic	Luka	Hisa eksperimentov
France	Metayer	Franck	Le Vaisseau
Israel	Rosenberg	David	Bloomfield Science Museum

### Who will participate?

Participation to the group is open to all ECSITE members with specific interest in the role of human interface. Participation of explainers will be particularly encouraged. Only active participants will take part in the group: in other words, participation in the group will consist in actively contributing to the activities (no "sign-in and run-away" participation). No formal mechanisms will be set up until the ECSITE annual conference.

Sub-group, focused on particular topics/actions, can be organized.

### THE tutors, lecturers and friends

Many experts from European and extra-European countries have collaborated to the organization of THE pre-conferences:

Bronwyn Bevan, CILS and Exploratorium (USA); Frank Burnet, University of the West of England (UK); Sara Calcagnini (Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnica, Milan, Italy); Antonio

Gomes da Costa, The Pavilion of Knowledge (Lisbon, Portugal); Sally Duensing, King's College, London (UK); Miha Kos, Hisa Eksperimentov (Ljubiana, Slovenia); Heather King, King's College, London (UK); Sheena Laursen, Experimentarium (Denmark); Katharine Lee, Science Museum (UK); Lucinda Lewis, Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester; Guglielmo Maglio, Fondazione IDIS- Citta della Scienza (Naples, Italy); Matteo Merzagora, ICS-SISSA (Italy) and TRACES (France); Rosalind Mist, Head of Project Development, Ecsite-uk; Mikko Myllykoski, Heureka (Vantaa, Finland); Paola Rodari, SISSA Medialab (Trieste, Italy); Jenny Search, Programme Developer, Ecsite-uk; Lynn Tran, University of California (USA); Maria Xanthoudaki, Museo della Scienza e della Tecnologia (Milan, Italy).

THE pre-conferences 2007 and 2008 were dedicated to:

- explainers self-perception and professionalization;
- the dialogue model of communication and new formats of animation;
- tackling controversial issues;
- theories of learning through conversation;
- good practices in explainers training;
- good practices for enhancing the relationship between explainers and management.
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