The Story Collider

Communicating the stories of science

The Story Collider is an organization with a simple yet vital task: to collect and relay stories about science. This task is fundamentally collaborative, involving an assortment of global voices from across every demographic. There are very few lives, after all, which have not been touched in some inexplicable way by the capabilities of modern science. Research Outreach were privileged to catch up with Erin Barker, the Executive Director and co-founder of The Story Collider, and host of its popular weekly podcast. Erin is herself a highly successful storyteller. She has won The Moth’s GrandSLAM storytelling competition twice – the first woman to do so – and her stories have been featured across public radio. We spoke to her about the fascinating business of storytelling.

Despite the remarkable reach of modern science, many of us find it difficult to tell stories about its influence. We may feel we do not have the technical knowledge, or perhaps the creative prowess, to form a convincing narrative. Due to entrenched and exclusionary ideas about who can and who can’t speak about science, we may feel our voice is worth little in this unfolding conversation.

The Story Collider is here to help. Through its weekly podcast and its live shows, The Story Collider opens the door to everyone to share and to shape science culture, or academia culture. I was startled to learn a few months in that scientists don’t even use first person in most of their writing, and even more startled to learn through the stories we produced that many don’t feel comfortable bringing their full selves to work every day. And I’d had no idea that storytelling could be something of a subversive idea in some of these scientific circles. Since then, I’ve been really gratified to see the impact that The Story Collider has had on the culture of science, along with other organizations and initiatives, such as This Is What a Scientist Looks Like, Reclaiming STEM, IF/THEN, our friends in the LiveSci Collective, and so many more. There is still so much work to do, but I believe that inclusive science communication is valued now more than ever.

Can you tell us about some of the events which The Story Collider are currently running?

Every week, we put up a new episode of our podcast featuring two stories – you can find this on any major podcast platform or at storycollider.org. One of my favorite podcast stories of the past few years was from Sean Bearden, a physicist who discovered his passion for science while incarcerated as a young man.

I founded Story Collider as a nonprofit organization with a mission to reveal the vibrant role that storytelling plays in all of our lives through the power of storytelling. canal to our lives though the power of storytelling. What was it about the particular intersection between storytelling and science which interested you? Before my work with Story Collider, I hadn’t had much experience with science culture, or academia culture. I was startled to learn a few months in that scientists don’t even use first person in most of their writing, and even more startled to learn through the stories we produced that many don’t feel comfortable bringing their full selves to work every day. And I’d had no idea that storytelling could be something of a subversive idea in some of these scientific circles. Since then, I’ve been really gratified to see the impact that The Story Collider has had on the culture of science, along with other organizations and initiatives, such as This Is What a Scientist Looks Like, Reclaiming STEM, IF/THEN, our friends in the LiveSci Collective, and so many more. There is still so much work to do, but I believe that inclusive science communication is valued now more than ever.

We also host live shows across the U.S., the U.K., and Canada. Over the past few months, we’ve held several outdoor shows, and through the winter, we will continue hosting online shows until it’s safe for us to fully return to the stage. While online shows are not quite the same as being in person, it’s allowed us to reach new audiences who may not have been able to attend otherwise. We now hold

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Spanish-language shows on a quarterly basis, thanks to our producers Lily Be and Gastor Almonte.

How are the public workshops run, and who is usually in attendance?

The Public Workshop Program was created by our program director, Nisse Greenberg, in summer 2020, in order to continue our work during the pandemic. These workshops typically meet six times over the course of two weeks, and are fully online. We offer introductory storytelling courses, as well as more in-depth electives, such as “Facilitating Storytelling in the Classroom and the Field” or “Performance Skills.” Most of our participants are scientists, science communicators, or graduate students, but we have also welcomed park rangers, patient advocates, and many more. They’re based in the U.S. and Canada, but also in Kenya, India, Nepal, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Costa Rica, and more.

Are there any interesting trends you’d like to mention in the stories you hear – any patterns in people’s relationships with science, for better or for worse? This is a great question! Over the past eleven years, there have been many shifts. I’m gratified to see that many are becoming more comfortable sharing stories that are critical of the institution of science, or that are honest about their experiences within academia. One of the most notable trends we’ve seen over the past few years is a sharp increase in story pitches that revolve around issues of identity, particularly within science academia. I believe this reflects a deep desire that so many of us have been feeling recently, both to feel heard and to help others feel less alone in their experiences. I’m incredibly grateful that storytellers trust us with these powerful stories.

How important is it that we hear personal stories about science, from a diverse cross-section of society?

It’s so important! At The Story Collider, we aim to document the oral history of science in modern times, and we strongly believe that without a diverse representation of storytellers, we are not truly telling the complete story of science. We define diversity in terms of many factors, including race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, but also education level and relationship to science. From March 2020 to March 2021, 51% of The Story Collider’s were Black, Indigenous, or people of color.

In 2016, scientist and educator Jeff Schnake published a study in which several of our stories, and others, were incorporated into the curriculum of an intro-level science course as “Scientist Spotlight” homework assignments. At the end of the semester, Jeff and his colleagues found that those students who had been assigned the Scientist Spotlight homework expressed more interest in science, could see more of a place for themselves in science, and even got a better grade in the class! It’s incredible to see what we are capable of when we feel included within the narrative of science.

Understanding that The Story Collider’s stories have the power to change our perception of who can be a scientist, or have a voice in science, presents us with both an awesome opportunity and an awesome responsibility. Right now, Indigenous, Black and Hispanic professionals are still grossly underrepresented in STEM fields, many fields such as engineering and physics are still male-dominated, and pay gaps persist in STEM across gender, race, and ethnicity. We must elevate these often-overlooked voices in science, not just to encourage a more diverse workforce through representation but also to shift the perceptions of their white and/or male counterparts to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

What can our readers do to get involved with The Story Collider? You can sign up to take one of our storytelling workshops here – registration for our 2022 workshops is now open! And we’re also available for private workshops to university, conference, corporate, and other clients. Or, you can pitch us your story at https://www.storycollider.org/submissions

www.researchoutreach.org