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Lifelong Learning Group

Marcellus Matters EASE: Community Conversations Events

Formative Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The Penn State University Marcellus Center for Outreach and Research has developed a series of “community conversation” events – featuring theatrical performances, expert scientists, and audience / community dialogue – about natural gas drilling and the Marcellus Shale gas play. A formative evaluation of two community conversation events in 2012 addressed several questions related to the structure of the events: the presence or absence of a “balance” between science content, engagement with art, and community dialogue; audience members’ perceptions about the effectiveness of these three elements; and which moments (if any) may have garnered particularly strong short-term reactions from audience members.

In general, audience feedback supported the structure of the program across these questions.

Audience members noted, and had positive reactions to, the multiple elements of the event and how they worked in combination. Comments also suggested that audience members valued the interplay of art, science and dialogue. The former was seen as a novel way of creating safe space for the latter, while the presence of “real scientists” lent the event credibility as a source of factual information about complex issues. October audience members’ greater prior knowledge around gas development may have influenced their reports of finding less *new* information at that event.

Audience members’ responses indicate a strong interest in the elements of these events.

Many respondents indicated their interest in and need for more factual information related to Marcellus shale; others (mostly in the spring) mentioned how rarely they encountered opportunities for civil dialogue around gas development-related issues. Together, these two types of comment suggest that people in communities served by this program are seeking ways to meet their dual needs – for more information and more conversation – around Marcellus shale. Comments were less detailed and less enthusiastic in the fall than in the spring, but largely included similar themes.

Differences between the two data sets, including somewhat higher demand for and somewhat weaker acknowledgement of each element, suggest differences between the events. It is impossible to clearly determine whether differences between the two data sets are primarily the result of changes to the program between May and October; or to the presence of an arguably more knowledgeable, confident, and familiar audience in the latter event.

However, several findings suggest a need for continued adjustment as the program moves forward.

The audience’s stated interest in factual information, coupled with the acceptance of several pieces of deliberate (and unchallenged) misinformation during the May event indicates audience members’ high level of trust in the scientific expertise of the program team. In its first pilot iteration, at least, it seemed that audience members believed there to be more, and more accurate, science content than was actually present. This misalignment highlights both an opportunity and an obligation for the program team to more diligently present accurate science content and dispel misconceptions – both those presented in the plays and those which arise during the dialogue portion of future events.

In the fall, execution of the dialogue portion of the event seemed to be unsatisfactory for both the audience and the project team. Discrete adjustments can be made to the event to serve this need without changing its overall structure. Similarly, in light of two very different audience experiences, there may be a need to build more flexibility into the events to accommodate varying audience needs and interests.

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Introduction

The Penn State University Marcellus Center for Outreach and Research has developed a series of “community conversation” events – featuring theatrical performances, expert scientists, and audience / community dialogue – about natural gas development and the Marcellus Shale gas play.

A formative evaluation of the first two community conversation events was conducted to assess and compare the effectiveness of two different event and performance structures. The evaluation addressed several questions:

To what extent and in what ways did audience members (and performers, and scientists) find that the structure of the “Community Conversations” event:

- Is effective at communicating science content?
- Is effective at using art to highlight the complexity of gas drilling-related issues?
- Is effective at fostering civil dialogue on gas drilling-related issues? (That is, do audience members report or indicate openness to dialogue?)
- Demonstrates a “balance” between engagement with art and with science?

What aspects of the “Community Conversations” event, if any, garnered particularly strong short-term reactions from audience members?

Methods

A census of audience members was approached as they entered the events and asked to complete a short written questionnaire at the end of the events. These “feedback forms” were described to audience members by a data collector while being distributed. At the first event (in May 2012), 16 of the 17 audience members completed and returned a questionnaire. At the second event (in October 2012), 18 of 22 audience members did so.

Structured interviews were also conducted with audience members after the event; refreshments were offered as an incentive for individuals to linger post-event, but no incentives were offered in exchange for interview participation. Because there were relatively few audience members, a continuous / convenience sampling method was used to select participants. A total of nine individuals were interviewed in May, and ten were interviewed in October.

At the October event, six of the twelve Marcellus Matters team members present (including performers, scientists, project coordinators) completed open-ended written reflections in the days following the event. These reflections were analyzed inductively in order to identify key ideas or patterns as they emerged in the text.

Audience members who provided email addresses at the events will also be contacted in 2013 to complete an online survey which will serve as a delayed post measure.

Results

Interviews and questionnaires

Reactions to the event

Among spring interviewees (n=9), the overall reaction was very positive: the mean rating on a seven-point scale was 6.11 (SD 1.167). Moreover, the ratings were skewed heavily toward the positive end of the scale. All interviewed audience members rated their reaction a 4 or higher. Fall interviewees' reactions (n=11) were similarly positively skewed, but were somewhat less strong (mean of 5.50) and more narrowly distributed (SD 1.080).

When asked to select up to three words from a word bank that best described the events, interviewees selected a wide range of positive or value-neutral words (see Table 1 below). This indicates not only positive reactions overall, but also the variety of content and structural elements which resonated with these individuals. Similarly, when asked to select words that *least* fit the community conversation, the words most often selected had negative connotations: stuffy, dry, boring, and confusing. The only word to appear among both the “best descriptions” and “worst descriptions” in May was *scientific*, which also hints at the variety of perceptions audience members held about the event’s purpose and structure. “Enlightening” appeared on both lists in October, suggesting that at least some audience members found little new information in the event.

Table 1. Words that most and least described the community conversation events

Most Describe		Most Describe		Least Describe		Least Describe	
entertaining	3	entertaining	6	stuffy	6	boring	7
educational	2	performance	5	dry	5	stuffy	6
powerful	2	educational	5	boring	5	confusing	4
innovative	2	professional	4	pointless	2	dry	3
moving	2	enlightening	3	lecture	1	pointless	2
enlightening	2	innovative	3	insubstantial	1	upsetting	2
relevant	2	relevant	2	scientific	1	powerful	1
informative	2	exciting	1			informative	1
performance	1	scientific	1			enlightening	1
professional	1						
accessible	1						
unusual	1						
scientific	1						
Total (May)	22	Total (Oct.)	30	Total (May)	21	Total (Oct.)	27

As with their word bank selections, when interviewees were asked to describe their feelings about the event in their own words their comments tended to be positive and to touch on the unique structure and feel of the event. In general, spring interviewees were “speechless,” “impressed,” and “enjoyed it.” More specific reactions focused on the multi-part nature of the event, and particularly the ways in which it created space for dialogue and for appreciating the complexity of drilling-related issues. They noted how a balanced variety of perspectives (including from “the elders of a

community”) were included that shed light on contention, but with “no factioning” within the event itself. The only neutral-to-negative comments about the community conversation seem to indicate a desire for more of the same: one individual pointed out that it “still left unanswered questions” without any clear next steps. Another may have expected more specific science content, because they “thought that the Marcellus people would include a lecture.”

Audience members interviewed at the fall event tended to describe it as “interesting” or “entertaining,” and a few also mentioned appreciating its format or atmosphere (though these comments were less specific than in the spring). Some called it informative, even when also claiming ample prior knowledge, while one other individual regretted not having time to ask more questions during discussion. Several people described finding the event relatable – particularly the raising of unanswered questions and open discussion of uncertainty that emerged both in the performance and dialogue portions of the evening. Finally, one interviewee made an explicit connection to the Marcellus Community Science Volunteer Program, saying the event “would have been good to have at [the] beginning” of that program. The differences between spring and fall responses suggest that while the latter event was an enjoyable experience that resonated with audience members, it may have seemed less groundbreaking and discussion-focused than the first iteration in the spring. These reactions may have just as much to do with interviewees’ own entry agendas or prior knowledge as with the structure of the event itself.

Balance of elements

Audience members were asked in the exit interviews to share their feelings about the balance between science content, dialogue, and performance within the event. May respondents offered even more favorable ratings of this balance than of the event overall – including the same positively skewed range of responses, and with a slightly higher mean rating (6.28) and narrower distribution (SD 1.093). All October interviewees rated the balance between five and seven; however, the mean rating was slightly lower (6.00) with a still narrower distribution (SD 0.816). A few individuals offered comments in addition to their ratings. They noted how the multi-part structure of the event “made it realistic and not stale,” it “made the audience feel comfortable,” and “got the audience involved” in a learning opportunity. In the fall, commenters approved of the “broad review of everything,” but several also suggested changes. Consistent with previous team discussions and program goals, these requests were for more science content or information, more opportunity for post-performance discussion, and representation of a wider range of perspectives (particularly “industry or government people”).

A set of more specific rating questions, asked of all audience members in the feedback questionnaires, also garnered positive responses. (See Table 2 for details.) Respondents agreed somewhat that the community conversation featured “lots of factual information,” and agreed moderately that there were “lots of emotions/feelings.” There was weak agreement, and a wider distribution of responses, about whether the event included *new* information or new points of view. In fact October respondents actually offered weak disagreement with the “new information” item, indicating a greater amount of prior knowledge overall among that audience group. This larger group of audience members had more moderate agreement than interviewees that the balance of information and performance was “about right” in May, and weaker still agreement in October. The pattern of weaker agreement in the fall than in the spring suggests one of two things: a more savvy or better-prepared audience was reached in the fall (including returning audience members’ expectations for the performance), or that changes to the event structure may have created a perceived imbalance between key elements of the project in its second iteration.

Table 2. Questionnaire ratings of event balance

Today's event included...	May Event				October Event			
	N	Min	Mean	Std. Dev.	N	Min	Mean	Std. Dev.
...Lots of factual information	14	3	4.86	1.610	17	2	4.71	1.611
...Lots of emotions/feelings	15	2	5.33	1.589	18	1	5.28	1.565
...Information that is new to me	15	1	4.53	2.295	17	1	3.59	2.002
...Points of view that are new to me	16	1	4.69	2.120	18	1	4.28	1.873
...About the right balance of performance and information	16	1	5.38	1.996	18	2	4.89	1.491

Items were rank-item from 1 (strongly negative) to 7 (strongly positive)

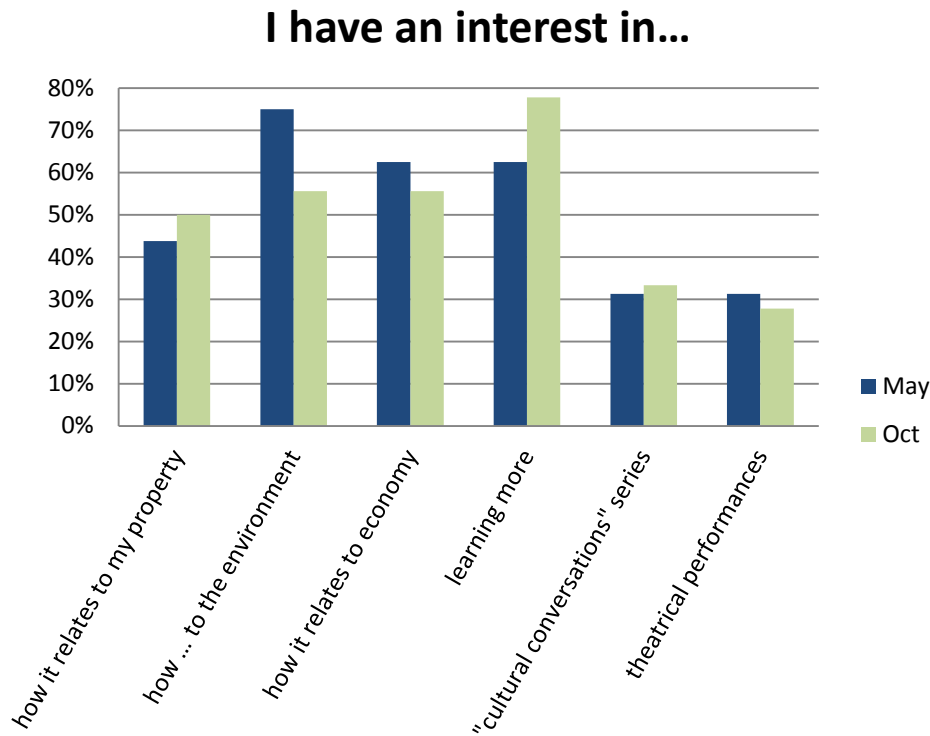
To get an idea of what were viewed as the key elements of the event, interviewees were also asked to complete the sentence “I would recommend an event like this one to people who are looking for...” Overall, spring respondents articulated the main aspects of the community conversation’s structure: community dialogue and a balanced selection of viewpoints to facilitate learning and conversation. The event was also described as a “creative way to think about these issues.” Another group of responses, however, focused on the desire for more information: whether learning more about gas drilling and related issues, developing a better understanding of those issues’ complexity, getting “answers,” ensuring that other community members are well-informed, or connecting to resources for action, audience members expressed high expectations for the factual content aspects of the event.

Among fall respondents, this pattern reversed – most statements included references to information-seeking, or at least becoming “aware of questions” and the possible reassurance that can provide. Interestingly, a few respondents suggested the event as an introduction to the Marcellus Community Science Volunteer Program, a nod to one of the methods used to publicize the fall performance. One individual described the evening as good for those seeking “deeper thinking” about natural gas development. None of the October responses to this interview item related to conversation or dialogue, marking a dramatic departure from the spring and from the program’s intended goals.

Interest in the event

When asked what interests attracted them to the event, a majority of audience members in May (n=16) selected environmental (75%) or economic (63%) concerns, as well as an interest in learning more about Marcellus shale-related issues (63%). A smaller proportion (44%) reported interest in “how [Marcellus] relates to my property,” or in theatrical performances in general or Penn State’s “Cultural Conversations” series in particular (32% each). In October, “learning more” was the most common selection (78%), followed by environmental and economic interests (56% each) and “my property” (50%). Interest in theatrical performances or in “Cultural Conversations” were about as common as in the spring (33% and 28% respectively). Figure 1 presents these interests visually.

Figure 1. Interests contributing to audience members' attendance (n=16)



Audience members who were interviewed also offered a range of responses when asked “what brought you to today’s event?” In both cases, these open-ended responses point to the limited scope of publicity for the events, but also to some of the audience members’ motivations for attending. Email messages or personal connections with people involved in the event were the most commonly mentioned ways that interviewees became aware of the event. In the fall, these connections took the form of participation in the Marcellus Community Science Volunteer Program for several respondents; at least one also mentioned attending the May performance as well. The interests individuals described in May align with the options provided in the feedback questionnaire. At least one commenter wished to learn more about Marcellus shale and related issues. Several others expressed interests in protecting the environment from potential hazards of gas drilling (or conserving the environment in general), while still other comments – sometimes from the same individual – related to economic opportunity. October respondents also described being motivated by an interest to learn more, but offered less detail or elaboration than in the spring, referring to “seeking information” or “learn[ing] something about fracking.” One other individual expressed interest in seeing “people with different views and experiences” at the fall event, suggesting some continued demand for engaging in dialogue.

Openness to dialogue

Audience members were asked if they agreed with a series of statements related to participation in dialogue around gas drilling and the Marcellus shale. While there was agreement with each statement, the strength of respondents’ agreement varied. The statements with weakest agreement in the spring were “I am clear about my own point of view” and “I want to share my opinions with

others,” with average ratings of 4.79 and 4.93, respectively (SD 1.251 and 1.668). Agreement with these items was considerably stronger in the fall, with means roughly two-thirds of a point higher in each case. Statements that focused on different points of view garnered moderate agreement: “There are multiple valid points of view” had a mean rating of 5.60 (SD 1.920) in May and 5.78 (SD 1.517) in October. “I can see where people with different points of view are coming from” was rated 5.73 (SD 1.335) in May but 5.44 (SD 0.984) in October – this suggests a greater consensus but somewhat less strength of agreement among the fall audience.

Following both events, the strongest agreement was with statements valuing others’ views – “I want to hear what other people have to say” (spring mean 6.07, SD 1.223; fall mean 6.28, SD 0.958) and “I believe I could learn from what other people have to say” (spring mean 6.40, SD 0.986; fall mean 6.50, SD 0.857). This very strong agreement among the fall audience suggests their openness to and interest in dialogue, though comments elsewhere suggest they may have hoped for more of it at the event itself.

Table 3. Ratings of dialogue-related statements

	May Event				October Event			
	N	Min	Mean	Std. Dev.	N	Min	Mean	Std. Dev.
I can see where people with different points of view are coming from	15	3	5.73	1.335	18	4	5.44	.984
I want to hear what other people have to say	15	4	6.07	1.223	18	4	6.28	.958
I am clear about my own point of view	14	3	4.79	1.251	18	3	5.39	1.243
There are multiple valid points of view	15	1	5.60	1.920	18	2	5.78	1.517
I want to share my opinions with others	15	2	4.93	1.668	18	1	5.56	1.504
I believe I could learn from what other people have to say	15	4	6.40	.986	18	4	6.50	.857

When interviewees were asked about their comfort discussing gas drilling or the Marcellus shale with others, they offered a range of responses from “not very comfortable” to “I enjoy it.” In general, though, respondents in both the spring and in the fall described at least some comfort in doing so. In May, individuals’ reasons for feeling comfortable focused on a belief in the value of discourse, as well as more specific opportunities to learn from others’ expertise (or the freedom that comes from not needing to be an expert oneself in order to participate). Conversely, one individual described their discomfort as stemming from their current lack of knowledge on the issues. A second noted their work for a nonprofit organization, and the feeling that this role limits participation in dialogue which might be perceived as issue advocacy. Two other individuals also made a distinction about their comfort engaging with people who may disagree with their views, noting that such conversations become more difficult and uncomfortable, but also that contentious-yet-civil dialogue is “better than arguing.”

In October, a larger proportion of interviewees expressed comfort with Marcellus-related discussions; a majority of their reasons echoed those named in the spring. Several respondents, however, mentioned confidence in their own knowledge of the topic as a reason for feeling comfortable. This suggests a difference between the two audiences that could possibly be attributed to the passage of time, audience members’ familiarity with the previous performance, or (in some cases) participation in other Marcellus Matters activities. Those who expressed

discomfort with participating in dialogue in the fall did so by describing *others'* lack of knowledge or unwillingness to engage constructively, suggesting their own openness to dialogue despite some reluctance.

The locations where interviewees at both events imagined their Marcellus-related conversations happening reflect a variety of everyday places – work, school, home, public meetings, and more – where audience members were already likely to be, rather than indicating plans to seek out new conversational settings. In May, several elaborated on these imagined conversations by describing important characteristics of dialogue: a neutral setting, encouragement to “get more information,” and regret that people sometimes confuse their own opinions for facts on an issue. In October, these elaborations tended to focus on specific topics of conversation (e.g., trust, the “economics of natural gas”) or the belief that such conversations would “go well” or be enjoyable.

Openness to changing views / new information

Audience members who participated in exit interviews were also asked a series of questions relating to their exposure and openness to new ideas or viewpoints. Four of eight individuals in May reported that their views had changed in some way because of what they had seen or heard at the community conversation; the changes mostly focused on a new appreciation of the complexity of drilling-related issues and considerations. That awareness also involved an interest in “listening to people’s stories” and in the need to have “more people involved and educated” on these issues. Two of seven individuals reported changed views in October: one noted their skepticism or concern about human error as it related to risk in gas development, and the other described being “more persuaded that wind [or] solar are worth thinking about” as energy sources.

Only three individuals in the spring were able to describe any new information or ideas from the event. One noted the novelty of the community conversation’s structure. Another mentioned the variety and complexity of individuals’ stories. The third was inspired – perhaps by a thread of conversation around formal K-12 education in the audience dialogue period – to think about “engaging kids in the topic.” The fall interviewees, in contrast, reported new ideas or information related to the knowledge and skills addressed by Marcellus Matters: details about gas development or well construction, as well as new considerations of risk and “who to trust.” This difference among groups is reasonable given both changes to the performance and the fall audience’s unique familiarity with the program overall.

Audience members were asked in both the interview and the questionnaire if anything about the event had surprised them. Two feedback forms and five interviews from May included affirmative responses to this question; no feedback forms, but four interviews, did so in October. (Note that it is possible a single individual could potentially have given two similar responses through both methods of this study.)

In the spring, one comment addressed the structure of the event – in particular “the play part.” Several others mentioned the conversation that took place, praising the “level of common viewpoints that were shared and the willingness of those gathered to want to work together to address the issues.” Another commenter noted the personal complexity of drilling-related issues, for “people who talked about environmental issues and then said their children worked there,” while someone else indicated their high expectations by expressing the feeling that one skit was missing an important viewpoint. Finally, two comments mentioned a specific moment of scientific misinformation within one of the plays: surprise that “chemicals could evaporate & create dust on to plants.”

One fall interviewee was surprised by the entertainment value of the event, that it was “funny and interesting.” Two others were surprised by the value of specific points in the conversation – a comparison or metaphor (possibly about hunting) used to discuss risk tolerance, as well as the opportunity to hear perspectives from other attendees whose communities were already more involved in gas development. One individual reported surprise at the “uncertainty of scientists.”

Team reflection logs

Six team members completed a short reflective exercise in the days following the October event. The six responses – from a combination of both “performers” and “scientists” – reflect some points of consensus, but also points of incomplete overlap or even contradiction between one observer and another. While each one contains intriguing and potentially useful observations, then, there are relatively few consensus findings or trends in this particular data set.

Describing the audience

Some described the audience in demographic terms – that they seemed “older” overall, and lived in or near Clearfield County (i.e., local to the venue). Others noted different entry characteristics. Several described audience members as seeming well-informed about and highly engaged with natural gas development topics and issues. Several team members noted the prevalence of familiar faces in the audience, either repeat attendees from the May performance event or Marcellus Community Science Volunteer Program participants. One noted that “all but three were already ‘known’ to us” from other contact with Marcellus Matters activities. Still others noted that only about half the individuals at the event were audience members at all – 21 of 43 were present to either conduct or observe the event in some official capacity, a similar proportion as in the spring.

These observations suggest two important findings. First, the prior knowledge and familiarity of audience members with both information about gas development and with the Marcellus Matters program in particular likely shaped their views of the event. Second, the presence of so many “repeat” or “known” participants points to ongoing difficulties in promoting Marcellus Matters activities – and the performance events in particular – to audiences who are not already highly engaged (or even expert) in the subject matter.

Audience engagement: perceived success

There were a range of views among the team about the most engaging parts of the event. Some saw overall success, with “both parts” engaging the audience “evenly, but in different ways.” Praise for the performance was weakest overall: it seemed to be “appreciated” and did not “make people uncomfortable.” The success of humor as a strategy for engagement in general was noted, but not in relation to this specific performance. The dialogue portion of the event was most often mentioned as a success, but also garnered substantial critique elsewhere in the reflections. This wide range of views suggests two possible interpretations. First, while no portion of the event was clearly most engaging, neither was any seen as clearly least engaging by all team members who responded. Second, these varied reactions suggest that each team member focused on very different things when reflecting on the performance – this indicates the persistence of team members’ individual agendas, understandings of the project, or criteria for project success, rather than the adoption of a unified set of goals and indicators for the team as a whole.

When asked if they noticed any unexpected audience reactions, team members focused on similar topics but reached opposing conclusions. The unexpected moments that were recalled focused on engagement with the performance – but some noted their surprise at how actively the audience was engaged, while others expected more engagement than they observed. Similar comments focused more specifically on humor in the performance, where comments described both more open laughter and less open laughter than the team expected. It is interesting to note that these points of non-consensus all stem from the performers themselves; none of the “scientist” team members who completed reflections described any unexpected audience reactions.

Audience engagement: areas for improvement

Comments describing parts of the event as “least engaging” were less numerous than responses to other prompts, which suggests that the event itself and the audience’s reactions generally met the team’s expectations, even when those expectations varied from one respondent to another. When asked to describe them directly, the least-engaging aspects of the event (and evidence for that perception) were reported as:

- The group dialogue time, because a handful of people in one group dominated the discussion;
- “Long sections of the performance” in which one commenter felt the team was more focused on their characters than on engaging with the audience; and
- One overall impression that the October event created less “emotional tug” than the May event.

The competing views of audience engagement continued when team members were asked to describe any unexpected audience reactions, as described above. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the main point of consensus around audience engagement was that team members wished to see more of it going forward.

These comments’ breadth (encompassing nearly the entire event) and the lack of consensus among them may suggest more about how team members were inclined to perceive the event in different ways, rather than pointing definitively toward weaknesses in the event itself.

Identifying audience take-aways

There was a greater consensus among reflection-writers about what the audience seemed to “get” (i.e. understand or take away) from the event. Only a single comment described something the audience hadn’t “gotten,” the lyrics to one parody song that seemed to get lost due to poor sound control. Most named the overall themes – about risk, competing perspectives, and trust or uncertainty – as things that seemed to resonate with the audience. Individuals offered a range of evidence or explanations for these moments, however. Some pointed to the group discussion, where audience members referred to both the content of the performance and their own experiences in talking about risk. Another mentioned that “smiles, eye contact, [and] laughter were consistent” during the performance, indicating a grasp of its themes and of the humor used to convey them. One comment described this understanding as resulting from their use of humor in the performance to create “space” for exploration of ideas rather than a solely emotional reaction.

Yet another felt that the “particularly knowledgeable” audience “got” more than another group may have due to their prior experiences. Despite the overall positive tone of comments about “getting it,” this last thought about the audience’s prior knowledge is complicated by reflections elsewhere wondering if the event was “too clever” for those who attended. Once again, these competing views

suggest the team’s own non-consensus about the event itself and their competing perceptions of the audiences they seek to reach.

Suggested changes to the event

Even if these reflections showed only partial consensus in identifying the event’s strengths and weaknesses, the team members’ suggestions for change all seem compatible and able to strengthen future events. Multiple team members noted a number of specific technical and logistical issues, for instance. The need to clarify or visually signify the “self-tuning radio” aspect of the performance was mentioned, as was the need for better sound quality or acoustics at future venues. The dialogue portion of the event was perceived as needing changes in order to better engage more participants: smaller group sizes and more active (or perhaps trained) facilitation were both mentioned.

Their reflections about what might be done differently show that project team members have concrete, actionable improvements they would like to make to future events; moreover, many of these suggestions appear to be of a scale that would not require major structural changes to the project. However some of the suggestions do point toward larger concerns. These concerns are not new, but they remain pressing. One respondent included a reminder that the cognitive gains from a one-hour experience would necessarily be low, and suggested instead framing future events as a “gateway” to deeper content knowledge. This sentiment was echoed by another individual’s concern about how much factual information was “packed into” the evening, and another comment that the October event seemed to elicit less “emotional tug” than the May event. Such comments evoke a key question that has circled this project from the beginning: what is the optimal combination of science content, affective connection, and dialogue for these events?

Another, unrelated comment spoke to two of the largest roadblocks the Marcellus Matters project has encountered, publicity and the “expert” status of program participants, by suggesting that Community Science Volunteers serve in an audience development / program advocate role in their home or neighboring counties. Finally, one comment shed positive light on the science communication questions raised after the May event – a “scientist” reported feeling considerably more comfortable speaking and participating in October than in the spring, which suggests that changes to the performance, the dialogue structure, and/or the scientists’ preparations made it easier for them to engage with the general public.

Conclusions

Summary of findings

May 2012

In general, audience members understood and reacted positively to the unique structure of the event. Not only did some individuals explicitly mention its multi-part structure in their comments, but the wide range of words audience members used to describe the event indicate that it served a variety of purposes for a variety of people. Respondents particularly appreciated the creation of a balanced, respectful space for discussing complex issues.

At the end of the event, individuals' comments and responses strongly indicated their openness to dialogue, and that a high value was placed on what might be learned from encountering others' viewpoints. Similarly, there was a great deal of interest in learning more: whether to feel more educated or informed about Marcellus-related issues, to identify and incorporate facts into one's thinking, to benefit from hearing others' perspectives, or to obtain "answers," many audience members seemed to be seeking information. This "seeking" among audience members highlights an opportunity for the events to serve dual purposes: not only creating a valued space for dialogue, which the first community conversation did very well, but also providing reliable, accurate, factual information or resources to audiences alongside audience conversation.

October 2012

Audience reactions to the event itself were positive, but were less strong and more homogenous (i.e., more narrowly distributed) than in the spring. This change may be attributed to changes in the event itself, but also to the presence of an audience with considerably more prior knowledge and (perhaps) different expectations of the evening. Indeed, the lowest rating among fall attendees was for the inclusion of "information that was new to me," indicating the presence of "information-seekers" in the audience whose existing level of expertise surpassed the content of the event. Unlike in May, no corresponding group of primarily "dialogue-seekers" emerged based on the data collected. Audience members offered relatively less detail about their views on the event's balance of emotion, dialogue, and information. This may, once again, relate to differences between audiences, between event structures, or between data collectors in the spring and fall.

Audience members in October gave considerably higher ratings on aspects of their openness to dialogue, suggesting it was highly valued by this group, but team observations indicated that dialogue only took place for a narrow sub-set of attendees at the event itself. Most interviewees who described their confidence about participating in dialogue attributed it to their confidence in their own knowledge base and point of view. Responses like these, coupled with observations by project team members, further suggest differences between the two audiences despite both groups' positive responses. It seems that the May audience was able to articulate an interest that was served particularly well by the Cultural Conversations event, while the October audience expressed no such unmet need despite also being largely satisfied by the event.

Similarly, team reflections in October showed no detrimental changes or major challenges about the event itself but did suggest room for improvement. The varying observations made by project team members highlight the variety of backgrounds, interests, and expertise held by the team. While this diversity is an asset to the project, it also requires active management toward a clear set of shared goals and expectations. The different ways audience members described their experiences of the two events – though both seem to have been well-received – suggest that perhaps there is work to be done in this area. It seems that the team has not yet fully anchored their work to the outcomes originally stated for the project and the necessary balance between them. Instead, the team's careful consideration of changes in the spring and summer (e.g., the integration of more science content in the performance, clearer fact-checking opportunities) may have led them to over-correct and lose sight of their affective and dialogue-focused outcomes somewhat. The full collection of project outcomes can serve as a touchstone for future activities, helping the team to keep each of the events' already-successful elements in balance with one another.

Provocative questions from the two events

May 2012

People seemed to see a lot of different things in the event, which is both an indicator of success and a challenge. Do you have any thoughts on how (or whether) to meet all those different needs? How could you best serve both the dialogue-seekers and the information-seekers?

For most people who discussed it, the reasons for being comfortable or uncomfortable with dialogue have to do with access to or lack of information. That seems to point to the value of serving both the dialogue-seekers and the information-seekers.

Do any of these findings challenge your assumptions about community conversation audience?

- Their comfort with, awareness of, and openness to complexity?
- The competing interests and views sometimes held by the same individual?
- The fact that no one expressed hostility toward Penn State, either in person or in their comments?
- The overall comfort they reported with engaging in dialogue?

Some minor critiques of the event's structure from interviewees:

- The language in the third theater piece felt too complex.
- There was too much talk from the facilitator.
- One person noted one point where they felt one point of view was missing in a play. (If the goal is to be comprehensive, audiences will hold you to that high expectation. If sharing every viewpoint is not the goal of the plays, how can you effectively communicate what the goal actually is?)

What do you think it means that "scientific" was chosen among both the "best describes" and "least describes" word-bank words?

What does it mean that at least one individual was surprised by (but did not question) an example of scientific misinformation that appeared in the plays and went unchallenged in the dialogue?

Very narrowly focused publicity may have created an audience that included only one (or more) specific sub-set(s) of the people you hope to reach.

October 2012

What do you think it means that "enlightening" was chosen among both the "best describes" and "least describes" word-bank words?

To what extent does the team have consensus about the goals of these events? What are the team's criteria for success? To what extent are those goals aligned with the publicly stated outcomes of the project?

The two audiences seemed to have somewhat different interests and prior knowledge, but similar needs for discussion and information. How can future events remain flexible enough to meet different audiences wherever they are?

Similarly, audiences valued the combination of dialogue, performance, and science content, but perceptions of those elements' balance varied somewhat. Is the optimal balance of these elements some proportion other than three equal thirds? Does the optimal balance change from one audience to another?