

Workshop report: Confession session – reinventing the idea of a meeting

Satu Lipponen (Cancer Society of Finland, Helsinki, Finland, EUSJA) & **Wolfgang Goede** (International Science Journalist, WFSJ, Teli) & **Ulla Järvi** (Finnish Association of Science Editors and Journalists, Helsinki, Finland, FASEJ) & **Mikko Myllykoski** (Heureka Finnish Science Center, Vantaa, Finland, ECSITE)

1. Background and aims

This is a report on the workshop that was held at the PCST 2018 conference in Dunedin, New Zealand, and the article mainly builds mainly on the experience of the conference. We have included in this report some observations resulting from the engagement session *Make your neurons rock* at the PCTS Istanbul (2016) and the confession sessions at the European conferences in Graz (2016), Copenhagen (2017), and Porto (2017).

The confession session originates from an idea by Mikko Myllykoski, Experience Director of the Finnish Science Center Heureka. The name was thought up by a Dutch colleague of his. It was first aired at the ECSITE conference in Graz in 2016 with extremely positive feedback in the post-conference evaluation.

Un-conferencing, informal sessions and engaging participants aim at inspiring events. Several collaborative formats have gained popularity over traditional top-down lecture formats. Networking is an important part of conference participation.

The group format is effective when solving problems and creating new ideas. The idea of co-creation puts an emphasis on the diversity of the group. It should have participants from different fields of science. Thus, science communication, science engagement, and science journalism events have been ideal test beds for confession sessions.

In a broader context we are in search of practical ways to inspire people so that they can solve complicated problems together. These problems occur in every facet of our actions: research, learning, business, and political arenas.

2. Confession session in Dunedin 2018

The workshop in Dunedin had two goals: firstly, to explore ways to increase collaborative knowledge production; and secondly to learn from mistakes and transform them into innovations. The workshop was among ten parallel sessions just before the conference closing plenary. This meant that there was a need to publicise the workshop due to tough competition. The best confessions were rewarded

with a comic book and we built the workshop around the second goal and concept of confession having to have a clear message.

The workshop was attended by about twenty people. To break the ice, we first carried out a sociometric line-up. After that Mikko Myllykoski explained the idea of the session.

The idea of the confession session is simple: What if instead of listing successes you reveal your worst mistakes? When we share learning from mistakes – our own and those of others – this honest peer learning boosts professional identity and bridges generations. Mistakes are not a problem but learning from them can be.

To maximize the learning process it is crucial to create a relaxed atmosphere. For this purpose we used a soft, throwable microphone, the Catchbox). The Catchbox was used to make this participatory session dynamic, enjoyable, and therapeutic.

To analyse the nature of any confessed mistake, we categorized them according to so called Seven Deadly, or cardinal, sins: [pride](#), [greed](#), [lust](#), [envy](#), [gluttony](#), [wrath](#) and [sloth](#). Whatever was confessed during the session remained behind in the workshop venue. But what we can say is that we heard confessions relating to each one of the seven categories of sin, and everybody in the room joined actively the process. The format of publicly sharing your professional mistakes is both engaging and empowering.

3. Ethical dialogue

A confession session was organised in Copenhagen 2017 at the European Conference of Science Journalism (ECSJ 2017). In Copenhagen, most of confession makers were middle-aged and highly experienced journalists. Younger participants mostly listened in and commented judiciously on what they heard

It might be that if you are at the early stage in your career this kind of personal ethical divulgence discussion is "a little too much". You might not have enough professional tools to handle your own uncertainty or contingency. Critiques of individual mistakes may be especially harsh when it involves journalists. A confession session is a safe place to air and tackle professional dilemmas. Intergenerational and openhearted deliberation offers a supportive environment in which to share and understand ethical issues.

In Dunedin, the group involved people of different ages and nationalities. The participants mainly worked in or were studying science communications. The younger attendees at the session were engaged and active commenters.

Uncertainty and distractions in one's work were common to the Dunedin group's confessions, so it was easy for students to reflect on their own professional dilemmas.

4. Group therapy or we-intentions?

Group modality are termed "we-intentions". We-intentions differ from individual intentions (or I-mode). With we-mode, members share a collective acceptance of and collective commitment to the group's goals. The confession session in we-mode is an interactive tool for professional development and sharing important ethical questions.

If looked at from a more individual perspective – I-mode and group empowerment – confessions in a professionally coordinated session and supportive atmosphere can address mental stress and offer therapeutic help.

Whatever the character of the group dynamic, every group is unique. Every confession session is built on sharing, not on individual participant input. The focus is on the audience, not the presenters. And the session is a great networking opportunity.

5. Future suggestions

The confession session in Dunedin was held in the very last session slot of the conference. In order to have a greater icebreaking impact on the attendees, it would have been better to arrange this kind of community and identity-building workshop at the very start of the conference. This is true of all similarly interactive methods.

If the group is small and use of a microphone unnecessary, any something easily throwable can be used as a “talking stick”. It gives a structure to interactions and keeps the discussion lively. Also, providing rewards for the confessions adds to appeal of the session.

In the future more professional events will be organized online. Virtual surroundings may make engagement and participation difficult. Developing interactive methods for science communications online in the digital age is a very pertinent challenge.

References

<http://www.eusja.org/how-to-make-neurons-rock-toolbox-with-20-methods/>

<http://www.eusja.org/welcome-to-confession-session/>

<http://wfsj.org/v2/2018/04/23/pcst2018-engage-audiences-by-hearts-and-emotions-with-facts-and-figures/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/collective-intentionality/>