Case Study 8: Café Scientifique

promoting public engagement in emerging science and technology

**Author:** Duncan Dallas, Cafe Scientific; Daniel Glaser, Wellcome Trust  
**SUMMARY DETAILS**

**Geographic region:** Kenya, Uganda, Nepal, UK, US, Palestine, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Denmark, France  
**Relevance of approach across scientific disciplines:** Trans-disciplinary approach; Governance of Science, Communicating uncertainty

**DIALOGUE PROCESS**

**Summary of dialogue process:** Café Scientifique is a place where anyone can come to explore the latest ideas in science and technology. Based on the French Café Philosophique tradition, it is a non-hierarchical and democratic formula for involving all participants in a scientific discussion. Committed to promoting public engagement and making science accountable, ‘the discussion is where the important stuff happens’. The balance of power lies with the audience and presenting scientists have had their views challenged and their minds changed.

Cafés Scientifiques cover a wide range of issues relating to science and technology, welcoming suggestions from the audience about their programmes. Internationally, meetings have taken place in cafes, bars, restaurants and theatres, but always outside a traditional academic context.

Initiated in 1998, the concept has spread all over the world and is now well established with around 300 cafés in 40 countries, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Uganda, Kenya, Poland and Turkey, under names ranging from "Science in the Pub" in Australia to "Chai and Why" in India. A number of countries have also established Junior Cafés in schools to promote youth engagement with science.

Cafés are adaptable and have been successful in a range of cultures. They engage with British culture in one way but in Uganda, in quite another. They are broader than science and have much to do with an individual organiser’s personal interests. It has developed into an emergent network of individual cafés, bound by a set of common principles and shared objectives. Within this loose network, many formats and ways of running cafés can flourish.

**METHOD**

**Venue**

Meetings should be held in a public space which is owned and controlled by the audience, which supports informal conversation and is outside a traditional academic setting. It is important that the venue is relaxed and informal and that drinks (and perhaps food) are available.

Café Scientifique is all about conversation, so it is important that the venue allows the audience to see and hear the speaker and each other. The venue needs to strike a balance between being large enough to accommodate the audience (usually from 30 to 50 people) and small enough to allow them to hear each other and interact successfully. Noise should be kept to a minimum while the cafe is running, especially during the opening talk from the speaker. Cafes and bars are an obvious choice but pubs, arts centres, community centres, science centres, cinemas and theatres have all been successful.
Format
A speaker talks for about 20 minutes, generally without slides or visual aids, giving an outline of their field and identifying a couple of relevant questions.

Following the initial talk, there is an immediate 10 minute break for informal discussion and refilling of drinks. This is intended to promote full participation and avoid more confident members of the audience, ready with immediate questions, creating an environment which puts off the engagement of less confident members.

A discussion of just under one hour is started after the break. Discussion involves but is not led by the speaker: it is not a question and answer session. While the expert's voice does not dominate, it is often the silent presence of a professional which legitimates and promotes an empowered discussion.

Speaker preparation is very important, to help them pitch their contribution at the right level. One idea is to suggest to speakers that they assume the audience is as intelligent as them, but just does not have the same vocabulary.

Café host or facilitator
Café discussion needs to be guided by an experienced facilitator who undertakes a number of roles including:

- Setting the tone of the evening: greeting people at the door, introducing new members, and organising the seating before the talk begins. The tone should be friendly, informal and inclusive. Some hosts prepare ice-breakers or trivia questions for the start of the evening. Some hosts undertake a series of introductory questions to allow participants to better know ‘who is in the room’ and create a feeling that the Cafe is a safe space for all to contribute.
- Establishing the format for the discussion, and introducing the speaker – not with an academic biography but a few points of general interest.
- Moderating discussion to support as wide a participation as possible, identifying opportunities for timely engagement across the audience, and ensuring that dominant voices do not drown out others.

Principles for the Café discussion
Each Cafe Scientifique event is open to the public and is run on the principles of free speech and respect for the individual. It is important the host maintains these principles and that everyone feels able to ask questions.

The discussion should be two way between the presenting scientist and the audience. It is not a one way flow of information from the expert to the non expert.

Topic
Cafes are audience-driven in the sense that the topic of discussion has to be of general interest. In Uganda, for example, Cafes are usually focused on issues of health, which are a major concern of most people.

Audience
Experience suggests that an effective Café discussion requires at least 20 participants and not more than 50.

Once a cafe is established, many organisers set up email lists or use established channels for circulating details of forthcoming events. However, the first few events must generally be publicised using a wide range of means to build up an audience. Dependent on local communication means, most cafes start off using a mix of posters, leaflets, inserts in local ‘What's On’ publications, local newspapers and local radio and television.

Cafes in Kenya have tried to include within each Science Café someone who has had a personal experience with the topic under consideration in order that discussion can benefit from the insights of directly affected users of the science.

Variations on the Café Scientifique format
Participants have experimented with a huge number of variations to the general Café Scientifique format. Some have combined speakers – for example, a poet with a scientist – to provide alternative perspectives. In France the Café Scientifique value balance in presenting information and usually include a panel of three to five speakers. One panel member might be a scientist, one some kind of opposing view and one a politician, enabling the debate to draw on different perspectives.

Given deference to age and experience, café organisers in Japan have identified new ways to facilitate discussion, taking participants’ questions by text or email. In Uganda people heard about the science meetings and asked for them to be held in their local languages (Lugbara, Kiswahili, Luganda and Itesot) at the local malwa (millet beer) joint, where the local ‘malwa’ brew is made in a very large pot and the people stand round it drinking through large straws. Some Cafes take place in bars, but many cultures have no alcohol. In Nepal some of the audience thought it would be a good idea to start cafés, like the ‘Café Climate’ organized by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) with British Council in February 2010, in the rural areas in tea stalls where people generally sit and chat.

The Florence café runs two types of events – the traditional café and a café/ conference blend, called Cafferenza through which they have tried to widen the café experience and support wider participation through employing a range of media (film, radio and web) including:

- During the Cafe: recording, streaming, and supporting distance participation
- In parallel with the Cafe: producing radio broadcasts
- After the Cafe: providing podcasts

Other alternatives to the straight café have included quizzes, games and experiments, science cabarets with comedians and readings or rehearsed readings of relevant science-themed plays.

Efforts are underway to undertake Café Scientifique via Second Life and to run Cafés through internet bringing together audiences in different countries across very different cultural contexts.

**Funding and Sustainability**

Cafes are generally free and participants can just turn up on the night. However, in some venues
from a hospital where HIV-testing services are provided for free, the people had been reluctant to use these services.

In Palestine, cafes have allowed ‘people to interact in a civilized manner and discuss controversial topics. For the students, cafés are a window on a world they are not allowed to travel to’.

European Cafes have taken place in middle class areas, with an intelligent and informed audience. The Cafes have proved popular because the topics chosen have related to the personal, social, global experience and anxieties of this (large) section of the population. However once SciCafes try to engage with more socially and economically deprived cultures, problems start to emerge. These problems stem from a range of issues:

- Some are economic, such as transport issues;
- Some educational – resistance to science and education, lack of questioning;
- Some social – fear of discussion, apathy about involvement, lack of interest in futures;
- Some geographical – isolated country communities or deprived city areas;
- Some religious – antagonism to evolution and cosmology;
- Some linguistic – inclusion of immigrant and refugee communities, and use of local rather than official languages;
- Some personal – suspicion of different groups or races;
- Some technological – no computers, or just an interest in Facebook;
- Some financial – any spare money spent on immediate needs or pleasures, not interests.

While the cafés on such subjects as HIV and use of Anti Retroviral (ARV) drugs in Uganda have been successful in linking health providers to the people, they have also raised expectations regarding service delivery. “It’s sometimes frustrating though that, after creating the demand, the health services aren’t always available,” says Christine Munduru. In Kenya organizers found that the Cafes turned into forums for public education rather than public engagement, with most communities starved for information. For example, ‘(t)he Kibera science cafe brought representatives from the Government AIDS control body, NASCOP, as well as other treatment based Community Based Organisations (CBOS), who took time to explain how the treatment works, the side effects, the nutrition and addressed all the conspiracy theories around the availability of ARV drugs in Kenya. After the café discussions, the attendants were exceedingly convinced and aware of how the ART medication works but the ironic bit was the medicine was hardly available at the local health centres due to issues between the health ministries and the health funding agencies.’

**Informing specific humanitarian decision making process:**
Cafés provide a facility for the whole community. How they encourage change, depends on the café itself.

**Informing the focus of current/proposed scientific research:**
Cafés have impacted on science in many ways. Scientists can come to learn what the audience knows and what interests or concerns them and as a result scientists may think differently about their work.

Cafés have also provided a forum for acknowledging the place of science in the local economy and its value to the community, as well as being somewhere for retired science professionals to continue their involvement in science. Most scientists who take part see engagement as a responsibility. According to a pilot survey of Cafes in the US undertaken in 2007, ‘(s)peaking at cafés affects the scientists. In the survey, 90% said they were initially recruited by an organiser but 92% were interested in doing it again. There is a significant ripple effect, as scientists speak to their colleagues about their experiences.’