Mixed Cultures: Microbiology, art and design
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With an increasing focus on engagement of the public with research, it is important for science students to consider how best they can communicate their science to audiences who may not be particularly science-literate, or even science-interested. One pathway for enhancing engagement is to use art and the humanities as a vehicle or medium for provoking interest and initiating discussion around scientific topics.

Despite the emergence of celebrity scientists the archetypal scientist is still perceived to be dull, boring, preoccupied, inward looking - and male. However, the imagination and creativity necessary to come up with, and test new ideas are also attributes of the scientist. Thus, first –year undergraduate students of microbiology were challenged to use their artistic talents to create an output that could use art and design to stimulate discussion around their subject. Over the years, several hundred students took up the challenge, producing a rich array of artworks, textiles, jewellery, teaching aids, music and food that were used in a variety of settings – peer-reviewed publications, exhibitions and other events. Students enjoyed the assignment, remembered it with fondness as their studies progressed (some selecting final year projects inspired by their ‘art project’), and were able to used their work as an example of acquisition of different skills related to employability.

The staff (presenter) were amazed and impressed by the talent and ingenuity of the students, and as a result developed a keener interest in science communication and public engagement, working with staff in other disciplines to produce different provocative collaborative outputs, such as using novels about zombies and vampires to discuss disease transmission and control at the Manchester Children’s Book Festival, producing communal agar handprints to demonstrate ‘hands across the disciplines’ at a social science conference on Qualitative Research, providing a sounding board for art students embarking on science-related projects, employing interactive arts graduates as interns to develop our faculty science communication activities (www.sci-eng.mmu.ac/engage) and strategy, and writing papers for peer-reviewed journals.

The presentation will describe a selection of these activities, with the intention of raising awareness of: the forgotten creativity of scientists, and the value of inter-disciplinary collaboration in the field of science communication to staff and students from all disciplines.