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European Researchers' Night as a Learning Environment

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European Researchers' Night as a Learning Environment

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Abstract: European Researchers' Night is an annual pan-European initiative of the European Commission held on the last Friday in September. In 2015, 1.1 million European citizens and 18,000 researchers took part in events organised in more than 300 cities within Europe and neighbouring countries. The objective of European Researchers' Night is to encourage the wider public to visit research institutes, engage with researchers, and learn more about European research and potential career opportunities. In this paper, European Researchers' Night in Ireland is considered through the lens of informal education. The types of learning taking place at European Researchers' Night events are explored, and recommendations are made on how learning might be better assessed at future events.

Keywords: European Researchers' Night, Informal Education, Public Engagement

Background to European Researchers' Night

European Researchers' Night takes place in at least 300 cities across more than thirty countries in Europe each year. It was first implemented as an initiative of the European Commission in 2005 and has been included in successive funding streams ever since (including the sixth Framework Programme, FP6, and its successors, FP7 and Horizon 2020). The cumulative funding made available for European Researchers' Night through these funding streams is approximately €40 million. The goals of the initiative are to bring researchers closer to the general public, increase awareness of European research, support the public recognition of researchers, create an understanding of the impact of researchers' work on citizens' daily life, and encourage young people to embark on scientific careers (EC 2014). Simultaneous events across Europe take place on the last Friday in September, and in 2015 the initiative engaged 1.1 million European citizens and 18,000 researchers (EC 2017). The events themselves can include tours, workshops, lectures, demonstrations, debates, and discussions.

In this paper, results are presented from an evaluation of European Researchers' Night in Ireland in 2015. The event was hosted by Trinity College Dublin in partnership with the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Visitors to the event had the opportunity to see diverse research environments and participate in interactive installations, debates, tours, and presentations in four subject areas: human, technology, world, and society (RCSI 2015). In addition, visitors had the chance to engage directly with some of the country's leading researchers in such areas as robotics, neuroscience, and zoology. Although similar types of public engagement events take place in Ireland (see Roche, Cullen, and Ball 2016; Roche, Stanley, and Davis 2016), European Researchers' Night is the only event that makes labs and research centres publicly accessible for one night each year. While the primary focus of the evaluation was to better understand the attendees of the event, a secondary component involved exploring the informal learning that takes place at European Researchers' Night. Informal learning is "usually intentional but not highly structured" (Marsick and Watkins 2001, 25). Over the last two decades, informal science

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learning has become a growing field of research. Falk and Dierking (2000) provided a general framework for understanding informal or free-choice learning—a contextual model of learning—which focuses on such aspects as agenda, personal motivation, and the sociocultural nature of learning. In 2009, the National Research Council pointed out some of the issues with the field of informal science learning: “There are a range of perspectives in research on learning science in informal environments which, despite clear similarities and areas of overlap, have not been well integrated into a common body of knowledge” (NRC 2009, 49). In 2016, the Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education documented how “growth in infrastructure for the [informal science education] field over the past 10 years has created new resources, capacity and expertise that can be leveraged to engage public audiences with the products and processes of research” (Bell et al. 2016, 4). European Researchers’ Night represents an ideal event to explore informal science learning because it is an annual pan-European event that has been running for more than a decade and will likely be funded for the foreseeable future.

Research Questions

Considering the amount of funding being made available to invest in European Researchers’ Night events, it is appropriate to consider the educational impact (if any) of the initiative. To help evaluate the impact of European Researchers’ Night, two research questions were developed:

1. What do people learn about research at European Researchers’ Night events?
2. What can be done to improve European Researchers’ Night as a learning experience across Europe?

These research questions were developed by investigating European Researchers’ Night as an educational endeavour that focuses on engaging European citizens with current research.

Methods

The methodology for this research stemmed from the evaluation of European Researchers’ Night in Ireland. The full evaluation involved a mixed-methods approach consisting of surveys, observations, and focus groups. This paper focuses on a specific question in the survey: “At this event, did you find out something that you did not know before, and if so, what did you find out?” Additional results from the surveys, observations, and focus groups are described in Roche et al. (2017).

To address the research questions, it was necessary to understand if visitors to European Researchers’ Night felt like they had learned anything new. A simple, open question in the survey was considered the best way to gather meaningful data. Although simple, open questions are more demanding for the respondent and the researcher analysing the answers, they are needed when the potential replies are too numerous to predict or are unknown (Kelley et al. 2003).

Data gathered from the open question were analysed using content analysis. Content analysis “is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contents of their use” (Krippendorff 2004, 18). Although content analysis was first introduced in Scandinavia in the eighteenth century (Rosengren 1981), it has become a staple tool for evaluating public engagement events in recent decades. It transitioned to the field of public engagement after being first established as a research tool in health studies (Nandy and Sarvela 1997).

The rationale for carrying out a content analysis on the data gathered at European Researchers’ Night was the strong inferential value of content analysis for analysing communications. It facilitates the study of social events without being obtrusive, and it can be used to analyse large amounts of information while remaining efficient and accessible (Babbie 2015). A drawback of using this method is its reliability—biases can affect researchers,

respondents, and content, and this needs to be taken into account by ensuring intercoder reliability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This was addressed by having three researchers independently code the data gathered at European Researchers' Night.

A conventional content analysis was undertaken, with the keywords and codes derived from the data itself (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Other forms of content analysis such as directed or summative were considered unsuitable as there was not enough prior research published on informal learning at European Researchers' Night to appropriately define the codes in advance.

Results

On the night of European Researchers' Night in Ireland in 2015 (September 25), 242 people completed a visitor survey. One of the questions on the survey was an open-ended question that invited visitors to share details of anything new that they had learned: "At this event, did you find out something that you did not know before, and if so, what did you find out?" Figure 1 shows that 16.9 percent of participants chose to leave this question blank. Although 25.2 percent of participants answered in the negative, most of these respondents indicated that they had just arrived at the event.

At this event, did you find out something that you did not know before?

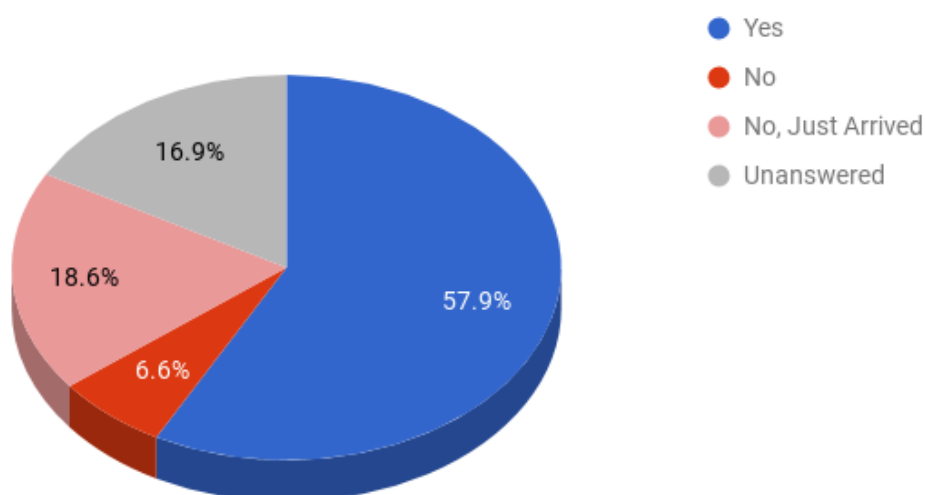


Figure 1: Self-Reported Informal Learning at European Researchers' Night.
Data Compiled by the Authors

The activities that took place at the European Researchers' Night event were diverse and varied. The Appendix shows a list of events that were suggested to researchers to help them consider activities to run on European Researchers' Night. Figure 2 shows that the most common topics of informal learning indicated by the visitors at European Researchers' Night were in the areas of medicine and biomedical science. The next most common area of learning was research practice.

Informal Learning at European Researchers' Night

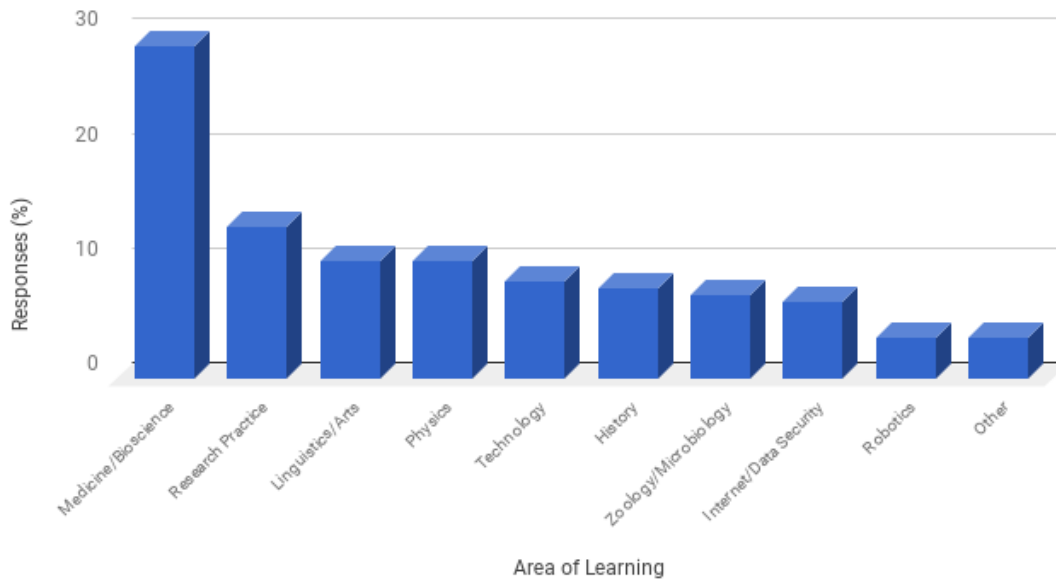


Figure 2: The Types of Informal Learning at European Researchers' Night. Participants' Open-Ended Answers Were Organized into the Ten Categories Shown.
Data Compiled by the Authors

Discussion and Conclusion

Of the 242 surveyed visitors to European Researchers' Night, 57.9 percent indicated that they had found out something at the event that they did not know beforehand. This provides a crude approximation that European Researchers' Night itself is functioning as an informal learning event. It is likely that a larger number would have responded that they had learned something new if they had been approached later in the event, as most (73%) of those who reported not learning something indicated that they had just arrived at the event (Figure 1).

The range of topics mentioned by the visitors helps to address the first of the research questions: "What do people learn about research at European Researchers' Night events?" The main areas of learning were medicine, health, and biomedical science, with at least twice as much self-reported learning in these areas compared to the other observed areas (Figure 2). Several factors might have influenced why this area was the most common area of learning. The expertise and research interests of the organisers, who were based in the Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute, perhaps led to more researchers (and more motivated researchers) from the biomedical sciences and bioengineering participating in the event activities. This, coupled with the involvement of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, could potentially have brought an intrinsic medicine, health, and biomedical science bias to the event. However, it is also plausible that the visitors to the event were naturally more interested in learning about topics involving health, as it is traditionally the area of research that receives the most support and interest from members of the public who are not involved in research themselves.

The second most common area of learning was "research practice." This included visitors who indicated that they had learned more about the process of research itself and how it is undertaken in an institution of higher education. This finding is in line with the European Commission's objectives for the event, which include "increased awareness among the general public of the importance of research and innovation" and a "better understanding of the key benefits that research brings to society" (EC 2017). Several constraints placed limitations on this research. The sample size of 242 visitors engaged on the night is a useful cross-section of the

attendees, but given the overall attendance numbers of approximately 6,000, it is likely that the sample size was below the targeted threshold of 10 percent of all visitors.

In relation to the second research question—“What can be done to improve European Researchers' Night as a learning experience across Europe?”—there are a number of obvious recommendations. European Researchers' Nights in Ireland will have to include locations other than Dublin in order to become a truly national event. A comprehensive study with students and young adults needs to be undertaken to assess whether all the objectives of European Researchers' Night are being met. It is likely that more attention will need to be given to connecting young people with researchers and providing them with a clear and honest illustration of career opportunities in Europe.

Although there were many different types of engagement activities at European Researchers' Night (see Appendix), the overall models of communication were still quite limited. Considering the engagement in terms of conventional frameworks of science communication models (Trench 2008), the communication that was taking place was often of the “deficit model” variety (in which visitors are considered “deficient” in knowledge on the topic in question) rather than the more democratic dialogue and participatory models of communication. This is not a new phenomenon and harks back to Arnstein's model of citizen participation, which imagined citizen participation as a ladder with its bottom rungs representing nonparticipation and the higher rungs affording increasing levels of control to citizens (Arnstein 1969). The need to strive towards more participatory models of communication is becoming a wider goal of public engagement events (Bultitude, McDonald, and Custead 2011). This is especially important in times of global political turmoil (Roche and Davis 2017).

Despite the fact that European Researchers' Night has been running for more than a decade, little has been published on what is working and what is not working. Only a few research groups have completed and shared in-depth evaluation reports regarding specific European Researchers' Night events—see Dimitrova (2010) and Sardo (2016) as rare examples. It is crucial that the wealth of learning taking place at the European Researchers' Night events across Europe are shared by the event organisers so that best practices can be followed and ineffective approaches be discontinued. Although European Researchers' Night coordinators in other countries are carrying out evaluations, there has not been a coordinated effort to share these evaluations and to publish the learnings and insights in peer-reviewed journals. Future work in this area will depend on the development of a network of European Researchers' Night evaluators. For European Researchers' Night to successfully achieve its goal of raising awareness of European research, it needs to have the same level of scrutiny and rigour applied to it as the research it promotes.

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APPENDIX

Table 1.1: Event Formats

<i>Event</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Audience (Min–Max)</i>	<i>Production Level</i>
Auction	Audience “bids” on ideas or projects that are pitched to them	5+	LOW
Cabaret	Mixes music, song, dance and drama with an overarching theme	20–100	HIGH
Debate	Facilitate healthy and real debate within a research topic	20–50	LOW
Pop-Up Exhibition	Small exhibition of research equipment, images, or outputs	30+	HIGH
Street Feast	Everyone brings and shares food for social gathering	10–30	HIGH
Forum	Airing of differing opinions along a specific theme	20–50	LOW
Gig	Stage performance by band or comedian	40–80	HIGH
Hackathon	Collaborate to build a prototype within a set period of time	7–15	MEDIUM
Improv	Unscripted comedy performance with audience contribution	30–60	MEDIUM
Interview	One-on-one discussion with researcher on chosen topic	40–200	MEDIUM
Open Mic	Sign up for talk or performance just before it starts	20–50	MEDIUM
Panel Discussion	Classic side-by-side cross-disciplinary discussion	40–200	MEDIUM
Performance	Theatre, dance or music performances	20–200	HIGH

Science Gallery Dublin, Trinity College Dublin 2015

Table 1.2: Event Formats Continued

<i>Event</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Audience (Min–Max)</i>	<i>Production Level</i>
Screening	Screening of a film or documentary in a theatre	10–200	LOW
Listening Event	Curated, hosted event during which the audience listens to radio pieces	15–50	MEDIUM
Quiz	Challenge style event—host, teams, and tournament	30–100	HIGH
Talk	Classic, straight-up talk on a specific theme	50–200	MEDIUM
Situation Room	Gather to discuss important issue, with solid plan as an outcome	50–200	HIGH
Silent Disco	Everyone listening to the same set / performance on headphones	5–20	MEDIUM
Unconference	Agenda decided at beginning of conference by participants	20–60	HIGH
Walking Tour	Guided tour around specific research-related buildings / sites	5–15	LOW
Workshop	Hands-on session where visitors learn a skill and make something	1–15	MEDIUM
Lightning Talks	A fast succession of “elevator pitch” talks lasting between one and ten minutes; no multimedia	20–60	HIGH
Ignite / Pecha Kucha	A talk lasting about five minutes, with slides every fifteen or twenty seconds	20–60	HIGH
Speed Geeking	Like speed networking, but pitching a big idea to a small group	5–25	MEDIUM
Demonstration	Short “shows” during which researchers demonstrate equipment or method	1–15	MEDIUM
Soundclash	Two groups “battle” with different approaches to the same thing	20–200	HIGH
Crowdsource	Installation of ideas or suggestions from audience	20+	MEDIUM
Lost Lectures	Talk in secret, unusual location announced just before it happens	5–15	MEDIUM
Cinema Royal	Film screening in unoccupied or unusual location	5–15	MEDIUM
Silent Conference	Like silent disco, but with talks and discussions	5–20	HIGH
Live Documentary	Mix live, Skype, and pre-recorded interviews that explore a theme	60–200	HIGH
Group Build	Visitors participate in the building of a giant structure or performance	20+	HIGH
Fishbowl	Chairs in concentric circles around one volunteer and three panellists	20–60	HIGH
World Café	Cumulative brainstorms at tables for four or five people for twenty minutes	20–40	HIGH

Science Gallery Dublin, Trinity College Dublin 2015

Table 1.3: Event Formats Continued

<i>Event</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Audience (Min–Max)</i>	<i>Production Level</i>
Start-Up Evening	An intense session where people collaborate on a new start-up	5–20	HIGH
Editathon	Group editing session on specific Wikipedia entries	5–20	LOW
Visualisation	A wall of illustrations and flowcharts describing event content and ideas	20+	MEDIUM
Curated Dinner	Chef and researcher collaborate to create a themed dinner	15–20	HIGH
Party	Blend of exhibits, demos, music, talks, and performances—all after hours	100–300	HIGH
Live Recording	Recording of a podcast or radio show in front of a live audience	20–100	HIGH
Home-School	Learn from an expert how to do something at home	5–20	MEDIUM
Career Talks	Interviews or talks on different career progressions	20–60	MEDIUM
Meet-Up	Facilitate a social meet-up of like-minded people	20–40	LOW
TED-Style Talks	Fifteen-minute, rehearsed, and highly prepared talks on ideas	100–200	HIGH
Taxi	Simulate a conversation in the front of a taxi	2–4	LOW
Moth-Style Talks	Storytelling to celebrate diversity and commonality of human experience	20–100	HIGH

Science Gallery Dublin, Trinity College Dublin 2015

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