

How to Talk Maths in Public a delegate's point of view

I attended *How to Talk Maths in Public: an IMA Conference on Public Engagement* as a delegate. Many of the articles in this special issue were written by the organisers, speakers, e^x factor mentors and workshop leaders. I will therefore give an overview of the interactive elements of the conference from a delegate's point of view.

The first day of the conference followed a traditional format, with talks from many well-known maths communicators. There were also small workshops that allowed delegates to discuss a specific area of maths communication with mathematicians experienced in that area. (Please see pp. 238–239 for the full Programme overview.)

Even the conference dinner was taken as an opportunity for further training. For the dinner activity each table were given four cards with awkward questions that were representative of the difficult questions mathematicians often face from many different people who dislike or fear mathematics. The cards encouraged discussion at dinner and the questions ranged from school/college students asking 'Why is maths so boring?', 'Calculators and computers do all the hard maths, why do we need proof?' and 'What use has been any of the research in pure maths since 1900?' to being put on the spot by a TV/Radio presenter asking you to multiply 67×83 and what do you say to the potential conversation stopper 'What do you do?' at a party.

The most entertaining answer of the evening was the reply to 'A radio show presenter asks – I have never used Algebra, why did I have to learn it at school?'



Algebra Made the Radio Star

Answer: *Algebra Made the Radio Star*, aka *Ignorance Killed the Radio Star* sung to *Video Killed the Radio Star* and accompanied by guitar.

The second day was far more active than the first and began with *Speed Dating*. We each spoke to briefly to about eight people. It was quite difficult to shout above the noise, but it enabled the delegates to talk to people they might not have met otherwise.

Most of the second day was given to e^x factor activities. Delegates were put into small groups with a mentor and asked to produce a piece of maths communication for radio, TV, public lecture or written publication. My group wrote a short article for *Plus* magazine, entitled *Is the Magic Over?* which recognises the



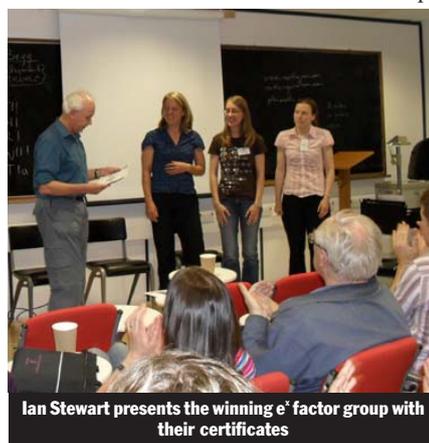
Speed Dating

gap Martin Gardner's passing has left in the world of Recreational Mathematics. On the advice of our mentors we took the opportunity to interview some prominent mathematicians about how Martin Gardner influenced them. The article is available via <http://plus.maths.org/>

The groups then presented their outputs, which included energetic talks for children, maths busking, short radio and TV items and outlines of articles and press releases.

These presentations were excellent practice in front of a sympathetic audience. As Colin Wright put it when I interviewed him, *there's nothing like that bowel-loosening moment when you stand up in front of an audience thinking I've got to do this now for real in front of people.*

I would like to thank everyone who let me interview them. Some of the interview comments are in boxes in this special issue.



Ian Stewart presents the winning e^x factor group with their certificates

The e^x factor activities were assessed by four judges who presented 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes – with the winners each receiving a bottle of wine! The winning group were a panel of three mathematicians being interviewed by their mentor who posed some very tough (and repetitive questions) asking them in various ways to justify the existence of mathematics and mathematicians! They won first prize because in a very short film they managed to get over the message that mathematics is beautiful, enjoyable and useful, and communicating that to the public is why we were all there. □

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