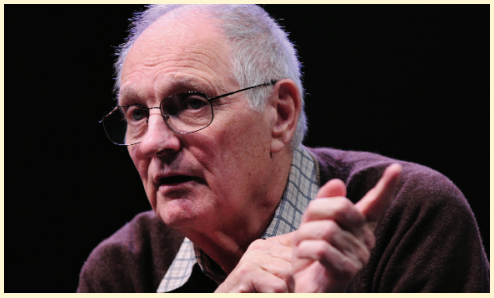
By Robert F. Keeler

Communicating Science

A New Center at Stony Brook Explores Innovative Ways to Bring Science and the Humanities Together


Alan Alda puts Stony Brook University graduate students, joined by Theater Department faculty Deborah Mayo and Steve Marsh, through some improvisation exercises.

In a now famous 1959 lecture at Cambridge, British scientist-novelist C.P. Snow spoke of the loss of communication between "the two cultures" of science and the humanities. Alan Alda, then 13, didn't learn of the lecture until years later, but he soon began acting it out in his life.

"In high school I started to believe that if you loved art, you couldn't love science," he wrote in *Things I Overheard While Talking to Myself*. Like Snow, he saw science and the humanities as continents that had drifted apart. "Whenever I was asked to talk before a group of scientists, I would ask them to find ways to drag those continents back together somehow."

At a Staller Center dinner involving the Stony Brook Film Festival and the creative writing program at Stony Brook Southampton, where Alda is on the faculty, Alda and then President Shirley Strum Kenny discussed it.

"I had been interested in this for a very long time," Kenny recalled. "That seemed to me enormously important in a lot of ways—one of which, of course, is to get the kind of continuing funding for science projects, for pure research that doesn't immediately have a product that sells to billions of people."

So Kenny asked a small group to meet with Alda. "He was passionate, engaging," said Howard Schneider, dean of the School of Journalism. "We brainstormed what we could do, tried to probe a little bit more what he was thinking. And we thought about everything from a C-SPAN for science to special courses."

Teaching scientists to make their research interesting and engaging will help Stony Brook maintain its competitive edge.

Then an ad hoc Stony Brook group explored the ideas, starting with a look at what others were doing. "And we could find nowhere in the country a university that had established a systematic program…to train all future scientists in how to communicate more effectively to the public, the press, and public officials," Schneider recalled.

The result was a decision to start a center that would help scientists embrace their responsibility as public citizens to "communicate what they do and what it means," Schneider said. Months later, Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) secured $214,000 in start-up funds for the center. And the University set up a steering committee, led by Schneider and David Conover, dean of the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, who also has a burning interest in communicating science effectively.

The first fruit of this collaboration was workshops for young scientists—two at Stony Brook Southampton and one at Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL). Each visiting scientist spoke. Then Alda showed them an improv method called theater games—"It's a little complex, and it's a little mysterious"—that he learned four decades ago. Each got up again, using the techniques he had taught them. All three of the workshops were recorded.

"When you see the before and after, it's surprising how much more communicative they are," Alda said. "There's something there, I think, and the more we'll do it, the more we'll find out what the most effective elements of it are."

The full range of the Center's programs will begin to unfold in the months ahead at Stony Brook, BNL, and Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. Meanwhile, Alda is editing the workshop tapes for future use. The workshops have already made a strong impression.

After Alda's instruction, the scientists spoke in a "much more audience-focused" way, said BNL's manager of community relations, Jeanne D'Ascoli, who chose the participants. "You really felt after these exercises like they were talking to you, and it made a huge difference."

"I hear the most extraordinary reviews of the impact on the scientists who participated," said Lawrence Martin, dean of the Graduate School. "We need to make science interesting and engaging if we're going to maintain our competitive edge in the world, and the way you do that is by communicating science effectively. So I think it's a hugely important program." ■

PHOTOS: SAM LEVITAN