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[Communicating Science With Help From Hawkeye](#)



Posted by



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The Council of Graduate Schools recently held their annual meeting in Washington, DC and one of the many guest speakers was actor [Alan Alda](#). So why exactly was the guy that played Hawkeye on the sitcom *M*A*S*H* at a conference for graduate school deans? Good question -- but the answer is even better. Alan Alda, who has appeared in numerous television shows and movies in addition to being the host of PBS' *Scientific American Frontiers*, is dedicated to improving communication in the world of science. In fact, he's so dedicated that he helped develop [The Center for Communicating Science](#) at Stony Brook University in Long Island, NY.

Alan shared some of his personal experiences interviewing scientists for his PBS series, and he explained how the show runs smoother when a genuine dialogue is taking place rather than just a stiff scientist lecturing to the camera. Personable and engaging experts make the subject matter more interesting to the audience; they can relate to the speaker and better understand the practicality of science that can often be complex. Scientists need to develop skills, Alan explained, to effectively communicate with the public, with policy makers, and with other scientists. He is so passionate about this cause that he hopes one day writing and communication classes will be a core part of the science curriculum at universities nationwide.

Everything that Alan spoke about made perfect sense, but one important question remained -- *how* do you teach communication skills to students of the sciences? Currently, Alan is a visiting professor at Stony Brook, teaching in [The Center for Communicating Science](#) that he helped establish with the cooperation of the School of Journalism and funding from the US Department of Education. In front of hundreds of graduate school deans Alan and theater director Steve Marsh were joined by five graduate students of the sciences, and they demonstrated the unconventional methods they use to improve their abilities to communicate science. Well, the exercises weren't unconventional if you were a theater major, but passing around an imaginary object that changes shapes, partaking in role playing guessing games, and pretending to pick up quirky hitchhikers on an imaginary road trip aren't exactly the types of things that a typical biology student does in the lab. These improvisational exercises are intended to relax the students and allow them to communicate more freely. Perhaps the strongest evidence that these exercises are beneficial to building communication skills was a video from the workshop at Stony Brook.

The audience laughed as the students engaged in improvisational exercises that teetered between incredibly silly and surprisingly creative, and Alan chimed in with some insight and more than a few hilarious one liners along the way. But it came time to close the deal. Time to prove to a room of graduate school deans that this new school of thought about communicating science wasn't a hokey experiment, but a truly valuable tool that could benefit generations of scientists to come. Alan shared a "before and after" video of graduate students that had participated in the improvisational theater classes at [The Center for Communicating Science](#). Students in the "before" video stood anxiously on stage in front of their classmates, reciting half memorized phrases from textbooks as their voices quivered; overly technical as they stumbled through complicated jargon and polysyllable terms in an effort to explain their focus in a particular field of science. It was painful to watch. Next came clips of the very same graduate students after only a few of the improvisational theater classes. Confidently commanding the stage, the students clearly explained their area of study in a relaxed manner, using metaphors and real-life examples to relate ideas to an audience generally unfamiliar with that field of science. They went from stiff scientists lecturing into the camera to intriguing experts worthy of an Alan Alda interview on *Scientific American Frontiers*.

A chemistry professor in front of a lecture hall full of students, a Ph.D on Capitol Hill lobbying for an environmental cause, a biology graduate student searching for someone to fund a project -- Alan Alda and [The Center for Communicating Science](#) at Stony Brook University are helping scientists like these become better communicators. Next time you can clearly understand a physicist explaining the intricacies of their dissertation, you might want to consider that Hawkeye from *M*A*S*H* may have been partly responsible for that scientist's effective communication skills.