Making Our Science Interesting and Fun

As I write this, we’ve just tipped over into the second half of 2017 (where did the first half go?), and naturally, I’m starting to think about the Annual Meeting this fall in Tampa, FL. I look forward to the meeting as a time to reconnect with friends and colleagues from around the country and world and as an opportunity to hear and see new research, including from outside my primary discipline of plant breeding.

As useful as the routine presentation of research is, the formula can get a bit stale, not only in oral presentations and posters, but also in scientific papers. I think we can make our science more interesting, expand the impact of our specific research, and make the connection to the public easier if we did a better job with our presentations, posters, or papers. Here are some possibilities.

Providing Context

Something I always hope to see in presentations, whether at national/international meetings, at seminars, or in job interviews, is a sense of the context in which someone is doing their research. Why are you doing this? What is the greater scientific, and perhaps even societal, context? What is the rationale for doing your work, besides as a step toward an M.S. degree or tenure? Providing context helps those outside your specific research area get a sense of how your work fits into the big picture, and how they might connect with you.

Engaging the Audience

Presentations at the Annual Meeting are the perfect place to be challenging—maybe you don’t have all the data to suggest a way forward, but you can certainly suggest alternatives. You can explain why your approach is better than another or pose larger questions about research direction in your research area. Explicitly posing questions for the audience is a great way to stimulate thinking, which could possibly lead to a collaboration. Of course, not every research project lends itself to an audience challenge, but with a little creativity, maybe yours can as well. I don’t mean here to be argumentative, but rather, to pose your research in a way that engages the audience and makes them think.

I don’t know if any data back this up, but I have a feeling that we had much more discussion after research talks in the past than we do now. I can remember in my early member days being in sessions where the elder statesmen of a discipline would argue with one another about this or that point and present alternative views. I don’t see that nearly as much these days; maybe we aren’t as engaged as our predecessors? Maybe we need more challenging presentations?

Making Your Science Fun!

What?! At the CSSA Annual Meeting? Yes, it’s possible. We don’t have to be fuddy-duddies. We are doing cool stuff—tell your colleagues about it. Add humor to your presentation—it’s OK to joke around…within limits; we are agronomists after all. Way back in high school, I was in a bunch of plays. Talking with some friends the other day it occurred to me that though I never pursued theater afterward, getting up on stage (or in front of a class) and giving a talk really is a one-person show. And since you hold the stage, you can have fun with it!

My comments here don’t only apply to the Annual Meeting though I would love to see more engaging talks and posters and more fun in Tampa. These thoughts can also extend to our journals. Beyond regular research papers—where challenging ideas and speculation on future directions can be included—we can also publish perspectives, opinions, and review and interpretation papers. These can be excellent vehicles to extend our ordinary research reports, be creative, and stimulate others to be creative as well. And while we’re at it, we can write in the first person and use active voice. We did this research…it’s OK to say it.

Let’s continue to advance our science, but let’s have fun doing it! I look forward to seeing you all in Florida this fall, ready to engage and be challenged and stimulated.