

HOW TO... COLLABORATE

Stem cell scientist **Loriana Vitillo** explains the collaborative *Dish Life* project that was presented at the launch of the Pint of Science festival, which is taking place in May.

1 Can you explain the *Dish Life* project?

Technically, *Dish Life* is a film about the relationship of the scientists with their stem cells. In reality, it is a collaboration that has a life of its own between myself, a stem cell scientist, sociologist Dr Karen Jent and the TV director Chloe Thomas. *Dish Life* is one of four films made for the 2016 Cambridge Shorts series, an initiative of Cambridge University, funded by the Wellcome Trust.

2 Why did you decide to take part?

In my work, I was spending hours caring for stem cells, dealing with their daily crises and I thought a lot about how interesting “the process” is. I found it striking that all anyone ever talked about was the results. Every day, as I was training junior scientists on the art and craft of stem cell culture, it was the human factor, the emotional component, such as the resilience to failure, hope, caring, nurture and yes, passion, required to sustain that type of work, that was in my head. I felt there was a need to communicate this. So when an opportunity to produce a professional film in collaboration with a humanities researcher came along, I jumped at it.

3 How did the collaborative process work?

I was lucky to find the Reproductive Sociology Research Group (ReproSoc) of Professor Sarah Franklin, with whom Karen works, and I was extremely surprised at just how aligned our ideas were on the sociological side of science. Karen studies the societal implications of scientific practice. I discovered the emotional components of my work were actually very interesting to her and were the subject of their academic study. It was kind of a natural match. The basic idea of the film was generated in less than two hours over a coffee, because we had already been thinking about these issues for years in our own ways and in our own academic bubbles.

Of course, talking about how research is done and how researchers feel about the work is unusual. This is where our collaboration took a very bold and risky turn. Not only had we never worked together and came from completely different disciplines, but we were producing our first science film. In addition, we didn’t want to make a “science” film, but something different – it needed to be entertaining.

Although we had the opportunity to pitch the idea to many filmmakers,

choosing the right person was a challenge. It could have gone in any direction; it was such a critical step. Someone that truly understood our idea and was interested in the emotional story we wanted to tell was more important than someone who had made many scientific documentaries. We needed to have a feeling of trust to go through this creative process together.

Thankfully, we found Chloe, and I think it worked because she was not from a scientific film background, but comedy and drama. She is a storyteller. It was what we needed to make our idea a reality. She came to the lab to learn about what we do, see the process and sit with us to get to the bottom of our core

message for the film. Then we gave her the space and time to develop her own creative idea. She did, and we then worked closely to refine it until we all felt it was true to our core idea, as well as her own creative process.

4 What has been achieved through the collaboration?

The film had an impact that exceeded our expectation, due to its accessibility and relevance to various audiences. *Dish Life* has travelled the world, from Melbourne to Moscow at film festivals, and has also featured in *The New York Times* and science outreach websites. Moreover, this collaboration had

many benefits for us. We are more confident in embarking on uncharted territory and applying for grants for our ideas. We all have a larger network of academics and creative professionals. We have learned (and continue to learn) from each other. We are a team and are working on other projects that build on this experience.

5 Top tips for others on how to collaborate and work with people from different disciplines.

Working with people from other disciplines and professions is definitely easier than you would imagine, and more rewarding than you’d think.



IMAGES: ISTOCK/CLIPS TAKEN FROM 'DISH LIFE: A CAMBRIDGE SHORTS FILM'

PINT OF SCIENCE

Pint of Science is a non-profit organisation that brings some of the most brilliant scientists to local pubs to discuss their latest research and findings with the public. Attendees don’t need any prior knowledge of the subject, and the sessions represent a chance to meet the people responsible for the future of science (and have a pint with them). The Pint of Science festival runs in May every year, and there are Pint of Science events held in other months. This year’s festival is held on 14-16 May. For more information, visit pintofscience.co.uk

Fig. 1. A series of stills taken from the film *Dish Life*.




But you have to be bold enough to start that conversation with people outside your circles, send that email to a possible collaborator, even if there has never been contact before, as was the case for us. There are an incredible amount of interesting ideas that arise at the crossover of disciplines, but you need to start somewhere. Another tip is to respect each member of the team in his or her own area of competence. There is no point trying to have overall control of everything – it stalls creativity. Instead, develop trust and distribute tasks so that everyone is adding value. Finally, at some point, you might feel like you are lost. This is a good sign – you all have to get lost before you find the right path for a project.

6 Does collaboration help you reach a wider audience and why?

We presented it to kids and teenagers, to anthropologists, scientists and the general public, both at film and science festivals. Each responded in a different and interesting way. I believe this shows how such multidisciplinary projects can go the extra mile in terms of communication.

7 Why is it important to reach a wider audience and promote science?

The biomedical field is getting more fascinating, but also more complex by the day. But many

people don't have the tools to catch up with findings, or truly understand the science. Wouldn't it be much better to try and find ways for people to understand more about our methods and work, so that they can appreciate findings that will directly relate to their health? Scientists themselves are in the best position to change this by partnering with people outside their area of expertise to create new content for the public. Explore new media, play with them and aim to reach those who would not generally be interested in your science. It will be a challenge, but it will be rewarding for the benefit of all to give it a try. 

Dr Loriana Vitillo is a stem cell scientist at University College London.

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DISH LIFE

Dish Life is one of four films made by Cambridge researchers for the 2016 Cambridge Shorts series, funded by Wellcome Trust ISSF.

The scheme supports early career researchers to make professional quality short films with local artists and filmmakers.

The film compares the task of raising stem cells in the lab to the challenge of looking after a gang of unruly kids. It features conversations with children and scientists and shows how tricky it is to work with these “super cells”.

Dish Life aims to illustrate the high level of commitment required to work successfully with living cells in research that contributes to the development of new treatments for degenerative diseases.

The film won third place in the Raw Science Festival in Los Angeles.

Chloe Thomas is a BAFTA-nominated director.

Dr Karen Jent is a sociologist at Cambridge University, working with the Reproductive Sociology Research Group. Dr Loriana Vitillo is a stem cell scientist at University College London, working on the London Project to Cure Blindness. Loriana has a PhD from the University of Manchester and post-doctoral experience at the Cambridge Stem Cell Institute, University of Cambridge.

The film *Dish Life* can be viewed at bit.ly/BS_DishLife