

Public Engagement for Responsible Innovation

Larry Bell

Studies in the US and the UK have found that most scientists blame public ignorance of science for flawed policy preferences and political choices. They view public engagement primarily as one-way dissemination of scientific information, not two-way dialogue and public participation in decisions. But research on climate change, evolution, embryonic stem cell research, and other polarized topics indicates that what ordinary members of the public believe does not reflect what they know, it expresses who they are. More knowledge is not enough. Scientists need to establish communication channels with publics that engender trust. Competence is necessary but not sufficient to win the trust of a wide variety of publics. To build trust, scientists must listen as well as talk. They need to engage the public in a more open and honest bidirectional dialogue about science and technology and hear about their concerns, priorities, and questions. Inclusion of public perspectives is a key component of responsible governance. Public engagement with science is developing in informal educational organizations, advanced by collaborations between the Nanoscale Informal Science Education Network and the Center for Nanotechnology in Society. It is characterized by topic and ways that publics and science experts are involved.

Larry Bell is Senior Vice President for Strategic Initiatives at the Museum of Science in Boston and the Director of the Nanoscale Informal Science Education Network. He has worked at the Museum in various educational and administrative roles since 1971, where he led the Museum in implementing a long-range plan for science center exhibits employing constructivist learning experiences to provide visitors with practice in scientific thinking skills. Currently he is especially interested in public engagement with societal implications of science and technology and activities that engage the public in dialogue and deliberation around socio-scientific issues, and in how research in the science of science communication can inform informal science education practices. He currently is leading the launch of a multi-site public engagement with science project focusing on synthetic biology. He received a B.S. in Physics and an M.S. in Earth and Planetary Science from M.I.T. in 1971.