

David Sittenfeld, Museum of Science, Boston

“Engaging scientists and publics in dialogue about the societal issues of nanotechnology and synthetic biology”

The NISE Net Forums Team adapted techniques from Danish Citizen Consensus Conferences and a variety of other vehicles for stimulating respectful and productive dialogue about societal and ethical implications of nanotechnology. “Societal and ethical implications” was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable topic for most NISE Net partners until the NISE Net with partners from the Center for Nanotechnology in Society rebranded “SEI” as “nano and society” and developed hands-on activities that could engage visitors in discussions about the societal dimensions of specific nanotechnology applications. The *Multi-Site Public Engagement with Science – Synthetic Biology* project (1421179) has combined the Museum of Science’s decade of work with dialogue programs and NISE Net’s hands-on science and society approach over the past three years and just received a supplement to develop a dialogue program about the issue of human genome editing. The project’s two formats, (1) one-on-one conversations between visitors browsing in small groups and an activity facilitator and (2) round-table discussions in a two-hour dialogue program, were each designed to stimulate conversations between public audiences and scientists and students working and studying in the field of synthetic biology or a related field. The goal was mutual learning by both public and scientist participants. Scientist participants reported learning how to discuss their research with public audiences. 83% of those who came to events to facilitate the learning of the public said that they learned from the public in the dialogue programs, and 88% said that the experience increased their interest in doing public outreach in the future. In these times when dialogue between scientists and various publics seems more important than ever, we are interested in other topics and questions scientists would like to discuss with public audiences in settings where mutual learning can take place.