

The COPUS Clarion

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The Coalition on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS) is a grassroots effort linking universities, scientific societies, science centers and museums, advocacy groups, media, educators, government agencies, businesses, and industry in a peer network having as its goal a greater public understanding of the nature of science and its value to society.

WHY IS SCIENCE IMPORTANT?

<http://whyscience.co.uk/about/>

-- Alom Shaha, *physics teacher, television producer, science writer, and science communication consultant, United Kingdom.*

Shaha sets out to uncover a genuinely satisfying answer to his students' most common question: why is science important?

The seeds of my “why is science important?” project were planted in January 2008, when I returned to teaching after working in television for seven years. Upon returning to the classroom, it struck me that we were not doing much to teach the most important thing of all: that science is important.



<http://vimeo.com/user1353157/videos/sort:date>

Anyone who knows me will confirm that I wear my passion for science on my sleeve, but I do not think that is enough. It is also not enough to assume that the importance of science is somehow implicit in the courses I teach and that it will somehow seep into my students' consciousness through the sheer number of hours they spend doing so-called “science at school”. I started to think that a film might be a useful way of addressing why science is important.

So, in October 2008, after months spent securing funding, I started work on a film in which I planned to interview high-profile scientists, writers, and teachers about why they felt science was important. I also started up a blog, which I planned to use for research and as a record of my journey making the film. However, the blog very quickly took on a life of its own—people from all over the world were coming forward to contribute with their answers to the question “why is science important?” It quickly became clear that the film should really be based on the blog, and not the other way around.

*“Happy is he who gets to know the reasons for things.
I wish this 2,000 year-old statement from Virgil was
enough to deal with the question that must plague teachers
all over the world — ‘what’s the point of this?’”*

- Alom Shaha, <http://whyscience.co.uk/about/>

I completed the film in mid-March and so far the response has been positive, particularly from teachers in the U.S. However, the project still needs the support of people around the world if we are to share the message that science is important. It is an ambitious idea—to try to get people to commit to watching a half-hour film on the Internet. After all, it is not just a funny clip of a cat falling into a puddle or some other

meaningless “viral” that can amuse people for 30 seconds. I have concerns that the project may simply be “preaching to the choir” and only reaching those people who already appreciate and understand the importance of science. Those concerns will only go away once the viewing figures for the film are much higher.

When I started this project, my goal was to make it easier for any science teacher to answer that inevitable question, “What’s the point of all this?” and I hope I have done that. The results have surpassed my best expectations – I have received nearly 100 responses to my question, from high-profile scientists and writers, as well as from fellow science teachers.

The past six months have been exhausting. I would not recommend to anyone trying to produce and direct a film while teaching in a high school. But the end result is worth the exhaustion. The project has become a kind of joint love letter to science and I hope that you will help me in sharing it with the world.

As part of the project, I collected essays, video clips, and a couple of comic strips. The most bizarre answer had to be from Mark Miodownik, who argued that “science is your mum.” (Miodownik makes sense once you hear his explanation.) I really loved the response from Maya Hawes, a 12 year-old student of mine, who eloquently explains why science is not “only about blowing up things and making potions”. Here are a few more quotes from some of my favorite contributions (all of which can be found in full at www.whyscience.co.uk).

- ✧ Dr. Susan Blackmore, psychologist:
“Truth is better than illusion... other claims...prevent people from using their natural curiosity to find out how things really are.”
- ✧ Dr. Elaine Greaney, rocket scientist:
“It allows us to do things that previously we wouldn’t have dreamed of.”
- ✧ Simon Singh, science writer:
“Being curious and addressing scientific questions is what makes us human.”
- ✧ Adrian Gaylard, science blogger:
“One of the most beautiful things about science is that it equips you to think for yourself.”
- ✧ Lee Turnpenny, developmental biologist:
“Science, like art, surprises, delights and moves us.”
- ✧ Martin Robbins, blogger:
“An understanding of science is vital to an understanding of politics.”
- ✧ Kat Arney, science Information officer at Cancer Research UK:
“Science tells us whether a treatment actually works or not.”
- ✧ Finally, a favorite statement from a former teacher of mine, Dr. Michael de Podesta,
“Science is humanity’s greatest achievement.”



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Learn more at <http://www.yearofscience2009.org/about/zine-contest.html>.

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