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The Craft & Graft exhibition at the Francis Crick Institute in London, curated by Emily Scott-Dearing, showcases the work of the Crick's staff.

COLUMN

Academia to freelance curator

A chance event brought **Emily Scott-Dearing** into science communication.

I had a wonderful start in academia. In 1999, after finishing my PhD at the University of Cambridge, UK (where I researched gene therapy), I joined Peter O'Hare's laboratory at the Marie Curie Research Institute in Oxted, UK. There, I looked at the herpes virus and how it was able to get in and out of cells.

Peter was very driven and would stay late in the lab, chatting about our work. By the time we got in the next morning, he would have read multiple papers and formulated a new

theory to test. He was constantly posing new questions.

I was doing well, getting publications and presenting at conferences, but I realized that I didn't feel as passionate about the day-to-day work as Peter and other successful senior scientists did. And that bothered me. I wanted to do something I was both really good at and really excited about.

As I reflected on my appetite for change, I realized I enjoyed stepping back from the

detail of my research and explaining the bigger picture to people, putting it in a broader context. That's where my shift from doing science to doing science communication began.

There was a seminal moment, a couple of years into my postdoctoral post, when I attended a conference in London on alternative careers for scientists. I skived off at one point and went to the Science Museum, which had just opened its Wellcome Wing focusing on contemporary science. I was fascinated ▶

► to see the science I'd just been reading about in the big journals already covered in the displays. I asked, 'Who writes this stuff?' And as luck would have it, Heather Mayfield, who was head of content at the time and later to become deputy director, was seeking scientists to join her team.

I took quite a pay cut in 2001 when I left the lab and started as an exhibition developer, a member of the Science Museum team that quickly turns around displays on the latest ideas and innovations. We created a new display every week. It was a brilliant training ground.

Every Monday morning, we pitched ideas based on research papers that were about to be published. If your pitch won, you had seven working days to research and write it up, find items to put on show, commission the design of the display and manage its installation, so it was ready for the public on the day the paper came out. It was like being in a news team. I had to learn fast and work hard, but I loved it.

CONTROVERSIAL START

My first big exhibition was about the controversy over the vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR). It was all over the newspapers at the time, and was causing concern. We interviewed a range of scientists, clinicians and public-health professionals, including Andrew Wakefield, whose now-disproven research in *The Lancet* had fuelled the anti-vaccine movement. Bringing a cool scientific lens to an important topic and providing neutral, carefully researched information for our audiences felt like a huge responsibility, but also a great opportunity.

I led major redevelopments of two of the museum's most popular galleries: Who Am I?, about the latest genetics and neuroscience; and Launchpad, the main interactive gallery. In 2012, I became head of exhibitions and programmes, responsible for activities as diverse as an exhibition about cosmonauts, a scientist-in-residence programme and a festival about consciousness called ZombieLab.

When I left in 2017, I was lead curator for a suite of new medicine galleries, which are due to open later this year. I now freelance, with clients including the Wellcome Collection, the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Natural History Museum, all in London; and the University of Oxford, UK.

The route I took into science communication is increasingly unusual. At the Science Museum, I was surrounded by colleagues who had come through the internationally renowned master's programme in science communication at Imperial College London next door. Many of them did summer placements with us while on the course.

I'm often cautious about giving advice on routes into roles like mine, because the museum world is a very particular one. Although it isn't the obvious place to practise science communication, it is a wonderfully creative world. The benefit of a



Freelance museum curator Emily Scott-Dearing.

science-communication master's is that it lets you try a range of things — from print journalism to television production — and build up contacts. But undertaking a full-time course is a big investment.

There are ways to keep working while testing the water. In your spare time, you could volunteer, write for student papers or start blogging, or you could try your hand at stand-up comedy (Science Showoff events in the United Kingdom seek performers who can blend comedy with science, for example). These and other public-engagement activities are high on the agenda of many universities and research funders, with scientists expected to explain to a wider audience why their work is important. Look out for opportunities to give it a go and take advantage of any expertise and training on offer.

My leap into freelance life came at a point in my career when I felt established, but it still felt scary. For six years I commuted to London, more than 80 kilometres away from Oxford, where I am based. It took its toll on me and my young family. My two children are now 13 and 9, and one of my criteria for taking on new projects is that the work should not eat into our family time. I'm lucky to be wonderfully busy and able to do much of this work from home. That comes from having deep networks, and

having worked in a major national institution such as the Science Museum.

My current exhibition, *Craft & Graft*, is at the Francis Crick Institute in London until 8 February 2020. It showcases the work of the technicians, engineers and specialists who make the life-changing science at the Crick possible — from fly-breeders to glass-washers and microscopists.

It was a fascinating exhibition to research, and being invited to meet the wonderful teams and see the facilities at the Crick felt a little like I'd come full circle, almost two decades after leaving the lab behind. I saw a possible version of my original career in some of the specialists I was interviewing.

When I left research, I don't think I had really looked ahead to the challenges of an academic career, going from grant to grant while juggling family life. I was simply drawn to a new world that would be a better fit for me. In a way it was a gamble, but I haven't regretted it for a moment.

As a curator, I do look at museums differently now. That happened the day I walked into the Science Museum as a member of staff; you can't ever be an ordinary visitor again. But I still love taking my family to exhibitions and visiting museum collections. It's a busman's holiday for me, and also a secret research trip. I'm watching my children like a hawk, seeing what engages them and grilling them about it afterwards. ■

Emily Scott-Dearing is a freelance curator and public-engagement consultant.