Fantastic worlds and where to find them: astrobiology outreach for KS2 and KS3

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Introduction
The University of Hertfordshire runs an extensive Physics & Astronomy outreach scheme in collaboration with The Ogden Trust to provide opportunities for schools to promote STEM subjects. Recently this outreach programme has incorporated astrobiology activities and we are developing an astrobiology workshop.

The Kings College London ASPIRES Report (2013) introduced the concept of ‘Science Capital’ and the importance of early years outreach in addressing aspirations towards STEM careers. Additionally, in recent years science educators have become aware of the existence of Sojourner Stage Three (KS3) Hump, the drop off in science engagement by pupils aged 11 to 13, where children become discouraged in choosing science as a career.

To encourage more children into STEM subjects, capturing their imaginations and interests prior to or in early KS3 may be able to counteract the KS3 Hump.

Figure 1: The large, inflatable mobile dome that can seat up to 100 people provides an immersive astronomical experience (left). Example of the 360° view provided in the domes, inside the fixed dome (right).

Resources and results
The University of Hertfordshire has a long history of presenting astronomy-centric planetarium shows and owns three planetaria (one fixed, two mobile and flexible HD projection systems. During the 2016/17 outreach season, the Outreach Team delivered workshops and activities to over 15,000 children, of which 10,000 were KS2.

Our new astrobiology programme will include astrobiology and exoplanet workshops and will use this equipment to present shows discussing exoplanets, including the discovery of an exoplanet around the nearest star to Earth, Proxima Centauri; extremophiles and the conditions they live in on Earth, and the similar conditions that exist in our Solar System and potentially on known exoplanets.

We are currently developing an astrobiology workshop, aimed at KS2 and KS3, to be incorporated into the overall outreach programme. This includes a hands-on microscope experience where pupils can observe tardigrades and learn how they are important to astrobiology, and fill in/take home custom-made worksheets on how to find their own to examine.

Feedback from initial trials suggested that several pupils requested microscopes for presents since attending the outreach event.

Figure 2: Worksheet on tardigrade survival conditions verses environmental conditions on planetary bodies.

Do you do KS2 or KS3 outreach?
This presentation aims to promote discussion around astrobiology outreach for pupils aged 7 to 13.

Can we share or pool resources to be further exploited to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive experience for pupils of all abilities?

Have you run outreach exclusively targeted at KS2 to KS3?

Our astrobiology workshop
The astrobiology workshop will have the following activities:
1: What is life? How do we recognise it? Can we really recognise it?
Addresses the curriculum requirement ‘living things and their habitats’.
3: Tardigrades. Hands-on experience of using a microscope to view an extremophile that lives locally.
4: Viking lander soil experiment. Using our three samples of ‘martian soil’.
5: Group discussion. Focus on where we might find life in the Solar System and what does that mean for the ‘Goldilocks Zone’.

Figure 3: A tardigrade (local to Bayfordbury Observatory) as viewed through a ×60 microscope lens. The view pupils had during outreach events.

Acknowledgements

Further information
Please email to continue our discussion and/or for further information. You can find a copy of this poster at http://star.herts.ac.uk/~srolfe

Literature cited


1 Bayfordbury Observatory, Physics, Astronomy and Mathematics, University of Hertfordshire, Bayfordbury, Hertfordshire, SG13 8LD, UK (srolfe2@herts.ac.uk)
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