



8 | Departmental Spotlight: The Discovery Zone at Leeds – an explosion of science

Picture a sports hall filled with 24 science stations, manned by over 70 research staff (PhD students right up to Professors) from the University of Leeds; a sea of colour and unusual objects, awash with enthusiastic chatter and anticipation. Crayfish in tanks are limbering up for races. Academics are pumping up airbeds to balance children on. Twelve foot models of neurones, made from ropes, balls and funnels are being tested. Plants are everywhere, forming small jungle areas interspersed with bats, insects and..... spectrophotometers! The doors open and 120 school children arrive, looking around in eager expectation at all the impending activities. The children are efficiently assigned to their stations, the staff await the onslaught, the noise levels increase and the fun begins! This is the Discovery Zone at the University of Leeds!



This two day event, kindly sponsored by a BBSRC Public Engagement Award and by a grant from The Physiological Society, enabled nearly 500 school children aged 8-14 to experience science phenomena first hand. Using models, live animals, machines, fact sheets and brain power, the pupils encountered the evolution of ant colonies, LEGO proteins, the wonders of saliva, real brains, skeletons, maths problems, insect defence systems and the importance of a healthy heart. They extracted DNA from fruit and thought about its role in humans, then made DNA bracelets. They experienced different kinds of energy and its uses. Each station provided some simple take-home messages, learnt through hands-on experiences. It is amazing how staff members managed to make intra- and intermolecular bonding relevant and understandable by making goo – the message being re-enforced beautifully by practical fun. There is nothing like the opportunity to blow things up to interest children whilst others really enjoyed learning about the exquisite sensitivity of the tips of our fingers, enabling us to read Braille and identify objects, just based on touch. In the year of a celebration of evolution, pupils learnt about adaptations of plants to enable survival by changing ways of seed dispersion.



The extremely positive feedback from University staff, accompanying teachers and most importantly the pupils, illustrates the importance of running such events at University and the rich and varied rewards. Through funding from BBSRC and The Physiological Society, transport was provided to the event, making it accessible to all schools, regardless of socioeconomic status. Many children were therefore experiencing a university setting and staff for the first time. One child described the event as a “wonderland” whilst another school reported that pupils had gone back to school buzzing so that others who had not attended organised a delegation to the headteacher to demand to be taken!

This comment from an eminent Professor who helped to run a station summed up the feelings of all the staff when he reported “This was a really great occasion, it was gratifying how many children said they really enjoyed the experiments – isolating DNA was “cool” – and several said they wanted to be scientists when they grew up!”

Overall, a success for schools, University and most importantly, science, thanks to The BBSRC and The Physiological Society.

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