

Updates from the deep

Finding the next generation of researchers

Dr Clare Woulds inspires young scientists with tales of deep-sea exploration.

Everyone knows that fieldwork is hard work, so as I headed off to Goa in September 2008 to join the RV *Yokosuka* on an ambitious international research cruise in the Indian Ocean, I had to ask myself whether it had really been sensible to promise to email regular reports on my adventure to a secondary school in Essex. At midnight, after a long, hard day of slicing mud, was I really going to appreciate having to put pen to paper and explain what I had been up to and why?

More to the point, could I actually bring myself to talk at the video camera that the head of science had enthusiastically lent to me for recording a video diary? (Yes, but ONLY in the privacy of my own cabin!) In fact I found the correspondence nothing short of therapeutic, and my whole Researchers in Residence (RinR) placement to be enjoyable, inspiring and extremely interesting.

I first got involved with RinR during my PhD, when they facilitated a visit to the Plume School, my old secondary school. These placements bring research science into schools, raise awareness of science careers, and give pupils role models and inspiration.

It struck me as I got stuck into planning my most recent cruise that this was the perfect basis for a second RinR placement. I was heading for a tropical ocean on a foreign (Japanese) research ship, and, to top it all, I would be going to the deep-sea floor in the



deepest diving manned submersible in the world.

The first challenge, though, was getting the school visits organised. My idea was to visit the school both before and after the cruise so that the students could get a real-time sense of involvement in a research project. My contact teacher was very receptive and enthusiastic about my ideas, but it turns out that postdocs and teachers are busy people, with very different daily schedules.

Thus the weeks before each visit slipped by in a series of missed calls and brief emails, and without much of the careful preparation I had envisaged. Nevertheless, two school visits did occur. They were not exhaustively planned, but I found that an open mind, a willingness to be flexible ('yes, I'd love to talk to your year 9 class in ten minutes!'), and the ability to adapt talks on the hoof enabled me to communicate with more than 450 students.

I presented my cruise plans and photographs to whole year-group assemblies, and followed this up with slide shows in science lessons, after which students were encouraged to ask questions. I was bowled over by the students' enthusiasm, and by the thought and imagination behind their questions.

These ranged from the scientific 'What was the most interesting animal that you saw?', to the pragmatic 'What happens if you need the loo while you're in the submarine?' I got the impression that had the bell not rung they may have continued grilling me all night. For A-level students I decided to use slides created to report initial cruise findings to my research group at work, and was very impressed with their ability to follow the science and ask pertinent questions.

My RinR placement actively enhanced my Arabian Sea experience. Emailing the school from the research ship made me take a step back from what was occasionally a very stressful project, and reminded me what an unusual and lucky position I was in.

The students' enthusiasm and curiosity were inspiring, and showed that simply by telling pupils who I am and what I do, I could have a huge impact on their feelings about science. I would highly recommend a RinR placement to anyone else, and would suggest that you will benefit just as much as the school. ❖



MORE INFORMATION

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