

Case Study: Natural History Investigators



Outline

The Investigator group was formed to provide young people between the ages of 14 and 16 a chance to explore their interest in nature. Young people taking part have the freedom to devise and carry out their own project based on museum specimens, in their free time.

Background

The groups was formed to address three issues. Firstly, young people with an interest in the natural world are in the minority and there are few opportunities for this particular age group to develop this interest.

Secondly, scientific skills, such as devising experiments and working practically, are important but schools rarely have the resources to allow young people to spend time developing them.

Thirdly, the Museum has a huge potential to inspire young people but this is difficult to realise in a 'one off' visit.

Audiences

The opportunity is primarily for young people educated in the state sector. It was felt that these students were likely to be taught in large classes and have limited extra-curricular opportunities. The opportunity was advertised in the Museum, during school visits and through the Museum's teacher network. However we didn't ask teachers to nominate students. Young people were encouraged to apply independently.

Aims

We hoped that participants would meet friends with a similar interest in natural sciences and appreciate the possibilities of exploring the use of specimens in a natural history collection. It was also an opportunity to showcase the science that takes place in the Museum and for young people to meet scientists behind the wide variety of projects taking place.

Delivery

Each year, around ten projects are put together based on the collections



and expertise available. Each has to use specimens and enable students to demonstrate the skills needed for a Silver CREST award, which are devised by the British Science Association to recognise a broad range of scientific skills such as experiment design or making sense of data.



Museum of
**Natural
History**



Around 20 people are accepted each year. They choose a project and spend ten Saturday mornings working on it. Young people are supported by the project coordinator and Museum and other University scientists.

Sometimes a scientist will give a short talk; sometimes there is a group activity relating to one or all of the projects. Most of the time people work on their individual research. The project culminates in a science communication activity, such as taking part in a family science fair or working on a display case in the Museum.

Outcomes

Investigators enjoy the informal atmosphere that develops over the 10 week period. Students work on their own if they prefer or with others for part of the time. Friendship groups form and people support and entertain each other in a variety of ways.

The participants meet scientists in the Museum and are able to appreciate that science is driven by curiosity and creativity and sometimes application. Scientists meet an audience of young people contemplating a



career in science, gaining a better understanding of the engagement possible at this stage in people's lives. After 10 weeks a significant number of the group are keen to join the Museum's Youth Forum and continue their relationship with the Museum.

Reflection

It is clear that this opportunity is quite different from science at school. It might be better to spend the first session or two on a whole group activity that focuses on devising experiments that make the best use of specimens before people choose their main project idea. The Investigator group provides a great opportunity to work with young people who have an identified

interest in nature. The next step is to work with people at an earlier stage and bring this interest to the fore.

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I liked how enthusiastic everyone was. I got enough freedom to do what I wanted and came up with my own question [to study]. The whole thing was brilliant. Not only did I learn a lot, I also made some new friends.

Natural History Investigators
participant

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