CONASTA Conference 2014

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Overview of the conference & Highlights

Canasta 2014 took place at Adelaide University and my journey began with a stroll around the many educational booths and picking myself up a toy electron, proton and neutron which I thought would be great to throw around at my year 9 students! As we headed for the lecture theatre for the first guest speaker Professor Bob Hill I wasn’t sure what to expect. As the lecture began I was intrigued by the research and information presented on the evolution of Australian vegetation and how this knowledge helps us explore our current bush fire crisis and how we may be able to decrease their severity. As the lecture continued my teacher head kicked in and I began processing how I could include this new found learning into our current year 9 curriculum.

With my brain now switched on we headed to our second guest speaker Professor Lynne Cobiac from the CSIRO who brought to light the exciting new research and findings in the areas of food and how important gut health is to us and our future genetic code. The day continued with a number of smaller workshops which I choose to focus on my specific teaching areas and levels. These workshops gave practical ideas, hands on experience and useful resources. Not only this, but they also enabled professional dialogue to be made with teachers from all over the country. It is always nice to hear that teachers from other schools experience the same struggles with students that you do and to get some ideas about how they have been tackling these problems.

Day two and three took similar paths to day one where guest speakers and workshops were attended. Guest speakers included Professor Roy Tasker who pushed the idea of how we teach Chemistry to students and opened up a whole new way of allowing students to be engaged in and understand atomic theory. Professor Tanya Monro explored the importance of developing new measuring tools to allow advances in science to take place and Tara Pukala explained the research into folding diseases and how advances in science have allowed us to better understand these diseases and how we may be able to help slow or prevent these diseases in the future.

Throughout the conference there were many highlights including the above mentioned guest speakers and the delicious catering! However I believe it was the workshops where I was able to gather the most practical ideas and resources which I could take back to my colleagues and use with students.

One such workshop was labelled “Keep calm, keep curious: turning food for thought into thought for food” which was run by PICSE (The Primary Industry Centre for Science Education). During this workshop we were directed to a number of useful resources to use in the classroom and then we got to get our hands dirty and actually have a go at making flavoured food balls or worms. While participation in the practical we were able to talk with other teachers about how we could incorporate the science behind this activity into different units of work and how it may be modified to suit our school environment.
Another great workshop I attended was run by WASP (Woodside Australian Science Project) who focus on Earth Sciences. The entire workshop was spent rotation around a number of hands on activities from their list of resources for middle school students. These ACARA bases activities were able to be tested and tried by us so that we could see more readily how they could be incorporated into the classroom, explore the practicalities of them and just have some fun!

How you plan to share your experience/learning with colleagues, students, families and/or the wider education community

CONASTA 2014 not only reinvigorated my own thirst for new scientific learning but it also rekindled my enthusiasm for changing up the activities and investigations that I have been using with my students during Science lessons. As a year 9 teacher at Marymount College I work closely with a team of year 9 science teachers and it was great to be able to come back from CONASTA with a number of new resources and ideas for changing up our current curriculum.

Year 9 girls can be rather hard to motivate in the area of science so it was refreshing to be able to bring a number of new ideas and learning to the table and I look forward to testing them out to see what the students think of them. For this to occur across the school I begin by running a workshop with the year 9 science teachers during our team meeting time. I covering a number of the practicals and interactive resources I gathered from the conference and compiled a list of online resources under each of our topics for the year. I feel this was a valuable learning experience for all and we look forward to following up on how well they worked with the students in a meeting later in the year.

Not only was I able to share my experiences of CONASTA with the staff at Marymount but also the parents. As mentioned, I work in a middle school setting with year 9 students and at the end of the year they will leave us for their Senior Years of schooling. For this reason this time of the year brings a lot of questions about subject choices for next year and possible pathways for what they would like to do in the future. So when parent teacher interviews came up in week 3 of this term and the questions form parents came up about what their daughters should do in the way of science learning for the future, it was great to be able to share some of my new founded understandings of where science research is going. It was also a comfort to share with parents the importance of their daughters learning the necessary skills of science but that as far as specialisation goes they were open to flexibility. I was able to share how their daughter could be part of a team of scientists to solve new world problems and issues.

I also shared this understanding of the way scientists are working in the 21st century to solve problems with my students and gather enthusiasm from them to continue on into an area of science because of all the exciting possibilities for them. It was pleasing to then see these students enquire about further education into fields of Science at the yearly Science Expo. All year nine’s at our school attended the expo which was held at the Wayville show grounds and launched science week 2014.

Overall attending CONASTA 2014 was definitely a positive experience and worth losing three days of the school holidays for! I feel I have been able to share some of my newly found enthusiasm for new research in the world of Science and I look forward to continuing to incorporate the new exciting learning ideas into my science lessons.