

● Visitors

Although this technique has been used extensively as a social technique in the schools, it is also an invaluable learning tool for science programmes. Whatever the reason is for inviting a visitor to school, students gain far more from the session if they are actively involved in conducting it.

The range of possible visitors is almost endless: other members of staff, students with interesting hobbies, parents, medical personnel, public figures, police, trade union representatives, university and polytechnic staff, industrialists, etc. However, not all visitor sessions are successful. This is usually due to lack of preparation on behalf of the group or visitor. A visitor to a class must be sensitive to their particular difficulties and help overcome them.

Initially, the prospect of a visitor is suggested by the teacher: 'Shall we have a visitor to the group?' As the teaching programme progresses, ways in which a visitor can be usefully employed often arise naturally from the work. Stimulus for such work can be found in the student copymaster, Local noise problems – arranging a visitor (page 207).

Preparing for a visitor

- Who do we invite and for what purpose?
- Who will make the invitation? In writing or in person?
- What do we talk about?
- How can we make sure everyone says something?
- How do we prevent individuals dominating the visit?
- Can we ask personal questions?
- Where is the best place to meet?
- Do we provide refreshments? Who looks after these?
- How do we greet the visitor?
- Where will the visitor sit? Where will the class sit?
- How do we bring the session to a close?
- Who will thank the visitor?
- Who will escort the visitor back to reception?
- How do we review the visit?

There is usually a natural progression towards a series of questions that need answering, when preparing for a visitor. The lively discussion and small scale role plays that grow from this work ensure that everyone is clear about what will happen and what is to be said. Students will also feel more confident. Since it is unlikely that groups will consider all the relevant questions, especially if they are inexperienced, prompt questions should be prepared.

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Preparing for the visitor

Preparation in anticipation of a visitor attending the school is vital. The whole process must be reviewed with the students. The group may wish to discuss the scientific questions to be asked and organise who should put them to the visitor. Understanding the objectives of the visit, and the visitor's background, will enable the students to achieve maximum value from their questions. Basic issues can be covered before the visitor arrives to allow more time to discuss specialised points. Since it is unlikely that groups will consider all the relevant questions, especially if inexperienced, prompt questions should be prepared to stimulate discussing.

Preparation on the visitor's behalf is just as important. The visitor needs to know a little about the nature of the group and the work they are doing. Brief the visitor on the type of questions they can expect to meet. Preliminary questions may be a little stilted and visitors should be requested not to talk at length or fill in for small silences which crop up. This will also avoid by-passing some of the questions students have so carefully prepared.

Very important

Request that visitors be punctual to the minute, if possible. If students are waiting eagerly in anticipation of a visitor, a late arrival can kill any spontaneity in the questions to be asked (despite having rehearsed them!)

Teachers sometimes put-off their first visitor session, saying 'My group isn't ready yet.' Avoid doing this – don't delay! Experience has shown this to be a most unifying exercise, often the point at which groups 'take off'. The teacher's hardest job when a visitor arrives, is to sit back and leave it all the students. One of the most rewarding moments comes when students gather around afterwards, bursting to talk about their experience, and share a corporate sense of 'didn't we do well'. Last, don't forget the debriefing – it is essential to review the science learning that has resulted from the visit.

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The role play visitor

Role play visitors are a viable alternative to actual visitors. However, the task of preparing a visitor of this nature can be quite taxing for students. Time needs to be given to role research and preparation of the 'visitor'. The teacher can help this preparation by designing visitor role play cards which outline personal details and brief life history, etc. The research process can be done by individuals or in groups.

Once the role is researched the next step is to decide whether the class are told who the visitor is, or whether they have to identify the visitor by questioning. This technique is especially useful for studying the lives and work of deceased scientists. Indeed, it forms the basis for a fascinating look at their ideas. The method has been used very successfully to introduce advisors, advisory teachers and student teachers to groups they encounter in their profession. Naturally, practice at this method will be required.

Students are pleasantly surprised at the result they achieve from talking to visitors. Students mature in their own eyes through the willingness of a visitor to speak freely with them, and are often eager for another visit to take place. The visitor contribution to learning is considerable. Students also realise that visitors can be nervous too!