

FOCUS on....

Science behind the 'wow'

This summer has been one full of 'wow' moments for me. I have spent much of it on the Isle of Mull as I do most years. After countless visits to the island, there are still times when I see something that I haven't seen before, think about things I haven't thought about before and wondered why these might be. This year saw one of my 'bucket list' items being ticked off. On my first visit 14 years ago I went out on a boat trip to Staffa – home of the most impressive basalt columns and Fingal's Cave (a source of inspiration for some of Mendelssohn's compositions). It is also home to the puffin during the summer months and very sadly the year I went the breeding season had failed and there was not a puffin in sight. This year, inspired by my son looking at a picture of puffins in our holiday accommodation and saying '*I would like to see a puffin*', I took that boat trip again. I had my wow moment because I was able to get up close and personal with what I believe to be one of the most characterful birds that exists. Sitting a metre away from countless puffins was without doubt a wow moment.

I am sure that everyone can think of a moment when they were wowed, when something was so impactful and memorable that it will stay with them for a long, long time. I can remember science lessons in school that were 'wow' lessons. Mostly this was because there was something explosive, a 'big' reaction in chemistry, something that dared to be a little bit different. Some, however, were wows about learning: I remember looking out of the school window at trees and feeling a real sense of wow as we learned about photosynthesis in detail.



The 'hook' wows are good. They are important. They are there to engage children on a level that means they might buy into a little more science than they otherwise would. But as teachers we also need to try to create more of those learning wows: the moments when science knowledge is understood, really contextualised, made meaningful and is almost an internal wow. This issue has a number of articles written by a range of people who recognise the power of the wow but also the potential limitations. On the surface, Tom Pringle makes a living from creating wow moments, but as you dig a little deeper into his work you realise that there is far more substance to it than appears at first glance. Tom and I have spoken at considerable length about this. There are plenty of people who will come into your school and put on a science show for the children, but I hope what you will see from Tom's, and the other articles in this issue, is that there is more to be done to capitalise on wow experiences, creating hooks on which to hang science learning.

There is a danger that a science wow can be used just as a performance, more of an attention grabber than a hook: a hook implies there is something to be hung onto it. There is value to be added for learning to take place, layers of understanding to be created through engaging with something that captures the mind and stimulates thoughts. Wows are great; please use them, but with some caution. Meaningful wows are worth more than we can possibly imagine.

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