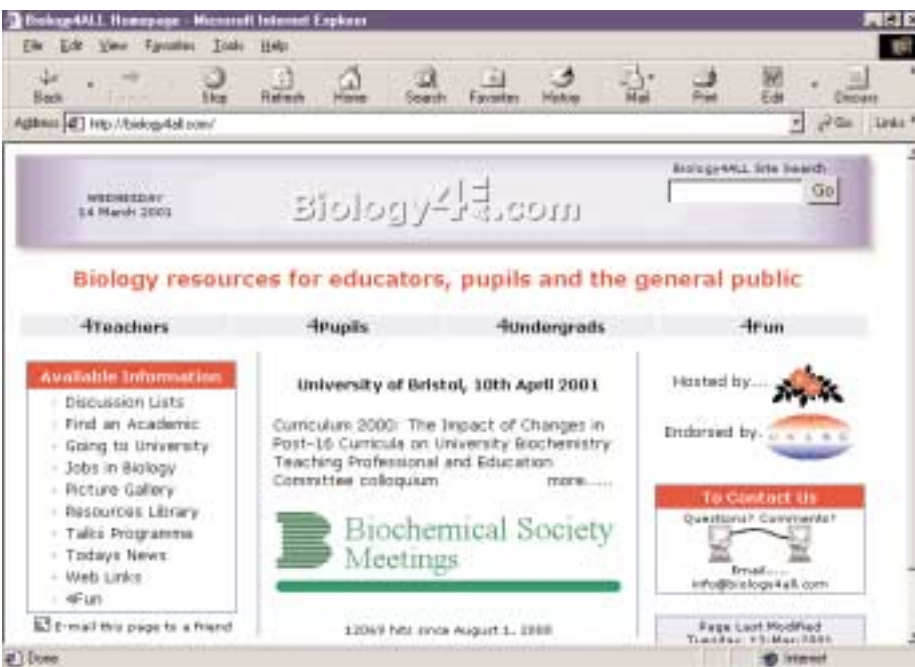


Biology4ALL.com aims to bridge the gap between universities and schools

Peter K. Robinson



Nowadays, the launch of a new website is generally little to 'write home about'. However when the University of Central Lancashire launched its Biology4ALL.com site in September 2000 this was another significant step towards bridging the gap between biology schoolteachers and the academics in universities and research establishments.

The Biology4ALL project actually began some years earlier when, in March 1998, staff at the University of Central Lancashire launched a free email discussion list (called BIOTUTOR-L) specifically for biology teachers in local schools around the Preston area. Teachers could email problems and requests to the discussion list and then either university staff or other teachers could email a response. A rather unusual feature of this list – and perhaps a key reason for its success – was that it was private, with subscription being restricted to teachers or others with a professional interest in biology. This meant that teachers could discuss real problems without fear of their pupils 'listening in'. Thus, whilst similar discussion lists, bulletin boards and chat rooms have struggled to achieve significant interest, the BIOTUTOR-L list quickly outgrew its local roots and achieved national coverage within its first six months of operation. Currently, there are about 350 schools subscribed to the service, mainly from the UK but also from Australia, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, the US, Austria, Denmark and the Philippines. Last year the Listserv in Preston distributed over 200,000 emails to members of the group. Indeed the list has proved so successful that a second list (SCITECH-L) has been set up to provide a similar service for science technicians in schools. Within eight months SCITECH-L has also

grown to have over 300 subscribers and has generated a staggering 500,000 email deliveries.

The BIOTUTOR-L discussion list thus provides an excellent forum for biology teachers to share good practice and resolve problems. It is also increasingly being used by learned societies and universities to advertise events and projects that may be of interest to schoolteachers and their pupils. As well as the SGM, the Institute of Biology, Society for Experimental Biology, the Biochemical Society, Physiological Society, Science Museum, BBSRC, BBC (Education) and Royal Society of Chemistry have all used the service over the past year.

Email discussion lists are, however, not necessarily the best way of disseminating complex information such as practical schedules – as most people who have tried to send an email attachment to multiple recipients will generally confirm! Consequently, the University of Central Lancashire developed and launched the Biology4ALL.com website (<http://www.biology4all.com>). This houses a resources library where teachers can both retrieve and deposit practical schedules, lesson notes, spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations and images. This website is now listed on all major web search engines and currently receives over 700 visitors per week (generating 3,000 page impressions per week). The resources library welcomes contributions from SGM members who have information which they feel may be useful for GCSE and post-16 teachers and (very importantly) which is free from copyright restrictions.

The website also provides information for those interested in studying biology at university and houses a links page to all 250 UK university bioscience departments (including medical, dental and veterinary schools). A jobs page also enables visitors to find employment in the field of biological sciences. The site also acts to help advertise the schools liaison events of UK universities and a list of university lecturers prepared to visit schools to give talks is expanding steadily.

The recent endorsement of Biology4ALL.com by the UK Life Sciences Committee was another pleasing step in the development of this project and should hopefully encourage wider interest in the project from the UK higher education community. Should anyone wish to subscribe to either of the two discussion lists, or if anyone feels that they have either content or expertise that could help in the development of this project, please contact me.

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