Professional Development and Cultural Exchange Opportunities

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Abstract: Would you like to travel to a foreign country or host a colleague from another country? We will discuss a successful model for this kind of professional development and cultural exchange. Winners and hosts of the “Week in Italy,” “Week in the United States,” and “Week with the GDP” contests will share their experiences.

You can get involved as a participant in one of these existing programs or you can be an innovator in your own country by initiating a similar program in your region. Come and find out how you can participate and make valuable international connections.

Paper:
This paper is designed to highlight three existing contests that are supported by the International Planetarium Society (IPS); these programs provide an opportunity for cultural and professional development exchange within the global planetarium community and are offered under the auspices of the International Relations Committee. Applications are requested from educators or astronomers who work with any of the various models of planetariums. For more information about these and other projects go to https://www.ips-planetarium.org/page/share

The three contests are:

1. A Week* in Italy for an American Planetarium Operator:
Each year, in the spring, the Serafino Zani Astronomical Observatory (Lumezzane/Brescia) hosts an American planetarium operator, whose native tongue is English, to work with high school students of English. *The expected length of stay in Italy is actually 10 days.*

2. **A Week in the United States**

Two international planetarians, from any country in the world, will be hosted for a week in the United States. The visits will be arranged to best fit the schedules of the winners and the host facilities. **Applicants must speak English.**

3. **A Week with the GDP** is offered by the Society of German-Speaking Planetariums (GDP).

A planetarium in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland will host a planetarium colleague from another country for the week, which will be arranged to best fit the schedules of the winner and the host facility.

It is hoped that these contests will serve as models for other countries to follow as they create new cultural and professional development exchange opportunities around the globe.

Rather than tell the entire story of their travels, the panel members agreed that answering some specific questions would highlight the most important aspects of these programs and inspire others to apply or establish some new initiatives in other countries.

**John Meader** A Week in Italy Winner 2004 and host for Week in the United States 2019

*John can you give us your perspective of having been both a guest and a host?*

Picture: (L to R) John and Laura Meader and Loris Ramponi, one of the Italian hosts.

My name is John Meader, I run a mobile planetarium business called Northern Stars Planetarium in central Maine, USA. In 2004 I traveled to Brescia, Italy and spent a week teaching astronomy to Italian high school students. In 2019 I hosted Ruth Grützbauch from Vienna, Austria for 10 days in Maine. Having had such a powerful experience teaching in Italy, I found the combination of teaching experience along with a cultural exchange over an extended time was most
valuable. The juxtaposition between sharing where I live and exploring Italian culture was valuable for both the students and me. I found teaching in Italy was much easier than I anticipated, the students were attentive and inquisitive, and their English skills were far better than my Italian. It was a rewarding week for me in Brescia, and I hope the students took their own rewards from our exchanges.

**Photo: Ruth Grützbauch giving a fireside astronomy chat.**

When I was given the opportunity to host a similar exchange to an overseas colleague, I jumped at the chance. I wanted to have a quality exchange in professional development ideas with Ruth when she visited, but I also wanted to give her a genuine feel for my home state of Maine. So we mixed teaching in different venues such as my portable and visiting the Emera Astronomy Center with its modern installation. We had sessions with elementary students, college students and the public. We even helped run telescopes at a star party at Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, the only dark sky sanctuary in the eastern US. Beyond the astronomy activities I wanted to offer Ruth a cultural exchange and included local activities such as canoeing, hiking, and a cookout at the lake. We visited the Common Ground Country Fair, and went to an environmental rally at a local college. I wanted a well-rounded package and I think we succeeded.

The professional development between us was through numerous long discussions, watching each other teach in the dome, and exploring our various styles, backgrounds, and even the equipment we use in our respective portables.

The ultimate value in these exchanges is to see beyond yourself and your own culture. Getting to know colleagues from other countries creates a broader world view for all involved. You will establish friendships with colleagues that will become deep, meaningful, and lasting. I would say that professionally, these two exchanges are two of the most valuable professional development exchanges in my entire 41 years in the planetarium field.

**What did I learn that was unexpected?**

When I was in Brescia we did one *Magic Walls* session where you project the stars upon the wall in a darkened room without the dome. I found it frustrating and swore I’d never do it again. That was largely due to the fact that we were given a room where we couldn’t effectively block the light from the windows, and there were posters permanently mounted on the walls that could not be taken down. So I had to work with a very small piece of blank wall with dim stars. It was not ideal. But now with Covid-19 upon us, I’m rethinking *Magic Walls* as a way to present the stars in classrooms until it’s safe to take students back into my portable dome again. I will take the positives and negatives from my experience doing Magic Walls in Italy to create my own version that will work for me here in Maine.
I’m so glad I had that experience, it may be what keeps me working through these difficult times.

**Ruth Grützbauch** Week in the United States winner 2019

*Ruth, you visited John Meader as one of the winners of the "Week in the US" for 2019. You and John are both running a mobile Planetarium as a small business. Did you find that you have a lot in common in your work? And what did you take away from the experience for your own professional development?*

Answer: Yes, we found a lot of similarities in our work and had a lot to share and talk about, but in fact we also found that we have quite a different approach, very different equipment and also different didactic methods. John is focusing more on story-telling and it was inspiring to experience his way of interacting with the audience through stories. It made me think about my own style of presenting and my motivation as an educator.

I think the point is that as educators we rely a lot on our own motivation and enthusiasm. To design and present inspiring programs we need to channel our own fascination with the subject and we need to let the audience feel that enthusiasm. And to keep that enthusiasm over the years of telling the same stories we need from time to time a new perspective on our work, we need new stories, new ideas and that is precisely what this exchange program is providing.

So I think the professional development opportunity is not just sharing good practice examples or learning about new techniques and programs. It is also about staying enthusiastic through new input and through making new experiences in a different environment. I also feel a lot more connected to the international planetarium community than before taking part in the program.

**Picture: Ruth setting up scopes with amateur astronomers.**

**Andy Kreyche** A Week in Italy Winner - 2020 (Date of visit TBD due to Covid19)

*Andy, why were you interested in taking part in a cultural exchange opportunity and what was your reaction when the program was delayed due to Covid19?*

Beyond any practical obstacles, I can’t imagine anyone NOT being interested in participating in such a program. A wonderful humanities teacher in college opened my eyes to the richness in the art, architecture, and culture of other places, including and especially Italy. And as astronomy educators, we seem to share a natural curiosity that manifests into a love of learning and a desire to know what’s out there beyond us. Pursuing and sharing that knowledge is rewarding enough by itself, but due to the nature of the subject, understanding more about the cosmos provides a marvelous bonus. Knowledge of the universe, by its nature, broadens our perspective of our place within it.
One of my favorite astronomy books is *The Astronomical Companion*, by Guy Ottewell. The combination of his clear descriptions and hand-drawn illustrations serve, for me at least, to help bring this cosmic perspective to the fore. On his website, he has a page that caught my eye many years ago and never fully left my consciousness, despite the fact it was never developed beyond two short paragraphs. The title of the page is “Xenophilia: In Praise of Human Variety.” This is his attempt to promote a new word meaning “love of strangers,” where people are encouraged to find interest and value in those different from themselves. The word is offered as an alternative to the unfortunately more familiar “xenophobia,” a word literally meaning “fear of strangers,” but in practical usage implies hatred and prejudice.

To me, wanting to learn more about the universe and wanting to learn more about our planet and the people living on it go hand in hand. I learned about the IPS “A Week in Italy for a Planetarium Operator” program some years ago, and was instantly attracted to the idea. For a number of reasons it took me several years to finally apply. When I finally did so in 2019 and was chosen, I was convinced that the time was right. The excitement of being chosen was palpable, and I was committed to making the experience a fulfilling one, for myself, for my hosts, the Italian students, and for my wife who would accompany me. Plans were made and shared, plane and train tickets purchased, and a whole European itinerary was developed. The date of departure for Italy was set: March 16th, 2020.

As with many plans during this unusual year, mine were interrupted by the harsh realities of a worldwide pandemic. The extent of the suffering brought about by Covid put the cancellation of my trip into perspective. Indeed, I learned lessons about the resolve of dealing with Covid from my new Italian friends because they were deep into sheltering in place before many of us (foolishly!) didn’t see it coming here in the States. Even amidst their own hardships, my Italian hosts offered consolation and a guarantee that they would welcome me to Italy to fulfill the program once it was practical to do so. So I try to see this delay as an opportunity in several ways.

Much of the fun of travel is in planning for and anticipating the trip. Now I have more time to do so. This has included getting to know my hosts better through various virtual means. And although learning Italian is not a requirement of the program, now I can learn more of the language than I would have with just six month notice. Also, part of the program is to share about the place where I live. Having spent so much continuous time, both at home and within my community, I think I’m better equipped to share insights about them. In short, I fully expect to have a more rewarding experience in Italy because of the delay.

More broadly, another positive aspect to the pandemic is that it is a globally shared experience. In addition to this, there’s also an analog with what I see as my goals in the planetarium. There, I try to provide a cosmic context that in turn gives a sense of wonder,
clarity, and belonging. A sense of belonging I think is key to coming out of the pandemic as a healthier global society. There are lessons to be learned, and although they may be ignored by some, a variety of teachable moments come to mind. One concerns our effect on the environment, since the lessons of a temporarily cleaned up planet during shutdowns is an example of possibility that bears repeating down the line. But beyond the strictly scientific, there are human lessons as well: our need for social interaction, our vulnerability and interconnectedness as both individuals and a species, and in this time of reckoning, the need for just treatment of all. My time on the IPS Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee for the past few months has brought this last one into clearer focus. When I finally do make it to Italy, I look forward to fulfilling the promise of new friendships, shared experiences, and other commonalities. But I also expect that exposure to a different culture, with different practices and ways of being, will bring about changes in me for the better.

**Michele Wistisen** A Week in Italy Winner 2010 and host for Week in the United States 2017 and 2019

*Maybe we typically don't receive a large number of applications for these contests. Why do you think people don't apply to be a guest?*

Maybe they feel they don't have anything to offer. I applied for the experience in Italy just because I thought it would be great to experience another country but didn't think I had something that was super outstanding that would set me apart from anyone else. So I think the message here is that we all have something to share.

Maybe they are not sure they will be able to share what they do outside of their planetarium (dome, system). Yes this is an issue. I experienced several different systems. Everywhere I went, the host ran their projection system and I was free to present the lesson without having to learn the equipment and I even presented my lesson without a projector. But I prepared something to fit every situation; it made my presentation even better! Thanks to what I learned from attending Live Interactive Planetarium Symposia (LIPS) I was able to do this!

Some people may feel that they don't have the funds. It did cost me something but it was so minimal compared to what it would have cost if I was just vacationing and I was also able to experience the country on a personal level.

Another concern is having to take vacation time or to get leave from work. My school district actually gave me time off as professional leave. Maybe this is something that we can work towards having some sort of document that is through IPS.

**Picture: Michele and a big dipper!**
Michelle, why do you think that people don’t apply to host?

Again, maybe they think they don’t have anything to offer. I hosted twice. David Gruber was from Italy and Guilherme Marranghello from Brazil. I was truly surprised that someone was excited to come to a little planetarium in Wyoming. But after hosting I could see that the value of being the host was in the collaboration that occurred as we spent time together. It was a treat to share both of my guests with my community.

Possibly people are not sure their system is good enough. Actually, this is a great way to see how someone else can present using your system and even outside the dome. When David was here he only presented in the dome once and then the rest of the time it was in museums and in classrooms. It was fun to see him teach beyond the dome. I learned a lot from him.

Picture: Michele and David Gruber from Italy.

Possibly they think that they don’t have the funds to take care of a guest presenter. I did have to do some grant writing to get enough funds for hosting plus IPS and a regional association, GLPA, helped by providing $500 each toward airfare. In the future I would suggest collaborating with multiple planetariums or affiliate regions could also be helpful. Both David and Guilherme were willing to stay in my home which cut down on the cost of hosting them.

Of course another concern is that it does take time to host a colleague well. My suggestion is to get a team together if that is an issue. I did have help getting my guests to different places if I thought I would be busy. David also rented a car while he was here and was able to get himself around. Both guests were ok to hang with me when I had to teach and I worked with the planetarium in Laramie to arrange transportation for Guilherme. Everyone who had the opportunity to meet my guests thought it was a great experience so it was easy to get help with hosting them.

Picture: Michele shares an activity involving light and shadows with her guest from Brazil, Guilherme.

Today we are all talking about the value of participating but I think the issue is more about what is keeping people from participating. Having been on both sides, I can say the positives way outweigh any
negatives. I would host again in a heartbeat.

**Guilherme F. Marranghello:** Week in the United States winner 2019

*Picture: Guilherme in Casper, Wyoming, giving one of his presentations to the public.*

*How did this experience contribute to your professional development?*

I started working with a portable planetarium in 2013 and with a fixed dome in 2017, when I became also the first director of the Planetário da Unipampa, so I consider myself pretty new in this business. The Week in the US program appeared to me as an amazing opportunity to grow and learn a lot about the planetarium in a short period of time. And that’s what happened. Visiting Casper Planetarium and Vaughan Planetarium, in Laramie was a great moment of learning. Especially, these days with Michelle were really amazing. I really loved the way she works with her students, but what I liked the most were the lessons we shared. One of the first things I did when I came back to Brazil was to share the lunar phases model she showed me, built about 30 models and went to a school to try it.

I also loved the visit to the mountain school, when it was snowing a lot. We almost don’t have snow in Brazil and going up and down the mountain during a snowstorm was... WOW. But the time we spent with the students in the school was wonderful.

After all, Michele also arrange me to visit Dan at Denver Museum and I could take a look in three completely different types of planetarium, learn about their equipment, the way they run the shows, work with their monitors and engage to the public.

*Did you know about Casper, Wyoming before going there?*

No, I didn't know anything but Michele was such a great host and the time I spent there was wonderful. It was great to meet Cordell and their family, especially their grandchildren. They took me to the mountains, to amazing restaurants and, of course, to museums, where I could learn a lot more about american history. Just be careful when you follow Michele trying to capture a good Moose picture, you may get stuck in the mud. Thank you so much Michele.

**Tilo Hohenschläger:** Week in the United States winner 2018 Organizer of the Week with the GDP 2019

*Picture: Tilo (L) and Matthias (R) travelled to Florida in 2018 as guests of Derek (Center).*
Tilo, what made you decide to setup the program “A Week with the GDP?”

Matthias Rode and I applied for the 2016 program “A Week in the US”. Luckily we won and we travelled to Sanford / Florida in July 2017 to visit our host, Derek Demeter at the Seminole State College. We spent the week learning about the American planetarium culture and taught school children and college students about astronomy. The big event was an evening show Friday night for a mixed audience. In between the sessions, we had enough time to travel around Florida to watch wildlife and visit the Kennedy Space Center. All in all, it was a perfect experience. After that we decided to invite Derek over to Germany, to experience the German culture too. Before that happened we all met again at the last IPS conference in Toulouse and Susan Button suggested a new program for our GDP. When Derek finally visited, it was kind of a test run of how an exchange program could work with the GDP. During the visit we travelled through Germany and organized teaching sessions in our mobile planetarium. In the end, the visit was a great success as well and Matthias and I decided that such an experience should not be a one-off opportunity. After consulting with the GDP we decided to go ahead and offer our new program “A week with the GDP” every year, officially hosted by the GDP. 2019 was the first year for applications and we were very happy to announce our first winning candidate, Sara Twidal from the Fort Worth Museum of Science & History, in the beginning of 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemia, nothing is sure for 2020, but the current plan is that Sarah will travel to the Planetarium Berlin in late September or early October this year. In case of further problems the trip will be postponed to the next year. While saying that, the application process is still open for this year to travel to Germany in 2021.

After all the great moments I had as a visitor and host in our planetarium community, I am really happy that we decided to take the next step in establishing our new program and I can only recommend to all members to do the same.

For more information about these and other projects go to https://www.ips-planetarium.org/page/share or go directly to the individual contest page:

https://www.ips-planetarium.org/page/italy
https://www.ips-planetarium.org/page/WeekinUS
https://www.ips-planetarium.org/page/Weekwithgdp

Applications are requested from educators or astronomers who work with any of the various models of planetariums (fixed or mobile). If you want to express an interest in any of these programs please feel free to contact Susan Button (sbuttonq2c@gmail.com) or any of the panel participants (emails above); we would love to answer any questions you may have.