

Astronomy Conversation

Rachel A. Hilton
Due Date: November 21, 2013
Physics 1040
Salt Lake Community College

During the course of this semester, speaking about astronomy with others has become one of my favorite pastimes. Everyday there are dozens of stories pertaining to astronomy that surface on the internet. All throughout the semester, our class was assigned to carry out discussions about astronomy in the news with fellow classmates. I took inspiration from this concept and decided to focus my conversation with friends on events currently happening in our universe.

I recently moved to Umeå, Sweden and thought this assignment would be a great opportunity to get to know some locals on a universal scale. I invited my boyfriend's coworker, a chemical engineer and his fiancé, a camp director to 'dinner and astronomy' on November 16th at our place. I thought dinner would be the perfect opportunity to have an at-length discussion without growing bored of the subject. In addition, limiting the group size to four people total would ensure that everyone was heard and that the conversation would not get out of hand. I asked my three guests to find an article that they found interesting on a credible website and be prepared to share it at dinner.

The conversation lasted almost three hours, with very few tangents other than my boyfriend briefly discussing the inaccuracies of recent space movies and the plausibility of time travel with his co-worker and whether or not the space-time continuum could be tweaked for intergalactic travel and future vacation spots of Jupiter's moons. I started by asking if anyone had seen Comet ISON, since it is supposed to be visible to the naked eye now. (Rao, 2013) Currently, the weather in Umeå is typical November weather and the visibility of the stars at night has not been the best. However, someone did mention that they had seen the Aurora Borealis while driving to a town North of Umeå earlier that week.

I made an outline of subjects that I was familiar with from research throughout the semester, in case we needed some inspiration during the conversation. There was not a dull moment throughout the evening. The conversation followed my plan extremely well, since it was quite loose to begin with. I wanted a sense of freedom to be felt by my participants, as to not chase them away early on in the evening. At first, I thought having one topic, astronomy, was going to be stuffy and non-inspirational, but as soon as I started mapping out the evening, I realized that astronomy might be one of the broadest topics to discuss. There is so much we know (and don't know) about our universe.

Throughout the evening, the conversation participants exhibited many different emotions, from fear to anger to sheer giddiness. When it comes to the universe, a subject in which research has come a long way, yet has left much more to be discovered, some people become uneasy. The unknown can be a scary thing.

As expected, the conversation did veer toward the subject of aliens. It almost seemed like a perfect gateway into the subject of the three potentially life-supporting planets found orbiting the star Gliese 667C, 22 light-years away. (Landau, 2013) Everyone found this fascinating and can't wait to hear more about the discoveries they will make in the future. What would it be like to discover planets that have oceans made of water and life-supporting air, just like ours?

Other topics discussed were the meteorite that was pulled from Lake Chebarkul in central Russia earlier this year. (BBC News, 2013) I figured, with Sweden being close to Russia, my guests would have heard about the huge meteorite, but they had not. They had learned about the asteroid explosion near the Podkamennaya Tunguska River in Siberia in 1908 in school though. (NASA Science, 2008)

We also discussed the Aurora Borealis. Since I've yet to see a charismatic display, I wanted to know all about the shows the two native Swedes had experienced. While Umeå is much farther North than Salt Lake City, the Aurora Borealis is not as powerful here as it is in the very northern parts of Sweden and Norway, where the light displays are almost unworldly. The guests suggested we spend a night or two at the Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärv, Sweden.

Among many topics, one that seemed to stand out to everyone was the concept of Virgin Galactic. The first commercial space travel airline is about to send people on the ride of their lives in December. (Neild, 2013) This idea made two of the participants nervous, while the other two could hardly contain their excitement. Hopefully, before our lifetimes are up, the price for space travel will be more reasonable, allowing average people to take the amazing journey into space.

During the conversation, it surprised me how much everyone knew about astronomy. I guess I never started paying attention to astronomy in the news or how life and planets are created until this class. It was great that I didn't have to offer-up all the information we talked about. This was not only because I had asked the participants to be prepared to share an article, but also all of my guests have Masters degrees or higher. Hardly any scientific terms that came up in conversation had to be explained, although it did make me feel happy when none of the people with a Ph.D. knew what an 'accretion disk' was and I got to explain it.

If I had to do this assignment again, I wouldn't change a thing. I felt as though everyone had an educational and eye-opening experience. It was fun to swap stories and learn about our ever-changing universe.

I really enjoyed working on this assignment and took more from it than anticipated. Imparting my newfound knowledge of and love for astronomy has brought me so much

intellectual stimulation. With backgrounds in science, everyone was able to converse at length and most often, in an intelligible manner. Overall, this assignment clarified for me that astronomy seems a little frightening as well as completely astonishing to lots of people, not just myself.

Works Cited

- BBC News. (2013, October 16). *Meteorite pulled from Russian lake*. Retrieved from BBC News: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24550941>
- Landau, E. (2013, June 26). *Researchers: Newly found planets might support life*. Retrieved from CNN: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/06/26/tech/innovation/new-habitable-planets/>
- NASA Science. (2008, June 30). *The Tunguska Impact--100 Years Later*. Retrieved from NASA Science: http://science.nasa.gov/science-news/science-at-nasa/2008/30jun_tunguska/
- Neild, B. (2013, June 12). *Richard Branson: Galactic spaceship to blast off in 2013*. Retrieved from CNN: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/11/tech/branson-farnborough-virgin-galactic/>
- Rao, J. (2013, November 14). *Potentially Dazzling Comet ISON Now Visible to Naked Eye After Outburst*. Retrieved from space.com: <http://www.space.com/23591-comet-ison-visibility-naked-eye.html>