

SETI IN HIGH SCHOOLS DOWN UNDER

Carol Oliver¹, Edna DeVore², and Les Vozzo¹

1. SETI Australia Centre, University of Western Sydney Macarthur,
Campbelltown NSW, Australia

2. SETI Institute, Mountain View, California, USA

The SETI Australia Centre at the University of Western Sydney and the SETI Institute have recently collaborated on a project to introduce SETI as an educational tool into Australian high school science classrooms.

The project began with two years of classroom trials in New South Wales, Australia of three units of the award-winning Life in the Universe (LITU) series. These were produced by the SETI Institute for U.S. schools. Twelve state and church-run private schools located in Western Sydney took part in the trials in 1996 and 1997, and these involved 1,600 high school students and 35 science teachers.

SETI offers an excellent context in which to teach science, a fact that was realised early on by the SETI Institute. In recent years, a number of major science education projects in various countries have concentrated on the use of contexts. This was done because of the growing belief that science education at the high school level needs to be relevant to the student. The choice of context-driven materials was underscored in a decision by the New South Wales Education Department to include the approach in the new state science curriculum for 2000. However the use of SETI as a context was contingent upon satisfying the mandatory requirements of the curriculum while maintaining the integrity of the SETI Institute materials – two basic but seemingly disparate objectives.

SETI Australia decided to create two five-week modules for years (or grades) 7 through 10 for the New South Wales science curriculum. The modules were produced by a team of teachers and other experts culled from the two years of Australian trials. Essentially these modules were used as a guide for Australian teachers to meet the needs of both the curriculum and those of the SETI Institute. The authors suggest it is possible that such an approach may have international application in the wider promotion of SETI as a science education tool. It should be possible to use the same materials internationally while adapting them to the needs of different cultural environments.

The two modules entered the NSW science curriculum on February 1, 2000.