Drinking beer and talking about science

> ALAN PIFFER

While some may equate a discussion about biology with a dull lecture, it can actually be quite fun and interesting. Especially if it's held in a pub.

Café Scientifique, a popular series held once a month in venues like the Strathcona Hotel, Swan's Pub and the James Joyce Bistro, provides a means for professors and scientists at UVic to talk about their work with the general public.

Dr. Paul Zehr, the director for UVic's Centre for Biomedical Research, started the Café series, which is now in its fourth year.

"I really wanted to increase the engagement of this research centre with the community on many different levels," explains Zehr. "And to help raise our profile, as far as people being aware of the Centre being here and the researchers being here . . . there's a lot of really good people working on biomedical problems here."

For Zehr, Café Scientifique represents a way to reach people in a comfortable pub environment.

He focuses on the Café's teaching approach, based on a more casual group discussion than a standard PowerPoint-driven lecture.

"For this particular example of people just in a room, we've tried to really focus it on having a narrative, and just talking, and removing the barrier that the screen creates where we now are going through the screen to talk to each other," says Zehr.

While being hosted by the Centre for Biomedical Research naturally led the Café to discussions on biological and biomedical issues, other UVic departments, such as Physics and Astronomy, have since contributed their own topics.

Zehr says Café speakers find they have to change their typical approach to discussing issues, partly through providing frames of reference for people regarding their work.

"I think the trick is getting people to think about their own work in the context of how it fits in the bigger picture," says Zehr. "If it's molecular biology, about sequencing a certain genome, how does that relate to human biology in general? So there's that issue of extrapolating beyond what you do, which we're normally not asked to do in research papers."

Zehr says Café speakers enjoy the opportunity to reach a wider audience.

"People who have done these cafés for us, find it a really great experience, typically," explains Zehr. "It's a really feel-good experience to just be out there in front of the general public, and answering their questions. It really does make you feel a lot more connected to society, in a different way than your ordinary work does."

Zehr says Cafés often generate a lot of energetic discussion from audiences, including ethical concerns they have about scientific issues, and other questions based on their own experiences.

"I think it's a way for people to be able to participate more in understanding the process that they see shaping their world," says Zehr. "If there's one thing that comes back to my own philosophy, it is really demystifying science — talking to people about how it works, and why we do it."

The next Café Scientifique is on Nov. 7 at the James Joyce Bistro. Dr. Jon Willis from UVic's Department of Physics and Astronomy will talk about the search for life in the universe.

Got an interesting science-y story idea? Email scitech@martlet.ca.