L'Aula del Cel (The “Sky Classroom”) is an effort to bring astronomy closer to school children. It is a project led by the Astronomical Observatory of the University of Valencia in collaboration with the regional education authorities. It has been running for two years and it has been a big success, with nearly three thousand students visiting the Aula during the school term.

Astronomy teaching in the Valencian school curriculum

The role of astronomy in the school curriculum of Valencia (Spain) is very limited. It often appears only as a sub-subtopic included in larger science areas, such as physics or the natural sciences. At high school it is an optional subject, but it is offered only in very few schools (many teachers do not feel prepared to teach it) and it is on its way to extinction. It is more often just an extracurricular activity, through visits to science museums, astronomical centres or planetaria.

The reasons behind this situation are:

- Lack of didactic material available at the schools
- Scarcity of resources elsewhere
- Teachers who can only work with didactic material written in Spanish or Catalan
- Lack of information about the already existing resources

The “Aula del Cel” (The “Sky Classroom”)— http://www.uv.es/obsast/in/divul/auladelcel.html was created partially to mitigate this situation, as a place where both teachers and students encounter astronomy. The project was started as an agreement between the Astronomical Observatory of the University of Valencia and the Generalitat Valenciana (the regional government), but it soon attracted more sponsors, some from other areas of the same university (like the Vicerrectorat de Cultura), the national government, and even some private companies (Caja de Ahorros del Mediterráneo, Telefónica).

We are located in a modern building at one of the three campus sites of the University, where we have a small laboratory for about 20 students, with plenty of didactic material (seven Pentium IV computers, activity books, celestial globes, planetary...
systems, planets, simple telescopes, spectrographs...). There is also a seminar room where the audiovisual presentations are held. A typical visit follows this scheme:

1. The teacher talks to the Aula’s didactics team to agree on the educational content of the visit so that the program matches the students’ current area of study better.
2. The group comes to the “physical” Aula at the Astronomical Observatory’s building. The maximum group size is 30 students, and it is split into two in order to make it easier for everybody to communicate and share ideas, thoughts, questions...
3. We start with an interactive multimedia presentation at the seminar room. The students can ask any question they have at any moment, to enable easy communication among everybody.
4. After the talk, we look at the Sun with a small solar telescope to check the number of sunspots on that particular day. Our pool sundial (which is included on The Planetary Society’s Earth Dial project—http://www.planetary.org/mars/earthdial) tells us about the relation between the solar and official times and the current season of the year. It also reminds us of the two NASA rovers that are exploring Mars and are provided with similar sundials.
5. After the “astronomical” break the students go into the laboratory, where they build a simple paper or cardboard sundial, star charts, constellations with phosphorescent stickers, homemade telescopes, etc. Computer activities are also carried out using a variety of local and internet resources.

In the near future we will perform remote observations by using the 60 cm robotic telescope TROBAR, a fully automated telescope at our observing site at Aras de los Olmos (Valencia, Spain), the darkest spot of the region, which makes it a very good astronomical site. Because it can be controlled through the internet, the students will be able to perform the observations themselves from school, moving and pointing the telescope to the celestial object of their choice.

In the same vein, agreements with institutions that have robotic telescopes in South America are being set up, so we can perform night observations during daylight, that is, during local school hours.

The Observatory owns a valuable collection of old astronomical instruments (sextants, astrolabes, theodolites...) and they constitute the “historic side” of our outreach program. We are currently in the process of building replicas of these instruments for them to be used, manipulated and explored by the students, complemented with a visit to the Observatory’s museum.