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Kids try out a microscope at the Uni Project, which transforms urban spaces into public learning venues—and could provide a model for science and natural history museums.

STEM for All

Unconventional approaches can extend the reach of science and natural history museums.

BY WINIFRED KEHL

I love science and natural history museums. There are some things you just can't experience anywhere else—a hall of giant dinosaur skeletons towering over you, or an interactive exhibit about tornados or Tesla coils. But museums have one major downside when it comes to public access: they exist in a physical location. You need to get yourself there. The travel (whether one hour on a city bus or three hours in a plane) plus costs like admission and parking can put museums out of reach for many people.

Science centers and natural history museums have extended their reach in various ways. Mobile learning labs such as the Pacific Science Center's Science on Wheels and portable "museum-in-a-box" programs like the Burke Museum's Burke Boxes—both in Seattle—bring exhibits, activities and demonstrations to their "visitors." Then there are science cafés, themed after-hour events and "portes-ouvertes" days. Despite these opportunities, the problem of access remains: for special events and free days, you still need to be able to



Above and right: The Uni Project uses cube-like shelves loaded with books curated by local museums and libraries.

get yourself to the museum (and be prepared to “enjoy” it cheek-by-jowl with other visitors). Mobile learning labs or museum boxes usually only serve school districts.

All these programs are wonderful, and I’m certainly not suggesting that they aren’t good enough. Nevertheless there are whole populations that are left out of these models—from kids attending rural schools that can’t or don’t bring a science mobile to them, to adults who’d like to attend a special event but can’t because of their work schedule, to whole families that can’t attend free “first Thursdays” because transportation is an issue. That left me wondering what other possibilities are out there.

There is no single outreach effort that reaches everyone, not even the Internet. According to 2011 Census Bureau data, 71.7 percent of U.S. households have Internet access, leaving almost 3 out of 10 Americans without. Even so, why don’t more institutions follow the model of the Google Art Project? This initiative brings the world closer to acclaimed art and art institutions by using Google technologies that allow anyone with a decent Internet connection to explore art in museums at incredibly high resolution. You can “walk” through art museums like the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, zoom into paintings for magnified views and create your own galleries. Where is the Google Science Project—or, even better, the Smithsonian Science Project?

There are innumerable virtual museum websites of



varying quality, created both by venerable institutions like the Smithsonian and by individuals passionate about a particular topic. Although some seem to be well researched, I’m not sure I would trust the reliability of information from online museums like the Cyber Museum of Toasters. Big-name museums have an advantage in this area, and a number of major science museums have virtual panoramic tours. Unfortunately, the quality of these virtual tours falls far short of the Google Art Project. While one well-known natural history museum’s panoramic tour is visually very appealing, the text is difficult and sometimes impossible to read, making the experience more useful as a “teaser trailer” than as an actual virtual museum.

A number of science museums have “online exhibits,” but these are often more like traditional, informative webpages than virtual museums. Other museums have tried hybrid approaches, such as the Natural History Museum in London’s Nature Plus (nhm.ac.uk/natureplus), which allows visitors to “collect” museum objects in a virtual account that can then be accessed from home via the Internet.

In contrast, the Google Art Project not only boasts a slick and visually appealing interface, but allows you to search and



browse art from around the world by museum, artist, subject and time period. It also lets users “curate” their own collections of art, which other users can then browse. While interactive science exhibits may be more difficult to digitize and display than a painting, nature is full of wonderfully explorable, observable static objects, from rocks and minerals to feathers and fossils.

Another venture into mass accessibility is Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). MOOCs are free-choice online educational programs open to anyone who signs up. The idea is that an educator designs a course that can be delivered via the Web, complete with homework. Unlike videos on a YouTube or Vimeo channel, MOOCs aim for interactive participation and open access. While MOOCs do face scrutiny for being over-hyped, some museums have taken the plunge. The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), the Museum of Modern Art and the Exploratorium all recently announced their participation in the MOOC hub site Coursera, which will provide free professional development courses aimed at educators. The AMNH’s first three courses will cover genetics, evolution and earth science, while the Exploratorium will focus on inquiry-based learning such as integrating technology and engineering into classroom

Nature is full of wonderfully explorable, observable static objects, from rocks and minerals to feathers and fossils.

activities. The Exploratorium sees MOOCs as a natural outgrowth of their efforts to train science teachers. In a press release, Associate Executive Director Rob Semper said, “We are constantly tinkering with new ways to expand our impact and reach those who stand to benefit the most.”

On the other hand, London’s Tate—well known for their digital education initiatives—initially decided against MOOCs as a viable venue for their education efforts. Rosie Cardiff, senior digital producer at the Tate, notes that the ideal of MOOCs providing free, open learning on a global scale fit the museum’s vision, but the reality is that producing and sustaining MOOCs requires staff time and money. In a world of limited resources, Cardiff says, the Tate worried about the quality of the MOOC learning experience and low course completion rates (which may be as little as 10 percent), as well as their ability to keep content fresh and provide appropriate tutoring for courses. The Tate, however, is involved in creating a MOOC on Andy Warhol in partnership with the University of Edinburgh through the “Artist Rooms” program and will evaluate the success of this approach.

There are other ways to bring science education to people, rather than the other way around. Pop-Up Museums have gained popularity with cultural organizations. This concept, as created and described by Michelle DelCarlo of the Smithsonian Institution’s Spark!Lab, “is a participatory community event where people share personal objects and stories with one another.” Each Pop-Up Museum has a theme, such as “home” or “adoption”; the goal is to spark conversations among people. Conversation is something that could

benefit modern science—from legislating carbon taxes to personal choices about genetically modified organisms (GMOs). “In a typical museum experience,” notes DelCarlo, “visitors can access stories, objects and information



Uni Project visitors learn about the illusion of motion by studying a zoetrope.

only in the context that the museum sets forth. In a Pop-Up Museum, the context of each theme brings forth every person's perspective, which gives them more authority and access to the context of an idea."

In contrast to Pop-Up Museums, which focus on conversations and depend on visitors to provide content, mobile museums bring curated content to geographically diverse audiences. The Think Tank, developed by the University of Chicago's Tyler Alterman and Daniel Casasanto, and the New York-based Uni Project are taking STEM to the public sphere. The Think Tank describes itself as "a mobile cognitive science lab and education station" whose main goal is to engage people who don't normally go to science museums and to get STEM-underrepresented kids hooked on science. Once finished, the Think Tank will be a truck filled with fun, addictive science including brainwave-reading headsets and games and lab space where visitors can design and run their own experiments. The Think Tank will roam the streets of Chicago, parking alongside sidewalks, parks, schools and museums. There are also plans for "sidewalk talks" delivered by psychologists and neuroscientists.

In New York, Leslie Davol and Sam Davol's Uni Project seeks to temporarily transform urban spaces into public venues for learning: "We start with the conviction that books and learning should be prominent, accessible, and part of what we expect at street-level in our cities," states their website. The project is made up of groups of cube-like shelves that can be unloaded from a truck and stacked in almost any urban space. The shelves are loaded with books that have been curated by area museums and libraries. Anyone passing by can borrow a book to read on a bench (also a portable part of the Uni structure). The project has spread to several cities, including a STEM-themed Uni in Seattle created by the Foundation for Early Learning. This Uni features hands-on STEM activities as well as books, with the goal of encouraging STEM education and kindergarten readiness. It's been a huge success at public libraries and public events around Washington State, from Seattle to Spokane.

All of these ideas come with their own limitations. You can't touch anything in a virtual museum, and you had better have high-speed Internet. MOOCs might not be worth the effort to create them if only a few people actually participate and complete courses. Portable projects like the Think Tank and Uni can be resource intensive and can only exist in one physical location at a time. But these initiatives offer something just a little bit different to a portion of the population that doesn't often intersect with the local science museum. They are small, one-off efforts that can be nimble and take big risks. Museums need not abandon their physical buildings to become mobile entities, but they could benefit from seeking out, partnering with and fostering these sorts of projects. With enough efforts accessing different parts of the population, maybe we could finally reach everyone who is interested in science—whether they knew they liked science or not! «

Winifred Kehl is a science writer and exhibit development consultant based in Seattle, Washington.