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Museums Journal, 2005(5), 15

Croft, C. 2002. Animal magic: Do our furred and feathered friends have a future as exhibits? *Museums Journal*, 2002(9), 32-35

Adult education as a tool for volunteer training and recruitment

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We all know that volunteer labour is integral to the normal functioning of almost every museum, in both the public and research sides of Museum life. There is naturally a constant concern about standards to ensure that the volunteer-museum relationship is constructive for all parties. Particularly treacherous is striking an effective balance between initial training investment from (paid) staff and the capricious promise of unpaid effort, compared to the eventual benefits volunteers bring. The National Museum of Ireland Natural History Division is scandalously understaffed—with two full time curators for a significant European capital’s collections—thus recruiting a core of reliable volunteers is clearly a priority under our new scheme to improve collections access. However, for historical socioeconomic reasons in the Republic of Ireland there is not the established culture of “volunteerism” that other countries can depend on. Adult education is a creative and effective solution to answer both recruitment *and* training issues for museum volunteers.

In Autumn 2004, we elected to pursue an Adult Education module as an addition to our joint teaching programme with University College Dublin. The resulting course “*Dead Zoo: behind the scenes in the Natural History Museum*” aimed to introduce interested members of the public to the living scientific research face of the National Museum of Ireland (NMINH). The other, unadvertised aim of this course was to train a group of prospective volunteers with an effective six-week orientation programme.

The class was administered through the University College Dublin Adult Education Centre and advertised through the annual UCD “interest courses” brochure. The Adult Education Centre was particularly eager to help as they have experienced a chronic shortage in tutors for science-based interest courses, despite demand from the public. The established administration of the Centre also handled all queries, registration, and student fees. A small honorarium was paid to two tutors who presented the six weekly sessions. Classes were scheduled during working hours, two hours per week, and held in the NMINH exhibits building. Place and time were carefully selected—all students who were free to attend the class would potentially be free in future to volunteer. Topics were selected from a range of subjects, including lectures and discussions on the breadth of uses of museum objects, background in biodiversity and evolution, and an introduction to object conservation. Learners were typically retired individuals, with a keen interest but no academic background in the sciences.

Many of the learners who took this course said that they enjoyed it immensely—the small class size and novel setting made for an exciting contrast to the typical dowdy evening lecture series. The course was particularly praised for being held in the daytime—the only Adult Education course not offered in the after-work hours—as retired individuals many of the learners are often hesitant to travel alone in the city after dark. Covering a breadth of topics, loosely themed on “collections-based biology” also allowed learners who missed one or more classes to feel they could return without having fallen behind in lessons.

These learners come away with a common basic knowledge about collections and museum procedures taught in a structured course, and we impressed upon them the important contributions that could be made by volunteering. Indeed, since the course required a fee, volunteering (for free) can feel even more rewarding. This learning experience was highly successful for the 16 students enrolled, and “*Dead Zoo*” was an integral part in our Teaching Programme 2004, which was awarded the top prize for outreach in the all-Ireland Museum of the Year Awards. Six individuals (i.e. one-third of the class) have stayed on as volunteers in various capacities, suited to their interests and abilities. More importantly, the whole class has come away with a new understanding that there is a life “behind the scenes” of the Dead Zoo.

Risk zones for IPM: from concept to implementation

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