

Defining and articulating the quality of learning in zoos

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Abstract

The Zoological Society of London's (ZSL) Discovery & Learning (D&L) team has recently gone through a process of defining the principles that shape their learning programme with consideration of how 'quality' is articulated to key audiences. A framework of five key Principles for Excellence were defined that the department felt underpinned learning at ZSL. These five Principles are the benchmark against which all learning activities and resources will be measured and new products shaped, in addition to prioritising evaluation needs.

How is the 'quality' of learning in zoos defined? How do zoos articulate what a zoo learning product 'is'? What makes zoos unique as learning environments? Over the last 12 months, the Discovery & Learning (D&L) Department at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) have been considering these questions.

From April 2005, ZSL London Zoo benefitted from seven years of funding from the London Mayor's Office to grant state and independent schools free visits to ZSL London Zoo under the Free Visits Scheme. In 2012 this funding ceased. Bookings have since steadily increased, but the Zoo is not yet back to the highest figures of school visitation achieved in 2010 under the Free Visits Scheme period.

The termination of this funding was an ideal time to consider not only how to increase the quantity of school visits going forward, but for the Zoo's D&L Department to reflect upon what activity is offered schools. What made up a 'ZSL' schools activity or resource and how this was articulated to schools audiences? How can an organisation that stay competitive for out-of-classroom visits with sites such as the free National Museums and other attractions in London?

Internal stakeholder consultation

The first step was to consult with the teams within the D&L Department to clarify and categorise what they felt were the key elements of a ZSL schools activity or resource and how the programme should be promoted to key audiences.

A series of two hour consultations were undertaken with all staff in the D&L Department. This consultation specifically looked at the programme's online presence and considered what features were (or should be) main promotion points for the range of activities and events on offer.

Further consultation focused on the D&L Officer team and the process they went through to develop activities and events for delivery to schools audiences. The team considered the drivers for developing particular sessions, what elements and resources they included and why, and how they structured learning activities to best support students to reach intended learning outcomes.

This was a key reflective period for identifying the Department's perceived unique resources and best practice for learning at the Zoo, but it needed to be corroborated with teacher and student evaluation and feedback.

External stakeholder consultation

The next step was defining what teachers and students valued in an out-of-classroom visit to a zoo. What did they see as a zoo's unique selling points that enriched and extended classroom teaching and what were their reasons for visitation? There will likely always be a proportion who come for 'just a fun day out', but even so, how were teachers justifying zoo trips to school management?

In summer 2013, a consultation was undertaken with nineteen teachers, ranging in responsibilities from Early Years Foundation Stage (3-5 years old) to college level courses. Fourteen had visited ZSL London Zoo or ZSL Whipsnade Zoo with a school group previously, none had brought school groups on visits to both sites. The main findings identified teachers wanted sessions that used objects from the natural world as these resources not available in schools; they desired 'science in context' and access to scientific and keeper staff where possible and wanted pre- and post-visit support material that extended the work beyond the day of the visit.

In school visit evaluation forms, a number of features were identified as important to teachers. Strength of delivery staff presentation styles, interactive or 'hands on' nature of sessions, use of equipment and live animals, access to real objects from the natural world, Institute of Zoology scientific staff (only currently available in one bookable A-Level session), links to exhibits and clear links of session content to school class and coursework were regularly cited by teachers as the strengths of sessions delivered to schools.

However, these evaluation forms also identified that some sessions could have been strengthened by more use of objects and live animal handling collections, encourage a stronger use of scientific vocabulary relevant to the topic and alternative methods of delivery such as including more small group work and less 'talk up the front'.

Student feedback was recorded from formal observations of D&L Officers delivering schools sessions, including teacher comment where given. Student reaction and high levels of engagement when using objects and equipment in sessions, reaction to scientist talks and live animal handling collections provided some indication of the success of different resources. It is acknowledged that moving forward particular evaluation effort will need to be targeted on gaining insight to student experience and opinion.

As a result of the reflection and consultation, a framework of five Principles for Excellence were identified that the team felt reflected the best standard of what was a 'ZSL learning product'. The Principles were key to what the department felt underpinned, or should underpin, all D&L learning products at ZSL. These five Principles were the benchmark against which every existing product was to be measured and were to be used to shape new developments to help meet the Departments aspirations for excellence in zoo learning.

The framework of D&L's Principles for Excellence



2. Conservation in context - By exemplifying ZSL individuals and projects conservation is put in a real world context

ZSL is a leading organisation in the field of conservation research. It attracts exemplary researchers who are involved in conservation work in over 50 countries across the world. This provides 'conservation in context' – the most up-to-date examples of research being undertaken in the 'real world' and the personal journeys of the researchers, communities and also the species involved that can be used in learning activities and events.

3. Objects from the natural world - A learning experience is enriched by handling real objects that exemplify the content and cater to multiple learning styles

As important as visual stimuli are, it is not always possible or appropriate to access living collections in a more kinaesthetic manner. By using objects from the natural world, such as feathers, bones, shells and animal skins, in learning activities, students can gain a more well-rounded experience that caters to a number of learning styles. They also enable the application of practical skills such as weighing, measuring, close observation and direct comparison amongst others.



1. Living collections - Engagement with living collections raises motivation, inspiration and helps bring concepts to life.

The living collections are the primary attraction for visiting groups and help ZSL promote and achieve the worldwide conservation of animals and their habitats. The very 'living' nature of a zoo's collections is its most engaging attribute. Access to these collections is an incredibly memorable experience for any visitor, stimulating awe and wonder at the size, scale and sensory experience of being near live animals.



- Development and delivery approaches - A strong development framework and range of delivery approaches ensures we cater to all learner needs

The D&L programme for school groups aims to cater to a range of learning styles with strong visual, audio and kinaesthetic stimuli. Our activities encourage individual, small group and whole class work that includes storytelling, hands on workshops, lectures, practical learning programmes in the Zoo and more. School visitors are exposed to rich content presented in a variety of formats and have access to a range of resources to maximise the opportunity for an individual to reach any or all of myriad far-reaching outcomes during a visit.



4. Expertise and excellence... The people working for ZSL are one of its strongest assets and provide the personal stories that bring its work to life.

ZSL attracts leaders in their fields and hence has a wealth of expertise and experience that can be drawn on in the development of D&L activities. These individuals are a rich resource in themselves by providing not only their work in context, but their personal, engaging journeys and experiences that bring content to life. They provide role models that inspire and help raise the aspirations of school visitors who are building their own identity.

What happens next?

Once the framework of the Principles for Excellence was determined, an audit of the entire learning programme was undertaken at both ZSL sites, ZSL London Zoo and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo. Each education session and its associated onsite, pre- and post-visit resources were scrutinised and benchmarked against all five Principles. In a standardised 'audit sheet', detail was recorded of how each met, partially met or didn't meet each Principle.

Over five audit meetings with the Learning Manager and D&L Officers, the sessions that didn't meet or partially met certain Principles were prioritised for redevelopment work to ensure they met the newly defined quality standards. There are some sessions that can't realistically meet particular Principles, for example, using scientific staff in every session (Excellence and Expertise). In these instances, we aim to ensure the Principle

can be met to whatever degree was possible. In the example given we could add video content of scientists into session presentations or include web links to particular scientist's work in pre- or post-visit resources. The aspiration is that all five Principles for Excellence will be met to the highest degree possible through the session and its associated supporting resources.

As part of this process, it was acknowledged by all levels of management and the D&L Officer team that a standardised development process was desired that included audience and ZSL staff consultation from the earliest stages. In order to best meet internal drivers such strategic aims, to showcase real research, conservation in context and the personal stories of zoo staff and individual animals, there needed to be clear communication channels in order to know information could and should be included.

The next stage is to put an extensive and ongoing evaluation and research framework in place. This will gather evidence to measure the extent to which the Principles for Excellence help learners achieve intended learning outcomes, help ZSL to promote the quality of its learning programme and increase visitation of school groups. It will also be used to inform development and delivery processes to ensure we are achieving the best practice possible.

The D&L team is already discussing the need for a sixth Principle of Excellence to include in our development work. This will address how to support schools audiences to foster behaviour change to help ZSL meet its vision of A world where animals are valued, and their conservation assured. Watch this space!

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