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Digital Learning

Biology Collections and New Technologies

Department of Museum Studies, Leicester University, 30th January 2001

IT usage has moved far beyond using computers simply for documentation purposes. Digital technologies are reshaping how we use, interact with and display biological collections. They offer new ways of communicating and affording access to the huge resource and potential contained within biological collections. This meeting looked at some of the ways digital technologies are being used and at their potential for providing access, information and new ways of using and interpreting collections.

This was a very well attended meeting, with over 70 delegates, this perhaps reflecting interest in and opportunities afforded through IT usage. The day included demonstrations of the pilot NBN Gateway, virtual reality technology, and the Virtual Store project created by Stoke on Trent Museums.

Overcoming the Shock of the New

Changing the agenda for digital learning

Ross Parry - New Technologies Lecturer, Department of Museum Studies

There's more to IT then word processing and collections databasing. Isn't there? Ross Parry from the Museum Studies Department at Leicester University discussed the wider usage of IT and how it can be effectively utilised to communicate with our audiences.

Late Victorian Cambridge – exclusive, hierarchical, conservative. Not, perhaps, the place where we would today (with our inclusive and progressive outlooks) expect to find a key moment in the history of collections and new technology. And yet on 13 June 1894, J.W. Clark (historian of library classification) delivered a paper as that year's prestigious Rede Lecture, which was just that. Through a meticulous piece of scholarly work, Clark placed the University libraries that surrounded him and his audience into the context of a sweeping story of civilisation. From Sir Christopher Wren to St. Benedict, and from Sir Robert Cotton (one of the benefactors of the British Museum), to Bishop Alexander of Jerusalem, this was nineteenth-century narrative history at its most introspective and self-congratulatory. It was, however, his comments on the current state of archiving and librarianship that contribute to the history of museums collections and media technology. Clark concluded that: 'common sense urges that mechanical ingenuity, which had gone so much in other directions, should be employed in making the acquisition of knowledge less cumbrous and less tedious'. His recommendation, therefore, was a simple one: 'that as we travel by steam, so we should also read by steam, and be helped in our studies by the varied resources of modern invention.' In short, writing at the twilight of the Victorian age of expansion and mechanization, Clark saw his culture's new technologies as having a role (a significant role) in the organization of his society's, libraries, archives and museums. To him, it was 'the varied resources of modern invention' that had a active and unavoidable part to play in the future of memory institutions. I doubt he could have guessed how true his words would prove to be.

In particular, it is in the last twenty-five years that the 'resources of modern invention' (our new technologies) have become increasingly more conspicuous within the modern museum. By the end of the 1970s IT projects were emergent in museums – if weighed down by the weight of expense and labour-intensive