
How the LTM reached new audiences through working with local schools

*Ruth Singer,
London Transport Museum*

I am going to talk about how the London Transport Museum has used the web to work with disadvantaged inner city children to produce resources for the National Grid for learning and our website.

I will discuss how we set up and ran these projects and will mention some of the principles and difficulties involved.

I was recently employed as Interpretation Officer to, amongst other things, produce content for the London Transport Museum website, which is designed by a dedicated in-house designer. The site has been up for about a year, is 450 pages long and has 150,000 hits per year, predicted to rise to 250,000 this year.

We have run two very successful collaborative projects and the site has become interactive and innovative as a result of these projects. Other features such as a tour of the closed station Down Street and on-line exhibitions have captured the public imagination. Phase two is under development with online shopping, learning resources database search access and further exhibitions. The site has received excellent reviews in computer publications and our on-line evaluation shows that users are generally very impressed with the site.

Firstly I will explain the objectives of collaborative schools work

- To widen access to our collections and to the Museum. Audience development is fundamental to the museum's purpose. Web based collaborations allow us to work with our local community and to encourage use of the museum by non visitors. All the schools we

worked with enjoyed free entry to the museum.

- To develop the education section of the website. We wanted to make the section more than just an advert for our services, and to do more than just put our education packs on the web.
- To develop resources for schools. We want our education section to be interactive, relevant to teachers and to reflect the curriculum. We also wanted it to be fun and accessible. To achieve this we produced multi-media case studies and resources for use at the museum and in the classroom.
- To work with new partners and test out new ways of working internally and externally. We wanted to develop opportunities for different museum departments to work together, particularly ICT and design.
- To put children's work on the web. To make children feel valued by the museum and to promote inclusion and community involvement.
- To share good practice with widest possible audience, within both the museum and the education worlds.

The first project I shall discuss was with Burdett Coutts Primary School who worked with us to develop KS2 Victorian Resources.

This was the first schools collaboration project so we started small. Working with just two classes in one school was manageable and effective and we set ourselves reasonable, realistic goals. This allowed us to evaluate how easy (or difficult) future, larger projects might be and assess the time it would take to translate the workshops into the finished webpages.

How we made the link with Burdett Coutts Primary School

Rather than re-invent the wheel, we opted to develop on-line resources based on our existing workshops and education packs. We suggested a variety of options to schools involved in the Westminster Grid for Learning and Burdett Coutts responded positively.

How it worked

Two classes each made two visits to the museum, including a Victorians on the Move workshop. The children prepared tours and descriptions of their favourite vehicles, took notes and digital photographs and recorded interviews with a museum actor. This work was collated and developed into the website by the Interpretation Officer, the Schools Officer and the web designer.

The site contains tours of the vehicles including pictures, descriptions and quizzes. It also has teachers' notes and resources.

The second project I shall discuss is called Our transport, Your transport.

We received funding from DFEE and Westminster SRB for a 10 week pilot study-support project starting in April 1999. We worked once again with Westminster schools, this time with 40 children from 4 different schools all of which had a high proportion of school dinners. This area is amongst the most ethnically diverse and socially disadvantaged in London.

Building on our previous success with Burdett Coutts we were able to work in depth with children who had, for the most part, never been to a museum and who were identified by their teachers as those who would benefit the most from the project.

Teachers were heavily involved in planning meetings and helped to form the basis of the project content. This helped us understand what the particular needs of the children were and ironed out many of the possible problems. However, the project was very staff intensive - two museum staff in every session and freelancer, as well as considerable input from teachers, and some admin assistance.

The project consisted of museum and location based transport investigation activities using digital cameras, creative work, writing and interviewing. The children worked with a freelancer and museum staff to explore Victorian transport and to compare it with today. This linked in with curriculum topics on the Victorians, Citizenship and literacy.

Many of the children involved benefitted greatly from location work in their local area and gained confidence in talking to adults and approaching strangers for interview. Teachers also felt that working in the museum broadened the horizons for the children involved and increased their social skills with both adults and children from other schools.

The children's work was developed into a 14 panel exhibition on display at the museum and 27 web pages.

Detail panel - children explored museum collections closely and considered how modern vehicles differ from Victorian ones. Working in pairs the children took pictures of key parts of the vehicles and wrote captions based on their impressions of the objects, using descriptive words. Pull door, rough, scratched - automatic door, shiny, smooth.

One activity which the children really loved was interviewing an actor in the character of a Victorian Passenger. The character was asked about her opinions about travelling in London and the children wrote a newspaper article about her.

The beauty of the web is that these pages comprise many different things which can be used in many different ways - there is an exhibition, produced by children, but professionally designed and interesting to all ages. The site can be used by schools covering various topics from Victorians, local history, literacy, photography, design and of course, transport.

Teachers Zone is useful both within the museum and the class room. The resources can be used by home learners and schools all over the world.

The pages can also be used for informal learning about a variety of transport topics. It would also be useful to trainee teachers in considering how to use museums.

Plans

We are planning and developing many more collaborative projects with local schools, particularly secondary schools.

Creative writing based in museum. Year 10. Up soon.

French. Year 10. Guided tour of Museum in French and role play about journeys.

Geography. Year 7. Issues surrounding contemporary transport such as congestion, pollution and future transport strategies.

Geography A-Level, for whom we have developed an integrated study programme. Including teachers' pack, student activities, study days and on-line resources. This will lead from further development of the website links with related transport organisations.

GNVQ Leisure and Tourism. Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced levels. Another integrated study programme, including notes for teachers, student activities, study days and on-line resources.

And finally

DFEE consortium bid with 5 transport museums:

The London Transport Museum, the National Tramways Museum, The National Motor Museum, The National Tramways Museum and the National Waterways Museum. This is a two year project starting in January 2000 and will work with schools all over the country to produce resources for National Grid For Learning, Local Education Authority Intranets and museum websites based broadly on transport collections.

This project will work with Primary and secondary students and support the curriculum areas of ICT, English and history. Again several of the schools selected are those who will benefit most from the project. The project allows all the partner museums to share expertise and resources and produce extremely valuable resources, and work towards long term projects with LEAs. It will aid professional development for museum staff and teachers involved in the project

So, to sum up, when starting a web project remember that you will need:

- New and creative ideas - surfing the web is the best way to come up with ideas. Don't just look at museum sites, education sites, art colleges and companies can all be useful in developing fresh approaches. Also talk to other people both within and without the museums profession. Talk to teachers as much as you can, and other education advisers.
- Clear brief - why you are doing the project and what all parties need to put in and expect to get out of it.
- Timescale - teachers are very busy and need to know their deadlines. They are often hard to get hold of, and enthusiastic, committed teachers are essential to project success. Although it is controversial and sometimes difficult, we have found that paying teachers for their out of hours input has been very effective. We agreed this with headteachers at the outset, so work payment onto your budget if possible.

- Communication - meet all participants beforehand and continue to meet and talk regularly throughout the project. Also allow for feedback during the project.
- Flexible - be prepared to cut sections and alter your targets! Work produced in museum sessions can sometimes be unsuitable for the web. Talk to your designer in the planning process.
- Resources - collaborative projects are extremely intensive both in staff time and museum space! Make sure your ICT department knows what you require of them.

Overall, projects like those I have described briefly here show what can be achieved by working in partnership with other organisations, both on a small scale and on a larger scale. Museums should strive to work with their audiences, both established and potential, to create what they want, rather than what we think they want. The NGfL is an ideal opportunity for museums to really consolidate the skills, resources and experience they have into something which can be used by thousands.

