

A Comparison between the Educational Outreach Programs developed by the Lauer Foundation, Chicago, USA and the Fossil Fish Section of the Natural History Museum, London, UK

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The Lauer Foundation (LF) curates and provides permanent access to the Foundation's collections of scientifically important paleontological specimens and provides educational outreach programs to schools (grades 2-7). The public Earth Science educational outreach programs are customized to fit the audience.

The Natural History Museum, London (NHMUK) attends fossil festivals with scientific staff and volunteers where members of the public can interact with scientists and participate in enrichment activities. The museum also runs an in-house lecture program for visitors under the banner "Nature Live" where the public are encouraged to ask questions and get hands-on with specimens. Staff members also visit schools, universities and science fairs.

Both the LF and NHMUK programs provide hands-on learning experiences to people who do not normally have access to fossil specimens or visit museums. The programs are designed to be fun and engaging but also to inform, educate and provide interaction. Their aim is to supplement and complement the educational curriculum. As people learn differently, the use of visual, auditory and tactile teaching methods are utilized. Accommodations are made to facilitate those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Both the LF and NHMUK have found that hands-on experiences and visual aids are beneficial in order to increase the comprehension of unfamiliar concepts such as stratigraphy, deep time, fossilization and index fossils. Both provide program content designed to demonstrate why scientific data is important and how it is utilized. In addition, handouts and labelled specimens help to reinforce the retention of the program information.

The LF and NHMUK differ in terms of student participation. The LF programs are presented primarily in schools as either a supplement to the curriculum or as an enrichment program. Therefore, a much more visually engaging, interactive, experience is required to differentiate it from that in their regular classrooms. In contrast, NHMUK's participants at fossil festivals chose to take part, often returning yearly for the opportunity to meet and talk to experts.

Feedback Post activity reflections, reference to learning outcomes and participant feedback are used to measure the effectiveness of the program and refine it where necessary. This valuable data identifies what was learned and what they most enjoyed from the program. Feedback from the children themselves makes the whole process worthwhile.

Both the LF and NHMUK provide an opportunity for children and the general public to engage in an interesting, fun, interactive learning experience. We hope to improve their understanding of the importance of science and how it applies to the past, present and future of the world. Forging a connection with young people and the community is vital for the support of science initiatives and encouragement of the next generation of scientists.

