



VIDEOCONFERENCING OPENS UP MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

The impact and real-life communications benefits of the JANET Videoconferencing Service (JVCS) are being demonstrated in an outstanding education programme at the Natural History Museum. Videoconferencing means that rich learning resources at the Museum can be accessed live in a two way dialogue by those who have no other opportunity to enjoy them. Network quality is assured by the powerful internet connection provided to the Museum by the London Metropolitan Network (JANET London) through Imperial College. All institutions in the London academic community can similarly develop videoconferencing as an added value service from membership of the Network.

Natural History Museum

The Natural History Museum is one of the world's foremost resources for natural science, with magnificent collections and groundbreaking research expertise. Their aim is to explore diversity of the natural world and the processes that generate this diversity, using knowledge gained to promote responsible interaction with the natural world. The Museum's mission is delivered in part by the collections of over 70 million specimens.

More than 300 scientists work at the Museum, with research organised around major challenges covering such topics as biodiversity, evolution and the ecosystem. Through this research, the Natural History Museum is a world-class science and geography resource for learners, aiming to help people enjoy the natural world, develop their scientific knowledge and understand the impact of science on their lives. As a leading resource the school programme caters to all ages and levels, including foundation, primary, secondary and A level. There are curriculum linked events, workshops, hands-on activities and a teacher support service for children and students visiting the Museum.

Access to Learning

For many living too far away to make the journey to South Kensington, or unable to travel because of personal circumstances, access to the wealth of exhibits at the Natural History Museum may be difficult and even impossible . The Museum wanted to provide a 'visitor experience' for those school children unable to visit in person and began to explore the potential for videoconferencing.

One of the educational activities provided to visitors by the Museum is a performing 'gallery characters' programme. These characters have been selected to highlight specific aspects of natural history and live performances by actors as Charles Darwin or Mary Anning give visitors the opportunity to ask questions of the characters and get involved in a real dialogue.

Based on the success of their in-house 'gallery characters' programme, the Museum's education team decided to design a similar programme to be delivered specifically via videoconference. This allows children to access the special benefits gained from interacting with 'gallery characters' by watching the characters and talking to them live about their role in natural history without having to travel to the Museum. The special attraction of videoconferencing is that it can provide this interactive dimension to education giving children a similar kind of experience to those visiting the Museum.



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An Exciting Technology

Educational videoconferencing at the Museum has been extremely popular with all slots booked months in advance and additional slots continually being added for future programmes.

“Using video in education is quite common but this is something different that provides a different kind of experience and the children are generally excited by the technology and the fact that they can take part. It’s popular with schools that are too far away in the UK to make the trip to the Museum or services (MOD) schools based overseas,” explains Lara Zane, Schools Programme Developer at the Natural History Museum.

Lara also goes on to say, “I know that other museums in London are planning or operating videoconferencing in the same way to give wider access to their collections and resources - I believe that all organisations should be using it as the benefits are great.”

Significant for Higher Education

“We see the JANET Videoconferencing Service being of great potential value in higher education,” explains Maria Ilia, Head of Business at LMN. “The education team at the Natural History Museum has shown how the technology can be used to create effective education programmes and, with the growth of distance learning in higher education, this is becoming of immediate interest to London’s universities and colleges.”

“Many of London’s leading museums are already LMN associate members,” says Maria. “This excellent service from JANET is a way of adding value to membership both for them and for all our other public sector and education members.

A Broad Range of Practical Uses

More affordably priced high speed internet access and equipment have made videoconferencing available to a much wider group of users, making it now a more practical tool for communication and teaching in schools, colleges and universities.

“We have also trialled using our videoconferencing equipment for meetings with partner Museums in Newcastle, Manchester and Oxford,” says Lara Zane.

“Higher Education institutions can use videoconferencing for teaching or for meetings and also to provide access, as at the Museum, to those who cannot attend normal university and college sessions,” explains

Maria Ilia. "It is very powerful for live demonstrations, displays and performances, providing an important additional learning resource."

Videoconferencing Made Easy

The Natural History Museum benefits from the fully supported service provided to users through the JANET Videoconferencing Service (JVCS). Guidance on purchasing suitable equipment and the safe operation of videoconferencing is also available from JANET's Video Technology Advisory Service (VTAS) on their website.

"We decide in advance when our videoconference sessions will be run and once I receive a request from a school, I book the time on the JVCS Booking Service website so that we can access the service" explains Lara Zane. "I also liaise with the school to make sure that they are already registered with JVCS but Tim Boundy, a Schools Advisor for JANET and the JVCS team are extremely helpful in supporting us and helping if anything goes wrong."

Organisations wanting to start videoconferencing need to register with the JVCS Booking Service. A suitable room is needed, as well as equipment (CODECs, microphones, monitors or TVs) and an IP or ISDN network. JANET(UK) has a preferred pricing Framework Agreement with Direct Visual which eligible organisations are able to take advantage of and will give them best value for money.

Network speed and quality will not be a problem for London based organisations linked to JANET(UK) through JANET London.