Computing: Is There a Future in the Past?

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Abstract: This short summary describes the outcomes from the decision of The National Museum of Computing (TNMoC) to open its doors to visits by students from across the UK. Our experience has inevitably caused us to question the reasons for their visit, the students' understanding of what they see and the relevance their 'day out' has on their understanding of computing.

Keywords: National Museum of Computing, young people, learning guides

The Rationale for Opening our Doors to Young People

The Trustees of TNMoC have expressed a clear aim for the museum within its mission statement:

> *"To collect and restore computer systems particularly those developed in Britain and to enable people to explore that collection for inspiration, learning and enjoyment."*

Inspiration, learning and enjoyment are at the heart of what we aim to offer through our learning visit programme.

The Experience over the Past Year

The museum has organised a programme for supported visits that is open to schools, colleges and universities. Visits are supported by 'learning guides' and are a combination of a museum tour plus more interactive activities.

Over 3,000 young people visited the museum over the past year. Their ages ranged from as young as seven year olds through to mature students well into their twenties. Typically most are studying GCSE (aged 15/16) and post 16 courses (aged 17/18). Arriving from all parts of the UK, the students typically stay for 4 to 5 hours. They can be a group of 6 or 60 with most between 15 and 25 in number.

Figure 1: Student visit to the National Museum of Computing

Why Do They Come?

The visiting group's teachers express a wish for their students to better understand the history of computing, to support;

- the school curriculum generally, (typically pre 16s)
- the specification of a qualification, (usually GCSE or A/AS Level)
- the teacher's desire to extend and broaden their student's understanding and outlook, (e.g. to encourage a take up of Computing at GCSE)

What Do Young People Think About What They See?

It is important to understand how young people perceive the past and how they make sense of technologies way beyond their life experience. We attempt to encourage them to 'be there' and understand why computing developed in one direction compared to another. The visits are becoming less a collection of 'facts' associated with big machines and more a story that we can illustrate through our collection.

Young people have little experience of any 'past' through which to rationalise what they see. We try to help them get a better sense of time, social context, problem solving and the pace of development.

Their world is essentially 'now'. The computing of today is very bright, attractive and at the heart of their day to day experience. We find it important to link the past to the now, to help capture their attention and interest.

We want young people to better understand why we are where we are and the reasons for that journey. It is vital that they perceive a 'story' not a collection of facts and we want them to understand that they are living in the latest chapter of that story, certainly not at its end.

The past is offering students a chance to 'be there' and think about why decisions were made that have such great impact on what we do today. Where possible we ask students to use the 'story so far' to think about what might come next. 'Future gazing' is an increasingly important outcome for the museum. We would like to do more to listen to young people's predications, desires and fears for the future of computing.

What Next For Our Visits?

TNMoC realises that presenting the past is not enough. We have a responsibility to interpret and explain why we are where we are. Through our visit programme for students we are developing an experience, which will;

- Improve their knowledge and understanding of the past and its story,
- Encourage their perception of building on the shoulders of those from the past,
- Develop their respect and understanding for conservation and restoration,

- Offer opportunities that will, over time, ensure a new generation of enthusiasts, experts and volunteers that can continue looking after the history of computing,

Continuing, developing and improving our learning visit programme is an important contribution by TNMoC to securing the future for 'the past' through the next generation of young people and beyond.

Links and References:

TNMOC Learning: http://www.tnmoc.org/learn
OCR Awarding body: http://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/gcse-computing-j275-from-2012/
DFE Consultation on Computing KS1-4:
  http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/c/computing%2004-02-13_001.pdf
Computing at School: http://www.computingatschool.org.uk/