

Chapter 41

The Children's Virtual Museum of Small Animals: From the Schoolyard to the Internet

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ABSTRACT

As referenced in the chapter title, the Children's Virtual Museum of Small Animals is a website where multimedia documents are collected, based on the real experience of groups of children from many parts of the world. There, people can find photos and videos of insects and spiders, with scientific names and classification, place and date of discovery, and age of the class, group, or single kid who found it. There are also drawings, texts, and other things related to the real, possible, or fantastic meeting between children and small animals: voices from actual experiences, slide shows about "watching details," pictures of creations by artists close to kids' imagination, suggestions on how to use technical tools. Children there can act as protagonists in producing and sharing information, just like usually scientists, journalists, photographers, and video makers do, through the global information society. It is also the "extension" of a method, a way to address scientific issues with children, which has given regular, excellent results with hundreds of groups during many years. The author presents it as a work in progress, calling others to meet and exchange, suggest, and propose additions, also from different experiences and points of view. Digital means are proposed to show the "objects" of the study as well as the "process of studying" by children, with all their enthusiasm and surprise, as is evidenced particularly from their voices. Other children visiting the virtual Museum should be called to come and take part in it from their usual real life environment, making new discoveries and sending documents, sharing experiences and ideas, worldwide.

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INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to “the science of kids” by Gouthier & Manzoli, Pietro Greco tells about a five years old Albert Einstein looking at the compass needle and imagining “something beyond.” Quoting the words of the great physician, he writes that if “given” science can be considered almost as impersonal knowledge, science “in progress” as an aim of the human being is a very subjective, emotional field of experience.

Small animals are all around and every one of us can watch them. But many people of all ages are not used to considering themselves as possible scientists and researchers in the field: too complicated are classifications and too difficult it seems to take directly significant documents, such as pictures and videos. At school, studying taxonomy, classes and orders is often a far, boring subject.

Modern digital photo and video cameras, with their macro lenses powerful and easy to use, allow everyone to discover micro worlds, as it was impossible until few years ago. It's a real surprise, but also a great opportunity, especially for children, with their enthusiasm and curiosity, of naturally going exploring green spaces and trees, discovering many little, often unknown living beings, watching details and characteristic movements.

By watching from direct experience and through a virtually unlimited number of shots, also taxonomy becomes a “natural” thing, based on the real observation of the local fauna actually met and not on the abstract and often far, few images and texts of school books or “stranger” web pages. Children partake with enthusiasm, and also the quality of scientific learning is surprising.

Thanks to the easy, cheap and powerful digital tools and the World Wide Web, average children can take – it is the first time in history – an active part in production and distribution of information and even in scientific research. About how, up to what a level, an academic theory is still to be written, as documents from concrete experi-

ences are being produced, collected, ordered and studied. And we need also to go beyond the limits of the old book learning culture (“the paradigm of the text ... knowledge as a physical object,” Maragliano), beyond TV culture (“paradigm of flow ... knowledge as immersive environment”), as well as beyond the fashion stereotypes suggested by the market of digital devices (“paradigm of interactivity” but often only from a consumerist perspective).

Joining together still and moving pictures from the experience of unlimited groups of kids from their school gardens or yards, a huge amount of documents, all *produced by children*, are collected and can be exchanged, just like usually they do with cards. Teachers and eventually true scientists help to order all this stuff, and the internet allows the communication among any group from any country of the planet.

So it comes from the idea of the *Children's Virtual Museum of Small Animals*.

I have been working as a free lance in education during 30 years with thousands of children, making theater and videos, inventing stories and writing books, using computers, just basing on the natural capacity of children of learning and doing by playing, following and developing the pedagogic attitude known in Italy from the Seventies as “animazione teatrale.”

The particular project of the Museum comes from my personal experience in Brescia and other towns of northern Italy, from 1997 till now, carrying on small lessons (4-8 hours maximum) as an exterior expert in primary schools and kindergarten, provided by *Coop* (a system of cooperatives, the largest supermarket chain in the Country), as a part of its consumer education campaigns.

With different titles and subjects during the years, we have been providing simple didactic experiences to introduce children to natural environment, plants and animals, collecting a huge amount of documents, videos and photographs. We have made several videos and a CD ROM, with the Brescia Town Council, *Alla scoperta della*

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