

Confidence with a PDA

John Paul Sumner describes how a new project in Glasgow aims to help people explore themselves, as well as Kelvingrove's collections.

Glasgow's **Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum** re-opened in July 2006 to great press coverage after a £35 million restoration programme. A supplementary element to the project is an extension to the **Campbell Hunter Education Wing**, to create an 'Object Cinema' for young people. **The Hunter Foundation**, Sir Tom Hunter's venture philanthropist charity, generously helped us create this high-tech space in Kelvingrove to inspire young people.

Both Sir Tom and Glasgow Museums were keen to attract young people from excluded and disadvantaged backgrounds. Initial ideas were tested with a group of 200 teenagers, who contributed information on their attitudes and the values that inspire them. We discovered that the group considered museums in general 'Uncool'; 'Boring'; 'Geeky, unfashionable and dull'.

Another obstacle to inspiring young people is that their confidence and self-esteem can be low. A World Health Organization **study** found that Scottish kids lack confidence: they ranked 23rd out of 29 countries. The new **Scottish 'Curriculum for Excellence'** aims to enable young people to become confident individuals, with self-respect, secure values and ambition. But how to create confidence? How to instill ambition?

The Centre of New Enlightenment (TCoNE) is one response. A cinematic and digital tour experience for pre-booked groups, it involves a physical visit to Kelvingrove, supported by a pre-visit interactive CD and a post-visit bespoke **webpage**.


The key philosophy in developing TCoNE was that this experience should use technology as a tool to interpret the collections and create meaning for visitors. It was not about technology for technology's sake, and should not rely simply on high-tech effects. Our Educational Psychologist Consultant **Dr Alan McLean** described our target visitors, 10-14 year-olds, as intrinsically self-centred and self-absorbed. They are not really aware of the world outside their own sphere of influence. They are concerned with their looks, their status, and how others perceive them, and they're not really keen on engaging with adults. The subtle use of technology is a useful tool for communicating with this target group.

The visitor experience starts when they arrive in a white, dust free, high-tech room that challenges their preconceptions of a museum. We take a digital photo of each visitor, and their first name is entered into the system: an important first step because it establishes this as a personalised experience.

A facilitator then tells them how to use the Personal Digital Assistant (PDA – a handheld computer) that is used in the project. This takes about five minutes, and allows a colleague time to upload the visitor's identity – their photo and name – into their PDA via an infrared link. The visitors then see a short film, and are amazed to see their own photos and names integrated into the production. The novelty and personalised nature of this really impresses them. Adults are sometimes not



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Every atom in your body
was created inside a star

so keen! Then, using the PDAs, they embark on a journey through Kelvingrove to interact with the collections. The PDAs give them clues that become progressively easier to solve. The visitors find this part, 'the treasure hunt', most enjoyable.

The PDAs do not recite information and facts about the collections; instead they prompt the visitor to question how they feel about the painting, sculpture or specimen in front of them. An infrared beam at each object triggers the PDAs to activate, confirming that the visitor has reached the correct destination. Visitors' individual results and feedback are collated 'live' by a central server, to be displayed in the finale to the visit.

During this journey the collections are used as a tool for visitors to explore their own personality. Subjects addressed on the tour

include family bereavement, empathy with others, judgement in relationships, and confronting prejudice. All serious issues, but presented in fun-packed challenges. Will you make Elvis cry by telling him he's a terrible singer? Will you make friends with the refugee girl by telling her jokes? Can you read the emotions on other people's faces? On return to the room where the tour started, visitors' achievements are shown and their strengths revealed.

Our pilot phase in spring and summer 2008 catered for approximately 2,000 invited visitors. Our in-house evaluation was very encouraging – 92% said that the experience was fun, and 8% said it was just OK – 0% said it was boring. It was most rewarding that at the end of the experience 81% of visitors said that they felt confident or very confident.



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NEW
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At TCoNE we aim to use technology to tap in to visitors' emotions, and contribute to their interpretation of the collections in a new and personalised way. Professor John MacBeath of Cambridge University will have completed a more in-depth educational evaluation by the end of 2008, and will show whether we've demonstrated that technology can be more than a vehicle for facts, figures and fun.

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