Sniff, Swing and Swipe

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Sniff, Swing and Swipe was an interactive, e-learning technology project offered to Primary and Secondary schools in 2001 and 2002. It received the Distance Education Association (DEANZ) premier award for 2002 for excellence in distance, open, flexible and e-learning.

Auckland Zoo Education Service is continually enhancing programmes and projects being offered, to keep at the cutting edge of holistic learning. In 2001 the Education Service took the opportunity to extend the zoo's vision, to provide exciting experiences and inform people to care for wildlife, to non-visiting students.

The Behavioural Enrichment Team of keepers at Auckland Zoo is continually looking for new ways to encourage natural behaviours, to mentally stimulate and to promote activity amongst the animals in their care. Here was a great opportunity for a project where students would be solving real technological problems in a real context. Thus the project Sniff, Swing and Swipe was developed by Megabright, the Auckland Zoo Education Service and the NZ Learning Net. Using an online environment it was possible to offer the project to schools throughout New Zealand and one participating school from Brunei.

Sniff, Swing and Swipe was a ten-week interactive online programme designed to be user-friendly with easy hyper-links to make moving around the site quick and simple. A nominated keeper was our expert for each of the species and a zoo educator facilitated keeper feedback on the prototypes and the final products. The species chosen were Grant's zebra, slender-tailed meerkat, ring-tailed lemur and kea, providing students with a choice of animals whose behavioural patterns are quite varied.

A timeline page on the site took students through the design production and process from registration and sharing backgrounds to researching, designing and making model prototypes. Digital images and descriptions of the prototypes were submitted by email. Participants then modified their designs in the light of keeper feedback and submitted a digital image and description of their final prototype design. Designs selected by the keepers were produced as final products for use with each species. All participants received an online certificate of participation.

Sniff, Swing and Swipe encouraged students to work in groups drawing on strengths of individuals. The nominated keeping staff contributed information for web pages on successful behavioural enrichment already used at Auckland Zoo plus details of each of the four species' behavioural patterns. Hyper-links to other relevant web sites were also provided. A specifications web page outlined what the enrichment must have and what it might have in terms of materials used, food rewards, economy of production, safety and durability.

Individually and in teams students submitted 73 designs. A particular favourite of the keepers was a trampoline for the meerkat, designed so the meerkat could leap high and better perform sentry duty. A group of eleven-year-olds designed a solar-powered eagle to fly over the meerkat enclosure with the aim of encouraging natural behaviour and a nine-year-old home schooler, who had never seen a zebra, designed a barrel that gave food rewards through holes when rolled. To trial her prototype she used her pet horse. Another useful enrichment was an eight-year-old's kea food dispenser consisting of a bucket of water with some floating food suspended over the stream in the kea enclosure. The intention was that when the kea landed on the bucket, it would tip, sending water and food into the stream below.

Selected final products were trialled by the keepers. These were the zebra's carrot dispensing ball, a mealworm filled papier-mâché log buried in the meerkat enclosure and a papier-mâché balloon-shaped fruit dispenser for the lemur's night enclosure. All items were met with some degree of interest by the animals. The meerkats happily destroyed their 'log', consuming the mealworms as they went. The lemurs were a little overwhelmed by their enrichment, tentatively touching and sniffing the fruit balls on their first encounter. The zebra basketball showed a high degree of success with interest, tentative nuzzling and an extended longevity of usefulness.

Sniff, Swing and Swipe was a unique project providing learning opportunities to local and distanced students. The project definitely raised participants' knowledge of the specific species and their concern for those animals' welfare.

http://education.otago.ac.nz/NZLNet/candoatakzoo/home.html