IELA AWARD WINNER

Case Study: Engaging Learners Through Curiosity, Community, and a Sense of Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the collaboration between Smithsonian Affiliations and Desklight to develop a digital learning hub for Smithsonian's Affiliates Program. Anchored in human-centered design, the design process relied heavily on ongoing insights from current Affiliates to identify the most useful information to share in this online resource. These insights guided the development of unique Learning Excursions within the learning hub that offered curated worksheets, real-world impact scenarios, and helped prospective Affiliates envision what it would look like to join forces with Smithsonian. The success of this learning hub is attributed to stakeholder involvement, personalized learning, real-world examples, flexible accessibility, community building opportunities, and a design thinking approach. This work serves as a blueprint for organizations aiming to enhance programs, foster meaningful engagement, and drive transformative outcomes by using learning as a benefit.

KEYWORDS

digital learning, human-centered design, engagement, Smithsonian Affiliations, Desklight

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Smithsonian Affiliations: background information

Smithsonian Affiliations, a division of the renowned Smithsonian Institution, establishes long-term partnerships with museums, educational institutions, and cultural organizations. These collaborations allow the Smithsonian to reach millions of visitors annually, fostering a deeper understanding of the world to drive positive change [1].

In collaboration with Desklight, Smithsonian Affiliations had a vision to cultivate an immersive and supportive community for their Affiliates. The strategic objective for this partnership was to create an online learning hub that transcended conventional educational platforms, offering dynamic and personalized experience for Affiliates in every stage of affiliation.

1.2   Partnership with Desklight

Smithsonian Affiliations recognized the need to provide prospective Affiliates with comprehensive information and resources. To do this, Smithsonian Affiliates partnered with Desklight, a learning experience innovation company [2], with the objective to create an engaging and accessible online learning hub to showcase the benefits of collaborating with the institution.

Desklight centered the design of the learning hub on the needs of Affiliates by collaborating with Affiliates throughout the design process. This allowed the learning hub to not only provide valuable and relevant resources, but also to co-create a platform that resonated with the unique challenges and aspirations of the Smithsonian Affiliations community.

2   METHODOLOGY

2.1   Design process

Desklight initiated a comprehensive design process, beginning with ongoing input from current Affiliates. The iterative journey involved early exploration research, learning and content strategy development, and the implementation of final designs. Affiliates were active participants, ensuring that their needs and motivations were integral to the evolving strategy.

2.2   Contextual inquiry and co-creation

To gain a deep understanding of the needs and expectations of prospective Affiliates, Desklight employed contextual inquiry. Co-creation workshops followed, involving stakeholders in the effective development of content strategies. This collaborative approach ensured that the learning hub would authentically capture the diverse perspectives of the target audience.

2.3   User testing and UX prototyping

User testing and UX prototyping were integral components of the iterative design process. Smithsonian Affiliations and Desklight engaged in continuous refinement, responding to feedback to ensure the final product was not only intuitive and engaging but also effectively met the evolving needs of Affiliates.

3   LEARNING EXCURSIONS

The pinnacle of innovation within the learning hub is found in the introduction of Learning Excursions (see Figure 1). This groundbreaking feature is designed to provide Affiliates with a dynamic, hands-on experience. Each Learning Excursion is thoughtfully curated, offering an immersive journey through a series of worksheets and relevant information that serves as education tools and practical guides [3].
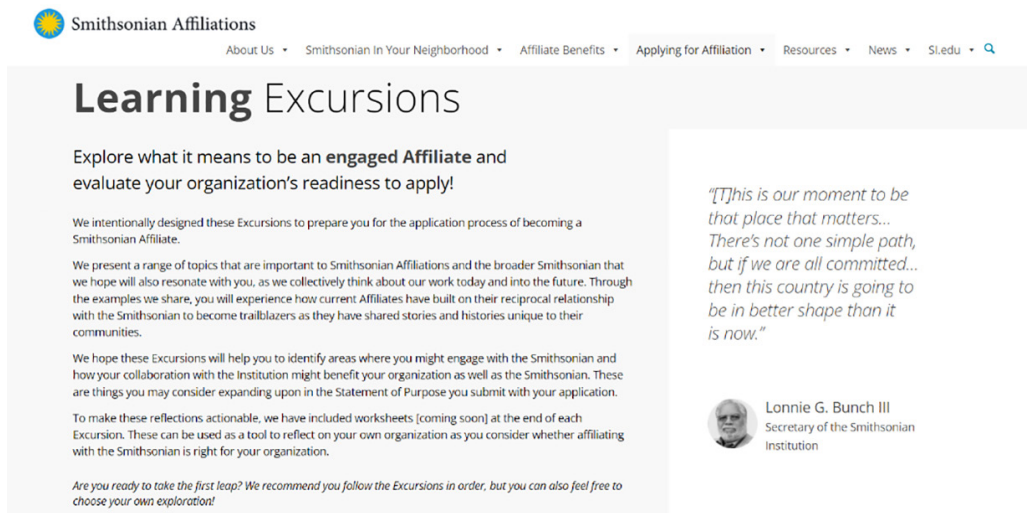
Fig. 1. The homepage of Smithsonian Affiliations' online learning hub. This page introduces the Learning Excursions and guides Affiliates toward the first steps of engaging with the Affiliate Program

3.1   Curated worksheets

The Learning Excursions house curated worksheets designed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by Affiliates (see Figure 2). These worksheets are not merely static documents, but are dynamic resources that incorporate answers to frequently encountered questions, detailed information on key topics, and exemplars of successful collaborations.

Fig. 2. An example of the worksheets found in each Learning Excursion, which offer opportunities for reflection and helps Affiliates gather the information they will need to apply to the program in bite-size ways

3.2   Interactive learning pathways

Affiliates embark on interactive learning pathways, navigating through curated worksheets to gain insights into affiliation essentials, success stories, and tools for overcoming common challenges. The pathways are structured to accommodate various experience levels, ensuring that both prospective and existing Affiliates find content tailored to their specific needs (see Figure 3).
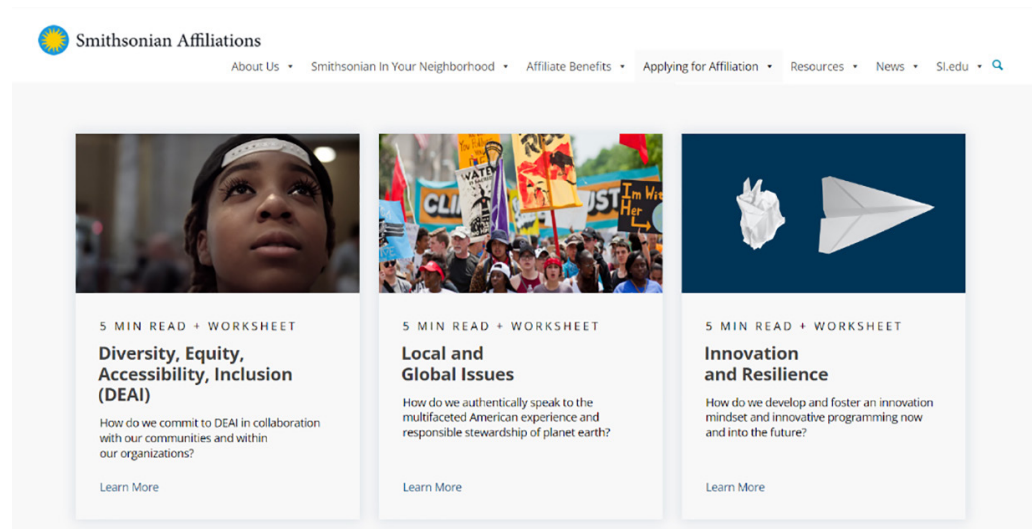
Fig. 3. Screenshot of the Learning Excursions within the learning hub. This allows Affiliates to choose what they would like to learn about, boosting engagement through a sense of exploration within the learning hub

3.3   Real-world impact scenarios

Learning Excursions are enriched with real-world impact scenarios, providing tangible examples of successful Affiliate partnerships and programs. These scenarios not only illustrate theoretical concepts but also serve as inspirational case studies, showcasing the transformative potential of collaboration within the Smithsonian Affiliations community (see Figure 4).

Fig. 4. Sample of the real-world examples offered in each Learning Excursion. These examples inspire Affiliates to learn from other Affiliates while showcasing the benefits of affiliating with Smithsonian

3.4 Continuous learning and skill building

Beyond static learning, Learning Excursions emphasize continuous learning and skill building. Affiliates are empowered with actionable steps and practical i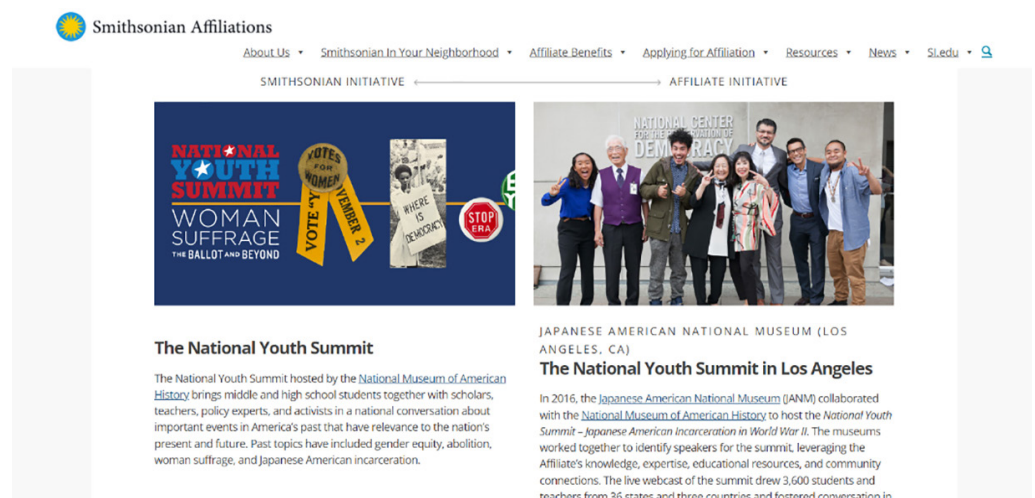nsights, allowing them to implement newfound knowledge immediately. The learning process becomes dynamic, adapting to the individual needs and aspirations of each Affiliate.

3.5 Accessible on-demand learning

Learning Excursions allow for on-demand accessibility. Affiliates can engage with the Learning Hub at their convenience, eliminating time constraints for busy staff members. This flexibility ensures that the learning experience is not only enriching, but also accommodates the diverse schedules of Affiliates. Each Learning Excursion is broken down into straightforward topics so Affiliates can pick what interests them with the time they have (see Figure 5).
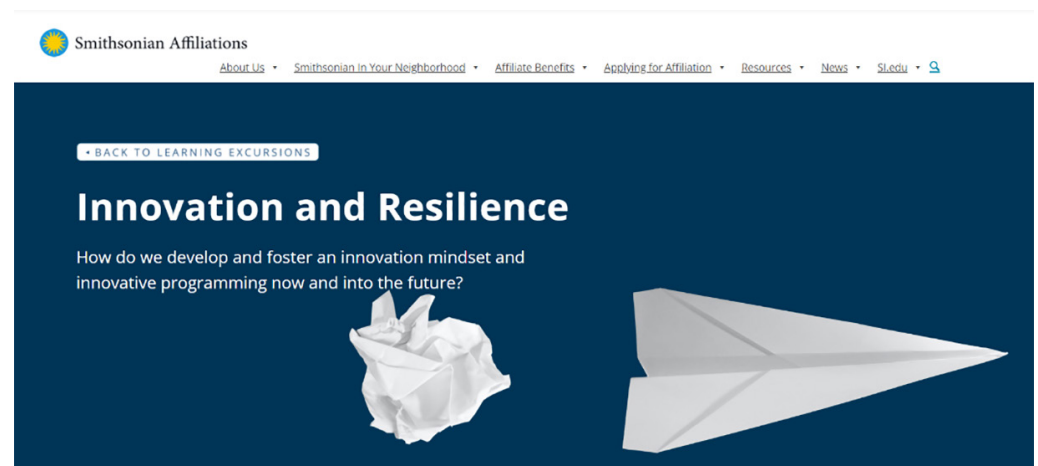
Fig. 5. Learning Excursion headers simplify the learning hub into approachable categories. Affiliates can easily navigate through the learning hub to learn based on their interests and their availability

3.6 Building a vibrant community

Learning Excursions extend beyond individual learning. They also foster a sense of community among Affiliates. By participating in shared learning experiences, Affiliates are connected, creating networking opportunities, and strengthening the bonds within the Smithsonian Affiliations community.

3.7 Visit the learning excursions

For an immersive understanding of the impactful Learning Excursions co-created by Smithsonian Affiliations and Desklight, explore the curated worksheets and real-world scenarios at https://affiliations.si.edu/learning-excursions/. This firsthand experience provides a vivid portrayal of the transformative learning journey offered within the learning hub.

4   CONCLUSION

The partnership between Smithsonian Affiliations and Desklight serves as a compelling blueprint for organizations seeking to redefine and elevate their collaborative learning initiatives. Beyond the learning hub, this case study unveils a strategic methodology and a set of principles that can be strategically applied across diverse industries. The emphasis on learner-centered design is not just a means to an end, but a fundamental philosophy that underlines the success of this program.

4.1   Strategic utilization of stakeholder insights

The cornerstone of success lies in the strategic utilization of stakeholder insights. By actively involving current Affiliates in the design process, the Learning Hub was not just tailored to meet their needs, but was a product of their collective aspirations. Organizations looking to replicate this success should prioritize ongoing collaboration with their user base, ensuring the end product resonates authentically with the audience it seeks to serve.

4.2   Personalized learning for diverse audiences

The success of the Learning Excursions lies in its ability to cater to the diverse needs and experience levels of Affiliates. This personalization is not a minor feature, but is a deliberate strategy to acknowledge and address the unique challenges faced by different segments within the Smithsonian Affiliations community. In any industry, a personalized learning approach recognizes the varied requirements of participants, fostering engagement and relevance.

4.3   Integration of real-world impact scenarios

The integration of real-world impact scenarios within Learning Excursions transforms theoretical concepts into actionable insights. This approach is not confined to the field of cultural institutions but can be extrapolated across industries. Demonstrating the tangible outcomes of collaborative efforts not only educates but inspires, serving as a powerful motivator for participants to envision and realize their potential impact.

4.4   Flexibility and accessibility in learning

The learning hub's commitment to on-demand accessibility is a lesson in adaptability for organizations in any sector. By accommodating the diverse schedules of Affiliates, the program ensures that learning is not a rigid, time-bound activity. This flexibility is pivotal in sustaining engagement, especially for time-constrained professionals across various industries.

4.5   Fostering community and collaboration

Beyond individual learning, the success of the Learning Hub is rooted in its ability to foster a vibrant community among Affiliates. Organizations seeking to build

strong networks and collaborations should take note of the emphasis put on shared learning experiences. By creating opportunities for networking and relationship-building, the learning hub establishes a sense of community that goes beyond the digital realm, influencing the broader ecosystem of Smithsonian Affiliations.

4.6   Utilize design thinking in digital platforms

This case study outlines a robust design thinking process that can be a guiding principle for organizations aiming to innovate in digital platforms. The iterative design journey, grounded in ongoing input, contextual inquiry, co-creation, and continuous refinement, showcases the power of thoughtful design. By prioritizing the end user in the design process, organizations can create engaging learning experiences through digital platforms that not only meet immediate needs but evolve with the changing landscape. These insights can be applied across industries to enhance programs, foster meaningful engagement, and drive transformative outcomes.

5   REFERENCES

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