

Questions fuel 'Ask A Biologist' website success

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The Arizona State University online children's science portal, "Ask A Biologist," provides the backdrop for an editor's pick in the Oct. 12 online edition of Public Library of Science (PLoS). In the article "Ask A Biologist: Bringing Science to the Public," ASU's Charles Kazilek, the creative force behind the popular site (with a million or more visitors each year), points to the power of providing science education in a format that the public, quite literally, asks for.



Image by Sabine Deviche

Many of the 2,500 pages of educational content available on the "Ask A Biologist" website have grown directly from requests or queries from users. Using the simple question and answer form – the "Ask a" in "Ask A Biologist" – Kazilek (known as Dr. Biology in cybercircles), has received more than 25,000 queries from parents, students, teachers and life-long learners about all aspects of biology.

"A key-stroke can bring the world to one's laptop, but nothing substitutes for a living, breathing expert," says Kazilek, director for technology integration and outreach in ASU's School of Life Sciences.

The experts backing up Dr. Biology are more than 150 volunteer scholars at ASU, which include professors, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in the School of Life Sciences and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The popularity of the site has also attracted an army of off-campus volunteers from around the world.

"Scientists, educators and science Web developers often don't realize that great graphics and in-depth content are only part of why 'Ask A Biologist' is popular," Kazilek says. "People still need people."

This key theme is reiterated throughout Kazilek's article in the PLoS journal. A real person not only offers insight into why the sky is blue and whether ants can see at night, the interactions between users and experts expand public understanding of who scientists are as people and, he says, alters users' relationship with cutting-edge science.

Catering to that relationship has also fueled expanded multimedia content on Kazilek's site, including a podcast competition where local public school children come to ASU to interview scientists (askbiologist.asu.edu/explore/watch_listen).

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The PLoS article predicts that the role of "Ask a" websites in science learning will continue to expand. Though these sites were some of the earliest on the Net, akin to primitive search tools, Kazilek says that with investment and energy the approach is extraordinarily resilient in an electronic medium whose only static feature is change.

Kazilek points to the function that "Ask a" websites can play in helping Internet users negotiate the sheer volume and rapid change of information on the Web. "'Ask a' formats offer up-to-date information, more clearly resolve competing claims and minimize misinformation," Kazilek says.

Dr. Biology's diverse audience is proof that online science education resources have much to offer learners at multiple levels. "From 'K to gray,'" quips Kazilek. "Invest energy in something creative and fun and people will come. The key is giving them what they 'Ask a' for."