

What are our assumptions about what it means to do Informal Science Education on the Web? Can we be explicit about those assumptions? What are our sacred cows?

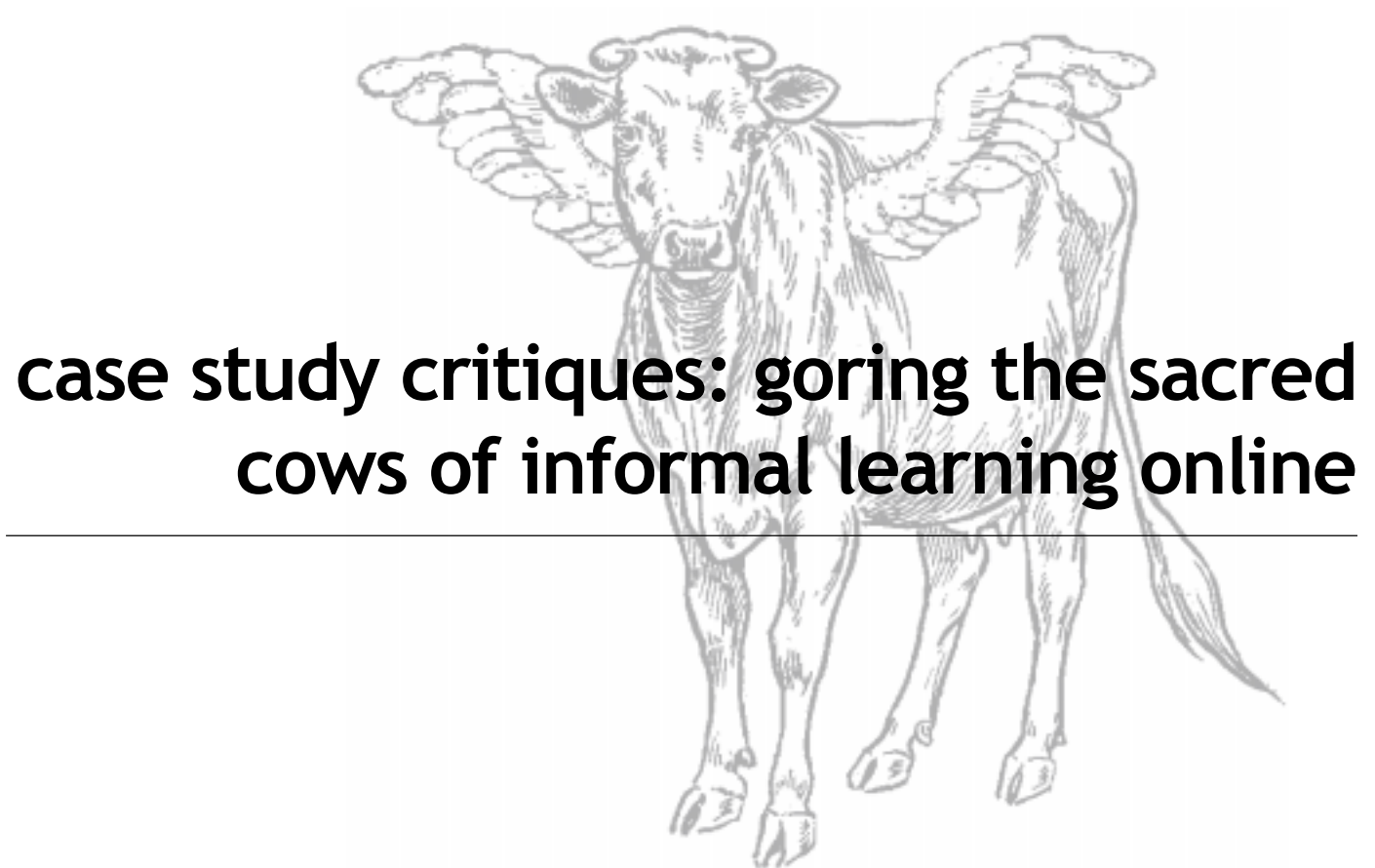
Is it desirable or possible to use the established conventions for Old Media and on-site ISE online?

What other opportunities are available online that traditional ISE efforts could not realize?

What must we leave behind? What is worth keeping?

**WEB DESIGNS FOR
INTERACTIVE
LEARNING
CONFERENCE**

June 15-18, 2005
Ithaca, New York



case study critiques: goring the sacred cows of informal learning online



Introduction

For better or worse, I was responsible for the format for the critique sessions, as well as for matching the case study sites with critique presenters. One of the goals was to avoid the kind of dreary case study show-and-tell that we frequently experience at Web conferences when people stand up and say, “This is how we did it.”

At the same time, we wanted to be very concrete in our discussions, so we have selected some sites as examples to help us think about what is important, what is challenging, and what we want to emulate and carry forward, without getting too bogged down in technical details.

We also want to bring the spirit of positive, friendly discussion to the critique sessions. We want this to resemble an art charrette in which participants have shared perspectives and shared reactions to a piece of art. The Museums and the Web conferences have instituted a format in the last couple of years that may serve as an example of the type of thing we are going for—a “crit room” that focuses on a structured, positive critique of different sites.

Overview

Steven Allison-Bunnell
Senior Producer & Writer, Educational Web Adventures

The Purpose

The central goal of the critiques and their associated discussions is to help us examine the models, objectives, and assumptions that we all have about what it means to do Informal Science Education on the Web. Conventions and formats for Old Media and on-site ISE are well established. Is it desirable or possible to use them online? What other opportunities are available online that traditional ISE efforts could not realize? What must we leave behind? What is worth keeping? Let’s gore some sacred cows! Needless to say, the idea is not to find fault with the sites themselves so much as it is to help us have concrete conversations about the issues that identify real-world challenges and solutions.

The Format

Example Sites

Reexamining Sacred Cows

The three critique sessions are structured in pairs, each featuring two example Web sites and two critique presenters. Each session focuses on a “Sacred Cow”—a main theme framed in terms of an assumption about informal learning Web design that warrants closer examination. These main themes are stated in a deliberately provocative manner to stimulate us to react and reflect.

Two sites were selected for each Sacred Cow to highlight different aspects of that theme. The sites were

not paired to create an artificial competition concerning which site approach is best. We strongly feel that there are many possible solutions, approaches, and frameworks to solving common problems in the field. The example sites were selected and paired to highlight that rich diversity and creativity.

Contentions

Each case study site was given a “Contention”—a statement about the purpose, nature, and success of the site that illuminates some aspect of the Sacred Cow. These were phrased as affirmative statements in a deliberate effort to accentuate what is genuinely positive about them (and there is a lot to like about them all!). Because most of the sites are very large and embody many different conceptual, design, and technical principles, the Contention is meant to focus the presentation of the example sites. Presenters were asked to orient their remarks around the Contention, if possible, or to reframe the Contention while keeping the focus on the stated Sacred Cow.

Critiques

The critiques are framed around a “Provocation”—a question about the site that may at first sound negative, but is intended to help us dig deeper. The Provocations each include pro and con aspects, and are on the table as food for thought rather than entrenched positions.

Critique presenters do not necessarily personally subscribe to the position suggested by the Provocation. The presenters were selected according to their interests and experience, and because of the useful insights and further penetrating questions they could offer concerning the example sites and the larger issues.