

Return of Boaty McBoatface

By Susan Wenzlick

OK, I know I said no more on collaboration for a while, but I left you all hanging on the Boaty McBoatface thing. The UK National Environment Resource Council is building a fancy new polar research ship and held a national naming contest, in which the winner by 124,000 votes was the RSS Boaty McBoatface. Not what NERC expected. They are now backpedaling and have announced they will review the entries but are unlikely to use the winning name. My last post was about different ways NERC could have collaborated for a better outcome, but I didn't go into what that would look like. NERC is almost certainly saying, So, Ms. Smartypants Blogger, what would YOU have done for that project?

Dear NERC:

If you were really committed to engaging the public in your shipbuilding project and sharing your research and education with a broader audience, you could have used the Best. Collaboration. Ever. method to do it in a much more effective way. (Yes, Best. Collaboration. Ever. is my corn-fed, hopelessly Midwestern name for that approach. If its Portland originators had named it, I'm sure their name would be ironic.)

The Best. Collaboration. Ever. used three levels of collaboration to make a museum exhibit on contemporary Chinese design relevant to a broad audience in Portland, Oregon. Collaborators participated as Creators, Commentators, and Consumers.

For NERC's Best. Collaboration. Ever., instead of a national naming contest which netted you the overwhelmingly popular name of RRS Boaty McBoatface, you could have held a contest for UK schools only. The winning school's teachers and students become the Creators. They choose the name for the ship, and the teachers are the bad cops who don't let Boaty McBoatface get out the door. The winning school gets live monthly video streams during the shipbuilding and the research vessel's first year or two out at sea. The teachers send you ideas for the video streams that coincide with their lesson plans and their kids get to ask NERC questions during the stream. One of the NERC staff visits the school annually to touch base. You create a scholarship for kids from the winning school to go to science camp.

Then, you make your streams available on a NERC YouTube channel for every other school in the world to watch, and though the students and teachers couldn't ask questions live, they could submit questions to your web site. You use these questions for a Q/A on the web site, or a blog targeted to teachers. You invite teachers to share their classroom experiences and unique ways they use your educational materials on your website. These are your commentators.

This project is cool and features cute kids, so the media would naturally be all over this. Media coverage lasts for the long term, not just during a naming contest. There must be space on the BBC's equivalent of PBS kids' programming, or the Today Show, where short spots about the

project's progress could be broadcast. Viewers could also check out your web site and YouTube channel where your classroom videos are available. They could see and learn without participating in the project. These are your consumers.

Instead of superficial engagement that lasts as long as the media cycle then forgets the RRS Whatever, you get broad, long-term engagement and educational benefits that go way beyond Boaty McBoatface.

Yes, this is a much more substantial commitment of staff and money and time. But it fulfills your goals much more effectively than a naming contest.

Sincerely,

Susan the Smartypants Blogger

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