The Expanding Role of Virtual Programming in Children's Museums

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Volume 4 of the ACM Trends Report series, *Museums in a Pandemic*, reported findings from regularly conducted surveys by Knology and Association of Children's Museums (ACM) about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the children's museum field. Museums closed their doors to the public in March 2020 at the start of the pandemic. More than 70% of ACM member museums were offering virtual programming by June 2020. Last year, museums slowly began reopening for in-person visits and had reached 61% by March 2021. The Spring 2021 ACM COVID impact survey suggested that about two-thirds of museums (*n* = 43 out of 67) were interested in continuing to offer virtual programming or engaging with communities online even after pandemic restrictions lifted.

In October 2021, Knology and ACM launched the first in an annual series of discussion forums that aim to address emerging questions from the field. Each forum features a panel of external experts that share recent research that might be applicable to the work of children's museum operations. Presentations are followed by breakout sessions where museum professionals can consider the implications of that research to their practice, and explore their perspectives on the theme more broadly.

Based on the results of the impact survey, this first discussion forum focused on virtual programming. It is important to note that by October 2021, when the discussion forum took place, 91% of ACM members had reopened for in-person activities. We invited leaders and educators from ACM members to share their perspective about virtual programming. A total of 39 leaders and educators from museums across the United States attended the discussion forum. They represented museums that had offered virtual programming during the pandemic, and museums that had not done so. For this conversation, we defined virtual or online programming as programming or exhibits that require at-home or on-the-go screen time. This definition of virtual programming included activity kits if they offered a virtual or online engagement component.

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For the October 2021 discussion forum, we invited four experts to present their research. ACM Trends Report 5.1 focuses on the discussions that followed those presentations. During those conversations, the attendees explored the role of virtual programming as part of their institutional missions and culture, as well as their impact assessments of that programming.

The forum discussions included meeting attendee polling, and a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) exercise with attendees based on their own experiences and institutions. This was followed by a general discussion about the future of virtual programming and possible needs to make that vision a reality.

Polling Results

We conducted live polling during the discussion forum, which helped to benchmark attendees' opinions to support the discussion. These polls are not considered representative of the entire field. Rather, they represent the attendees' perspectives.

Most attendees reported that they had either expanded or started virtual programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic ($n = 21$). A little over half said that they planned to continue offering virtual programming in future ($n = 16$). We also asked museums to select the *types of virtual programming* they have done from a list generated from data gathered from the Spring 2021 COVID impact survey. The most common offering was take-home activity kits that included a live or pre-

recorded virtual activity led by museum staff. This was followed by a virtual story time, and other pre-recorded and live videos on social media. Other activities that museums provided included free-play prompts, interactive games, and virtual museum tours.

SWOT Analysis Results

The SWOT exercise aimed to better understand museums' experiences with and perceptions of virtual programming. We asked all attendees to participate whether they offered virtual programming or not so that we could get a mix of perspectives.

Strengths

During the pandemic, many museum educators were tasked with filming virtual education programming for their institutions. As a result, museums invested in infrastructure and systems their staff needed to create and deliver these programs. This allowed museums to build up a library of virtual resources that they can provide to different audiences and share with other institutions. For example, one attendee said that, after participating in the museum's virtual education programming, some parents of homeschooled children were interested in in-person learning experiences with their children at the museum.

Virtual programming has had other benefits for children's museums, including *increased accessibility*. Many respondents said it helped make their programming more accessible to families. Some respondents also shared that the pandemic was an opportunity for their staff to develop new skills in support of virtual programming.

Lastly, many respondents said that working on virtual programming helped them strengthen existing partnerships, particularly with schools and educators. For example, one museum developed a website that showcases content from their exhibits, which they shared with local educators.

Weaknesses

The limits of virtual programming meant the museums had to think creatively about how to engage with families in their communities. Feedback from museum staff and

leadership indicated that some felt that switching to virtual programming took away many of the elements of play they curated for their in-person visitors. Some respondents indicated they struggled with creating programming because virtual learning pedagogy was unknown or unfamiliar to them. Museums also had to consider the trade-offs and benefits to children's learning between pre-recorded and live virtual sessions.

Museum staff described challenges with developing the skills needed to provide virtual programming. Some staff described difficulties with forming connections online audiences. Not all museum educators were comfortable with presenting content in an online format. Because of these experiences, some museum staff wanted resources about best practices for providing programming in virtual environments.

Museums either released or furloughed on average between 40 – 55% of their staff (ACM Trends Report 4.12). We heard from several participants that as a result they lacked the time and resources to produce high quality virtual programming. Some museums chose not to produce any virtual programming. Also, a few museums charged a fee, which may have prevented some families from accessing their programming.

Opportunities

Several attendees said they needed resources to help them continue providing virtual programming. One suggestion was to develop a platform where museums can exchange curriculum, media assets, and other resources related to providing effective virtual programming. Some museums have already taken steps to begin sharing resources. For example, one attendee said their institution was working with a consortium of other museums in California to collaboratively develop five activity kits that include video components they would share equally as a resource. By pooling their resources and working collaboratively on the content, these museums created higher quality kits and videos for their communities, while limiting costs and burdens on museum resources.

Some museums described opportunities for continuing virtual programming in partnership with local schools.

These partnerships help extend the museum experience beyond in-person interactions to include learning in other contexts. One museum, which created a website with lesson plans for educators during the pandemic, now works with the local teachers. They are now developing targeted field trips that have a classroom component and an in-person or virtual experience.

Threats

The primary threats to continuing virtual programming in children's museums are time, energy, and return on investment given the variability in attendance. Creating virtual programming can be a strain on both staff capacity and museum resources. One museum leader said they would need to staff a department dedicated to virtual programming to continue providing this type of service. Another museum leader said their pandemic virtual programming was necessary, but likely beyond their means when the museum returned to full operations due to staffing and budget constraints.

Many attendees felt that the return on investment was not sufficient for staff to continue virtual programming at their institutions. Concerns included the lower revenue from virtual programming when compared to live in-person programming. A few mentioned they were redirecting resources from virtual programming back toward reopening activities. One attendee said their museum's partnership with Amazon Affiliates had helped to reduce their spending on virtual programming and enabled them to provide free or low-cost activity kits to families. But most leaders said that continuing to provide this kind of programming may not be sustainable without additional sources of funding.

Another critical concern raised in this session was *Zoom Fatigue*, the sense that interacting on screens had become overwhelming for working families and school age children. Attendees observed that many parents and caregivers who were responsible for supporting their families and helping their children with formal online learning seemed less inclined to engage in additional virtual learning with museums.

Virtual Programming in Future

During the pandemic, museums reimagined their operations and service, and this has affected the staff. As COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, many museums have re-opened their doors to in-person visits. As of March 2022, 92% of ACM members globally are open the public (up from 91% when the discussion forum took place in October 2021). This has implications for the future of virtual programming in children's museums. Museum staff shared their perspectives based on their experiences during the pandemic, and their thoughts on continuing to provide online content in future.

Museum staff said that virtual programming offered during the pandemic was most successful when it was done in partnership with local schools and educators. They also said that partnership was the most sustainable way to continue offering virtual programming in future. However, they noted that there was a lot less demand for virtual programming now that children's museums and schools have re-opened for in-person activities.

Most attendees reported that they were re-assigning staff and resources from virtual programming back to their traditional in-person activities. Several mentioned the limited staff time available to keep offering virtual programming, even though they felt it was valuable extension of services. Some children's museum staff reported developing a backlog of virtual content they could roll out slowly over time, but most had no plans to develop new virtual content once full operations resume.

Overall, attendees were reluctant to continue with virtual programming without financial sponsorship. They reported that the funding for virtual programming during COVID-19 restrictions came from grants, but even that was relatively minimal. They suggested that hiring additional staff who would be responsible for fundraising, planning and executing virtual programming might allow these programs to continue.

Key Takeaways

There are a few important takeaways from the responses to the polling questions and the outcomes of the SWOT exercise:

- Education was the primary focus for most virtual programming during the pandemic. Many museums became education partners, providing content and space that could be used by both educators and parents;
- Virtual programming has helped museums support and serve new audiences in their communities;
- Some museums have formed partnerships with local schools and/or nearby children's museums to collaborate on creating and providing virtual programming;
- Children's museums would be open to an online exchange platform to help them build customized and branded virtual programming in collaboration with others;
  and
- Museums said they would require additional funding or new revenue streams, staff, and training resources to continue providing virtual programming in future.

References

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