ASU?s Ask A Biologist website wins prestigious SPORE prize

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The American Association for the Advancement of Science has chosen Arizona State University's "Ask A Biologist," an online resource for children's science education, to receive the *Science* Prize for Online Resources in Education, or SPORE, award.

The prize, established to "encourage innovation and excellence in education, as well as the use of high-quality online resources by students, teachers, and the public," recognizes the website's creative content and its developer, Charles Kazilek, director of technology integration and outreach in ASU's School of Life Sciences in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

What set Arizona's Ask A Biologist apart? Reading interventionist Joan Howell with the Phoenix Elementary School District, a teacher for 20 years, says that it is Kazilek. "Charles simply knows how to connect with children," she says. "He has combined science and art and created a wonderful vehicle for learning. It keeps you aware of the Web, it's something local, it shows that ASU is a leading institution and it's infectious. We are very thankful at our school and in our district. He has opened up a world of possibility."

Kazilek's virtual world is kaleidoscopic, encompassing coloring pages, image and zoom galleries, games, stories, science career pages, teacher's resources, experiments, and language translations into Spanish and French. Entrancing more than a million visitors a year from across the globe, favorite offerings from amongst the 2,500 pages of content are the Ugly Bug contest and the Ask A Biologist's podcast, which injects children's voices, as co-hosts, in the website's audioprogramming (http://askabiologist.asu.edu/explore/watch_listen [2]).

"The Ugly Bug contest teaches kindergarteners to sixth graders how to look at things closely," says Howell. "The details of the bugs inspire all sorts of questions. It's a wonderful skill for children to develop. They don't even realize that they are learning."

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The numbers are telling: more than 10,735 votes have been cast to determine 2010's ugliest bug since it debuted on Oct. 31. Locked in battle are top contenders, the assassin bug and yellow dragonfly (http://askabiologist.asu.edu/activities/ubc [4]).

Inspiration for the unusual comes easily to Kazilek, a double-ASU alumnus with a bachelor's degree in fine arts and a master of natural sciences degree, an avid photographer and aficionado of microcomputers and microscopy. Kazilek embraces the world, its challenges and puzzles with the same questioning approach as his charges.

Kazilek credits the perplexed public with much of the website's content development. "The Q&A feature has been one of the greatest tools for developing content for Ask A Biologist," he says. "It is our barometer to measure what topics and concepts excite interest, are fresh and intriguing and might be important to add to the website."

Besides showing that science is fun and answering more than 25,000 biology questions from children, teachers and parents in the last decade, Kazilek has also actively pursued building connections with the public he serves. In one year alone, he met face-to-face with 1,600 educators and nearly 1,000 K-12 students in Arizona, Washington, D.C, Indiana, and Texas.

Kazilek has likewise worked to expand his online partnerships, which have broadened his ability to expand online access to science learning. The more than 150 contributors involved in Ask A Biologist, including scientists, artists and experts from ASU and other learning institutions in the United States, such as Harvard and MIT, have grown to embrace the talents of volunteers from Panama, Columbia, India, France, England and Canada. Kazilek has also worked to bring other virtual

technologies into K-12 classrooms to expand real-time access of youth to scientists at ASU and the Smithsonian Institution.

Laura Martin, director of science interpretation with the Arizona Science Center, points out that she and her staff can "refer students, teachers and families to his exceptional resources knowing that they offer good science, good pedagogy and up-to-date modes of access."

Martin is also quick to acknowledge Kazilek's enthusiasm, energy, generosity and "the creativity that has been invaluable to many of our own science center projects."

ASU and Kazilek join 11 other awardees selected in 2010 from entries from the United States and abroad. Other institutions recognized by the AAAS include Baylor College of Medicine, Carnegie Mellon University, Harvard, MIT, Johns Hopkins University, Rutgers University and the universities of Utah, Washington and Johannesburg, South Africa. A complete list of winners and their essays can be found at http://www.sciencemag.org/site/special/spore [5].

AAAS, who publishes the journal *Science,* created the SPORE competition to recognize that "being an outstanding science educator is as valuable to society as being an exceptional research scientist."

ASU and the School of Life Sciences have offered fertile ground for Kazilek's development of Ask A Biologist, the launch of a podcast series and other innovative educational approaches. Robert Page, dean of the School of Life Sciences, says "We, as a public institution, have a responsibility to reach out and make what we do accessible and relevant. Ask a Biologist is premier example of how we can and should engage the public in understanding what we do as scientists and the world around us."

SOURCE [6]

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