Freelancing in Environmental Education
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ABSTRACT

Freelance educators are uniquely positioned to connect the public to history, culture, and nature in a variety of informal learning environments. The contributions freelance educators make to lifelong learning is unknown. Who are freelance educators? How do they create change? If you’re a freelance educator, share your story.

CONTACT

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PROJECT HISTORY

I have been a freelance educator since 2002. Prior to this I taught biology as adjunct faculty at two community colleges. Over the years I have met many independent professionals working in natural resource fields and environmental education and have observed how they communicate with the public at community events, environmental education events, lectures, and workshops.

It is because of my experiences that I began to wonder about how many freelance environmental educators there are in the world and what it is they actually do. My experiences in the field caused me to formulate the following hunch:

Informal freelance educators engage with the public and create change in many settings. The change they create does not receive the attention it deserves.
What nothing but a thoughtful hunch, I launched The Freelance Condition and Lifelong Learning in Communities, an investigation into the contributions independent educators make to lifelong learning. Since then my hunch has established some footing thanks to the stories freelance educators have shared with me. With each story, the list of places freelance educators engage with the public gets longer and the ways they engage the public, more inspiring.

In the survey I created for this project, I reference the usual places where one might engage with freelance educators - places such as museums, nature centers, and gardens. What educators have told me to date in their own words, is that they work in 39 other settings as well. I expect this list to become longer as my investigation continues.

I think of freelance educators as interpreters, even though they might not identify with the title. These interpreters may be artists who are inspired by nature or people with full-time jobs who freelance on the side connecting people with nature, place, and community.

In the fields of interpretation and environmental education, there is a lot of organizational thinking. A lot of thinking and advocacy that supports the excellent work of museums, nature centers, zoos, gardens, aquaria, and cultural and heritage sites. Support for freelance educators, however, does not appear to be as established.

I know freelance educators are out there and I have heard them make noise at conferences, but not a lot of noise. Because of my own experiences as a freelance educator, I felt it was time to act on my hunch and to describe who freelance educators are and what they do.

In an era where so much learning occurs outside of school and online, and in an age where information about the environment is disputed, it is worth our time to understand how freelance environmental educators work in communities. Understanding what freelance environmental educators do is important because it provides insight into how the public learns about nature and the environment as they move through life. I assert many people learn from freelance educators working in informal learning environments.

Where does the public learn from these independent professionals? How are they learning it?
These are some of the questions I hope to answer.

EARLY INSIGHTS

- So far, informal educators in different stages of their career have participated in the survey. Thirty-eight percent have worked in informal education for 0-9 years, 26% for 10-20 years, and 35% for more than 20 years. (n=34)

- More than 50% of the freelance educators completing the survey identify most with the role of educator or interpreter.

- More than 60% of the freelance educators surveyed participate as exhibitors or vendors at public events.

- More than 85% of the freelance educators surveyed feel their work has had a positive impact on peoples’ lives.

These insights represent only a small peek at the information shared with me so far. Much more information has been gathered through open-ended survey questions and the conversations with freelance educators I have conducted in person and through online tools such as the Zoom video conferencing platform.

FIND OUT MORE

To receive updates about this project, I invite you to join my mailing list.

I have two mailing lists, one specifically for freelance educators and one for individuals who are not freelance educators but who are interested in this project. Select your preferred mailing list and join at https://www.taniamarien.com.

ABOUT TANIA

Tania Marien has an M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies (Biology & Student Learning) and a professional certificate in Free-choice Learning. She has encouraged an interest in plants and nature through art, science, and interpretation since 2002.