Iraqi Artifacts Go Online

Internet giant Google has announced that it is photographing thousands of artifacts at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and will post the images online early this year. The museum houses artifacts dating back to the Stone Age, including items made by the Sumerians, Assyrians, and other civilizations that have inhabited the region throughout the millennia. Looters stole thousands of objects in the chaos following the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein (Science, 1 August 2003, p. 582). Museum officials now estimate that about a third of the roughly 15,000 looted objects have been returned, and the museum reopened in February 2009 (although so far, tourist traffic has been light). Google plans to post about 14,000 images, which should help make the collections more accessible to people around the world.

Learning With Style


There’s a huge industry out there on “learning styles.” It’s based on the theory that people learn best when taught in a manner compatible with their style. But now a team of psychologists argues that the literature offers no evidence that such “matching” improves learning.

The authors, headed by Harold Pashler of the University of California, San Diego, set a rigorous standard: For any experiment to be valid, it must randomly assign students to two different teaching conditions on a particular subject, then give them all the same test. The theory is supported if students who prefer teaching style “A” do better than students who prefer style “B” when style “A” is used—and that the reverse is true with teaching style “B.” Pashler’s team reports that very few studies used this design and concludes that if a teaching technique is good, it’s better for everyone regardless of learning style. The lack of hard evidence suggests that “people out there are selling tests and packages and workshops without having any remote idea whether the methods they promote provide any real educational benefits,” says Pashler. The report appeared in the December issue of Psychological Science in the Public Interest.

Psychologist Robert Sternberg of Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, says the paper “does not even begin to be a serious review of the field. … [In] limiting themselves to random-assignment studies, they ignored almost the entire literature.” Just so, says Pashler—most of it is “weak.”

The buzz from President Barack Obama’s visit in June still hasn’t worn off for Egypt’s scientists. Among the promises Obama made was “a new fund” and “centers of scientific excellence” for science and technology development in the Middle East. Last month, Obama named Egyptian Nobel Prize–winning physicist Ahmed Zewail—now at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena—as the United States’s “scientific envoy” to the Middle East. Science spoke with Tareq Hussein, a particle physicist and president of the Egyptian Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, about the developments.

Q: Do Egyptian scientists have ideas for the new U.S. funds?

Zewail was here 2 weeks ago to discuss the ideas. One idea is to give real funding to [Jordan’s research synchrotron] SESAME. It needs about $100 million. Another area of interest is solar energy. We are talking with Italy and Spain about building a prototype electrical grid, linking to Europe with cables under the Mediterranean. But an even higher priority than energy is food security. We are working very hard on agricultural biotechnology. We really need crops that are drought-resistant, even growing when irrigated with salty water.

Q: Are you worried that the Egyptian public might reject genetically modified food?

I’m confident it will not be a problem. People in the Middle East are more worried about poverty and hunger.

Q: Obama’s vision is for science to promote peace in the region. Will that include Israel?

Egypt is going to wait until Israel finds a peaceful solution with the Palestinians before directly collaborating in science.