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PRE-PRINT Author's Draft

R. David Lankes

It's a familiar folk tale. Three blindfolded men are put into a room with an elephant. One grabs the animal's trunk and concludes he has found a snake. The second man runs into the elephant's body and tells his friends that he ran into a wall. The third man grabs the elephant's tail and announces he has found a dangling rope. The moral of this story is that one can rarely understand the whole from its parts. The authors of the commissioned papers in this issue of GIQ have clearly pointed out that ERIC has a similar problem on its hands.

In 1999 The Office of Educational Research and improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education commissioned 5 papers to begin assessing the ERIC program. It has since allocated funds for a more comprehensive program assessment to occur in 2001. What the authors of these papers knew at the start of their work was that the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) is in fact operated through 19 contracts and has been in operation for some 35 years. However, what they soon found out was that to some ERIC is a database; to others ERIC is a publisher of monographs and synthesis pieces. To still others ERIC is a website. Some call ERIC AskERIC. Some call ERIC the Gateway to Educational Materials or the Virtual Reference Desk¹ or NPIN. To some ERIC is a service for researchers. To others it's a service for teachers or parents. Did the world know that ERIC helped shape international standards for thesauri and educational metadata? Did the world know that ERIC mounted one of the first 100 websites ever? Why didn't the world know about these things? Because while we love to talk about "ERIC", in truth there are many ERIC's.

While the authors of the commissioned papers acknowledge that ERIC has been a success over its 35-year history, they also point out that its success has not been distributed evenly across all ERIC activities nor has its success been completely institutionalized within ERIC. For example, while each ERIC Clearinghouse has its own website, there are few common standards across these sites and there is no way to search all this information centrally. The only unifying element of the ERIC system is the ERIC Database, and as both Stuart Sutton and Clifford Lynch point out, the database in its present form is becoming increasingly marginalized in the face of the current Internet environment.

It is time for a change. ERIC must create a unified system. It is time to transform the ERIC database into the ERIC Knowledge Base. The knowledge base would be comprised of a unified metadata framework that would include a wide variety of multimedia materials. It would also include varying levels of description (from the current ERIC document resume to simple automated descriptions of disappearing web resources),

¹ While both GEM and VRD have recently moved from ERIC to the Office of the CIO in the Department of Education, both began as ERIC Special Projects.

varying levels of duration (from months for conference announcements to decades for research articles), and varying levels of synthesis (from digests to datasets). In addition to the traditional materials ERIC collects and produces, the Knowledge base would both support, and be enhanced by a series of services that have become ERIC's strongest hallmarks. For example, personalized reference service would continue through AskERIC (building immediate question/answer archives in the ERIC Knowledge Base) and Clearinghouses would continue to identify hot topics and build synthesis pieces from and within the new knowledge base.

The ERIC Knowledge Base would build on the decentralized nature of ERIC and create one-stop any-stop access to all ERIC materials and services. Each ERIC Clearinghouse would still continue to develop its own and often unique audience, a major strength of ERIC. ERIC users comfortable with the materials and look and feel of a given ERIC Clearinghouse or component would be able to search all ERIC information from their favorite ERIC entry point. While some Clearinghouses might concentrate on the collection of K-12 materials such as lesson plans, other Clearinghouses would be free to build high-quality research reports and syntheses. All of this material would be available to the end-user in a seamless manner. Rather than seeking to build one common ERIC interface that tries to match the needs of the majority of people, a decentralized ERIC can build niche interfaces that best meet the needs of specific constituencies. The point being, however, that these niche interfaces would be accessible through a common and current knowledge base where all ERIC users have access to all ERIC information.

Our aim, to borrow from the folk tale, is not to shrink the elephant, but to make the elephant more accessible. If a user encounters ERIC through a Clearinghouse publication – that publication should be available full text in the ERIC Knowledge Base. If a user receives useful information from AskERIC, another user should be able to find that same information from ACCESS ERIC, or the ERIC Facility, or the U.S. Department of Education's web site. The value of AskERIC, for example, should not lie in the fact that it holds an item uniquely (ERIC should not be a competitive environment), but that it best serves its unique audience.

The authors of the ERIC position papers did a tremendous amount of work in a very brief period of time. The ERIC position papers point us in an initial direction. The authors' messages have given us the push we need to make ERIC better. The messages relating to metadata and the web are clear. The message relating to service over content is clear. The message suggesting unifying the web with the database is clear. The messages relating to system-wide research and the creation of a definite institutionalization mechanism are clear. Our starting point is clear. As always, the devil is in the details, but innovation and service have always been a hallmark of ERIC. Change is good, and it is time to tame the elephant. We're on it.

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Materials and the Virtual Reference Desk Project. Lanke is also an Assistant Professor, Syracuse University School of Information Studies.