

ONLINE DATABASES

ERIC's Extreme Makeover

By Carol Tenopir

ERIC, ONE OF THE VERY FIRST online bibliographic databases, was started in 1966—when subject-themed clearinghouses were established to gather, index, and input bibliographic information and make available journal articles and gray literature. The ERIC database has been a favorite resource ever since and, with over a million records, is the largest education database.

But like many baby boomers, ERIC is now undergoing a dramatic facelift. The new ERIC (which now stands for Education Resources Information Center, instead of *educational*) is being unveiled this month.

Beginnings of the new ERIC

New ERIC began with the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (PL 107-279). Christina Dunn, ERIC spokesperson at the National Library of Education, explained at the annual conferences of both the American Library Association (ALA) and Special Libraries Association (SLA) that this new act broadens the scope of ERIC database coverage and dissemination. She said that changes will also reflect user suggestions and the modernization of an aging system where each clearinghouse functioned independently. Now there will be a single ERIC web site rather than 16 separate web sites from the clearinghouses.

In the new system a technical Steering Committee and group of content experts advise a single ERIC contractor, Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC), and its subcontractors, such as Research Triangle Institute (RTI). CSC is doing the technical redesign, and RTI will oversee the materials selection.

More full text

One incentive to reinvent ERIC was to allow more online full-text access. ERIC will actively pursue full-text rights to as many resources as possible and provide a customization tool so libraries can identify their holdings. The familiar microfiche and E*Subscribe services from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service will be eliminated in October. Initially over 100,000 ERIC documents from 1993 forward will be online free to users. Materials not freely provided will be linked to commercial sources.

A new search system

According to Dunn, another goal is to shorten the time it takes to load materials into the database. Authors will also be asked to submit metadata, abstracts, and indexing. This was met with some skepticism by the SLA librarians, and Dunn acknowledged that the information will be verified and completed centrally by ERIC indexers.

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Another incentive was to design a modern search system that both fully exploits the highly regarded ERIC thesaurus and is easy to use. Announcements promise "increased search capabilities utilizing simple, streamlined retrieval methods....[including] popular search features such as 'show more documents like this one' and 'save my searches.'" These features assume you go to the new ERIC web site. Third-party vendors such as OCLC will still sell access to ERIC but with their own search features.

Dunn says that flexibility and the ability to make improvements are big advantages. "We will evaluate new technologies and online products and services for improving the content, infrastructure, interface, usability, efficiency, functionality, and interoperability of the online system."

Alan Wallace, education librarian at the University of Tennessee, hopes "the new system continues to serve casual as well as sophisticated searchers. "I would really hate to see a 'dumbing down' to the point that high-precision searching would be a way of the past," he said.

Transition time

References and links to 2004 materials won't be added to ERIC until the end of this year. ERIC Digests will no longer be produced.

Some question the need for a new system when the old one worked just fine. Wallace says, "With the advent of the web, the clearinghouses assumed an even greater role.... Many provided additional materials beyond what was in the ERIC database. This shall be missed."

The elimination of AskERIC from the former ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology leaves a gap in reference support. One initiative to fill that gap is the Educator's Reference Desk (www.eduref.org), a collaborative project between the former AskERIC staff of the Information Institute of Syracuse and members of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL).

Some educators fear elimination of the independent clearinghouses was achieved through sinister political motivations, including possible attempts to control or limit controversial materials. But Dunn speaks of broadening the coverage, including selected articles in economics, health, mathematics, and technology.

The Education and Behavioral Science Section of ACRL sponsors a web page (www.lib.msu.edu/corby/education/eric/neweric.htm) that is the single best place to find both background and current information on ERIC changes.

Carol Tenopir (ctenopir@utk.edu) is Professor, School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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