

Resources

Whither ERIC? Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

Since 1966 the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system has gathered, preserved, and disseminated the literature of education. Recently the United States Department of Education decided to revamp ERIC, resulting in major changes to the program. To understand how these changes will affect the teachers and researchers who are the primary users of the ERIC database and other ERIC services, it is instructive to look at ERIC's past, its present, and its future.

Past

From its inception ERIC was structured as a decentralized network of subject-specific clearinghouses and technical support units. Clearinghouses and adjunct clearinghouses acquired, selected, and provided subject terms and abstracts for documents and journal literature in their area(s) of specialty. These materials were then contributed to a single, central ERIC database. As of December 31, 2003, there were 16 Clearinghouses, 11 Adjunct and Affiliate Clearinghouses, and three support units: ACCESS ERIC, ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS), and the ERIC Facility.

ERIC was developed originally to capture and organize the reports of government-funded education research (Trester, 1981). Documents (numbers beginning with ED in the database) eventually included not only reports of research sponsored by the federal government but also conference papers; curriculum materials; publications from state, local,

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and international governments and organizations; and more. ERIC staff provided a lengthy (typically 200-word) abstract and indexed the document in depth. Most of the documents gathered were archived in a microfiche collection which is held widely by libraries and other organizations around the world. A support component, EDRS, could provide microfiche, paper, or electronic copies of many documents on demand.

In addition to documents, ERIC clearinghouses regularly indexed and briefly annotated articles from an average of 700 to 800 journals (numbers beginning with EJ in the database). Some journals were indexed comprehensively and others more selectively. Articles might also be selected on an occasional or “one-shot” basis, for instance, when a non-education journal published a special issue about education. The full text of journal articles was not available from ERIC and had to be obtained from a library or a reprint service.

Clearinghouses were also responsible for such outreach and dissemination activities as synthesizing research, creating bibliographies and other publications, training users, developing websites, and answering questions from the public. All clearinghouses were responsible for producing publications, such as the ERIC Digests that provided “brief overviews of current educational issues” (Smarte, 2001). Each clearinghouse also maintained a website with links, publications, and other features, such as the Native Education Directory sponsored by the Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools or the National Parent Information Network which began as a partnership between the Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education and the Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

The popular AskERIC question-and-answering service was sponsored by the Clearinghouse on Information and Technology, but all the clearinghouses participated. Clearinghouse staff attended conferences, both as exhibitors and presenters; offered workshops to librarians and others on using the ERIC database and finding educational research and practice materials; and responded to thousands of questions received by phone and email.

The technical support units managed the database, supported and coordinated system-wide activities, and produced the paper indexes, *Resources in Education (RIE)* for documents and *Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE)* for journal articles. ACCESS ERIC provided a central website for the ERIC system and developed and distributed system-wide publications, such as *All about ERIC* (Smarte,

2000). The ERIC Processing and Reference Facility reviewed the clearinghouses' contributions and added them to the ERIC database, developed acquisitions arrangements with publishers, and managed the evolution of the *Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors* and the *Identifier Authority List*. EDRS created the microfiche archive of ERIC Documents; managed subscriptions for the database, microfiche, and the electronic full text service, E*Subscribe; and provided on-demand copies.

Present and Future

December 31, 2003, marked the end of an era for ERIC. On that date all ERIC Clearinghouses ceased to exist. As of June 30, 2004, ACCESS ERIC closed, and the ERIC Facility and EDRS wrapped up their operations on September 30, 2004. The distributed network created to develop the ERIC database and disseminate education knowledge has been replaced by a single contractor as a result of changes mandated in a *Statement of Work* (2003), or SOW, issued by the U.S. Department of Education in June, 2003. The current contract for the development of the ERIC database was awarded on March 18, 2004, to the Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC).

The SOW for this contract does not include many of the activities that were part of the ERIC mission in the past. For instance, no publications, such as digests, bibliographies, or subject-oriented websites, are expected to be produced. User services, such as workshops, research assistance, or question answering, are not mandated in the SOW, except for online help and feedback screens and a "toll-free number for users who cannot successfully search the database" (Statement of Work, 2003). A call to this number reveals that it is staffed primarily to provide assistance in the mechanics of using the search engine, but the technician will also help in choosing terms and constructing queries.

Constructing the database has always been the primary task of ERIC. As part of planning for the "new" ERIC, an 11-member Steering Committee to provide guidance for technical aspects of the project and a panel of 48 Content Experts have been chosen. Content expert involvement is limited to a meeting to set criteria for approved journals, conferences, and organizations. The contractor's curators will make day-to-day decisions about specific documents and articles to be added.

A new ERIC Selection Policy for acquiring materials, which differs substantially from the previous standards, has been established. The

old criteria for judging the quality of submissions included contribution to knowledge, significance, relevance, innovativeness, effective presentation and thoroughness of reporting, authoritative source, relatedness to current priorities, intended audience, comprehensiveness, and availability. The new criteria are more stringent and include completeness, integrity (of content), objectivity (underwent a review process), substantive merit, utility/importance, and sponsorship.

The types of materials to be added to the database have changed, too. Non-text, digitized materials, such as audio and video recordings, may be included in ERIC, but lesson plans (and, presumably, curriculum guides) are specifically excluded from the database along with blogs and individual web pages. Some materials, such as “opinion pieces,” are not mentioned as being either included or excluded. In general, a much higher priority is given to research reports, especially if they are “evidenced-based” and come from “established research and policy organizations” (ERIC Selection Policy, 2004), and a lower priority is given to materials written by or for teachers, parents, and other audiences.

The contractor is expected to use “electronic harvesting software” to find materials for the database. More journals than in the past will be completely, rather than selectively, indexed. Materials selected for the database are to be added within one month of publication or discovery. An “online open submission system,” developed specifically for conference paper submissions, is scheduled for implementation in November, 2004, and is to be “programmed so that individuals submitting papers must provide (1) abstracts [and] (2) specific indexing and metadata information” (Statement of Work, 2003).

According to the SOW, beginning in January, 2005, 1,000 records per week, or 52,000 records per year, will be added to the ERIC database. By comparison, 32,099 records were added in 2001. This requirement may be difficult to meet given the more stringent selection policy; the importance of “approved” organizations, journals, and conferences; the requirement that authors abstract and index their submissions; and the increased emphasis on gaining permission to provide full text, a requirement that may discourage some people and organizations from submitting. The use of harvesting software and more thorough indexing of journals may help but could lead to a database that will be even more heavily weighted toward journals than is evidenced by the current 60%/40% split.

Obtaining ERIC materials will be both easier and more difficult in future. Doing so will be easier because the full text of 107,000 documents

added to the database since 1993 is now available through the ERIC database. The contractor has also been directed to obtain future materials in full text as much as possible or provide links for purchasing the materials. However, it will no longer be possible to order on-demand copies of pre-1993 documents and some documents added between 1993 and 2003 (those entered into database at “Level 2,” which were limited to distribution in microfiche or through E*Subscribe).

Many of the technical enhancements proposed in the SOW are very welcome, especially the availability of free, full-text documents; the use of such technical standards as XML and Dublin Core; and the ability (finally) to search for peer-reviewed journals, but the “personal touch” that has been provided by ERIC staff will be missed. The SOW does leave open the possibility that services such as publications or question and answering could be reinstated at a later date. As the “new” ERIC continues to develop in the months ahead, visit the ERIC site (<http://www.eric.ed.gov>) for current information. For background information, a time line, pertinent links and documents, and information about the former clearinghouses, see the *ERIC Reauthorization News* site (<http://www.lib.msu.edu/corby/education/doe.htm>) maintained by librarian Kate Corby.

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