

The Organisation of Knowledge in Virtual Libraries in the Field of Education / L'organisation des Connaissances dans les Bibliothèques Virtuelles en Éducation

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ABSTRACT :

In this paper, we propose to discuss the results of a research project which focusses on Web resources in the field of education. The project and the paper relate to the second theme of this year's conference: How are discourse communities and fields of knowledge redefining themselves in changing technological contexts? Education is a culturally and politically stamped field of knowledge and practice. Educational objectives, methods and systems vary considerably from one country to another, and even, in Canada for example, from one province or region to another. As a consequence, communities of educators and education specialists have traditionally remained somewhat isolated, communicating mainly on the general level of "educational principles". The Internet has brought significant changes to this situation. Educators from around the world now participate in online discussions, converse through e-mail, and share the contents of specialized databases. The political will to open educational systems to each other and to the world exhibits itself in the establishment of national academic recognition information centres (see for example: europa.eu.int/comm/education/socrates/agenar.html) and through declarations such as that of Bologna (www.unige.ch/cre/activities/Bologna%20Forum/Bologne1999/bologna%20declaration.htm), which promotes more transparent educational structures within the European community to allow students to move more easily from one national educational system to another.

Educators and education specialists know that they can also find on the Web huge amounts of education-related information. Resources in education may be accessed via general directories (such as La Toile du Québec, Yahoo, Northern Lights, etc.) or in special virtual libraries which offer systematically organized collections of links to selected pertinent resources. Virtual libraries in education are created and maintained by governments and official agencies with responsibilities in education and training, as well as by professional associations of educators and education specialists. Resources may have been selected and organized for the benefit of educators only, for a target audience of parents, for actual and potential students, for mixed audiences of specialists and non specialists.

Are education-related resources organized in a way that will maximize efficiency of identification and retrieval, especially in the context of expanding global exchanges of information? Once we have entered the virtual library, do categorization schemes and keywords reflect anything else than local perspectives and systems?

The main facets of the domain of Education have been identified, defined, and used repeatedly to organize and provide access to education-related information in directories, handbooks, and traditional library collections; the terminology used to facilitate retrieval has been controlled through specialized dictionaries and reputable thesauri. Yet, to organize and provide access to virtual collections in education, ad hoc schemes, structured around loose categories representing a mix of subjects, document types and target audiences, have been preferred. A majority of these organizational structures exhibit a lack of concern for any kind of standardization and a marked disregard for known theoretical principles of knowledge organization (facet analysis, citation order, etc.) A main objective of our project was to analyse and compare among themselves and with traditional classification schemes the newly-created thematic structures set-up as navigation aids for the information searcher in the field of Education. The following criteria were used to compare and evaluate the various structures: the macro-structure (i.e. the main structuring classes and categories), the facets used to divide and subdivide classes and categories, the level of specificity allowed within the structure, and the potential of the framework for exhaustivity. We also tried to evaluate whether the chosen categories and relations could be considered universal and therefore transferable from one society to another.