

## Re-Framing the Quality Discussion in NSDL

Draft, 2/14/03, [Diane Hillman, Cornell, Core Integration]

The discussions regarding the development of quality collections of resources within the NSDL occur on many levels. Oftentimes assumptions about what constitutes quality loom up quickly, regardless of whether the participant in the discussion is familiar with the stated NSDL goals of large scale and automated operation. Some of these assumptions are based on the notion of traditional library selection processes, but others emanate from an even more restrictive notion of peer review, where someone or a group determines according to objectively established criteria what is “in” and what is “out.” This model might generally be characterized as the Gatekeeper Model.

The necessity of a gatekeeper of some kind seems to many people an extension of a “national” resource funded by a government agency, and to some extent, this is indisputable. Clearly, there is a bottom line that must be maintained. We all agree that spam, pornography and materials completely irrelevant to the STEM focus do not belong in NSDL, and that such materials should be excluded. It is beyond this point that divergence of opinion begins.

Leaving aside for a moment whether a gatekeeper (whether a person or group) is feasible given the funding levels of the NSDL, there’s a more elemental question of whether a panel of experts is an appropriate way to develop what is intended to be a collaborative, community-based resource available through a variety of “portals.” The Gatekeeper Model, essentially a top-down method of managing quality, is expensive, slow, and difficult to manage. None of these problems are, by themselves, sufficient to look elsewhere for a model--if it were the correct one, efforts should be made to address those issues specifically.

But given that the NSDL is beginning to focus on scenarios where the CI functions as a “wholesaler” of sorts, and portals as “retailers” of more specialized, focused information to end users, it seems less obvious that any gatekeeping to be done should occur at the “wholesale” level. Portals will themselves be defining gates around their focus, tailoring their offerings to a subset, whether topical, audience type or level, or resource type--or possibly a combination of factors.

Shifting the discussion a bit from the loaded term “quality,” we might want to introduce the idea of “usefulness.” Usefulness is clearly a subjective term, defined at a much more accessible level, by users, whether portals or people. A math portal, for instance, might define usefulness by the subject of a resource, by its level of review or the sources of annotations, or by any other criteria they could reasonably define. A teacher might define as specifically useful any image resource about animals submitted by another teacher.

The key to allowing various definitions of usefulness to reside happily together is the ability to associate characterizations and assertions by other services, agents and users and to build these upon a base of information that may be inadequate or of questionable

quality by itself, and to expose those characterizations to portals and end users as appropriate. This approach depends on tools that allow assertions to be made at various levels, whether via adding value to data from external services (indexing services, taxonomy services, etc.) or by individual users who wish to share their experience with a resource. It also depends on users having access to the information submitted, in ways that meet their needs of the moment.

In this alternate model, which could be called a Collaboration Model, useful resources, no matter their original source, may rise into view of a person or be selected by a portal as “useful” as the result of a variety of activities going on within NSDL. For instance, formal or informal annotations or comments added by other users regarding their experience or impression of the resource (perhaps including ratings) might be a criteria selected to define usefulness. For another user or portal, only formal annotations or comments by a particular category of commentator might be useful, regardless of the source of the resource. Since usage of resources is intended to be tracked and made available as a criteria, a user might define a criteria, or a resource might be highlighted in a portal, based on its overall usage, recent usage, or how many people had contributed reviews or annotations within a recent period.

It is axiomatic in digital libraries that only some of the successful strategies of the pre-digital world will survive and flourish in this newer world. This understanding leads us to examine closely our assumptions lest we drag too many unwieldy legacies with us as we move forward.