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Places to Go: Pedagogy in Action

by Stephen Downes

The Web site [Pedagogy in Action](#) is a "portal for educators" offered by the Science Education Resource Center ([SERC](#)) at [Carleton College](#), a small, independent liberal arts college based in Northfield, Minnesota. SERC offers services to the scientific education community, supporting projects such as the [Earth Exploration Toolbook](#) and organizations such as the [National Association of Geoscience Teachers](#). SERC's [focus](#) is on collaboration with other agencies to support professional development, community visioning, research on learning, and efforts to widen the awareness and use of science in the general public.

This is how a small institution can have a large impact: by forging links among other institutions working in a field, amplifying their effect, and offering services back to them in turn. The Pedagogy in Action Web site is an example of this sort of contribution.

Visitors to the site will not first notice SERC or Carleton College but the services that meet their needs. On the left, we see two major boxes, one linking to items in a library "connecting theory to classroom practice" and the other to a set of pedagogical services helping users "create, contribute and customize." The right column is a news feed advertising new developments on the site; readers may easily subscribe to the [RSS feed](#).

The library is divided into three major sections: teaching methods, activities, and research. Users browsing the site will typically access each in turn. [The Teaching Methods](#) page is comprised of a long list of links, one for each method, such as Karin Kirk's [Experience-Based Environmental Projects](#) page. The list of teaching methods is incomplete, and not all links work. Moreover, the library would be stronger if it aggregated resources from other sites onto these pages; see, for example, how I import external links into my own Topic pages, such as the one on [Connectivism](#).

The activities section contains a much larger set of resources (690 as of this writing). The first ten of these are available as links to full descriptions; to the right of the index listings, a useful subindex helps users "narrow the view" by focusing on specific subjects or types of pedagogy. (Why is this list not also available from the individual activity page?) Many of the activities described are imported from other sites and adapted for the Pedagogy in Action Web site; others are created by external organizations, such as the [National Numeracy Network](#), as part of a collaboration with SERC. Some of the activities, such as the [global warming unit](#), have been reviewed and rated by a peer review panel. Activities are not organized into grade ranges; these are not even indicated, so the activities would need to be adapted appropriately by teachers using them.

The third part of the library is devoted to [research on learning](#). A number of the entries in this section, such as the reference to [The Hidden Earth](#), link to part of the SERC print resources collection, and the reader is directed to an associated Web site. Others, such as references to [Prothero](#), are links to academic journal articles. Not all of the 429 links lead to full text; some, such as the reference to a 1998 article by Narayanan and Hegarty entitled "[On Designing Comprehensible Interactive Hypermedia Manuals](#)," link to abstracts only. The free availability of the full text of such articles is an ongoing challenge for resource-based Web sites, and it would help everybody if academic articles were freely available for use as teaching resources or for general research.

The Pedagogic Service side of the site provides means for people who collect or create resources to contribute to the community. Potential contributors are asked to complete an [online form](#) describing the work, specifying a grade level, and linking to external resources. The form is much simpler than a typical learning metadata form, but it still requests a fair amount of detail. Contributors can also create a module describing a

teaching method; a [page](#) outlines what these models look like and how to contribute one.

One wonders why a more collaborative authoring process is not available to potential contributors; this would be more productive than a "submit-and-review" system because it could combine the knowledge and insights of several people rather than depending on one person to create a resource and another to pass judgment on it. Readers in a more collaborative environment could also expect to see discussion support around each resource, allowing users to link to related resources, describe their own uses of the resource, or suggest revisions and updates.

Instead, community-based activities seem to be constrained to in-person [workshops](#), and while these [activities](#) are indeed "an excellent way to bring people together to develop a community vision and action plan," they create a barrier to wider participation as there is not an online component. Similarly, the [SERC community](#) seems to be based more on collaborations with institutions than with individuals, though it is worth nothing that the institutional contributions are impressive.

The Pedagogy in Action portal is typical of many academic enterprises today. Its originators saw the potential of the Web to leverage the contributions of small institutions by creating connections and encouraging collaboration. As a result, a quality library of a modest size has been assembled, providing a useful resource to both collaborators and visitors.

And yet, the Web moves forward, and such sites remain static and unresponsive to the possibility of a more intensive collaboration. The resources are there, but the collaboration and discussion—which no doubt occurs between the partner institutions—occurs off site, inaccessible to those who would be interested. As a consequence, only a limited type of participation is possible, one that is worthwhile but one that restricts the growth and wider applicability of the service.

Academic institutions are looking for ways to bridge the more traditional forms of collaboration and society that made such work so rewarding with the possibilities inherent in a collaborative and social Web, and the challenges faced by Pedagogy in Action are echoed in similar Web sites across institutions and across disciplines.

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