

Community Interviews on the Value of NSDL

Introduction

As part of the 2010 NSDL Annual Meeting, the NSDL community began a conversation about the future of NSDL. After the announcement that funding for NSDL program within NSF will end as of September 30 2011, there is a sense of urgency to discover a vision of and path to the organization that NSDL needs to become. NSF officials have made it clear that NSDL, as an organization, is valuable and should continue.

At the first of the year, the Resource Center (RC) decided to further the discussion from the Annual Meeting with in-depth interviews of selected community members to better understand the value of NSDL going into the future. A set of questions were designed to understand the value proposition of the current NSDL programs and what would be necessary looking to the future. The interviews were conducted and analyzed by Susan Jesuroga, former Project Liaison for the RC. The results of these interviews provide important perspectives regarding the value of NSDL and the shape of its future services.

Method

Because the NSDL community had begun a discussion about the future of NSDL at the 2010 NSDL Annual Meeting, a group of 15 NSDL community members, from a list of Annual Meeting respondents willing to be contacted, were chosen. They represented a range of participants, from newly fund PIs to long-time projects, along with a range in professional experience. The group was guaranteed that all answers would be confidential and results presented in aggregate or in a manner to disguise their identities so as to encourage honest responses. Of the 15 contacted via email in February, 5 agreed to be interviewed. These 5 were contacted in March and April for an hour-long interview, using the questions outlined in Appendix A.

Results and Discussion

Participant Background. The first section asked questions pertaining to the demographics of the respondents. The five interviewed included two women and three men. Two have been involved with NSDL since the beginning, two involved about half the life of NSDL and one is part of a new project. Two are PIs, two are Co-PIs and one is a project staff person. Two are involved with Pathways and the rest work with service projects. Each responded that they had attended every Annual Meeting since receiving their initial grant.

The audiences they serve primarily include K-12 teachers (4), curriculum developers (2), school administrators (1) and college faculty (1). Primary partners include Pathways (4), Resource Center (3), Technical Network Services (3) and other projects (2). Three respondents work in universities, one in non-profit and one in a private business. Three consider themselves as being at mid-career, one early and one late career.

Questions about Participation in NSDL. The second section of questions focused on the participants' personal participation in NSDL, looking beyond participation in their projects.

Question 1. When discussing what results this group hoped to accomplish in being part of NSDL, two themes emerged. The first theme concentrated on the results of being engaged with a community: building professional relationships, using community interactions to build or share their own knowledge and looking for potential

collaborators. The second theme focused on the results of each project's outcomes: providing new services and infrastructure to a broader audience (than previously possible), influencing educators with regards to standards and best practices and scaling up to better disseminate outcomes.

Question 2. When describing what they hoped to gain personally and/or professionally, all answers focused on increasing their knowledge, whether gaining access to effective models and state of the art knowledge about digital resources or finding experts. Two emphasized the ability to find new collaborators and finding other funding for their work. One underscored how access to the community had given him at least 50 new ideas to pursue and one mentioned access to a broader audience through other projects for the work in which he is engaged.

Question 3. While discussing what they hoped to contribute to NSDL, all talked about their projects' services and resources aimed at end users. However, one asked if the repository will continue, because it didn't seem worth the effort to put resources in if NSDL would fold. More personally, most respondents hoped to influence educators' use of digital resources, including how best to use those resources in a more effective manner. Three specifically mentioned contributing their knowledge of how educators really use web sites and practical knowledge gained in their use of assessments to the broader community. Two participants (one long-term and one medium term community member) mentioned contributing to the larger NSDL through sustainability and strategic discussions.

Question 4. The answers to the question about who they most wanted to influence varied. Three mentioned both teachers and students, and also content contributors. Other targets included decision-makers, such as science education leaders, other federal agencies and others outside of STEM education.

Question 5. This question focused on changes they saw in their own practice. Four respondents mentioned a greater awareness beyond their usual field of study, whether it is in the area of standards, platforms, results that confirm their own research or a greater confidence to communicate with people outside of their immediate circle. One underscored the personal realization about how difficult the task of coordinating large projects that engender change in educational practice can be. Most discussed some sort of theme of how easy it was to collaborate with others.

Question 6. In comparing NSDL to other groups, two of the male respondents commented on how open and welcoming NSDL was in comparison to other, more established groups. One of them specifically emphasized how other long-time organizations were closed, dogmatic and very proprietary. Other comments emphasized that NSDL: 1) recognizes the common themes across education that go beyond discipline; 2) makes cutting edge classroom ideas broadly available; and 3) provides opportunities such as the Annual Meeting and other networking opportunities to encourage more collaboration. One mentioned that NSDL also suffered from the same problems as other groups, including resources that range from great to junk, a lack of coherence due to the "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach and the inherent gaps between K-12 and higher education. Another underscored that the early focus on technology led to less of a focus on educational need and context than other professional groups.

Question 7. In asking if they would personally stay involved in NSDL, all replied yes, but also commented it was dependent on what NSDL becomes in the future. Most see value in NSDL convening groups that overlap, but all emphasized the importance of clearly defining the services that a new NSDL would provide.

Questions about Infrastructure. The last section of questions was meant to understand what services would be of value to NSDL community members going forward.

Question 1. This question asked what is working well in NSDL and should be continued. Clearly at the top of the list, they appreciated their interactions with others in the community, including the RC and TNS. Specific activities of value included sharing information, webinars and the Annual Meeting, and also efforts by RC to coordinate activities across projects. One mentioned he would be willing to pay to attend the Annual Meeting because it was so valuable. The second most often cited answer related to the value of the repository, and the ability of projects to access good resources that they could re-use to serve their audiences.

Question 2. In terms of what doesn't work, NSDL.org was the top answer. Comments included the site has: 1) a lack of clarity of its purpose with too diffuse offerings; 2) not enough traffic to be helpful for dissemination; 3) a lack of a standard (enforced) vocabulary; and 4) a lack of process to integrate other services and tools. Other important comments included: 1) larger NSDL initiatives are difficult to sustain because they are essentially unfunded tasks (like paradata); 2) it's hard to find out about TNS tools and what they do; 3) RC communications are uneven, especially those relying on the community to participate (e.g. the community site); 4) competition for funding hampers collaboration at times; and 5) the emphasis on Pathways at times (such as the monthly calls) excludes other grantees from full participation.

Question 3. As far as what is missing or priorities for new initiatives, all respondents primarily answered from a project-centric view. Two interviewees talked about an emphasis on standards, and both in helping teachers to use them effectively and partnering with states with strong initiatives in standards. Two mentioned e-learning and cyberlearning. Another talked about the long-standing issues of sustainability and user assessments. Two also mentioned shared efforts to produce professional development workshops, online course or conference presentations. Basic requests included surveying existing projects for what they will share going forward, and performing a needs assessment in order to define a clear set of services and APIs needed to support projects. One respondent took a larger view by asking for broader advocacy across the range of projects, including outreach to include non-STEM communities. One unique idea was to have NSDL serve as a reference library for the community of content and library developers.

Question 4. In order for their projects to succeed in the future, only one interviewee mentioned money. Both the repository and shared activities, such as collaboration, outreach and coordination (on standards and other important common practices), were frequently mentioned. Two mentioned needing practical help, such as letters of support or technical advice (e.g. metadata, standards). One thought a platform for community webinars would be a tool for which he would willingly pay.

Other Comments. During the course of the interview, other comments surfaced.

- Fears that the repository would disappear or become static were a primary concern for most.
- Another feared losing the knowledge of RC and TNS staff.

- One suggested perhaps it's time to choose a new name more relevant to digital learning.
- Another suggested that NSDL should look beyond the STEM education arena, because challenges in digital education were not limited to STEM subjects.

Summary

In reviewing the results, answers were most definitely formed from two perspectives: as part of an NSDL-funded project (focusing on project-specific research and development outcomes) and as part of the larger NSDL community (focusing on broader personal and professional outcomes). In looking for places of common value, it is essential to focus on answers related to the larger community.

The primary themes of collaboration and community suggest these respondents highly value NSDL as a unique place for collaboration and as a source of knowledge. That source of knowledge is broad: quality resources that can be re-used, experts in fields outside their own discipline, information and research on the use of digital resources in the classroom and effective models of practice. They value NSDL for providing coordination across individual projects, but some expressed frustration in being left out of conversations and communications that seemed oriented to the Pathways.

It is clear that this group did not see value in continuing NSDL.org as a dissemination mechanism to users, preferring that the individual Pathways and projects meet specific audience and user needs. They did, however, see great value in the shared repository, which underpins NSDL.org, and being able to access those quality materials for re-use in their specific contexts. Although they valued collaboration and sharing knowledge, most recognized the need for a central means for interacting, but some felt the current community site was not as effective as it could be in encouraging participation.

These respondents clearly would miss NSDL if it were to disappear altogether, and some of their open-ended comments underscored the sense of loss associated with the possible disappearance of the repository and collective expertise or almost worse, the repository becoming static over time. They see the value in NSDL, and expressed interest in continuing to participate.

Given these responses, it appears there is great value for a future NSDL in two areas: 1) as a shared repository of quality resources for “wholesale” use (but not for “retail” access by end users through NSDL.org); and 2) the potential to become a type of reference library on digital education for the community (e.g. a place to find things such as models of practice, standards, assessments, experts or access to other community knowledge). This clearly would move NSDL beyond being branded and marketed as the *umbrella for users* to find and interact with a network of STEM resource providers, to becoming an *umbrella for the community* of library, service and content developers who want to collaborate on the larger issues of effective use of digital resources in the classroom. Moving from the emphasis on STEM education would also allow the future NSDL organization to work actively with groups outside of STEM education, which also face the same issues in effective use of digital resources.

APPENDIX A

Questions about You:

1. How many years have you been involved in NSDL?
2. What is your role in your NSDL-related project?
3. How would you categorize the outcomes of your project? (E.g. creating resources, services, research, etc)
4. Who is your primary audience?
5. How many Annual Meetings you have attended?
6. Who do you see as your primary partners in NSDL?
7. What type of organization do you work within (university, business, non-profit)?
8. How would you categorize your professional experience? Early, mid, or late career, or retired?

Questions about Your Participation in NSDL:

1. What results do you hope to accomplish by being part of NSDL?
2. What do you hope to gain personally and/or professionally by participating in NSDL?
3. What do you want to contribute to NSDL?
4. Who do you most want to influence through participating in NSDL?
5. What changes in your professional practice do you see as a result of your participation in NSDL?

6. How does being a part of NSDL compare to working with other groups dealing with STEM education issues? What is unique or similar? What stands out or is lacking?
7. Given the change in NSF funding for NSDL, would you be interested in participating in NSDL as a stand-alone educational entity, not funded by NSF?

Questions about NSDL infrastructure:

1. What is working well in NSDL and should be continued?
2. What does not work well and should be improved or discontinued?
3. What is missing, or what new initiatives should be a priority for NSDL?
4. Looking forward, what does your project need from NSDL in order to succeed?