

Teacher perceptions of eThemes services

Summer 2000

eMINTS teachers value the educational resources provided them through the eTHEMES project and especially appreciate the time it saves them. They want easier access to the archive of resources and better checking of links.

Context

The information in this report is taken from a series of nine focus group interviews with participating eMINTS teachers conducted in the summer of 2000. One group was conducted in each cluster. The focus groups were moderated by eMINTS Evaluation team members. The purpose of the groups was to understand teachers' impressions of program services after their first year as eMINTS teachers. Teachers were asked to discuss their experiences with the eTHEMES service, their experiences with eMINTS and GE Capital technical support, and their impressions of the necessary qualifications for Cluster Instructional Specialists. This report summarizes teacher comments about the eTHEMES service. Other focus group reports from the evaluation team address these topics.

Value of the service for teachers

Most of the teachers had overwhelmingly positive comments about eTHEMES and found it a great service having practical value. One of the continuing refrains heard from the teachers was that eTHEMES is a valuable part of the project. It enables the exchange of information, it provides ready access to on-line resources, and encourages teachers to create interdisciplinary lessons. The eTHEMES service is seen as something to help the teachers apply ideas of subject integration into their teaching practice.

Advantages of the service

Teachers described several factors that contribute to their use of the service: it saves research time, Internet resources are delivered promptly, and, in most cases, teachers believe the delivered sites were appropriate for the students.

The most common benefit stated was that the eTHEMES service was a time saver. One teacher described searching for information on China, a search "that would have taken me days or weeks." Instead this teacher used eTHEMES and saved considerable time. Another teacher commented that one could spend hours trying to find graphics. While the evaluation team was present, this teacher checked her e-mail to see if the eTHEMES had answered her request for moving wagon graphic. It was there and she was delighted with the results.

Virtually all of the teachers had positive things to say about the usefulness of the materials that they received. Teachers report receiving multiple sites that could be used in their lessons, and many report receiving more materials than they expected. In one school teachers were able to construct a school-wide Millennium project using sites collected from an eTHEMES request.

Value of the resource scouts

Central to the value of the eTHEMES service were the activities of the resource scouts. Three of the clusters relayed how cordial they were. It seemed that these scouts were happy to send information to the teachers and that they volunteered assistance. One scout overheard that a teacher was working on an Economics unit and she informed the teacher that she had information that would be useful.

Even if the resource scouts missed the mark the first time, they were willing to repeat a request. One teacher sent back her resources asking that it be scaled down a bit for her grade level. The resources she received the second time fit her needs.

Most teachers report that the sites found by the scouts were appropriate to their students' grade level. Occasionally teachers reported that the reading level was too advanced for their students, and occasionally the subject matter of the received sites was not appropriate for their students. But even those that said that everything was not appropriate felt that enough resources were sent that they had plenty from which to choose.

By and large the teachers were satisfied with the turn-around-time for resources. The following comment is typical, "Anytime I've requested anything from them, they've been fast."

The only exceptions are isolated. Teachers in one cluster said they did not get quick responses to their requests. A teacher in this cluster said they had to wait two or three weeks for a reply. Another reported not receiving a reply to their request.

Teachers who have used the eTHEMES service thought that the activities of resource scouts were extremely helpful. Several teachers were impressed by the responsiveness of the scouts and appreciated their efforts to provide useful and appropriate Internet resources for their students. Scouts are perceived as an important resource for teachers, especially as teachers develop new lessons using the Internet.

Possible areas for improvement

In the course of the focus group discussion, teachers had the following suggestions for improving the eTHEMES service.

Improve access to eTHEMES archives

Many teachers stated that eTHEMES service and archive were hard to access. Some teachers said that the database is a little time consuming to get through, and that they had trouble finding it.

Teachers' opinions about access to the archive vary widely. Some teachers thought that the archive is easy to understand and work through. These teachers went to the archive first because chances are that whatever they were looking for had already been collected. Another teacher

commented that she had to stumble on to the archives to find it; and at least one teacher said that she didn't know what the others were talking about, that she had never accessed an archive.

All teachers thought a searchable archive, one that supported several modes of access (e.g., via keyword search, organized by grade level and subject, etc.), would be a valuable addition to the service. They also suggested that the archive functions have a prominent location on the introductory page: "Put it on the front page, right...doggone it, right on the top button." "I can stumble on the first page."

Research sites more thoroughly for inappropriate materials

All sites sent to teachers need to be thoroughly researched for appropriate content. This includes materials that, while topically appropriate, are not appropriate for an elementary school audience.

Check periodically to see that the sites are still up and running

Teachers requested that the resource scouts periodically check that the sites they recommend are active:

Increasing the range of resources available on the eTHEMES service

Several teachers thought that access to lists of sites used by other teachers would be valuable. The teachers who have not used the service emphasized that they can get the sites they need from their fellow cluster teachers, from MOREnet, and from the emails from all on the list serve. Most of the teachers who have not yet used this service acknowledge that they will establish a connection with this service this summer and continue through the coming school year.

Teachers have requested that "hot lists" i.e. lists of URLs assembled by individual teachers be posted on the eTHEMES site. The most common request was to incorporate these lists into a searchable archive.

The teachers had confidence in the sites that their fellow teachers used and recommended. Although, eTHEMES was referred to as an excellent resource, teachers said they still had to figure out the links and see what's appropriate. But if another teacher sent the site, they felt more assured that the web was classroom ready.

Summary of eTHEMES findings

Most teachers have positive things to say about the eMINTS service. They appreciate its availability and have been able to submit requests that produce satisfactory results. Teacher requests have generally been fulfilled in a reasonable amount of time.

Teachers used the eTHEMES to locate graphics, resources for students, resources for teachers, unit resources, and curiosity to see what the service was.

Concerns voiced in the focus groups are that the teachers want assurance of safe site, and age-appropriate sites. Another feeling is that eTHEMES are “distant” (removed from the reality of the classroom, they “know subject matter, but not elementary students.”)

Occasionally teacher report problems with the resources provided by the service. A continuing concern is that the resource scouts investigate their sites thoroughly for safety and developmental appropriateness before sending them out for use in the elementary classroom.

All of the teachers who use eTHEMES, said that they will use the service this summer and from here on more frequently. They were pleased to learn that the service would be available during the summer. One teacher reflected the sentiment succinctly, “The first year we were just trying to keep our head about water.” Others stated that the first year they were focused on the implementation of technology in their classrooms and are now ready to use eTHEMES more.

The teachers focused on the "resource scouts" as a distinct issue -- mostly positive. Thus, it is a fair implication to note that eTHEMES is not merely about the quality of the resources relayed to the teachers. The quality of the interaction between the teachers and the scouts is important to the teachers as well. Indeed eTHEMES appears to be about building relationships of credibility between the scouts and the teachers. Scouts have been and need to continue to be perceived as helpful, responsive (even eager) to help. Thus, scouts may value the confirmation that how they serve is nearly as important as what they serve—in short, being “customer centered.”