Virtual Collaboration:
Speed Bumps on the Road to IDEAS

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The Image Database to Enhance Asian Studies [IDEAS] has successfully unified digitizing efforts already in progress at four campuses into a shared searchable database. IDEAS is now available on the world-wide web [http://ideas.nitle.org/], making it the first multi-institutional, interdisciplinary, pan-Asian searchable database in the country. Focusing on the generally underrepresented area of Asia, IDEAS makes multi-media materials available for specialists and non-specialists alike.

IDEAS presently houses over 1500 images with accompanying metadata, produced or compiled by faculty at four different institutions. The database includes a range of digital assets from a variety of disciplines, including still images, video clips, sound recordings, and scanned text documents. Although initially a collaboration between Colorado College, Earlham College, Lake Forest College, and St. Olaf College, the IDEAS project is committed to cooperative sharing of ideas, expertise, and resources among liberal arts institutions building online image collections.

IDEAS provides digital information that by virtue of its highly specialized nature is not readily available on the Internet or in print. For example, there is documentation of an Indian religious rite that is vital educational material, but too specialized to ever attract the interest of a publisher. A Japanese garden requires numerous images to convey the dynamic experience of changes over time, but texts usually present only one static image. Similar arguments can be made for most works of three dimensional art, architecture and ephemeral items of material culture. The collections hosted by the IDEAS project also offer users suggestions by knowledgeable faculty on selection and sequencing of these materials. The broad scope of IDEAS allows for the continued addition of new materials over time, and the plan is to expand the present four collections to include four new institutional collections by the end of 2007.

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Limiting Issue—Obstacles to Success

Development of the IDEAS project over the past three years has highlighted several key advantages to virtual collaboration as well as potential disadvantages. Three that cross both categorie— technology, time and money—will be considered here.

One "apparent" advantage to virtual collaboration is the relative ease with which materials and expertise can be shared, thanks to the marvels of modern technology. The term "apparent" is bracketed because the creation of the IDEAS database was not without unforeseen technological speed bumps along the way. One of the largest of these related to putting our previously created materials into a new system. In order to accomplish this transition there was the need to learn how to merge pre-existing materials into a different database structure, along with teaching faculty and staff new database tools. These types of technological issues, while not insurmountable, took time away from other activities that we had budgeted for, and in many ways cut into the quantity of materials we initially were able to post to the database. For those considering embarking on a project involving new technology, time must be allocated to coming up to speed on the technology, remembering that some members of the collaboration may be faster at this than others.

Although some may view technology as a bane as much as a blessing, the more critical issue facing all of those involved with the IDEAS project has been, and will continue to be, the constant crunch of time. With the organizing group comprised of twelve original members, the mere

logistics of getting together to meet was one complicating factor.

Yet more than finding time to physically meet, finding the time to work on the project, such as to create the content, to edit and proofread, or to create a metadata document with fields suitable to our vision of the project, has been extremely difficult. None of the faculty received a course release for working on the database project, a reality that meant that work on the project was happening on evenings or weekends, on top of regular academic loads.

The IDEAS project has been very fortunate in having a sizeable start-up grant that has been judiciously utilized over the past few years. Money for start-up in the form of manpower hours was vital since it allowed us to hire staff to work with the collation of the pre-existing collections as well as creation of the web interface.

One complicating factor for IDEAS over the past year—and one reason for our slow pace vis-à-vis new acquisitions and new contributors—has been the assimilation of our grant-provider, the Midwest Instructional Technology Center, into the larger entity of the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE). Both are funded by grants from the Mellon Foundation, which allowed for the continued monetary support. The IDEAS project presently is supported through NITLE in the form of a server to house our project and the monies to invest in the database software and support. However, as with all grant funding, this is not a permanent situation, and we envision that IDEAS will over time become more self-supporting. To this end, we continue to look for cost-effective ways to collaborate and to entice new contributors to join our cause.

Ways to Achieve Success in Virtual Collaboration

The IDEAS project has developed some techniques for streamlining our process and for working towards our ultimate goal, a relatively self-sustaining, easy to use, easy to contribute to database. The following items are just a few that have helped make for a successful virtual collaboration.

One way to better address technology issues in the very beginning of a virtual collaboration is to ascertain who will be the point person for this aspect of the project. Having all of the technology issues going through a central person leaves other time available to those who should be more focused on content. IDEAS has also asked to have access to technology that will make the process smoother and less complicated for contributors. Making the IT people aware of our project needs helped them familiarize project members with tools that complemented our new database technology.

Vis-à-vis time, those involved with the project recognized early on that one way to save time was to avoid barrages of emails, choosing instead to set up monthly conference calls. The first year we spent an inordinate amount of time communicating via email, working out to about five emails a day, often with repeated concerns or information. This clearly wasn't the most efficient use of time, and a decision was made to hold a monthly conference call with a set agenda, which helped to prioritize issues.

All IDEAS project correspondence as well as reports now goes through Moodle, an Open Source course management system. This approach allows for project members to go in and check on past conversations, emails or earlier documentation. Rough drafts of proposals or projects can also be posted along with a calendar for setting suitable times to call or meet. Moodle is internet-based, allowing access from anywhere, and stores everything that has been proposed or is under discussion in a threaded fashion. Moodle also allowed for the creation of subgroup conversations, where project members with certain types of expertise received notification of activity on specific topics. For example, new collection development goes largely to the editorial board, not to everyone. Metadata issues go to the librarians; technology issues to the technologists.

All of the IDEAS project members would stress to anyone considering a virtual collaboration the need to periodically meet face to face. Although much can be accomplished via Moodle or conference calls, the greatest progress on IDEAS has been made when the project members meet around a table. Originally this was done at one of the four participating schools, but given the

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difficulties and time it takes to get to each institution, the most recent project meeting was held in a downtown Chicago hotel. This cost significantly less than flying the participants to one of the colleges. Future meetings will be held in conjunction with large conferences, utilizing the venue as an opportunity to continue our outreach efforts.

NITLE has allowed us to continue to work utilizing our present funding until it runs out, going no later than summer 2008. Money will always be an issue, especially should NITLE no longer support us with the server and database support staff. Members of the IDEAS project plan to look into optional funding opportunities over the next year, preparing grant applications where appropriate and as needed. Like the subgroups created for technology or metadata, a subgroup of grant writers devoted to finding support for maintaining any virtual collaboration is vital.

Concluding thoughts

The IDEAS project presents a unique model for faculty interested in collaboration. Successfully bringing four very different groups together to work towards a common goal, the IDEAS project continues to grow and serve the greater academic community. The members of the project ask for patience as we continue to expand our collections, and feedback as you start to use the images and metadata in the database. It is our belief that the dialogue and collegiality that a virtual collaboration project like IDEAS promotes is vital to sustaining Asian Studies in the 21st century. ⬡