Development of the Research Initiative Website: 
Input from Focus Group Interviews

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June 2003

ACCLAIM’s mission is the cultivation of indigenous leadership capacity for the improvement of school mathematics in rural places.
Editor’s Note. This report was developed by the author to provide Center faculty and staff, as the principal audience, with some of the information needed to improve the website sponsored by the Research Initiative. We are making it public, in part, consistent with the aim of the Occasional Paper series to document Center activities and concerns.
In order to help improve the Research Initiative Website, a series of focus group interviews were conducted. Initially, an e-mail message was sent to people directly connected with ACCLAIM to solicit volunteers for the project. Nine members volunteered to participate in the interviews, four males and five females. The nine volunteers were assigned to three groups composed of three people. The participants were three from the management team, three graduate cohort members, and three graduate research assistants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. The interviews were conducted via teleconference and recorded. Themes from the interviews were developed, and the following is a summary of those themes that emerged.

**Overall Impressions of the Website**

All participants reported that the website had many positive aspects in terms of overall appearance and content. One participant stated, “This site does the best job capturing ACCLAIM as a whole.” Other comments about initial impressions of the site were as follows.

- The site is inviting.
- The site looks good.
- The coloring and layout are attractive.
- There is a plethora of useful information.

Although overall impressions were positive, several noted specific items that caused their impression of the site to be diminished or indicated items that they felt could enhance the website. These items for improvement fell into two areas, appearance and content.
Appearance

One item that disturbed three of the nine participants was the picture on the main page. These three individuals were passionately opposed to this picture on the main page. One of the interviewees commented, “We are trying to combat the stereotype that rural means dumb or slow. This picture depicts rural as out of date, backwards, and broken down.” Suggestions were made to replace the current picture with a picture showing a mountain scene or a view of an industrialized farm with machinery and workers.

Another comment made by multiple respondents was that the page needed to be on one window. When a person accesses the site, one must scroll down to see the entire page. One participant commented, “It is better for the user to be able to see the entire page on one window.” Several interviewees commented that the main page needs to be viewed in its entirety when the first window appears. One suggestion in how to accomplish this was to eliminate some of the white space on the main page. This person repeatedly indicated that too much white space was present on the main page and throughout the site.

Another comment regarding the appearance on the main page dealt with the size of the ACCLAIM logo. Many participants felt the logo should be enlarged so that the layperson that visits the site may immediately see what ACCLAIM means. Additionally, comments were made regarding the gray text underneath the logo describing information about ACCLAIM. One group of
participants felt that this was very important information, but the gray text seemed to indicate unimportance. One respondent stated the gray text was like a “whisper” when this information needed to be presented as a bold statement.

Content

The organization of the site was questioned by one participant. The participant stated, “The site seems to not be organized in a logical manner, or at least I could not figure out the organization scheme of the site.” In contrast, another participant said the site was organized, and the organization centered around the four blocks of information on the main page. Although this respondent did see more organization, this person did agree that the fourth block was not organized in a logical manner. No suggestions were made by these participants on how to better organize the site.

Another aspect of the main page that the participants mentioned was the redundancy of information. Several items are listed multiple times on the site. One participant indicated, “You can tell the initiative is proud of the newsletter, as they should be, because it has four ways to get to it on the main page.” Although this participant did not necessarily see this redundancy of the newsletter information as a deterrent, other participants felt that the redundancy was distracting and not needed.

In contrast to the redundancy, one group mentioned that the research clearinghouse was underemphasized. This group felt that this aspect of the site was probably the most important piece, but it was not emphasized in that way on
the main page. This group indicated that the research clearinghouse needed more attention on the main page in some way, but did not present any ways of achieving this. They did suggest, “What is of most importance should be presented at the top of the main page.”

**Immediate Needs**

A few items were mentioned that need immediate revision. First, the information on the Capacity Building Degree Programs is out of date. This information was correct at one point, but the Capacity Building Initiative has modified the programs since. A second area of immediate concern was on the form to get the ACCLAIM newsletter. One participant was concerned with the question that asks for the sex of the person registering. This respondent questioned the need for this information. A final comment on immediate changes dealt with the front page. A typing error was found that spelled opportunities as opportunities.

In addition, the tabs at the top of the main page were addressed on two separate occasions. On one occasion, the participant indicated the tabs do not always work. For example, the tabs would not link the browser to the appropriate place. Moreover, one tab indicates it would launch the user to “About RI,” but rather takes the user to “About ACCLAIM.” Although one can get to “About RI” from “About ACCLAIM,” this pattern of links may not be understood when the tab brings up an unexpected screen. Another aspect of the tabs at the top of the screen was that the last tab stair steps to the right and off the screen. While the
other tabs drop down, this last tab drops slanted which takes some of the links off the page.

While one group indicated that, the links made the content easy to navigate, one participant from the group indicated having trouble finding the link to occasional papers. After hearing this comment, the other participants in that group concurred. One of the three groups indicated the links were not easy to follow, and made the content too overwhelming.

**Long Term Needs**

An improvement suggested by one participant was including a “What’s New Section” on the site. This would allow frequent users the opportunity to see what new papers or items had been added. This would alleviate frequent users from having to navigate through the old papers to see what new ones had been added. The participant stated this could be accomplished in a link on the site to “What’s New” or in the form of an announcement through a listserv.

When time permits, one interviewee suggested, “Some of the sections should be rewritten because the writing looks stylistically hurried or uneven.” In addition, this participant indicated the use of sidebars was not consistent throughout the site.

Another suggestion was the need to connect to all other institutions and initiatives. Although one can connect to the initiatives and universities through the portal, this participant wanted direct links to each. Moreover, although the bottom of the main page lists links to institutions, some of the links take the user
to the institution while others take the user to the initiative housed at that institution. This participant wanted direct links to all initiatives and institutions for this site and all initiative sites. This idea was reiterated by another group when addressing the need for connecting the research to practice for practitioners (this is addressed below).

**Searching Issues**

The majority of the participants were concerned about the accessibility of the website. Most participants questioned whether searches in Yahoo or Google would reveal this site. In addition, the participants wondered which words would pull up this site. They felt this was a very important site and being able to find the site through various search engines was important. The participants indicated that being able to search for the site was essential since the URL address was not easy to remember. Most participants indicated linking to the Research Initiative site through the ACCLAIM portal.

When searching for ACCLAIM on the Ohio University website, one participant reported only finding one article about ACCLAIM with no links to the Research Initiative website or any other Initiatives' websites. This was a concern for this particular participant.

**The Audience**

All respondents reported that the primary audience for this site would be researchers. Researchers included students working on research papers or
dissertations and anyone in academia conducting research in rural mathematics education. Another audience mentioned was anyone in rural education interested in mathematics education or visa versa. Outside of persons conducting research, the participants did not indicate any other audience for the site. In addition, one focus group mentioned that practitioners and principals would have no need for the site. In this interview, the respondents indicated the need for a link between research and practice. Some suggestions from the group were to have an ACCLAIM scholar write a column that takes a research paper presented on the site and comment on how it can be applied to practice. Another idea was to include more action research type papers of teachers using research and how they are using it. Because of the overwhelming amount of information, several participants stated that whomever used the site frustration finding specific resources may cause the audience use another site. One participant indicated that while doing research on the site he/she became frustrated and went to Google. The “Aides for Navigation” section provides suggestions on how to alleviate some of these frustrations.

The Non-ACCLAIM Audience

For those who access the site that are not familiar with ACCLAIM, one person says, “they may feel frustrated and lost.” To begin, the participants felt that the ACCLAIM logo should be in a larger font to help this person understand what the site is about. Additionally, several indicated the need for short definitions or one-paragraph summaries to help someone understand what
ACCLAIM and RI is about. The interviewees did not feel that everyone
(especially the layperson) would read the theoretical framework. Therefore, the
need to explain ACCLAIM in these short definitions and summaries is important.
Another area that needed to be addressed was some of the acronyms that are
used. For example, one participant indicated that certain acronyms are defined,
but JRRE was not. This participant noted frustration and inadequacy about not
knowing what JRRE meant. Moreover, the JRRE link takes a person to a list of
volume numbers with no explanations of what is contained within each volume or
why one would want to use this source. This is not true of all resources.

Aides for Navigation

If a person is trying to hurriedly navigate the Research Initiative website,
the participants feel the person will become frustrated and unable to find useful
information. In order to help navigate the website more quickly, all participants
indicated the need for a “Site Map” or “Search” button on the site. One
participant stated, “The massive amount of information makes quick navigation
difficult.” Another responded, “When looking for something in particular, I had
trouble finding it.” All indicated that first time users of the site would have
difficulty navigating the site to find what they need. Although they indicate that
navigation becomes easier with more familiarity of the site, the need for a quicker
way to search the site is essential.
Other Navigation Needs

When on the main page, the links at the top of the page were reported to be deceptive. Several participants indicated that they came upon the drop down folders by happenstance. They indicated the need to make these drop down folders more visible. One suggestion was to put icons around the drop down items that look like file folders. Otherwise, this feature of the site may be missed. Several reported not even knowing this was on the site. In addition, the “next page” icon was indicated as difficult to see. One person commented, “I did not see it at first, so I missed a lot of information that was contained on subsequent pages.” The other two participants in that interview did not see the “next page” button either.

Conclusions

Overall, the general impressions of the site by the participants were positive. Each participant was impressed with the general appearance and the amount of information presented. The above suggestions contain some immediate needs based on accuracy of information while some suggestions are more general to the website appearance and navigability. Some key ideas that emerged were the inclusion of a “Search” feature or a “Site Map.”

The above ideas are based on varying navigation experiences. Some indicated having navigated the site on multiple occasions while some indicated having navigated the site for the sole purpose of the interview. Depending on desired
output, future interviews may require a set time of navigation on the site. In addition, outside sources may be helpful, especially in making sure that items specific to ACCLAIM are understood by individuals outside of the center.