Empower: The Educational Advisor

We propose to create an interactive multimedia program designed to help people
with the many diverse questions that they have about education. It should have a
retail price of about $100 and should run on systems using optical storage that
should start to be widely available around 1990. Within that decade, systems that
can run the program will become a standard consumer appliance and we intend that
the program will become the standard source of educational information and ideas
for the general public.

All sorts of people have all sorts of questions about education. A great many guides
and resources currently exist to help answer various types of questions that people
have. These, however, aggregate into a thicket of information that only the most
sophisticated can penetrate with ease. This situation, however, is ripe for change. It
has become technically feasible to bring into a single multimedia resource, one that
will be fun and easy to use, good responses to virtually any question about
education that might reasonably be asked. Such a program should be called
Empower: The Educational Advisor -- the goal would be a resource that would
help people solve for themselves any and all educational problems that they find
themselves encountering.

If a resource of this character were done well, the market for it can soon become
huge as the technology for using it will become, in one variation or another, a
standard consumer appliance. Creating such a program at Teachers College
makes sense: the College is the custodian of the requisite information about
education and by creating the program, TC would help itself financially through a
lucrative stream of royalties while it would help the public substantially improve
educational actualities by bringing a better base of information to bear upon them.

To bring off such a program, we will need to develop the preeminent database of
practical information about education in all its forms and organize it for interactive
query with a first-class user-interface for delivery to people on CD-I and ensuing
technologies. In designing the database, it would be important **not** to structure it as
an epitome of what experts putatively know about education. Rather we should
structure it with the questions that motivate people seeking educational services of
diverse kinds. 'I'm concerned about my child's reading. How can I help her?' 'We
want our community center to get better resources to help people learn English.
What can we do?' 'My son hopes to go to college but none of us know anything

about that and his school isn't helping him much. How can we find out about it?'
The task would be to imagine as many concrete situations as possible and to make
explicit the educational questions that arise in those situations and to work out
responsible, helpful answers to those questions, presenting them to users of the
program in a direct, engaging way, making full use of interactive pictures, graphics,
sound, and text.

Once started, a program of this sort would generate resources more than adequate
for it to be continually updated, revised, and improved. If a comprehensive, practical
source of educational information and advice could be developed, the market for
Empower would prove to be be very large in scope and extended over time. As a
product, it would exemplify something that can be done with interactive technologies
that really can not be done with print because the result would be a horribly unwieldy
set of reference books. The project would be doable, but by no means trivial.

In structuring the enterprise, the College should clearly be in the position of designer
and information provider, benefitting from the project through royalties. To carry the
project out, the College should ally with a major corporation, say Time-Life, that
would serve the function of publisher and distributor, assuming the costs of
production and distribution, receiving the profits after those costs and royalties were
defrayed. To start the project up, the College will need to mobilize resources to
support design work on the order of $200,000, which it might do with the concept of
"venture endowment," operating expense gifts that have a high probability of
converting into income streams to the College far greater than the originating gifts.
In addition, substantial effort would be needed to amass the appropriate content,
most of which should probably be provided by the organization serving as publisher
and distributor.

I think ILT should take on such a project as a major development goal -- **Empower** is
a feasible educational product and one that will make a difference. Somebody is
going to try it, it had best be us, based at a top graduate school of education. There
are over 40 millions kids in school, K through 12, a million or two in college, several
million teachers, and many, many million parents; there are millions and millions of
adults who have learning needs and endless organizations, philanthropic and self-
interested, that have a stake in these adults' being able to meet their learning needs .
The compact disc makes it possible to draw together in one unified source most of
the information all these people need in order to manage their educational
transactions with greater, more humane effect than they currently can. An
interactive multimedia program that genuinely responded to the educational
concerns that people have, that informed those concerns and helped to empower
people to act on them, would be a worthy contribution to education and a
tremendous asset for the College. Let's make the creation of it our primary goal.

Robbie McClintock