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Virtual Library Project

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The Finnish Virtual Library project "Virtuaalikirjastoprojekti" was initiated in May 1996 as a joint undertaking of five university libraries. The libraries involved are Jyväskylä University Library (project management), Kuopio University Library, Oulu University Library, the University of Art and Design Library, and Helsinki University of Technology Library. The project is part of the Ministry of Education's programme "Finland as Information Society - a national strategy".

The aim of the project is to improve and increase the use of net data especially in higher education in Finland. The project carries out an inventory of data available on the net and develops user-friendly, subject-specific virtual libraries.

Each party to the project has been assigned a task area in the development of virtual libraries. These include, for example, compilation of material selection criteria, inventory of search robots, development of net data indexing, improvement of the user-friendliness and communicativeness of interfaces from a visual point of view, and evaluation and development of structural models of virtual libraries.

At the same time, the libraries involved in the project construct virtual libraries in their own subject areas. Thus the outcome of the project is a host of virtual libraries linked to the home pages of university libraries in the following fields: Arts and crafts, art education and visual communication, Ecology, Education, Environmental health, Environmental, protection technology, Geography, Geology, History of ideas, Molecular medicine and gene therapy, Psychology, Sami language and culture, Sport science.

The aim is that these different, virtual library pages together form one comprehensive, multidisciplinary virtual library. Certain similarity is sought in both their structure and visual appearance. These factors should facilitate their use. Most of these virtual libraries were opened for users on 1st September 1996, but some of them were available in a limited form even before that.

At the moment, the language of the project is Finnish; a potential continuation project could involve an English version of the virtual libraries for non-Finnish speakers. But although the libraries are in Finnish, most of the names of the documents selected are in English. Also some parts of the virtual library of psychology have been translated into English for presentation purposes.

Since this is a project of university libraries it focuses on scientific data

supply on the Internet. The primary purpose is to offer users as much relevant scientific full-text data as possible. However, the same applies to virtual libraries as to traditional libraries: collections can - and have to - contain not only materials but also channels to materials (secondary sources). Therefore, in addition to for example full-text journals, virtual libraries can offer their clients links to journal web-pages which include tables of contents, abstracts and author instructions.

The virtual libraries developed in the project will be much more than just mere lists of links. The material included is evaluated according to previously determined criteria. The documents selected must meet certain content and quality criteria, but attention is also paid to the form of the document, and the interface as well as the technical functioning of the links. Only material of a sufficiently high standard is included. Each link is accompanied by a short assessment of its contents. In addition, the virtual library has links to the local, physical collections of the libraries (online databases, catalogues of journals, theses etc.). Virtual libraries also include word search.

The virtual library pages contain a lot of guidance also in the use of net services at a more general level corresponding to traditional information and reference services in libraries. The virtual libraries constructed in the project are thus suitable for self-study materials, but they can also be used as teaching material.

Users of these virtual libraries can contribute to their development by returning a user questionnaire. Later this year, a report will be prepared covering the results of the user inquiry and the experiences gained from the project. The report will appear on the Internet. (see also <http://www.jyu.fi/~library/virtuaalikirjasto/>)