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How Responsive is Bibliographic Instruction to the Needs of Users?

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The question posed in the title of this article was stimulated by my attendance at the Thirteenth National LOEX Library Instruction Conference, held at Eastern Michigan University on the third and fourth of May 1984. At this conference, formal presentations, informal discussions, and an information packet/bibliography all focused on the theme "Marketing Instructional Services: Applying Private Sector Technologies to Plan and Promote Bibliographic Instruction."

What does "marketing" mean? According to Philip Kotler and Sidney Levy, "Marketing is that function of the organization that can keep in constant touch with the organization's consumers, read their needs, develop 'products' that meet these needs, and build a program of communications to express the organization's purposes."¹ Focusing on libraries, Stanley J. Shapiro states that, "(a) marketing attitude ... starts with the recognition that one's organization must be responsive in helping its users to solve their information gathering and processing needs. What business do you think you are in? In a very real sense, are you not in the business of creating satisfied customers?"²

Does the "product" bibliographic instruction satisfy consumers' needs? Members of the academic community turn to the library to find records of the ideas and creations of others. The fundamental objective of bibliographic instruction is to enable these individuals "... to make efficient and effective use of the available library resources and personnel in the identification and procurement of material to meet an information need."³ While the instruction typically deals with the organization of a particular library, and the characteristics and functions of specific reference tools or types of tools, it is still thought that "(t)he desired aim must be to prepare students to recognize opportunities for productive use of broad varieties of information systems. The ultimate instructional goal must center on teaching principles of information access, rather than the use of a particular library and its resources."⁴

While some people gain confidence and direction from the bibliographic instruction they receive, this training often fails to help people identify and acquire information relevant to their projects. This is because, in order to find information, individual must apply the research methods they have been taught. Frequently, this takes more time and effort than people want to spend.⁵ The process of gathering information might be likened to the process of losing weight; both can be said to be simple but not easy. The principle of losing weight (burn more calories than you consume) is simple, but the application of this principle is often difficult, as great effort is required to change long-standing habits. Similarly, the strategies and procedures that should

guide a search for information can be presented with great clarity, but using these strategies and procedures often takes considerable perseverance.

It is one thing to score high on a library skills test that assesses one's understanding of the card catalog, subject heading structure, bibliographies, fact reference sources, indexing and abstracting tools, and search strategies; and quite another to actually use this knowledge to find materials. As William Miller observes,

“Finding information in a library, and particularly in a large research library, is difficult. In our library instruction sessions and workbooks we present straightforward, pre-programmed search exercises likely to be successful. We try to make using libraries seem easy and enjoyable. But the real world is a complex place, and application of even simple principles of library use is difficult and frustrating for the inexperienced.”⁶

Even for experienced librarians, locating information to meet research needs requires considerable time and energy, and sometimes results in frustration. However, while most librarians seem to have a temperament that allows them to be enthusiastic about the information quest (and, of course, librarians are paid for their time), many library patrons consider the pursuit of reference materials a tedious and burdensome task that involves more labor than their patience allows.

I assume that college professors require their students to conduct research in libraries. (If they fail to do this, they contribute to the problem of the underutilization of expensive resources.)⁷ Given this need for library materials, it is reasonable to conclude that those who misuse or shun academic libraries do so because they have difficulty locating the information they need.

If librarians want to enhance their responsiveness to their clients' need for information, they must develop ways to reduce the amount of time and work required to conduct research. Bibliographic instruction programs can be helpful. They can provide users with confidence that information sources are available to answer their questions; that they themselves can find these sources; and that, if there are difficulties, assistance is available from friendly, competent people. The lessons that these programs impart can also direct people to the specific materials they need to begin or complete their projects. However, it is also clear that these programs are not as helpful as librarians claim they are, in that they do not help to reduce the time and effort required to locate materials. To do this, librarians must make the location and arrangement of library materials more obvious. As David Kohl notes,

“There is no point in teaching undergraduates the conceptual skills they need to be independent users of library information if the physical organization of the library is so opaque that they still require the mediating services of a librarian Is the library to be arranged for the needs and uses of the staff who must then mediate the collection and services to the patrons or is it possible through careful instruction and physical layout (including signage) to remove much of the need for a librarian interface?”⁸

Looking at my library, as David Kohl did his, I, too, continue to be surprised, and at times appalled, at the number of unnecessarily confusing arrangements that reflect obsolete practices and librarian inertia. "The goal should be, as one librarian put it, that, 'if all the library staff were propped up dead at their posts ... it should still be possible for a student on his first visit to the library to find his way to the books he needs'."⁹

The use of online information retrieval systems can often reduce the drudgery involved in finding materials. Conducting a thorough search of a database is a more expedient way to obtain a list of materials than examining printed bibliographies. This is particularly true when the subject in which one is interested is new (fifth-generation computers, for example); very specific (such as advertising campaigns for the Nomad telephone); or multifaceted (such as the relationship between reading achievement and self-concept among physically handicapped elementary school children). As the number and subject scope of searchable machine-readable files continue to grow, these files are becoming the tools of choice in bibliographic searches.

The cost of database searches has proven problematic for some libraries, but this is starting to change. BRS/After Dark and DIALOG's Knowledge Index offer access to a wide range of files at a very low price. Although these databases do not cover all subjects, and are in operation weekday evenings and weekends only, they do meet the needs of large numbers of people.

To ensure that these labor-saving services are used effectively, librarians must confront some organizational obstacles, and reexamine and re-evaluate a number of things. The librarians who are to provide these services must be trained and an adequate complement of staff members must be on duty on weekday evenings and weekends. Each library must devise a method of informing its clientele these services are available. Libraries in which online group demonstrations take place need microcomputers/terminals that can be connected to large video monitors.¹⁰

The goals and content of many bibliographic instruction presentations must be rethought.¹¹ Explaining the structure and uses of the printed versions of the ERIC indexes or Psychological Abstracts without also recommending a computer search of these databases, is, today, professionally negligent. Training users to search these systems is an instructional option that deserves consideration. The challenge is to reconsider traditional reference services and bibliographic instruction programs in light of the opportunities that online information systems provide.

A third service path librarians can upgrade is document delivery. Computerized information systems can play an important role here, too. While bibliographic databases facilitate the discovery of topical references, full-text and non-bibliographic files reveal the actual contents of the informative works. Computer systems can also lessen the time needed to order materials from document suppliers, like DIALOG's Dialorder.

In addition to employing computers to facilitate document delivery, librarians can work to improve the odds that the materials most needed by the community are readily available by

allocating funds or soliciting gifts, by purchasing multiple copies of the most frequently requested books, and by monitoring course syllabuses.

Using libraries is a part of academic inquiry that frequently requires much time and tenacity. Many people are not prepared to pay these costs, and bibliographic instruction, while it does alert clients to the existence of apposite materials and provide maps of the territory that a search might cover, often fails to make information gathering easier. Librarians might better meet the information-finding needs of their communities by investing more of their own time, effort, and money in clarifying the arrangement of library materials, facilitating patrons' access to computerized databases, and increasing the availability and/or speeding the delivery of materials.

NOTES

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 4. Topsy N. Smalley, **Bibliographic Instruction for Undergraduates: An Example of a One-Unit Required Library Research Skills Course** (Plattsburgh, NY: Benjamin F. Feinberg Library, State University College, March 1983), 4. ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 232 656.
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