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On the Limits of Bibliographic Instruction in Higher Education: An Opinion Piece

By Keith J. Stanger

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Beyond one-to-one reference service, bibliographic instruction is neither necessary nor sufficient to ensure that library materials will be uncovered, perused or used.¹ The content taught—bibliographic organization and search strategy—cannot produce the consequences desired—individual readiness and capacity to bring to light and use the ideas and works of others. Attention must be directed to developing the will and the wit of library users.

It is one thing to be able to extract facts about a topic from a library's collection, and quite another to use that collection to amplify one's understanding of a subject. Bibliographic instruction, as commonly implemented, facilitates fact finding. It helps students to match concepts in their heads with phrases in an index, which then points them to "answers" in the indicated sources. This sounds fine and good. However, learning how to locate bits of information about clearly defined topics is perceived by many in the academic community to be a rather trivial accomplishment. These academicians question both the difficulty and the real utility of this kind of library research. They point out that it would be significant if students could be taught how to use library resources to improve the quality of their scholarship and develop a keener comprehension of issues.

In postsecondary education, stimulating students' interest in, and cultivating their capacity to query, the social transcript is the proper province of the teaching faculty. Classroom instructors are the key individuals who possess the greatest ability to make changes in the use of libraries. The teaching faculty set the parameters of student achievement; they are the catalysts of students' inquisitive vigor. If they do not communicate the value of, or demonstrate the need for, being able to discover what is known about their disciplines, one can hardly expect those they teach to invest much interest in such pursuits.

"Library assignments" are not enough. Most are perceived by students to be akin to the "treasure hunts" of grade school. Term papers are often executed as exercises that entail summarizing fortuitously found information on a topic. If students are to be motivated to use libraries, instructors must profess and demonstrate the importance of being able to interrogate the information domains of their fields. In addition, instructors need to, and are in the best position to, provide assignments which will enable their students to develop and practice the necessary interrogatory skills—how to frame an answerable question; how to find what evidence is available to answer it (who produced the evidence, how was it disseminated, how can it be retrieved); how to evaluate the evidence.

Suggesting that teachers develop their students' knowledge of how information in their fields can be located, evaluated, and used is not meant to advance new topics in addition to or at the expense of those already in the curriculum. Rather, upon reflection, it can be seen that this knowledge is actually part of learning a subject, or, more importantly, learning how to learn a subject.

the information of a subject *is* the subject. To study a subject is to handle the information of the subject. The study of the subject is the proper place for education about the structure of the subject's information system, about access to the system and about the evaluation and use of the information.²

Academic libraries will be productively used, not when students are able to distinguish between article titles and journal names in *Readers' Guide*, but when students demonstrate the desire to gain access to what libraries provide—records of the knowledge and ideas of other human beings—and have the cognitive competence to know what questions to ask of those records so as to realize their utility.

REFERENCES

¹Patrick Wilson, *Public Knowledge, Private Ignorance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1977), p. 83-126. If you read only one other thing this year, let this chapter be it. The stimulation it provides will refresh your understanding of what it is librarians do.

²Colin Harris, "User Needs and User Education," in *Library User Education—Are New Approaches Needed?* (London: British Library Research and Development Department, British Library Research and Development Report No. 5503, 1980), p. 15.

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