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Library Instruction: Past Lessons, Future
Plans

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Library Instruction: Past Lessons, Future Plans

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Introduction

Enter an environment you don't know anything about and try to take advantage of the available systems which are also unknown to you. Now, suppose that you are an end-user of an information system, a newcomer or a novice. In this way, you can put yourself in a library user's shoes and plan accordingly.

When users enter an information system, however, they are on their own. They prefer to satisfy their information needs on their own. Many users do not want to share their information needs with others, even a librarian or information professional. (They need a librarian's help, but we cannot force them to seek it.) Under such conditions, our hypothetical users encounter huge amounts of complex information. It is likely that they cannot understand the how sources are stored and arranged and how to use them.

Users do not know how information is identified, selected, organized, stored, searched, retrieved, manipulated, and interpreted. They need systematic and continuous instructional programs to be able to do study and research. An instructional program is needed for any information system with a degree of complexity. From this point of view, there is no difference between a child who uses a children's library and a faculty member who uses an academic or special library. They are both users, and naturally do not understand the system's structure as well as information professionals.

An instructional course can improve information seeking skills of users. A child, for example, should have some information about reference books and a faculty member should know some of the most important databases in his or her field.

Library and information professionals have experienced the information seeking challenges of newcomers for many years. They have planned a wide range of instructional courses which were different in scope and depth to tackle this problem. Some courses have been provided for a few users in special information centers. Others have been implemented by a number of instructors for many users, such as the instruction programs in academic libraries.

Apart from the number of participants, every bibliographic instructional course has some things in common. A skillful tutor and a well-equipped and suitable environment are important prerequisites. Introducing the structure and function of information resources, and the methods by which an end-user can search are common syllabi.

In academic libraries, instruction is mainly done for undergraduate students, in order to teach them the skills they need to find information. In this paper, we will discuss some of the most effective instruction for undergraduate students. The skills that are taught are also examined, and based on this examination we will introduce other skills that need to be taught in an age of digitized information.

Effectiveness of Library Instruction: the Literature

The literature of the recent past shows what skills have been traditionally taught in library instruction, without consideration of more recent technological developments.

1982

Currie, Goettler, and McCaskill evaluated the effectiveness of library instruction on the improvement of library skills of biology and sociology undergraduate students at the University of Toronto in order to justify increasing amounts of time and money spent in such instruction. Their goal was to demonstrate the impact of using a compulsory library assignment on basic library knowledge. They collected data on 1,528 students, who were divided into control and experimental groups. Instruction included using the card catalog, encyclopedias, dictionaries in their field, finding journal articles on a particular subject, and so on. A questionnaire was prepared and a pilot study was done in cooperation with student library assistants. Based on extracted data some refinements were performed on the questionnaires. Then final questionnaires (tests) were distributed among a sample of 406 students. Results showed that instruction improved the library skills of undergraduate students.

1984

Wood demonstrated the educational value and effectiveness of a one-credit library research course by surveying Slippery Rock University (SRU) undergraduate students. Wood believes that such instruction not only improves the quality of higher education but also provides an essential instructional program for students who enter college with little or no library knowledge. Wood presents an overview of the creation of the one-credit course, from preparing a workbook to offering live instructional sessions to teach library skills to undergraduate students. Skills during included using subject headings, reference materials, searching indexes and abstracts, locating sources of information, using microform equipment, and compiling a bibliography using approved style manuals. As with Currie, Goettler, and McCaskill, there were control and experimental groups in Wood's study. Library instruction and library skills were independent and dependent variables respectively. Pretest and posttest were done by distributing questionnaires among respondents. The data was compared and analyzed using SPSS. Wood concluded that the library course at SRU has led to a positive and significant increase in knowledge of the library among its users.

1992

LaGuardia explored an experience in teaching bibliographic/library instruction to undergraduate students at the University of California at Santa Barbara. She discusses the importance of such instruction to library users generally and undergraduate students especially, as well as implementing an instructional course for academic library patrons when there is no instruction in high schools. Students have problems when they have to look for information in a new and sophisticated environment such as a large academic library. Problems include using online catalogs, referring to indexes, and speaking with reference librarians. A comprehensive program was established to teach

students how to use sources of information and to introduce them a range of services provided in the library. A tour of the library, understanding subject headings and classification, searching both manual and computerized catalogs, looking for information in CD-ROM databases, and doing an in-class/cooperative assignment based on learned skills were the most important parts of the syllabus. LaGuardia asserts that by the end of the course students were able to search and find materials as well as an experienced patron.

Skills Taught in Library Instruction

The most common skills or activities in library instruction are:

- *Library tour*: Such programs can help patrons be psychologically comfortable with the library/information centre as a new environment.
- *Understanding with subject headings and classification*: Patrons of an academic information system should be familiar with subject headings and classification, especially those of the Library of Congress, as internationally accepted standards by which holdings of information centers are catalogued and classified.
- *Searching both manual/computerized catalogues*: Catalogues are the "bread and butter" of information centres, and are one of the oldest type of information seeking tools.
- *Reference materials* : There are various kinds of reference sources including dictionaries, encyclopedias, bibliographies, handbooks, manuals, etc. They contain a wide range of data and information that can be applied to just-in-time information needs of patrons.
- *CD-ROM databases*: many journal articles, research reports, and thesis/dissertations are published every year. Taking advantage of CD-ROM databases needs some special skills which should be taught in conjunction with some others.
- *Using microform equipment*: Preservation and conservation of information is a source of concern for information professionals. Some solutions have been developed to address space problems. There is a need for an instruction on the use of microforms.
- *Assignments*: Instruction should finish with a theoretical/practical test. One project would be for participants to compile a bibliography about one of their interests. A final project can help measure learners' skills and evaluate the effectiveness of the course.

Future Plans

More recently, library instruction has added to the repertoire of skills that are taught. We suggest and endorse the following:

- *Virtual tour*: most academic institutions have designed and developed their own web sites during the past decade. Their missions and different services are introduced through this new and emerging communication channel. One of the links that should always be appeared on the site is the library or information centre, so that any interested patron can click on the link and be informed of services provided by the information centre. We should provide viewer of the page with a meaningful and well-formed page that can serve as a virtual tour of the library and its services.
- *OPAC searching* : OPACs are already in use in most information centers worldwide. Our patrons should be informed of OPAC search techniques.

- *Digital reference materials*: Internationally reputed works such as Merriam-Webster and Oxford dictionaries, Britannica and Americana, etc., are now available on CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs. Moreover, there is web access to some of these reference materials free of charge.

- *Internet searching*: The Internet has changed human life fundamentally. It provides billions of users with huge amounts of web pages containing mis/information. We as information professionals are responsible for guiding searchers through the information seeking process.

- *ICT equipment*: Humans have built and used tools throughout their evolution. As digital age professionals, we have to consider digital tools to solve digital problems. Therefore, we should include ICT in our instructional courses. Information is transmitted through technological communication channels. To take advantage of the available information, we have to know how these channels are used.

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