

# Subject access in an interdisciplinary environment

## Meaningful signposts must be created

by Anthony T. Vaver

**S**ubject organization governs much of what we do in libraries, from collection budget lines to library research guides to the arrangement of Web resources. Given our reliance on subject categories, the rise in interdisciplinary practices on college campuses has created real problems for libraries.

Interdisciplinary research draws upon at least two distinct disciplines, or subjects, to produce new kinds of knowledge, so it has the potential to shake up traditional subject categories and transform the curriculum. The popularity of interdisciplinary research, then, seems to call for changes in the way libraries organize their work and approach subject-based access to resources and services.

At the Brandeis University Libraries, individual subject specialists manage the selection of resources across broad subject areas, including the creative arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and major subject groups in the sciences.

Thus we solve the problem of selecting interdisciplinary resources that fall within one of these broad subject areas. But when considering resources that cross these areas, selectors often need to collaborate in making decisions, and this seems to be happening more and more.

Are we heading toward a time when the growth of interdisciplinary studies across cam-

pus will eliminate the need for selectors who cover traditional subject areas? Will we instead find ourselves working in selection teams?

### Who will decide?

When creating subject guides and organizing resource lists on our Web pages, the Brandeis libraries generally follow the departmental structure of the university. Until recently, we left out many of the interdisciplinary programs from our listing, except for major ones such as Latin American Studies. Now that we have decided to offer subject access to resources falling under interdisciplinary programs, we face the problem of who covers what.

Every interdisciplinary subject added to our list will require at least one person to oversee the content in the guide or resource list. Who will make decisions on what to include under Religious Studies when it involves elements of creative arts, the humanities, and the social sciences?

Once we create guides and resource listings for all the interdisciplinary programs on our campus, our subject-access offerings for interdisciplinary practices on campus will still be incomplete. Cutting-edge interdisciplinary work often remains hidden in the classrooms. Students taking a course listed solely in the

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English literature department might contribute their knowledge of anthropology, politics, or history to the class. Interdisciplinary programs by no means cover the depth of interdisciplinary practices on campus. Only when an interdisciplinary theme emerges after many course offerings across several departments does the need for a program that codifies the study of that theme arise.

The challenges posed by interdisciplinarity at the Brandeis University Libraries are not unique, and they raise broader questions for academic librarianship. Do interdisciplinary practices necessarily lead to a loss in our ability as librarians to make firm category distinctions and force us to rethink how we categorize resources? Should we abandon categorization altogether and put our faith in the power of search engines, where one search can retrieve multiple hits regardless of subject category? Can librarians anticipate the peculiar needs of the researcher whose research project combines chemistry, art history, and anthropology?

### Maintain the traditional

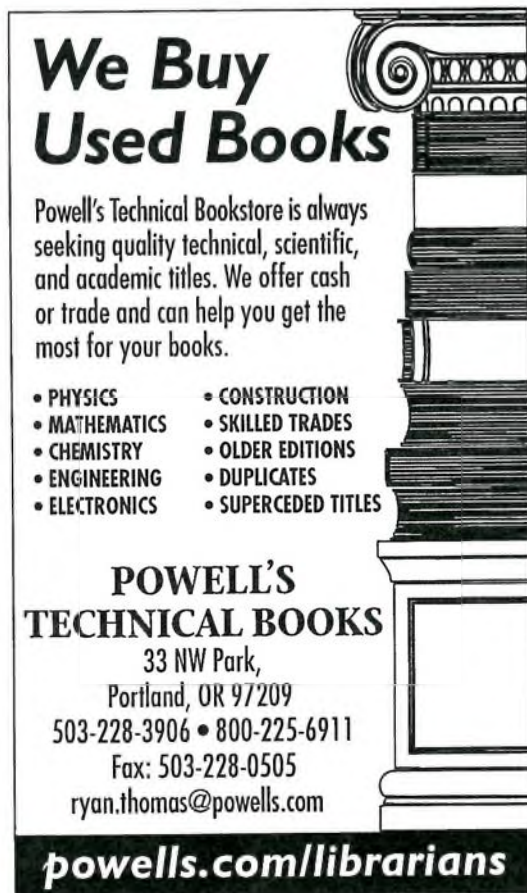
The answer to each of these questions is no. Ironically, the best way to accommodate the needs of the interdisciplinary researcher is to maintain traditional subject boundaries in our practice of librarianship. On a theoretical level, the very concept of interdisciplinarity requires the presence of traditional disciplines. Without them, you can't even talk about *interdisciplinarity*. Far from breaking down traditional disciplinary boundaries, interdisciplinarity lends great importance to these boundaries; it is their very presence that allows an interdisciplinary research project to take place at all.

From a practical point of view, the scholar pursuing a research project using chemistry, art history, and anthropology knows that he or she will have to consult resources in each of these three disciplines in the course of the research. If the resources in these subject areas are not organized according to these traditional boundaries, the scholar will have difficulty following the various research paths needed for the project.

Researchers often rely on a combination of well-thought-out research practices and serendipity. In both instances, a well-structured information environment is key. Research

strategies cannot be created without prior knowledge of how information is structured. Similarly, serendipity has a better chance of being meaningful within a highly structured environment, where chance can lead to new research paths, as opposed to a research environment where only isolated instances of good fortune can take place.

As librarians, we need to create meaningful signposts for resources so that our users can navigate through and retrieve them with relative ease. We still need to decide what goes where, which admittedly becomes tricky when dealing with interdisciplinary resources. But making category distinctions has always been tricky, even when working with traditional subject areas. By creating a slew of new subject categories, in an effort to anticipate the infinite combinations possible in interdisciplinary practices, we risk losing the structured environment that gives rise to these combinations in the first place. Interdisciplinarity should not distract us from one of our primary goals as librarians: to create meaningful categories in an information environment that sometimes resists structure. ■



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