College libraries and the new technology

By Thomas G. Kirk

The opportunities and challenges of using new technology

I read everyday about new technology and the dramatic things that will happen in the delivery of information as a result of that technology. As a librarian in a small college I often feel overwhelmed by this news and ask myself disturbing questions of self-doubt. How will my institution ever afford the costs of the new technology especially when my institution is stretched to provide adequate support to maintain the current purchasing level? Do our undergraduates really need all the glitzy technology that delivers evermore amounts of information when we aren't using fully what we already have? How will my colleagues and I learn to use the technology effectively?

Those questions come not out of any opposition to the technology but out of fear of the unknown and great uncertainty about what the future holds for me as an individual and us as a profession.

Keeping technology in perspective

Those questions do not, however, consume my professional life and do not preclude my library from moving forward. What keeps me upright in this topsy-turvy world of information technology is a return to some basic principles which help keep the rapidly developing world of technology in perspective and guide my thinking about how to engage the new technology effectively.

These basic principles include: the role of our college libraries is to improve the educational programs we serve. We improve those programs when the information we deliver can effectively be used. The program is more suc-cessful not when we have more technology but when our students' interest in and capacity to use the literature in all formats has been developed. Such capacity and interest should extend beyond meeting the needs for courses they take to include a fully integrated sense that libraries and information resources are an important avenue for lifelong learning.

The technology may be evolving very rapidly but the integration of the technology's use will take at least a generation. Technology starts out automating or mechanizing a tedious manual operation. Only after the technology has replaced the old way of doing things do users (and creators) discover new things the technology can do. Different levels of comfort in using computers, and the need for initial programs and hardware to evolve into more intuitive versions that complement the way people actually perform work, put a break on the fast pace of technology development.

Our work of implementing the use of the technology is a process. Our challenge is not the completion of particular work such as implementing an online catalog, developing a campus network, or purchasing a new CD-ROM database. Instead each is but a step in a larger process which has as its goal the continuing evaluation of the library's ability to provide technology in service to teaching and learning and the cultivation of the habit of lifelong learning.

I must be willing to change. My most critical challenge is to continue my own professional education. I should take every opportunity to learn about the new technology and how it might be used. I read, play on the Internet, attend conferences, talk with colleagues, and ask questions. I need to remember that if the habit of lifelong learning is important for my students to cultivate then it is also important for me to practice.

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I am not alone. We as a society and as a profession are navigating in uncharted seas. Like generations before us we are making up the rules as we go along. Therefore, it is not possible for us to know the answer to every question. There is a level of risk involved which we must accept and move on. Our challenge is to minimize the mistakes and learn from them.

Future challenges

With those principles firmly in mind I am ready to face the challenges of developing my library's program of service to the community.

The first challenge is development of a new curriculum for bibliographic instruction. The issues are so profound that even the old language (i.e., bibliographic instruction) is inappropriate. However, the new language has not been created. When I started out in this profession I developed programs of instruction based on a linear model of library research. The model suggested there are classes of library resources (e.g., encyclopedias, the library catalog, periodical indexes) which can be used in a sequence so that what has been learned at each stage contributes to later use.

The work of the last twenty years has upset that model even for beginning undergraduates. Advances in learning theory and its application to bibliographic instruction, the recognized importance of users' emotional states in the problem-solving effort of research, and the multipathed approaches and volume of information which automated systems provide, converge to demand new approaches to instruction. While the need to make students aware of resources and the particulars of how to use them are still of basic importance, we now must give much more attention to evaluating resources, understanding research as a decision-making process without the benefit of full information, and understanding the semantics and logic of indexing systems.

Whether you call it information literacy, information use instruction, or one of a dozen other possible names, the enterprise of preparing students to make effective use of the new technology, even with the benefits of more intuitive interfaces and the assistance of artificial intelligence, is still the most important thing we do as college librarians. While the technology complicates our effort it should not divert us from attention to this priority.

The second challenge is to use the technology to deliver a greater diversity of material which will increase students' awareness of the multicultural world in which we all live. This challenge is part of the articulation of a new paradigm for collection development. We need to find creative ways to use the technology to ensure that we have effectively balanced access, and purchase so that basic general sources, which may be under utilized, are adequately available while also providing a diversity of materials that present the experiences of particular ethnic, racial, and religious groups; women; physically challenged persons; and persons of different sexual orientation.

Our third challenge is to integrate the new technology into the library's reference service. The new technology increases, not decreases, the demand for user support. While an instruction program will help, there is still need for new approaches to reference service. The large academic libraries are now examining "differentiated service" and "undifferentiated service" as two contrasting models of reference service.[1] While some aspects of this discussion remind this experienced librarian of the 1960's discussion about information desks vs. reference desks, and central reference vs. subject reference and branch libraries, the new technology, among other factors, may have added new dimensions to the discussion about how to provide effective reference service.
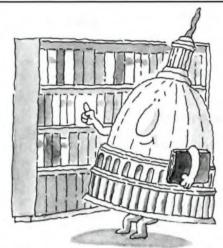
We must not dismiss the re-examination because it has primarily focused on large academic libraries. But neither should we ignore differences between the nature of colleges, their academic programs, and campus ethos on the one hand, and large multifaceted universities on the other.

Our challenge as college librarians is to remain true to our central commitment of serving the teaching and learning activities of our institutions. Our goal is support of processes which allow the effective use of new technology to improve access and reduce the drudgery of literature search and retrieval. Our reward is to pass on to the next generation libraries which are fully engaged in the effort to use technology to enhance our understanding of the world.

Note

[1] William L. Whitson, "Alternative Models of Reference Service: A Proposal," unpublished paper posted on Internet (Berkeley, Calif., February 22, 1994). Available from COLLIB-L@ WILLAMETTE.EDU. ∎