

Gladly would he learn, and gladly teach

By Sandra Weingart

Students won't learn if we do their work for them

I read Carol Goodson's column, "Putting the 'service' back in library service" (*C&RL News*, March 1997), with a great deal of interest. In my three-plus years as an academic librarian, I have always believed that the most important thing we do for patrons, particularly students, is to teach them how to find, retrieve, and analyze information. Goodson believes that we would all be better off if academic libraries provided research services on a pay-as-you-go basis. The students would get their materials more quickly and with less effort on their part, and we librarians would become a more integral part of the campus environment by providing this much-wanted service. I disagree thoroughly and wholeheartedly.

It is true that students would rather have a librarian do their research for them, and that many would be willing to pay for such a service. It is also true that we are more experienced and efficient at research than are students just learning the process. I am reminded of my own undergraduate days. I would much rather have had the teaching assistant in Math 109 do my trigonometry homework for me than do it myself. And I would have sold my blood in order to pay for it. The exercises would have been done much more quickly and much more accurately. *But that wasn't the point of having trig homework.* The point was for me to learn something new and useful and to develop my own competence through repetition and trial-and-error.

Assuming that students still go to college or university to gain an education, how on earth are they going to accomplish that if they pay someone else to do their thinking and their work for them? Just because students want

something doesn't necessarily mean it would be good for them to have it.

Learning to think critically, to analyze information, and to synthesize conclusions is not the same thing as buying a pair of jeans at J. C. Penney. In a retail sales transaction, the goal is to gain the desired item as quickly and as painlessly as possible. It is the sales associate's job to go find the right size and color if the store has it. And don't kid yourselves—that's just about as likely as finding the journal you want actually on the shelf. However, in an institution of higher learning the goal is to develop the intellectual capacity of the students. The process is essential to the finished product. If you don't do it, you don't learn it. I believe a more apt analogy would be to compare our job to that of a coach. A good coach spends tremendous amounts of time teaching his or her young charges the finer points of the game, running them through endless practices, and correcting their errors. But when it's time to perform, they have to do it themselves. Coach doesn't come in and shoot the free throws.

Another point of contention involves the notion of students paying for research service. Many may be willing to pay, but how many will actually be able? Does anybody seriously think that it would be a good idea to put it about the academic community that if you can afford it, the librarians will do your homework for you? And make no mistake; in many cases the research process *is* part of the assignment. Not only would this create inequity between the haves and the have-nots in terms of service; most schools consider the buying and selling of course work to be grounds for expulsion.

As for any librarian even implying that research is easy and that anybody can become an expert in minutes, I've never seen it. Every librarian I've ever observed acknowledges to

the patron that it can be difficult and frustrating and that it takes practice to develop competence. In classes we make it a point to tell students that they aren't expected to be experts on the basis of one 50-minute session. We librarians *are* experts and we are here to help.

Library instruction is designed to introduce concepts and skills. If they aren't practiced, they aren't mastered. Nobody expects a freshman engineering student to build a bridge after his or her first class. Neither do we expect students to become expert researchers without effort.

Fee-based research service performed by experts is quite common and effective in corporate environments, law firms, and other special libraries. In the academic world, undergraduates are supposed to learn the basic skills of information literacy. Without those skills, they will be unable to evaluate the quality and validity of the information they encounter. This premise is applied in many other areas of education as well. Nearly everybody uses a calculator to perform basic mathematical operations; but students are still taught to do addition and subtraction by hand. You won't understand the results if you don't understand the underlying concepts. That is why librarians are supposed to teach students how to access and analyze information. ■

(IFLA cont. from page 709)

- Library's integration into core function of university.
- Support IFLA's focus on the electronic environment:
- Copyright laws
- Electronic formats.

Elsewhere at IFLA

IFLA's Roundtable on User Education sponsored another successful program during its fourth IFLA conference, this one entitled "Library Gateways and User Education."

Special keynote speakers such as Ms. Sibanyoni, South African Woman of the Year for 1997, combined with special cultural events in libraries and Copenhagen's cultural institutions, made this meeting most enjoyable and educational. Sight-seeing within the city and quick boat trips to Sweden provided additional benefits for all conference participants. Of course the Danish drink and food, including the famous smorgasbord, were most delicious. Particularly striking was the fact that Copenhagen is such a safe yet very open city. It really does feel like living in a "butter hole," as several natives referred to their city and country. ■

Web Review Issue Now Available!

CHOICE brings you the best

- Reviews of some 200 research-related Web sites
- Concise, informative evaluations
- Features, including Librarians on the Internet and Internet/Web books

This is a special supplement, celebrating CHOICE's expanded coverage of Internet resources.

Copies mailed to current subscribers in August. **Order extras** for staff, faculty, students, and home.

\$20/copy
(inc.s&h)

CHOICE Web Issue Sales 100 Riverview Center Middletown, CT 06457
Fax: 860-346-8586. Phone: 860-347-6933 x33. choicemag@ala-choice.org