

## Guest Editorial



# Bibliographic Instruction: Not Just for Students?

I recently had the opportunity to facilitate a group of students, teaching faculty, and library faculty discussing the role of computers in the Kansas State University library. Some faculty members believed that too many computers were inappropriate for the library. Reasons stated ranged from too much reliance on electronic resources to ugliness of the machinery. Some students did not realize that much important information is still available only in print and that most high-quality electronic information is quite expensive. We librarians were dismayed at our exposed inadequacies in communicating with our patrons.

It became increasingly clear that misunderstanding abounded among these three groups. The purpose of our continued discussion over several weeks' time was to address these incorrect assumptions and to learn one another's varying perspectives for the role of technology in the library.

1. Not all electronic information is to be distrusted.

Both librarians and teaching faculty are constantly imprinting upon students the potential unreliability of some Web sites, especially sites posted by individuals of various interests. This does not mean, however, that all Internet information is automatically bad. Evaluation of sites to determine reliability is something that must be learned by everyone.

Another related issue is the acceptance of full-text subscription services or subscriptions to online journals. Libraries pay large sums of money to subscribe to these services, which provide electronic reproductions of journal, magazine, and newspaper articles. Some faculty members are

prohibiting their students from using these resources, insisting that the students show them the actual photocopies from the print journals or papers and eliminating useful resources for no reason other than the format. Librarians must convey to faculty as well as students that content is what must be considered. It is true that some information is lost in the electronic format; some services do not include charts, tables, or illustrations. Articles missing these may be incomplete. However, faculty members must realize that these electronic equivalents are usually acceptable alternatives to print; most libraries will not allow students to interlibrary loan articles that are available electronically, unless the purpose is to fill in crucial missing parts. These policies combined (electronic is unacceptable, yet no interlibrary loan is available) serve only to shut students out of much-needed and useful information.

2. Not all information can be retrieved electronically.

Many standard reference resources in all academic disciplines are available in print only. Although electronic availability is increasing, print publishing shows little sign of abating. Students who try to find everything online must realize they probably are missing important pieces; their research is incomplete without consulting these sources.

3. Librarians and teaching faculty must communicate more regarding requirements and acceptable resources.

Faculty members may have good reasons for assigning students print-only or electronic-only assignments. Perhaps the class is studying a variety of research methods and the instructor has simply

chosen a particular sequence for types of sources. Perhaps the faculty member is unaware that alternatives exist. The network that librarians build should allow for the means to communicate with faculty if a question arises. Open dialog will help everyone function more effectively.

#### 4. Convenience is not a bad thing!

A couple of faculty members said at one point in our discussion that students now have things “way too easy.” Referring to the painstaking searching necessary with print indexes and catalog cards, these people grumbled: “I had to do it the old-fashioned way.” I am sure they would not have been pleased to be told they could not use catalog cards because at some point that, also, was a new invention! To sum it up, the job of a librarian is indeed to make things more convenient for the user, whether faculty or student. Classification schemes, access points in catalogs, keyword searching—all were created for the convenience of the patron. Our lives revolve around arranging things for the convenience of our patrons.

This points to a potential conflict between teaching faculty and librarians. Much of a teacher’s job is, in a way, to “inconvenience” the students so they will learn. However, a balance must be achieved between giving students efficient tools to learn and creating discouraging obstacles. The calculator, once seen as an instrument enabling students to cheat, now is a necessary tool that allows students to go beyond what was previously possible.

#### 5. There are alternatives to the Ugly Computer.

Technology today enables computers to have flat or tabletop screens that have a much more streamlined appearance than traditional monitors. Surprisingly, many people object to more computers in the library because they are seen as unattractive.

6. Not all faculty members, not to mention students, have access to capable computers.

Many people in technologically rich de-

partments may forget that some of their colleagues are not similarly blessed. Having decent technology available in the library will assist and convenience many faculty members as well as students.

#### 7. The “one-size-fits-all” laptop requirement does not always work.

Many schools, colleges, or departments are requiring students to have laptops, desktop computers, or other equipment. Laptops have been popular because students can carry them around. Many faculty see spending money on computers within the library as a waste when students have their own machines. If a university has a policy where *all* students must own laptops, this might be true; otherwise, there is still a need for at least one more generation of library-provided computers. If a university enacts a policy for student laptops, by the time this policy is phased in the library computers will need replacement anyway.

### How to solve the problem?

1. Talk to faculty individually about electronic resources and what types of formats they prefer and why. If there are questions about reliability, show them some samples. Explain the cost savings and help them see the convenience for their own uses. Convenience for students may not be a viable argument.

2. Try to arrange bibliographic sessions with classes so that the faculty member can or will attend. Explain why it is important to present a “united front” on what is acceptable. Discuss evaluation of resources, especially electronic, and explain the difference between reliable and questionable sources. Hearing this point brought home to the students may ease the faculty member’s mind.

3. Never make assumptions. This library school maxim ought to be the first thing we say to ourselves every time we arrive at the office. Before switching formats, visit with *all* faculty involved. If possible, enlist the help of proactive fellow faculty members to help persuade

those who are reluctant. One well-spoken advocate in a department can make a positive difference.

4. Finally, be a good listener. Letting students and faculty talk about their frustrations without interruption or immediate correction will put them in a frame of mind to give your point of view equal consideration. Be a positive advocate for change, not for change's sake but because it is better. If it is not better, it may be the wrong decision. Agreement must be reached about what constitutes "better." If we push for a resource the rest of the institution will not use, we are wasting time and money.

After weeks of continued discussions with this group, something remarkable began to happen. Disagreement and controversy dissolved into understanding. With small compromises and minor adjustments to address the concerns of each group, everyone began to understand how more and better computers in the library

could be beneficial—not only for using electronic products, but also for accessing valuable print resources. By housing the computers within the library, near print resources and reference librarians, it became clear how this technology could provide a uniquely integrated environment, creating a positive impact on the quality of the students' work and providing faculty members with more opportunities for research and development. Faculty saw how librarians could encourage students to use the best resources, regardless of format. Librarians developed a better understanding of the difficulties electronic "shortcuts" have caused for teaching faculty. Students learned more about the importance of academic integrity and the value of proper research methods. Understanding on all sides created a firm resolve to help everyone become better learners through the best tools possible.

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