



Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One

-Plato-

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THE APPROACHING DEATH OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IS GREATLY EXAGGERATED!

By

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On Thursday, June 30, 2005, *The Chronicle The Chronicle of Higher Education* <daily@chronicle.com> conducted a Colloquy titled "Packing Up the Books". The University of Texas at Austin is one of several academic libraries that will clean out nearly all of its undergraduate books to make room for an "...information commons where students can collaborate with classmates on multimedia projects, consult with Internet-savvy librarians, and check out laptop computers. Texas is just one of several universities and colleges storing journals off-site, digitizing books, or sharing volumes with nearby institutions to free up space for computers and technology services." (*The Chronicle* June 30, 2005) Does this endeavor, along with similar efforts at other institutions, represent ultimately feeble

moves by librarians to stave off their inevitable extinction?

Alas the buggy whip maker, old lamp lighter, home delivering milkman, and the librarian. May the contributions that each made to the fabric of humankind rest in peace. For years librarians, in particular those of us employed by institutions of higher learning, have been told that the future of our profession is short term, at best. After all if one can't find what they need on the Internet, then the topic being researched must not have much value.

Very early in our history, college and university libraries offered their patrons hand-bound leather books, containing voluminous acid-free pages of information for research and/or pleasure. Later these tomes gave way to hardcover works with highly acidic content paper sandwiched between boards. In 1935 the first United States paperback publisher distributed Pocket Books with reprints of *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Bronte, *Five Great Tragedies*, by William Shakespeare, and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, by Agatha Christie ([Kane, et. al. 1997](#)).

We have come a long way from those leather-bound books to electronic formats, including books on compact discs, magazine/journal computerized databases, and, of course the, seemingly ubiquitous, Internet. But despite the

seemingly awesome changes in the content of academic libraries, their objective remains unchanged: to direct students and/or scholars to the information they seek. In many ways this objective has become more critical as users find themselves inundated with so much material that thoughts of careful evaluation of sources takes a back seat to “raw” quantity. Undergraduate students especially need to be reminded frequently of the importance of critically evaluating source material; no matter in what format in which it comes:

Identify the information needed

What is it the library user trying to find? Are we looking for numerous critical analysis of the writings of C.S. Lewis, or is our user looking for biographical information on this author? Would journal articles, depending on the currency of the information sought, be more applicable, or should we try to strike some balance between articles and books?

Develop a Search Strategy

With selected subject in mind, and depending on our goal, we now consult the library’s OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog) by entering “C.S. Lewis” as an advanced key word search. Entering “Lewis, C.S.”, followed in the next box by “criticism”, after which, on the far right, we choose “and not”, followed by “electronic” in the next box, our search will produce sixty-nine results from accessing all libraries in the University of South Carolina system. These sources will be actual hardcopy materials; with no ebooks included. Of course other OPAC strategies, such as “author”, “title”, and “subject” are available, depending on the user’s goals and may or may not produce additional results.

Paper indexes, such as Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature and Essay and General Literature Index (both publications of H.W. Wilson) have been replaced with far more effective computer databases. Tools such as DISCUS (Gale Group), LexisNexis (Reed Elsevier Inc.), and Wilson Web (H.W. Wilson) are just three examples of commercial groups of data bases offering access to periodicals, journals, newspaper articles, and court cases, to name just a few results. Too often users, especially students in their first or second year of college, tend to search the web utilizing only such tools as Google, Yahoo, Alta Vista, which admittedly offer a plethora of information but of which virtually none has been properly vetted. In other words the resultant Web-based information can range from Miss Grundy’s 4th grade class to Dr. Smith’s dissertation. It is the responsibility of the student, or end-user, to properly evaluate the results. Not all students are capable of, or wish to allocate the necessary time required, for this analytical thinking. Therefore I always steer patrons to the aforementioned sources such as DISCUS, where a plethora of vetted information awaits. It is also important to note that some faculty require their students to use only refereed journals, an optional search offered in some of the commercial tools such as DISCUS.

Evaluate the Information Content

It is important, no critical, that students learn to evaluate the information they choose to use. With the advent of the Internet, sources, some of varying accuracy, have proliferated at a tremendous rate. An illustration I often mention to my bibliographic instruction classes is the student that was doing research on Adolf Hitler. He

proudly came to me saying that he had found an excellent web site. After looking closely at this new found source, I asked the student if they were aware that this site was maintained by the American Nazi Party? I told the searcher they were welcome to use it, as long as they remembered that nothing negative will be said about Der Fuhrer. If students are just “surfing the Web” then it is their responsibility to determine the level of scholarship and accuracy in a document. This is another reason why I encourage use of the databases offered through the library.

In order to help library users, in particular undergraduate students, accomplish the most effective materials search of which they are capable, academic librarians must make students information literate. While this critical goal can be achieved as part of Bibliographic Instruction, unfortunately not all students are exposed to this important class. Thus through the traditional reference interview with users, as well as awareness of the student’s responses in the follow up to that interview, the librarian quickly ascertains the information literacy level of the user. Librarians must remember, especially recent library school graduates, that the successful outcome to an initial inquiry can hinge on understanding what the requestor is really seeking. When a student states that they desire information on corporations in the United States, are they really asking for an example of a business plan from a particular company? Or when a student states that they desire information on world poverty, the librarian must see if the student can narrow down the scope of their search. Each of these examples illustrates how, through the reference

interview the academic librarian can determine the level of information literacy in a particular user.

According to the information literacy standards developed by Academic College & Research Libraries (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandard/s/informationliteracycompetency.htm>):

Standard One:

The information literate student defines and articulates the need for information.

Standard Two:

The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.

Standard Three:

The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.

Standard Four:

The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.

Standard Five:

The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

As one can see from the above standards, the academic librarian forms a “partnership” with the student’s professor (the latter always the final authority), and the student. The librarian can help the student, through the aforementioned reference interview and follow-up, to explore sources to increase familiarity with the chosen topic and define the information need; thereby assisting the student in narrowing the focus of their search, helping the student differentiate between primary and secondary sources, as well as help the researcher determine the availability of needed information (what is available in-house, and how much more will need to be ordered through Interlibrary loan. All of these steps fall under the umbrella of “information literacy.” When the student is a novice researcher, the academic librarian can point out when dealing with online resources whether “help tools” are available, how frequently the offered material is updated, and what entity is responsible for maintenance of the web site. Of course the same is true of hard copy books and journals: who is the author? when was the document written? what sort of index and/or bibliography exists? How often is the source published: daily, weekly, monthly, etc? Even the more advanced student may, in haste, or otherwise, overlook some of these prudent points.

In the spring of 2001, *American Libraries* published an article, by Mark Y. Herring, Dean of Library Services at Winthrop University, titled: “10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library”. Herring points out “not everything is on the Internet”. While the process of digitation has come a long way in the last four years, the text of a substantial number of books and journals

remains to be digitized. In addition, Herring reminds readers that full text is not always full text; with tables, graphs, and charts sometimes being absent. (Herring, 2001). Librarians, as well as their users, must remain “information literate” through continual exposure to professionally geared information via journals, websites, listserves, and other “tools” available for their continued professional development. A few examples are: *American Libraries* (published bimonthly by the Association of College & Research Libraries), *College & Research Libraries News* (published 11 times a year also by ACRL), and *American Libraries* (published 11 times annually by the American Library Association: the parent company of ACRL). Like all professionals academic librarians utilize the aforementioned titles, along with attendance at local, regional, state, and national conferences.

It is worth noting, at this point, that in the current age of specialization, academic librarians fulfill a critical role. Where as each faculty member is expected to fully know his/her subject area, many librarians, especially in small libraries, are expected to understand something about *each* discipline, at least as it relates to accessing necessary on line and hard copy sources. The librarian not only must recognize that a search, following the all important reference interview, can lead to a particular data base, but they must be professionally prepared to affectively instruct the user in searching that data base; regardless of the subject matter covered. The same point is applicable to using the On Line Public Access Catalog to locate sources, both within the walls of the library as well as, outside that particular collection.

The librarian's role, while it may have evolved over time, remains pertinent to current research efforts in academic libraries. Academic librarians will continue to be effectively embedded in the continuing information revolution by attending professional on-line and in person conferences and workshops. The need to guide,

especially inexperienced, researchers among the shoals of constructive and destructive information has never been greater.

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