Information Literacy: On Our Way

Room 1070, the Instructional Services classroom in Waldo Library, is identified by a brass plate to the left of the door that announces, "This room was made possible through a generous gift from the Harold and Grace Upjohn Foundation." The donor would be pleased with the fruits of their donation since the room offers state-of-the-art equipment that is used to achieve a special goal: information literacy. Faculty librarians use this facility to provide instruction in how to make efficient use of the resources in the University Libraries. Their efforts are especially directed toward students, but as technology changes the ways in which we find information in libraries and other information resources, the process of retrieving that information or conducting research becomes more challenging and demanding to every patron.

No longer can library users walk into the library, simply consult a catalog, and believe that the result is acceptable. In order to be "information literate," they must be aware of the broad range of print and electronic resources and make informed choices about the best sources for their needs. Western Michigan University Libraries offer nearly 100 electronic databases, many with different search techniques plus hundreds of other print bibliographies. And this does not begin to describe the plethora of possibilities found once the Internet gate is opened. Researchers at all levels must master the techniques of using those varied computer systems if they are to locate that which they are seeking—or discover that it does not exist. To do these things well, to become "information literate," they need to be instructed in searching techniques, search strategy, and evaluation of sources—long before they apply or use the information that they have found.

These are the ambitious goals of the University Libraries' instruction program that, in turn, supports the University's mission "to help each student develop the ability to think critically and objectively, to locate and assess information ..." (Western Michigan University 1993-1995 Undergraduate Catalog, p. 8). The University Libraries has established a departmental liaison program that is designed to work with the general instructional program. The ultimate goal is to deliver, systematically, instruction to students on how to become information literate. Faculty requests for course-related library instruction are met by the team of librarians in subject areas that include freshman composition, history, women's studies, English, education, music, business, occupational therapy, the sciences, and other disciplines that cross the University's curricula. Instruction is available, at the present time, by faculty request, but efforts are focused on courses that provide a basic introduction to a significant number of students, such as English 105, or required courses in the major, such as History 190 or Women's Studies 200, which introduce students to print and electronic resources in their majors. There is also a plan to reach those classes that involve specific research projects at either the undergraduate or graduate level, but personnel and scheduling have become critical factors as the library liaison/faculty/classroom project develops.

Essential to the achievement of the goals is the equipment found in the classroom. A Macintosh with DOS compatibility dominates the teaching station. This "computer" enables use of software from both MAC and DOS platforms, as for example, presentations that were developed with either version of PowerPoint. Through an LCD (liquid crystal display) panel and projection system, search techniques are performed on the computer and simultaneously projected on a screen to an audience of up to 50 individuals. This means that demonstrations of how to search WESTNET databases, including FINDER (the online catalog), KELLY (the catalog for local area libraries), LOOK- ITUP (the KVCC online catalog), and DATAQUEST-1 (a selection of four periodical indexes), as well as FirstSearch (more than 40 different databases), are possible. Further, the system can also be used to demonstrate the use of specialized, disciplinary databases that the library has acquired on CD-ROMs, as for example, America, History and Life on Disc. Finally, an amazing spectrum of information can be navigated through access to Internet including Gopher and the World Wide Web.

The classroom is also designed to provide hands-on practice on the WESTNET system with small groups. Twelve stations are equipped with terminals and several offer printing capability. Students can practice the searching techniques demonstrated for them and immediately apply them to their individual research topics. This permits instructor intervention and assistance wherever necessary—by both faculty librarian and classroom instructor.

Many instructional efforts begin with course-related sessions in the Waldo classroom, but others are part of University-wide programs, or are offered at other service points in the libraries. A classroom next to the Education Library in Sangren Hall is often used for instructional sessions for education students. A tour of Waldo Library and a video that introduces the WESTNET system are part of the University's Freshmen Orientation Program. University 101, which reaches about 700 students each fall semester, includes a unit on the library that teaches students how to search for books and periodical articles on the computer. For two years, students enrolled in 101 have had the opportunity to use a hypermedia tutorial, which is mounted on four Macintosh computers in the Central Reference area on the first floor of Waldo Library; complete a quiz; and "graduate" with a certificate signifying their mastery of these basic library skills. Other opportunities for learning about the library are offered through individual assistance.

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Trivial Reference Books

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(St. Martin’s Press, 1984). Not every book of quotations would include such gems as this comment by George Lichtenberg, German physicist and writer: “He who is in love with himself has at least this advantage—he won’t encounter many rivals” (p. 122).

Every library has numerous books devoted to explaining punctuation rules. Only Karen Elizabeth Gordon, however, in The Well-Tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed (Ticknor & Fields, 1983) makes a game out of this chore. Here, for instance is how she defines a common point: “A comma is used to set off conjunctive adverbs, such as however, moreover, etc., and transitional adverbs.” She then illustrates, “We hate your ideas; however, we will give them proper consideration” (p. 53).

Thousands of specialized reference dictionaries exist, but one of my favorite genres is dictionaries of unusual words. For instance, George Stone Saussy III, in The Logodaedalian’s Dictionary of Interesting and Unusual Words (University of South Carolina Press, 1989) may be one of the few authors who will assist the reader to discover that his or her vocabulary is incomplete without a word meaning the ability to coin new words, such as “logodaedalian.”

Some quite non-trivial, and even solemnly serious reference books include entries that are unintentionally humorous. On a slow day at the reference desk, for instance, I hope I am forgiven for browsing the index to the U.S. Department of Labor’s famous Dictionary of Occupational Titles (4th ed., 1991). Just a few of the actual names for legitimate jobs in this country included among many thousands in this work are: suction-dredge pipe-line placing supervisor, continuous pillow-case cutter, upset-welding-machine operator, and ticket-chopper assembler.

And so goes the search for the insignificant fact or figure. All of the books mentioned above can be found on the shelves of the central reference collection in Waldo Library. They exist for your edification—and also for your amusement. Browsers are just as welcome as users with long faces!  

D.I.

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from a librarian at the reference service points found in different locations in the library system (science, government publications, music, rare books, education, regional history, etc.). The University’s off-campus centers are also sites for instruction; students in Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, and other centers are taught by a faculty librarian who is exclusively assigned to provide reference and instruction for these students.

The age-old image of the library as a repository of books is no longer an accurate image. With technological advances, the library has become a gateway to information in all formats—not just within its walls—but to information on networks that extend throughout the world. To help students and other patrons to learn how to access, retrieve, manage, and evaluate the information that they find is a primary mission of the University Libraries at Western Michigan University.

The library, as President Haenicke tells the student who uses the hypermedia tutorial, “is the heart of the academic institution.” At the center of that heart is the mission to educate its users!  

J.A.