



A Champion of Information Literacy

Somebody once opined, on the Association of College & Research Libraries Information Literacy list, that “Federated searching is as dumb as a bag of hammers.” It unleashed a storm of protest, all of it directed at me, the author of the unfortunate opinion. Speaking your mind on a major library discussion list can bring you a lot of trouble. But being an opinionated advocate of information literacy can also bring you terrific opportunities. Being asked to write for *ONLINE* on the subject of information literacy is one of those, and it’s a distinct honor.

I’m old enough now to be able to look back and understand the long path that made me a champion of information literacy/information fluency/research proficiency, or whatever you want to call this thing. It was 1984, and I was halfway through a Master of Library Science program. At the same time, I was running the library at a small undergraduate/graduate college. Never having thought about it much, I just assumed (incorrectly) that students picked up research skills by doing research.

When the truth hit me, I went to my sympathetic academic dean and told him, “Our students don’t know how to do research.”

“I know,” he said sadly.

So I proposed to him that we start a for-credit course in research, and he bought it. The problem was, I had no idea how to teach such a thing, so my first hapless students were going to have to endure my trial and error. By 1985, I had a one-credit course up and running. Then the dean and I decided, maybe sadistically, to make it compulsory for all students.

The results, over the years, have been fabulous. Those who take the research course see it as lifesaving, and the quality of research that results is much better than you would expect from the average student. I should have left it at that, but I started looking at what else was happening (or not) in the big, wide world. That’s how, little by little, I became an advocate for a bigger and bolder information literacy.

A FEW GOOD BIASES

If I’m going to write a column, it might help you to know where I am coming from. My biases, which I hope are good ones, are inevitably going to show, so let me make them clear from the outset:

1. Information literacy (or the lack of it) is the biggest blind spot in education today. It’s also the biggest gap in any workplace where employees need to acquire and handle information. The notion that people naturally learn informational skills is dead wrong. Most people, in fact, muddle through the research process like practiced drunks, giving an appearance of sobriety but hiding utter confusion within.
2. We must put to death forever the notion held by many in education and industry that people learn how to handle information by handling it, without the need for any education except a few initial instructions. The hundreds (or thousands?) of undergraduate and graduate students I have worked with over the past 22 years tell the tale very well—they don’t get it automatically. They have to be taught. The same is true for many in the workplace who have told me about their

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woes in the quest for needed information that they simply cannot find. We teach people how to drive cars, speak in public, play pianos, and dance ballet, but we assume that everyone can learn how to acquire and handle information just by trial and error. For the vast majority, that just isn't so. The skills they end up with by virtue of their experiences are minimal and are often more of a problem than a help.

3. We have to stop dumbing down the information-handling process and start believing that people can become sophisticated users of complex information technology. That's where my ill-advised comment about federated searching came from (more on that in a later column). We assume that people can only rise to a certain level of ability in dealing with information, so we set our expectations low. I can't tell you how many professors have mournfully told me how tired they are of mediocre research papers. In industry, managers fully expect their information people to miss things and have to redo their research. That's the level of the people you get, so why expect more? I, on the other hand, believe that information skill is teachable. I think we can help people become wise users of all the tools of information available to them. Information skill, in the context of an understanding of information itself, is crucial to all of our futures, and it needs to be mainstream in our thinking and our mission.

WHAT'S IN STORE

For upcoming columns, I hope to look at ways to help students optimize thesaurus use in databases and to guide practitioners in new online noncommercial tools for plagiarism detection. I would like to evaluate the good and the bad of federated searching, enter the dark world of those who use only the open Web as an information source, and provide tips for those of us who are trying to convince our personal powers that be that information literacy is crucial to an educated work force. I want to explore the use of analog resources to teach digital navigation. I hope to determine whether or not it is possible to write a decent research paper using Google Scholar, Google Book Search, or A9.com alone. If so, the implications for up-and-coming researchers are promising and terrifying.

That's enough about my biases and plans for now. On the more practical side for the balance of this column, let me introduce you to two students I met recently. They have given me some significant insights about the disparity between the way we think information technology should work and the way it is actually functioning.

FREE, ONLINE, AND ALWAYS AVAILABLE

Meet student A. I came across him by accident while I was discussing a RefWorks issue with another student (RefWorks is a useful but complex bibliographic manager). He offered his own viewpoint, which was mistaken but interesting. We got to talking. He was maybe 20, a keen user of technology, and he began telling me how he'd gone about pretty much leaving the hard copy world behind. He didn't need books and articles in paper format, because most anything he need-

ed was online. Student A, mind you, was not simply dumbing down to a Google search, grabbing the first three results and using them willy-nilly. No, he was doing real research using good academic resources.

Journal articles, peer reviewed and all, were easy to get with all the electronic full text available through our proprietary databases. But what about books?

"Ah," he said, without an ounce of shame, "I use Google Book Search."

"But that won't always work," I told him. "Google Book has copyright restrictions that limit you to only a few pages."

He admitted that such was the case. Then he smiled, exuding confidence. "But you can beat it. All you need is 15 Google accounts and you can pretty much read the whole book." (Is anyone from Google paying attention?) I didn't praise his ethics, but I was astounded at his conscious effort to work around the obstacles and get the full text he believes he deserves.

Here's the lesson from student A: In the mind of his generation, electronic full text, like music, should be always available and free. Copyright, shmopyright. Free online information is a God-given right, and woe betide anyone who tries to lock it up or pass it out only to authorized users. Try those tactics, and student A will find a way to get around them, because hard copy is dead and the world of the virtual is his playpen. To play effectively there, you need to replicate hard copy land by beating the forces of information repression and getting the full text you deserve.

STUCK BETWEEN DIGITAL AND HARD COPY

Meet student B. I encountered him while he was working on a graduate paper in biblical studies that demanded that he wrestle with some issues related to the manuscript tradition in the *Epistle of Jude*. I won't make this overly technical—he'd come across a Web site that reproduced the various manuscript readings he needed. Then he was looking for a source that would explain why editors of the *Greek New Testament* chose one manuscript tradition over another. I grabbed a textual commentary out of the book stacks, and he told me that this was exactly what he was looking for. Then he asked his inevitable question: "Can I get this online?"

Here you have someone about 10 years older than A who has discovered the benefits of the online environment but lives awkwardly in a mid zone between hard copy and digital. B struggles with reconciling the two and would prefer everything to be digital. But he lacks the electronic smarts and the ethical ambiguity of A, so he has to use hard copy as well as electronic information. He is constantly frustrated by the ungainly transitions between print and digital that are demanded of him. By the time he is done with his project, he will have about 20 hard copy books to back up a number of Web sites, and he'll be slowly puzzling over how to bring it all together.

Here's the lesson from student B: We think the digital environment is a help to those who use it, but its tacit promise of replacing hard copy is an illusion. What is more, those who live in both worlds find the shift from one to the other to be clumsy and frustrating. They are not enough at home in

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either world to know how to use the two together effectively or to find a way around hard copy.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN

We now have the technology to make the research task so much more productive than it was 15 years ago. We can discover, in a few moments, data that would have once taken somewhere between days and never to locate. We can expand our horizons, collaborate in our research, and improve our understanding in unprecedented ways. But we need to see that the transition from analog to digital creates researchers who have ambiguous or unhelpful relationships with both.

While some have never known anything except the new electronic reality (and are bending it to work for them rather than playing by the rules), others are learning as they go, uneasy in both the digital and analog worlds. So, for those of us who are teaching others how to benefit from our online world, how should we proceed?

1. It is always crucial to determine where the person we are training actually lives. Is it in digi-world, in analog/digi-world, or even in hard copy land fearing the digital invasion? None of us should assume that everyone is comfortable in the digital world or that everyone recognizes the value of hard copy.

2. For the "hard copy is dead" crowd, we should try to understand how they are using the informational technology we've provided for them. Copyright needs to be explored. Is it crucial? Should it be modified for new users? At the same time, we can learn from this new generation. As its members bend our rules, they are shaping the direction of information-seeking tools of the future.
3. For people in transition who are frustrated that so much essential information is not available digitally, we need to help them understand that hard copy and electronic information can work together and that hard copy is still their friend.

The new era of information holds great promise for all of us. My commitment is to teach people how to realize that promise in the midst of all the complexities that we have to navigate. Over the next few columns, we will get down to details about ways in which we can all carry out a similar mission. I hope the practical insights I'll share will strike a few chords and help you sharpen your own thinking about information literacy.

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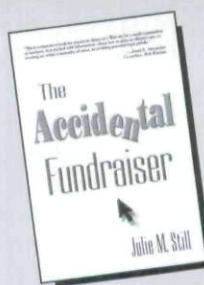
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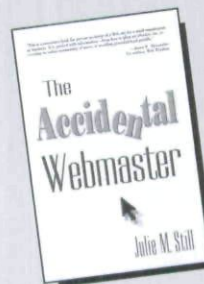
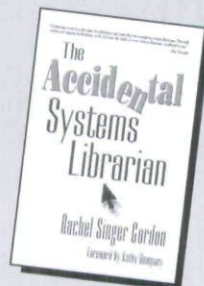
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