THE STUDENT, THE LIBRARY AND THE THINGY

One of the most endearing things about student library users is their frequent imprecision in formulating questions that reflect exactly what they want help with. They often use seemingly strange vocabulary and always presume that the librarian automatically understands them. Hence requests such as “where are the history books kept?” when in fact the need is for information on 17th century French costume, or, “I need the printout”, are all too common. A request from a student to “satisfy me” left me wondering whether this was another psychology project, whether to feel flattered, or whether the student needed glasses. What this student (and many since) needed, was copies of documents certified by a Commissioner of Oaths.

A fairly recent phenomenon is the incorporation of the ‘thingy’ into student library users’ vocabulary. Alas the library is full of strange thingies, as student users refer to the OPAC thingy, the journal thingy, the index thingy, the computer thingy and the bibliographical thingy amongst others. Why such ‘things’ that can stand in their own right are being appended in this manner is hard to explain. Reference to the thingy often follows on from an initial approach to a subject librarian which starts: “I have this development / politics / chemistry etc thingy to do”. Of course we know exactly what they mean.

One of the reasons for the prevalence of the thingy may well be that students are often reluctant or unable to adopt a problem-solving approach to assignments. This goes hand-in-hand with the vain hope that there is one book with the same title as an assignment topic that will provide the needed answer. Students often don’t or won’t follow the steps of topic analysis. These would include: understanding what is required by an assignment, formulating a strategy to reach an answer, deciding what information is needed and finally, locating the information. Failure to do this results in poor question formulation and the reliance on the irrepressible thingy to describe the seemingly indescribable and incomprehensible. The Internet and electronic onslaught may well have advantages in the information-gathering process but they have also served to confuse and blur the distinctions between sources and categories of information and the need for a systematic search strategy. In addition, the “halo effect” of information found on the World Wide Web often blinds inexperienced student searchers to the need to evaluate critically what they find.

Librarians long ago saw the need to move beyond a mechanistic approach to information retrieval which focused on how to use a library catalogue and particular sources. We encourage a more process-oriented, problem-solving approach. This requires critical thinking. The identification and use of information sources is seen within the context of a process of steps from topic analysis to final collating of an answer to a problem. It is an integral part of any research process but frequently, indispensable input from the Library is ignored. In the UNP Library this problem-solving approach is increasingly being adopted in ‘library instruction’ across a wide range of academic courses at various years of study. Unfortunately these skills cannot be acquired in one 45-minute lecture period; they take time to be explained and developed and need constant reinforcement.

As the information world becomes more complex, our commitment as subject librarians to helping our students unravel the mysteries of thingies, through formal information retrieval programmes and one-on-one contact, will continue unabated and remain a central focus of our mission.
Since its creation five years ago, the Library has worked hard to make its website a useful access point to a wide variety of information resources. The website is constantly being added to and revised, a task which takes a good chunk of time of all those involved. A website team, headed by Jenny Aitchison, manages the overall website development with all subject librarians regularly checking links, evaluating and selecting information sites to add.

Major changes that have taken place in the last few years include: the addition of links to electronic journals (that the Library pays for and free journals) as well as the arrangement of these electronic journals by subject (click E-resources then E-journals). Under the Subject links option (click E-resources then Subject links), subject librarians have compiled short useful lists of subject gateways and websites for a range of broad subject areas. Increasingly, subscriptions to indexing and abstracting databases have moved to on-line format away from CD-ROM. The improvement of Internet access has allowed for ever more information to become available via the Library’s website.

At the moment the Library Services link is being upgraded. Shelf guides and other library guides will be added to the site in the future. Comments and suggestions are always welcome.

**SUMMARY OF THE UNP LIBRARY WEBSITE**

**SERVICES**
- Libraries - locations of the five campus libraries
- General information - mission statement; opening hours; regulations; code of conduct and contact names and telephone extensions
- Subject information - subject librarians; subjects and disciplines; subject guides (under construction)
- Publications - Library Bulletin; library publication series; the journal *Innovation: appropriate librarianship and information work in Southern Africa*
CATALOGUE

- **WWW OPAC** - links to UNP and UND catalogues
- **telnet OPAC** - also a link to How to use telnet OPAC
- **Cataloguing Network in Pietermaritzburg (CATNIP)** - information about CATNIP members

E-RESOURCES

- **e-books** - selected dictionaries, encyclopaedias and collections of electronic books
- **e-journals** - full-text issues of journals to which the library subscribes (only available via the LAN); (logins and passwords are required in some instances – ask your Subject Librarian); free e-journals are also available
- **e-newspapers** - selected newspapers and collections of newspapers
- **online indexes** - selected online indexes available via the LAN such as SABINET, EBSCOhost (the latter has links to full text articles)
- **trial online indexes** - online indexes on free trial for specified periods
- **cd-rom indexes** - information about indexes, abstracts and other databases in CD-ROM format available on the LAN (NO links)
- **subject links** - subject gateways and selected subject-related websites

LINKS

- **Bookshops and publishers** - an alphabetical list
- **Forthcoming conferences** - listed at NRF’s TALK Conference Database
- **Higher education institutions** - institutions in South Africa and worldwide
- **Libraries and archives** - South African and British academic libraries, National Library of South Africa; British Library; Library of Congress and others
- **SA Government website**
- **Research, scholarly publishing** - includes links to research organisations
- **Search engines** - international and South African search engines
- **Using the Internet** - links to guides, tutorials and other resources

TRAINING WORKSHOPS ABOUT INFORMATION RESOURCES OFFERED AT UNP LIBRARY DURING THE SECOND SEMESTER

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<tr>
<td>Wed. 3 September</td>
<td>Library catalogue (OPAC) - Regular</td>
<td>12h20 – 13h05 or 14h10 – 14h55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thurs. 4 September</td>
<td>Library catalogue (OPAC) - Expert</td>
<td>12h20 – 13h05 or 14h10 – 14h55</td>
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<td>Fri. 5 September</td>
<td>UNP library’s website</td>
<td>12h20 – 13h05 or 14h10 – 14h55</td>
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<td>Wed. 10 September</td>
<td>Introduction to journal literature</td>
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<td>Thurs. 11 September</td>
<td>SABINET: SA databases</td>
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<td>Fri. 12 September</td>
<td>EBSCOhost: Index and full text databases</td>
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VENUE: Multimedia classroom Main Library lower ground floor

Booking essential: Gita Ramdass 08h00 – 13h00 only
email ramdass@nu.ac.za. ext. 5896

If these dates and times don’t suit you, please let us know so that we can offer alternatives.
This book reveals the information search strategies of top business researchers. The author conceived the idea of this book after seeing how researchers experienced great difficulty in recognizing the quality difference between free sources available on the Internet and professional online databases.

This book is a collection of insights and views from business searchers from a variety of backgrounds such as business investigators, competitive analysis experts, business valuation experts, corporate librarians and independent information professionals. It consists of eleven interviews with researchers and information professionals, many of whom have a library science background.

The author, who is a ‘super searcher’ herself, has been owner of Bates Information Services for some 12 years with 15 years experience in corporate and law libraries before that. She met with a range of information retrieval experts to extract valuable tips, techniques and strategies on how to find critical business information. In addition, these experts give their personal views on how they conduct reference interviews, the impact of the Internet on searches, and how searchers use the Internet.

Questions to the following interviews: How do you find information on business-related topics? how do you integrate value-added information services and the Internet based information into your search strategies? do your clients / patrons / users expect you to find everything you need on the Internet? are they doing their own business research on the Web? what impact has this had on your searching?

An interesting finding from one of the researchers Jan Tudor is that, before proceeding to online databases, she starts her research with the Encyclopedia of business information sources which ironically is a printed book, before proceeding to electronic resources. She says the interface of a database contributes to its functionality, user-friendliness and stability. Her preferred choice is DIALOG.

Many researchers rely on reading online services experts’ columns such as those of Greg Notess, and journals that review online searching such as Searcher, Database and Online. They also rely on networking with other people who are in the information retrieval business including libraries.

Susan Klopper from Arthur Andersen relies on her very large CD-ROM collection. She believes they are cost-effective and fast, particularly those which have good powerful search engines. She believes that CD-ROMs will play a very important role when “classic online systems fade away” which she believes they will. Contrary to this view is Anne Caputo who works for Dow Jones Interactive publishing. She finds online better than CD-ROM and would only get CD-ROMs for reasons such as accessibility or price. Super searchers confirms the value of the reference interview. Robert Berkman, editor of The Information Advisor, affirms that asking the right question compels the answer, therefore the art of asking good questions needs to be cultivated. In addition he only uses the Internet to find recent news, press releases and basic company directory facts because the Web lacks the analysis and evaluation that one finds from commercial databases.

Other views from Super searchers include:
- Use more than two online services
- Look at the world from the client’s perspective
- Set up a current awareness profile for the subject enquiry
- Find the speciality search engines and databases that best suit your research.
- The Internet cannot match commercial databases

Super searchers do business is a valuable resource for information professionals and for everyone whose tasks involve searching for information for research purposes.

Related Readings:

Nthabiseng Mosala