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## As Time Goes by . . . : Revisiting Fundamentals

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"You must remember this . . .  
The fundamental things apply  
As time goes by."

From the movie *Casablanca*

### ABSTRACT

AS WE REINVENT LIBRARIES FOR THE twenty-first century, it is appropriate that we revisit our vision of library instruction—an emerging dimension of library services which has been largely pragmatically based. Such a review suggests that four main areas require attention and redefinition: (1) the reference/instruction relationship; (2) the vision of creating the self-sufficient user; (3) the importance of replacing courses with curriculum; and (4) the need for significant outcomes. Firsthand examples from a variety of ARL libraries are used.

### INTRODUCTION

The problem with growing up like Topsy is, well, that you grow up like Topsy. When asked who was in charge of her upbringing, Topsy replied, "I jus grewed up." Library instruction is not much different. Even with the creative and committed leadership of Evan Farber, Virginia Tiefel, and others, library instruction pretty much "jus grewed up." On the one hand, such frontier freedom contributed considerable energy, creativity, and vitality to the process, on the other, it has left more than a few loose

ends. As a library administrator who is now some distance from the instructional "madding crowd," these loose ends have come more clearly into focus and are, I believe, important issues for the continued and productive development of library instruction.

The overall theme of the loose ends has to do with the piecemeal implementation of library instruction. This is by no means criticism in any dismissive manner. Having been intimately involved with library instruction in four ARL libraries, this author fully understands and appreciates the degree to which practical politics, individual personalities, the vagaries of local organizational structure (both within and without the library), and just practical operational necessity interferes with, and influences, logic and educational theory in the development of an instructional program. Indeed, the wonder is not (to paraphrase Dr. Johnson's celebrated remark about the dancing bear) that our instructional programs are not more developed and widely available, but rather that we have any decent ones at all.

Nevertheless, as creative and resourceful as both librarians and their occasional traditional teaching faculty supporters have been, the development of library instruction has been largely a process of experimentation and discovery, capitalizing on opportunities in an often indifferent or hostile environment with improvisation and make do. While such an approach has been necessary in the past and, given the academic library's status in the academic pecking order, will likely always be required to some degree, library instruction has now established itself well enough for us to pause and consider some broader issues. The trappers, traders, and explorers have explored and mapped the territory and have sent back their reports; now it is time for the settlers. The issues, or loose ends, which now require attention, form an agenda in four primary and intimately related areas.

#### ESTABLISHING PRIMACY OF INSTRUCTION

One of the fundamental problems we face today in carrying out the "access to information" part of the library mission is the inadequacy of the traditional reference model in a period of chronic funding shortages and ongoing radical technological change. Providing intellectual access to library information resources through one-on-one, face-to-face interactions has never been particularly efficient. In an earlier period, when library funding was better and information needs were simpler, such inefficiency was a more or less manageable problem. The job of the reference librarian, even twenty years ago, was more one of explaining the fine points of information tools rather than teaching basic new technologies. For example, it was possible to assume that most patrons understood alphabetical order when showing them how to use a print tool, whereas it is not wise to make the analogous assumption today (familiar-

ity with Boolean searching or proximity statements, for instance) when explaining the use of electronic tools. Further, there was more continuity in the information experience between academic generations and schooling levels. The size and complexity of the card catalog, for example, may have changed considerably from high school to college to research university, but these all worked on the same basic principle. And the tools which professors used as graduate students were basically the same tools their students were using.

As we all know, the information environment is radically different today. Changes in information tools are so basic and relentless that it is difficult for reference librarians to keep up, let alone provide interpretation and education to patrons in their use. Students are less prepared and have more diverse needs, and a large proportion of the faculty bring a personal experience with information tools that is so outmoded, they cause serious problems for both themselves and their students rather than, as formerly was possible, assisting public service librarians in their mission.

The reference model, with its locus in individual interactions, simply cannot cope with this kind of radical change—especially when reference staffs are more likely to be faced with downsizing rather than massive increases in personnel. The idea that library instruction whose classroom approach multiplies the librarian's ability to provide information access by twenty to thirty times is not new. What does need to be reconsidered, however, is instruction's place in the library organization.

As it has grown up, instruction has tended to find its home in reference departments, often as a kind of stepchild. Two important changes need to be made:

1. Instruction needs to be seen as the primary means by which the library provides intellectual access to the collection and other information resources provided by the library.

Reference and information desk services continue to be important but as rather specialized add-ons to the basic instruction function. We need to switch the place of reference and instruction, with instruction seen as the primary means of providing intellectual access to the collection. Expensive highly trained reference librarians can provide the frosting but not the basic cake.

2. Instruction services need to be located in their own department and reporting as highly as possible within the library organization.

My experience has been that it is very difficult for the instruction program to be taken seriously within the reference context. There are not only substantial philosophical differences in how adequate intellectual access is provided, but the shortages and stresses on the reference

department make it difficult to staff adequately, support, and develop a new program which appears to be cannibalizing the more traditional one. Instruction programs cannot adequately or fully develop as "little sisters"—they need a room of their own.

Reporting as highly as possible within the library organization is not to give the instruction unit "unfair" advantage within the library but is rather an organizational necessity given the university or college environment. Such reporting is an acknowledgment of the importance of upper-level library administration's helping to smooth and facilitate the path of instruction outside the library with the traditional teaching faculty and the nonlibrary administrative organization. It is difficult for library instructional staff to have access to the necessary forums, opportunities, resources, and information without upper-level library administrative help.

#### FOCUSING ON THE SELF-SUFFICIENT USER

Another one of the problems of "just growing up" is that it is possible for an important value to become a shibboleth—i.e., it continues to evoke religious veneration even when carried to an inappropriate extreme. This has happened with service. We have become so focused on service, or our particular definition of it, that we have come close to losing our way.

The legitimate concern to provide good point-of-need service at the reference desk has led us too far in the direction of creating dependent users. Although this author is convinced it is not their intention, the concern of reference librarians to personally mediate access to information has led them to create environments which not only encourage, but at times require, dependency on the part of patrons.

The classic example of this orientation is the organization of reference areas. Although libraries have spent a great deal of time and money classifying library materials in an organized and effective manner, reference units invariably regroup the reference materials in ways that improve the efficiency of, and convenience for, the reference staff but which totally mystify most patrons.

The common complaint that library instruction simply makes more work for reference is not surprising. A good instruction program teaches patrons the underlying logic of the library's information systems. When the reference department disrupts that overall logic, the potentially independent user is forced once again to become a dependent user and seek reference help. The reference librarians must then mediate a system which they themselves have disrupted. Although well intentioned and possibly, in an earlier simpler world, appropriate, it no longer makes sense.

Two important changes need to be made:

1. The primary public service goal of academic libraries must be to educate independent library users. The goal of education is not to provide information to students so that they are always dependent on their

instructors when they enter their professions or careers. Rather, the goal of education is to create independent professionals who can operate effectively and creatively on their own. The same must also be true in teaching students how to use information systems. Particularly as the use of information systems increasingly takes place outside the library building environment is the concept of independent user important.

2. The library needs to be reorganized to facilitate and encourage independent users. More than the reference area needs to be considered here. After several years as head of the Undergraduate Library (UGL) at the University of Illinois, I was astonished to discover that the chronic complaints I had been receiving about the stacks being out of order were in large part due to a UGL shelving policy which ran the oversized books along the bottom row of the stacks in their own sequence totally independent of the shelving sequence of the upper six shelves. The UGL circulation staff were not being perverse, they were just providing good "service." Years ago, someone had complained that having heavy oversized books on the upper shelves was both inconvenient and possibly dangerous. Obviously, the solution adopted was not a solution compatible with the concept of independent users. Ironically, the reference staff was as unaware of this "solution" as most of the patrons.

My experience over the years is that there are many such obstacles to independent use of the library. One of the primary tasks of library instruction, therefore, is not just educating the students but making sure that the library is organized in such a way that independent use is possible. The intellectual access taught in instruction programs must be reflected in the physical organization and layout of the library—creating a dual role and responsibility for instruction staff.

### ORGANIZING LIBRARY INSTRUCTION AS A CURRICULUM

Yet another problem with Topsy-like development has been too great a focus on individual courses for particular situations and not enough focus on the development of a logical focused progression of instruction in the use of modern information tools—a curriculum. Developing such a curriculum involves a successful struggle with the incorporation of at least three elements: (1) the logical and progressive development of skills and understanding in the use of information tools; (2) the appropriate relationship and counterpoint to the subject content of the student's educational development provided by the traditional professoriate; and (3) the acknowledgment of the diverse needs and strengths of a very complex student population.

In my experience, most veteran public service academic librarians have a good sense of the kinds of library skills and knowledge base which first year students need to have, of the additional skills which juniors and

seniors need, and of the specialized skills required of graduate students. And as public service personnel interacting daily with professors and students, they have the necessary background to have an intuitive sense of how subject content and student diversity need to be integrated. It just requires some thought, some time, and much hard work to formalize this understanding and express it as a focused and integrated curriculum.

The main problem is not that developing a curriculum is impossible, but that librarians have not traditionally posed the issue to themselves in these terms. In contrast, the concept of the "reference interview" is widespread and evokes a rich context of experience, research, and professional dialogue for academic public service professionals. "Curriculum development" (a reflexive mantra for the traditional teaching faculty) needs to become, for instruction librarians, as familiar and rich a concept as "reference interview."

Although we have begun the process of developing an integrated instruction curriculum at Cincinnati, we are finding that library faculty are as independent as their traditional faculty counterparts. Such faculty independence, in conjunction with the newness of the concept, makes for slow going. Still, we are making progress and are particularly hopeful that the concept of an instruction curriculum will pay large dividends in the future.

### FOCUSING ON OUTCOMES

The final problem—the legacy of a pragmatic Topsy-type childhood—is the ease with which one can lose one's way, wasting time and resources on misguided or trivial efforts. As Yogi Berra once commented: "Unless you know where you're going, you're not likely to get there." At the University of Cincinnati, a review of our instruction goals revealed that we were devoting considerable staff time and resources to a dubious library component of the Freshman English program. We were going through many motions, but the result was not satisfactory or even all that clear. We have, therefore (with some trepidation), indicated that we will not continue to participate in the program based on the past. Until we undertook a review of expected outcomes, success was measured by the amount of effort put into the process rather than by desired results—namely, what we expected students to learn.

There is also a practical advantage to outcomes. As legislatures and accrediting agencies are increasingly calling for outcomes-based education, such demand provides an opening for the library instruction agenda. In Colorado, a legislative call for outcomes-based education provided an opportunity for the library to define information literacy as one of the ten outcomes of a university education. Having such an official statement provided a tremendous advantage for the development and acceptance of library instruction.

Perhaps one caution is appropriate in this area. Most of the outcomes reported in the early days of library instruction involved students self-reporting on their satisfaction with library instruction courses or lectures. While this is not inappropriate, it is not necessary for library instruction programs to limit themselves to such subjective measures. At the University of Illinois, for example, we were able to determine a measurable increase in the sophistication and quality of students' bibliographies as independently verified by both librarians and course instructors. In short, students did not just feel good about instruction classes, they were actually able to make better use of information resources in meeting their course requirements.

### CONCLUSION

It is perhaps ironic, in a period when faculty status for academic librarians has stalled—even reversed—that the teaching mission for librarians has become so important. While seeing one-on-one reference service as teaching is by no means inappropriate, present day economic and technological pressures mean that we must move beyond this model. There is much we can learn from traditional teaching colleagues who are, in many cases, trying to reclaim their teaching role. Nevertheless, whether through greater use of the traditional classroom approach or through the innovative use of technology, our central goal has to be finding ways to leverage the limited library professional public services resources available to us to fulfill our central public services mission—i.e., providing intellectual access to the library's resources. A critical key to this process is library instruction, not necessarily as we have been doing it, but as we need to be doing it—by making fundamental improvements.