Plus Ça Change . . .

EVAN IRA FARBER

ABSTRACT

UNTIL RECENTLY, MOST REFERENCE AND bibliographic instruction librarians
believed their primary role in undergraduate education to be that of teach-
ing students how to find information. Now the new information technol-
ogy makes finding information so quick and easy that it is causing these
same librarians to reconsider their role. This article looks at the factors
leading to that reconsideration and suggests that perhaps the situation is
not much different from what it was—that at least there are more simi-
larities than differences.

One of the few advantages of achieving the status of an elder states-
man is the license it gives to reflect or reminisce and still have those re-
flections or reminiscences listened to or read with a good bit of toler-
ance, even perhaps with interest—albeit a bemused interest. It is tempt-
ing to indulge in these reminiscences—too tempting to resist, probably,
but they will be kept to a minimum. This article will encompass some
reflections—reflections that take advantage of the experience garnered
over thirty years of working with undergraduates, and reflections that
look at both some of the changes as well as some of the constants of
implementing a successful program of bibliographic instruction. I will
then reflect on how those changes—rather, *if* those changes—will help
provide some direction in the years to come.

The title, *Plus Ça Change*, is, of course, only half of the aphorism,
loosely translated: "The more things change, the more they are the same."
The latter half, *plus c'est la même chose*, is the more intriguing part of the

saying. In examining library use instruction over the past thirty years, it is easy enough to point to those factors that have changed; all, or certainly almost all, the changes relate to computer technology. Thirty years ago, those in bibliographic instruction (it was not called "BI" then but "library orientation" or "library use instruction"; the first use of the term "bibliographic instruction" in *Library Literature* seems to have appeared in 1974) were concerned with teaching only a few tools such as the Library of Congress subject heading volumes, a few specialized encyclopedias, some Wilson indexes, other disciplinary indexes or abstracting services, and the use of printed bibliographies. Some introduced students to the Library of Congress classification or reminded them of Dewey's mnemonic devices. Those who worked in libraries that were government documents depositories may have explained the SuDocs classification. One looks at the simplicity of our early handouts with some yearning—but surely that same simplicity would seem almost laughable to younger bibliographic instruction librarians now. Today there are not only many more specialized reference works in print—i.e., encyclopedias, handbooks, and bibliographies—but also students have to be shown the idiosyncracies of our individual systems' OPACs and introduce them to the proliferation of electronic databases available on standalone CD-ROMs or through the OPACs. And most recently—and prominently—we must cope with the Internet and what sorts of information—bibliographic, numeric, and other—are increasingly available through it. These decades, and especially the last few years, have seen an enormous change, or rather a series of changes, in the content of what we feel is necessary to convey to students; we have constantly scrambled to keep up with those changes—or felt very guilty for not giving students the latest and the best. What factors have remained constant? The faculty, first of all, has remained constant.

In the late 1960s, the bibliographic instruction program at Earlham had achieved a widespread reputation: we were working with faculty members in almost all disciplines, reaching a substantial proportion of our students, and the staff's excitement and enthusiasm about the program's successes were obvious. At the same time, we were still frustrated by the fact that we were not working with the other faculty members (more than just a few) whose classes had library-based assignments. It was puzzling. We knew that most faculty were dedicated and conscientious, and really concerned about their students' learning. We thought that they must know that bibliographic instruction would enhance learning, would make students' papers more interesting, and their teaching more fun. With even longer experience, I had begun to understand—not excuse—them and, a few years later, I characterized faculty who resisted our overtures as people who thought they could not spare the time either to talk about instruction or to implement it; were territorial—that is, reluctant to share

their classes with anyone; were mostly taught the way *they* were taught; had fragile egos so that it was risky to criticize their library assignments or even to make suggestions; and they could not think of librarians as peers with whom they could share their students (Farber, 1992, pp. 3-4). All of these, and probably others that I have overlooked, were obstacles to working with faculty. And yet if, as I said, those same faculty were dedicated and conscientious—and there is no question that most of them were— there had to be a way of convincing them that librarians could help their students' learning and their teaching. The key, it seemed, was to take advantage of that dedication while keeping the obstacles in mind and working around them. It took time, patience, perseverance, and more than a bit of politicking, but most faculty were eventually won over.

Has that analysis of faculty resistance changed? To some extent, yes. It is a different generation of faculty—they are more open, more democratic, less defensive. And because library technology has changed things so much since many of these faculty were in graduate school, they know librarians can find information they cannot; in a sense, they have gained a new respect for librarians. But they still exhibit some reluctance to share the classroom or to take the time to plan library instruction, still overestimate students' abilities to use library resources, and still do not really understand how improving that ability can help make students more independent, more interested, and more interesting, and thus more rewarding to teach.

However, things are changing, if slowly. First of all, the ubiquity of bibliographic instruction has meant that many younger teaching faculty have some familiarity with it, perhaps when they were students. Or they may come to teach at an institution where a bibliographic instruction program exists and, in a sense, be socialized into the uses of that program. A second, and more important, factor is the impact of the new information technology. In the past, one obstacle bibliographic instruction librarians faced was that so many faculty taught just as they were taught. Now, however, faculty recognize that their teaching toolkits must include the Internet, or Dialog, or whatever electronic sources are appropriate for their courses. Because librarians are the ones to show their students how to gain access to these sources and to demonstrate what they provide, faculty members are much more willing to accept librarians as teaching colleagues—not fully accepted in all cases, but at least colleagues to consult and work with.

How about students? When meeting with groups of alumni, one question almost always asked is "What are Earlham students like now?" My typical response is, "Well, their tastes have changed—and, in music, for the worse. They are much more comfortable with the opposite sex, and their dress and hairstyles are much more varied . . . but as for their social concerns, their interests, their study habits, they are pretty much

like you were twenty (or thirty) years ago." Groups of alumni are not particularly interested in hearing about the problems of teaching students how to use library resources. I do not say that students—at the beginning level, anyway—still have little understanding of the range, the richness, the usefulness of the resources of an academic library and again, initially, usually depend on a few things they can find easily in the catalog, be it printed or electronic. First-year students especially underestimate the complexity of finding information, and they also are unaware that there are many tools to help work through that complexity. That is, they bring to the college library the same habits they learned in their high schools—if indeed, they learned any there.

Another characteristic today's students share with those of a generation ago is an inability to discriminate among sources. Rarely have we seen a student who questioned the validity, or even the usefulness, of a book in the library. If a book was in the library, students seemed to infer that its content was reliable, that the information in it must be valid. To help correct this misconception, to encourage students to be more critical in their search for information, we used to point out to them that not only were there books in the library that were not authoritative, but that we even acquired some books because they were good examples of bad books. For example, we would explain that there was at least a shelf of books in the collection which seems to prove that Shakespeare never wrote any of the plays most people attribute to him—i.e., they must have been written by someone with a much better education and background. These books are disparaged by the teachers of courses on Shakespeare, yet the library had purchased them, cataloged them, and they looked very much like any one of the authoritative works written by the most eminent Shakespearean scholars. Why had we bought them? Because, though the books were not products of good scholarship, they represented a significant aspect of Shakespearean studies.

Are today's students less naïve? Certainly about some things, though "cynical" might be a more appropriate word than "naïve." Students do not believe what they see in the supermarket tabloids or other sensationalist magazines one finds at a checkout counter. They are skeptical about much of what they read in newspapers about politics and not without good reason. But they do believe almost anything that comes from a computerized source. It results, I think, from what Theodore Roszak (1986), professor of history at California State University, Hayward, called "technological idolatry" in his book, *The Cult of Information*. That attitude of students, the belief that whatever appears on the terminal or whatever comes from the printer is true, is a much greater danger today than, say, the danger of students not knowing about the claims to the authorship of Shakespeare's plays or not recognizing that books published by certain special interest groups are hardly reliable guides to American

political history. Why is the danger so much greater now? Most obviously, perhaps, because of the proliferation of available sources. The example of students' lack of library skills one used in earlier days was that of a beginning student coming into the university library, going to the card catalog, and finding dozens, maybe hundreds, of items on her topic, not having the vaguest idea of which ones were most important or useful, so probably ending up by just checking out the first few items. Today it is worse; a student can easily get into the library's electronic catalog and through it to other libraries' catalogs and perhaps several or more other relevant databases. Confused and overwhelmed by the multiplicity of references, the student turns to some quick simplistic way of getting the information. Not only has the student probably missed much better sources of information, but the quick and precise responses at the terminal give her a sense of accomplishment, of a job well done.

But there is yet another, even greater, danger. Earlier I mentioned students' finding books that denied Shakespeare's authorship. There are, of course, ways of evaluating such books, even if one is not an expert in the field and one tries to teach students some of those ways—the use of reviews, the author's and publisher's credentials. Those are some of the filters that scholars use. But on the Internet? A delightful cartoon in the *New Yorker* a couple of years ago encapsulated the problem nicely. The cartoon shows two dogs conversing, one seated at a computer, the other on the floor. The one seated at the computer says to the other dog who's looking up at him: "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." That is true, of course. Nobody knows whether you are a dog, or a Nobel Prize winner, or a flake. Unless one is an expert—someone who knows the field and the players—one really cannot tell anything about the validity, the usefulness of the source. It all looks very much the same. Even experts cannot always tell. Fortunately, academics are beginning to recognize the problem, and a group of librarians recently began to make an effort to solve it. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* describing the effort points out that what is needed is a project "to impose some structure and standards" on the Internet, that "students and faculty members . . . need authoritative 'subject access'—a single place on the Net where they can be referred to resources that experts consider worthwhile. . . " (Jacobson, 1995, p. A29). But it goes on to mention some of the problems such a project will encounter—problems of support, cooperation, bureaucracy, to say nothing of the fact that the Internet is a moving target, constantly growing and changing. It will be, one must recognize, a long time before students will derive any benefits from the application of "structure and standards" to the Internet.

What we have now, then, are students who are using (or perhaps one should say abusing) the new technology and are overwhelmed by material they do not know how to evaluate; faced with so much to read, confused

by the multiplicity of sources and conflicting views, they choose to settle for a quick superficial approach. Could we expect anything else? It is not really that they choose to settle for this quick superficial approach, but that they are forced to settle for less. That is not really very different from the students who used to be faced with hundreds of card catalog trays and very little guidance to their contents.

Given this situation, how will bibliographic instruction change? As far as beginning instruction is concerned, unquestionably it will more and more be computer directed. Students will not have any trouble learning how to find information or learning how to use even the most complex tools. All of that will be built into students' queries on the terminal. Artificial intelligence and expert systems can do a better job of instruction than we do today. For example, the use of workbooks has been shown to be one of the most effective methods for introductory levels of bibliographic instruction; there are, however, some inherent problems in administering their use: they are time-consuming and thus expensive to construct, distribute, and grade, and they invite plagiarism unless they are individualized (which can make them even more expensive). Computerizing them can solve some of those problems and make their applications even more effective (The Ohio State University Library's Gateway to Information system is a good example. See Virginia Tiefel's article in this issue of *Library Trends*). A computer has infinite patience, no time constraints, does not take coffee breaks or fails to show up on weekends, and it can adapt to individual needs and requests. And soon it will not be just typed-in requests that computers can respond to but spoken ones. Even today there are computers that can understand single-word commands or short phrases with reasonable reliability. Later, when more sophisticated programs using artificial intelligence and natural language technology are plugged in, even the most computer-phobic users should have no problems with using them effectively.

There is also no question that computer-based assistance will go far beyond beginning instruction, that so-called intelligent agents will find and assemble information for users. Some years ago, Apple Computers produced a video showing the Knowledge Navigator, sort of an information valet or what some are now calling a knowbot (knowledge + robot)— that is, an automated valet or maid that knows not only its client's informational needs but also the client's personal qualities to shape the package of information.

If this capability is on the horizon, what is the role of the librarian in teaching students how to find information? Will we, indeed, have a role? If the existence of that role is in doubt, one can legitimately ask: Does it make sense to spend a lot of our time and effort improving the bibliographic instruction we give now? Why try to tune an antiquated model? Why not just mark time and wait for the new model? It seems that there are three possible responses.

The first response is the very obvious one. As service-minded professionals, we are obligated to improve what we do. If we do not improve, we are letting down all those who prepared the way for us and those who follow us, not to mention those with whom, and for whom, we work now. If we do not continually try to improve, we cannot really claim to be professionals.

The second response is more speculative, perhaps, but also more pragmatic. Those knowbots, or information valets, or however those automated retrievers of information will be known, of course entail the use of expert systems; expert systems, in turn, are based on the advice of experts—the ways in which experts respond to queries, or solve a problem, or perform a particular operation. If, then, we expect machines to do really expert jobs, we need to keep improving our models, even systematizing them, so that they can be translated into a computer program. Here again, one can point to the Ohio State University Library's Gateway to Information system that was very much based on the ways librarians provide bibliographic instruction.

The third response, though, is the one most easily overlooked. For example, a piece in *Internet World* last year speculated that: "[I]ntelligent agents and filters will be developed to reduce the problems of information overload by providing easy, customized access to information sources" (Miller, 1994, p. 38). The writer of that piece was identified only as Chief Technical Officer of the International Internet Association, but one can be sure he has never been a reference librarian since what he either ignores or is unaware of is the critical role of the reference librarian. Workbooks, as mentioned earlier, have been perhaps the most effective means of giving students some self-instruction in using library resources, and computerized workbooks (e.g., the Gateway to Information system again) are the next logical step. But every workbook, printed or computerized, should be constructed so that one of the steps in it requires meeting a reference librarian. Why? Every public services librarian has seen students come into the library and begin looking around without any idea of what to do or where to go first ... and then giving up in frustration, for some reason refusing to ask the reference librarian for help. Was it fear, embarrassment, or the male syndrome of reluctance to ask for directions? Whatever it is, the lack of recognition of a reference librarian's helpfulness is sad and terribly unfortunate.

If there was just one skill, one step, that librarians who are concerned by student (and public) ineffectiveness in using libraries should try to inculcate in those seeking information, it should be: Ask the reference librarian. In constructing a printed or computerized workbook, somewhere in its structure the individual ought to be required to talk to a reference librarian—just to answer a simple question or, better, to approve a particular choice. The purpose, of course, is to ensure that the

person doing the workbook recognizes that a reference librarian is approachable and, indeed, is interested in one's information needs. Certainly, such an encounter is not needed at every step; as mentioned earlier, expert systems will be able to do a lot of what we do now in bibliographic instruction and in basic reference work. One encounter should be enough to overcome that hesitation, that reluctance that prevents so many students from asking for the help they need.

The reason for a reference librarian's intercession with a student at a critical juncture in his or her search is simply that it can result in making a small but significant contribution to that student's education, to that student's ability to evaluate information. The "teachable moment"—that moment when the student needs help in making a choice or a decision—that is when the reference librarian can play an important role. An undergraduate's request for many interlibrary loans, for example, can provide a perfect teachable moment: explaining to the student at the moment of need which items are appropriate and which are not—and why. Several institutions have automated that process, and others are in the process of doing the same. In this case, such automation precludes the possibility of a potentially valuable educational experience. That is why the move toward "disintermediation"—removing the librarian from a procedure that was once performed by individuals and substituting an automated procedure—should be examined carefully to ensure the gain in efficiency is worth the loss of educational benefits.

There is, then, a good case for a continuing emphasis on bibliographic instruction and, one could say, an even greater need for it in the near future. Others are beginning to see it also. Drucker (1994), in his article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, stresses the importance of continued learning in the new knowledge-based society. And in the latest issue of the *Teaching Professor*, there is an item, "Profile of the Autonomous Learner" (1994), that calls for developing "information seeking and retrieval skills," which include the ability to "select what is valuable from the mass of information available" (p. 3).

As the faculty begins to understand how easy it is becoming for their students to drown in the sea of information, that viewpoint will be an increasingly prevalent one. Even students will realize that they will not have any problem finding information, but they will still need help in learning how to sift through, how to evaluate, that information. To be sure, machines will perform better some of our more basic and repetitive tasks. But when it comes to helping a beginning student shape a topic, or interpreting something idiomatically American for a foreign-born student, or recommending something that a foreign student might want to read about an aspect of American history or society—or any other question or request requiring the personal touch—it is hard to imagine reference librarians being replaced. Bibliographic instruction will change, but its thrust will remain very much the same. And so the title, *plus ça change. . . .*

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