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# Bibliographic Instruction: Two Models Converging in a Common Goal

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ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC AND SPECIAL LIBRARIANSHIP

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**Bibliographic Instruction: Two Models Converging  
in a Common Goal**



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**Introduction**

This essay will explore research in the undergraduate curriculum by examining the divergent ways research is understood. The debate centers around the ways that the typical student perceives the role of the library in her education at the university. To limit the discussion to the relation between the student and the librarian misses the larger issue at stake. What needs does the average undergraduate have after completion of the B.A., if they have no plans to continue education further? Are research skills necessary only for the graduate student, or is there some truth to the humanistic notion of 'knowledge for knowledge's sake?'

There are three key sections to this essay; the first examines the perceived role of the academic library, in an overview fashion, from both the undergraduate and the casual reader of library literature. The second examines what I am calling the 'BI' (Bibliographic Instruction) model of research; what is usually taught in the one-shot 50 minute sessions about how to hunt down citations and navigate the OPAC and relevant databases. The last examines the 'humanistic' tradition which posits research as a democratizing tool needed for an effective citizenry.

It is argued that the BI model is a tool necessary to have in our cognitive toolbox and the humanistic model is the mindset necessary to see the value in the tool. As an imperfect analogy, consider the frustrated high school freshman forced to learn algebra. "Why do I have to learn this," he cries, "I'll never have to use the quadratic equation after I leave here!" The role of the successful teacher is to show him why he will need the overall mathematical philosophy learned, even if the specific formula will never again surface. So it is with research--although the average student will never have to track citations down with ISI Web of Science, the skillset she learns will be tested and used even without her knowing it.

## **The Perceived Role of the Library**

It seems to be the case as the literature is read and digested, that the issue of information literacy and the undergraduate has at least as much to do with the relationship between the faculty and the library, as it does between the student and the library. Cain (2002) has argued that there is a need for librarians to re-emphasize the reading of books, as this remains the core of what serious research is. The drive, she continues, to constant publications turns the profession of academia into a grind, and values output and not the scholarly slow drip of intellectualism. Much like elementary schools trying to create 'team players' and Dilbert-esque cubicle dwellers, so too the emphasis on undergraduate research tends not to produce refined thought but only to create future academicians. Gorman (2001) makes a similar point, that while we seem to be in a world beset by technology to an extent unheard of in history, what is actually taking place is that we seem to be being taken over by technology so that there is a lack of 'repose,' and time to assimilate what we are supposedly taking in.

There is reticence on the part of the student to admit that she needs help and to even enter the library (Mellon, 1986) There seems to be a parallel between the lack of student preparedness, distrust of the library's ability to give the student all that he feels he needs to survive classes and the frustration on the part of the library that it is doing all it can possibly do in the way of 'outreach', yet no one enters the doors, and the students that do are not asking the right questions or even utilizing the library resources that might help them the most.

There seems to be growing consensus that the academic library must move beyond its (traditional) role as a custodian of knowledge. This is seen most concretely with the prevalence of electronic media in the library, principally with database availability. Because most of the 'new' serial acquisition is done online, even if there is overlap in print, the library recognizes that it does not own the material, it is simply 'providing access' to it. The library is no longer the gatekeeper to the citadel of knowledge, rather the paradigm has become the television set that streams various channels, but cannot record any of them. The result of this is a vast array of knowledge that becomes very hard to keep up with. Bodi (2002) notes that the research process for scholars is markedly different from that of the undergraduate, and this is a fact that the teaching librarian often fails to discriminate. Undergraduates, as mentioned, often procrastinate and do assignments quickly--they have "...a coping strategy, not an information seeking strategy<sup>1</sup>."

As an interesting parallel, Feinberg (1998) remarks that the new location where research is being done in Greenwich Village is the local Barnes and Noble (B&N) store. There is a perception by the undergraduate surveyed that B&N provides 'general research needs,' and the library offers 'focused' research. This is fostered by the layout of the

B&N (the library has too confusing of an organization pattern), the abundance of multiple texts (indeed the collection, by being accessible, was perceived to be better at the store), and the false assumption that the hours were better at the store. This attitude is being carried over into academic library listservs, where one finds threads discussing, of all things, 'how to clean coffee stains off carpet in public reading areas.'

Thus the academic library must move out of the custodial role and into teaching critical thinking. This implies that all information is unequal. There is a tacit understanding by the undergraduate that all information gleaned from the libraries holdings is valid, and thus does not have to be critically challenged. The Internet throws the gauntlet down--now we have to be savvy viewers--where does this information come from, who is the assumed audience, are there ulterior motives, etc. This we, as library users in the past, did not have to do as much. Searching the stacks for secondary sources on Plato, for example, we did not have to wonder if the author was a disgruntled graduate student, a publisher trying to move unsold copies of a lousy manuscript, a member of an Aryan hate group, or a government agent. The role of the librarian seems to be twofold - teach how to access information and then how to evaluate it. This we have to do by both evaluation of content (document) and also source (database).

## **Research 1: The BI Citation Paradigm**

But what do we do if the student does not enter the library? This, coupled with the faculty not willing to give up class time, makes for a tough sell to a non-existent audience. Because the student is often unwilling to enter the library (Mellon, 1986), the librarian must come to the student. But before all this takes place, the librarian must approach the faculty and a stalemate sometimes ensues.

A necessary ingredient in all of this are the faculty assumptions. I speak from a privileged state, as one who has taught the undergraduate for a number of years, to a wide array of backgrounds and preparations. My basic assumptions about the knowledge base of the student have had to be continually shifted and changed, from leading them patiently through 'how to footnote' sessions, all the way to finally dropping the research paper from my syllabus.

I must admit, though, that I never encountered any faculty, staff member, or employee who remotely suggested that I arrange for a BI session. I would never have thought of this, principally because I arrogantly had a 'sink or swim' attitude to this process. I told students that if they needed help with writing or references they ought to 'go to the library and ask them.' I helped students with topic selection, narrowing down theses, navigating the Philosopher's Index, and I happily read rough drafts. But I never thought of arranging for a library session--I thought this was covered in 'orientation<sup>2</sup>.' Or even worse, I felt that this was something that English classes covered. Without even

checking, I assumed that all basic English courses covered footnotes, bibliography, plagiarism, and other basic composition material. Thus, I did not have to duplicate this. If students had problems, I sent them to the 'writing/learning center' and blithely continued to teach.

This attitude seems to be borne out in the literature. Leckie and Fullerton (1999) find that generally faculty (not just the sciences, but across the academic spectrum) have no clear idea how the students in their classes learn information literacy. But it is echoed that although faculty are not aware of the services that could be provided, it is obvious (Geffert and Bruce 1997) that when it is offered, skills and critical analysis are increased.

Valentine (2001) discusses the growing situation where students are so pressed for time that the driving force behind their research projects is knowing 'what the Professor wants.' Problems arise when, for example, the professor uses terminology without explanations ('case study') and gives vague, unspecified goals. The 'contract' approach, with deadlines and structured help along the way, seems to be the best methodology for aligning what the professor asks for and what the student provides. However, the problem keeps emerging that this is usually happening under everyone's radar except perhaps the front-line librarian.

## **Research 2: The Humanistic Paradigm**

And so we return to the question at hand--what does research mean to the undergraduate? It means more than simply 'teach BI,' although this might be a necessary part. I realize there is a fine distinction to be made; not all BI is the same. There is a crucial distinction between teaching how to search the Web in the first place and the more specific topics.

Research varies, as do the mechanics of paper creation and crafting, from discipline to discipline. A history paper looks and feels different than a physics lab report or a critical philosophical essay. Leckie and Fullerton (1999) make a strong case for BI being closely tailored to the discipline and this I agree with. It might be good for the subject specialist in each area to, in conjunction with the faculty and chair, devise a handout (to be supplemented by BI sessions) of salient 'how to' points. This might, to placate the transient user base, be something to place on the OPAC for 'point-of-need' moments (Lipow 2002)<sup>3</sup>. Faber (1995) agrees, by remarking that we as professionals are obligated to continue to meet the needs of those we serve, and this includes moving and changing with the times. The technology changes, but the basic tasks the technology performs doesn't. Privateer (1999) adds a clarification, that change should not happen for change's sake alone (the 'administrative' paradigm), but ought to be done because there are sound, proven pedagogical reasons for it.

Bergart (2002) notes that there is an instant drawback to this reliance on electronic resources. (see also Melgoza et alia, 2002) While the librarian is able to discern the relative qualities of the 'hits' a good, fielded search provides, the student does not always have this skill. If the student approaches the librarian in a (pace Kuhlthau) 'pre-focus' stage, the librarian might, without knowing it, limit the topic by the first search.

"The user's anxiety and the librarian's recognition of the vastness of the electronic databases leads to a...false focus for the student, leaving her with an abbreviated, manageable list of citations that cuts the research process off before it can naturally develop<sup>4</sup>."

The skills that research teaches are skills that are applicable more than ever in this information world. Because we are bombarded with information and are unsure sometimes of the validity of it, we have to be able to discern the good from the bad. This basic skill we use for everything from shopping for food to hearing the daily news, voting, personal health care, and child raising. Research is the process of thought management, organization skills, time management, resource gathering, logical analysis, and grammar. The difference in the world as it stands is that the information we are working with has lost the assumption of necessary worth it once had. With the daily news, because there are so many sources (Internet, cable channels, radio, newspapers, specialty magazines, etc.), each one having a unique slant, there has been an interesting shift--we almost want this variety of voices to do our thinking for us. We like the different voices. Research skills teach us to minimally be aware that there are these disparate voices and to not simply hear them all with an uncritical ear.

It becomes difficult to express how this is to be taught--it seems as if there exist only practice sets tried out over and over to be sure the student is finally doing it properly. This paradigm, it must be emphasized, is much more than 'stop them running to the computer- push them to the stacks' clarion call that is a constant undercurrent in the literature (Bergart 2002, MacDonald *et alia* 2000, Melgoza *et alia* 2001, Lombardo and Condic 2001). Indeed, Owusu-Ansah (2001) promotes the idea that academic libraries, established by the Puritans with a decidedly Utilitarian emphasis, have a mandated obligation to prepare their clientele to meet the demands foisted on them by society and societal change. The ability to critically analyze a text in whatever discipline, regardless of where it comes from, is the hallmark of the informationally (read: 'digitally') literate citizen ('netizen'). Hubbard (1995) delves into this issue of cross-disciplinary investigation when suggesting that academic libraries become 'laboratories' wherein students learn not just the canonical core of their major, but get 'clued into' *why their discipline believes they are the canonical core*. With a nod to Wittgenstein's 'language game' analogy, students ought to be able to have a deeper understanding of the implicit rules and 'dialects' of their subject area. This, writ large, equips them to be able to discern the overall informational stew they get placed into after graduation.

There is an aspect to all this that bears inclusion. With all of the striving towards independence on the part of the undergraduate, if we do not equip them with the ability to make quality choices of resources and not settle for whatever pops up first, we run a grave danger to eradicating the very definition of the library itself. Indeed, Radford (1998) and Budd and Raber (1998) mention that the new postmodern paradigm allows a student, by coasting along the serendipitous organization provided by the database and not the structured organization provided by the 'stacks,' to be able to, *even without her being aware it is happening*, in a very real sense create her own virtual, transient library. Radford describes this less in terms of a scientist crafting a teleological product, and more in terms of an artist creating an ethereal interpretation.

Again with the discussion of placing reference information of the OPAC (Lipow 2002, Herrington 1998), does this not in fact have the librarian walk out the parable--'teach me to fish and you have fed me for a lifetime?' We cannot ignore the results of the study by Churkovich and Oughtred (2002) that the most effective teaching comes from a librarian and not a tutorial. But the discussion takes another turn that is beyond the purview I have set for myself.

## **Conclusion**

We must move out of packaging undergraduate research. Yes it is understood that it a goal we all adopt and that there is real disagreement over whose provenance it is, but this all misses the central point that we have conflated two different conceptions of what research actually is. To the average student, research means the ability to pull up resources her professor will accept as footnotes in an essay. For the educator and librarian, it means a lifelong tool that is the bedrock for civilization; it is the ability to critically assess all possible information sources for relevance and worth. This is of greater and greater import in this wired world, but the recognition of the import of the mission is in danger of being lost.

Again, this is all lost if the students do not realize for themselves the benefit they stand to lose by not having this skill. Few undergraduates bother to consider the library as a place that offers classes, can help them with more than 'the printer is out of toner,' and more importantly can help them beyond *this* class and *this* assignment. How is this to be accomplished? Perhaps by recognizing (MacDonald *et alia* 2000) that we have to build for the future. The libraries have to take the research paradigm beyond the one-shot classes (while not discarding them, mind you) and actively involve the undergraduate, graduate, faculty, staff and community member. Borrow a page from the public library and have classes just for non-campus members, pop-up BI ads on the OPAC, posted signs on the walls and near the computers, hand out slingers as students check out books, take out advertisements in the student papers, mail handouts to student advisors. The list is endless, but so are the needs.

## Footnotes

1. Leckie (1996) quoted in Bodi (2002)
2. Full disclosure--I now feel safe in admitting that a large part of this was being an Adjunct. Feeling no ties to the school and having no knowledge of the library left me feeling bitter. I was paid slave wages to teach the basic minimum--let the tenured faculty deal with teaching how to do all that other stuff.
3. This 'point-of-need' discussion I find interesting; it is echoed throughout the literature that the essential goal of the reference librarian is to put themselves out of a job--to inculcate a sense of independence on the part of the user.
4. Bergart 2002, p. 181

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