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Beyond the software: The importance of personal communication to ensure access in complex ILL and other borrowing transactions

Abstract

This paper focuses on the ILL aspects of a larger project investigating the continued availability of items identified in a 1991 bibliography (Dillard). For this stage of the research, the particular focus was on obtaining various theses and dissertations, as well as books and sheet music items. As Lowry (2006) noted, especially in the humanities and social sciences, the majority of dissertation and thesis research has traditionally not resulted in further publication, with only about 10% of this work being republished in other forms. This means that the original works are the only source of this research, and therefore there is a need for continued access.

While aggregated databases such as ProQuest Dissertation and Theses Global provide instant full text access in many cases, other items are only available for separate purchase through the database, by borrowing through ILL channels, for download from individual institutional repositories, or for viewing in the library of the degree-granting institution (Smith, 2023). There are also issues in identifying more recent dissertation and theses research as there is no one universal source, but rather a proliferation of different directories and research databases where they may be listed, or they may only be listed within a single institutional repository (Center for Research Libraries, n.d.).

Despite the many difficulties encountered, one theme emerged from these retrieval endeavors: the importance of personal communication in overcoming barriers and ensuring access to materials. This paper highlights the different ways in which establishing communication promoted understanding firstly between the ILL librarian and the researcher, and then at each stage of the borrowing process, resulting in mostly successful transactions. Communication was able to overcome barriers of the borrowing institution's ILL policy that previously prevented successful transactions; it enabled navigation through complex and multi-stage digitization requests involving international universities and national libraries; it enabled direct digitization and electronic delivery of items at no cost to the borrower; and it enabled identification and retrieval of items from institutional repositories.

Keywords

Interlibrary loan, barriers to access, scholarly communications, digital humanities, library technology systems, academic libraries

Beyond the software: The importance of personal communication to ensure access
in complex InterLibrary Loan and other borrowing transactions.

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Although library aggregated databases may provide comprehensive coverage of designated areas of academic interest, there is often the need, particularly in more specialized investigations, to use InterLibrary Loan (ILL) to provide access to materials that are not available or licensed through the databases, that the databases do not acknowledge to exist, or that only exist in print form in a few locations.

Background to the project

The initial impetus for this project was Joseph's 1971 article calling for the creation of a comprehensive bibliography on the topic of the Victorian librettist and composer, W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, who together created a series of popular works between 1871 and 1896 (Joseph, 1971). Although some bibliographical work did exist on the creative output of each individual collaborator (e.g. Searle, 1931; Polidian, 1962; Allen, 1963), at that time there was no comprehensive bibliography despite a wealth of published material on the collaborators' joint efforts and individual works, the one example being a modest, self-published bibliography in 1968 (Bristow). Dillard's 1991 annotated bibliography was the first to include a broader scope of material, including academic dissertations and theses and thus reveal the existence of additional research on the topic.

This paper focuses on ILL aspects of a larger project investigating the continued availability of items identified in Dillard's 1991 bibliography. As the internet and http protocols were not generally available at the time of its publication, his bibliography was prepared through extensive use of ILL. Therefore, this initial investigation focused on the changes digitization had made to access, identifying what items were now discoverable that had not been easily discoverable before, with the emphasis on exploring the availability of doctoral dissertations and master's theses through aggregated databases. As Lowry (2006) noted, especially in the humanities and social sciences, the majority of dissertation and thesis research has traditionally not resulted in further publication, with only about 10% of this work being republished in other forms. This means that the original works are the only source of this research, and therefore there is a need for continued access.

While aggregated databases such as ProQuest Dissertation and Theses Global provide instant full text access in many cases, other items require separate purchase through this database, by borrowing through ILL channels, for download from institutional repositories, or for viewing in the library of the degree-granting institution (Smith, 2023). There are also issues in identifying recent dissertation and theses research as there is no single source, but rather changes in scholarly communication and the rise of the institutional repository have resulted in a proliferation of different directories and research databases where

dissertations and theses may be listed, or they may only be listed within a single institutional repository rather than in one aggregated database (Center for Research Libraries, n.d.; Baich & Fisher, 2011. See also Asadi et al (2019) for a more detailed discussion of problems associated with institutional repositories, including barriers to access.) The appearance of completed dissertations and theses in institutional repositories may also be delayed (Gee & Shirkey, 2010).

This stage of the project involved attempts to obtain a variety of materials through ILL that were not available through aggregated databases or institutional repositories, that were only available electronically in incomplete form, or that had few print copies available. A total of 18 items were sought: 8 doctoral dissertations, 4 master's theses, 4 books and 2 pieces of sheet music. In this investigation, all ILL transactions were conducted through the ILLiad system, the chosen software of the authors' academic library. The results to date include successful retrieval of 14 items: 7 dissertations (4 print copies, 1 microfiche, 2 digital copies), 4 theses (3 print copies, 1 digital copy in progress), 1 book and 2 pieces of sheet music (all print), although few of the transactions were completed on first request. One dissertation was incomplete, and three books were not able to be loaned per the lending libraries' policies.

What became clear during the procurement process was the many barriers that stood between the user and successful material retrieval, and the need for considerable personal communication and persistence in overcoming these barriers and ensuring access. Each of the barriers described below was encountered to a greater or lesser degree.

Barriers to access

Barriers can occur before the ILL process even begins. Software such as ILLiad has automated much of the process, allowing users to request and receive items either physically or digitally. Unfamiliarity with the process leads to users making requests that are incorrectly cited or lacking all relevant information. The more automated the system, the higher likelihood these errors will result in cancelled and failed transactions. Users may also have unrealistic expectations regarding response time, transaction cost, and item availability. Cancelled transactions may not include rationales, or the wording can be vague. Results may be determined by institutional policy. Users may not know how to access policies governing ILL and other library services, and even if available, policies may be outdated. Few libraries have the same policy across the board, and many do not update them frequently to reflect current laws and trends. Lending institutions may also impose restrictions such as short loan periods, in-library use only, and restrictions or prohibitions on copying or digitizing. There are different interpretations of copyright law when it comes to ILL requests and the understanding of fair use can further complicate matters. The ability of librarians to remain flexible can help overcome these issues (Leon & Kochan, 2021.)

Item format may be problematic. Items may be supplied in various microforms – microfilm, microfiche, or microcard – each of which requires specialized technology to access. Are appropriate readers available in the library? Do they work? Are they available in public areas or only in staff workspaces? If in workspaces, are they accessible to users and if so, are there limited hours of use? Do they only serve as readers, or can they digitize – i.e. must the item be used in the one location, or can a digitized copy be made? If the technological ability exists, what are the copyright restrictions that must be followed? Who performs the work - staff or user?

Problems of item quality may also inhibit access (Forro, 2011). Items may be damaged (e.g. scratched microfilm or broken bindings), may be incomplete (both physical and electronic copies lacking pages), and digital copies may be fuzzy, dark or otherwise illegible. Other physical items may also have restrictions as part of special collections or archives. Some items are only available in person and restricted to in-library use, often an insurmountable barrier to access.

Obtaining digital copies of items can present more challenges. Firstly, procedures may be obscure and complex, involving multi-stage processes (Munson & Thompson, 2018). In this instance a request for a UK university dissertation required an application to the British Library (BL) ETHOS system. Initially the required item was not listed, so one request had to be filed to add the item to the BL catalog before a separate request could be submitted to obtain a digital copy. These requests involve multiple institutions and although the BL guarantees a digital copy within 30 days of receiving the document from the holding institution, there is no guarantee that the holding institution will respond in a timely manner. (This one request was fulfilled six months after the initial request submission.) A separate request direct to a UK institution for a master's thesis resulted in an agreement to digitize the thesis and provide a copy (after the borrower had obtained copyright permission from the author) but the estimated time to complete this request was given as at least six months, although an offer to honor an earlier date if needed was made. This offer was acknowledged but not pursued. At the time of writing, the request has now been outstanding for seven months.

A final series of access barriers involve cost. Some institutions may employ a reciprocity model of borrowing rather than a direct payment model. This borrowing institution had a general policy of not processing requests that included a fee although exceptions could be made depending on the willingness of the user to pay fee themselves, or if their university department could pay. Without an agreement the request would be cancelled, and the item marked unobtainable. This policy was not generally communicated, and it was up to the user to inquire about paying a lending fee, and this led to otherwise successful transactions being cancelled. Even if transaction fees were agreed, if the right parameters were not set in the software, the automated system would deny transactions. In addition, costs may be prohibitive (e.g., the cost of certain individual dissertations already listed within the ProQuest database, but not included with the subscription) or may require payment methods with which the library is not familiar, such as the Interlibrary Loan Fee Management System (IFM) or International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) vouchers, described as antiquated payment systems by Munson and Thompson (2018). Additional problems may arise depending on how different lending libraries provide invoices. Not all institutions have the same fiscal year, and some invoices are only sent every few months, meaning that fees may need to be allocated to a different period than when they were incurred. One institution indicated they do all invoices once a year, leading to the transaction not being settled until months later.

Communication Solutions

Despite encountering each of these problems, in most cases some resolution was found through direct communication with the user, ILL staff and the lending institutions, although these communications were often protracted. It was also important for the ILL librarian to be persistent in pursuing requests that seemed to vanish into anonymous email systems or generic email addresses. Once communication with a single person was established, more progress was made. Leon and Kochan (2021) emphasize the necessity of excellent communication skills in ILL personnel.

The first barriers can be overcome by clear communication between the user and the ILL staff as to purpose and context of the research itself. This allows both parties to understand the potential problems that may be encountered and the best ways to proceed in terms of time constraints of the project, limits to types of materials that the library has the technology to read or digitize and potential copyright issues that may limit use. It also allows staff to educate the user in the need for accurate and complete item identifiers and that the more relevant details are provided, the greater the chance of correct item retrieval. This is also the opportunity to talk about the institution's policy on costs and to reach agreement on liability for payments and for setting cost limits. It was during this discussion in the present project, that the library's policy on

automatically rejecting any loan that had costs attached was disclosed. As most of the items sought existed as a single copy in one institution, this would have resulted in non-retrieval of several items without the user being informed of the possibility of retrieval even at some cost.

Communication between the ILL librarian and the lending institution also addressed multiple issues and enabled successful item retrieval. Not all ILL systems communicate clearly with one another and the default response to a lack of information or an apparent mismatch is often to say an item is unavailable. Direct communication can help identify areas of mismatch or miscommunication between ILL software, enabling corrections to the request that result in successful retrieval. Communication can also help the lending institution understand the status of items and the potential lending library's policy. In this project, several items were not available to lend although of relatively recent publication date, due to their being held within non-circulating special collections (but not necessarily identified in this way in WorldCat.) In other instances, an explanation of the borrower's credentials and purpose enabled items to be retrieved, or retrieved with use restrictions that still enabled the item to be examined.

Cost and payment issues can also be resolved with direct communication. Several cost issues arose during this project, most of which were resolved through communication with the lending institutions. In one case a European university library requested payment with IFLA vouchers for a copy of a dissertation that was not available in any digital form. While this is standard in many parts of the world, the procedure was unfamiliar to this particular borrowing library and the process of obtaining IFLA coupons through OCLC was difficult to manage within the confines of the library's own purchasing procedures. When this was explained to the lending institution, they made the decision to provide a digital copy at no cost, and this was delivered a few days later. The mechanics of payment can also present challenges particularly, as noted above, when invoices are created a long time after the lending event and the borrowing library must not only reconcile payments for services across different fiscal years but may also have to negotiate how to charge the user for items when final invoices have yet to be received.

Communication was also able to resolve questions of incomplete items. In one case the electronic copy of a dissertation within a database was missing multiple pages. While an initial request for an item check of the original resulted in a copy of the same incomplete file being sent, direct communication resulted in a librarian retrieving the original item from storage to verify that the original dissertation was incomplete and that no complete copy appeared to exist at the holding institution.

As the borrowing process started with user communication, the completion process may also require communication. The user must be made aware of any restrictions to use that the lending institution requires, whether this be use only within the library building or a prohibition on copying; the restrictions that the provided format may involve, such as the use of specialized equipment and its location or availability timewise; agreements on payment of costs and the mechanics of payment; and the importance of time restraints and the difference between due dates of the lending and borrowing institutions to allow for timely return of materials.

Conclusion

This paper described problems encountered in a series of ILL transactions and highlighted different ways in which establishing communication promoted understanding between the ILL librarian and the researcher, and then at each stage of the borrowing process, resulting in mostly successful transactions. Communication was able to overcome barriers of the borrowing institution's ILL policy that previously prevented successful borrowing; it enabled navigation through complex and

multi-stage digitization requests involving international universities and national libraries; it enabled direct digitization and electronic delivery of items at no cost to the borrower; and it enabled identification and retrieval of items from institutional repositories. The paper also focused attention on implications of institutional borrowing and lending policy, digitization and metadata practices, and open access publishing for accessing dissertation and theses research and the many barriers that may come between the user and the easy use of such materials.

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