
Bibliographic instruction for the print-handicapped

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How to set up training sessions and sensitize your staff.

Encouraged by “mainstreaming” in primary and secondary schools and by the establishment of support services at post-secondary institutions, more handicapped students are applying to universities and colleges.

University libraries have responded with a new sensitivity to the special needs of such students. Wheelchair access ramps and elevators have been added, washrooms made easier to use, automatic doors installed. And we, as bibliographic instruction librarians, have modified our classes and tours.

Most difficult of all, however, is the challenge of instructing the print-handicapped. University libraries are print resources. Most of the new technologies, such as online services, CD-ROM databases, and fax document delivery are only new ways of accessing knowledge available in printed form. Voice-activated, computer-controlled equipment is available at a cost prohibitive for most academic libraries at present, although obviously acquisition of such equipment should become a priority wherever possible.

But in general, to be print-handicapped while attending a university is the most serious challenge a student can face. What useful form can bibliographic instruction take for such students?

Working together with Larry Booth, the coordinator for the Toronto-area Pre-University Skills Program of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), our library has arranged several in-

troductory sessions for print-handicapped students. We are evaluating and assessing our approach and are ready to make a few suggestions for those librarians who are about to embark on a similar venture.

Library staff

The first of our recommendations: sensitize your staff. Months before you hold sessions for the print-handicapped, arrange staff sessions. These special students will require extra staff attention. Most library staff are willing to provide this help if they know what form that extra effort should take.

One promising option involves hiring students to assist their handicapped fellows in the library, making the necessary photocopies, fetching books and journals and reading the results to the print-handicapped student. These helpers could be volunteers, carefully trained by the library staff in the research process, training which would undoubtedly benefit them as well as enabling them to become useful helpers.

For our full-time staff, we arranged a tour of local CNIB facilities, viewing the library, talking to CNIB staff and seeing some of the equipment now available to help the visually impaired. Then, we arranged an in-depth workshop at our library. CNIB staff spent a half-day with our staff, fielding their questions and allaying any apprehensions. They also gave us a demonstration of our newly received Visualtek reader and our 8-track tape

player, both useful aids for the print-handicapped.

The result? We had so many volunteers that each print-handicapped potential student has a staff helper.

Institutional context

Our second recommendation is: coordinate your proposed introductory session with other sections of your college or university, such as labs, student center, and so on. If your institution has a coordinator for handicapped students, you can work through that office and arrange, as we did, for the students to have a tour of other areas. As well as being fun for the students, it helps to place the library in context.

Degree of handicap

Third, before your students arrive for their initial tour, certainly before they arrive as registered students, determine the degree of their handicaps. Some will be able to read print with the assistance of magnifying aids such as a Visualtek reader; some will be able to find their own way around part of your print resources if signs, call numbers, etc., are in large enough letters. Others have fluctuating degrees of handicap (e.g., dyslexics).

Again, a central coordinator for handicapped students would be helpful here. If all else fails, you can, as we were forced to do, ask the students themselves.

Tailor your session to these varying degrees of visual acuity, as well as to the different levels of library and educational experiences, as you would with any group. Such an adjustment is particularly important for this group as print-handicapped students tend to be older than the average undergraduate and some may have recently lost their sight and have considerable previous experience in libraries.

Space needs

A fourth suggestion is that you be aware of the special space needs of such students. Some will have human helpers, some will have guide dogs, and all will need to have clearly defined paths mapped out for them in order for them to travel with ease from one library resource to another.

If possible, the establishment of a special room, set aside for print-handicapped students, placed near the entrance to the library, will minimize transit difficulties. Guide dogs can have their water dishes here, special equipment can be safely stored, and the door can be closed for the quiet needed to tape essays and listen to recorded notes.

An initial valuable aid would be a taped "map" of the library for students to have in their portable tape players.

Introductory session

Try to schedule your session when your library is at its quietest. Seat students and helpers in a quiet room or area and spend 5–10 minutes setting the group at ease. Ask about their college plans. Introduce each staff volunteer, by name and position in the library; student volunteers by year and course plans. All participants should wear name tags in extra-large letters.

The instruction session itself should start with a general discussion of the library and the types of material to be found there, from required readings through to the most advanced research materials; then continue with an overview of the research process usually required for undergraduate courses.

As with any group, carefully question them to find out what they already know about libraries. Expect a number of questions; these students are realistically apprehensive. Prompt such questions if necessary or prod some of the staff volunteers to ask them.

Follow the initial discussion with a tour, using a route checked for hazards and obstacles. With a little imagination, depart from your usual visual approach to the teaching process and give copious, detailed verbal descriptions of those library features that may be unfamiliar to most of the students. (They may know what a photocopier is, for instance.) Encourage them to participate. They might be invited to feel the weight of a bound journal or run their hands along a shelf of *Psychological Abstracts* and then compare the size of a CD-ROM version. Encourage questions and relate everything possible to courses you know the students might take to complete their degrees.

Assignment

Next, we very much recommend following another standard practice in bibliographic instruction, even though you may at first think it dubious. Give an assignment to be completed in the library. It need not be overly complicated—to find a book on a certain subject or an encyclopedia article—but its successful completion (and your staff or student helpers will ensure that it will be completed successfully) will build confidence, not only for your handicapped students, but for their helpers as well. A final benefit is that an assignment serves to alert you to difficulties you may or may not have anticipated, either in the arrangement of your library or deficiencies in your instruction.

In our case, the assignment was to find a journal article on a certain subject and to make a photocopy. Successful completion required using a periodical index, our list of serial holdings, call numbers, the stacks, and the photocopiers.

Problems arose. Our Visualtek reader was necessarily, but inconveniently, located in the print-handicapped room, away from the indexes and from the stacks. Making their way around our li-

brary was difficult for the students due to our crowded conditions. Setbacks normal for any students, such as a particular volume not being on the shelf or having to select a new topic due to an absence of references, were particularly formidable for these students. We were torn between the advisability of "cooking" the assignment to ensure that everything would run smoothly or leaving things "natural" to give a realistic idea of library research process.

Conclusion

At some point, what the library staff can and cannot do for print-handicapped students should be spelled out. Extra help may involve fetching, photocopying, telephoning, but must never involve usurping the student's right to an education. The research decisions—which information to select or use—should be left to the student. Helpers should not pre-select or decide.

If the effort to instruct the print-handicapped in library techniques seems formidable, we can assure you that it is worth it. To see our print-handicapped students now in their second or third

year, using the library confidently on a regular basis, knowing that you have been a part of the process that has made it possible, is truly gratifying. No instruction librarian could ask for anything more satisfying and, at the same time, of more service to "equality of opportunity" for all students.

Recommended reading

Clarke, Alice S., and Kay F. Jones, eds. *Teaching Librarians to Teach: On the Job Training for Bibliographic Instruction Librarians*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986.

Dowding, Martin. "Service for the Disabled an Accessible Idea." *Quill and Quire*, October 1987, pp. 19-20.

Fox, Peter. *Reader Instruction Methods in Academic Librarians*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Kirkendall, Carolyn, ed. *Improving Library Instruction: How to Teach and How to Evaluate*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pieran Press, 1979.

Velleman, Ruth A. *Serving Physically Disabled People*. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1979. ■■



INNOVATIONS

Humor and creativity: Holidays

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The response to my article on "Humor and Creativity" in the March 1988 *C&RL News* has been most encouraging. The material I have received to date, largely in the form of copies of academic library newsletters, shows, as I suspected, that library humor is indeed alive and well out in the field. The light-hearted look that academic librarians are able to take at their own operations is a good sign. The results have been so encouraging that I am able, as promised, to provide *C&RL*

News with an analysis and excerpts of the best of academic library humor from time to time.

Holidays are a time for celebration and fun. There is substantial evidence that holidays are celebrated in both the usual and some unusual ways in academic libraries. Such celebrations serve to enhance staff morale by binding the staff together as a "family." These celebrations also serve to demonstrate that even staid academic librarians can have fun and prove that they are, after all, human.