User education at NYPL's new SIBL

By Mark Bentley

A new level of service at the New York Public Library

On May 2, 1996, during its centennial anniversary, the New York Public Library (NYPL) opened its fourth research center, the Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL), to integrate, in one site, its world-class research collection with a heavily used collection of circulating materials in these three fields. By supplementing this incomparably rich print collection with an extensive array of networked electronic resources on 75 public workstations, NYPL is making a bold statement about its philosophy of 21st-century library service. Arguably the most innovative of these services is SIBL's unique user-education program consisting of a wide curriculum of courses offered free to the public. After describing in some detail the specifics of SIBL's popular and over-subscribed instructional program, this article suggests issues that the library must address to keep the program viable and responsive to user and staff needs.

The SIBL profile

A $100 million facility located in midtown Manhattan, SIBL is the nation's largest public information center devoted solely to science, industry, and business. Comprehensive coverage is provided for the business fields of advertising and marketing, banking and finance, labor and industrial relations, and real estate. Particularly strong in mathematics and computing as well as the physical sciences, the library is funded to support life sciences at the college rather than the research level, with consumer health and health sciences beyond its collecting scope. Within these subject parameters, the collections can be described as: comprehensive and retro-spective, international in scope, in English as well as many foreign languages, and in print and electronic format.

In quantitative terms, they comprise: 1.5 million volumes in the Research Collection, 40,000 volumes in the Circulating Collection, 10,000 current serials titles, and nearly 100 database titles.

The SIBL challenge

A collection this comprehensive—and including legal research materials, government documents, and patents and trademarks, with their complex bibliographic structure—has the potential to overwhelm even without the added complexity of SIBL's three different classification schemes. Add to this the technological sophistication of the electronic resources, and the result is a setting that calls for user assistance in many forms. Many of SIBL's 2,500 daily users—students, scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs, and members of the small business and corporate communities—queue up at one of the library's three public service desks for one-on-one on-the-spot assistance. Hundreds more remote users get assistance via telephone reference or by visiting SIBL's homepage, small business, international trade, company research, patents and trademarks, and science education Web sites. But for those in need of more help in getting started to shape a research strategy or seeking orientation with the library and its array of resources, SIBL offers a unique user-education program.

The user-education program's profile

The program is distinguished by three features: a complex of four technologically advanced classrooms, a varied and flexible curriculum of 12 courses that offers instruction in the diverse array of print and electronic information re-

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One of SIBL's state-of-the-art classrooms

sources available, and an electronic reservations system that manages access to the program. As designed, the program has, for the most part, proven to be effective on two counts: for addressing the needs of users whose bibliographic and computing skills are so diverse, and for dealing with the logistics of coordinating the instruction of hundreds of users each week (as of mid-March 1997, more than 10,000 users have attended classes at SIBL).

The user-education program's physical configuration

The physical framework created to support the program is set around the Harrison S. Kravis Electronic Training Center (ETC). It is distinguished by four state-of-the-art classrooms. Each is equipped with: 13 public terminals for hands-on computer use by registrants; an instructor's computer and lectern at the front of the class, from which librarians can give Internet and database demonstrations; and an audiovisual system with an electronic roll-down front-projection screen and ceiling-mounted video/data projectors.

Coordinating the Training Center and user-education activities

Coordination of the program is managed by the electronic training coordinator.

Management of the Electronic Training Center (ETC) is carried out through consultation between the electronic training coordinator and a number of other individuals: the assistant head

for electronic resources, the head of information services, and the four librarians who manage the daily scheduling of 32 librarians between the classrooms and the library's three information service desks.

Curriculum development and classroom instruction are a responsibility shared among all librarians. Generally, each information services librarian is scheduled to teach a minimum of one class per week.

An essential component of the program's operation is an electronic self-registration system that manages the logistics of registering users for seats in four to five courses each day. To reserve a seat in one of the classes, registrants must use a reservations terminal called a kiosk that allows the user to place a reservation through a graphical user interface. Using the *classes* function on the kiosk, users can scroll through the listing of class titles and reserve a place in any one or more of the courses being offered for the current day. The kiosk generates a printout indicating the user's name, reservation status (confirmed seat or waiting list), confirmation number, classroom number, and course title. Users are able to obtain a schedule of classes covering a two-week period. It outlines class dates and times.

The curriculum profile

The program's curriculum includes six classes on the use of electronic resources:

• Web Workshop for Beginners,

• Web Workshop 2: Searching for Information,

• Introduction to Searching Electronic Databases,

• Introduction to Catnyp and Leo: The Online Catalogs of The New York Public Library,

• How to Use ABI/Inform for Business Information

• How to Use the Dow Jones News Service for Company, Industry and Financial Information.

(These last two teach users how to search two of the library's most heavily used business databases.)

The curriculum is not limited to training users in the use of electronic resources. It also includes courses on doing research using government publications, legal and legislative information sources, market research information sources, patents and trademarks information sources, small business start-up information sources, and physical sciences information sources.

The mission of the program is to offer instruction in the library-specific applications used for information retrieval. Thus, noticeably missing from the curriculum are courses offering basic computer training in the use of a keyboard and mouse and software applications for personal computing purposes. Additional courses on teaching keyboarding skills to seniors are being considered for the future, however.

Future refinements

The program is in a state of evolution. It can be continuously improved by making refinements in the areas of instructor training, scheduling, and classroom support.

Refinements in the pedagogical training of librarians must continue to be made. The program will benefit from the further training of librarians in course development strategies (specifically, such areas as verbal and visual organization of information that best facilitates learning for the user; understanding the need for a high level of accuracy in the content of courses; and understanding the need for updating and revising course content) and in the subject matter covered by the individual courses.

Routine evaluation of instructors and course content is another aspect of instructor training that will benefit the program. Factors to be considered regarding evaluation are:

• Should librarians evaluate their own performance and then be expected to make improvements, based on feedback from evaluation forms completed by course registrants?

• Should curriculum content designed by individual librarians be evaluated and approved by peers or managers before being presented to the public?

Refinements in the scheduling of librarians between information desks and classrooms can be accomplished by attempting to ensure that the scheduling of librarians between instruction and information desk duties is well balanced and flexible, so that breaks are made in the schedule, allowing time for valuable public service downtime; all librarians are assigned an equal amount of teaching time per week; and librarians have enough time to become knowledgeable about the content of a course before being scheduled to teach it.

Refinements in the area of classroom support can be made by ensuring the timeliness of 1) the return and review of evaluation forms; 2) the feedback and constructive criticism to course instructors based on information gathered from evaluation forms; 3) the distribution of documentation provided to each instructor for distribution to registrants at the start of each class; 4) the reconfiguration of computers after a classroom has been rented out for a private function; 5) the notification of systems staff of problems involving the computers and of changes to curriculum requiring new software installation; and 6) the notification of systems and security staff of problems involving the removal and replacement of computers in the ETC.

In a number of areas, important policy issues not related to the issues above have yet to be addressed. These are:

• The question of whether or not librarians should teach only in areas in which they possess a lot of knowledge, confidence, and expertise; or, whether they should be required to teach all classes, regardless of the level of familiarity with the content.

• The exchange of teaching duties for a heavier load of public service duties in other areas by librarians.

• The rate at which new classes are being added to the curriculum.

• The development of second-generation classes.

• The option of making advance reservations for classes by users.

• The use of classrooms for purposes other than the library's user-education program. Specifically, should the library allow 1) private groups to reserve blocks of classroom time for private instruction by librarians, reducing public access to the library's courses; and 2) ETC classrooms to be opened for public access to the computers in them when classes are not scheduled, greatly increasing the number of computers that would be available for Internet and database searching (currently the computers in the classrooms remain unused when a class is not in session).

Conclusion

Over the course of the 11 months that the user-

education program has been in place, it has been continuously assessed and evaluated. Through analysis of feedback from users and librarians regarding the quality of course content and instruction, significant revisions have been made to improve the quality of the program. In particular, improvements are being made in the presentation and course-design skills of librarians, in the quality of course content in terms of precision and depth of information, in the development of second-generation classes that offer advanced levels of instruction in different topic areas, such as searching the Internet and legal research, and in access to courses through the electronic reservation system.

In recent months, certain courses, such as the two World Wide Web courses and both the Patents and the Trademarks course, have undergone complete revisions to improve the currency of the content and the style of presentation. As well, two major steps have been taken to improve the program overall: 1) individual and group sessions have been held with a professor of communications from the City University of New York to provide librarians with expert advice on public speaking and presentation methods as well as curriculum development, and 2) a formal advisory body comprising librarians has been established to monitor the quality of the program in terms of teaching and course content.

Examples such as these prove that from the start the library has been fully committed to its user-education mission and to the idea that the quality of user education should be considered as important as the quality of reference service, collection development, and technical services. ■

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