

Bibliographic instruction or research: What's in a name?

By Steve McKinzie

Teaching research skills is the essence of our task

The world of bibliographic instruction is in the midst of a crisis. If the quarrels within the professional literature and the flurry of electronic postings over LIBREF-L are any indication, something is rotten in the state of public service librarianship. Things just ain't the way they ought to be.

What is interesting about this new crisis—and the profession has had its share of them—is that it isn't to be found in any of the places one would expect. It has, for instance, nothing to do with the electronic revolution. Librarians have embraced the gadgetry of the information age with a near religious zeal. We have championed the Internet, defended online catalogs, and campaigned for CD-ROM technologies as well as anyone could have hoped or feared. (Some of us even forward phone messages with moderate success). No, the electronic revolution has brought change, but nothing that public service librarianship can't handle.

Nor does the crisis entail any of those perennially troubling questions of academic librarianship: faculty status, managerial style, the ambiguous roles of support staff, the rising costs of periodicals, the equitable distribution of break-room kitchen duties—persistently important questions in and of themselves, but far from crises. These recurring problems are rather like those low-grade fevers or nagging winter colds: they sap energies, rattle nerves, and sour dispositions, but most of us can still make it through the day.

What is it we do?

No, the crisis is more fundamental and more far-reaching. It has to do with how we view

what we do: how we regard our work with patrons. Or, more specifically, what do we label the varied and manifold teachings now performed by librarians under the present-day banner of “bibliographic instruction?”

A growing consensus of the profession has come to insist that this venerated expression just has to go. The phrase “bibliographic instruction” is as hackneyed as yesterday's political rhetoric. It verges on the irrelevant. It borders on the absurd.

Almost everyone recognizes that it is at best meaningless, at worst misleading. Mention of the term draws blank stares from seasoned scholars and ruddy-faced freshmen alike. Even when the phrase does seem to signify something meaningful, it conveys nothing of what

The phrase “bibliographic instruction” is as hackneyed as yesterday's political rhetoric. It verges on the irrelevant. It borders on the absurd.

librarians want it to suggest. It conjures the wrong images. It implies lists of monographs, or maybe the skills needed to compile them.

To make matters worse, the recently proposed candidates of replacement for the outmoded expression (candidates enjoying vogue in some circles)—“library instruction” and “information literacy,” for instance—are scarcely better. Everyone recognizes that what we are about is far more than instruction on how to use the library. We also know that our ambitions for our users go beyond some sort of minimal literacy. What we do when we engage in what we commonly label “bibliographic instruction” is a host of diverse and complicated tasks—a myriad of approaches to access-

ing information that go far beyond whatever the term "bibliographic instruction" and its new-fangled rivals can ever hope to relate.

What we need is a term that explains more accurately what it is that we really do and what it is that we teach. I suggest that all of these terms both old and new are actually about "research." Our task is meeting the research needs

When will some self-appointed guru begin to talk of our work as "information empowerment," "instruction in new-age access," or some other obnoxious title?

of researchers. From involved discussions of critical thinking and the subtle sifting of resources to the uses of an index and the mastery of electronic formats, our concern is to give users the tools and skills to access whatever information they need for whatever endeavor they attempt.

The teaching can be as simple as informing people about the procedures of interlibrary loan or as involved as training users about the intricacies of the Internet. Whatever the level of complexity, our work is in one sense always the same. We are meeting research needs. It is essentially about teaching people how to get at information—how to do research.

If we begin to think of our pedagogical concerns as "research," we actually will be doing something very similar to other, more traditionally academic, disciplines. No one committed to the teaching of English literature in the academic community has ever thought of calling their work "literary literacy" or "English instruction." They rather simply describe themselves as "professors of English literature" or "teachers of English." Our work is similar.

Like the traditional literary professor whose goal may be to enlighten a class about a literature's importance or influence, our aim is to develop a sophisticated researcher. We serve no one by confusing our patrons with high-sounding notions like "bibliographic instruction," "information literacy," or whatever else may strike the fancy of librarianship's collective conscious. How long does anyone think it will take before some ALA pundit recommends some more faddish or politically correct labeling? When will some self-appointed guru begin to talk of our work as "information em-

powerment," "instruction in new-age access," or some other obnoxious title? Who thinks up these insipid expressions anyway?

No more outlandish pretensions

No, we should jettison the outlandish pretensions to which librarianship is so prone and return to the essentials of our calling. We are much better off considering our responsibility to be "research." We are to equip our users to analyze materials and ferret out resources to meet their complicated information needs.

In one sense, like the professors of English literature, we are specialists, with the particular field of research as our responsibility. We are paid to know any and everything about the research process, to understand the subtleties of information access, to communicate the complexities of the information revolution, and to equip our users with the skills needed to acquire data in an age rich with information resources.

Terms like "bibliographic instruction" may be adequate within the profession itself as code words for the varied dimensions of what we've discussed. "Information literacy," with its connotations of contemporary relevance may also serve equally within the rarefied climate of professional library literature. But in communicating with the world in general, I suggest a simpler, more straightforward label: *research*.

Nothing embodies the essence of our task more comprehensively. Nothing communicates its goals more clearly. We teach "*research skills*." We aid the curriculum by offering that quintessential "*research component*" to the educational task. We are the *research* specialists. Research is our game. That—all of that—and nothing more. ■

Share your library's news

CERL News wants to hear about your library's activities. Information in the News from the Field, Grants & Acquisitions, and People in the News columns is gathered from press releases and notices we receive. If you don't share your ideas and activities with us we can't share them with *CERL News* readers. Be sure to put *CERL News* on your mailing list today. Send notices to the Editor, *CERL News*, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; or bitnet: U38398@uicvm.bitnet.