

Gathering information: How to get there from here

By Celia Rabinowitz

Why metaphors matter on the information superhighway

Not too long ago a student came to me asking for assistance using the ERIC database. "I only have this much information," she said, displaying a pile of photocopied articles about 2 or 3 inches thick, "and I need more." I asked her if she had started to read what she had already collected. No, she replied, she didn't have as much as she needed yet. After we talked for a few minutes I was able to convince her to look through her materials, think about her topic, and then return to search for more if necessary.

Interactions like the one described above are increasingly common in the contemporary academic library. Students are becoming experts at "hunting and gathering." They come to the library, do "research" (this they identify as time spent using a CD-ROM database or two), collect journals, and spend 30–60 minutes photocopying. Most students feel a great sense of accomplishment leaving the library, knapsacks bulging with photocopied articles, waiting for the touch of a green or yellow highlighter.

Cerise Oberman is one of several librarians who has observed that many students (and I would add faculty) are convinced that all relevant information on a topic can be retrieved through the computer.¹ As a result, students and faculty often expect library instruction to be focused on tool, (i.e., computer) use. And after a significant shift away from tool-based instruction the past ten years, some librarians are moving back to teaching mechanics by offering generic workshops on the Web, use of electronic mail, or other electronic information-gathering tools. Information gathering has be-

come the climax of intellectual inquiry. And the computer has made information gathering seem easy.

Navigating the world of information

The various metaphors that have come to represent our relationship to the constantly expanding universe of information reflect how much we feel either in control of, or controlled by, new forms of access to it. Perhaps we have to accelerate faster than we would like in order to get on the information superhighway, too soon after having just learned basic driving skills, barely having time to enjoy the scenery, and more than likely missing our exit. And the most experienced Web surfer can be undone by bad weather ("the server is not responding") or may only manage to ride along the crest of the waves, barely skimming the surface. And aren't Web surfers, like their cousins the channel surfers, out there more for fun than serious business?

If we must view the modern world of information and its access points as a vast transportation system, I prefer to think of the individual user as a navigator, as someone who plots the course for a specific destination before setting out. A skilled navigator must be confident about the final destination and prepared for any number of roadblocks. The most effective path toward a given destination may not be a straight line or might involve travel over various types of terrain (print, electronic, microform). What looks on the map like the correct turn could turn out to be a dead-end. The savvy traveler will plan strategic rest stops to refuel and assess the journey. Alternative routes should be part of any good itinerary (in case of unexpected construction, accidents, etc.), and travelers should always feel comfortable stopping to ask for directions.

Librarians: The AAA of the information highway

In the academic setting, librarians and classroom faculty must continue to work together to ensure that students view searching, reading, and writing as interconnected parts of the journey we call the research process.² Questioning, searching, gathering, reading, and evaluating are components of a cycle repeated throughout the process of writing a paper or preparing a presentation. No matter how much fun, or how easy, the technology has made information gathering, we still have to read and think about what we find in order to prepare to write. There is an urgent need for faculty to make this clear to students, and to discuss the purpose of assignments and papers among the objectives of a class.³ Librarians are strategically positioned to help students and faculty develop good navigational habits grounded in an understanding of how knowledge is synthesized and produced in the various disciplines.

At the risk of carrying a metaphor to extremes, librarians are the equivalent of AAA for the information superhighway. We can help travelers plan their journeys, point out the scenic routes, highlight rest stops, and respond to roadside emergencies. We can also suggest alternative forms of transportation (formats and access points). Librarians possess the knowl-

edge and expertise to bring those who have joined the "computer as goddess" cult back to reality, and to encourage those who are still riding a horse and buggy to try something new. One of the most effective ways we can accomplish these goals is by strengthening our traditional role on campus as one of the primary loci of support for the process of intellectual inquiry for all members of the community. The faster the maps change, the more important the navigators become!

Notes

1. Cerise Oberman, "Library Instruction: Concepts & Pedagogy in the Electronic Environment," *RQ* 35 (spring 1996): 318.

2. For more on the holistic approach, see Barbara Fister, "Teaching the Rhetorical Dimensions of Research," *Research Strategies* 11 (fall 1993): 211-219, and Raymond G. McInnis and Dal S. Symes, "Running Backwards from the Finish Line: A New Concept for Bibliographic Instruction," *Library Trends* 39 (winter 1991): 223-37.

3. Robert A. Schweigler and Linda K. Shamoon, "The Aims and Process of the Research Paper," *College English* 44 (December 1982): 817-24, present a useful study of how students view the purpose of writing papers and why the result is often not what the instructor expected. ■



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2. **The 1979 President of the American Association of University Professors was a li-**

brarian. Who was she and where did she work as a librarian?

3. **What ACRL committee met for the first time at ALA's 1991 Midwinter Conference?**
4. **According to the results of the 1993 ACRL member survey, what was the number one reason for ACRL membership?**
5. **Who was Michael Kunashko, and what was his significance in the history of librarianship?**

Answers: 1. North Texas State University won a Special Award in the 1987 John Cotton Dana Library Public Relations Award Contest for its "Tough Guys Fight Crime" PR campaign against mutilation and theft which featured the three actors on posters and bookmarks (June 1987). 2. Martha Friedman was an associate professor and history and philosophy librarian at the University of Illinois, Urbana (February 1979). 3. The ACRL Racial and Ethnic Diversity Committee (April 1991). 4. To update knowledge of library practice (June 1994). 5. Michael Kunashko pleaded guilty to book theft from the General Library at the University of California, Berkeley. He received a six-month sentence to county jail, which was suspended, and was placed on probation and forced to pay restitution to the university and to the booksellers to whom he had sold stolen books (June 1984).

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