Computer manuals in the academic library collection

Improving accessibility

by Tim Klassen and Steve Bischof

Getting help with computer problems, or learning how to use new computer programs, is one of the major challenges facing both librarians and our users. One of the many interesting ironies of the Internet age is the growth in print publishing of third-party software manuals. Third-party published computer manuals[1] are a popular way to get the help that those infamously unhelpful manuals (which come with many software titles or, as is increasingly the case, don't come with software) often fail to provide.

In a brief survey[2] I conducted on the electronic list Web4lib, members were asked which methods they preferred for getting help with computer questions. Supplied manuals were the preferred method, followed by online help and third-party manuals, and finally, Web-based online help.

On the other hand, when asked which resources were most helpful, third-party computer manuals came in first by a wide margin followed by built-in help, then manuals, and finally Web-based online help. Ninety-five percent of the respondents thought it was appropriate for libraries to buy these manuals, and the libraries of 79 percent of respondents did buy them. Interestingly enough, only 18 percent of respondents indicated that their libraries collect the manuals that come with software.

Clearly, third-party computer manuals do have a place in academic libraries and an argument can also be made for supplied manuals. However, for academic libraries and traditional collection development policies, these types of manuals can be problematic because they tend to have a short half-life in terms of the value of the information, and they tend to be a very attractive target for pilferage.

Due to the theft issue and the timeliness of the information, these items have, in my experience, often been placed on reserve seven-day loan or placed in the reference collection. Both of these locations are problematic because:

- A reserve location does not allow for browsing, which would seem to be especially important with these types of books. People using computer manuals tend to be those looking for a solution to a known problem or novices who are looking for an introduction to the program in question.
- For the solution seeker, being able to browse all the available manuals on a given piece of software is probably more helpful than having to search the catalog and then ask for all the appropriate books (which can be more trouble because of the limits that many libraries place on the number of reserves circulated).

About the authors

Tim Klassen was formerly science librarian at Wesleyan University Library and is currently science and health sciences reference librarian at Southern Connecticut State University, e-mail: klasset@southernct.edu and Steve Bischof is science librarian at Wesleyan University Library, e-mail: sbischof@wesleyan.edu

• For the novice user who wants an introduction, the same problem applies, how to find the book at the appropriate level without browsing?

• A reference location opens up the opportunity for browsing but restricts the use of the book too much. Computer books are best used with the computer program, i.e., in a dorm room, computer lab, or faculty office.

When I came to Wesleyan as the science librarian, I discovered that computer manuals were handled in the same way here as they were at the library I had just left. I decided that there had to be a better way.

The collection

Based on the assumptions that third-party computer manuals were indeed a valuable resource for our users and that the library should be providing access to them, we developed the "Current Interest Collection" with the following guidelines:

• All material would be available on seven-day loan with high reserve level fines to encourage the rapid recirculation of the material.

• Manuals would be on public-accessible shelving, thus browsable.

• We would try to inventory and evaluate statistics on the collection regularly to determine which areas to buy in and to regularly weed the collection so it wouldn't grow out of control.

• We would accept a certain level of pilferage, if it occurred at all.[3]

• We would advertise extensively around the campus to draw in users, particularly in dorms and computer labs.

• We would solicit first-party software manuals for location in this collection from the university's Academic Computing Services. For the most part, these would be manuals for software that didn't have much or anything available in the way of third-party manuals. Good examples would be scientific computing packages used in teaching and lab work.

• Manuals of all types would be purchased, including highly theoretical manuals as well as visual manuals. In particular, we would purchase all appropriate manuals in the following series: O'Reilly *Nutshell* books, *Visual Quickstart Guides* from Peachpit Press, and *Easy* manuals from Que. (We did not buy *"Dummies"* or *"Idiot"* manuals, which was a personal aesthetic choice that is probably open to debate.)

The scope of the collection was defined as supporting productivity and scientific software used in the university, programming software both for the Web and for computer classes, and Web-style manuals. We were not supporting administrative computing.

Circulation figures

The collection was established in 1998 and located near our new books shelf. It was briefly evaluated in the summer of 1999 with a more in-depth evaluation taking place in the spring of 2001. As the results[4] below show, the collection has been a great success:

• Average circulations were 6.57, with the median being 2.

• Average circulation for books that circulated was 10.64, with the median being 6.

• 62 percent of books circulated.

• For the year 2000, five of the libraries' top ten most circulated books were from this collection, for 1999 and 1998 the figure was four.

For the collection from 1998 to 2000, the 406 books that were in the collection at some time during that period circulated a total of 2,671 times, with a total of 1,171 of those usages being renewals.

No. of circulations	No. of books
0	155
1	50
2	23
3	20
4	19
5	19
6-9	42
10–20	49
21–30	17
31 or more	19
Total 2,671	**406**

Note: Column total accounts for seven duplicate titles included in circulation count.

Usage of the collection by book type

In order to determine what types of material to purchase for the collection, materials were divided by type and statistics were generated for each type. The following table summarizes the results of this analysis with the categories listed in order of most popular to least popular:

Category	No. of Books	No. of Circs	No. Never Circulated	Average No. of Circs
General Unix	8	142	0	17.7
Matlab	15	345	4	16.3
Networking Protocols, e.g., TCP/IP, Novell, etc.	10	160	2	16
Mathematica	22	332	9	15.1
C++	19	237	4	12.5
Photoshop	13	139	4	10.7
HTML, e.g., HTML, XML, DHTML, etc.	20	189	2	9.5
Web Programming, e.g., Perl, Java, etc.	37	339	6	9.1
Web Editors, e.g., Frontpage, Dreamweaver, etc.	20	147	5	5.5
Style/illustration, e.g., how to create effective Web pages, GIFs, Animation, etc.	53	294	12	5.5
OS, e.g., MacOS, Windows 98, NT, etc.	14	69	6	4.9
Linux OS	15	71	5	4.7
Microsoft Office Software	35	138	15	3.9
Content of Web, e.g., subject guides, search engines, etc.	19	24	4	1.2
Scientific Computing Program Manuals, e.g., IDL, Code Warrior, S-Plus, Hyperchem, etc	30	17	20	.6
Misc., e.g., GIS, Illustrator, FileMaker, Palm, Year 2000, etc.	76	28	57	.4
Totals	**406**	**2,671**	**155**	

The results show that the most popular materials were for programs that would be used by fairly sophisticated computer users, for example, Unix, programming, Linux, and C++, which don't tend to come with manuals. Also highly used were the books that support software that is used to create Web pages, such as Photoshop, HTML guides, and Web editor manuals.

We were disappointed with the very low usage of the scientific computing manuals. Nonetheless, we will keep these manuals in the collection as they cost us nothing but cataloguing and storage space, and we and academic computing consider them an important resource. Also surprising was the fairly low usage of the manuals for the highly used Microsoft office products. We often hear from faculty that the students are not as proficient at using these programs as they would like them to be. It's possible that the students are struggling with the manuals that come with the software and don't bother to seek help. It's also possible that we need to do more to publicize the collection to our undergraduates.

Who's using them?

Finally we decided to see who was using the material. Our results show that the biggest users were graduate students with 63.5 percent of circulations. This is not surprising given that the most popular types of material were those that would be used by the more advanced users and that grad students tend to be a highly motivated group of students. Also interesting was the high usage rate by faculty (6.6 percent), given the reputation of faculty as being users who are reluctant to seek help. Undergrads were 22.4 percent of the users, a

fairly low number given the proportion of undergraduates to either faculty or graduate students. The other 7.5 percent of circulations are interlibrary loan and staff.

Conclusion

The circulation data for this collection shows that these types of materials achieve high circulation figures and certainly break out of the traditional 80/20 model of library circulation. There is definitely a need for third-party manuals, particular for highly technical software that doesn't tend to come with manuals.

Unfortunately those who need the help the most, undergraduates, appear to be the least likely to use the collection. It would be interesting to look further at usage to determine how the usage of the various categories of materials reflects the user type.

Notes

1. Third-party computer manuals are defined as those published by organizations other than the manufacturer or distributor of the software.

2. See http://www.southernct.edu/~klassen/web4libsurvey.html for a summary of the results of this informal survey.

3. So far, losses have been negligible.

4. Statistics were gathered from our SIRSI Webcat in spring 2001 and were analyzed by hand. They should not be considered rigorous statistics as some data was unavailable and it is not the purpose of this article to be a rigorous accounting of how these books were used. ■

("The library takes the lead" continued from page 500)

our policy was lacking, and, with the author's permission, we used it as our model. Rather than listing a vague statement that illegal activity is prohibited, specific actions are listed in the Rutgers' policy as being illegal by federal and state statutes, e.g., "to make more copies of software than allowed by license or to view, download, distribute, or possess child pornography. . . ."

A subcommittee of three librarians was selected to actually write WSU's policy. The first draft was completed in August 2000 and was sent to all members. The full committee met to discuss changes and subsequent drafts were sent as e-mail attachments. I kept meetings at a minimum until the final wrap-up session. After eight drafts, the final document was completed and unanimously approved by the full committee in November 2000.

By fall 2001, all levels of the university administration had accepted the policy. It has made its way through the Faculty Senate Library Committee, university counsel, several vice presidents, and the president of the university. In line with the committee's recommendation to consolidate all university Internet and information policies, Jackson has been appointed chair of the University Technology Subcommittee to Review WSU Technology Policies.

The creation of the university-wide Internet policy was a lengthy process, especially for the library representatives involved. Three key elements helped us to succeed: involving all the technology centers on campus, the thoroughness of our research, and maintaining a relaxed team atmosphere with a common goal.

What happens when the library takes the lead in creating the university's Internet policy? At Wichita State University the result is a uniform Internet-use policy that preserves intellectual freedom and protects individuals' right to privacy.[3]

Notes

1. Janis Dybdahl, "Internet use policy: some features to consider." *Colorado Libraries* (1999) 25:43-7.

2. "Acceptable use policy." Rutgers University, available at http://rucs.rutgers.edu/acceptable-use.html; accessed 2002, June 10. See also, "Acceptable use guidelines." Rutgers University, available at http://rucs.rutgers.edu/acceptable-use-guide.html; accessed 2002, June 10.

3. The author thanks the members of the Ad Hoc Committee to Develop a Policy on Internet Access and Pornography for all of their hard work. Thanks to David Duncan, Ted Naylor, and Sandy MacGill for drafting the policy. Special thanks to Janet Brown, Ted Naylor, and Kristen Sen for their roles in presenting the policy for the Kansas Library Association. ■