

Chapter 3

Discovery Services, the Next Tool Libraries Must Have, or... Should Discard?

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ABSTRACT

Discovery tools have great appeal for many university libraries in the South. The main reason for this is that it makes searching user friendlier, especially for undergraduates. Many authors have expressed their enthusiasm for discovery tools and their dislike for colleagues who did not share it. Although discovery tools are still improving, they are not perfect. Most of the discussion about them focuses on matters of precision and no attention is given to recall problems. Some libraries in the North have decided not to use them and some have discarded theirs.

INTRODUCTION

Most university and college libraries in the North now have discovery tools as one-stop-search interfaces for their print and e-resources whereas libraries in the South are trying to keep up with this evolution and are installing these “must have” instruments as soon as possible. Since 2008 hundreds of articles have been published on the subject¹, some dealing with discovery tools as a new phenomenon, some discussing the pros and cons, some investigating the role of librarians in the process of implementing a discovery service or in promoting it to the library users. In their eagerness to demonstrate the benefits of the new instruments authors have not held back their critical remarks vis-a-vis what they considered to be the irresponsible attitude of librarians who did not see the benefits of web-scale discovery tools.

Criticism of discovery tools focuses mainly on issues of precision and on loss of highly valued search instruments in bibliographic databases like specialized thesauri or subject headings. Few remarks have been made concerning recall, although the constant reference to Google or Google Scholar obviously should lead to a discussion about the number of retrieved documents, however it does not.

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Here and there in the North libraries are discarding their discovery tool and relying on what it claims to mimic, i.e. Google. One of the most provoking standpoints in this regard has been put forward by Utrecht University library, but other universities in the North just take it for granted that Google Scholar is the better choice and offer it, enriched with links to the full text in their databases through their link resolver, as their search tool for electronic publications.

BACKGROUND

Most articles start with a literature review, but a few years ago some colleagues obviously thought the time was right to write a survey of all the publications on discovery services during the first half decade since the first implementations. More & Greene (2012) focused on literature about the selection and evaluation of services or software packages, Ellero's main point of interest were articles treating topical searches and the role of metadata (Ellero, 2013), while Thomsett-Scott & Reese (2012) may have the broadest view, although placing an accent on user acceptance, usability and information literacy.

Since the publication of the first literature surveys many more articles were published, but the central points of interest remain the same: technical issues, advantages and disadvantages, with an emphasis on matters of precision, acceptances (mainly by undergraduates), consequences for information literacy and the role librarians therein.

It is distressing to notice that many authors find it necessary to criticize in strong terms what they consider to be the conservative attitude of some librarians who apparently refuse to see the benefits of discovery tools, infect students with their negative attitude and in doing so prevent the latter to enjoy the advantages of these beautiful and powerful instruments. Even Thomsett-Scott & Reese (2012) write in their summary:

In general, librarians as a group are not comfortable with change, especially change where they have little involvement or input. (p. 138)

Other authors were still less restrained in their choice of words when they were describing the supposed negative attitude of librarians:

The biggest risk we faced was negative librarian experiences and views flowing through to our users. (Howard & Wiebrands, 2011)

Every missing citation, change in indexing and variation in performance was systematically tracked down by librarians as we attempted to build our understanding of this radical new tool. (Howard & Wiebrands, 2011)

For some authors there is no doubt that discovery tools are great; librarians just need to try harder to comprehend this, all the more so because they are expensive:

As discovery tools become more commonplace in academic libraries, there will be increased impetus for their use in library instruction not only to meet learning outcomes but also to justify the costs dedicated to them. (Fawley & Krysak, 2014, p. 297)

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