

Chapter 15

The New Age “Information Dowser” and Mobile Learning Opportunities: The Use of Library Classification and Subject Headings in K–20 Education – Today and Tomorrow

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ABSTRACT

This treatise will profile a case study exploration involving the possible use of library classification and subject headings as an element of contextual identification – evidence that a particular material’s subject matter and content (as a whole or a portion of it) may satisfy an informational need. One of the challenges of this task is to develop a materials evaluation process using library classification that is both user-friendly and technologically savvy. In this case, mobile technology has been selected as the possible mode of information delivery.

The other challenge is to determine if the resulting use of contextual identification (using library classification and subject headings) accessible via a mobile device is appropriate for a particular institution’s information/material retrieval needs, user population, and budget (in this case, a small academic library). The result is the development of the “RMU Information Dowser” project by the Robert Morris University (RMU) Libraries. This project, also designed to possibly satisfy the RMU Libraries mandate to assist in university-wide application of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education in the future, will profile how the university has been exploring use of a combination of mobile technology and reference processes to create a tool to promote rapid library catalog information retrieval and materials access in a student-centered, socially-friendly context.

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INTRODUCTION

In today’s information age, the “desire” to retrieve information quickly and easily is increasing at an exponential rate. Appropriately, the “desire” to identify, review, and use the resources (i.e. steps in the materials selection and information literacy processes) in order to satisfy an information need quickly and easily is also rising at a rapid pace. In unison with these factors is the proliferation of technology tools designed to comfortably and successfully locate and use these items. Furthermore, the ability of young people (identified arbitrarily as “Millennials” ages 12 to 24) to use technology (cell phones, Palm computers, and the like) has also grown exponentially and can be attributed to a broad awareness of technology tools information provided by popular media outlets as well as convenient access to the equipment, peer association with the items, and widespread use of technology tools in the daily lives of teens – both inside and outside the classroom.

Conversely, while the widespread use of technology tools and the “desire” to retrieve information and information materials is rapid, the mastery of information literacy skills – the ability to identify specific information and the sources used to obtain that information -- in the post K-20 environment has declined significantly over the last quarter century. Furthermore, the “psychological” effects of information literacy skills decline have lead to an increase in the number of young adults entering the academic environment with the “fear” of research and its associated negative connotations.

One key aspect of information retrieval involves the use of terms and classification associated with a specific item (i.e. subject headings and library classification). In the past, library patrons used printed bibliographies or “finding aids” to locate library materials corresponding to specific subject headings (typically the Library of Congress Subject Headings) and classification (mainly the Library of Congress Classification System or the

Dewey Decimal Classification System). These location tools also included institution-specific information on where the items were located in the library and how they were obtained for use.

Today, the same identification tools exist (i.e. library classification and subject headings) but are primarily housed and delivered electronically. However, the electronic mode of information delivery, in most instances, still remains very “traditional” (i.e. use of a computer terminal or laptop-type computer in a “fixed” location). As will be explored in this discussion, the challenge is to determine how the same useful identification tools can be used in world that increasingly relies on “mobile technology” (i.e. hand-held devices) as information delivery tools.

BACKGROUND

As was mentioned earlier, locating library materials using library classification (i.e. an item’s classification-derived “home on the shelf”) is, obviously, not a new concept. Likewise, the use of the descriptive labels associated with a particular classification number to validate item selection also has its origins in basic library theory and practice. According to Mills (2004), indexing and searching function as the two fundamental operations of retrieval. The classification number itself – using a combination of numbers, letters, and, in some cases words -- works to establish the placement context for a single unit or multiple units with respect to the tangible placement of that entity in a prescribed physical area. The classification’s descriptive labels function as “access points” in creating an intellectual link between the subjective labels and the objective number. Library catalogers create the conceptual bond between the classification number and its descriptive labels to develop a tool users may manipulate to encourage information retrieval, since such retrieval is the “final and, therefore,

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