

Chapter 7

Online Research without E-Reference: What is Missing from Digital Libraries?

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ABSTRACT

With so many e-resources in the library, and so many avenues to it, what tools point users to the information relevant to their research? Investing in an electronic library without a strong online reference service leaves resources undiscovered, unapproachable, and underutilized. This chapter will discuss the important and welcoming function of reference services in order to increase the value and use of an institution's e-resources collection, especially resulting with increased information literacy for students.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians were among the first to adopt new educational and information technology. The creation of online library catalogs and the automation of circulation and technical services began in some libraries in the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, reference services were adopting online tools, and by the 1990s, they were moving from mediated to unmediated services.

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Virtual reference was introduced well over a decade ago. One of the best known of the early efforts was the Internet Public Library (www.ipl.org), a service launched in 1995 by the University of Michigan's School of Information and Library Studies. Initially a case study, it is now a well established service that is a collaborative effort among four schools of library and information science. Beginning in 2007, the service host for the program changed to the Drexel University College of Information Science and Technology. The Internet Public Library (IPL) provides a variety of

online resources arranged in broad subject areas, a number of pathfinders, an extensive FAQ section, and an online form for asking reference questions. IPL has a staff of volunteers that answers questions, usually in no more than three days, and the service can be accessed directly or through a link on a library's website. Despite its name, many academic libraries link to IPL.

The one holdout—and the focus of this chapter—is the area of collection development. In particular, the development of e-reference materials was clearly the last to be affected by the new digital technology (Branin et al., 2000). But as scholarly materials moved beyond reference databases and catalogs into full-text journals and e-books in the mid- to late 1990s, there was no escaping the significant changes underway. Print, which held sway in reference collection development, was still the dominant format in many disciplinary fields in 2000, but digital formats could not be ignored and were quickly being adopted by students, faculty, and librarians. The University of Washington Libraries (2002), in one of many research studies on this subject, found through a survey of their faculty and graduate students that between 1998 and 2001, visits to the reference desk in the physical library were declining while use of networked computers increased in offices and homes. Access to information was growing across all reference needs and disciplines.

This chapter will build on that research. Rather than discussing the well-documented need for services such as online chat, it will instead focus on the collection development aspect of online reference. As more libraries continue the transition from print to online, how can we help online reference services and their content meet the extent of librarian knowledge? In other words, what services will point students and faculty to the information truly worth using? This is especially crucial in today's world with online teaching and learning; students often use library services from places other than the physical library. Information provided in this chapter will demonstrate

innovative collection development choices that combine content acquisition with information literacy services.

BACKGROUND

Millennial Generation students, those born after 1990, clearly perceive the Open Web as their information universe. This is in opposition to the view of many librarians and faculty, who perceive the library as the center of resources relevant to academic work. Students usually approach their research without regard to the library's structure or the way that the library segments different resources into different areas of its website. Library websites often reflect an organizational view of the library (for example, how to access the reference department or search in the institution's online catalog); they do not do a particularly good job of aggregating content on a particular subject area or more importantly teaching students when to use a particular database or resource (information and digital literacy). It is clear that faculty should also have a role to play in teaching subject-specific information literacy. Some examples of successful bridging of library resources, information literacy, and faculty teaching involve scaffolding and similar projects, but this collaboration in many institutions is not significant (Connaway, 2008).

Undergraduate and graduate students usually prefer the quick search of Google to more sophisticated, but more time-consuming search options provided by the library. In libraries without federated search, students must make separate searches of the online catalog and every database of potential interest, after first identifying which databases might be relevant. Conversely, in libraries with federated search, students are often overwhelmed with thousands of results, many which are not relevant to their work. In addition, not all searches of library catalogs or databases yield full-text materials, and Millennial Generation students want not just speedy answers, but

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