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## Bibliographic Instruction And The Reference Desk

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No Abstract

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librarian who, one hopes, will be at the desk and not off talking to a class, will that student be able to discover new developments

Granted that one must teach what one knows, not what one may know years from now, is there nevertheless some value to explaining present research methodologies? Does such instruction not contribute "to students' understanding of the nature of learning and scholarship?" No

Implicit in the "Recommendations" and in bibliographic instruction ideology generally is the belief in the omniscient librarian, capable of such tasks as reviewing and evaluating "the basic textbooks in all disciplines" The "Recommendations" concede that "library research competence has traditionally depended largely on tacit knowledge acquired through the process of socialization to a discipline" Yet they are strangely reticent about urging bibliographic instructors to undertake research in a discipline themselves Recording and analyzing "the library research behavior of scientists and scholars," the suggested alternative, is hardly a satisfactory substitute As *Sanders' Union Fourth Reader* notes, "It is in studying as in eating, *he who does it*, gets the benefit, and not *he who sees it done*" It seems highly questionable whether a person who has never undertaken research in a field can give a true account of the process The result seems likely to contribute to "students' misunderstanding of the nature of learning and scholarship" (*felix culpa*, that misprint in the "Recommendations") Only by undertaking research himself will the student learn the intricacies of library resources, their strengths and weaknesses, values and limitations "Socialization to a discipline" is indeed the only way to learn In this process of socialization the student will need assistance from the reference librarian Then, and only then, in that one-to-one situation, will the student be ready and able to learn about bibliographic resources Library use is a skill and the art for which classroom instruction is no substitute for experience

"Even if all you have said be true," counters the bibliographic instructor, "surely you will concede that it is more *efficient* to explain to 20 students at once how to use the card catalog than to offer the same explanation 20 times individually?" In fact, bibliographic instruction is terribly inefficient One must spend time in preparation for a presentation If one includes a handout and quiz (or other form of evaluation), one must spend yet more time Then there is the presentation itself, which is the beginning, not the end, of the librarian's chores Students will forget titles, they will forget how to use an index, they will not remember how to locate a certain source Some will remember everything, but because their topics weren't specifically treated, they will not be able to use the sources mentioned (or, perhaps, even the methodology) and so will need special help anyway I doubt that a reference librarian actually saves time by addressing an entire class, certainly in the light of these considerations "studies aimed at justifying bibliographic instruction's existence" are not, as the "Recommendations" claim, unnecessary

"Bibliographic instruction practitioners" are, for the most part, well intentioned but misguided They fail to realize that they can best accomplish their goals not by running around campus with projectors and screens, not by sitting in faculty offices, but by helping users within the library It is time for the tide of bibliographic instruction to ebb, for librarians to trade the appearance of teaching for the reality

## Bibliographic Instruction and the Reference Desk



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***"Reference desk service and bibliographic instruction are intimately connected, and both are necessary to teach students and other researchers about using the library and finding specific information. These activities are complementary, not competitive with each other."***

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The Think Tank's statement that bibliographic instruction is "the very heart of the reference process" had librarians in the 1981 Preconference audience leaping from their chairs to make rebuttals Now, as well as then, I disagree with the emphasis of this statement, but agree with its intent of stressing the importance of bibliographic instruction The Think Tank overstates its case, but Lewis and Vincent in their response article, do equal or more damage in their rejection of the Think Tank's position

Lewis and Vincent are much too negative about the Think Tank's report They take potshots at the Think Tank by questioning its membership and naming three "stalwarts of bibliographic instruction" who were not members Who could not think of at least three more experts who were not members? That highly arbitrary game could be played indefinitely The authors make a snide reference to the Think Tank's use of the term "bibliographic instruction practitioners" but fail to note that "instruction librarians" is used in the same section The Think Tank was probably looking for variety more than anything else These nasty jibes aside, the core of the real philosophical differences between the two

statements is found in two areas. First is the relationship between reference desk service and bibliographic instruction. Second is the independent user: how independent do librarians want users to be?

There is a middle ground on the relationship between bibliographic instruction and reference desk service which is more illuminating and productive than the approach taken by either the Think Tank or by Lewis and Vincent. Reference desk service and bibliographic instruction are intimately connected, and both are necessary to teach students and other researchers about using the library and finding specific information. These activities are complementary, not competitive with each other.

Their connection is that their purpose is to help a researcher understand and carry out a literature search. Literature searching, the process of knowing about library resources and finding information, can be seen logically as going from the general to the specific. To elaborate, first students need to know types of information available in a library and the types of access tools used to get to the information. In addition, they need to know how library resources relate to each other and how to use the resources in a logical or systematic manner. Students then need to know titles to use for their specific projects and how to locate the sources listed in various access tools, including how to find material not available in their own institution's library.

The literature search process is served most appropriately by bibliographic education at the general end where the framework of literature searching and the nature of the literature can best be explained. The classroom which provides an uninterrupted, structured setting is appropriate for presenting broader, more comprehensive information.

The time period is also better. Even though a fifty-minute class seems short, it is much longer than the five or ten or even fifteen minutes which can be allotted to a patron at the reference desk. Assistance at the reference desk is best geared to individual topics and the unique complexities of various approaches to a topic. At the reference desk, the librarian can lead the student to the best source for the topic and explain idiosyncracies of sources. The librarian also can help with the different aspects of a specific topic. Assistance and teaching at the reference desk is more specific and more individual. Online searching and interlibrary loan offer even more specific assistance with the literature search process.

The value of this view is that it emphasizes the strong point of each activity. In bibliographic instruction presentations, emphasis must be placed on the overview; introduction of too many details simply loses the audience. At the reference desk, it is rarely desirable or possible to launch into a discussion of the literature of a field, while it is appropriate to teach the use of specific indexes or bibliographies.

How independent should the user be? Ideally, the user should understand principles, such as types of resources and their purposes. This knowledge should be transferrable to new fields of study. The user should not, however, have to know titles outside his/her specialty. Rather than independent users, librarians should strive for sophisticated users.

Bibliographic education is not necessarily the heart of reference service, but it is *the* first step in a total reference process for academic libraries. Bibliographic education should come first and reference desk assistance should follow. In personal terms, there is nothing more satisfying than to be able to reinforce at the reference desk what was said in a class.



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## An Administrative Point of View

It would be relatively easy to quibble with Lewis and Vincent's response to the Think Tank. They chose to take phrases or statements out of context and to interpret them in a vacuum, devoid of the sizable body of literature published on these topics during the past decade.

It will be more useful, however, to address the major flaw in the response. The authors have totally misunderstood the Think Tank statement that "bibliographic instruction is intended to teach students to make intelligent, independent decisions about library use."

During the past decade I have attended many programs devoted to bibliographic instruction and I have never heard one speaker espouse the notion that a bibliographic instruction program was intended to supplant the reference department. A number of us, in fact, have advocated the