

Instructing the Academic Search Service User: the Faculty Connection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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Schumacher, Mark. (1989). Instructing the academic search service user: the faculty connection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Research Strategies, 7, 33-6.

Article:

Every database searcher in academia has encountered uninformed or misinformed patrons. (Perhaps they have had a DIALOG search run, and now they want an ERIC search! Perhaps they do not realize that the ERIC documents you have located for them are on microfiche, or how to find them.) Patrons, particularly graduate students, arrive at the reference desk in a confused state for any number of reasons. Maybe their textbooks are vague or incorrect in the information that they provide about computer searching (1). Perhaps friends, with whom they discuss searching, do not explain it clearly enough. Quite possibly, however, faculty members who suggest computer searches to them, either in classes or as thesis/dissertation advisors, lack information concerning the details of either the process or the product, and therefore provide misleading or incomplete information about searches.

In order to improve faculty understanding of the library-based computer searching service at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the Reference Department decided to organize a series of informational workshops. With local grant support, we were able to hold these seminars in March of 1987 and again in March of 1988. Open to both faculty and graduate assistants, the seminars had a dual purpose: first, to explain how computer searching could improve the quality of research and/or classroom instruction, and second, to provide more complete and accurate information about computer searching to pass on to their students. By reaching a group of instructors who in turn could reach hundreds of our potential computer search patrons, the department hoped they could work in partnership with the faculty to increase knowledge campus-wide of the library's searching services.

BACKGROUND

At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), a state institution of 7,500 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students and 600 faculty, database searching, through the DIALOG, MEDLINE, and briefly, BRS systems, has been available since 1976. In three recent years, 1560 DIALOG searches have been conducted at Jackson Library, of which approximately 48 percent have been ERIC searches. In any given year, forty to fifty databases are searched at least once. Six reference librarians perform DIALOG searches; the government documents librarian does all the MEDLINE searching.

Information about the library's computerized database searching services is regularly presented in our course-integrated bibliographic instruction sessions. All graduate classes receive some explanation of searching, as do a large percentage of upper-division undergraduate courses. Certain instructors, in social work and education for example, schedule separate sessions for instruction in computer searching. Nevertheless, it is difficult to reach all students before they

reach a point in their studies when they might benefit from a computer search. Vagaries of individual scheduling, a large part-time student population, and problems in identifying and successfully contacting all the appropriate research methods courses lead to a situation in which information about library services, including database searching, is not as widely disseminated as we in the reference department would wish.

GRANT FUNDING AND WORKSHOP ORGANIZATION

UNC-Greensboro, in recent years, has made a considerable effort, in terms of grant support, to increase the computer skills and understanding of its faculty and its students. The grant proposals for our workshops were submitted to the Faculty Development Office in the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs' office in October 1986 and October 1987. Each was approved the following January or February. Funding was provided to cover a mailing to the faculty, photocopying and other supply costs, and computer costs. The mailings were sent early in March of each year, with the actual sessions scheduled late in the month. The mailing included a brief description of the presentation format and a sign-up sheet with a choice of seminar times. (See 1987 example--Appendix 1.) Although funding was approved, in the amount of a few hundred dollars, in two consecutive years, it was recommended in 1988 that monies be found in the library's operating budget to support this endeavor in an ongoing manner. With assistance from DIALOG (see below) this may in fact be possible.

Due to the restricted space in our computer search room, where the hands-on demonstration was to be held, and because we wished to keep the group small enough to encourage informal dialogue among participants, it was decided to limit each group to twelve enrollees. Each group met in an alcove of the reference room (rather than in the more properly equipped library instruction room) in order to be near the basement terminal room, and thus reduce transit time in an already tight schedule.

The seminars began with a general discussion of databases, database producers and vendors, followed by information on the DIALOG and MEDLINE services available in Jackson Library. The next area of discussion involved deciding whether a computer search would effectively locate material on a particular type of topic. The concepts of Boolean algebra and intersecting sets of terms were presented at this point. Following that, the actual process of search strategy formulation, by the patron and the librarian, was outlined. Possible output formats were also presented. In order to relate the discussion to the participants' individual interests, several sample searches based on the research concerns of attending faculty had been designed and executed beforehand. These printouts allowed attendees to compare online and offline results, while learning about the cost and turn-around time involved in each format. The "lecture" portion of the workshop concluded with an explanation of end-user searching; in two of the 1987 sessions, this discussion was complemented by seminar members who were already end-users, and who could contribute the "voice of experience" to the discussion. Their comments to their peers provided a personal testimony to the advantages and drawbacks of end-user searching.

From the outset, a hands-on demonstration of the actual search process was planned as one component of the seminar. In our normal routine, patrons must conduct the search interview in person (rather than over the telephone), but rarely accompany the searchers during the running of the search, which we usually do early in the morning to optimize response time. We felt that showing the faculty the machinery and by demonstrating the ease with which searching is done,

we might well create greater confidence in the service as a whole. After speaking with several people in the customer service office at DIALOG we obtained demonstration passwords, which enhanced our capability to provide relevant and exciting search samples to the participants, as well as showing the broader principles of searching strategy through the use of the ONTAP files. By being able to hand the individual faculty member a useful citation of which she or he was perhaps unaware, the power and efficiency of database searching was made apparent in a direct and personal way. (Anyone interested in developing presentations such as ours should contact the database vendors through whom they search. Vendors are invariably eager to help librarians promote a wider market for search services, whether intermediary or end-user based.)

UNEXPECTED INTEREST

When we first began planning for these workshops, we had no idea what the faculty response to our project would be. In 1987, we hoped that there might be twenty-five to thirty interested faculty. Instead, there were 88 responses, which required that we do all eight sessions, rather than the three or four originally envisaged. Sixty-nine persons actually attended, an excellent turnout given the often hectic faculty schedules in mid-semester. What we found most encouraging was the attendance of faculty from all five professional schools (Education, Music, Home Economics, Physical Education, and Business and Economics) as well as the College of Arts and Sciences. In 1988, five different sessions were offered; 64 persons signed up, and 38 actually attended. Although a smaller number of faculty responded in the second year, this was to be expected since most of those interested in computer searching may well have attended in 1987. One way to improve the marketing of these workshops would be to provide a separate mailing to new faculty on our campus, which we will do when these seminars are next offered.

The initial response to the seminar mailings, the regrets of faculty who could not arrange their schedules to attend any of the sessions (and who invariably asked when they would be repeated), as well as the results of the simple evaluation form handed out at the end of each presentation all seem to indicate that information about computerized database searching was much needed and much appreciated by a large segment of the UNC-Greensboro faculty. For example, when asked if they felt better able to decide if a computer search would be useful to their teaching or research needs, 29 of 31 respondents in 1987, and 22 of 25 in 1988 replied "definitely yes." A number of comments on the evaluations reaffirmed the success of our efforts. One faculty member in biology, already familiar with end-user searching, remarked that it was "a timely and important workshop!" Another, from sociology, described her session as "very interesting and informative." After observing our online demonstration, one participant, in fact, returned within 24 hours to have a full-scale search run.

THE PRESENTATION EVOLVES

Because this was our first attempt at this kind of relatively large-scale instruction concerning database searching, designed exclusively for faculty, the initial organization of the presentation followed an outline covering points we felt would be important for all participants to know. As the 1987 sessions progressed, however, the sessions' content evolved. The changes were based both on comments on the evaluation forms (often returned immediately following the session) and on the personal reactions of the presenter. We found that more emphasis, and therefore more

time, should be given to the hands-on demonstration. Not only was it the most striking portion of the workshop for the attendees; a number of faculty had to leave before getting a chance to see the terminal in action. (Others commented that they would have liked more time for that phase of the seminar.) Conversely, the introduction, perhaps too theoretical or vague, was shortened. As we began the 1988 sessions, then, we had a better sense of the type of presentation would be optimal for our faculty participants.

To the extent that a greater percentage of the workshop attendees did get a chance to participate in the hands-on demonstration in 1988, we can say that the second year's format improved upon its predecessor. By concentrating on the combining of sets into a search strategy, and on the "nuts and bolts" details of the search service in Jackson Library, sufficient time remained to allow a clear and comprehensive session in the terminal room.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The fact that 15% to 18% of the entire faculty at UNC-Greensboro attended these two series of workshops, and that they were, in general, highly pleased with the information they received there indicates that a need exists among faculty to better understand the advantages (and drawbacks) of computerized database searching.

In the academic context, bibliographic instruction is almost always thought of in terms of students, undergraduate or graduate. However, the teaching faculty, who are in constant contact with those students, can serve as the BI librarian's allies in the effort to impart knowledge about the library, its resources and its services. To that end, bibliographic instruction for targeted or self-selected groups of faculty can enhance an already active BI program aimed at students.