

Looking for a few good questions

It really is process, not product

by Celia Rabinowitz

You know how cartoons show that a character has an idea by having a light bulb suddenly appear in a bubble over the character's head? That's what learning is—an unpredictable moment when a connection is made. And what makes learning so exciting is that it is so unmanageable. We can try to encourage it and create structures in which it can take place, but I am not sure we can (or would want to) manage it. It is really a kind of miracle.

When we talk about managing information, we usually focus on finding ways to help students learn to use information retrieval tools of all sorts, create good search queries, evaluate results, cite properly, and avoid plagiarism. We decide whether to make handouts available to students in print or on the Web. We plan workshops on First Search databases and comparing Internet search engines. We ponder how hands-on instruction spaces should be configured.

Many of the students I see at the reference desk have requests that begin, "I need information on . . ." and I usually respond by asking, "What do you want to know about this subject?" or "What are you going to do with the information that you find?"

In class I often ask students how psychologists, or philosophers, or political scientists might ask questions about certain ideas or topics. More than a manager, I want to be a learning partner. I want students to learn that there will always be questions: Why didn't I retrieve the results I wanted from that search? Which

databases will work best? Are there other resources (human, print, etc.) that will help me? Am I still asking the same questions that I was when I started?

What students need to ask

I recognize that our current preoccupation with trying to manage the process of learning and the information that accompanies it has, in some ways, been driven by necessity. Vendors modify (they would probably say enhance) search interfaces every few months, and content is continually added or deleted. We find ourselves in a seemingly never-ending expansion of electronic resources and are responsible for making sure students and faculty know how to use these expensive (albeit extremely useful) resources. But they also need to know the when, why, and why not.

Some of the really fundamental questions are ones we should be encouraging students to ask (and that we can model for them in all kinds of settings). Those questions include: What do I think I want to know? What do I already know about this? Why do I need/want to know this? Why is this question interesting to me (and worth the next eight-to-ten weeks of my time)? What kind of information is out there? These are the questions that can lead to the light bulb of revelation when real learning is taking place.

Easy on the "how"

Can we really afford to place less empha-

About the author

Celia Rabinowitz is director of the library and media services at St. Mary's College of Maryland, e-mail: cerabinowitz@smcm.edu

sis on the "how" of searching? Despite (or because of) how fast the "how" is changing, I think we should. I am always reminding faculty that if they want to try new approaches to learning, or focus on incorporating information/technology fluencies into their courses, they must also be willing to sacrifice content.

If we really want to provide students with transferable knowledge to help them become successful lifelong learners, we need to help them know how to ask the right questions. And this probably means we won't be able to cover how to use every possible source. But we will be able to help students recognize when they have a question that information sources are likely to help answer, and how to identify the places they are most likely to find information they can use.

And if they learn that most databases support truncation, Boolean operators, limiters of various sorts, and printing or downloading, then we will have achieved our goal of helping students become adaptable and able to use new tools.

If we really want to provide students with transferable knowledge to help them become successful lifelong learners, we need to help them know how to ask the right questions.

Sometimes the screen of hits in PsycInfo provides the very spark that results in the light bulb of revelation. But the spark has to have something with which to interact, and that's where the unpredictability of our, and our students', intellectual curiosity comes in. That's the unmanageable part of this process that we often overlook in our desire to feel as if we have control over the information and information tools with which we work. I, for one, am glad that the amazing human-driven part of this enterprise remains a constant. ■

Make NO Mistake

According to a recent readership survey of librarians and higher education faculty:

- 79% of subscribers polled rely on **CHOICE reviews to make their material selections!**
- 51% use CHOICE reviews as their **primary collection development tool!**
- Compared to 10 other leading review sources, **CHOICE reviews were preferred by 5 to 1!**
- For the best, short critical evaluations of new titles anywhere, readers **favored CHOICE 8 to 1!**

If you purchase material for your college library collection and are looking for exciting new ways to make selecting books and Internet resources easier, faster, and more efficient than ever ...

There Is Only One CHOICE!

**60 Days Online
for FREE!**

To try ChoiceReviews.online or our **NEW** ChoiceReviews.online Site License Edition **FREE for 60 days**, click on www.ChoiceReviews.org. To subscribe to CHOICE Magazine or Reviews On Cards, contact us at www.ala.org/acrl/choice, or call (240) 646-7027.

.....

CHOICE

*The internationally-acclaimed
source of current reviews
for academic libraries.*

CHOICE is a publication of the Association
of College & Research Libraries,
a Division of the American Library Association.



There's nothing
off-the-shelf
about our online
environmental
research solution

Delivering only the most relevant and reliable environmental information from the most respected sources, the new **LexisNexis™ Environmental Universe** offers a rich resource sure to satisfy students and researchers at all levels.

With quick and easy access to abstracts and full text on a wide variety of topics, including pollution, energy, population, global warming, waste management, and so many others, environmental research has never been faster, easier, or more complete.

Tapping a broad vein of source types, LexisNexis Environmental Universe provides critical coverage of environmental journals and publications, case law, regulatory agency decisions, codes, and many others.

Newspapers • Journals • Magazines • Trade publications • Case law • Codes • Regulatory agency decisions • and more

For a **FREE 30-DAY TRIAL*** of LexisNexis Environmental Universe, visit us online at www.lexisnexis.com/academic. Or call 800.227.9597 ext. 4846

 **LexisNexis™**
Academic & Library Solutions

*Some restrictions may apply.

LexisNexis and the Knowledge Burst logo are trademarks of Reed Elsevier Properties Inc., used under license. © 2001 LexisNexis, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.