
Library science students develop pathfinders

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An undergraduate library reference class helps with BI.

Not another paper on abortion! I must have read a dozen of these this year!" was a complaint reference librarians at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire often heard from English composition or speech instructors. However the topics which instructors viewed as "worn out" because students chose them year after year were precisely those which continued to be of current interest and concern to students. When the reference librarians analyzed this situation, they concluded that instructors were not really as concerned with students' choices of topics as with their failure to develop the topics properly.

Observation of students' search strategies and analysis of sources being quoted indicated to the reference librarians that students frequently failed to develop their topics well because they were unable to define their topics adequately and because they did not use reference sources of sufficient depth. The *Reader's Guide* and general encyclopedias were all too often the only sources of information. This strategy either turned up too little information or information that was superficial. Faced with either situation, a student usually attempted to cover the entire subject in a short paper or speech which lacked the depth necessary for a significant discussion of the topic. A student with access to sufficient information tended to focus on one aspect of a subject and to treat that aspect in greater depth.

Subject pathfinders were considered as a solution to the problem. Recurring topics could be

identified and relevant sources listed to guide students to both general and in-depth information. However, traditional pathfinders were viewed as unsatisfactory because they provided specific references to information and did not require students to develop their own search strategies. It was hoped that pathfinders could be developed which would facilitate learning rather than using a "cook-book" approach which provided precise citations. With this goal in mind, a few popular topics were selected and prototypes were developed.

Anticipating that the availability of a subject pathfinder would initially enhance the popularity of a topic, the reference librarians believed that at least 20 different pathfinders should be ready before any were publicized. Since each pathfinder represented eight to ten hours of work by an experienced reference librarian, it was evident that the preparation of pathfinders would consume a great deal of staff time. In a reference department which was chronically understaffed and already facing demands for increased reference service and bibliographic instruction, time to undertake a new project of this magnitude was not available.

The reference librarians continued to believe that there was a need for subject pathfinders, however, so they began looking for alternate sources of preparation. This led to the realization that the preparation of subject pathfinders was a significant learning experience and, as such, that perhaps library science students might benefit from that ex-

perience. The Chairman of the Library Science and Media Education Department, Glenn Thompson, was contacted and he agreed. The preparation of a pathfinder was included as a required assignment in the reference class which he taught during the 1984 Fall Semester.

The reference class at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire was a core course in an undergraduate minor offered by the Department of Library Science and Media Education. During the 1984 Fall Semester there were 18 students enrolled in the course: two sophomores, eight juniors, four seniors, and four "special" students. Of these "special" students who were not enrolled in degree programs, three had baccalaureate degrees and were working towards state certification. The composition of the Fall 1984 class was considered to be representative of the reference classes.

Barbara Stevens, the reference librarian who developed the pathfinder project at UW-Eau Claire, presented the reference class with a list of topics which were popular with students in speech and English composition classes. Each student chose a topic at random and Stevens gave reasons for developing pathfinders, indicated the target audience, and explained the process used to prepare a subject pathfinder. Students were told that those pathfinders receiving an A grade would be used in the McIntyre Library and that the name of the student who prepared the pathfinder would be included on the pathfinder in a prominent location.

Students were given three weeks in which to prepare a first draft. Following the submission of these

drafts, Stevens and Thompson met and evaluated the pathfinders. While several were judged to be excellent and were adopted immediately, the majority were returned to their authors with suggestions for improvement. These students then had the opportunity to rewrite the pathfinders and re-submit them for reconsideration. Most students took advantage of this option and by the end of the semester 15 of the 18 pathfinders were of such quality that they were usable as submitted.

All who participated in the Project—students, instructor and reference librarian—agreed that the pathfinders were a worthwhile project. The experience reinforced students' development of appropriate search strategies and expanded their knowledge of reference sources. The fact that the students knew that their pathfinders would be used, that this was not simply one more classroom exercise, made the project especially meaningful. At the same time, the library acquired a series of tailor-made pathfinders with a minimum expenditure of time and effort.

During initial discussion of this project, the instructor and the reference librarians estimated that no more than 50% of the pathfinders would be usable. In actuality, over 80% were adopted with little or no change and the others provided a basis for completion by the reference staff. Because of these successes, future reference classes will be asked to develop additional pathfinders. Few changes are planned in the project as the initial procedure worked well. ■ ■

BIS Preconferences

The ACRL BIS Preconference Feasibility Committee is gathering data to determine future continuing education needs. Please respond to the following questions and return the questionnaire by June 14, 1985, to Judy Reynolds, Library, San Jose State University, One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95192-0028.

I would be interested in attending a pre post-conference in
 San Francisco in 1987.
 New Orleans in 1988.
 Dallas in 1989.

I would be interested in entry level or advanced topics that are applied or theoretical.
_____ other person(s) could attend from my library. Conference fees over \$_____ would prohibit me from attending.

Additional comments or suggestions: