

## Introduction

# WORKSHOP ON ONLINE DATABASES, INFORMATION SERVICES AND WEBSITES FROM THE USER EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

By

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Thank you for the invitation to share our ideas on user education. I find EURASLIC, BIASLIC and IAMSLIC meetings beneficial because I meet a very varied group of librarians, from many different types of libraries, with different interests and preoccupations. It's very useful for me to be reminded that not all libraries are university libraries.

Something we all have in common, which many previous speakers have referred to, is that we are now going through a period of rapid and profound change in librarianship. I remember being told this at library school, twenty three years ago, before the WWW had been dreamt of. Though it's difficult to believe this now, the profound change in the professional life of librarians at that time was the appearance of the second edition of the Anglo- American Cataloguing Rules. As we now know, even more profound changes have come since then. PCs have appeared on everyone's desk, university libraries provide them in large numbers for their users, and there is ready access to the Internet, the WWW and databases of all kinds.

For librarians working in universities, the Internet has brought about a revolution in the area of user education. It has vastly increased the subject matter of librarianship, and, consequently, the amount of information which we have to give to our students when we teach them literature searching skills. In practice, we have tended to focus on teaching them how to use bibliographic databases, though as this workshop has reminded me, there are other kinds of database, and when I am back at work I will review the emphasis which I give to bibliographic databases.

The reasons for focussing on bibliographic databases are:

- They are the successors to printed indexes and abstracts, a fundamental part of librarianship, and literature searching is a core skill needed by students and academics.
- Apart from their basic usefulness, unlike many WWW sources, bibliographic databases are relatively stable.

There are, of course, upgrades and developments, but it is, all the same, possible to prepare teaching materials, and to be reasonably certain when the time comes to use them, that the databases they relate to, won't have changed beyond all recognition. (Sometime a database supplier will make changes during the summer: this is precisely the period when we are revising our materials for the coming session. On the whole, though changes aren't made overnight and without warning).

But WWW sites as we know, are tinkered with, come and go, are given total makeovers, pages are sometimes "under construction" for long periods, links can disappear, and the site designer can give free reign to his or her creativity. In library instruction about the WWW draw the users' attention to the types of materials and facilities that they may find relevant

and useful: marine and aquatic organisations' websites, relevant datasets, electronic journals, subject gateways, to give the users some starting points for looking for information on the WWW.

With bibliographic databases, on the other hand, we give more systematic and detailed instruction. We try to ensure that each student, at an appropriate time in his or her degree course is given a grounding in literature searching skills is taught how to use the appropriate bibliographic databases for their subject. We do this by preparing step-by-step guides to each database, with examples of searches, and the students work through these, in a computer room, with a librarian in attendance to give help if necessary. (We are always grateful if a database supplier provides documentation which we can adapt, or use unchanged). One point we try to emphasise to our users is that using a bibliographic database is a transferrable skill. Despite the differences in appearance, format and layout, they can learn to see beyond the surface of things and be aware that it is possible to do more or less the same things on each database; if they know how to search one, they know how to search them all. That is the core of our user education, though it is put in the larger context of the full range of literature searching techniques.

Before preparing a guide to a database, we must of course evaluate it, and insofar as it's possible to find a magic formula, a checklist of items to consider in evaluating a database, we've reduced it to these four.

- Coverage
- Access
- Refinements
- How to search

The first is are fairly unproblematic. We ask: Does this database index the core journals in a field? How far back in time does it go? Which departments in the university is it of relevance to?

For the second we are concerned with ease of access. We have a large number of databases that we encourage students to use, so the fewer obstacles to accessing the database, the better. Ideally, we prefer IP address recognition, with no passwords, and the facility for off-campus access, eg from a PC at home.

By "refinements" is meant facilities such as thesauri and indexes, which help the user to develop a search, and also any additional, specialised fields which the records in a database might have. Examples of these would be geographical area fields, or the fields in some life sciences databases which make it possible to search on taxonomic terms at different levels. Users need to be made aware of any features of this nature. Easy-to-use help screens and documentation are also a refinement which we and our users appreciate.

"How to search" is the most important question to consider in preparing detailed instructions for using a database. We need to note the special features, the advantages and disadvantages of the database, and any ways in which it might differ from earlier databases, or from the users expectations.

We ask: Is it self-evident how to begin a search? How self-evident is it? - (With well-designed search software it is clear at a glance how to begin a search). Does the user need to look at the help screens before he or she can even begin a search? Is there anything contrary to expectations? Is there anything which in addition to being contrary to

expectations, the user could be unaware of, and so not appreciate how the search strategy is operating.

On this question of "expectations", that is, assumptions made by a user on the basis of experience with other databases, I am not saying that simply because something has been done up till now, in the design of search software, that it should be perpetuated, and become a standard - (the QWERTY keyboard is a classic example of a standard that is not the ideal arrangement). My view is that what has been done already may be what common sense would suggest, and if so, software designers should not make changes solely for the sake of change. The ideal shape for the wheel has probably been arrived at, so there is little point in trying a different shape.

The participants then divided into smaller groups to assess six databases of various types, and the workshop concluded with a report to the full meeting from each group.

The databases assessed were:

- Elsevier - Oceanbase
- ASFA from Cambridge Scientific Abstracts
- FAO Website
- WAVES-Canada, Dept. Of Oceans and Fisheries Database
- IOC Website
- oneFish Community Directory