

# GENERAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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## Book Reviews

### **Distance learning: Information access and services for virtual users.**

Hemalata Iyer (Ed.). New York: Haworth Information Press, 2003. 151p.

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Co-published simultaneously as *The Reference Librarian*, No.77, 2002.

This indexed volume covers numerous aspects related to the provision of library services to distance learners at tertiary level. Broadly, the main subject areas covered in this monograph are studies of distance learning programmes, and the access to information resources for distance learners. Daphne Jorgensen, in her chapter on "The challenges and benefits of asynchronous learning networks" defines distance learning as students accessing courses at their convenience by means of a computer without the need for them to leave home. However, it can also refer to the provision of course work via web-based access to a home computer or from a campus computer. Often the web-based course information is backed up by additional material sent via email to students enrolled locally or internationally. This is a situation which is often the case in South African tertiary institutions.

Daphne Jorgensen highlights an important aspect of distance learning, that of getting distance learners actively involved in a collaborative (or group) learning environment online. She also stresses the cost of linking geographically dispersed lecturers and students. She emphasises the challenge for instructors to modify course delivery to fit the medium, and that the instructor's role is more that of a facilitator.

A continuation of another aspect a group identity in distance learning is highlighted by Cecilia Salvatore. She discusses the "Implications of culture in distance education", stressing that cultural issues, such as community building and identity formation, are essential for successful distance students to feel that they belong to the broader student community.

Margaret Garnsey in "What distance learners should know about information retrieval on the world wide web" points out that distance learners are often older than traditional "on campus" students. She looks at how to find information on the Internet, distinguishing between directories and search engines, and how to evaluate search engines and internet information. Following on from this chapter, Nancy Cannon looks at virtual reference sources: the virtual reference desk, the invisible web (or digital library), journal articles, and virtual reference services.

Jane Subramanian traces the development of consortia and their role in information cooperation, in her article "Growing and changing role of consortia for distance higher education". The examples of consortia that she examines are interlibrary loans and consortia of similar types of libraries (e.g. Center for Research Libraries – college, university and scholarly collections in North America). She sees consortia as vital for distance learning (she uses "distributed learning"), showing how consortia have been involved in the joint purchase of types of electronic resources other than e-journals, e.g. collections of e-books, joint automated systems which could assist in sharing the cost of online systems, etc. However, she also points out problems, such as vendor instabilities and changes that vendors make with little or no warning, overlapping of items and services, and licensing issues.

Two related articles are "Instructional services for distance education" by Robin Kinder, and "Virtual teaching: Library instruction via the web" by Carol Anne Germain and Gregory Bobish. There is a need for a professional librarian to be the liaison person to information technology and the library for distance learners. The library can also provide online instruction on how to use the library by means of online tutorials for distance learners. This is the case in certain South African universities, e.g. UCT Library Services web site.

Robin Walsh in "Information literacy at Ulster County College: Going the distance" describes their online information literacy course, which was a collaborative effort between the faculty and library, and is offered as a credit course, recently available using WebCT.

Holly Heller-Ross in "Assessing outcomes with nursing research assignments and citation analysis of student bibliographies" examines whether distance learning library services at Plattsburgh State University in the USA provide undergraduate nursing students with the relevant research materials. For distance learners, more emphasis was placed on access to online resources and their use. Instructor guidelines were found to be the most important criterion in the selection and use of resources by students.

Although largely American-based, as an information provider who has recently become involved with postgraduate distance learning in a South African university, I found the articles interesting, practical and useful.

limitations of, the lists used locally that: "It is highly likely that research and development having a potential to influence LIS practice for the benefit of South African society will not find a place in an accredited journal" (Darch and Underwood 2005:7). Maponya (2005:13) strikes a different note of caution when she argues that knowledge sharing is undermined by the need for authors to accrue personal rather than group benefit within the system of reward currently operating in many higher education institutions. Calvert and Gorman (2002:2) identify another problem in the form of inherent contradictions in the scholarly communication system. They see tensions between the demand for papers of the highest quality to allow for "new conceptual approaches and techniques" in the discipline when the "publish or perish" imperative can result in editors being overwhelmed with manuscripts of indifferent quality.

In addition to the range of formats there is also a wide variety of journals in any one field and each presents a different option for authors. Murray (2005:38) cites Blaxter et al. in identifying five types in addition to the academic journal: popular, professional, applied, multidisciplinary and electronic journals. There is clearly some overlap between the categories such as academic and electronic journal.

Within individual academic journals there are various publishing options. Murray (2005:xii) suggests that each research field has its own rhetoric and argues that in fact each journal has its own genre in a sense; "its own prevailing conventions and values". Detailed analysis of journal articles from different fields bears this out. For this reason the process of working out precisely what particular journal editors and reviewers are looking for in a particular journal can provide useful guidelines. Murray's (2005:25) view is that "writing for academic journals is not about performance; it is about persuasion" noting that one's writing style needs to be adjusted to suit the audience comprising editors and referees of a particular journal. Murray (2005:38-39) suggests that one develops a profile of the journals in one's field, and that one should then try to establish a direct connection between one's work and that of a likely target journal. The choice of journal depends on the nature of the content and the purpose of the manuscript. Apart from the scientific or scholarly article, there are short articles, review articles, proceedings, research notes, book reviews, news articles, comment and letters, advertorials and abstracts.

## **5 Bridging the academic research versus professional practice gap: the role of evidence-based librarianship (EBL)**

Although applied research predominates in LIS, some authors have questioned whether practitioners in LIS consult the research produced by their academic colleagues (Turner 2002:2; Booth 2003:3). With reference to McNicol and Dalton's (2004:174) point that LIS is both an academic discipline and a field of professional practice this observation suggests an academic research versus professional schism in the field. Murray (2005:41) refers to the argument that in publishing in academic journals one reaches a minute readership whereas professional journals convey the ideas to a larger group of people who have the capacity to implement them. Turner (2002:7-8) cites Schön's view that practice-based knowledge is communicated amongst practitioners using descriptive reporting, conferences, association meetings, and conversations that are "difficult to capture and commit to written, published form". Schön suggests that there is less impetus for information professionals to consult published research when they are working on dynamic, practical workplace issues. Turner (2002:9) cites Heron to argue that the reason for this might lie in the research produced by academics being "too remote and esoteric to supply applicable and practical results".

Which research areas are of interest to practitioners? McNicol and Dalton (2004:170-171) report on practitioner research areas in Britain, finding research greatest in academic and public libraries. Major barriers to research are time and money. In all library sectors user surveys are the most frequently reported type of research. For the years 2004 to 2007, LIS research areas as seen by the broad LIS domain, were electronic information services, library and information management, staff development, user needs, education, learning and information skills, the impact of LIS, social inclusion, networks and links and health information. In general McNicol and Dalton's survey of practitioners alone tended to confirm these areas, with the precise nature of the research varying by sector (McNicol and Dalton 2004:171-173).

Nevertheless Murray's untitled figure (2005:41) shows that in some fields there are journals which bring the two types of endeavour, the academic and professional, together.

<b>Academic</b>	<b>Professional</b>	<b>Both</b>
• Research	Practice	<b>Study of the practice generates new knowledge</b>
• Small audience	Large audience	<b>Mixed</b>
• Values theory	Values experience	<b>Researches experience</b>

**Figure 2 Untitled (Murray 2005:41)**

The third column indicates both that research can be done on practice to generate new knowledge and that experience can be the subject of research. Commenting on the alleged research-practice gap, Booth (2003:3) suggests that "practitioner-led research is criticised for its lack of rigour", academic research for its lack of relevance to day to day practice and for being presented in ways that "impair understanding and application" but that evidence-based practice presents a "pragmatic approach to bridging this gap".

Like Murray (2005), Booth (2003) believes that the academic versus professional gap can be addressed, for instance, by the production of systematic reviews. Griffiths (2002:38 citing Griffiths explains that a systematic review entails an explicit and reproducible method to identify and bring together, in an unbiased way, all the research evidence that can answer a particular research question. Such a review is a major research undertaking. Booth (2003:5) addresses the importance of the systematic review for evidence synthesis among general library practitioners, also citing Booth and Haines in support of this point. Other solutions to bridging this gap have also been seen in collaborative research networks, mentoring and secondments (McNicol in Booth 2003).

Evidence-based librarianship represents in Hoivik's words cited by Booth (2003:6) "a deliberate approach to change". Booth (2003:6) refers to two important definitions of evidence-based librarianship, the first is from Eldredge:

Evidence-based librarianship seeks to improve library practice by utilising the best available evidence in conjunction with a pragmatic perspective developed from working experiences in librarianship. The best available evidence might be produced from quantitative or qualitative research designs, although EBL encourages more rigorous forms over less rigorous forms of evidence when making decisions.

The second definition is from Booth (2003:6):

Evidence-based librarianship (EBL) is an approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation and integration of valid, important, and applicable user-reported, librarian observed, and research-derived evidence. The best available evidence, moderated by user needs and preferences, is applied to improve the quality of professional judgements. Much of this research is assisted by networking practices and publication in turn facilitates networking as it makes known the contribution and research niche of the researcher.

The impact of electronic publishing and electronic access to journal articles is examined next before proceeding to discuss the role of networking and research niches.

## **6 Electronic publishing and electronic access to journal articles**

One of the journals surveyed for the case study was a free online journal and this suggests the importance of referring briefly to electronic journals, in particular access to electronic journals and barriers such as the prohibitive cost of access to electronic journals. An electronic journal is a publication that is available in digital format (Ashcroft and Langdon 1999:105). Electronic journals share the characteristics of conventional journals in that the main contents are scholarly, research-based writings which are peer-reviewed (Testa 2004). The journal is intended to continue indefinitely (Ashcroft and Langdon 1999:105; Cronin 2001:57). Electronic networks are used as the primary distribution channel for these journals but there may be supplementary distribution through other formats such as paper. Many journal articles that appear primarily in paper based formats are also available via electronic research databases including a variety of full-text resources (Pather 2005:25). In addition to the free online journal, full text electronic access is possible for two of the journals surveyed via SABINET's SA ePublications while for a fourth selected articles are available via the journal website.

Electronic journals, Prior (2001:1) argues, have fundamentally changed scholarly communication by offering an interactive environment, rapid dissemination, access to large data sets and the ability to manipulate data, multimedia features, as well as other advantages such as desktop delivery and multiple user access. Electronic journals present new challenges for libraries regarding the provision of infrastructure and access which requires management by skilled electronic resources librarians (Prior 2001:640). The high cost of electronic journals via services such as Emerald limits access. A particular problem is encountered for articles that appear only in electronic journals that are not available locally via interlibrary loan. There are also issues to be resolved around the archiving of back copies and perpetual access to these. Such archival access comes at a price (Pather 2005:194). In this regard pressure has come from initiatives like the Public Library of Science whereby some 30 000 scientists threatened to boycott journals that did not make their contents free online or accessible via a server like PubMed Central after six months (Geslin 2002:7).

Weller (2001:303) identifies the benefits of the Internet for the exchange of scholarly information: allowing for speeding up peer review and developing "preprints" that make possible open peer commentary. Harnad, Carr, Brody and Oppenheim (2004) support a mandated online curriculum vitae for departmental staff in terms of the British RAE, which is then linked to a university based preprint archive. Spurret (2004), in proposing an open access e-prints site for a local university, makes the case for open access to preprints as a means of maximizing the impact of research with the

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