

ONLINE DATABASES

E-Access Changes Everything

By Carol Tenopir

IT IS TEMPTING TO FALL INTO A funk with budget cuts looming, but the 29th annual Charleston Conference on Issues in Book and Serials Acquisition, held in November, took a positive approach with a theme of "Necessity Is the Mother of Invention." Rather than wallowing in woes, participants were urged to rethink everything we know about library collections and services. According to several of the plenary speakers, this reconception must involve essential local services built around ever-growing collections of e-resources.

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Research and pizza

Kevin Guthrie, president of Ithaka, believes that the digital delivery of knowledge changes everything: "books in electronic form will change our world." Scholarly information is no longer insulated from the commercial marketplace—the same system is used to search for pizza as for research. Library responsibilities are shifting from managing physical objects in library buildings to developing localized services built around bits and bytes. Libraries must compete with large-scale commercial services to serve their constituents.

This transformation means that librarians must build and curate academic tools with customized content and annotations. Rather than trying to compete by emphasizing our collections populated by materials available via many sources, libraries instead should stake their claim by promoting services and unique collections. Publishers have embraced this concept of value added for quite a while; libraries need to as well.

OPAC is (still) dead

Jane Burke, VP of Serials Solutions, described how e-resources increasingly disintermediate libraries from their users in the research process. She was unequivocal in her conclusion that the "old model of library use is over," and the "OPAC *is really* dead."

Studies by ProQuest, Ithaka, OCLC, and others show that the OPAC is no longer the primary discovery tool or starting place for research. Library spending prioritizes e-collections over print, but the OPAC covers less than half of e-resources—typically it excludes journal articles and digitization projects involving special collections.

User perception of the value and quality of the library remains very high, Burke said. Still, students have difficulty navigating dozens of interfaces and content silos. The easiest place to start research is Google, which many faculty believe is leading to a decline in the quality of research done by students.

The solution? "Accept the new search paradigm," Burke suggested. "Accept the short-term risk to avoid long-term disintermediation, give up our rules, and make complexity simple."

Hide the complexity

Of course, this is easier said than done, but Burke provided some practical strategies and definite opinions. First, she urged the librarians in the audience to "give up bibliographic instruction" because "we do it at the wrong point" (too early) in students' academic careers.

Students know the library has high-quality content. But they also exhibit a "general lack of awareness of resources" or don't remember where to find articles among the choices on the library web site.

Unfortunately, the traditional OPAC confirms the complexity of library processes. "We can't teach the difference between a database and the catalog" because the "format of information doesn't matter" to students, Burke said.

By offering students "discovery solutions," they can start their research with a simple, fast, and single search across the breadth of library collections. "Once [students] find things, they will go back" to the library systems, but they need to find something first. (Burke's company, ProQuest/Serials Solutions, produces Summon, which puts into action many of her suggestions, but her talk was not a sales pitch—she also mentioned competitors' products and did not dwell on any one in particular.)

Listen to the first-years

Discovery solutions, including federated search, local discovery system software (such as Primo, Enterprise, Encore, VuFind, or Extensible Catalog), or web-based hosted systems (such as Summon, EBSCO Discovery Service, or WorldCat Local) are built on the "belief that the information world is flat, every information object is equal in potential value."

Burke warned librarians not to "gum it up—discovery is for end users; resist the impulse to display the complexities." Unlike the OPAC, discovery "is an end user tool, not a librarian tool," so we can't judge it by our own standards. And when we evaluate these discovery tools, librarians should "listen to the freshmen, not the faculty."

Of course, even a simple tool that attracts students to the library as a starting place has to identify the library as the driving force behind the resources retrieved. All of these tools can provide a new path to the library, not away from it. The continued success of libraries in tight budget times ultimately depends on making students and faculty more aware of the library's role in providing access to the high-quality resources they need.

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