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ONLINE DATABASES

Under the Online Hood

By Carol Tenopir

THE FAVORED SEARCHING TEXT in LIS programs for over a decade has been *Online Retrieval: A Dialogue of Theory and Practice* by Geraldine Walker and Joe Janes (Libraries Unlimited). It covers search basics and more advanced techniques, focusing on the Dialog system. Janes is working on a new edition with Carol Barry of Louisiana State University, and the appearance of two new books is welcome.

Suzanne S. Bell's *The Librarian's Guide to Online Searching* is aimed at LIS students and Greg R. Notess's *Teaching Web Search Skills* is for instructional librarians. Together they provide a basic picture of modern online searching for generalists, whether LIS students, librarians in need of a refresher, or librarians teaching search skills. Aspiring subject specialists or super searchers will need to supplement these texts with materials from the vendors, such as *Introduction to Dialog for Information Professionals* (new edition 2005; revised 2006, gep.dialog.com/instruction/workbook) or "Westlaw User Guides" (west.thomson.com/westlaw/guides).

Librarian's Guide

Bell, economics/data librarian in the Rush Rhees Library Reference Department at the University of Rochester, NY, wrote the *Librarian's Guide (LG)* while teaching online searching at the University of Buffalo, NY. She wanted a text that described the resources and systems that were "similar to what [students would] find in future jobs (assuming most were going to academic or public library jobs)."

Her examples focus on common web-based proprietary systems available in all types of libraries and for all subjects, such as WilsonWeb, Ovid, ProQuest, and ABC/CLIO. In addition, she devotes many examples to open access systems, including PubMed and the U.S. Census Bureau.

LG covers the basics that haven't changed over 35 years, even as the in-

terfaces have altered dramatically. Good online searchers, reference librarians, and library instruction librarians still need to know about file structure, fields, Boolean logic, proximity, truncation, indexing, etc. Bell covers this nitty-gritty in the first three chapters as part of a "Searcher's Toolkit." Especially in the age of Google, information professionals need to know what's going on under the hood. Even though students are often expert end users, "they don't know about the underpinnings or any 'higher functions' in terms of searching," Bell said.

Middle chapters tackle common databases and systems by topic, including

logic in information retrieval systems, it doesn't dwell much on Internet search engines and strategies. That's what *Teaching Web Search Skills* does. Notess ("Need Info? Just Ask.com," *LJ* 7/06, p. 110), a reference librarian at Montana State University, shows librarians who teach others how to be effective web users.

He covers Boolean logic from the standpoint of how (and why) to teach it to end users, assuming a prior understanding by his readers. He helps instruction librarians design short teaching sessions and offers web materials for these sessions. He provides practi-

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social sciences, science and medicine, and humanities, as well as bibliographic and numeric databases. Examples of multiple proprietary databases and open web sources and the library OPAC are interspersed throughout. *LG* reflects Bell's philosophy, moving from system to system, topic to topic, and strategy to strategy.

Students may be overwhelmed at first, but the advice reflects Bell's experience as an academic reference librarian: don't be afraid of any subject and be prepared to take on even difficult and scary challenges, such as finding numeric data or helping someone search a system that you don't know very well. Many chapter exercises specify a topic for one database (ERIC, Library Literature, and Medline, for example) or ask students to compare databases.

Bell devotes the final three chapters to information-seeking behavior, the reference interview, and database instruction techniques.

Teaching Web Search Skills

While Bell's book introduces LIS students to the ins and outs of Boolean

cal advice about online tutorials with a proviso: "without sufficient personnel, skills, and support, it is probably not worthwhile to create an extensive tutorial." Instead, he recommends the newer screencasting option as a compelling alternative to written tutorials, since it can be used by a single teacher with limited time.

The problem of currency

Every text that focuses on the content and attributes of specific systems, particularly in the web world, is in danger of being out-of-date quickly. To address this problem, Notess maintains a companion web site (www.notess.com/teaching) updating the specific URLs constantly.

Both of these books are valuable for their general approach, underlying explanations, and strategies. These don't change regardless of the vagaries of specific systems. That's what we must focus on when we teach search.

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