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## Responsibilities of Online Educators

Carol Tenopir  
*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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# □ ONLINE DATABASES □

BY CAROL TENOPIR

## Responsibilities of Online Educators

IF TEACHING PEOPLE how to do their own online searching is part of your job, you appreciate the many substantial instructional use discounts offered by the online services. Law librarians may be involved in teaching law students how to use LEXIS or WESTLAW; science or medical librarians often instruct in the NLM service or STN International; other academic librarians may teach BRS/AfterDark or Knowledge Index (and almost certainly instruct in the use of CD-ROM or online public access catalog [OPAC] databases); school librarians may teach DIALOG CLASSMATE; and special librarians instruct end users in a variety of online services. Some of you, like me, teach future librarians about online searching on DIALOG, Mead, BRS, and other systems.

### Instructional discounts

In all of these cases the cost of instructional searching is nowhere near the corresponding cost that would be incurred in "real" searching on the same systems. Instructional rates vary, but Mead Data Central offers a variety of flat-fee plans ranging from \$320 to \$1500 per month, depending on the number of passwords; BRS, ORBIT, and WILSONLINE charge \$15 per hour, waiving telecommunications and printing charges; DIALOG charges most instructional users this same \$15 per hour plan. OCLC EPIC offers library schools up to 300 free hours per year on selected databases, plus multiple copies of training materials. Starting this fall, DIALOG is offering American Library Association-accredited library schools unlimited free access to most databases for normal instructional purposes. DIALOG is also offering free or greatly discounted instructional

materials, selected CD-ROM databases, and training for library school faculty.

For many of us, these discounts are the only way we can offer extensive training in online searching. Today's students have the luxury of learning online searching skills without worrying about every minute they are online. Unfortunately, this unrealistic view of the costly online world may be fostering poor searching habits in these future searchers.

### LEXIS/NEXIS print problems

This spring, Geri Simpson, manager of Educational Programs, Business Information Services of Mead Data Central, sent a letter to all instructional account holders of the LEXIS/NEXIS service. The letter was in response to concerns expressed to Mead from commercial clients about the searching ability of new employees who have recently graduated from academic programs that provided online instruction. It made me think about instructional practices for all systems.

LEXIS/NEXIS instructional accounts are held by law schools, business schools, departments of journalism, political science, and others, mostly in colleges or universities. Many of the schools pay a flat monthly fee that provides almost unlimited searching to students for instructional purposes. Sometimes the instruction is done formally through the library or in a special online reference class, but oftentimes students are given the passwords with which to practice with little or no supervision. Costs are rarely passed on to the students.

According to Simpson, although employers "really appreciate hiring people who already come with the skill of using the LEXIS/NEXIS services," they are concerned "that these recent graduates are not being selective enough on what is being printed" or downloaded with the "print document" command.

Simpson went on to explain that a "commercial customer pays 25¢ per line and is, therefore, very selective in the number of print lines [requested].

Since Mead Data Central does not charge the educational market for the printing, students download many large documents. What is being shared with us by the companies is a concern that they see a carryover of these poor printing practices. As part of online training, perhaps we need greater emphasis on teaching selective use of the printing or downloading options or the use of the screen print function."

Excessive printing/downloading is not only costly to the commercial user who eventually employs poorly trained students, but, according to a Mead spokesperson, printing to disk or printer also puts a burden on Mead's computer resources. "Printing" on the educational accounts "is much heavier than we expected. It ties up our system and begins to affect commercial users" by slowing down response time.

### Copying and customer service

Joseph Rhyne, vice president and general manager of Business Information Services at Mead Data Central, mentioned a third impact in a subsequent letter: "High volumes of printing also impact our Customer Service Department. In the last quarter of 1991, over 600 calls were received requesting large, unwanted prints be purged from our system." Mead threatened in the original letter from Simpson to add an additional fee to the flat-fee educational contracts. "Unless we can work on this area together to reduce the amount of printing, it may become necessary to add an additional fee to the contract for those subscribers using the Document to Disk/Printer function."

Even though Mead received suggestions from users on how to reduce printing, the later letter from Rhyne brought the news to educators that "your efforts to correct this problem, however, have not been successful and printing continues to soar." Starting August 1, 1992, Mead began to charge extra for passwords that allow the print document function. (Educational users can opt to be charged their old lower monthly rate, but without printing capability.)



Carol Tenopir is Associate Professor at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu

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### Solutions

The solution to the problem is not to start charging more or to revert to charges of the past. In times of tight budgets, higher charges will probably only serve to restrict training opportunities. The DIALOG searchers I train now who get virtually unlimited hours of online practice will be better at almost all fundamentals than those in the past when we had to severely restrict online access. Solutions lie with educators and better instructional practices.

The original Mead letter asked instructional account holders to send solutions to the excessive printing/downloading problem. A Mead spokesperson stressed that "each suggestion works uniquely in a given situation," and there isn't one best way to handle the issue. Some schools simply whited out the "print document" instructions on the LEXIS/NEXIS function key template, so unsupervised students wouldn't be tempted to print. Disguising or disabling such a valuable system feature hardly seems like the best pedagogical response. It fails to instill responsibility in these future searchers.

A more realistic solution is to make sure that all students get some supervised instruction, rather than just being turned loose with a password. Instruction on improving search strategies may help students to limit set size and to request less printing. In a supervised instruction program, students should be shown or given a copy of the commercial price list so they can visualize realistic prices of their actions. An instructor can demonstrate the same search topic done several different ways and show how much each method would have cost. Better yet, have the students add up the estimated cost of each search they conduct and have them suggest and practice ways to reduce the cost while getting the same results. One instructor admonishes students to always "think before you print!"

### Substituting free databases

Many of us feel uncomfortable teaching in a fee-based environment. When costs get in the way of optimal results, the first reaction is to curse the pricing policies of commercial online systems. One solution is to emphasize CD-ROM searching, searching locally mounted databases, or searching on "free" databases over the Internet or OPAC networks. When budgets were

tight and DIALOG charged us \$15 per hour, much of our beginning database searching was shifted over to the DIALOG Ondisc Discovery, a CD-ROM training disc. We used it to simulate the online search process, even though every function and procedure is not exactly the same.

Although teaching students at all levels how to search CD-ROM, local, and Internet databases is an essential part of database instruction, ignoring commercial online services is not the answer. Students familiar only with free (to them) database searching will be ill-prepared to move into positions requiring access to commercial services. Good strategies and search habits are often different when the online meter (or print meter) is running. Ignoring these systems merely means we

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have failed to create completely information-literate graduates.

### Ethical searching

Unsupervised and unlimited online practice time may also be failing to teach ethical searching behavior. Almost all online systems have extensive "Terms and Conditions"—policies that invoke copyright and otherwise restrict how the information in each database is to be copied or used. These policies are probably rarely shown to students—even those law students who will be charged with upholding such contractual agreements in the future.

Indiscriminate printing or downloading is more than expensive and time consuming; it may be teaching students to regularly violate copyright or contract law. (I discuss these and related issues in more depth in the upcoming premiere issue of *The Journal of Information Ethics*, edited by Robert Hauptman, St. Cloud State, Minn.)

Of course, talk about teaching ethical practices is hypocritical at best when the instructor routinely violates contractual terms and conditions. Yet

a third letter to LEXIS/NEXIS instructional account holders this summer stated that a "very serious and growing problem of using the educational contract for commercial use has been brought to our attention. Over the past few weeks, we have become aware of abuses of our educational contract. In the case where there has been flagrant abuse, Mead Data Central, Inc. has cancelled several educational contracts."

Educational accounts are possible because database producers agree to waive royalties of instructional use and are financially supported by the online vendor in the promise of future return on investment. All online instructional programs restrict use to formal education settings in support of the curriculum. Mead warned users that "Mead Data Central cannot support a nonprofit program if it results in our losing commercial use. We are also in jeopardy of losing the support of our licensors for the educational program if we cannot stop this problem."

### Changing online literacy

Instructional accounts are a good deal for everyone concerned: Mead and DIALOG get a new generation of workers who are hooked on the convenience of online searching and can't imagine doing research without it while schools have the opportunity to train students in electronic research skills without keeping track of hours or counting pennies. Now it turns out that unlimited online practice without a cost associated encourages poor search habits that translate directly into overloads on online systems and into employers' dollars after graduation.

The new generation of online-literate workers that librarians are helping to create may be getting only part of the message. They may be learning Boolean logic, search commands, and the power of online resources without learning cost-cutting techniques, the need for watching the cost of their searching techniques, and ethical searching behavior. Although poor search practices mean more expensive searching and more immediate profit for online services such as Mead, concerned employers may put restrictions on searching if waste continues. Anyone who takes on the task of teaching in an electronic information age bears some of the responsibility for teaching the entire picture.