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Online Searching in Schools

By Carol Tenopir

MANY SCHOOL librarians have hesitated to introduce students to online searching because they believe the costs are too high or feel it would interfere with learning manual reference skills. An increasing number of high school librarians, and even those in intermediate and elementary schools, are recognizing the value of online searching for students. Vendors are also providing low-cost options to help make online searching feasible in schools.

Ann Lathrop, library coordinator, San Mateo County Office of Education, is compiling information about online searching in schools, in what will be a first comprehensive list of schools that provide it (write her at SMERC Library and Microcomputer Center, 333 Main Street, Redwood City, CA 94063). Some of the most active programs are discussed below.

Since 1976 senior high school students at the Montgomery County Public School System (Md.), a pioneer in online searching, have had access to *DIALOG* searches to supplement their manual information gathering. Initially students submitted search requests to the Professional Library where searches were done by a librarian without the student present. Later selected school media specialists and student assistants were trained to do online searches for students in their high schools. Now *DIALOG* searches are incorporated into the library skills program.

Students learn database construction, search strategy, choosing appropriate databases, and accessing information online. The most frequently used databases are *Magazine Index*, *Medline*, and *ERIC*. Students do online searches only after they have exhausted all manual sources (see Pruitt, Ellen & Karen Dowling, "Searching for Current Information Online . . . How High School Library Media Centers in Montgomery County, Maryland, Are Solving an Information Problem



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Using *DIALOG*," *Online*, March 1985, p. 47-60).

According to Anne Caputo, program coordinator for *DIALOG*'s educational program, Radnor High School (Pa.), another pacesetter, was the first high school in the nation to establish a *DIALOG* educational account. All ninth-grade honors students are required to learn about online searching before passing to the next grade.

Cypress-Fairbanks School District (Texas) introduced *DIALOG* searching in a variety of classes and created its own curricular material and manuals.

High schools offering online searching on systems such as *DIALOG* include: Princeton HS; Bellarmine College Preparatory HS, San Jose, Cal.; St. Thomas Aquinas HS, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.; and Lexington School for the Deaf, Jackson Heights, N.Y. (see Bev Smith, "Student Searchers: Are They Out There?" *Information Today*, March 1984, p. 1-2, 32-33). Caputo estimates that high schools hold 20 to 25 percent of *DIALOG*'s educational/instructional passwords.

Much of the online searching in schools is experimental. Lucy Anne Wozny ("Online Bibliographic Searching and Student Use of Information: An Innovative Approach," *School Library Media Quarterly*, Fall 1982, p. 35-42) describes an experiment in which ninth-grade honors students at Radnor High were introduced to *DIALOG* searching as one way to gather sources for a research paper on energy. After they defined and narrowed their search topics through a manual search, they were introduced to online searching. After the library media specialist assisted with search strategy refinement, each student chose a database and performed the search. Since energy was the topic students used only four databases (*Energyline*, *Enviroline*, *Magazine Index*, and *Historical Abstracts*).

Probably because their school library did not have them, most students (81 percent) did not include in their bibliographies the references they retrieved online. (Only five percent of the

total references in the student bibliographies were retrieved online.) Wozny feels that online searching provided other benefits, however. The search process made students aware of the variety of materials available and forced them to think logically and to develop search strategy skills.

In "An Introduction to Online Bibliographic Searching for High School Students: A Successful Approach" (*Educational Technology*, June 1984, p. 39-41), Kathleen Craver and Lee Ounanian report on a study of college-bound seniors who used *DIALOG* to find information on debate topics. After manual searching to refine their topics, the students were introduced to the principles of online searching. Debate groups selected an appropriate database, formulated a search strategy, and observed a search on their topic. (Students did not do their own searching.) A post-test showed that students understood online searching and almost all expressed their approval of the online searching curriculum unit.

BRS is offering bibliographic support services for ACCESS-86, a New Jersey project in classroom data communication which provides technical assistance, training, and curriculum development for either public or private schools, grades eight through college, that plan to offer online searching. BRS training will be incorporated into the project that also includes computer skills and data communication principles. For more information contact: Richard Titus, Coordinator, Computer Education, Educational Information Resource Center, 207 Delsea Dr., Sewell, NJ 08080. (609) 228-6000 x257.

Some intermediate and upper elementary schools are also beginning to introduce online searching to students. Caputo says that only a handful of intermediate schools are now using *DIALOG*, but that number will probably increase. Many school libraries, especially in elementary and middle schools, feel their students do not need to access such sophisticated systems as *DIALOG*. An alternative is the con-

sumer information online services such as *The Source* and *CompuServe*. *The Source* is offered for free in selected schools in an experimental project with IBM. As Suzan Prince ("Information at Your Fingertips: How One School Is Making It Happen," *Electronic Learning*, September/October 1981, p. 38-40, 63) and William Martin ("Touring an Informational Wonderland," *Classroom Computer Learning*, February 1984, p. 52-60) point out, both *The Source* and *CompuServe* have been widely used at all grade levels.

Both systems provide access to newswire services, some periodicals, the *Academic American Encyclopedia*, and bulletin boards. They also have features like CB simulators, electronic shopping, travel planning, quizzes on academic subjects, and remote computing. The *Academic American Encyclopedia* database is most often accessed by students of this age. Wire services are used for current events. Despite limited search powers, *The Source* and *CompuServe* provide a simple introduction to online information and can cost less than research databases.

DIALOG, *BRS*, and *Wilsonline* are all now actively seeking the school library market. According to Anne Caputo, high schools, intermediate schools, and the upper grades of elementary schools are among *DIALOG*'s top priorities in 1986. Each of these major online systems mentioned above offers low-cost options to make online searching feasible for schools.

DIALOG has offered an educational discount program for instructional purposes since the early 1970s. Almost all graduate schools of library and information science take advantage of this program and *DIALOG* has turned to other professional schools and the high school and elementary school market.

For about \$15 per hour, instructional plan users can access almost all of the *DIALOG* databases (the Chemical Abstracts Databases are notable exceptions) and use most of the *DIALOG* search features. (No offline prints, SDIs, or permanent saves are allowed.) Most of the high schools mentioned above use the *DIALOG* plan.

In the fall of 1986 *DIALOG* will offer an even more attractive option for secondary and upper elementary grades. Curriculum materials aimed specifically at schools have been developed and are being tested at six school sites. They include a teacher's guide, masters for overhead transparencies, and sample exercises and will be sold with passwords that are good for a preset amount of online time. The price has not yet been set, but Caputo emphasized that it will be low enough to make online searching attractive to many schools. Curriculum materials are also being developed for targeted

professional schools (such as business, medical, and law) and the library school lab workbook is being revised.

The new high school and elementary school option will access *Knowledge Index*, *DIALOG*'s simplified search service aimed at end-users which provides access to only a subset of *DIALOG*'s more than 300 databases. It includes the databases thought to be of most interest to students (e.g., *ERIC*, *Magazine Index*, *National Newspaper Index*, *Medline*). Regular users of *Knowledge Index* can access it only after 6 P.M. or on weekends but the school option will be available during regular school hours.

For more information about *DIALOG* school programs contact: Anne Caputo, Program Coordinator, *DIALOG* Information Services, 1901 N. Moore St., #809, Arlington, VA 22209.

BRS also has a long-standing instructional plan available to all grade levels. For a total charge of \$15 per hour *BRS Instructor* provides access to almost all of the *BRS* databases (including, as of late 1985, *Magazine Index* and *National Newspaper Index*). *BRS Instructor* comes with a workbook, transparency masters, and *BRS* database information.

For educational professionals *BRS* offers *BRS Educator* (formerly *BRS Colleague/Education*), which allows the choice of the *BRS* command-driven system or their simpler menu-driven system. The one-time set-up fee of \$75 includes a user's manual, and online charges start at \$18 per hour. Some databases of interest to educators are available only on *BRS*. *Resources in Computer Education (RICE)* contains information on school applications of microcomputers and specific information about software, *School Practices Information File* contains descriptions of all types of educational programs, and the *Texas Education Computer Cooperative Database* has educational software reviews.

WILSONLINE, the H. W. Wilson Company's online search service carries the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, the print version of which is relied upon by school libraries for student's manual searching. (All other Wilson products are also on *WILSONLINE*.) The cost of *WILSONLINE* access depends on how much online time you buy and whether your library subscribes to the corresponding print index. Subscribers to the print *Readers' Guide* who do not buy a specific number of online hours pay \$35 per hour to use the *Readers' Guide Database*.

Only relatively current information is available online. *Readers' Guide* contains citations to literature from January 1983 to the present, *Education Index* from September 1983 forward. *WILSONLINE* is updated twice week-

ly, however, so current information is almost immediately available.

WILSONLINE also offers an instructional program with all Wilson databases available for \$15 per hour, with a *WILSONLINE* tutorial and the user's manual available. Of particular interest to schools is Wilson's menu-driven software interface called *WILSEARCH*, for use with IBM PCs (and Apples in 1986), which helps users formulate search strategies and select databases. *WILSEARCH* then connects to the *WILSONLINE* system and executes the search. The yearly licensing fee is \$150 for *WILSEARCH*, with reduced prices for multiple copies. The additional charge for every search (every group of ten references retrieved) goes from \$1 per search, if you commit to 2000 searches per year, to \$5 if you do not take the prepaid subscription.

An alternative to online access for schools is to purchase search software and subsets of some databases on floppy disk. The best subsets for school use are *ERIC Microsearch* and *Microcomputer Index on Disk (MIND)*, both of which serve as simulation tools to teach searching before allowing students to access full databases online (see my "Database Subsets," *LJ*, May 15, 1985, p. 42-3) for more detail).

Benefits of online searching

Researchers and school librarians have found that students derive many benefits beyond just finding articles or reports for research projects from the online searching experience. Students learn research and problem-solving skills and use logical thinking processes to develop search strategies and work with the librarian to refine their questions for a computer search. The major online systems require knowledge of set theory and Boolean logic.

Awareness of the wide variety of electronic information sources opens up new worlds of information for the students. Schools using online searching find that students do not rely solely on articles from the popular literature. Even when they do not access the complete document found in a bibliographic search, students are made aware of the potential value of government documents, research reports, conference proceedings, and specialized journals.

School librarians and classroom teachers cooperate in most online searching experiences, leading to closer ties between the library and classroom. Finally, as Anne Caputo pointed out in her "Online Goes to School: Instruction and Use of Online Systems in Secondary and Elementary Education" (in *Proceedings of the Sixth National Online Meeting*, Medford, NJ: Learned Information, 1985, p. 85-90) students enjoy online searching and discover that research can be a pleasurable experience.

