Print versus Online: Teaching Sources in an Online Reference Course

Jenny Bossaller
School of Information Science & Learning Technologies
University of Missouri

Introduction

Teaching and taking a reference course in the online environment is different from teaching and taking a reference course in the face-to-face environment. One difference is that students do not have equitable access to the same reference titles, which changes the assignments that can reasonably expected to complete using print sources. One common assignment in a reference class involves asking the students to find answers to questions by using reference sources, such as a variety of dictionaries and encyclopedias, bibliographies and indexes (this type of assignment will hereafter be referred to as a "treasure hunt"). This is the way that many of us (professors) were taught, and we recognize the utility of these assignments.

The researcher's conviction in requiring the use of print resources has wavered, mainly for ready reference questions. There are a number of excellent free online sources for reference work, and a good librarian should learn how to exploit those sources (such as those in Internet Public Library and ALA's Best Free Reference Sources). However, historical and obscure information might only be available in print. Learning how to use sources and using them regularly will help librarians uncover more difficult to find information (Mann). Failing to teach those sources to future librarians could result in shrinking the knowledge base to which we are able to expose our patrons.

As mentioned before, this instructor has wavered in requiring the use of print resources for the treasure hunt. Some students are willingly drawn to the print resources and others are not. This may not be due to the students' willingness to go 'above and beyond', but instead because of their proximity to libraries, their perception of print resources as outdated, or the idea that 'everything can be found online.'

Literature Review

There have been several studies addressing both education of future librarians, including barriers posed by distance education (see Adkins et. al., 2006) and library students' attitudes toward reference (see Lee, 2008). The study by Adkins et.al, which asked library educators to explain how they teach reference courses, points directly at low print source availability as a barrier to their use in an online course. This study is directed to students' attitudes and use of print resources in an online course. Because this course is the introductory (and most likely only) reference course the students will take during the course of their program, it is important that, if they are employed by a library in the future, they are able to work within both a physical and an online library environment.

Research questions

This research asks:

- What factors influence students' willingness to seek and use print resources?
- Do students recognize the utility of print resources?
- Do students think that using print resources should be required for reference class?

Both quantitative data and qualitative data are being collected through the survey; many questions ask the students to explain their answer.

Methodology

A survey, composed of twenty-six questions, was distributed to students who took reference from the same professor over a period of six semesters. The survey asks how far they live from a library (generally) and an academic library (specifically); whether they work in a library; and a variety of other questions that might influence their ability to use quality print sources to answer the questions. The survey then asks whether, and how often, they used print sources. Finally, it asks whether they thought that using print resources helps them understand the nature of reference sources and the research process, and whether it should be required.

Findings

While many of the students felt that it was difficult to get to a library in order to answer the questions for the treasure hunt, seventy-five percent of the students felt that their use should be required. They described why they felt this way; while the sources themselves were important, several students brought up relationships that were formed with the libraries and librarians. In other words, actually having to get into a library to do the work was valuable for their professional development.

References

Adkins, D., & Erdelez, S. (2006). An Exploratory Survey of Reference Source Instruction in LIS Courses. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, *46*(2), 50-60. Retrieved March 2, 2010, from Library Lit & Inf Full Text database.

Lee, L. (2008). Reference services for students studying by distance: A comparative study of the attitudes distance students have towards phone, email and chat reference services. *The New Zealand Library & Information Management Journal*, *51*(1), p. 6-21. Retrieved March 2, 2010, from Library Lit & Inf Full Text database.