

The Media Center: The Changing Face of Reference
September/October 2009

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This class turned my idea of reference on its head. Mine too. I'm the instructor. There is no better way to enhance your knowledge of a topic than to teach it and engage in discussion with a diverse group of graduate students representing various age groups and professional experiences including practicing media specialists, classroom teachers, and paraprofessionals. This column reflects my recent experience teaching an online reference course for Minnesota State University-Mankato and discussions with other media professionals.

Reference has long been placed, a specific section in the media center, the shelf with the big sign. A class assignment for my graduate students was to visit that place a school media center to examine the physical reference collection. The students were surprised that in almost every case, the reference collection they examined was hugely underutilized and dated. The overwhelming response to a posting on the same topic on the Minnesota media specialist listserve was similar, although a few media specialists mentioned continuing heavy use of specialized print reference materials or student favorites such as the *Guinness Books of Records*. Use often depends on teacher expectations. One media specialist commented "It is a constant marketing job, telling teachers and students about them in hopes that they will be better used. When teachers see how cool some of the books are, they get interested. Teachers fuel student use of the books." Growing classroom collections further contribute to less activity in the reference section. Materials like sets of dictionaries, atlases, almanacs, thesauruses that were once only found in media centers are now common in classrooms, further contributing to a declining need to visit the media center for research or reference instruction. Media specialists who are reluctant to spend limited budgets on updating seldom-used materials are wisely putting their money and energies where the kids are – online.

The students were blown away by just how much is available online and the implications this has for what we do. Nostalgic reminiscences of reference are just memories and not enough for today. There is much to think about.

How much of the print collection should be maintained? Should I update it and if I do will it get used? Reference collections need to be weeded just like the rest of the collection. Weeding remains a hot topic among media specialists. Discarding expensive reference sets or valuable, but seldom-used single volumes, can be a tough decision even though they are dated. Yet, resources such as *Literary Criticism*, *Bartlett's Quotations* aren't dated quickly and they might come in handy some day. What about continuing print sets that require annual updates? *Current Biography* annuals are useful and nice to have on hand but I recently struggled approving the purchase of the newest update from a school in my district even though I know it's reasonably well used. A quick stop by the reference section is all many students need when they are seeking biographical information. When

revamping the reference collection is in order, it makes sense to shift books to the regular collection, something many say encourages use, or putting them in storage just in case.

The proliferation of virtual reference ranging from subscription databases to e-books or free online versions of familiar one-volume tools presents both challenges and opportunities. A first is access. One student reported visiting a media center that did not have one computer for student use. Others described media centers with a handful of computers for student use, or perhaps several computers, but not enough for an entire class to use at once enough for instruction or a facility designed to accommodate large group instruction. I was disappointed to see a new media center in a large state of the art high school in with enough computers only for individual or small group use. A lab was across the hall, a situation likely not the most conducive to encouraging both access to virtual reference or simultaneously using print and electronic resources.

Access to virtual reference is cumbersome if database links are not present on the school or district web site. Web browsers that don't default to the school or district web site provide another level of frustration. As one teacher said, "The kids just want to 'Google it' anyway; if they have to go through hoops to use the databases I expect them use they give up. If things don't work right they are easily flummoxed." Unnecessarily requiring logins, passwords or public library bar code numbers to use databases on site is another inconvenience. Registering the school's IP number with the vendor so students can access them onsite without a login will eliminate the need. One media specialist worked with database vendors to establish the same log in and password for any student in the district accessing the databases offsite "It took a lot of time, but it's worth it. The implication for future—and current media specialists: Learn about IP number ranges, technical requirements for databases, advocate for good access, and above all, make sure you have a voice and active role in maintaining the media center and school web site. Many new or future media specialists are surprised this is part of the job.

Online testing is creating a new accessibility barrier, a frustration voiced by media specialists in many states. The labs may be closed for testing for days at a time, or the media center itself is closed to provide a "quiet place" for students. The first round of data in 2009 Minnesota survey from 309 schools revealed the average number of days computer labs are closed for testing is 17 days. Increased online testing is sure to exacerbate the problem.

Most educators can and should thank their state legislators for providing statewide access to databases that would be unaffordable to many districts, especially in a tough economic environment. For schools and districts that do provide more the decision about what to buy can be another challenge, especially when many products offer similar features. A natural student assignment for the students was to examine a commercial database and develop a purchase proposal. The task was another eye opener, "learning to sort through it to find the most relevant resources seems to be a never ending task." But it's a task we all should take some time for. You will be amazed!

A database's presence doesn't mean teachers and staff know about it or how to use it. A first-year K-12 media specialist wrote, "My predecessor did nothing to promote the databases. Not a teacher in my school is aware that these exist. " Many practicing will concur. The dual challenges of advocacy and educating users are huge.

Web 2.0 tools offer advocacy potential that extend beyond traditional web links, posters, bookmarks, flyers, and wallet-sized cards with access information. Christine Lindstrom, a media associate at the Academy of Holy Angels in Minneapolis created an Xtra *Normal* video to explain the difference between a database and web site <http://www.xtranormal.com/watch?e=20090505231104149> Create your own video about searching with *Movie*

Maker; use Slideshare.net (www.slideshare.net) to embed *PowerPoint* shows in your web site; create audio directions with *Voice Thread*; use of *Animoto* < <http://animoto.com/>> to add video presentations; or try *PictureTrail* < www.picturetrail.com> to create jazzy photo shows of students using databases. Search YouTube for student friendly video. You could to showcase the physical reference section *Shelfari* < <http://www.shelfari.com/>> these resources are free and fun to use.

A practicing media specialist who did not have access to place content on his school web site used *Google Sites* to expand the listing of virtual reference links for his students. *Google Sites* offers a wealth of possibilities Unfortunately, in some schools this brings up another challenge if personal sites and other web 2.0 tools are blocked.

Keep up with your own learning about reference databases. The training materials provided by vendors are a gold mine providing we take the time to know where to find them and use them. Webinars, slide shows, tutorials, videos, and printed materials will help us keep up with the continual proliferation of resources, evolving interfaces and new search options available. The challenges are finding time to carve out an hour in the daily schedule to participate in a Webinar or finding the best way to reach staff and students. Lindstrom's school solved the "reaching out" problem by taking advantage of a free advocacy service provided and created by Gale/Cengage Learning. The customized vendor created web site depicts each of her school's databases including non-Gale resources, using appropriate widgets. < <http://access.gale.com/aha/>> For another example of this free vendor provided service visit the Milwaukee Riverside University High School's site < <http://access.gale.com/ruhs/>> or Olathe (Kansas) Northwest High School's site. (<http://access.gale.com/olathenw/>> What a wonderful service! When you are poking around the database be sure to learn how to gather usage statistics. They will help you with purchase decisions, teaching and advocacy.

Why bother Oh, but they just "Google it" anyway. Learn more the competition. *Google* is pretty darn good. We learned more exploring often ignored aspects of *Google* such as advanced searching Books, *News* and *Docs*. One student's daughter had a meltdown because she had forgotten her book report book at school. Mom went to *Google Books* and located an e-book version of the needed children's classic. Crisis solved.

Expand your thinking. There is so much beyond *Google*, subscription databases and the by-now standard online versions of the Almanac. phone book or other core references. Explore other search tools including visual search engines such as *Kartoo* < <http://Kartoo.com>> or *Search Cube*. <http://www.search-cube.com/> Compare what you find with the familiar *Google*. Many of us hadn't done this type of search engine comparison for quite a while. It's worth it.

"Why would I waste my time with this?" Borrowing a suggestion from Daniel Pink**, students were encouraged to use URouLette <http://www.roulette.com/> to see what might pop up randomly. Students found some worthwhile sites and were reminded of just how vast the web is. Take a spin and see what you find that might just be a useful link in your virtual reference collection. I just did and came across information about a city I have been wanting to visit.

Back to some basics and a reminder for all of us. Reference is really all about helping learners, whether they are students our teacher. Readings and discussion about the reference interview were helpful and a popular topic. "The discussions made me think about how I talk to students and teachers about their needs. When a student just asks, "Can you help me find information?" I need to use all of my resources to help that student discover what he or she really would like. I've thought a lot about listening and follow up questions?" The reference interview

should be format neutral; it is still about learners and learning. “With much of the focus on technology and its applications in reference services, it’s important to note that no matter whether your media center has the latest and greatest technology or is still gamely holding on to its set of 1979 World Book Encyclopedias, the success of the student’s visit really comes down to a person, not a computer. Being accessible and approachable to both students and staff is as important as knowing how to set up an advanced Boolean search using truncation and wild cards.” Our discussions certainly made me rethink many situations that a colleague and I could have handled better.

What’s next? Virtual reference will expand; students are likely to access reference resources from mobile devices such as Kindles and cell phones. It’s happening now and will reach all of us soon. Teaching the class forced me to think and explore in a way I don’t do in the “confines” of my day job. I encourage readers to do the same. Reference is a pretty traditional type of topic, but when you throw in all the new things the image of reference changes dramatically. Keep learning, keep exploring.

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*MEMO-L, February 2009

**Pink, Daniel H., *A whole new mind: Why right-brainers will rule the future*, Riverhead Books/Penguin, 2005.