

# Training Students to Use the Library

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## TRAINING STUDENTS TO USE THE LIBRARY

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At the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology attempts have been made in the past to train students to use the library. Two methods have been employed, both with equal lack of success:

One was to put up a notice saying that between 5 and 7 p.m. in the evening, when the students are tired, a lecture would be given on how to use the library. Needless to say no one attended.

The other way was that small groups could ask the librarian to be shown round the library with explanatory remarks such as "here is the subject catalogue", "this is where the dictionaries are", "here are periodicals on civil engineering", etc. The user had gained some idea of where things were but not how to use them, nor what purpose they served.

Both these schemes were abandoned for lack of interest and the arrival of the new director made it imperative that something be done so that engineering students who by nature are not "bookworms" could be made to use the library and draw some benefit from it. After all, using a library intelligently is something that a graduate must be able to do if he is to continue being a valid member of his profession throughout his career. Moreover, it is a form of permanent education and of acquiring general culture rather than only professional know-how.

The stages in which students require assistance with library use can be defined in three ways:

- when the student makes a step from his secondary education to higher education,
- at the time he takes his diploma, and
- when he starts his postgraduate studies.

The average secondary student coming into a technical university has done his obligatory reading of his language subjects and has probably used his school's library as little as possible. It is very likely that he has not used his municipal library unless it be to look at some technical work that treats the subject of his choice in a simple manner. Free access to the stacks and the possibility to browse makes this person feel very unfamiliar and virtually ill-at-ease in a university library where he must go through the catalogue to obtain a book.

Students taking their diploma have a research project to do. This may be the only time during their life when they actually have research to perform. They have been accustomed to using the library but not to search through the subject catalogue and their knowledge of bibliographies and "documentation" is very scanty indeed. Few, if any, have knowledge of inter-library loans. The slightly panicky state of mind of the student before examinations makes him singularly receptive to "information about information".

Postgraduate students are very aware of the need for information. They are probably amongst the few who have consulted bibliographies in their undergraduate days. Their needs however become very specific. They have to have them explained individually

and sometimes the best solution to their problems is to use one of the automated bibliographic data bases available commercially. The Library of the Swiss Institute of Technology is equipped for this.

The approach that was chosen has two definite aims:

- 1) to ensure that a captive audience could be reached, and
- 2) that practical explanations would be given in an interesting manner outside the library thus encouraging the student to come into the library and to find out for himself that things are really like he was told they were during the lecture.

The first objective was attained by either ensuring that one period of exercises was given up by a professor. This gave the lecture enough weight in the eyes of the students. The alternative method was to choose a free period immediately following a teaching session where all students aimed at were assembled. It was less effort to stay on rather than to leave the class room. This was applicable to the first year students.

The diploma students were more difficult to reach since their lectures are fewer and they do not follow a "main stream". Consequently, the class representative is contacted or even frequently contacts the librarian spontaneously with a request for a presentation.

The first year, the lecture is presented in a narrative manner starting by following four library users in their quest for information. They are:

- the user who knows the author and title of the book he wants,
- the user who knows the subject that he wants to know something about, but who does not know any title in the field,
- thirdly, the user who is seeking information in a field that is not his own and in which his knowledge is not particularly advanced, and
- finally, the user with a more general thirst for knowledge.

Following the first user allows the audience to become acquainted with the general and alphabetical catalogue, the different types of cards there are, and the order in which they are filed. Our catalogue contains also certain special sections (e.g. proceedings) and other facilities that it offers.

Following the second reader allows the students to get to know the subject catalogue and a digression is made to explain the UDC very superficially.

While the third example, the user who is looking for a subject that is not familiar to him, tends to make the students think of the subject catalogue, this in a technical university is far too erudite and in practice they should have recourse to an encyclopaedia. This is a good "entry" to a subject and criteria for evaluating encyclopaedia are given to the students.

The last category are simply making the students aware of the fact that the library has newspapers, journals of general interest and magazines. In addition, books dealing with post-university life of the engineer, such as accounting, management, personal management and other techniques useful to the manager are mentioned. One more thing explained is the stock of books in the humanities, which are now an obligatory subject.

The course that is given to the pre-diploma students is rather different. It is not so narrative. An introduction is made showing the network at the level of the university, at the national level and world-wide, of information exchange. Then, the difference between periodical literature and books is discussed leading up to the use of bibliographies. Then, particular problems concerning bibliographies in the particular

subject field of the students is discussed with them. Their problems are debated and solutions proposed. Some notion of the strategy of searching is given to them. Of late, an online retrieval demonstration has also been included. Candidates for doctorates are invariably dealt with on an individual basis.

What will interest you most are the practical results. This procedure has been carried out experimentally for one year and on a more definite basis for two. It is impossible as yet to make an evaluation in terms of examination results, but students have come and asked for presentations which is encouraging. Professors have sat in on the lectures and their comments have been positive in private discussion. Consequently, the effort is being maintained and will be improved, developed and supplemented. For the first year students or any new library user, a tape/slide show has been developed and can be used by those who have missed the lecture or as a refresher course.

First of all I would like to tell you something about the aim and procedure of the inquiry (of Electrical Engineering). What we tried to find out was how intensively the department library is used and what kind of literature is consulted most by students. The results of the inquiry might be used to improve the provision of literature.

The questions were formulated in co-operation with the Centre for Didactics and Education (see Appendix 1 for questionnaire). Owing to the assistance of a number of lecturers the questionnaires could be handed out during their lectures and the questions could be answered on the spot. That is why hardly anybody refused to co-operate and why also those students who otherwise would not be motivated to express their opinions could be reached. Consequently we cannot speak of a particular response to this inquiry, but rather of a representative average of students of Electrical Engineering. For, with a population of 319 students, 180 questionnaires were filled in.

The questionnaires were assorted according to the years of study (question 1). Besides, a number of questionnaires was filled in by students from other departments.

Others	1st year students	2nd year students	3rd year students	4th year students	5th year students
10	2	31	43	50	42

Table 1

The questionnaires handed in by 'students from other departments' and 'first year students' were excluded from further analysis because they could not give relevant information. Those handed in by senior students were subdivided according to the number of visits they paid to the library of the Department of Electrical Engineering (question 3).

## 2. Results

Question 1: To which year of study do you belong? The answers have been tabulated above (Table 1).

Question 2: What is your final subject, if known?

	2nd year students	3rd year students	4th year students	5th year students
participants	31	65	90	42
number of answers	0	19	24	33
% (percentages)	0	29	27	79

Table 2