People Profile: Julie Arendt

Editor
It has been argued that the subscription database is better than Google Scholar for a user to learn how to use it. For most students, especially undergraduates, this amount of database knowledge is unrealistic. Often the end users of the library’s databases have not had any formal training. If they receive training, it is often a one-time guest lecture by a librarian or informal instruction at the reference desk. Because one-shot instruction sessions and brief instruction during reference encounters are the norm, there rarely is time for most users to thoroughly learn how to use a database. Typically there is only enough time to transform a complete novice database user into a slightly less-than-complete novice. Even when there is more time, the time spent teaching a database reduces the time available to teach information literacy skills. The Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education from the Association of College and Research Libraries lists five capacities of an information literate person. Only one of those capacities deals directly with searching techniques.

As suggested by Diane Zabel, perhaps it would be better for librarians to have regular, ongoing collaboration with faculty to integrate information literacy throughout students’ disciplinary studies. Perhaps it would be better to teach the broader information literacy concepts in a separate, mandatory course and to use one-shot instruction sessions for discipline-specific bibliographic and database instruction. In colleges and universities that manage to successfully implement either model, librarians would have the luxury of approaching reference and one-shot instruction sessions with the knowledge that students will cover the other important ideas somewhere else. I do not have that luxury, and many of my colleagues at other institutions also work without that luxury. I go to classes where students’ exposure to information literacy is as varied as the courses and instructors they have experienced up to that point. I am not the first to suggest that in a world with Google Scholar, it is time to move away from teaching the mechanics of searching databases to teaching more of the whole of information seeking. I try to approach these teaching opportunities with two questions, “What are the most important things for them to learn from my presentation?” and, “What can I teach them that will help them the most on their work for this course?” My answers to these questions are always more than I can fit on their work for this course. Sometimes those extra minutes on database navigation are worthwhile. In some subjects, the appropriate disciplinary database may produce better results with less effort for students despite the extra navigation. Google Scholar is weaker in the social sciences and humanities than it is in the sciences. Some disciplinary databases have useful search features that are unavailable in Google Scholar. When students know how to use these features, they appreciate them. On the other hand, when the interface is hard to use and the advantages over Google Scholar are small, those extra minutes spent on navigation pale in comparison to the other things that could be taught.

Although an hour is too short to build “an intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information,” it is enough time to encourage students to think critically about the information they find and to think about the legal and social issues involved. Knowing why it matters that there are differences between a white paper, newspaper, magazine, or scholarly journal article, or some other type of source will serve students a lot longer than knowing where to click in a particular database interface to find its advanced search tools. Knowing why it is important to cite sources should be useful after graduation, unlike knowing where to click on the college library’s Website.

One objection that may be raised to teaching Google Scholar is that it will direct students away from subscription databases that the library spends so much to have. In writing