People Profile: Barbara Williams

Editor
In 2004 I arranged to have the evaluation of ENGnetBASE formally incorporated into those engineering courses that have information literacy objectives. The purpose was to gather student input and feed that information into the decision-making process to determine if the library’s subscription to the database should be renewed.

To evaluate the database, each class was divided into two groups. Each student received the same seven questions, all related to a class project/assignment. The questions were designed to identify specific facts, figures, graphs and charts. One group sat at a table with seven print reference handbooks in front of them, and the other group sat in front of computers linked to ENGnetBASE. Each group was given twenty minutes to use the resource(s) in front of them to individually answer the questions. The group that used the print handbooks completed their task before the time was up. The group using ENGnetBASE did not find their answers as quickly. The groups then traded places and the results were the same even when the first group knew the names of the books the answers were in. The majority of the students that used ENGnetBASE answered fewer than five questions in the same time it took students using the print handbooks to answer all seven. This experiment was duplicated with twelve librarians and the results were similar.

The biggest complaint about the database was its failure to mimic its print equivalent; users indicated it was much easier to find the information in a physical book. The second biggest complaint was the huge number of hits a search retrieved and the subsequent frustration in having to comb through the information to find answers. The reason was that the search box on the main page searched the entire Website. To search within specific books required an additional click to get to the advanced search feature. Spending a few minutes reading the instructions on the main page would have minimized this problem. However, my students like many have a Google-like mentality about everything. “If we have to be instructed on how to use a resource isn’t that an inherent flaw in the design?” voiced one student, yet echoed by many. Students resented having to stop and read the online help feature to figure out the most effective way to search. Several students referred to the user interface as non-intuitive which speaks to the importance of user-centered designs.

Lastly, the inability to use the browser’s back button to return to the previous page where the search was initiated was considered “a rookie mistake.” Not being able to use the browser’s back button meant one could not modify a previously executed search. This problem was immediately fixed in the succeeding iteration of the software. Generally speaking, most of the problems, to one degree or another, have been resolved in subsequent iterations of the database, as one would expect.

However, after our in-class information literacy-focused discussions regarding ENGnetBASE as related to some of the issues from ELD’s Best Practices for Electronic Resources, the students were able to provide more relevant feedback. For example, a number of students did not understand the fairness of a subscription-pricing model whereby the library would not own access to any materials once the subscription ended. In their minds the types of activities they would use ENGnetBASE for would be primarily to gather facts, figures, graphs, etc. This information that does not need updating on an annual basis. I learned that a number of students received handbooks as high school graduation gifts; these were passed on to them as heirlooms. Handbooks were once considered the definitive resource in their field. Also, many of the department laboratories have old copies of various engineering handbooks on hand for anyone’s use, or they can be found on a number of instructors’ office shelves, which students can borrow.

Our conversation evolved into a debate on the types of resources that added academic value to the learning experience, and those that added convenience. This dialogue introduced me to a genre of information resources that was not on my radar, such as software products that blend technology and information content, such as the line of AspenTech products. AspenTech produces software that allows students to simulate theoretical concepts; some of their software provides access to content previously owned by other entities. These products are widely used in corporate settings, and one’s ability to use these types of products gives one a competitive advantage against other candidates when competing for jobs. Not surprisingly, this discussion became...