

The teaching of library informatics in the Central Library of The University of Veterinary Science

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"I think user education is a special service of questionable value that arose not because users asked for it, but because librarians thought it would be good for them" (Eadie, 1990, p. 43).

Do you approve of the ironic overtone of this statement? We don't. However, examining the emergence of user education we find that much of it can be verified. Permanent changes in library routines and daily co-operation with readers urge the management to take preventives measures before problems manifest themselves. It is especially important in higher education where young generations get to know a special spot of intellectual life by using the library.

The article quoted enumerates the causes underlying the need for user education mentioned by the librarians interviewed.

- It is difficult to find one's way in libraries
- It is difficult to use sources on your own
- It is difficult to select proper pieces of information
- Group training saves time and manpower
- User education is a good mean of public relations.

The author attempted to argue against this reasoning, however, we were not convinced.

The Central Library of the University of Veterinary Science has striven for having library use included in the curriculum since 1983. Educational goals and the content of user education have changed parallel with technological advances. First, regulations of the use of the recently renewed library were included only. Later, it was supplemented with the methods of bibliographic search and the steps of preparing a thesis. The teaching of the logic of computerised searching followed a simple presentation of traditional abstracting services. The material determined the scope of students involved. A brief orientation for first-year students, and some lectures and presentations for the fourth grade. Once or twice we could participate in further training courses offering up-to-date knowledge. It was at that time, around 1986-1987, that a publication entitled "Content and formal requirements of thesis writing" was made. All these were initiatives of the library.

What has elicited user needs?

The renewal of the content and form of training in computerised searching was induced by the appearance of CD-ROM databases. Only staff members could carry out on-line searching.

Thus the aim was no more than presentation, CDs have created the possibility for readers to search information for themselves. It has the advantage that the user may immediately decide which items s/he needs. However, it turned out that independent search has its drawbacks as well. Users are able to utilise only a fragment of the capacities offered by the databases and their software. It has become clear that unassisted searches are carried out at a level lower than that of former on-line searches. Though computer side explanations and printed user guides are indispensable, they have less impact on the situation than expected. These are consulted only when the reader would like to get a result set, and have no patience to listen to the explanation, and even less to reading the guide. It still gives some hope that from time to time guides disappear from their folders, indicating that they are studied more thoroughly at home. Users feel that training through personal consultation and hands-on experience is also necessary.

The process started was reinforced by the introduction of our integrated library system TINLIB. Materials acquired after 1986 can be searched in the OPAC. The expansion of the Internet in the field of bibliographic searching, the incorporation of individual learning and information gathering in the curriculum also gave further impetus to user education.

Who attends the courses?

As an optional subject of the credit system introduced recently, first-year students in increasing numbers have chosen library informatics. For them the courses seems to be too early. Though most of them have some kind of experience of computers, they lack the professional background necessary to access the abstracts retrieved, and handling the thesaurus is also cumbersome. Sometimes their knowledge of English is insufficient, but this problem is diminishing. Their motivation is reduced by the fact that they do not really need the tools of literature search. Our curriculum does not yet contain such individual tasks during the first year. Third-year graduate students, learning English, do not have a language barrier. For them difficulties in writing papers are hard to understand.

We held group training for PhD students in 1993 for the first time. Beside the courses for fourth-year graduate students whose interest is determined by the deadline for thesis-writing-Groups consisted of 12 members, and the course to 16 (8x2) hours. Motivation was generated by the fact that they indeed have to survey the literature of a scientific topic at this level of training.

However, it has to be admitted that we did not have the necessary experience in training database searching. It was difficult to determine how thoroughly the systems should be presented. Some are of the opinion that it is enough to present the operation of the software to participants of the course. Underlying file structures, methods of indexing (for words or fields etc) are irrelevant for them. It is also true that people are more ready to remember search possibilities if they are aware of the background. We have been trying to avoid extremes, so far as the quantity of searching practise is concerned. After all, students found the course very profitable. Though we have also got favourable impression during the exams, we can't yet be sure whether the use of more sophisticated search techniques (thesaurus, lateral search) has

become habitual. In 1996 an abridged version (8 hours, one whole day) of the subject was included in postgraduate veterinary training.

Is time enough?

Sixteen hours proved to be sufficient initially for students (even without previous experience of computers) who participated in the course without absence. However, it seems likely that the course should be supplemented with sources of technical information appearing on the Internet, that implies an increased number of lessons.

Eight hours in the further training program is far from being enough for the teaching of how to use the system. We aim rather at showing possibilities and presenting the services of our library. Vets, having graduated earlier, haven't got a computer background that would be sufficient to get experiences in the use of the system in such a short time.

The content of the curriculum

We start by discussing the methodological issues of documenting scientific work, and giving a general survey of information gathering and retrieval. Before students are able to put their hands on the computer, the emergence of bibliographic databases, and a short history of computerised search are dealt with. Meanwhile, we don't forget to emphasise that no scholarly publication has ever been created of mere bibliographic references. Literature searching is only the first, although very important step.

The use of softwares is a practical matter. Usually three softwares are presented in detail:

- SPIRS CD-ROM (Silver Platter Information Retrieval System for CD-ROM)
- Focus On Search & Retrieval Program, the same software as for Current Contents with Abstracts on disc
- TINLIB, our integrated library software

with the hope that students are able to make generalisations of what has been taught for other information retrieval systems. Loosely related to this, we show students how to use e-mail as initial step of teaching network use.

Students carry out searches to get practice in the use of search softwares. The examples are partly minor questions, focusing on the technique, and more comprehensive ones, focusing on the topics of interest for the student. Evaluating the latter may present difficulties. An example of a technical question: " How many records does the 1992 disc of CAB CD contain under the thesaurus descriptor 'acidosis'? How many records will be found if subordinates also are included in the query?"

Practical examples give an opportunity for us to demonstrate the usefulness of parallel strategies and the possibilities of revealing mistakes originating from inconsistencies of indexing. It is emphasised that people perform indexing. In natural language synonyms or

overlapping notions are unavoidable. Therefore more strategies should be used simultaneously. In the end results are merged.

The material of the 8x2 hours looks like this:

- I. Theoretical introduction in lecture form: Types of documents (primary and secondary, traditional and digitised)

Abstracting services. The history of information retrieval. Major printed services used in the field of veterinary science. The history of computerised information retrieval.

Practical training
- II. The fundamentals of computerised information retrieval (indexes, Boolean operators). Databases and their structure. Fields of bibliographic databases. Use of the software SPIRS.
- III. The content and indexing strategies of CAB Abstracts. Search practices. Tracing a major topic, search strategies.
- IV. Bibliographic databases in the field of veterinary sciences and in related disciplines. Beside CAB Abstracts, MEDLINE and Focus on, the scope of FSTA, BIOSIS, Zoological Records, AGRIS, and AGRICOLA are also dealt with briefly. Use of the Focus on ... software.
- V. The use of TINLIB, the library's integrated software. General features of library catalogues (OPAC).
- VI. Visiting the national documentation centre of the field.
- VII. Finding Internet resources. Searching the Web, a few useful titles to start with. The use of e-mail.
- VIII. Closing lecture. How to find the documents using the bibliography compiled of search results. Pieces of practical advice on how to make scientific papers. The standard form of citations in theses and other scientific papers. Publication strategies. Citation, impacts factors etc.

The environment of user education

Lectures are accompanied by demonstrations of figures on the theory of science. Of course, it makes exercises easier that everybody may work individually in the computer room of the university. However, advantages of the library background can make up for the inconvenience of having 2-3 students working on the same computer. It must be ensured that there are no great differences between members of the groups regarding previous training. The experiment to give one task to two students proved to be a success, because it revealed that everyone approaches the same problem in different manners. That the core material was published as a lecture note has also increased the level of the education.

Future plans

It will be necessary to harmonise the curriculum with the teaching of veterinary subjects. There is too much information to teach searching in general. Co-operation could involve giving topics to be searched and the assessment of results.

Internet opens new perspectives in veterinary sciences as well as in any other discipline. Libraries, information services and the representatives of veterinary science try to gather the most and the best information sources and makes them publicly available. Acquiring information through the network is far from being straightforward due to the organic and unorganised development of the Internet. Still, net searching will be an indispensable capacity for all users.

Since underlying principles are common, we think that getting thoroughly acquainted with library systems would help a lot. We plan to include the following networked information sources in the curriculum beside e-mail:

- a) Presentation of some library systems other than TINLIB. It is very important for researchers to be able to use library catalogues all over the world. Catalogues are using different systems, and the possibilities they offer can be exploited only if the user is acquainted to some extent with the system. In the future the spread of common surfaces manageable through the Web is expected.
- b) The use of full text in the Hungarian Electronic Library. We have considered this database, because it is elaborated in detail, and being in Hungarian it's easy to follow. It would prepare our users for reading full-text electronic publications, which are becoming more and more common.

Our plans are limited by some financial difficulties:

- The amount of computers is insufficient, and the ones we have are outdated and not powerful enough to link to the Internet.
- The computer room is too small for education. Not more than 10-12 students can be working comfortably. A screen projector would make demonstrations much easier.

We have plans, and we count on your helpful contributions and remarks. We hope to have time and energy to improve teaching bibliographic searching for veterinary experts of Hungary and later on maybe of Eastern and Central Europe.

Suggested reading:

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