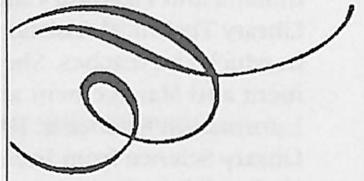# HELPING TODAY'S STUDENTS
AT THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

by Jeanne Holba-Puacz & Christine Bradfield

The public library seems to be a comfortable place for all types of students, young and old, to come for help. From grade-schoolers to undergrads, distance learners to home school students, and everyone in between, the public library may be the first or even the only place they go when they need assistance. Public librarians have valuable support to offer these learners and can help to guide them on their paths to information fluency. Bibliographic instruction, computer classes, online catalog tips, database search lessons, term paper counseling, referrals, and so much more are available from our reference desks. Public librarians have much to offer and can do much to meet the needs of all types of learners.

One of the greatest joys (and one of the greatest challenges!) of public library reference work is the variety of patrons and questions that librarians encounter at the reference desk. Vigo County Public Library (VCPL), for example, a library with which the authors have much experience, is in Terre Haute, a city that has quite a mix of educational institutions and opportunities. Terre Haute has three universities, a vocational college, a business college, both public and private elementary, middle, and high schools, a sizeable number of home schooled students, a strong and growing English as a Second Language (ESL) community, and an active community of lifelong learners. As you can imagine, work at VCPL provides many opportunities to see different kinds of students and different kinds of assignments. This has prompted us to develop various strategies so that we can better help these students find what they need.

Now you may be wondering what all of these different kinds of students are doing at the public library. We wonder the same thing sometimes! But, even though we sometimes wonder how (and why) these students chose to come to the public library, we are always happy to see them. This may seem obvious, that librarians would be happy to see patrons, but, unfortunately, this is not always the case. There are actually articles in the library literature encouraging librarians to get students out of public libraries. One librarian in the literature went so far as to say that

students are public library abusers. This librarian adds that he does not consider students to be legitimate patrons of the public library (Antell, 2003).

Now, we could be mistaken, but we thought the whole idea of a public library was to serve the public, whoever they might be. The aforementioned librarian justified his position by saying that his public library just did not have the materials to support students. However, librarians researching the phenomenon have found that even small public libraries can provide more than enough material to serve the needs of most students, even many college students (Antell, 2003). Plus, even if we don't have absolutely everything they need, and even though we may not be specialists in their areas of interest, we do still have resources that can help all types of learners and we can get them started, teach them about libraries and information literacy, and tell them how to proceed.

A positive attitude toward our student patrons will help us to establish relationships with them that will affect their future library use. Remember, first impressions are vitally important, especially when new patrons are developing their attitudes about the library. Try to avoid saying no or sending your student patrons away. We have much to offer and they will appreciate any assistance we can give. Be helpful and friendly and maybe you'll help to create a life-long library patron.

IT'S ELEMENTARY

As we begin to discuss how to help elementary, middle school, and high school students, it is important to put ourselves in their shoes, remembering back when we were young and shy, maybe lacking self-confidence, and uncomfortable asking questions and afraid of looking "dumb". Think about some small deed or action that a teacher or adult did for you when you were a child that has stuck with you throughout the years. It is true, little things mean a lot, and the little things can also have a big impact when you are dealing with a child.

We often see elementary students end up at the reference desk either because their parents brought them there or because the Young Peoples Department

did not have the material they needed. Please don't send them away. No matter how they got there, treat their questions seriously. This is an opportunity to establish a relationship that will carry on through the rest of their lives. In order to make the children feel important, talk directly to them and not to their parents whenever possible. As you ask questions to determine what it is they need, explain why you need to ask. Unfortunately, their answers will not always be very helpful, so you will just have to do the best you can. Do your best to find available resources that match their educational level, like the *World Book Encyclopedia* or databases such as *Sirs Discoverer* or the *Grolier* products. Even if you have a Young Peoples Department, you should still have a working knowledge of the youth resources. When you determine sources for them to use, get up from the desk and go with them when possible. Keep talking to them as you locate the materials. For instance, take time to explain how materials are shelved. It's a good idea to treat the interaction as a partnership. For example, say something like "let's see what we can find in the encyclopedia." Many times their topic is extremely narrow and you will not have an entire book on the subject. When you have to look in a broader source, explain what the index is and how you are using it to find information on their topic. If you do have to take them back to the Young Peoples Department after you have identified what is needed, that's ok, but facilitate the process. For example, write down call numbers and alert Young Peoples that a child is coming who may need help with a particular topic. Just try to make the experience as painless as possible.

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

The middle-schoolers may show up at the reference desk because they do not want to be viewed as a little kid, feel their topic is too advanced for the YP collection, or maybe just because they do not know the Young Peoples collection exists. Treat them with respect and, once again, you have the golden moment to establish a future relationship. Often these students do not know exactly what their assignment is or what sources are required. Ask them what sources they have already used, if any, and offer search tips and database suggestions. If you do assist them with the databases, be patient with their computer and typing skills. Once you determine appropriate sources, review for them what is available in the adult collection and in the YP materials. Give them an "excuse" for checking the YP materials, such as suggesting that they have the best illustrations or telling them that you often recommend these types of YP materials to adults who need a nice overview of a subject. If possible, take them to where the materials are and let them browse, but try to follow-up to see if they found what they needed. Be friendly and helpful or you may lose them as a patron for life. They may be in the awkward age when they don't really feel like a child and want to be treated as if they were older, but really do want to be a kid when they need help. They may be self-conscious and uncertain about how to ask for what they need.

HIGH SCHOOL – ASKING ISN'T COOL

Generally, high school kids already think that they are adults, so don't treat them like children. As a co-worker put it, this group of students *wants to get steak dinner results from a fast-food search*, and that's not going to happen. Take the opportunity to explain that there is more to research than Google. A survey done by the U.S. Department of Education showed that 7 out of 10 teens reported using the Internet for their last project, and nearly 8 out of 10 use the Internet for homework help (St. Lifer, 2005). Most public librarians are probably not surprised when they hear this, but these statistics show the importance of opening students' eyes to all types of Internet resources. Also, with all the technology available, the need for a librarian's help has increased. We're the ones who can help them sort out the sources and best determine what they need to use. (Riedling, 2005). Start by explaining how to evaluate websites when they use the Internet; explain why they should use multiple sources, and let them know what databases are available. Plant the idea that research requires time and multiple searches. It becomes a real balancing act; telling them what they need to know without having them tune you out. At least get them going with the reassurance that you are there to help them if they want further assistance. Provide handouts or websites that are relevant to what they need, such as finding an online journal article, explaining how to cite, or developing a search strategy. Let them know if you have remote access to your databases; they may be more comfortable searching while in their own environment. Promote your "e-mail a librarian" service and chat reference; many times, at least at our library, they will use these services while they are in the library building so that they don't have to come to the reference desk and "feel stupid" asking where to find something. These are techie users so they may find the remote access and e-mail and chat services very appealing. We need to be the bridge for what's available from the online library and what's available in-house (Janes, 2003). If the library doesn't have the material they are looking for, introduce them to interlibrary loan or perhaps establish a relationship and ask them what materials they would like to see available in the collection. If the item is ordered, make a point of letting them know the next time you see them so that they know their input is valuable to us.

HOMESCHOOLERS IN THE HOUSE

We don't necessarily know when we are dealing with a home-schooled child. Often our first reaction is

to wonder why they are in the library during school, so be tactful when you approach a child during the day. Make them feel welcome. Everything we've already talked about applies to home-school students as well. Be friendly, respect them, and guide them to a variety of sources. Grab the chance to establish a relationship. If you know they are home-schooled, please don't ask them what grade they are in. This can be a difficult question for them since they may be in several different grade levels, depending on the subject. Keep in mind how to find age appropriate reading materials with different reading levels (www.johnsburglibrary.org/hrc.htm). Be ready to do "B.I. on the fly," meaning quick bibliographic instruction on the catalog, databases, Internet searching, or in-house sources. Offer to set-up appointments for them in order to provide further instruction on the catalog or databases or possibly provide extended loan time for library materials. Since they do most of their schooling from home, make them aware of your library's useful websites, such as those for homework, evaluating websites, and citation information, or provide handouts listing useful homework sites. Let them know that they can call or use your online chat and e-mail service if they have a question when they are at home. Be sure they know about remote access to *INSPIRE* and any other databases that your library provides to remote users. In other words, let them know the types of sources available inside and outside the library and that you are available for more help.

COLLEGE STUDENTS

We know that college students are coming to the public library, but do we know why? Many librarians seem to assume that college students don't understand the differences between public and academic libraries. We assume that they think that one library is just as good as another. However, it appears that this is not the case. Recently, a number of public library-using college students were interviewed to ascertain why they had chosen to use the public library instead of their academic library, and some of the results were surprising (Antell, 2003).

The students interviewed knew that the public library wasn't the best place for academic research, but they had extenuating reasons for their library choice. Some started their research at the public library because they felt more comfortable there; it is smaller and less intimidating. Plus, they knew they could move on to the college library if necessary. Many chose the public library because it was closer to home and a few pointed out that they could also pick up pleasure reading during their library visit. Most interestingly, the largest number of the students interviewed noted that it is difficult to take your children with you to academic libraries. This brings up an important issue; the face of the average college student is changing. Many college students no longer fit the traditional stereotype of a young, single, residential student. Many of the students that we are serving at the public library may have unexpected circumstances and nontraditional needs.

Now that we have an idea about why they are using public libraries, let's think about how we can help them. You may think that you're not able to help with academic questions; but, in fact, it has been studied and the questions received at public and academic reference desks aren't all that different (Antell, 2003). The bigger difference is in the types of collections available to answer the questions. Traditionally, academic materials were only in the academic libraries. Database sources, particularly the wonderful resources available to us [in Indiana] from INSPIRE, have changed all that. Now popular and academic materials are available to librarians and patrons in the public library and even from home. So let's not worry about the specialized academic sources we can't give them; let's focus on all the help, instruction, and sources that we can give.

UNDERSTANDING UNDERGRADS

More specifically, what can we offer our undergraduate patrons? Well, maybe we can help them get into college in the first place! We can make sure that we have a variety of materials available for the college bound, things like test preparation material for the ACT and SAT, including books and audio-visual materials that include test taking tips and practice tests. Consider subscribing to a test preparation database like *learnatest.com* and be sure to offer remote access if at all possible. Try to help your undergraduate patrons learn about the testing and registration process by providing easy access to important links like *collegeboard.com*. Be sure to also make financial aid information, such as the FAFSA forms and website and scholarship guides available. Remember, scholarship research is a long and intensive process, and students may be more successful if they can check the guides out and take them home; so, try to have reference and circulating copies of the guides available.

When it comes to research, we can also help them by teaching research skills and doing term paper counseling. Keep in mind that this kind of bibliographic instruction can be done in formal classes but can also be done on the fly, one on one, whenever you have a patron who is looking for this kind of assistance. You may need to start with *pre-search* work so that both you and your patron clearly understand the topic overall; then you can help them to focus on a relevant piece of the topic to research. When you move on to searching, don't forget to teach them about the library catalog. If you help them to learn about your library catalog and catalog searching, they will be better prepared the next time they are faced with a catalog to search.

In addition to the catalog, try to introduce them to databases by first explaining to them what databases are, what they do, and how to select an appropriate database for their topic. Then you can move on to teach them how to develop effective search statements and evaluate their results. Be sure to also tell them about the value-added features of databases, such as full-text, e-mailing results, and remote access. After the search, take a few minutes to talk about citations and the importance of correctly attributing their research. Create a simple handout that explains these ideas that they can take with them. This handout should also be compiled into a web document that can be posted to the library's web site, so this practical and helpful information is available from the library online and the students can access it 24/7.

MAKING THE GRADE WITH GRADS

Even those librarians who agree that the public library is capable of assisting undergraduates often balk at the idea of helping graduate students. We agree that many graduate students really will need to access resources not found in the public library collection. However, there are still lots of ways that the public library can serve them. Many grad students still feel more comfortable using the public library and find that it is more convenient, particularly for those graduate students with children. Maybe they are considering grad school and need information about evaluating programs, preparing for exams (GRE, GMAT, LSAT), or financial aid information. Maybe they need a place to study that is removed from the distractions of home and work, or maybe they are looking for a place to hold their group meetings. Maybe, though it might seem hard to believe in today's technocentric world, they do not have computing resources or Internet connections at home. Maybe they just need someone to kindly and patiently explain why they will sometimes need to go to the academic library to access material that is more specialized.

IN THE DISTANCE

Distance learners present a whole other set of challenges to the public library, but they are challenges that we are ready and able to meet. Distance students probably don't have a physical campus library accessible to them and, even though their home institution is required to make services available to them remotely, they may be uncomfortable with their virtual library options. Maybe their computer skills aren't the best, so the distance options are uncomfortable. Or, maybe they need practical, hands-on help like accessing e-mail, formatting papers, or uploading their assignments. This kind of assistance is usually easier to get face to face, especially for computer novices. Perhaps they just feel a need to supplement the virtual services available to them.

Never miss an opportunity to promote the availability of your reference service to your distance learners. Invite them to chat or e-mail their question to you, to telephone, or to stop-in in person. Assure them that there are librarians available to meet their needs and that they should use whatever method of communication is most convenient and most appealing to them. Also, remember to mention any other library perks such as remote access to resources, meeting room space, productivity software, Internet accessibility, wireless access, etc. Finally, remember that distance learning can be very lonely. Some classes don't require any kind of interaction with other students and the interaction with the teacher may be quite limited. Billing your library as a place where distance learners can come for face-to-face contact may be very appealing and reassuring to those distance learners.

LEARNERS FOR LIFE

It is important that we do not overlook the topics of lifelong learning and adult education. One of the goals of most public libraries is to encourage and support education, but we must remember that this does not just mean education in the traditional K-12 sense. We also have to be ready to assist and serve the adult learners that come to the public library, whatever the focus of their learning. This section will point out just a few of the adult education subgroups that are common in public libraries.

Many public libraries receive regular questions about the GED, so be sure to have pertinent study guides available and provide in house and remote access to test preparation databases if possible. Your library may want to consider coordinating study groups that can meet in the library or even consider hosting test sessions. If hosting the test session is not feasible, then the library can serve as a clearinghouse for test registration and scheduling information. The library should also serve as a clearinghouse for literacy information and initiatives. Be sure to offer adult materials at the early reader level and think about offering tutoring or coordinating a volunteer literacy tutor program.

The library should work to provide ESL opportunities for new and non-native speakers of English. ESL materials should be included in the collection and the library should consider collecting bilingual materials if at all possible. ESL tutoring and educational support for ESL students are worthwhile services to sponsor, and conversational English tutoring is a wonderful program in which to involve library volunteers. Also try to provide the opportunity for ESL students to access the web and e-mail so they can keep up with the news of their country and stay in touch with family and friends at home.

Senior Citizens are another important group of adult learners often found in public libraries. When providing services and programs for seniors, remember that they may feel more comfortable and less intimidated if you instruct them in specialized peer group settings, especially if you are talking about computer technology. We showed this to be true a few years ago with our "Surf's Up for Seniors" basic computer classes when we targeted these classes to those 55 and older (Holba Puacz & Bradfield, 2000). We offered the classes in peer group settings and in a casual atmosphere that included cookies and coffee and the seniors were very receptive. We also provided some individual instruction time for class participants by offering a chance to schedule ½ hour of individual instruction in the days immediately after their computer classes. Most of them took advantage of this service and were very grateful for the special instruction. Besides offering basic computer classes, other possible tech topics might include e-mail basics, computer and online security, and digital photography. Also, downloadable audio books are now becoming available in more libraries and may be a good subject for instruction. While we are on the subject of computer technology, many seniors are uncomfortable using the online catalog. While you certainly should do catalog searches for them, this might be the perfect moment to give them a minimal amount of individual computer instruction, as mentioned earlier. You could take the opportunity to begin to show them how the computer can help them and also give yourself a chance to promote your basic computer classes. The Vigo County Public Library catalog offers summaries, reviews, and many times the first chapter of a book for patrons to view. Taking the time to show them these options might be another way to get them interested in using the computer and the catalog, which might get them into the library more often. Moving away from the technology aspect, your library can also help the retirees by presenting senior learner programs and pathfinders on topics of interest for this age group. These topics might include retirement planning, estate planning, reminiscence writing, medical information, travel, and developing their creative skills through pottery, painting, beading, etc. Don't forget to mention your book clubs to these patrons; they may have more free time to read for pleasure and they would probably enjoy the social interaction as well.

SERVING ALL LEARNERS

So, what can public libraries do for all learners? We can take advantage of the *teachable moments* to encourage information literacy. We can bring together

services and sources, both online and in-house, to help meet student needs. We can try to establish relationships and encourage lifelong library use. We can help them understand all the varied and important sources that are available from the library. We can also help them understand what is available to them from other types of libraries and how they can access this information. We can make handouts and web guides available on such topics as evaluating websites, identifying various types of publications (so they know what a scholarly journal is!), the essentials of doing research, citing sources, choosing relevant databases, and accessing resources from home.

Most importantly, we can give each patron our respect and our attention and offer them friendly and non-judgmental help. Remember, the library is an intimidating place for many people and library anxiety is real. A positive attitude from us can help to ensure student success but, likewise, a negative attitude can seriously hamper the possibility of success or even of future library use. We need to remember to invite them to return to the library in the future, regardless of their information needs. Students are a part of the community and should be welcomed warmly at the public library. It should be a goal of ours to make the public library a resource for students, a place where all members of the community can come to further their education. Librarians, as a profession, are all on the same team and we share responsibility for the success of all of our students. Only by working together will we be able to give all of them all of the assistance they will need in order to excel.

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