

USE OF LIBRARIES: THE IDEALS AND REALITIES

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Abstract

Establishment of an ideal library does not necessarily lead to the full utilization of its resources and services. In order to obtain the maximum benefits of a library, appropriate information seeking procedures should be comprehended and practised by the information seekers. Many library users have shown little interest in developing such abilities. At present only few libraries have formal arrangements for reader education. Although reader education is at present considered the sole responsibility of the libraries, ultimate success of such programmes depends on many important factors lying outside the control of libraries.

1. The Ideal Library

Libraries may be defined as institutions devoted to collecting, conserving and exploiting literature. Libraries are also considered an essential feature of modern civilization promoting intellectual capabilities, research, education, information, recreation and many other social and cultural needs of the community. To the right person a library is a continual place of surprise, adventure and growth. To the academic and the scientist the library provides a congenial background for perusal of information relevant to his subject of interest.

2. The gap between the ideal and the reality

Easy acceptance of the mission of the library in most encouraging terms as mentioned above, may sometimes be self defeating and counter productive. Five decades ago, referring to the same issue in respect of British libraries Carnel said, "It is a fine thing for a library to be an intellectual workshop and a cultural centre, but it is hard work, it costs money and it requires a combination of favourable circumstances, some of which are outside the control of the librarian".

All librarians capable of self appraisal are conscious of a gap between the ideals and realities pertaining to their own institutions. All good librarians are trying hard to keep abreast of new knowledge by acquiring, cataloguing and arranging library materials for the benefit of readers. Making these formal arrangements alone does not contribute to the optimum use of such facilities.

In this brief survey an attempt will be made to explore the circumstances contributing to the under-use of libraries and resources by information seekers.

3. The Need for Information Users' active involvement in the information seeking process

Acceptance of the mission of the library in most encouraging terms may sometimes give an

erroneous impression that benefits of an ideal library will reach its patrons automatically. A library may be well stocked with up-to-date materials. It may also possess most comprehensive facilities and services. The optimum benefits of such a library can be obtained only by the readers who will be actively involved in information seeking and information using activities.

Browsing the new accessions or going through the new current periodicals can be a rewarding experience for a newcomer to the library, because in the process of browsing, not only does he discover new information but he may also learn hitherto unknown methods of information discovery. An interested reader may further improve these capabilities by trying to locate an item he wishes to read, first in the library catalogue and then on the library shelves. When he fails to find the item he requires on the stacks, the reader can make it an opportunity to speak to the reader services staff in the library. The reader, if inquisitive, can then observe the methods the library staff is using to locate the item. The interested reader can make this the beginning of the process of his library education. Some readers consider that information seeking in a library from this point onwards is the responsibility of the library staff. Although it is the library's responsibility to assist the reader in locating information, it would also be useful for the reader to grasp the fundamentals of information seeking procedures in a library.

This practical involvement on the part of the reader can be further improved by using periodical indexes to locate new articles relevant to one's own subject. Using an abstracting journal to survey the newest literature relevant to a subject or picking up the abilities of making a subject search using a CD-ROM database, are further abilities a reader may acquire during the course of his long and fruitful association with his library.

It is therefore obvious that a practical involvement on the part of the reader is not only desirable but also necessary, if optimum benefits of a library are to be obtained. The library authorities should help and educate

library readers in improving their information seeking abilities. The ultimate initiative in this endeavour should originate from the information seeker himself.

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4. Under-use of library resources

The under-use of library resources is a world wide phenomenon which unfortunately debars the optimum use of libraries. The same tendency results in nonuse of valuable library materials leading to the waste of scarce financial resources.

Some of the following tendencies observed in readers have been identified as the main causes for this unfortunate situation:

- i. Reader's inability to identify the specific library or libraries that may satisfy his information need.
- ii. Reader's meagre knowledge of the arrangement of materials in his library.
- iii. His inability to use the library catalogue and other information sources properly.
- iv. His inability to locate periodicals relevant to his subject.

- v. His inability to locate and use periodical indexes and abstracting journals relevant to him.
- vi. His lack of interest (backed by his own inability) to locate special materials either in his own library or in other libraries.
- vii. Unwillingness to spend time in the library to trace either the materials of his choice or bibliographic data he requires.
- viii. His misconception that locating materials and tracing bibliographic data is the duty of the library staff.
- ix. Inability to maintain friendly relation with the reader services staff.
- x. Reluctance of readers to talk to the library staff when they have difficulties in locating and obtaining library materials.
- xi. Inability on the part of the readers to formulate their queries properly.
- xii. Lack of desire on the part of information seekers, to learn information seeking procedures, when library education initiatives are available in some libraries.

Many library users acquire the ability of information seeking by using libraries for a long period. Many others never acquire these abilities inspite of their long association with their libraries. It is unfortunate that facilities for the formal or informal education of information seeking procedures are non existent in many libraries.

5. Basic steps of a literature search

Although it is not possible to provide a simple series of instructions to cover all searches, there are common types of searches which can be designed to retrieve information needed to enhance an individual's knowledge of a topic which may be described as a "literature search" or a "retrospective search", each having a slightly different meaning.

Basic steps of a literature search can be identified as follows:

- i. Define the information need.
- ii. Seek clues or leads.
- iii. Decide search policy and select search tools and search terms.
- iv. Note all potentially useful bibliographic references (author, title etc.)
- v. Check the library catalogue, published subject indices and bibliographies.
- vi. Trace the materials available in the library.
- vii. Try to trace the materials not available in the library. (contact/visit other relevant libraries and documentation centres).
- viii. Assess the relevance of materials collected.

Ability to follow these steps demands a high level of information seeking skill. While doing the search there are many important decisions to be made depending on the circumstances. Figure 5.1 traces in a flow chart, the important steps of a literature search elaborating the points where decisions have to be taken.

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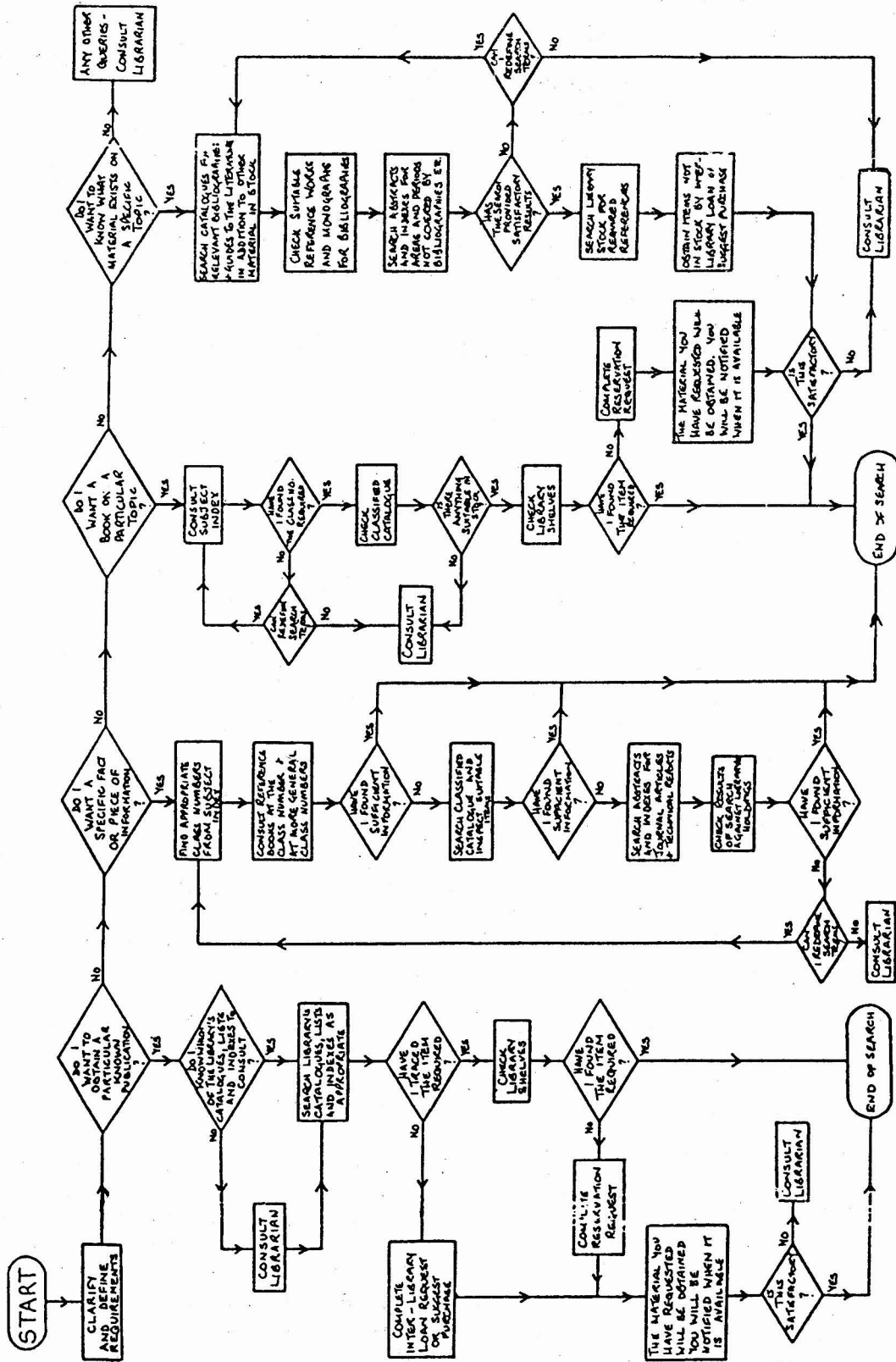


Figure 5.1: Flowchart of Search Procedure.

(Source: A.J. Evans. Education and training of users of scientific and technical information. p. 69.)

6. Some tendencies arising out of inadequate information seeking skills

A number of studies relating to the behaviour of information seekers have indicated that there is a group of readers among the scientists and engineers who are more talented than others in information retrieval techniques. Many of them select and pass information to their colleagues. This tendency is so widely prevalent that they have been identified as "gate keepers of information". The persons who either do not use libraries or do not have the capacity to engage in information seeking procedures often use the informal information resources introduced to them, primarily their professional colleagues. They find talking to such persons easier, pleasanter, quicker, more affective and rewarding than search the stacks of a library. Such practices not only reveal the underlying reality in information use, but it also indicate the need to establish a more systematic and acceptable system of educating library users.

The librarians should indeed take a considerable share of the responsibility of educating their users. The librarians can take the lead in this endeavour by either arranging brief introductory courses/training sessions or helping the individuals who show an interest in these procedures.

7. Improving information seeking skills.

The librarians should indeed take a considerable share of the responsibility of educating their users. The librarians can take the lead in this endeavour by either arranging brief introductory courses/training sessions or helping the individuals who show an interest in these

procedures. Such education will not only assist the library users to obtain the best out of their libraries, but it will also lead to the better utilization of library resources and services by users.

The most decisive factor in such training sessions is the need for active interest on the part of the library user to acquire information seeking skills through practical work. This is an absolute necessity for which no alternatives can be found.

In the case of the institutions of higher education, the teachers can actively support this process, by encouraging the students to use library resources by giving them assignments and projects.

The use of computers in all spheres of information processing and use in libraries, CD-ROM database facilities, electronic mail services, computer network facilities now going as far as the INTERNET, demands a new set of information seeking skills from the users of libraries if the optimum benefits of libraries support by the new technology are to be obtained.

8. Conclusion

Provision of an effective library service does not necessarily lead to obtain the full potential of a library. Nature of library materials and their presence in libraries are such that their location and use require special abilities on the part of the library users. The library can certainly assist the user in locating the materials identified by him. However, there may be many other relevant items in the library of which the information seeker may not be aware. The need to acquire information seeking skills by the user himself arises from this situation.

The library should certainly take the initiative to educate the readers in the information seeking process. The readers should realize that the degree of success in library education programmes depends on the degree of interest by the users themselves. Reader education in fact should be a combined effort where the librarian and the library user should play their respective roles with mutual faith and diligence.