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Individual Research Consultations:  
A Safety Net for Patrons and Librarians

by Caroline E. Rowe

When discussing group and individualized bibliographic instruction, library literature typically reflects the advantages or disadvantages of using either approach. For example, Donegan, Domas, and Deosdade (1989, 195-205) maintain that the increased variation in ability, knowledge, and library expertise among college students implies that individualized instruction would be more effective than group instruction. Kohl (1984, 6-11), on the contrary, states that he prefers group bibliographic instruction to one-on-one instruction since he regards individualized instruction as inefficient and wasteful of limited staff time. However, instead of choosing between these two approaches, a strong argument can be made for incorporating both methods into a single comprehensive bibliographic instruction program. With this approach, the varying needs of the heterogeneous clientele would be met. Group instruction could be the medium used to provide general orientations to the library and to introduce materials on specific subjects. Individual instruction could be designed to fulfill the requirements of patrons with more detailed research requests.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA MODEL

Reference librarians at the University of West Florida’s John C. Pace Library (an institution with an enrollment exceeding 6,500 students and a collection of over 600,000 volumes) have developed a four-step bibliographic instruction program that accommodates different levels and types of library users (Perdue 1985, 1-2). Steps 1, 2, and 3 involve group instruction, and Step 4 offers individualized instruction. Step 1 is a basic introduction to the library, which may be voluntarily attended by library patrons. A subject area orientation, or Step 2, is taught during a regularly scheduled class period and is coordinated with a faculty member. Step 3 consists of term paper, online catalog, or CD-ROM workshops that may be attended by interested library patrons. An individualized research consultation, or Step 4, allows a patron to arrange a meeting with a librarian to discuss specific research needs. In addition to the four steps, library orientation lectures are provided for all freshmen students, and tours are conducted for high school and community groups.

Individualized instruction in this type of bibliographic instruction program operates as a safety net that catches users with research needs not adequately met in group instruction classes. The structure of Step 4 sessions follows the typical individualized instruction format as described in several articles (Bergen and MacAdam 1985, 333-340; Dehreczey 1985, 156-163; Donegan, Domas, and Deosdade 1989, 195-196; Ishaq and Cormick 1978, 168-176; Schobert 1982, 146-151). Patrons are asked to schedule an appointment with a reference librarian who has subject expertise in the appropriate discipline. The librarian then prepares a pathfinder or a list of sources that can be used as a teaching guide during the session and later as a useful handout for the patron to consult following the session.

ADVANTAGES OF INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

The main advantage of individualized instruction, namely that the patron receives uninterrupted time with an undistracted, well-prepared librarian who provides service based on the patron’s specific research needs, is documented in the literature (Adams 1980, 83-94; Donegan 1989, 196). The ACRL Bibliographic Instruction Handbook mentions other advantages, including flexible availability, personal contact, instant feedback, excellent public relations, no faculty involvement, and no special requirements for space or equipment (Association of College and Research Libraries 1979, 54). It has also been noted that individualized instruction provides the patron with an identifiable resource person for additional consultation (Bergen and MacAdam 1985, 336). An overwhelmingly positive reaction to the service from library patrons emphasizes the effectiveness of this approach (Bergen and MacAdam 1985, 336; Dehreczey 1985, 159; Ishaq and Cormick 1978, 174; Schobert 1982, 149).

Not only do the patrons appreciate individualized instruction, but the library staff benefits from it as well. Beyond the obvious advantage of producing effective library users and satisfied customers, individualized instruction eliminates the frustration experienced by librarians who want to provide more adequate service to patrons with complicated requests than is possible within the constraints of the typical reference desk interview. A request can be referred to a librarian with relevant subject expertise and the librarian is given time to prepare material for the session. It may even be profitable to identify librarians outside the reference department who have knowledge in specific subject areas and who would be willing to conduct individual

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research consultation in those areas.

**DISADVANTAGES OF INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION**

Individualized instruction is certainly labor intensive (Donegan, Domas, and Deeds 1989, 201) and, as mentioned in the ARL Bibliographic Handbook, is time consuming and can cause scheduling difficulties (Association of College and Research Libraries 1979, 55). To patrons seeking an instant answer to their requests, the appointment system could be considered an inconvenience. In fact, patrons may actually cancel or fail to attend their appointments because they have found other means of fulfilling their research needs during the interim. The incorporation of individualized instruction into an entire bibliographic instruction program minimizes some of these disadvantages.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Considering the disadvantages, it may be suitable for individual instruction sessions to be used primarily as an alternative once group instruction opportunities have been exhausted. Most patrons would find that group library instruction classes are adequate for their requirements. Relatively few patrons would then seek individualized assistance. (See the table, which summarizes the attendance of library instruction classes at the John C. Pace Library during a six-year period.) The number of University of West Florida students who participated in the individual research sessions (Step 4) is comparatively less than the number of students who received group instruction (Steps 1, 2 and 3). It is hoped that the statistics reveal the advantages of offering both group and individualized instruction. Furthermore, it is apparent that due to extensive group instruction offerings, individualized instruction does not place undue strain on the reference staff or schedule.

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<th>Number of Students Taught</th>
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**References**


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**Call for Papers**

The University and College Library Section of the Southeastern Library Association seeks submissions for the biennial Conference meeting in New Orleans, March 18-21, 1992.

**Theme:** CD-ROM Literacy.

Possible topics are: user instruction, collection development, administration, security, networking, staffing, and technology.

Papers will be juried and authors notified by October 1991. Oral presentation should be 20-30 minutes. Papers must be submitted by July 15. Send papers to and receive additional information from: Winston A. Walden, Tennessee Technological University, University Library, Box 5066, Cookeville, TN 38505, Phone: 615-372-3408. Fax: 615-372-6112.