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Online Information Services for Secondary School Students: A Current Assessment. ERIC
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CURRENT STATUS

Online searching in schools is a relatively recent phenomenon. The earliest reported
access to online databases was in 1976 in the Montgomery County Public School
System in Maryland, when high school seniors were allowed to supplement their
manual information gathering by submitting search requests to the district's Professional
Library to be conducted by professional searchers. DIALOG reports that the first
instructional password for training students to search was acquired by Radnor High
School in Pennsylvania in 1980. Since that time the importance of providing information
for students from electronic sources has been acknowledged by a growing number of
school library media specialists and administrators at the local and state levels, who
have acquired the equipment, supported training, arranged for financial support, and
developed curriculum materials.

Schools across the country have expanded reference and bibliographic access by going
online, although such access is still extremely limited in scale, and where it does occur,
is often limited to a special group of students or classes.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF
ONLINE ACCESS

There are numerous advantages to connecting students and information electronically.
Such access extends the limited resources available to them in the school library media
center, increasing the potential diversity of information available to solve information
related problems. Students are able to locate the most current information since online
databases are updated at frequent intervals. Search time is reduced by the cumulated,
comprehensive database indexes. Additional entry points for searching are available,
such as key words and phrases. In addition, electronic access creates excitement about
the search process, and provides a means to search multi-faceted topics.

One of the major disadvantages is that going directly to an online search may not be the
best approach for all subjects, e.g., a single concept search. Other disadvantages
include the lack of suitable databases for students in some subject areas; difficulties in
finding some of the journals and sources identified by the online search; user frustration
when computer systems are down or telecommunications difficulties are encountered;
start-up and training costs; investments in materials and equipment; and the additional
time for media center staff if online is added to the existing services provided.

GETTING STARTED

School library media specialists who wish to initiate online information retrieval for
students must, first of all, understand what online access is and the type of information
suitable for students that is available online. Equipment, telecommunications software,
and a search service vendor must be selected, and curricular objectives and materials
must be prepared. While the rationale for the budget will depend on the goals and
objectives established for the program, specific budget items will fall into the categories
of capital expenses for equipment and space needs; operating expenses for connect
time, communication costs, supplies, documentation, professional training, print
charges, fees for saved searches, and costs of online ordering; and miscellaneous
expenses such as equipment upgrades and maintenance, and travel to online
conferences and demonstrations.

It has been suggested that library media specialists might prefer to skip online systems
and wait to move directly into CD-ROM, which would give them access to databases in
disk format on a subscription basis and permit unlimited searching of locally held
databases.

Aversa and Mancall (1986) suggest six instructional goals for teaching online to
students: (1) training students to become knowledgeable information seekers; (2)
expanding students' perceptions of how to access their information environment; (3)
assisting students in refining their information research process; (4) creating enthusiasm
among students for independent investigations; (5) working cooperatively with teachers
in planning online instruction that is integrated with classroom activities; and (6)
expanding the knowledge of teachers and administrators about what information is
available electronically and how to access it.

Aversa and Mancall (1986) also suggest that school media specialists working with
online services will need to have: (1) enhanced interviewing skills for working with
students and teachers in the pre-search stage; (2) knowledge of the advantages and
disadvantages of using different vendors and of the content of available databases; (3)
online search skills; (4) knowledge of other community resources and formal and
informal ways of accessing materials in their collections; (5) management strategies for
financial control, planning, training, general collection development, and evaluation of
the service; and (6) knowledge of how to teach online searching.

IMPACT OF ONLINE SERVICES ON STUDENT
BEHAVIOR

Both obtrusive and unobtrusive measurement strategies have been used to assess the
impact of teaching online searching on the behavior of students. Craver (1985) directly asked students' opinion of the worthwhileness of completed units on online instruction with positive results. Others (Mancall & Bertland, 1985; Mancall & Deskins, 1984; Wozny, 1982) report the use of such unobtrusive measures as comparing the referencing patterns in papers of students who have had the opportunity to search online. Other means of examining student response to online training that have been reported include testing students on their understanding of terminology, selection of appropriate databases, search formulation, and interpretation of an online citation (Craver, 1985); keeping online logs to capture data on who is searching and for which courses; the level of satisfaction of those who search or request a search; subjects areas that are most frequently searched, in which databases, and with what success; types of materials that are being referenced; number of relevant references retrieved and average cost per relevant reference; and how many relevant references are available on site or locally (Mancall & Bertland, 1985).

While few basic patterns have been uncovered, Wozny (1982) reports that whether or not students use materials identified by online searching in their papers, those who have been taught online searching use more current and more diverse types of materials than similar students who have not been exposed to this innovation. She believes that the major influences on the student are the teacher and cooperating library media specialist who used online searching as a technique to achieve their educational objectives, i.e., assisting students to develop appropriate search strategies, and expanding their concepts of the different types of information available.

**FUTURE SCENARIO**

A synthesis of the literature and survey of current practice in secondary schools in 1986 point to the following: o point of rapid expansion. o support instruction in this area, the school media specialist can anticipate the development of commercially produced materials as more of the major database vendors, producers, and publishers realize the economic potential of this market. o school setting will undergo considerable change in response to the initiation of online services. o technology. The availability of databases on CD-ROM, the possibility of shared disks, and the continuing need for currency must all be considered as schools plan for the provision of information to students, teachers, and administrators. (Aversa, Mancall, & Oesau, 1987, pp. 25-26)

**REFERENCES**


**ONLINE INFORMATION SERVICES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS:**
A CURRENT ASSESSMENT. Syracuse, NY: ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources.


PENNSYLVANIA ONLINE:


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