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Does a Book Locator System Save Time? A Critical User Study

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New Technology

“In the future, our ‘Union Catalog’ may become a true ‘CUNY Online Catalog’.... Some day, through centralized processing techniques, it may become feasible to load in pre-indexed magazine article titles –perhaps with a light pen/bar code labeling system carried within the magazine itself. In this way, a major source of information would be integrated for the first time into the library’s database along with books and media, realizing an age-old dream of libraries.”

Low, F. E. (1985). Selling library automation proposals within the context of the service mission. *Urban Academic Librarian*, 3(1), 23.

DOES A BOOK LOCATOR SYSTEM SAVE TIME? A CRITICAL USER STUDY

Judi Pitch

A library user finding a desired book listed in a library card catalog usually feels frustrated when the book cannot be located on the library shelves. If the user frequently has this frustration, he or she may conclude that the library is deficient. Many of us have heard or overheard patrons complain that they can never find anything they want in the library. However, a persistent patron may discover that a book is out and can be reserved upon its return.

While it is not possible to ensure that books will always be on the library shelves when users need them, it is possible to minimize the time lost to users in determining whether a book has been checked out and when it is due back. This can be achieved by means of a computer terminal designated as a book locator. Such a terminal can be located in library stacks, in the card catalog area, or in any other accessible location and can be reserved exclusively for library patrons. Several companies have developed such programs, which can be run in conjunction with automated circulation systems to make a service possible.

The library at Queens College uses the CL Systems, Inc. circulation system, and in November 1981 we placed in the stacks a terminal to be used as a book locator.¹ The terminal has limited capabilities, since it can be programmed only to perform inquiries by the fields designated as title. When a patron uses it properly, the terminal will display call number, author, and title and will show whether a book is in the library or has been checked out. If the book is out, the due date is shown.

How the System Works

With the CLSI program it is possible to key into the title inquiry by several methods. One may use the call number, the author, the title, or a library-devised author/title code. In our application of this system we decided to use the call number because it is the most exact form of entry and is one of the shortest forms of entry. Use of the call number, however, has proved to be confusing to patrons.

Before the call number is entered, it is necessary to begin with a back slash. If the call number includes a date, a volume number, a part, or any other form of clarification, one must enter a front slash before these items. Hence when a call number is entered properly, it looks like this: \ps2650s/1975. One then presses the "enter" key to hold the information. For simplicity

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we color coded the back slash, the front slash, and the enter keys.

There is a large sign above the terminal with instructions explaining the terminal's use (See Appendix A). If the call number is not entered as it exists in the computer data base, the response will be "NOT ON FILE." The entry must have the proper volume, number, or other sequence used in the original entry. The Stack Supervisor is stationed at a desk near the terminal to provide assistance to patrons as needed. We are most anxious, however, for patrons to master the use of the terminal themselves, so that they will be able to use it independently.

Patron Problems with the Terminal

The biggest problem with the terminal seems to be that patrons either do not read the instructions, or they glance at them so quickly that they do not understand them. On the terminal screen one sees: "INQUIRY: TITLE." the second line of the instructions, in capital letters, reads: "TITLE MEANS CALL NUMBER." Despite these instructions, patrons proceed to type in the title of the book.

The next most frequent problem is the improper entry of the call number. Not only is it crucial that the slashes be properly used, but periods must also be in the right place. There may be no extra spacing, and the abbreviations must be entered correctly as well. For example, volume five has to be entered as v5 and not as vol 5 or v.5. In the instructions we have tried to explain the principles of entering the call number as simply as possible; and, to achieve a short, clear explanation in this effort, we did not list all points of difficulty.

If a patron makes an error in his entry, the response is "NOT ON FILE." If the call number is incorrect, it is possible for staff to retrieve the desired information through other methods. Frequently the patron has left out part of the call number, and we explain the importance of writing down the whole number.

Evaluation of the Terminal

In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of patron use of the book locator terminal, we conducted a survey of patrons who used it during March, April, and May of 1982. The terminal had then been in use for about six months. Of the 178 responses ninety-two were quite positive and eighty-six were negative.

The positive responses were impressive. Patrons thought it was about time that the library offered such a service. Those who experienced difficulties brought the problems to our attention. In the majority of cases where there was difficulty patrons did not understand the response "NOT ON FILE"; and they blamed the computer, saying it had no memory or wondering why nothing was in the data base.

In November 1982 we initiated a second survey using the same form and instructions. Of the 142 responses received during this second survey the results were much more positive. They are shown in Appendix C. One big difference from the first survey was that over half of the respondents claimed they had used the terminal previously. The surveys do show that with assistance and practice patrons can learn to use the terminal as a time saver. This is in contrast to a study on public terminal use at Ohio State University, which showed that "search patterns were fairly consistent despite increased use of the system and an increase in the number of search options. Even the number of invalid commands remained constant."²

Conclusion

There are several ways to improve the programming and the instructions so that users will experience less difficulty with the terminal. If the words "CALL NUMBER" showed on the screen instead of "TITLE" in the initial inquiry, much confusion would be eliminated immediately. Many unnecessary fields of information should be deleted from the screen display. Only the author/title code, the author, the title, call number, issuing agency, and book's location need be retained. Since this terminal can be programmed as a segment of an online catalog, it should have the capability to prompt responses. Then the service would be "user friendly." We have requested CLSI to make these changes, and hopefully they will begin to reprogram the book locator terminal soon. We plan to rewrite the instructions so as to incorporate several of the suggestions offered by our users. Ideally, we should have a staff member stationed at the terminal at all times to assist users. Unfortunately, this would be prohibitively expensive. In time, as more patrons gain familiarity with the terminal, they will use it correctly.

Once patrons feel comfortable with the system, it would be advisable to place a terminal at the card catalog so as to save yet more time. This step leads to online catalogs where the patron learns the status of a book at the time of discovering whether the library actually owns the book. Hence, user time, effort, and frustration will be reduced; for all needed information will be accessible at the same place.

NOTES

1. CL Systems Inc. (CLSI) has marketed this terminal since 1978. It later became part of its Public Access Catalog (PAC), which is an online catalog system. According to the marketing department, hundreds of terminals had been sold for PAC or title queries by March 1983. Other libraries have been using the title query terminal as a book locator as well. For further information, see an unpublished study at

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the University of Pennsylvania Library: Jeffery L. Davidson, The Book Location Terminal at the University of Pennsylvania, March 7, 1979.

2. David J. Norden and Gail Herndon Lawrence, "Public Terminal Use in an Online Catalog: Some Preliminary Results," College and University Libraries, July 1981, p. 315.

APPENDIX A

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING THE TERMINAL

1. Press (red circle) button
2. **TITLE MEANS CALL NUMBER**
Type in Call Number. If the Call Number includes a volume or date, type Call Number, press (yellow square) button and type volume or date.

ex: \ps345a6/1982
 \e99m27/v1

3. Press (pink rectangle) button.
YOU WILL RECEIVE THE FOLLOWING RESPONSES
 - A) **ON SHELF** - the book is in the library. If you do not find it in its proper location, check with the Stack Supervisor.
 - B) If the book has been checked out, the response will have two dates. The second date indicates the day the book is due back.
 - C) **NOT ON FILE** - check with the Stack Supervisor.
RES INDICATES THE BOOK IS IN THE RESERVE LIBRARY

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