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Mobile information literacy

Let's use an app for that!

While at the reference desk, have you ever had a student thrust her phone at you and ask, "Do you have this book?" Or, while teaching an information literacy class, have you had to tell students to put away their cellphones? It seems that our students can't live without their smartphones anymore. But who can blame them? Most of us have grown accustomed to having information available at our fingertips. There are hundreds of thousands of apps available that let users do everything from looking up restaurant reviews to accessing Wikipedia in a mobile environment. As an increasing number of mobile apps and Web sites are being built by database vendors, such as EBSCO and WilsonWeb, it's time to leverage students' addiction to smartphones and teach them information literacy in a mobile setting.

As librarians, we are responsible for teaching students how to become information literate. The goal of information literacy classes is to turn students into independent thinkers by teaching them different ways of accessing, evaluating, and using information. Typically, our classes teach students how to find an appropriate book, decipher whether a Web site is trustworthy, and can be used for a paper, and, of course, search academic databases. But aren't we forgetting something? Our students are already using their mobile devices for everything — why not also teach them how access information by using their phones?

Our campus, Lehman College, is part of a large urban public university system (City University of New York) and, thus, our students have unique information needs.¹

They are, for the most part, commuters who live at home with their parents and have jobs to support their families. They rarely have a private space in which to do their classwork and assignments. Some of them don't even have computers at home. However, many of them do have smartphones or similar devices (such as the iPod Touch). In fact, the Horizon 2011 Report predicts that "Internet capable mobile devices will outnumber computers within the next year."² It's beginning to look like the days of the desktop and laptop as the preferred ways to search, access, and read information are numbered.

Research is a process involving many steps, not all of which need to be accomplished while sitting in front of a desktop computer. In fact, research is hardly ever done in one sitting. It takes time and patience. So what better use of a student's time than to get on EBSCO's mobile Web site and look up information while on the bus ride home, or to access Gale's app while waiting in line at the grocery store? Students can even use their devices during breaks at work to get started on a term paper.

Knowing this, it becomes apparent why we think it's time for librarians to take mobile sites and apps seriously. We need to know which free apps are trustworthy, and then recommend them to our patrons.

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Apple's App Store currently has more than 350,000 different apps. Who, if not librarians, should recommend the right apps to our users? We can apply the same collection development skills we use when evaluating "traditional" resources to determine which apps or sites are authoritative, and then recommend the best ones to our users. This process is really no different from what we've already been doing for years. The only difference is the platform on which these resources are available.

Subsequently, we propose embedding the teaching of mobile information literacy skills into our standard instruction classes. Of course, some of you will say, Who can see anything on those tiny screens? And typing on that keyboard? Forget about it. While this may be true, we need to be where our users are, and if that happens to be the mobile universe, then we, as librarians, need to familiarize ourselves with it and help our users navigate it.

Here is what we propose to our fellow academic librarians:

- **Identify authoritative apps, whether free or fee-based.** Use them on your own device. Learn how to search these resources and contact the vendor when you find bugs or to suggest features. Most of these apps and sites are new, and the developers will appreciate feedback.

- **If your favorite vendor does not offer an app or mobile Web site, tell them you'd like to see one!**

- **List mobile resources on your website and share them with your users.**³

- **Start showing your patrons mobile database interfaces.** If you do not have a mobile device, make use of websites that pretend to be a mobile device, such as the iPhone 4 Simulator.⁴ You should show your students the interfaces of EBSCO Mobile, WilsonWeb Mobile, Gale MyCollegeEdition, etc.

- **Stay up-to-date with the ever-evolving app/mobile world by being "in the know."** Read blogs (such as Aaron Tay's Musings About Librarianship⁵), and

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browse different app sites (e.g., Android Marketplace, Apple App Store, etc.).

We at Lehman College are currently employing all of these techniques, and, taking it a step further, have piloted a mobile information literacy class that began fall 2011. It focuses on showing students how to search and access reliable information solely using mobile devices.

The purpose of this class is to demonstrate that it doesn't matter where or how students find the information they need. They will be able to find authoritative information, whether on a mobile device or a more traditional desktop computer.

The understanding of what a library is has changed. Today's students are used to accessing databases from their dormitories, their workplaces, etc. The same can be said for the ever-present mobile devices. The librarian's role is changing, too. Clearly, we need to keep current with emerging technologies and take the lead in teaching our patrons how to use them successfully.

Notes

1. Maura A. Smale and Mariana Regalado, "Preliminary Results," The Scholarly Habits of Undergraduates at CUNY, 2011, <http://ushep.commons.gc.cuny.edu/files/2011/01/ushep-prelim-report1.pdf>.

2. Larry Johnson, Rachel S. Smith, H. Willis, Alan Levine, and Keene Haywood, "The 2011 Horizon Report," The New Media Consortium, 2011, <http://www.educause.edu/Resources/2011HorizonReport/223122>.

3. You can view Lehman College's mobile resources page as an example at www.lehman.cuny.edu/library/database-mobile.php.

4. iPhone 4 Simulator, <http://iphone4simulator.com/>.

5. Aaron Tay's Musings About Librarianship, <http://musingsaboutlibrarianship.blogspot.com/>. ♪