

**ALA Report  
June 22-25, 2007  
Rebecca Miller  
Trinity International University**

### **Hollywood Librarian**

The first night I was at ALA, I went to the premiere of “Hollywood Librarian,” a documentary on librarians. I thought it was well done, with good production values, and a quick pace that kept you interested. It was fun to watch with a room of other librarians, who laughed and applauded appreciatively, particularly when their jobs (such as cataloging librarians) were mentioned. It included clips from various movies, which made me want to watch some of them again or for the first time: *Party Girl* with Parker Posey, *Desk Set* with Katharine Hepburn, and *The Music Man*. For a fuller description of the documentary, you can go to its website at:

<http://www.hollywoodlibrarian.com/>

### **Instruction Section Teaching Methods Committee**

Much of my time at the conference was taken up with the two committees I am involved in. This past year I chaired the ACRL Instruction Section Teaching Methods committee. The committee currently updates two bibliographies. One is a bibliography of textbooks for students and librarians on information literacy skills:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/is/publicationsacrl/teachinglearning.htm>

The committee also recently took over updating a bibliography of items on librarians’ involvement in first-year experience courses:

<http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr/bibliography1.html>

We were discussing the idea of starting a new webliography with a list of sites with teaching tips for librarians. We are still in the process of deciding if this would be a worthwhile project.

I also attended the two advisory meetings for the instruction section. There were a couple of items I found interesting: There has been a task force developing a checklist to help people assess their information literacy program. It is called the Analysis of Instructional Environments, and it should be posted soon on the Instruction Section website:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/aboutacrl/acrlsections/instruction/homepage.htm>

### **ACRL College Libraries Section Research for College Librarianship Committee**

I am also a member of the CLS Research for College Librarianship Committee. I have coordinated coaches for a program called “Your Research Coach.” This program matches librarians who are experienced at getting published with librarians who need help writing, developing projects, and getting published. There have been quite a few success stories, and we’ve had a lot of interest in the program. Unfortunately, right now we’re short on coaches, so we’re looking at ways to recruit more experienced people to help. We also discussed preparing handouts on tips for getting published. This could be helpful for both coaches (as a place to start their mentoring) and the people they’re working with.

### **Utilizing Learning Theory in Online Environments**

This session was sponsored by AASL (American Association of School Librarians). I was concerned that it might be geared too much toward K-12 education. However, the speaker (Michelle Kowalsky) does reference with both high schoolers and graduate students, and she is working on a doctorate in learning styles. Her information was therefore useful across the spectrum. She talked mostly about how to do effective virtual reference. She brought up learning styles (visual, verbal, social, etc.) and also the current learning theories (Vygotsky's social learning, Lowe and Wegner's situation learning, and brain-based learning). I would like to research these learning theories to learn more about them. She suggested a couple of books: *How People Learn* and Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice*. Kowalsky highly encouraged active learning, which I found encouraging, since I've been tending more and more toward having the students do their research during instruction sessions, rather than me lecturing. Kowalsky also discussed the differences between generations and how they use virtual reference. Millennials are of course much more comfortable using virtual technology than previous generations. She encouraged us to make our interactions as personal as possible. She also showed some clips from her use of Second Life, which she said is a way to embody a physical presence online. I would like to explore Second Life more, although I have an idea that it would probably be more time-consuming than practical.

### **See it, Hear it, Touch it: How do Learning Styles Affect Virtual Reference Service?**

This session actually turned out to be very repetitive of the one I went to previously. There was more discussion on the differences between the generations. The speakers also emphasized the importance of building personal relationships. They also emphasized not forcing instruction, but focusing on getting the user's needs met. They also said to match the user's tone. If they are informal and use text speak, it helps build a connection if you match that. They also suggested librarians practice using virtual reference in other situations – with a company that uses it, for example. That way you can get exposure to how it feels to be on the receiving end of virtual reference help.

### **Survey Fatigue? An Rx for Avoiding the Problem**

I found this session very interesting, since I had just helped design and administer a survey for our library. The speakers on this panel were emphasizing how surveys can be over-used, to the point where people become irritated and ignore them. Your results then become less reliable, since you have to wonder why these people responded when others didn't. They said that bad web surveys are driving down responses to all surveys. The first speaker, a consultant from the RSL Research group, gave tips on how to do better surveys. He emphasized determining what you're going to do with the questions before you ask them. Don't just ask a question because you're trying to be comprehensive. He also said to be sure to pre-test the survey with users. You can get some useful feedback. When you give the survey, you should also announce how and when they will learn about the results. He said it was better to announce a survey by mail first, rather than email, since people will tend to think it's junk if it's online. You should have a sample of the population you send the survey to, rather than to everyone. At some schools, you can reserve a sample. He mentioned a calculator you can use to determine what size of sample you need:

<http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>

The second speaker suggested some alternatives to surveys. These alternatives included focus groups, observations, usability studies, interviews, customer panels, data mining, social networking info, comments, counts, and logged activities. These tend to be more qualitative rather than quantitative. However, this can be more useful for bringing about useful change. It comes more directly from the users, and is directly about what issues they think are important. It can help us identify important issues. For focus groups, you need 6-10 people for critical mass, since a lot of it is about interaction. The topic needs to be clear and there needs to be a good facilitator who can tell when to pursue a topic more and when to move on. Librarians can be note takers. It's better if they don't know the students, and they should be careful not to give direction or teach the students – they need to “bite their tongues.” They suggested that incentives aren't useful for surveys, because if people are doing it to get the incentive, you're less likely to get a thoughtful response. But incentives are good for usability studies.

The last speaker described some more innovative things that librarians are doing for assessment. One library is using “mystery shoppers” to test the circulation staff. They develop scenarios, have someone from HR come in and play the role, and see how the staff person responds. Another library uses “talking points” where the circulation staff are trained to give little messages at the point of service and ask for the person's comments. The comments are then recorded on the computer, evaluated and disseminated. One library did a web usability study with affinity mapping. They put magnets on different categories from the website, and had the students arrange them by what they thought was important and what is missing. You can also hire a student employee to do usability studies on the website. Set up a process for them to follow, and you can use Camtasia to record the student's activities. Still another library is using RSS feeds to follow student blogs. They use a keyword alert to see where the students are talking about the library. The librarian then can post to the blog and give them a suggestion about research. It's a way to do marketing. They also keep track of the criticism, and do a text analysis, which can be used for assessment.

All of these different ideas can be used for accreditation and other times where you need assessment data. Plan on organizing and reporting on the results and improvements you make. Do analysis to show it's substantive and how you used it to make improvements. In the future, more importance will likely be given to qualitative data rather than quantitative.