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Formal Instruction in Library Skills at the High School Level: The Present Situation and Implications for Future Instruction

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Formal Instruction in Library Skills at the High School Level: The Present Situation and Implications for Future Instruction

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Abstract

Since the Dewey Decimal System, upon which the organization of most public and school libraries is based, is not likely to be well understood through a random approach, and since many individual items in the library require, for fullest use and benefit, an understanding of their organization and purpose, the hypothesis of this paper is that skills in the use of the library as a whole and of its many materials need to be taught in a formal manner.

In an effort to conclude whether this hypothesis has validity, the writer has sought to learn what many students of the library have written on the subject. In addition, a survey was conducted of a number of selected high school libraries regarding their present practices of teaching library skills. This was done in the anticipation that learning how library skills are presently being taught would illumine the causes of ineffective, or even non-use, of libraries and hopefully, could assist in determining implications for future instruction in these skills.

FORMAL INSTRUCTION IN LIBRARY SKILLS AT THE
HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL: THE PRESENT SITUATION
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE INSTRUCTION

A Research Paper
Presented to the
Faculty of the Library Science Department
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Margaret V. Hearity
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Section 1

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

In a wooded setting in northeastern Iowa, where the land slopes gracefully toward a quiet stream, there is an imposing building called the Public Library. From the twenty-foot-tall windows of the main reading room one can look out into the tops of lovely old oaks. A separate carpeted, air-conditioned reading room opens its glass walls to a stone-paved patio shaded in summer, sunny in winter and visited by bunnies and birds the year around. Upstairs are spacious areas for large-group meetings and for graciously served tea parties. Large groups come and go through this area and it is often a busy, gay place. All of this affirms John Cotton Dana's sentiment that, "Libraries are pleasant places."¹

Only slightly set apart from all of this is a carefully shelved collection of 119,780 volumes.² A well-trained librarian catalogs the new acquisitions and

¹John Cotton Dana, Libraries, Addresses and Essays, (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1916), p. 95.

²Mason City Public Library, 80th Annual Report. (Mason City: Stoyles Press, 1974).

maintains a carefully typed card catalog. In the Reference room a Reference Librarian is always on duty. In this area, too, one would be inclined to agree with John Dana as he says, "Their shelves do not groan with the wisdom that is on them. They delight in their burdens."³ All is in beautiful order, waiting and able to serve well the library needs of a community of nearly 30,000 residents.

But where are the residents? At almost any hour of any day the stacks of books are largely devoid of people. The Reference room, large enough to seat fifty people comfortably, is frequently empty entirely and rarely hosts more than two or three at a time.

In short, though there is much use of the building, little use is made of the wealth behind the backs of all those books. One may well wonder, "Why?" One writer states, regarding the search for an explanation of non-use of libraries, that, "The first conclusion is that many of the subjects, users and non-users alike, are poorly informed about the library."⁴

People who graduated from high school longer than 40 years ago are quite likely to have learned little about the library before graduation. Librarians were rarely found in schools and books, if indeed present in numbers

³Dana, p. 95.

⁴Charles Evans, Middle Class Attitudes and Public Library Use, Research Studies in Library Science, No. 1 (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1970), p. 98.

large enough to be called a "collection", were the only library materials available for use.

However, the more recent concept of school libraries is one of the library as a center for a wide variety of printed as well as audiovisual learning materials, plus the services of a professional librarian. It can now generally be expected that students could acquire considerable facility in the use of a library before graduation from high school.

This writer, functioning in a community college library within the last two years, has been able to observe how those students functioned in a library following graduation from high school. It was apparent that some, in this college library, could find their own materials; some, who obviously could not, would ask and be helped; others would wander around, looking helpless and wasting what was probably valuable time. Indeed, some who had seemed helpless in the library eventually came to the librarian for her signature on "drop" slips.

Who can say how much their ignorance of the library was responsible for their leaving college? And, indeed to a lesser degree, who can say how much a student's ineffectiveness in the library impairs his learning? At any rate, the situation might well prompt one to agree with Ralph Perkins when he says, "The time is approaching . . . when someone must be judged harshly for not making

it possible for students to become familiar with libraries."⁵

Through personal experience, then, and observation, as well as through reading pertinent literature, it has become apparent to this writer that completion of high school has not assured the graduate of a functional knowledge of the library; that knowledge of the library is important to its use; that its use is vital in college and enriching out of college. These certainties have provided the motivation for undertaking this study and crystallized the convictions upon which its hypothesis is based.

Statement of the Problem

Since the Dewey Decimal System, upon which the organization of most public and school libraries is based, is not likely to be well understood through a random approach, and since many individual items in the library require, for fullest use and benefit, an understanding of their organization and purpose, the hypothesis of this paper is that skills in the use of the library as a whole and of its many materials need to be taught in a formal manner.

In an effort to conclude whether this hypothesis has validity, the writer has sought to learn what many students of the library have written on the subject. In addition, a survey was conducted of a number of selected

⁵Ralph Perkins, The Prospective Teacher's Knowledge of Library Fundamentals, (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1965), p. 195.

high school libraries regarding their present practices of teaching library skills. This was done in the anticipation that learning how library skills are presently being taught would illumine the causes of ineffective, or even non-use, of libraries and hopefully, could assist in determining implications for future instruction in these skills.

Basic Assumptions

In beginning this study, the assumptions have been, first, that library instruction, when given at all, has - in most cases - not been comprehensive enough to result in the student becoming proficient in the use of a library; second, that this lack may have an important effect upon his future learning in or out of college; and finally, that the situation could be effectively improved by providing him with formal instruction in library skills before he leaves high school. The high school level is emphasized because obviously it is here that he must learn these skills if he has not had opportunity to acquire them earlier, and is to do so comprehensively, i.e., through formal instruction.

Definitions of Terms

Library: This term will be used to refer to every concept of a library, from one having only a small collection of mainly print materials to one with a wide collection of both print and audio-visual learning materials. It is a term that, in reference to school libraries, will be used

interchangeably with "media center."

Librarian: This term will be used in reference both to a public and to a school librarian. A school librarian denotes someone professionally trained as both a teacher and librarian, and in this context may be used interchangeably with the term, "media specialist."

Formal instruction: This term is perhaps the most central to this study. It refers to instruction that is planned, structured, and comprehensive for the library; further; and as far as possible, it is integrated with the curriculum. It is followed by testing the student's knowledge of all the facets of the library covered by formal instruction. This would include such specifics as the card catalog, the Dewey Decimal classification system of arrangement; also, testing would cover use of such materials as Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and other reference materials available in the library and for which formal instruction was given.

Informal instruction: Instruction given on the spot as a specific need arises. It can also be initiated by the librarian. No organized effort is made to include materials not requested by the student.

Limitations of the Study

The focus of this study is not compatible with exact scientific methods or measurement and consequently will not involve sophisticated statistical material. Information available is principally that acquired through

written opinion of others who have addressed themselves to the problem, personal observation and experience of this writer, and statements by school librarians concerning present practices of teaching library skills in their various schools.

The search for opinion about library instruction has extended into literature from the present to as long as fifty years back. In searching the literature for opinion concerning library instruction no attempt was made to use ideas expressed more than 50 years ago. Before this little thought was given to the potential inherent in school libraries and the need for instruction in library use. Response to questions about present practices in high school library instruction was solicited from schools only in Iowa and within a 100 mile radius of the writer's home. The schools were located in communities of from 356 to 30,000 residents in order that both rural and urban membership would be included in the sampling. They were chosen to represent annual per pupil expenditures in 1969-70 of from \$1,022 to \$633.⁶ The 1969-70 figures would be an acceptable time span because, though the exact amounts would be higher 1973-74, the same base for expenses would be expected to prevail. The amount of financial support is a situation which could be expected to be reflected in the amount of library service and material provided for the students,

⁶Iowa Dept. of Public Instruction, Iowa Public School Data - Administration and Finance 1969-70, (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1971).

which, in turn, could have a bearing on the formal teaching of library skills.

The period of time involved in conducting the study was first defined by the span of the course itself, within which it involved a period of approximately eight weeks. This is a decidedly limiting factor and precludes the possibility of doing a statistical study to test the hypothesis of this paper; such a study as presently conceived by this writer would require at least a two-year period.

Miss [unclear] [unclear]

Section 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Books and articles in profusion have been written about the advisability of teaching library skills to students. They tell what specific skills should be taught and at what grade levels the learning of these skills might be the most beneficial. Less often did students of the library address the problem of "how" the skill should be taught, i.e., the question of teaching them formally or informally.

Beginning at least as long ago as 1926 there were some people thinking specifically about the "how" of instruction in the use of the library. One of these was William Warner Bishop, who wrote:

In the secondary school the student can and should learn the elements of dealing with books in libraries. . . . He should learn by formal instruction of the high school librarian that books have to be arranged or classified on some sort of system.⁷

Obviously Mr. Bishop's thinking is positive toward formal instruction in library skills, but by limiting to arrangement or classification the areas he suggests for formal instruction, he falls short of the meaning of 'formal' in this paper. Yet, if by "the elements of dealing

⁷William Warner Bishop, The Backs of Books (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1926), p. 114.

with books in libraries" one can assume that he means all of at least the basic knowledge necessary to effectively use the library, then he does, indeed support the hypothesis of this paper.

Mr. Bishop goes on to state his argument for instruction in library skills with what must surely be one of the most important reasons for deliberate, formal instruction:

If a boy (or girl!) knows how to use the card catalog of a high school library, there is no reason why he cannot easily use other catalogs, even so huge a thing as the card catalog of the Library of Congress with its 2,000 trays and hundreds of thousands of entries.⁸

Another author, whose work appeared in a book published nearly twenty years later, has this to say about the way library skills should be taught:

Library instruction may take one or all of three forms: separate and arbitrary units taught to students in the instructional program, instruction integrated with subject courses, and individual instruction as opportunity occurs in the library.⁹

One might assume that through using separate and arbitrary units or instruction integrated with subject courses it would be possible, but not certain, that a student would be taught all the basic facets of library use. Like Frances Henne, many writers have recommended the

⁸Bishop, p. 115.

⁹Frances Henne, "The Reference Function in the School Library," in The Reference Function of the Library, ed. Pierce Butler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), p. 70.

"individual instruction as opportunity occurs" method; by itself, this is obviously a hit-or-miss approach and could leave many important facets of the library untouched by instruction.

R. G. Ralph, writing in 1949, was somewhat more specifically an advocate of formal instruction. He stated:

It is argued by some that training in the use of books is best acquired informally, by the child's working in the library and asking questions when he finds himself in difficulty. This tends to waste time since the same questions keep recurring, while as M. P. Douglas points out, "The greatest pitfall in informal instruction appears to be that pupils, teachers and librarians alike do not realize when the need for instruction has arisen until after the crest of the need has passed." A properly organized course will include formal and informal methods.¹⁰

Another, more recent, writer has stated without qualifying his statement, that, "The operational side of library use can best be taught on the spot in the library."¹¹

He, like many others, appears to recognize that library skills should be taught. Yet he, like many others, does not go on to advocate that the teaching of them be structured and comprehensive so that all the basic library skills may be learned rather than only those that a student may need at a particular moment.

Still another recent study found that, "Skill in

¹⁰R. G. Ralph, The Library in Education (London: Turnstile Press, 1949), pp. 21-22.

¹¹Geoffrey Ford, "Progress in Documentation: Research in User Behavior in University Libraries," Journal of Documentation, May 1973, p. 17.

using reference books was definitely increased by taking a formal library science class."¹²

At any rate, the literature shows that considerable thought has been given to the matter. Whether opinions were found to be pro, or con, or indifferent to the hypothesis of this paper, the writings reveal the permanency of the problem; as stated, do indeed indicate recognition of the value of formal instruction in library use at the high school level.

What was not found was a scientific study resulting in statistics to either support or negate this hypothesis.

¹²Golden V. Adams, Jr., "A Study: Attitudes, Usage, Skill and Knowledge of Junior High School Age Students Enrolled at Lincoln Junior High School and Burns Union High School, Burns, Harney County, Oregon 1971-72." (Unpublished research report, Brigham Young University, 1972).

Section 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The kind of library instruction that has, to date, been given to students before graduation from high school has obviously left many of them with little facility in the use of a library. This sentiment has been found to have been concurred in by a number of writers through a period of at least fifty years. Logically, the extent to which a student learns to use a library before he leaves high school will have a bearing on his use of a library after he graduates, whether he is in or out of college. The results produced by present kinds of instruction might, then, be expected to hold implications for the design of future instruction. This study was designed to gather information about the way in which students are now being taught library skills before they leave high school, in the hope that analysis of this information might be of value in the design of future instruction.

Since the librarian is central to all that takes place in the library, it was to him that the request for information was directed. Questions were posed to cover the kind of instruction being given: whether it was formal and/or informal, whether it was broadly correlated with curriculum, whether the Dewey Decimal System was explained,

and whether testing was done to evaluate competence in use of the library as a whole and of selected reference materials. The librarian was also asked whether she considered the students leaving that high school to be adequately prepared to use a library with competence. Because provision of adequate personnel is germane to the provision of a program of formal instruction as defined in this paper, information about staffing was also solicited.¹³

To obtain this information a questionnaire was sent to twelve schools as described earlier under "Limitations of the Study." With the questionnaire went a cover letter which included definitions of key terms¹⁴ and a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return of the questionnaire.

Of the twelve sent, eleven questionnaires were returned. For purposes of this paper as earlier defined, and because the schools were chosen to represent both rural and urban communities and per-pupil expenditures at both high and low levels of financial support, these returned were considered to have supplied a representative questionnaire though admittedly limited picture of library skill instructional practices in Iowa.

¹³Appendix I.

¹⁴Appendix I.

Section 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Whether formal instruction, as defined in this paper, would even be possible would usually depend first of all on the amount of library personnel available, both professional and non-professional. Table I shows the response to the question regarding employment of personnel.

Table I
Employment of Library Personnel

	Number of Schools
Professional personnel	
One employed	9
More than one employed	2
Non-professional personnel	
None employed	4
Employed part-time	3
Employed full-time	4

Provision of at least one professional librarian in each school complies with the Code of Iowa, which requires that "a Junior or Senior High School shall have a qualified

librarian on a part-time or full-time basis, as determined by the local board."¹⁵ No indication was given as to how much of the professional employment was on a part-time basis. Though supportive staff was provided in slightly more than half of the schools employment was on a part-time basis. There is no mandate in the Code of Iowa for employment of supportive staff in the media center.

Employment of personnel on this basis would fall far short of recommendations of Standards for School Media Programs for ". . . one full-time media specialist for every 250 students or major fraction thereof,"¹⁶ and ". . . at least one media technician and one media aide . . . for each professional media specialist in schools of 2,000 or fewer students."¹⁷

In order that formal instruction be comprehensive enough to result in the ability to use the library fully, it would need to include both the organization of the library and use of materials. Since a library patron obviously cannot use materials unless they can be found, it appears that instruction in library organization would have first priority. Yet results showed that only slightly more than

¹⁵Iowa, Code of Iowa 1973, Vol. 1 (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1972), p. 1121.

¹⁶American Association of School Librarians and Department of Audiovisual Instruction of NEA, Standards for School Media Programs (Chicago, Washington, D.C.: ALA and NEA, 1969), p. 12.

¹⁷AASL and DAVI of NEA, p. 16.

half of the schools offered this. In even fewer cases was formal instruction given in actual use of the materials.

Table II shows a tabulation of these responses.

Table II
Provision of Formal Instruction
in Library Skills

	Number of Schools
Formal Instruction	
In use of library materials	5
In organization of the library	6

Learning about the Dewey Decimal System seems vital because it is so large a facet of library organization; this was indicated as being formally taught in eight of the eleven schools.¹⁸

Testing to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction is an integral part of the formal approach, consequently this survey asked whether this was done. A final question concerned the adequacy of the instruction for further effective use of the library. Table III shows the results of that portion of the survey.

¹⁸Appendix II.

Table III
Evaluation Following Formal Instruction

	Number of Schools
Testing	
To evaluate competence in use of the library as a whole	5
To evaluate competence in the use of selected reference materials . . .	5
Basic instruction considered adequate for future competence	6

Due to the design of this study and the intent of the questionnaire, the responses did not yield precise, scientific information that could be used in exact measurement. The information did, however, illumine the instructional situation as it presently exists in the chosen schools. In accomplishing this, it fulfilled the purpose for which it was designed.

Section 5

DISCUSSION

One hears, now and then, reference to a fifty-year lag in education. Though the whole educational picture is, seemingly, being touched up here and there to bring it more into the present, one may well wonder when the artists will dab out the dark spots of lag in the library.

It is probably safe to say that where a library exists there are usually adequate materials to serve its patrons. Gradually, school libraries are becoming true media centers that have, besides print materials, at least some of the various audio-visual devices; these are intended to present even more adequately the wildly expanding knowledge available to students. The lag in the library is obviously less in the materials it provides than in the services it offers.

However, services such as formal teaching of library skills require time and preparation by the librarian, both in integrating the course of instruction into the teachers' schedules and in preparing the course materials themselves. In the opinion of this writer and as compared to the recommendations of the Standards for School Media Programs referred to on page 16, there is, at least in Iowa, no

requirement that assures a school library of staffing with professional plus non-professional personnel sufficient to allow implementing a program of formal library instruction. To begin with, then, if formal instruction in library skills is to be provided for all high school students, it must begin with provision of adequate personnel, both professional and non-professional.

Given sufficient personnel to implement it, wide use of formal instruction would be dependent upon other conditions as well. If it were to come into preferred use its virtues would first need to be fully determined so that conclusions might be reached about its superiority or lack of superiority. It is impossible, at this time, to say whether those who use a library effectively do so because they were instructed in a comprehensive, formal way, or whether those who cannot use a library effectively are unable to do so because they did not receive formal instruction.

Informal instruction will, of a certainty, always have its place in any library, even the public library; certainly in a school library it is an integral part of a librarian's job. But formal instruction obviously holds a different position, quite probably due in part to lack of data to conclusively prove its superiority.

A scientific study designed to test the effectiveness of formal-with-informal as opposed to exclusively informal instruction might be a wise investment of someone's time. Being knowledgeable about how to use a library seems reason

enough for someone to attempt to prove which is the surest and best way to learn the necessary skills.

To date, then, it seems there are two major obstacles to assuring a student of comprehensive, formal library instruction before he leaves high school: uncertainty about the superiority of the method and insufficient library staffing to implement such a program. Neither obstacle appears at present to be receiving enough attention so that it is likely to be overcome in the foreseeable future. Perhaps if a study yielded support for the hypothesis that formal instruction is superior to informal, adequate staffing would be supplied to implement the superior method.

Section 6

SUMMARY

This paper was conceived on the hypothesis that skills in the use of the library need to be taught in a formal manner before a student leaves high school if he is to be able to use a library with facility thereafter.

To determine, if possible, the value of this hypothesis, two kinds of information seemed essential. The first was that of opinion of students of library work. It was found that many have written about methods of teaching library skills; some have supported the hypothesis of this paper, but no conclusive evidence was found to show that teaching library skills formally is definitely superior to other methods.

Secondly, inasmuch as so many people seem unable to use a library with facility, it seemed important to know whether, and in how many schools, students receive formal library instruction before they graduate from high school. Questions were also asked regarding staffing attendant upon the use or non-use of this method since, without adequate staffing, such a program could not be carried out, whatever its virtues. It was found that formal instruction is used in only about one-half of the schools surveyed, and

that staffing, while it fulfills requirements of the Code of Iowa,¹⁸ does not meet the recommendations of the Standards for School Media Programs.¹⁹ It appears that present staffing would be inadequate to implement a program of formal instruction in library skills.

Until the conditions of unproven superiority of the method and inadequate staff to implement such a method, in that order, are remedied, it cannot be expected that formal instruction as a means of teaching library skills will come to take precedence over the other methods presently being used.

¹⁸Iowa, Code of Iowa 1973, Vol. 1 (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1972), p. 1121.

¹⁹American Association of School Librarians and the Department of Audiovisual Instruction of NEA, Standards for School Media Programs (Chicago, Washington, D.C.: ALA and NEA, 1969), pp. 12 and 16.

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APPENDIX I

COVER LETTER

To the Librarian:

May I ask you to complete the attached questionnaire? I have attempted to make it possible to use very brief answers. However, if you feel a more detailed answer would serve better in your case, please feel free to expand your response.

The information I have asked you to supply will be used in a paper I am writing on formal instruction at the high school level in the use of the library; the present status and implications for the planning of future instruction.

To amplify the term "formal instruction": this implies structured teaching designed to include all facets of library organization pertinent to the user's functioning in the library, and the use of what you, as the librarian, consider basic library materials.

The paper is being written as part of the requirements for the Master's degree in Library Science at the University of Northern Iowa.

Neither you personally nor your specific library facility will be identified in the paper except possibly in the bibliography as one of the group polled.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Margaret V. Hearity

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. In your library, do you give formal instruction to high school students in the use of library materials?
YES NO
2. In your library, do you give formal instruction to high school students in the organization of the library, i.e., the location of the various kinds of materials?
YES NO
3. Does the instruction correlate with only selected curricular areas?
YES NO
If your answer is YES, please indicate the curricular areas.
4. Does the instruction correlate with a large number of curricular areas?
YES NO
Please list the areas with which instruction correlates.
5. If instruction is mainly geared to the organization of the library, do you include an explanation of the Dewey Decimal System?
YES NO
6. If formal instruction is not given, is it because this is considered to have been adequately done at the lower levels?
YES NO
7. Are tests given to evaluate a student's competence in the use of certain library materials - for example, Readers' Guide, Current Biography, etc.?
YES NO
8. Are tests given to evaluate a student's competence in the use of the library as a whole?
YES NO
9. Do you feel students leaving your high school are adequately prepared to use a library effectively without further BASIC instruction?
YES NO
10. How many professional librarians work in your library?
How many library aides or non-professionals (other than student assistants work in your library? _____)

APPENDIX II

RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL SITUATION IN ELEVEN SELECTED IOWA HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARIES

	Number of Schools
Give formal instruction in use of library materials	5
Give formal instruction in organization of the library	6
Instruction correlated with several curricular areas	5
Dewey Decimal System explained	8
Testing to evaluate competence in use of library as a whole	5
Testing to evaluate competence in use of selected reference materials	5
Basic instruction considered adequate for future competence	6
Professional personnel	
One employed	9
More than one employed	2
Non-professional personnel	
None employed	4
Employed part-time	3
Employed full-time	4