Six Letters That Count

ILS + RDA = A Better School Library Experience

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There has been a lot written recently about the online experience that we create for our school library users. We are very concerned about making our websites usable, and using the latest in interactive web-based technologies to enhance our students’ learning experience. Yet the most basic of library online experiences, that of using the online catalogue for accessing our physical collections, seems to be nowhere on the radar when it comes to conversations in the school library world. And it needs to be.

Forget all of our concerns about Google being the first search choice for our students. It’s no wonder that it’s their first choice. Google is pretty good at helping me to figure out what I want, even if I’m not so sure. If I spell my search term incorrectly, it politely asks me if perhaps I meant something else. Even when I use a simple, one-word search term, it figures out how to rank the results with the most useful at the top, through it’s powerful ranking algorithms.

And what of the rest of my online experience? I can customize my web experience with RSS feeds, custom home pages and widgets. I am able to experience online environments that keep me connected with friends and family, and extend my professional conversations. And how about the ways the web helps me interact with books? My online book experience is about engagement in reading. My Facebook friends and I can follow each others’ reading preferences. And when I want to find out about a book, my go-to place is, as often as not, Amazon. Amazon remembers me. It knows what I like to read. It tells me about the book, and frequently it lets me read the first chapter. I can read reviews from notable sources, and the opinions of other Amazon customers. Amazon invites me into to book experience. Unlike most online library catalogues.

Don’t get me wrong. I know that our cataloguers do their very best to fully describe the resources in our libraries. But they face two huge barriers. Firstly, the technology that powers our Integrated Library Systems (ILS) has not always had the user experience at the heart of its mission. Secondly, it’s that description thing.

Unlike the web, where full-text is the default search, our OPACs search bibliographic descriptions – title, author, subject classifications and the like. Our cataloguers’ task is to describe the resource as best they can, within the constrictions of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd edition (AACR2) which govern their practice. But changes are afoot. New guidelines have been in the works for some time. Resource Description and Access (RDA), delayed from the expected release in 2009, promises to expand the way cataloguers can describe our collections.

So finally I arrive at my thesis. New generation Integrated Library Systems combined with the increased flexibility of Resource Description and Access hold some promise for improving the relevance of our online catalogues. ILS + RDA = Relevant OPACs for school libraries, if we demand that it be so.
The professional literature is hot on this topic, from all library sectors except schools, it seems. My suspicion is that many of us have secretly found ourselves extraordinarily frustrated about the inadequacies of library catalogue search interfaces, but have lacked the context or the confidence to express our opinions. Be assured, there is a problem. The more we can educate ourselves about not only the issues, but the progress being made to address them, the more empowered we are to join the conversation.

Improving the OPAC

Let’s start by looking at improvements being made to the public access interfaces of our Integrated Library Systems. Depending on what product your school district uses, you may already be seeing a few of these features.

Relevancy Ranking: Of course, this is where Google excels, yet few of our catalogues rank our search results by where and how often the search term shows up in the record, or the proximity of search terms to one another.

Better Basic Search: New generation catalogues promise to have a basic search function that truly searches all available information, including all parts of the records and other data, like reviews and user-created search terms, or tags.

Advanced Searching: We should expect advanced search options that are easier to understand. Think of how Google’s advanced search gets you to use Boolean logic without even realizing that that’s what you are doing.

Faceting: This is one of the most exciting areas of innovation. Faceting arranges your search results in a host of different ways. It sorts things out for you. Were you looking for a book about that person or by that person? Did you want reviews? What format do you want – a book, a CD, a DVD, an eBook? Once you’ve done a basic search, the interface helps you to browse through all of the options, sorted and ranked.

Spell Checking: You know how it is, especially with young students - spelling is a huge barrier to searching. Even using singular or plural can mean the difference between success and disappointment. Google politely suggests alternate spellings, and gives different options. We should expect the same from our online catalogues.

Similar Searches: You have likely encountered this feature in online bookstores. When I look at an item in Amazon, it tells me that people with similar interests also found these other books interesting. This is good marketing, of course, but aren’t we trying to market the choices in our collections to our library users, too?

Reviews: Many online catalogues already offer this feature. Future generation catalogues may actually make these searchable fields.

User Tagging: You know how it is. Our comprehensive and precise subject headings help to refine our searches. The trouble is, they are not always intuitive, nor do they always capture current and topical terminology. That fact, combined with the lack of full-text searching, is a barrier to searching success. New generation OPACs allow users to add their own search terms. User tags become searchable fields, presenting more facets for finding relevant results. My imagination goes a bit wild about how we could use tagging to create searchable resource lists for students and
teachers. User tagging, combined with disciplined bibliographic description offer the best of both worlds for relevant searching.

**User Reviews and Rating Systems:** New generation OPACs offer opportunities for users to enter their own reviews. Again, these are considered in the search results. Aggregated rating systems let us consider the popularity of a resource amongst users.

**RSS Feeds:** New generation OPACs will allow users to customize a search, and then receive updates on new resources that match their search terms through an RSS notification.

You can have a look at some of these innovations in practice in OCLC’s Worldcat, at [http://www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org).

**More Comprehensive Resource Description**

We know that the sky is the limit when it comes to the search interface, but let’s face it – a search is only as good as the breadth of data that it can access. The fact that our OPACs search the bibliographic record only remains the largest barrier. The ebook revolution may eventually have the collateral benefit of allowing full-text searching of our print collections. In the meantime, we can look forward to the more comprehensive bibliographic description that RDA encompasses.

RDA promises to overcome some of the anachronisms of cataloguing. It removes rules that are really a legacy of the days of the card catalogue – incomprehensible abbreviations originally created to save space on an index card, and the preference for limited access points to minimize the number of cards that had to be produced. RDA moves resource description more fully into the electronic age, describing resources in multiple ways and exploring relationships between resources. The RDA philosophy focuses on the user experience.

The move to RDA has been fraught with some concern, however, and implementation delayed. The head cataloguer in my school district has let me in on a few of the “Excedrin headaches” she has experienced getting her head around the whole thing, and shared links to some rather satirical blog posts on the topic from cataloguing aficionados. Who knew!

The fact remains that changes are afoot. We serve an audience that is the most likely to benefit from these changes. We need to involve ourselves in these issues. Ask questions of district level library support staff about what options are being pursued for your OPAC and your catalogues. Let’s make sure that the user experience is at the heart of all innovation.

**Recommended Reading**

