
Letter

Humor and creativity: Chemists

To the Editor:

Norman D. Stevens asks in his article, "Humor and Creativity: Music," *C&RL News*, April 1989, pp.274-76: "Whoever heard of a funny chemist or chemistry librarian?" Fully realizing that Mr. Stevens is unconsciously (?) needling us to praise by first himself debunking the species (does he have a grant from the American Chemical Society for free publicity?), I fall victim to his lure. Having been married to a funny chemist for more than 33 years, and closely associated with his departmental colleagues for almost as long, I can unequivocally state that chemists have as good and as bad a sense of humor as any other group and are probably far guiltier of punning than most. My experience with chemistry librarians is nil, but science librarians—tempered perhaps by the lightheartedness of physics, biology and geology—have vied successfully with their fellow Oberlin librarians in puckishness, frivolity and sly humor.—*Dina Schoonmaker, Head, Special Collections and Preservation, Oberlin College, Ohio.*

Norman Stevens responds:

Anecdotal evidence, such as that cited by Mrs. Schoonmaker, fails to disprove my original contention about the unfunniness of chemists and chemistry librarians. As associate editor for informational science of the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, and a regular reader of that infamous journal, I am well aware of what passes for humor among chemists even as I note that my fellow associate editors include those with specific responsibility for biochemistry (1) and chemistry (2). Some of it I enjoy but much of it, like much of chemistry, is over my head. As for chemistry librarians I suspect that they are so busy keeping the chemists happy, especially by protecting their departmental libraries from the threat of centralization, that they have little time for creativity and humor. So far, at least, no chemistry librarian, and indeed no science librarian of any kind, has responded to my challenge to submit examples that demonstrate that they too are human. Perhaps Mrs. Schoonmaker, and others, will send along appropriate examples of "puckishness, frivolity and sly humor." If they do, I'll be happy to apologize in a future commentary and compilation of what does exist.—*Norman D. Stevens, 143 Hanks Road, Storrs, CT 06268.* ■■



INNOVATIONS

Using Innovacq to create a subject guide to periodical indexes

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The San Jose State University (SJSU) reference desk is very busy and students often wait in line to get service. SJSU has one main library which serves all students and faculty, and librarians must assist with all types of questions, from business to music. Why not provide students with a tool such as a subject guide to periodical indexes, with which they

could help themselves? The guide would be of assistance also to librarians who might not be familiar with all available indexes and to patrons who want to do an exhaustive search of the periodical literature in a field. In order to meet these needs, we created the *Subject Guide to Periodical Indexes* (SGPI).

Goals

SGPI lists our 350-plus indexes and abstracts by broad subject and serves several purposes. As already stated, it allows library patrons to work self-sufficiently when the reference desk is extremely busy. Patrons use the guide to determine one or two main indexes, or to identify several sources in order to complete a thorough search on their topic. Students who might have experience with only a few periodical indexes might otherwise find our index collection overwhelmingly large. The guide is also helpful to temporary librarians, sabbatical replacement librarians who are new to the library, and librarians from other departments who serve on the reference desk only a couple of hours a week. During certain late night hours the reference desk is staffed with only a student assistant who can use the SGPI in helping patrons.

Decisions and procedure

1. *Database construction.* First, we decided what kind of data would be needed in the final form: subject heading, index title, call number, format of index (print, online, CD-ROM, etc.), and shelf location. We then explored software that would allow us to create an appropriate database and corresponding printed lists by subject. After examining dBase III+ and similar packages, we compared the advantages and disadvantages of using the library's automated serials control system, Innovacq. Innovacq provided an existing database with authority-controlled entries of almost all of the SJSU Library indexes and abstracts. This meant less time for the data entry person to key in, verify, and proofread data. The database is automatically kept up to date by the Serials Department, and is readily accessible by any library staff without having to learn a new database system. If the creators of SGPI were no longer available, other staff could easily manipulate and update the database.

However, with the use of Innovacq, several aspects of the project could not be realized as originally planned. We were only able to create one new field for each index entry: the subject field. There was no place to enter the carefully gathered data regarding index format or shelf location. Also, the final print product did not appear exactly as we had envisioned. However, the advantages of using an existing authoritative local database were judged to outweigh the disadvantages.

2. *Compilation of subject headings.* The index database was modeled on an existing, outdated drawer of catalog cards which listed indexes by subject. This catalog was unbalanced, with some subjects having many more indexes listed than others and with varying degrees of subject specificity. A few subjects, such as "dewatering," were no longer of interest to SJSU patrons. In order to create a subject listing which reflects most topics cur-

rently requested at the reference desk, new headings were added. We referred to the university's catalog for a listing of majors, and also used selected DIALINDEX categories. All of these subject headings, outdated or not, were combined in a master list. An alternative would have been to ask individual reference librarians (who at SJSU all have collection development subject specialties) to create their own categories.

3. *Data collection.* Should the project coordinators create the index lists by subject themselves or should they rely upon the expertise of the subject specialists? We saw no advantage to the former approach as our colleagues were quite willing to cooperate with us on this project. We circulated the new subject heading list, and asked subject specialists to choose the headings which fell within their area. They compiled lists of indexes and abstracts for each subject, indicating the two or three most important titles. They were free to add new subject headings or to delete no longer useful ones. In order to maintain uniformity of response and standardize data, we created a paper form which asked for the subject heading, titles of indexes, call numbers, and format. As explained in a latter section, this data entry form became one of the most crucial aspects of our project.

4. *List of subject headings.* We compiled a listing of all the subject headings used with several cross references from related headings. This was placed in the front of each copy of SGPI, and acts as a table of contents to help users determine relevant headings. There was a total of approximately 120 subject headings plus a large number of cross references.

5. *Data entry.* We obtained a university grant that allowed us to hire a student assistant to enter subject headings into the Innovacq database, and to print and correct the final lists. This took approximately 70 hours. Another student assistant designed a cover for us. The campus duplicating center then duplicated and spiral-bound the 178-page guide.

Problems and future implications

Lack of cataloging and indexing expertise hampered the smooth flow of this project. Several problems with data standardization might have been avoided if we had consulted with members of our Cataloging or Serials Departments as we wrote the data entry form. Most subject specialists used popular names for indexes rather than the authority list of names found in the SJSU list of periodicals (for example, "PAIS" instead of "Public Affairs Information Service. Bulletin"). We had to correct all popular titles, because the index title had to match the Innovacq authority list exactly for our data entry person to choose the correct Innovacq record. Also, to find the proper index by call number Innovacq demanded proper spacing. Most data entry forms had been returned by subject specialists with

no spacing at all in call numbers. Catalog librarians would have been able to warn us of these authority and database problems, and we would then have written the data entry form to ask for information directly usable by our student assistant without the added step of our having to make corrections.

Catalogers would also have advised that we write our lists by index rather than by subject heading (i.e., list subjects for indexes rather than indexes for subjects), so the student assistant would have to modify each Innovacq record only once. This would have cut down on the hours required for data entry. The Cataloging Department could have been of great help in determining specificity levels for subject headings. Some subject specialists (the "lumpers") created only a few long lists with quite general subject headings, while others (the "splitters") broke their topics into several short lists of more specific subjects. This created the potential for confusion on the part of librarians and patrons who would not know whether to look under more general or specific subject headings for their topic.

To alleviate this problem partially, we included a number of cross references in our table of contents list of subject headings.

Future implications include the possibility of transferring SGPI to disk, with Innovacq's permission, so patrons could access the information either in print or via a computer located in the reference area. This might also allow us to modify its printed format in order to create a more attractive final product.

Conclusion

We have observed several students and librarians using the *Subject Guide* during the semester it has been available in our reference area. It is serving our original purposes of increasing patron independence, assisting new librarians in becoming familiar with the index collection, and helping student assistants work with patrons during late hours when librarians do not staff the reference desk.

A faculty retreat: Coping with challenges

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After an unusually hectic, stressful Fall Semester working with 16,000 undergraduate students, the public services librarians in the humanities/social sciences library at Washington State University decided they needed to assess priorities and clarify future directions. The unit's first retreat presented an opportunity to discuss recent problems and successes as well as a chance to consider long-range issues which could not be dealt with adequately during busy weekly faculty meetings. It also provided time to analyze and recoup losses, encouragement to improve communication with colleagues, and the challenge of anticipating future developments which will affect academic librarianship.

When the idea of a faculty retreat was initially suggested, strong support was expressed by librarians and unit administrators. Plans were made to meet during Christmas Intersession when classes were not held. An additional librarian was hired to staff the reference desk so that all humanities/social sciences librarians could attend the day-long retreat. To avoid distractions, it was agreed that an off-campus community meeting room would be preferable. As Christmas approached, topics for discussion were proposed. An agenda was devel-

oped, and participating librarians were solicited to serve as discussion leaders for the following topics:

1. The future of reference service.
2. Collection development issues.
3. External access to the WSU Libraries' online catalog and effects on our services.
4. User instruction in the future.
5. New automation needs.
6. Professional development of librarians.
7. Organizational, budgetary, and personnel constraints/opportunities.
8. Directions for the coming year.

Discussion of the future of reference service began with a review of social, demographic, and academic variables which are projected to impact our profession in the foreseeable future. Lively and varied comments were presented on current reference issues, including discussion of the never-ending necessity for balancing conflicting demands for time among reference, collection development, user education, database searching, and other responsibilities. Also discussed was the possibility of an Information Desk staffed with paraprofessionals, streamlining reference duties, office hours for librarians, improving the accuracy of reference