

The lens

A tool for learning databases and improving searching skills

Research conducted by Monash University in 2000–2001 indicated that there was a need for librarians to develop their skills in information retrieval using electronic databases. The Lens project aims to address this need.

The project is funded by the State Library of NSW and the National Library of Australia and involves Charles Sturt University and Monash University. The researchers are members of Information and Telecommunications Needs Research, a group which is a joint initiative of Monash and Charles Sturt University. They are Dr Kirsty Williamson (Monash and Charles Sturt University), Marion Bannister (Charles Sturt University), and Dr Steve Wright and Louise Stockfield from Monash University. Louise was, until recently, the research administrator of the project.

'Evaluation of the useability of electronic library resources', a study conducted by Monash University and based on Victoria's Gulliver Program, led to the present Lens project. The former study involved focus groups, database trials, and interviews with ten patrons in each of four Victorian public library services. A key finding was that the four electronic databases studied (World Magazine Bank, Health Reference Center — now Health and Wellness Resources Center — Custom Database and Electric Library), were not being used to an optimal level. This was largely because, at that time, many librarians were not sufficiently familiar with the databases either to be comfortable about using them on behalf of their clients, or to instruct clients in their use. Anecdotal evidence from about the same time period (2000–2001) was that the situation was similar in New South Wales public libraries.

The Lens project is being undertaken in three stages:

- 1 The searching strategies and skills of professional librarians were observed; and qualitative methods were used to investigate the librarian's perceptions about their present skills and training needs. Twenty-six library staff at three venues were involved in this stage of the project.
- 2 Training modules were developed and evaluated using action research with the original sample.
- 3 Adjustments to the modules based on feedback from the second round and further evaluation with a new cohort of librarians.

After the first stage, the researchers concluded that the key aims of training should be: to facilitate understanding of what are the common elements or problems in using all databases; and to develop an ability to understand the idiosyncrasies of different databases.

To achieve those aims, the tool, called a 'lens', was developed and used as the focus of training in the second round of the fieldwork. The purpose of the tool is to bring the common elements of databases, along with their distinctive features, into sharp focus for the librarian. A by-product of the lens is a standardised 'cheat sheet' which can be used as a reference desktop reminder of the critical searching strategies and defaults for each database.

Two training modules are being developed, both making use of the Lens. The first is a self-paced package for experienced librarians; and the other, adapted from it, is a train-the-trainer module which is focused more as a refresher course on generic searching skills. It is envisaged that 'trained trainers' will deliver training to other library staff in face-to-face situations. Both modules ideally will include inbuilt self-assessment exercises and examples, and provide the opportunity for ongoing trainer/mentor feedback and support.

The second stage of the project is now complete, and the third stage has begun. It is expected that the project will be completed by the end of 2002. For further information, contact Kirsty Williamson: kirsty.williamson@sims.monash.edu.au or Marion Bannister: mbannister@csu.edu.au

Dr Kirsty Williamson and Ms Marion Bannister

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