

Who You Gonna Call? [Interlibrary loan and cooperation]

St. Peter School Hilites, Nov 1990

Over the space of a single month last year, I was asked the following reference questions by St. Peter High School students and the staff:

- Can I get a copy of the movie *Inherit the Wind*?
- What's the difference between "persuade" and "convince"?
- On what coin did the words "In God We Trust" first appear?
- Can you locate a short story by Jon Hassler which appeared in a woman's magazine about 10 years ago? I don't remember the name of the story or magazine.
- How do you make a medieval crossbow?
- Can I get a recording of Poe's short stories?
- How do you say "good luck" in Spanish?
- How do you change the print size in the *PrintShop* computer program?
- Can I get some books on "desertification"?
- What city had the first black mayor?
- What was the religion of James I?
- What were some books published during Grant's administration?

Believe it or not, all these information requests were filled. Many of the questions I could deal with using the materials in the high school media center. Having had eleven years of experience answering questions like these, I'm sure some of my quicker responses must have seemed to students like I was pulling a rabbit out of my hat. (My auto mechanic still has that effect on me!) I know my building resources well and can milk them for all they are worth.

But there are times when I can't provide the information, or the requested materials are not in our collection. (Not only has the rabbit escaped, but I can't even find the hat.) That's when interlibrary cooperation benefits your children. I call SMILE-Hotline.

All three St. Peter School media centers are members of SMILE - the Southcentral Minnesota Inter-Library Exchange. Through SMILE your third grader has access to as many resources as the oldest, longest-tenured, gray-haired professor at Gustavus Adolphus College.

Two large local area catalogs are easily accessed directly in the high school media center. The collections at GAC and MSU can be searched by computer using a modem using the same commands the terminals in the actual libraries use. These two libraries, as well as over a dozen other state university and state government libraries, are all a part of a library network called

MSUS/PALS. As members of MSUS/PALS, these libraries are obligated to provide interlibrary loans of certain materials.

St. Peter students can also search the catalog of all area public libraries which are a part of the Traverse de Sioux system (TdS). TdS includes among its members the public libraries in St. Peter and Mankato. Right now the TdS catalog is on microfiche in the high school media center, but the public libraries are in the process of automating their catalogs. Soon the microfiche will be obsolete, and students will have modem access directly to the public library catalog, like we currently have with the university system.

One additional source of information available to your children (and you) is MiniTex. This state-run service locates and sends photocopies of magazine, newspaper, and journal articles on request. This is an invaluable resource for finding information about out-of-way subjects - even 10-year-old short stories by Jon Hassler!

SMILE also provides a "call-in" reference service for area librarians and media specialists when we get a question we can't answer locally. It's a service which I've used many times. SMILE also coordinates delivery of materials from one library to another. Our town has delivery two days a week.

There some serious drawbacks to the interlibrary loan system. First of all, students and teachers have to plan ahead. It might take up to 2 weeks for an item to get here, longer if it has been checked out or placed on reserve at its home library. Students and teachers (and media specialists) find this frustrating. Also libraries may restrict the loan of some types of materials - videotapes, for example. And finally, no school media centers have their collections in these larger systems. The material your children can get through interlibrary loan will be mostly geared for college and adult learners.

All three problems, I believe, will lessen in time. Technology will speed up delivery of information as telecommunication networks are set up. The cost of videotapes and other kinds of audio-visual materials is dropping, and libraries will be treating it less and less as "special material." And yes, SMILE is working on getting school library/media center collections included in the public library data base so that more age appropriate materials can be borrowed from other schools.

Interlibrary loan will never replace strong local collections. Students and teachers need readily available materials which support the curriculum. Students need to be lured into reading by holding books with bright covers and interesting pictures in their hands. And some items will always be of such high use and expense that libraries will never be able to lend them.

But for students and teachers who plan ahead, there are huge amounts of information and resources waiting to be tapped...right now. Even directions for making a medieval crossbow!

Please call me if you have questions about SMILE or inter-library loan.

Media PostScript

Most educators feel students who have the greatest access to computers are the most educationally fortunate. However, Tom Snyder, an educational software developer, envisions a time when this might not be the case. As a part of a speculative timeline, he writes for a 1999 entry:

“A presidential commission has been established to study the growing inequity in computer allocation. Apparently, most computers are being used to deliver instruction to poor kids in the inner-city schools, putting these students at a clear disadvantage. All the best jobs and places in incoming college classes are going to applicants who were ‘fully teacher taught.’”
from “Technology, Trends, and Gizmos: A Timeline for the '90s and Beyond” *Technology & Learning*, September 1990, 92-98.