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## Introducing Teachers to Library Databases

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# Introducing Teachers to Library Databases

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“Do you believe?” he cried.  
“If you believe,” he shouted to them, “clap your hands; don’t let Tink die.”  
Many clapped.  
Some didn’t.  
A few little beasts hissed.

—from J.M. Berrie’s *Peter Pan*

## Seeing is Believing

Have you ever tried to tell a patron about your library’s databases? If you have, did it feel more like you were describing an imaginary friend than describing a valuable library resource? And when the almost inevitable “so they’re on the Internet?” question was asked, did you feel like you were describing an imaginary friend, who also lived in an imaginary place?

Explaining the usefulness of databases in a vacuum can be hard. Patrons who are unfamiliar with databases usually need a demonstration in order to see their value. Unfortunately, this need for a one-on-one interaction limits the visibility of the resource. It would be impractical to assail everyone who walks into the library with database instruction, but how else can databases be discovered?

Our solution was to offer database classes to the general public. We already had a handful of basic computer classes and adding another seemed like an elegant solution. As the months went on it seemed like we could not offer enough basic Internet and e-mail skills classes, but our database sessions were poorly attended. It was clear that our current plan was not working. We needed a new, more effective way, to make patrons aware of this important resource.

## Leveraging a Good Idea

At the 2009 OLA conference we had the good fortune to attend a presentation by Peggy Bryan. Peggy is a librarian for the Whitman County Library in southeast Washington. With the help of her staff she created a database class designed for the teachers in her community. However, initiating a library class for teachers can be difficult. While their connections to the local community make them a desirable group to work with, their busy schedules can often hinder a meaningful programming.

### Outcomes of Peggy’s Program:

- In the first year they had a 900% increase in database use
- They had a 400% increase the second year
- They experienced their most successful School Library Card Drive
- Received free, (and positive) local press dedicated to their achievements
- Built relationships with educators and schools



The genius behind Peggy’s program was that she took the motivations of her audience into account. Rather than offering a class that the teachers could take for fun, Peggy created a class that teachers could take for credit toward their continuing education requirements. Peggy was able to leverage this simple idea with great success. With the legitimacy of a “for credit” class, she was able to gain instant acceptance and provide a tangible and visible benefit to the teachers in her community.

We wondered ... could we reproduce something like that here in Oregon? Fortunately for us, Peggy is as generous as she is inspiring. When we asked her if she had any advice she sent her entire lesson plan and all of her promotional material.

### **Our Program**

The first thing we did was call our local Educational Service District (ESD). We told them about Peggy’s program and explained how we would like to try something similar. When describing the program we made sure to mention that we were introducing a valuable resource that could also save the school district money and travel time for the teachers. That simple phone call resulted in an invitation to present our idea at the next meeting of the school principals and superintendents.

Due to technological limitations at the meeting, we were forced into the difficult task of describing the databases. Our handouts and bookmarks were well received, and our descriptions of the databases stayed fairly lucid. However, the most persuasive part of our argument was that such a program had already proved successful in Washington.

After several months we received a call from the ESD. They wondered how soon we could send over a class outline for their approval. We sent it right away, but said we would need a month to prepare the class materials and secure a viable venue.

While designing our program, we learned that Oregon teachers need to accumulate Professional Development Units (PUDs) in order to retain their teaching credentials. Each classroom hour equals one PUD. We wanted our class to be as accessible and as useful as possible so we decided a one hour session would be best. This decision also helped us focus on what we wanted to cover and carefully consider the reasons we find databases so useful.

### **Goals of the Presentation**

#### **Our Main Purpose:**

- Demonstrate the usefulness of the library databases

#### **Primary Objectives:**

- Teach the basic skills needed to get the most out of the databases
- Articulate why these resources enhance student performance
- Show how teachers can use these resources to develop their professional skills

#### **Desired Outcomes:**

- Increase database use by students and teachers
- Set groundwork for continued collaboration with schools



While working on our presentation, we began to search for a location to teach the course. For the sake of convenience, we wanted to hold the class shortly after school ended. Our library was not a viable option because our computers are busiest at this time. Following a short brainstorming session, we decided to give our local community college a call. Since our class was free and would benefit the community, they were more than happy to provide a space for us.

Our last step was getting the word out to the teachers. Because we were in cahoots with the ESD, we were able to take advantage of their infrastructure. We announced our program through the ESD's e-mail lists, and used their courier to deliver a poster and fliers for all the teachers. As an extra precaution, I called the schools and gave the school secretary or the mail room staff a heads up.

With our announcements made, our course work prepared and our venue secure, we were ready for the presentation.

### The Presentation

Our presentation material and outline can be viewed online (<http://www.tillamook.plinkit.org/eshelf-research/teacherdatabaseclass/>) and should give you a good idea of how we proceeded, so I will not go into too much detail here. However, I would like to share some of the more effective ideas we used.

#### List of Databases Covered

- Kids InfoBits
- Student Resource Center Gold
- Gale Virtual Reference Library
- Educator's Reference Complete

- We brought all of our print Gale encyclopedias that were included in the database. We also hauled in a full year's worth of any print journals we still had that were also covered electronically. The amount of material made a strong impression on our audience and helped give the electronic databases a physical presence.

- We printed up complete title lists of all the material covered in the databases. This was also impressive, and made for a good visual aid.

- We only presented features that we felt a first time user might find useful, and possibly interesting. We made no mention of Boolean operators or automated article notifications, and instead focused on keyword searching, limiting to full text and the importance of picking the best database for your search topic.

- We did not use Power Point slides. In my opinion, the only thing with less visual pizzazz than a database is a slide of a database!

### How Does This Reflect a Change in Reference

With more reference materials becoming invisible to the naked eye, the need to make patrons aware of them becomes increasingly important. We, as librarians, need to take active roles in promoting these resources. Many important user groups are either unaware of, or do not fully appreciate, the benefits that databases provide. Hopefully our program will help you generate some ideas to try at your library. And like Peggy, we are happy to share more. Just ask!

