

EDITORIAL

That information studies education is being transformed is well evidenced by the emergence of new or radically restructured courses. Change, of course, is in no way peculiar to information studies; all disciplines with an active research base are prone to change since the fruits of the research sooner or later become fundamental areas of study. The pace of the change, though, is directly related to the level of activity of the research and those disciplines associated, as information education is, with information technology, which has an extremely active research and development sector, are going through quite a revolutionary period.

Courses are altered, though, on other than intellectual grounds. The current economics of the academic market place dictate that departments which fail to at least maintain their student numbers face an uncertain future. The new or radically designed course provides the opportunity to demonstrate the appropriateness of the offering to a student body seemingly more inclined than their predecessors to select courses on the basis of up-to-dateness, appropriateness to highly-paid employment etc.

The prospect of a diminishing student body, as is the case in a number of countries, taken along with the blurring of the edges between disciplines, particularly in the information technology area, has led in quite a few cases to the information studies departments which have evolved from the old library schools, facing competition for students from other disciplinary areas. The demise of the institutional basis of information education allows more flexibility, but assists in making the differentiation between departments less clear. The response to academic competition of introducing new and revised courses seems a perfectly sensible and positive one. What, though, should be the response to the Intelligent Information Facility (II-facility)?¹ To quote from the sales leaflet:

“It acts as the gateway between you and the information you seek. You need never communicate directly with a database if you do not wish to. You can make your information request to the II and let it do the work for you.

What II does is to translate your information needs into the commands necessary to retrieve the answers from a range of databases. It also offers you a choice of which database you want to have searched and even (where possible) the choice of supplier for a particular database service.”

In other words, if the leaflet is to be believed, II does away with the need for an intermediary and therefore the need to spend time and money on teaching students

¹ Details of II can be obtained from INFOTAP, B.P. 262, L-2012 Luxembourg, Luxembourg.

to do online searching. It is not difficult to imagine what the typical reactions of information practitioners and online searchers to these claims will be. Many will feel that the whole area of information studies is under threat and will argue vehemently that online searching cannot be done efficiently and effectively without a highly trained intermediary. Certainly a strong case can be made along these lines but perhaps a more constructive response would be recognize that a lot of online searching is, in fact, largely clerical and therefore capable of being performed by a machine and that online work is only a part of the information discipline.

Online searching has received a lot of attention from many quarters in recent years and while any attention in the information area is to be applauded, one result has been that resources (both human and financial) have been diverted from other areas, arguably more critical than online searching, within the information discipline. The long term future of information studies as a discipline surely lies on building on the fundamental areas such as index language construction, information use analysis etc. If research in these areas is neglected, as it has been in recent years, the discipline runs the very real risk of losing identity and becoming absorbed into some other discipline. Perhaps, then, the response to II and whatever other products it subsequently spawns should be to recognize that they present an opportunity to reassess the information discipline and its nature in the new technological age.

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