

## **PARLEZ-VOUS TECHNOLOGIE?: TEACHING INFORMATION SKILLS IN A SECOND LANGUAGE\***

**By Claire Spaven and Anne Murphy**

**Abstract:** Librarians are in charge of teaching information skills to post-secondary students in a government-funded college system in the United Arab Emirates. In developing a curriculum to meet the information needs of nearly 10,000 English-as-a-foreign-language students, librarians first had to review their own assumptions of their customers' existing information literacy skills. Among these assumptions were that students understood and appreciated library "culture" and knew how to find information in their native language. Other cultural differences such as the role of books in society, learner-centered versus rote learning styles and education as a life-long process were examined in developing the curriculum. This paper will examine some of the obstacles faced, lessons learned and offer advice to other librarians teaching information skills to students in a second language.

### **Introduction**

Teaching information skills to any library newcomer is a daunting task. Subject classification and orderly displays seem second nature to information professionals, but are a whole new world for those with limited library experience. Now add to that scenario instruction in a second language and you have the situation more than 10,000 post-secondary school students face in the United Arab Emirates. Not only are they expected to become independent learners in a relatively short time frame, but are expected to understand abstract concepts explained in English, a language few of them speak outside the classroom.

The authors have been involved in teaching information skills to college-level Emirati women since 1997. In developing suitable curriculum for our students, we have had to re-examine our views on librarianship and on lifelong learning. In this paper, we will share some of the internal and external challenges we faced, how we attempted to overcome them and share some advice for others teaching information skills in a second language.

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## **Our Environment**

We work for the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the United Arab Emirates, a small and oil-rich country in the Saudi peninsula. The government-funded system provides free post-secondary programs in English to more than 10,000 Emirati men and women in engineering, business, health sciences and communication technology. Based upon the Canadian community college model, the emphasis is on teaching practical skills that prepare graduates for the work force or additional education. By the time a student graduates from a two-, three- or four-year program, he or she is expected to "have the linguistic ability to function effectively in an international environment; the technical skills to operate in an increasingly complex technological world; the intellectual capacity to adapt to constant change..."<sup>1</sup>

As part of this information skills mandate, all first-year students receive instruction on how to use and analyze several information sources, including the online public access catalogue, CD-ROM products such as Encarta and the Internet. Each of the system's twelve learning resource centers also keeps such traditional print reference works as encyclopedias, almanacs, dictionaries, directories and telephone books. We have found that students who receive a good grounding in information skills during their first year build on that foundation in subsequent years with refresher or subject-specific courses.

Information skills courses are taught by librarians with a Master of Library Science degree or equivalent and at least three years of public service experience. Working with English teachers, we instruct students on how to use a variety of information tools. Students complete practical exercises to reinforce a particular information skill such as using an encyclopedia. For example, students are asked to find the population, area and official languages of a number of countries using the most appropriate source. While the Internet is often a student's first choice, we have found that exposing them to both print and online sources demonstrates that the World Wide Web is not always the best or quickest source.

Now that we have three years of Middle East experience on which to draw, we can tell you about some of the challenges we faced, how we overcame them and offer some tips to others in similar situations. We will divide the challenges into external ones from our client base and internal ones from our diverse backgrounds. Some of the challenges are ongoing. We view them not as obstacles but opportunities for growth.

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Colleges of Technology Mission Statement

## **External Challenges**

### **Level of English**

All students entering the Higher Colleges of Technology have studied English in elementary and secondary school. However much of that instruction has been by teachers who speak English as a second language themselves. For many students, English is not used outside the classroom, so they have little opportunity to practise their second-language skills. Conversely, some students have been educated in private schools or travel frequently to English-language countries and have a near-native level of English. Male students tend to have more opportunities outside the family to travel and meet non-Arab speaking people than women do. Students at HCT are segregated according to gender and are streamed into two programs based on the English results from the final year of secondary school and a diagnostic test written as they enter our system.

In order to immerse students in an English-only environment, faculty and supervisors are recruited mostly from outside the Arab-speaking world. Because the bulk of information skills instruction is completed during the students' first year, we use simple language and lots of pictures to show them how to use various programs. When we teach computer-based skills such as searching the Internet or using a CD-ROM product such as Encarta Encyclopedia, we use a data projector to show students what their screens should look like. Once the students are online, we walk around and troubleshoot problems.

Finding suitable materials is an ongoing process. After each term, information skills instructors sit down and talk about what worked and what did not and revise the course as necessary. For instance, a lesson on parts of a book was changed when students completed a generic fill-in-the-gap exercise (another term for the name of a book is the \_\_\_\_\_) with the title of a specific book. We divided the lesson in two so that the students completed the generic part before we gave them specific books in which to look for information.

### **Different Levels of Exposure to Technology**

Some of our students have home computers and are already computer literate when they enter our system while others will never have seen, much less used, a computer before. During their first year, all students take a compulsory computer course. As well, teachers in other subject areas encourage students to practice their technical skills by offering a variety of exercises using CD-ROMs, interactive computer programs and Web-based instruction. Peer-to-peer training supplements the formal computer-based instruction as students who have already mastered a computer program explain it to their colleagues.

This peer-to-peer training also applies to navigating the Internet, as students learn from one another the "cool" sites and want to be able to bookmark them. There are a number of advantages to this kind of instruction: students learn about sites which are of interest to them; instruction is in a language and manner which they understand; there is a cascading effect as they pass along their knowledge to others. Conversely, there are disadvantages to peer-to-peer tutoring: students tend to stick to a limited number of topics, which are usually leisure-related; bad habits are passed along and information is not analyzed for authority or bias.

As students become more familiar with computers and the Internet, they sometimes use these skills for non-academic purposes. For instance, some of our students download Hindi movie clips which take up a lot of memory and do not improve their English language skills. They also bring in disks that may contain viruses or illegal programs. To counteract this, all computers are equipped with anti-virus software and illegal programs are deleted on a regular basis. It is a case of balancing the students' need to improve their computing skills with the college's need to have an efficient computer network.

#### Library Culture a New Experience

One of the biggest challenges we faced during our first few months in the United Arab Emirates was realizing that our students were not used to spending time in a library. As a result, students did not know how to find information using the catalogue, speak quietly or keep the library tidy. We tried to instill in our students the importance of returning items on time, not defacing books or magazines and to act like they're in a library, not a zoo. The domed roof of our library does not help matters, as all conversations below it reverberate throughout the rest of the room.

We teach these "library etiquette" skills through formal and informal methods. The formal portion involves answering true and false questions about how to behave in the library. On a more informal basis, we try to demonstrate acceptable conduct by talking to students in a low voice and by returning items to their proper place.

#### New Learning Style

Most of our students come from a teacher-centered, rote-learning environment. What we want to teach them is how to develop life-long learning skills that can be adapted to any situation in which they find themselves. For instance, the "yellow pages" of the telephone book can be used to shop for an item for the home or to see if there are business competitors in the area. Sometimes it is difficult to explain to students that the purpose of many the information skills exercises we give them is not necessarily to find the correct answer within a short time frame, but to add the skill to their repertoire. One of the most gratifying moments we have experienced is when students are able to apply the skills we have taught them in

their own research. After weeks of trying to explain the differences among several reference tools such as an encyclopedia, atlas, almanac and the Internet, our students were able to pick out the most appropriate ones for a "countries-of-the-world" project.

### Limited World Experiences

Many of our students have limited exposure to the outside world that makes finding relevant examples difficult. Using a cookbook as an example of a relational database may be appropriate for a women's college in the West, but it produced blank stares in our college. First of all, few of our students cook as most large families have a maid who does that. Secondly, recipes are handed down orally, so students would not file them under appetizer, main course or dessert in a recipe box or book.

We have found that developing our own materials using situations that students might find themselves in such as booking a trip to another Arabian Gulf country works better than asking them to find out the cost of a train ticket between Devon and Brighton. One of the men's colleges has developed an information skills exercise based on four-wheel drive vehicles which are popular among their student body. We have a selection of women's, business, computer, health and general interest magazines and local newspapers available for students so that they can broaden their knowledge and improve their reading abilities in English. These materials are well-used because they are current and are easy to read or browse.

These are among the main challenges we faced from our client group when we developed our information skills programs. As we worked on these programs, we realized that we had to re-examine our views on librarianship. The next part of this paper will deal with some of the internal challenges.

### **Internal Challenges**

#### Comfort Levels with Technology

With "technology" an integral part of our system's philosophy, we had to look at our own comfort levels with teaching non-print information sources such as the Internet or CD-ROMs. Unlike print sources that rarely vary in format from year to year, electronic products such as Encarta change dramatically between editions. In some cases, we were learning how to use a new software program or CD-ROM only hours before we taught it to our students. We relied heavily on the advice of others who had used the product before or were good at troubleshooting problems. As we gained confidence in our own abilities through practice and honing our lessons, we assessed an electronic information source with the same criteria we used for a print one.

If there is one piece of advice we can offer someone demonstrating how to use a new technology (especially to a culturally sensitive group), it is to make sure you do not attempt a "live" demonstration using suggestions from your students. One of us was showing some students the Disney World web site when one of participants asked that we look at the wedding link. While the bride-and-groom images were certainly tame by Western standards, there were a couple of culturally inappropriate items (champagne and a bare-armed bride) for Muslim students.

### Speaking the Same Language

Although we are both native English speakers and fully-qualified librarians, we found that we used different terminology for the same thing. For instance, Claire, who trained in the United Kingdom, kept saying that students needed a "reader ticket" to check out items. Anne was more familiar with the term "library card." While it was relatively simple to clarify the terms among ourselves, we also had to explain to our students that the loans desk was also the circulation desk. Because other teachers and staff members come from around the world, the students soon become accustomed to different names for the same thing.

### Using Appropriate Language Levels for Patron Group

Our students are a fairly homogeneous group - mostly between the ages of 18 and 25, Emirati citizens and Muslims. However, their language skills in English vary from almost non-existent to near-native speaking. Most of the students we see in first year have a fairly limited English vocabulary, so we have to use photographs, step-by-step instructions and diagrams to augment oral explanations of new concepts. In addition to simple explanations, we also use examples from the students' own experiences. For instance, when explaining the rather abstract concepts of the Library of Congress classification system, we used the example of classifying purchases. Eggs and milk belong together because they are dairy products and need refrigeration while dresses and veils belong together - but not with eggs and milk -- because they are pieces of clothing. We have found that being patient and treating each question as a reference interview help to bridge any communication gap.

### Seeing the Library through the Patrons' Eyes

Of all the internal challenges, the one that we still find most difficult to absorb is that our patrons have an entirely different view of the library than the one with which we are familiar. Because we have been exposed to libraries and books since childhood, we would never think of writing in a library book or tearing out an article on Prince William from a magazine. We know how to behave in a library because we have spent so much time in one as a patron and as a professional. For our students, however, ideas such as unlimited access to the Internet, independent

learning and the freedom to choose a book or video are new concepts. From our vantage point, we may sometimes feel that patrons should be using the resources more wisely. The patron, however, may feel that her need to track down every possible picture of Leonardo Di Caprio is no less important than someone else's need to look up information on parts of a computer.

We are always treading a fine line between making the library so inviting that students are drawn to it and ensuring that it does not become merely a social club. We also are aware that the type of behavior they learn here, especially if it is their first experience in a library, will carry on in subsequent encounters. We have found that other patrons are much harder on noisy or disobedient students than we are. The offending students soon learn through group censure that their actions are inappropriate.

### **Tips**

- \* Make sure information skills are part of the overall curriculum and not an isolated topic. We work very closely with teachers on projects so that the skills students learn in our classes are used throughout the curriculum.
- \* Make sure teachers are on your side and ask how you can help. When teachers understand that you are working together to develop life-long learning skills, they will support you by coming with their students to your classes.
- \* Choose topics of interest to your customer group. For instance, we teach Internet searching skills by showing our female students pages pertaining to weddings while our colleagues at the men's college use four-wheel drive websites.
- \* Revise your curriculum as often as necessary to meet your customers' needs. If a lesson does not work, try to figure out how to improve it and test pilot it.
- \* Network with others who are also teaching information skills in a second language. This can be accomplished in person, by electronic discussion groups or by keeping up with the literature.
- \* Be patient. Remember the first time you tried to communicate to someone in a second language - did that person understand you? Eventually your customers will learn as much as they need to know.

### **Conclusions**

We have learned so much from our students, not only about teaching information skills in a second language but about how other cultures view the work we do. We

have learned to face internal as well as external challenges to help our customers become life-long, independent learners. Most importantly, we have learned that teaching information skills in a second language need not be onerous if we bring the enthusiasm we have for our profession to our customers.

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