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Practice

Librarian Fascination and Student Confusion with "RE" Words

Research, Reference, Resources, and Reserves

Valerie A. Lynn & Bonnie Imler

Valerie A. Lynn is the Head Librarian at Penn State Hazleton, vag3@psu.edu

Bonnie Imler is the Library Director at Penn State Altoona, bbi1@psu.edu

Student confusion regarding the use of library jargon on websites, during instruction sessions, and in conversation is nothing new; however, four commonly used terms have recently lost context both inside and outside of the library setting. Coincidentally, all four words begin with "RE": research, reference, resources, and reserves. By asking our students what they believe these "RE" words mean, we were able to get a clearer indication of their perceptions and specific information needs. We believe that finding a common linguistic foundation with limited library jargon reduces barriers and promotes student comprehension and satisfaction.

Introduction

The motivation for examining these four terms arose from anecdotal incidents with Penn State University students at the Altoona and Hazleton campuses. During previous website usability studies, students volunteered that they would not click on a link or tab labeled "research," because "that is what professors do." After reviewing a number of humanities syllabi at the campuses, we realized that the term research as an adjective or verb has all but disappeared. Paper and project assignments now lack the introductory phrase "research this topic;" the word "research" has been replaced with the verb "find." "Reference" has lost its library-centric definition as our Reference Desks have become Ask Desks or have been subsumed into our Circulation/Service Desks. Moreover, separate reference collections have been absorbed into the circulating collection. Students are still confused by the different definitions for the term "reference." It can mean a source (e.g. dictionary), a citation, or someone a prospective employer contacts to provide a recommendation. "Resources" is often confused or used interchangeably with its cousin "sources." As one student stated, "Resources is a floaty word that can mean almost anything." "Reserves," in the sense of "course reserves," is such an unfamiliar term that even a 20-minute observation at a service desk showed that most students simply stated, "My professor has something here at the library for my class."

Literature Review

We wanted to know if other librarians were experiencing similar shifts in student understanding of commonly used library terms. Discussions related to the use of library jargon and its negative effect on users have continued throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Jargon, defined by Michael Fauchelle (2017), relates to "words that represent complex systems, items, or concepts. Often only understood by specific groups or professions" (p. 612). David Isaacson (1978) acknowledges the importance of professional jargon to communicate effectively within a discipline, but he also cautions that jargon tends to mystify library patrons. In addition, jargon may act as a barrier to patron comprehension, particularly during library instruction sessions and reference transactions (Polger, 2011). To counteract this confusion, several librarians recommend decreasing the use of jargon in handouts and in conversations, particularly reference interviews. Rachael Naismith & Joan Stein believe that, "Librarians cannot rely on the patrons to decipher meaning from the context" (Naismith & Stein, 1989, p. 551). A study conducted by Norman Hutcherson (2004) specifies that students understand common library terminology (e.g. plagiarism, research, and copyright) while Kimberly O'Neill and Brooke Guilfoyle (2015) found that the word "reference" as a service point continues to baffle students.

Allison Benedetti (2017) used the vignette method to collect ideas from UCLA's undergraduates, graduates, interns/residents, academic personnel, and staff to describe library services. Outcomes of the survey suggest that specificity and context are important to students. Librarians need to consider using language the audience can understand. For example, "use simpler language for beginners and more complex terms for users with more experience" (p. 224). Benedetti also recommends that "internal structures and parlance should be translated into user-centered terms or supplemented with descriptions that explain the purpose and possible uses for a variety of audiences" (p. 224). As a result, UCLA's undergraduate library renamed their points of service to exclude the word "reference" in favor of the more user-centered phrases "Inquiry Desk" and "Inquiry Space" (p. 217).

Academic library websites display a vast amount of resources organized to provide optimal discoverability for undergraduates, graduates, faculty, and staff. Each person possesses varying degrees of aptitude locating information on library websites, which can make it difficult to design a universally user-friendly website. Both Barbara Dewey (1999) and more recently Brian Rennick (2019) emphasized the best practice of using jargon-free terminology on library websites. When necessary, terms should include brief descriptions. Another proposed solution is to provide a website glossary of library vocabulary (Gillis, 2017); however, Catherine Ayre, et al. (2006) questioned the effectiveness and use of library website glossaries.

Library vs. Common Definitions

Based on our students' previous reactions to library jargon during instruction sessions and reference interactions, we decided to compare and contrast different definitions for the following "RE" terms: research, reference, resources, and reserves. We consulted two academic library glossaries, [Washington State University (WSU)](bit.ly/2zHitNq) (bit.ly/2zHitNq) and [Cornell University (CU)](bit.ly/2SldvMC) (bit.ly/2SldvMC), as well as three online dictionaries, the [Oxford English Dictionary (OED)](oed.com) (oed.com), [Merriam-Webster Dictionary (MWD)](merriam-webster.com) (merriam-webster.com), and [Urban Dictionary (UD)](urbandictionary.com) (urbandictionary.com). Our desire to include the UD is based solely on its informal definitions and descriptions that, we believe, appeal to some of our students. These definitions are crowdsourced and approved by volunteer UD editor votes.

Research

The OED, MWD, WSU, and UD definitions for "research" were quite similar in nature with no real meaning variation: A methodical investigation with the goal of adding to the knowledge base or topic. The UD provided a

tongue-in-cheek illustration of research by using it in a sentence: "(see: Wikipedia) I was doing some "research" on 17th century painters last night." CU did not include the term "research" in its library website glossary.

Reference

The OED and MWD "reference" definitions agreed with each other: Consulting a source for information. The CU and WSU glossary definitions were similar and library-centric: A library department with personnel and collections to help with research needs. UD defined the term "reference" as follows: "When an individual makes an attempt to hipe [sic] up there [sic] linguistic intelligence around others to camouflage the fact that they haven't a breeze what there [sic] talking about."

Resources

Again, the OED and MWD "resources" definitions were similar: A source of support. The politest definition from UD was: "a person who is defined as departmental cog for a business/company." CU provided a library-centric definition: "An online site that provides access to a large number of library resources (indexes, journals, and reference materials, for example), library services, and information…" WSU did not include the term "resources" in its library website glossary.

Reserves

The first "reserves" definition in both the OED and MWD were related to something saved for a particular purpose, specifically military troops. Both CU and WSU contained similar information about an area set aside for specific library material identified by teaching faculty. As expected, UD was the outlier: "When a boy talks to you and treats you like a girlfriend but won't ask you to be his girlfriend, so he gives you the title "bestfriend" [sic]."

After reviewing these definitions, it became apparent that these words could act as barriers and possibly contribute to a breakdown in communication between librarians and students. With this in mind, we designed a simple terminology study to determine how the use of these "RE" words affected our students.

Simple Study

We decided that the most direct method to ascertain student understanding of the four "RE" words was to ask them for their own definitions. Our library websites contain the four "RE" terms, and they are used during instruction sessions and reference interactions; therefore, we structured the paper-based study to reflect these words as they appear on our websites.

This informal study was conducted at the Reference Desk of the Penn State Altoona campus in April 2019. The campus population (3,400) is largely undergraduate, and the vast majority of participants were in the traditional student age range of 18-22. Thirty participants volunteered for the study, largely enticed by the basket of reward candy bars prominently displayed on the desk.

The study had two parts, and both were completed within five minutes. In the first part, the participants were individually given a photocopied sheet with space designated for each of the four words and the following directions: "Please write what each word means to you. Do not use any outside sources (books, phones, computers, etc.)."

The definition results were telling. The responses for "research" most often included a version of searching (e.g. obtaining, looking up, discovering, investigating) for a variety of information (e.g. news, topics, sources). "Reference" encompassed library and non-library definitions, such as "source of information," "someone who brings

your name up," and "to suggest something." "Resources" was defined as "where to find information" with some participants providing examples of direct sources, such as books, computers, and librarians. Twelve out of 30 participants could not give a definition of "Reserves." Student definitions of the four RE words appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Student definitions of RE words

RE-Word	Similar to Library Definitions	Outliers
Research	Searching for information	Knowledge Progress History Computers
Reference	Source of information Citing sources	Someone who brings your name up To suggest something
Resources	Places where information is obtained	A place where everything is in it Providing credibility
Reserves	Putting something on hold	The leftover information that may not have been used in research but still helped you along the way What you have if a reference isn't reliable

The second part of the study was similar to classic card-sort testing. Participants were asked to think of website links as doors. They were presented with three sheets of paper; each sheet of paper contained one of the following headers:

- I know exactly what would be behind this door,
- I might know what would be behind this door,
- I have no idea what would be behind this door.

Participants also received fourteen sticky notes randomly displayed; each sticky note contained a widely used word or web-link phrase from our library websites. The common links chosen for the sticky notes were a mixture of specific and broad terms. The "RE" words were represented as they most often appear online. "Research" normally stands alone as a link or tab. "Reference" usually appears as "Reference Shelf" or "Online Reference Shelf." "Resources" is regularly delineated by web audience, such as "Student Resources." Finally, "Reserves" is frequently seen as "Course Reserves." Participants were asked to place each sticky note on the respective sheet that best matched their understanding (refer to Figure 1 example). After the participant finished, the librarian reviewer indicated sticky note placement on the reverse side of the definition sheets to keep each participant's study responses on the same sheet.
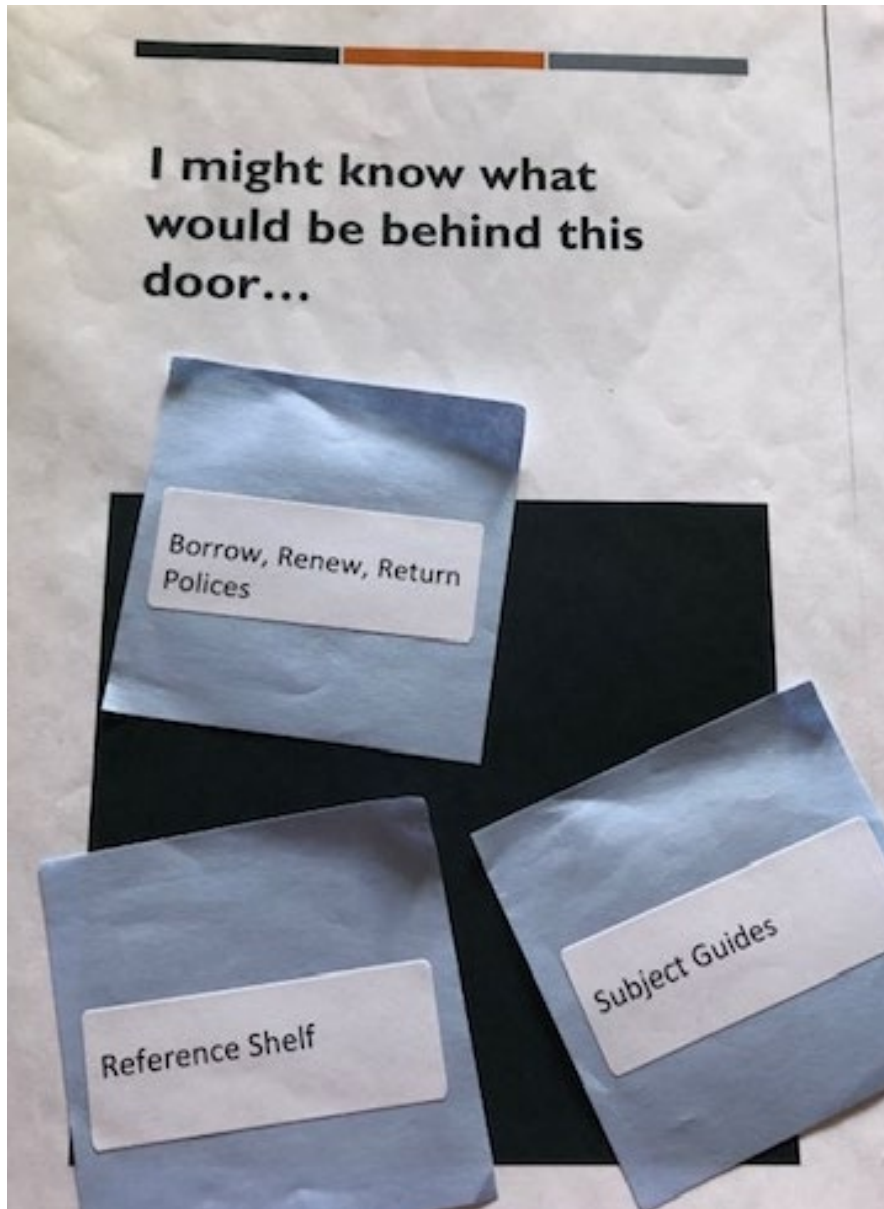
Figure 1

Photo of student response to card-sort test example

While no individual data was collected, it was possible to correlate a participant's definitions with their comfort level at clicking on the "RE" word links. The results of all fourteen terms are displayed in Figure 2. Of the four "RE" words, Course Reserves and Reference Shelf had the greatest return of "No Idea" responses.

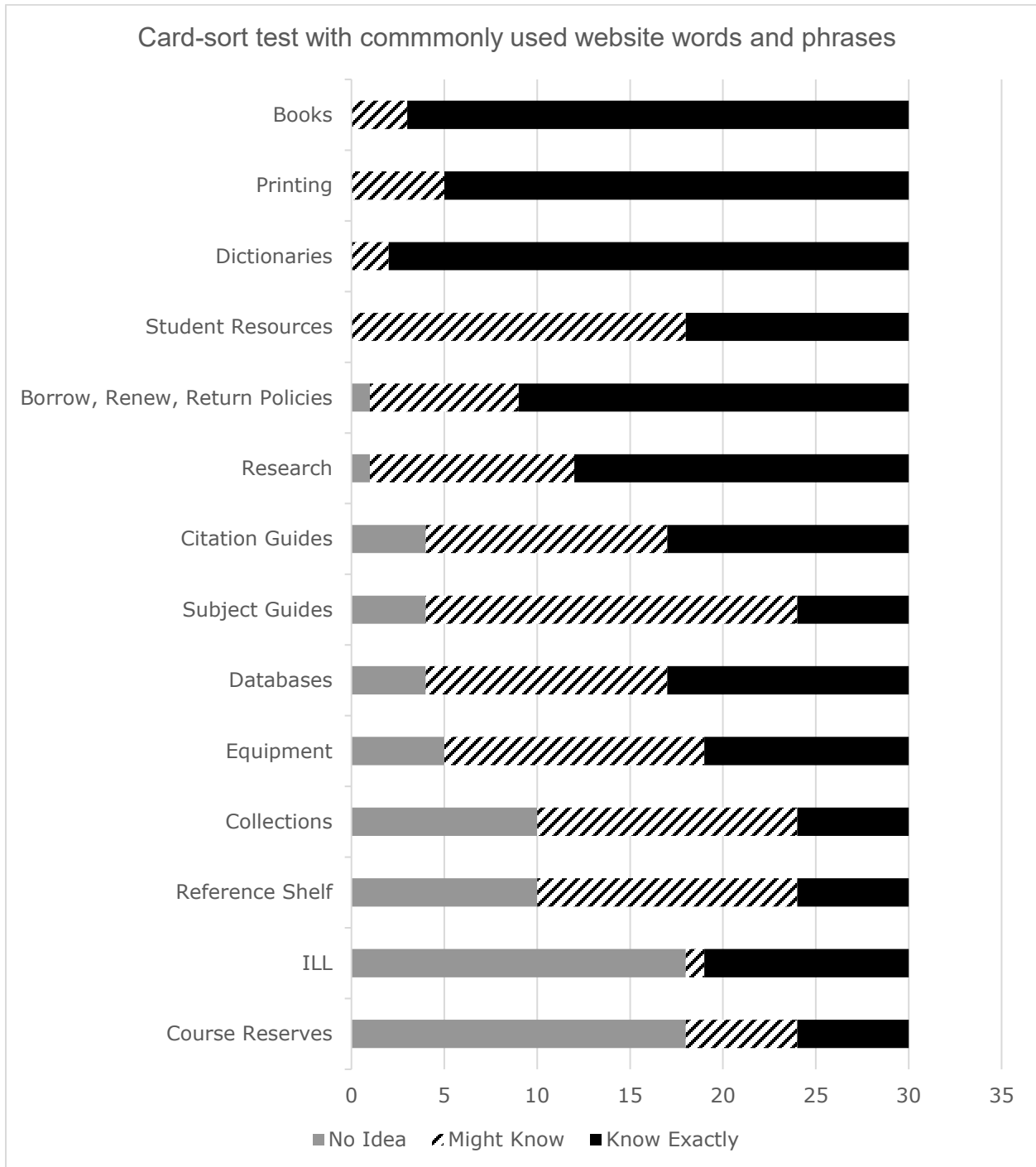Card-sort test with commmonly used website words and phrases

Figure 2

Card-sort test results

Before the study, we thought there may be a need to find synonyms or different phrases to replace the general or broad "RE" words; however, the results of the sticky note findings pointed to a different solution. Logic dictates that

users are more likely to click on links if they "know exactly" what they will find on the ensuing webpage. Participants were most confident with terms that were specific (e.g. books, printing, and dictionaries) and easily recognizable.

Discussion

Perhaps the answer to better website usability and improved communication during instruction sessions and reference conversations is to replace all-encompassing broad library terms with more specific words. Consider using a version of the 80/20 rule: If 80% or more of students are looking for dictionaries and encyclopedias, it might be more user-friendly to have direct Web links to those words versus "Reference Shelf." This strategy allows the very few students searching for almanacs and handbooks to use the search feature. Additionally, if "Books and Articles" covers 80% or more of the need, then why use the term "Research?" If "Items for your Class" would receive far more hits than "Course Reserves," use the more recognizable term. If LibGuides and MLA/APA guides are the top hits in "Student Resources," then add the direct links to the guides. Use your search tool analytics to your benefit. Investigate the terms typed in the website search box from the previous six months. If users are looking for specific terms in the search box, it might indicate that they are not sure what they will find "behind the door" of slightly ambiguous library terms.

Conclusion

The literature and our simple study indicate that students struggle to understand library terminology. Students are easily confused by the use of library jargon during instruction sessions and reference interactions. They also become disoriented on websites when confronted with broad library terms. By using more specific easily-understandable words, we can promote an environment in which learning transpires without unnecessary barriers.

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