

Hillel's Library Cataloging Tool Needs

Gabor Por, 2007-02-18 - LIS 520 - Assignment 2

<http://www.pgabor.com>

One of the first times I visited Hillel, the Jewish student union next to University of Washington's Seattle campus, I noticed that their library room lacked the organization I am used to in well-maintained libraries. Considering my interests in libraries and Judaism I was eager to offer my assistance. I was directed to Ms. K., the building manager. The following is an account of our search for the best approach to satisfy Hillel's need related to cataloging their library.

I went to my reference interview with Ms. K making sure that I follow the RUSA guidelines of showing interest and active listening. (Reference and User Services Association, 2004, p. 1) As part of this approach I wanted to make sure that I let her fully explain the situation, allowing her to express her needs. I was careful not to propose any solution, until I was sure I had understood her comprised needs. I had to actively remind myself of this because I was already familiar with some solutions, but my goal was to maintain objectivity.

Taylor posits that in the pre-search interview the librarian attempts to understand five areas of the client. (Taylor, 1968, p. 178) It may not be entirely applicable to this situation but by following them I could ensure that I covered all important aspects. First, the subject of the interest was easily identifiable: to find the best way to catalog the library. Second, the motivation was professional, Ms. K. was in charge of the building, and she was responsible for maintaining and improving all rooms. Third, her personal skills and characteristics included effective administrative capabilities, service to the community, and minimal knowledge related to librarianship, technology or Judaism. The fourth area, the "relationship of the inquiry to the file

organization" can be summarized by the notion that she was looking for something similar to the extant but incomplete card catalog. The final part, regarding her expectation, I can confidently say that she was open to my suggestions, because I gained her trust as a librarian with technical expertise.

During the interview I tried to use open, neutral questions to make sure I was not pushing her toward any particular direction. To signal my understanding I acknowledged her statements with nods and in general, focused my attention on her. I believe the 20 minute exchange was comfortable, friendly and professional and produced the required results. By the end of the interview I had a strong sense of the needs of the Hillel library.

Some of their needs are not relevant to this paper, such as a person to shelve books and develop and maintain the collection. The front desk person was already responsible for checking the books in and out. These needs, along with the need for cataloging were explicitly mentioned by Ms. K in our interview; she did not need any prompting. We also consulted Rabbi B., the executive director of the organization. It was important to learn how he envisioned the library and what he perceived as its goals. He explained to me that the library's primary function is to provide stimulating readings to patrons of Hillel and provide basic reference for Judaism-related topics. It is not intended to be a research library. He revealed the additional need of adding new books that could engage students and visitors.

During my interview with Ms. K. I suggested to her that we should create a computer-based catalog system. She was at first reluctant to embrace the idea, because of budgetary concerns, her relative lack of technical skills and because she did not immediately see the benefits. I transformed the first two of these into search criteria. I assured her that the solution would fit within her budget and its daily use would not require extensive technical training. I explained

three benefits of having a computer-based system: easier access from multiple locations (e.g. for computers on the building's network, through the web or through handy printouts); accessibility of additional information (culled from information stored in internet enabled databases); and increased searchability of the collection (e.g. by the standard fields of author, title, subject heading, publisher, year of publication or even reviews.) Ms K. embraced both my suggestion of using a computer-based system and to discontinue the paper based card catalog system.

The following list of search criteria is comprised of a combination of the identified needs and my availability and level of knowledge. It is sorted by the order of approximate importance, most important being on top:

1. The solution needs to be free or inexpensive. While I did not receive a specific number an explicit budget from Ms K. she made it clear that it is limited.

2. The tool has to be able handle a custom call number system, because a large portion of the books were already cataloged and labeled using the Weine classification system. That scheme "was originally based on Dewey and intended to be intershelved in day school libraries. It is based on the hierarchy of Jewish life." (Glasser, 2003, p. 2)

3. The tool needs to be able to run on Windows operating system or on a webserver.

4. Using the tool for checking in and out of books has to be simple requiring minimal knowledge. The system has to be easily learnable and has to have an intuitive interface.

5. Adding books should require minimal labor. Typing in the ten-digit ISBN number for the books should be sufficient. The tool would then retrieve the rest of the information from the Library of Congress and other internet sources. The system also needs to be able to handle the 13 digit ISBN numbers that the book industry started to use from the beginning of this year.

6. The Weine call numbers should be exportable to Microsoft Excel format for printing labels for the books.

7. Batch processing during input would be ideal. As mentioned under the fifth point I plan to input the ISBN numbers only. The time of looking up the additional information depends on the speed of the internet connection and the response time of the databases from which information will be gathered. I would prefer not to wait after inputting a single ISBN number, but do the culling of the information in batches during the downtime of the input process. Even waiting for a few seconds after inputting each book can add up.

Based on this set of criteria I set out searching for solutions on the internet using Google's search engine. I opted for this search strategy because I believe that best kind of information (in terms of currency, authority or format) was not necessarily available in books or scholarly publications. It was reasonable to assume that software companies and organizations would have web presence, ensuring that their product was easy to find. I was also hoping to find descriptions of the tools, which would allow me to measure them against the criteria listed above. Furthermore I was planning to test software to find the most suitable one for Hillel. Finally, I chose searching directly on the internet because online reviews could reveal potential flaws.

Using a combination of the keywords of "library," "catalog," "software," and "collection." I found webpages for numerous individual tools. I also found several professionally maintained lists of tools. I made the assumption that reviewing more than one listing would be comprehensive enough to filter out the biases of the editors of any one particular source. I also found it more efficient to consult the lists first as opposed to the individual tools' pages. The four most extensive, accurate, and current lists included two directories (Google Directory, 2007, p. 1) (Open Directory Project, 2007, p. 1), a blog (Open Source Systems for Libraries, 2007, p. 1),

and a post on a discussion forum (Chrisabo, 2006, p 1). I am aware that I was not supposed to consult with librarians for this assignment, however, in this case I believe the librarian community of Webjunction and the maintainers of Open Source Systems blog acted in my query as subject experts and not as reference librarians.

I followed every link from these four sources that fit my criteria. Fortunately these collections presented enough information to eliminate most of the links. Altogether I investigated more than 30 tools directly. Based on what I found I narrowed the list to four software applications (see Appendix.) They all satisfied the four criteria not listed there. I collected more information about these tools, than presented here. But these played no or minimal role in the decision making process, therefore they were not included.

I downloaded, installed and tested the fully functional trial versions these tools on my computer. Once I was familiar with them, I scheduled a second interview with Ms. K. We quickly ruled out ResourceMate, because the appropriate configuration would have cost several hundreds dollars more than the basic configuration. We also ruled out BookCollector because it would comply with our second criterion only through a cumbersome workaround.

In the process of exploring the software, Ms. K. expressed another consideration that we had missed in the first interview. Patrons should be able to search the catalog on the computers in the library room itself. They should be able to do so through an interface that does not allow them to modify the catalog. In other words, the ideal tool has to have at least two levels of access, one for administrators and another for users. This ruled out MediaMan, which is designed for personal collections without additional user levels. It took me an additional 30 minutes of research (mostly consisting of reading documentation and checking user support forums) to find

out that ReaderWare can handle multi-level access. Once I confirmed this we reconvened and finalized the decision: we selected ReaderWare as Hillel's cataloging software.

The next step was to check with Mr. W., Hillel's network administrator, whether the building's computer network allows us to install ReaderWare in a way that it would be available both from the front desk and from the library itself. After he confirmed it, Ms. K. ordered the software. A few days ago I received an email from her, informing me that the tool has arrived; Mr. W. installed, configured and tested it to both of their satisfaction.

In retrospect I believe all parties are happy with the process and its outcome. I recognized the need and took the initiative to help to meet it. I conducted an interview with the representative of the organization who became my client in the process, sharing her understanding of the needs. We also consulted the leader of the organization to get a deeper understanding accurate picture. Based on their input and my perception of the technical possibilities, I conducted a research. I came back with a small, carefully selected number of options that I not only summarized but showed in active usage to the client. An additional criterion was uncovered in the follow-up the demonstration, which led to additional research. I found the best solution and coordinated its purchase with the technical person of the organization. Ms K. expressed her appreciation both verbally and via email and noted the professional way I conducted the project. Furthermore, she was satisfied with the current results because it seemed to satisfy the organization needs. Ms. K. and I both look forward being using the new system and start providing value for the organization and its stakeholders.

Works cited

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Appendix

Comparative table of cataloging software

	ReaderWare	BookCollector	MediaMan	ResourceMate
Price (Criteria #1)	Starts at \$40, depends on configuration	Starts at \$39.95, \$59.95 with support and CD	\$39.95	Starts at \$195, depends on configuration
Custom call # (Criteria #2)	Yes	No, but "location" field can be used for this. It is several clicks away though from the main screen.	Yes	Yes
Data import/input (Criteria #5)	Yes, imports from two dozen sources	Yes, imports from multiple sources	Yes, imports from two sources only (Amazon and Library of Congress)	Yes, imports from multiple sources
URL	readerware.com	collectorz.com	imedian.com	resourcemate.com