Information Literacy for Students of Chemistry

By Philip Barnett, PhD

In most academic subjects information literacy means giving students instruction on finding information and doing library research for a specific course or major. Most of the time this instruction can be successfully given during class meetings.

Chemistry is an exception. Successful information literacy requires a dedicated course. This requirement arises because the language of chemistry is primarily chemical structures. This language must be translated into the everyday language that we use for searching and retrieving information from printed sources and databases.

Currently, about half of the colleges and universities in the U.S. offer dedicated courses in chemical information. In these courses, librarians, rather than chemistry faculty, are the instructors about half the time (Arleen N. Somerville, J. Chem. Inf. Comput. Sci., 38 (6), 1024 -1030, 1998).

Years ago the chemistry information divisions of the American Chemical Society and the Special Libraries Association realized there was a need for a central location where, librarians, teachers of chemical information and chemistry students could obtain guides and tutorials on understanding and using the numerous chemical information sources. These two divisions then initiated the Clearinghouse for Chemical Information Instructional Materials (CCIIM). The CCIIM collects and distributes items that were developed to instruct the use of chemical information sources. These voluntary contributions were created by chemistry or science librarians, chemists, publishers, or others.

Originally CCIIM was a print depository where for a nominal clerical fee, people could purchase copies of these materials. CCIIM is now online at: http://www.indiana.edu/~cheminfo/cciimnro.html. Except for some of the older materials which still exist only in print, these tutorials and guides are publicly available and can be viewed and downloaded at no cost.

Regarding course curricula, the most detailed description of a chemical information course is at: http://www.indiana.edu/~cheminfo/courses/471home.html. On this page are also links to a description of the ultimate in chemical information instruction, a Master of Library Science with specialization in chemical information.

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