

A Case for Browsing: An Empowering Research Strategy for Elementary Learners

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Although the library and information science literature shows that browsing is not the best search strategy for an informed research outcome, the literature does confirm browsing as a best practice strategy for creating lifelong library users when taught to young children in their early grades.

What Is Browsing?

Ronald Rice, Maureen McCreadie, and Shan-Ju Chang have presented an excellent framework for looking at research about information seeking (2001). These authors discussed many forms of accessing and browsing information and the research to inform their findings. In light of such informed research I ask, "Will the process of browsing result in a more informed and

successful information search?" To reach a conclusion, perhaps a definition of the term "browsing" and its many uses should be provided.

According to a Random House dictionary, browsing, in its common use, means to look through or glance at reading materials or goods for sale casually or randomly (Flexner 1987). According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster 1986), browsing is:

1. To look over casually (as a book): skim
2. To skim through a book reading at random pages that catch the eye

3. To look over books (as in a store or library) especially in order to decide what one wants to buy, borrow, or read
4. To casually inspect goods offered for sale usually without prior or serious intention of buying
5. To make an examination without real knowledge or purpose

From these definitions one begins to sense the intriguing nature of browsing, which Rice, McCreadie, and Chang described as sometimes "purposive" and sometimes "non-purposive" (2001, 173). The dictionary definitions include both purposive information-seeking



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behavior (definitions 1, 2) and seemingly non-purposive information behavior (definitions 3, 4, 5). Shan-Ju L. Chang (1995) has stated that browsing has been observed and investigated in the context of information seeking in the library in general and has reached importance as an information search strategy in human-machine interaction in particular (Fisher, Erdelez, and McKechnie 2006, 69).

Browsing as it relates to information seeking is primarily interactive and collaborative with the information source or system and involves less cognitive but greater attention demands than do analytical retrieval strategies. Browsing cannot easily be conducted by an intermediary (Rice, McCreadie, and Chang 2001, 173). Browsing is "informal and opportunistic and depends heavily on the information environment" (Marchionini 1995, 100).

In library studies and information science browsing has been construed as a search strategy, in media research as a viewing pattern, in organization literature as a screening technique, and in consumer research as an entertaining activity (Rice, McCreadie, and Chang 2001, 9).

What Is Browsing's Value?

Two major reviews or studies of browsing in libraries have been conducted: one by R. J. Hyman (1972) and a second by Paul Ayriss (1986). However, the literature is still divided on issues of browsing. A study by Gary S. Lawrence and Anne R. Oja (1980) revealed that 32 percent of the books selected

for use were not specifically sought for research and that 47 percent of users of "unknown items," that is, items not specifically searched for research purposes, were engaged in open-ended browsing (reported in Rice, McCreadie, and Chang 2001, 175). This study further showed that browsers did not appear to see themselves as having a well-articulated purpose and, thus, could not articulate a need for the material.

Historically, browsing as a search strategy has been undervalued by librarians, but researchers in different literatures, including humanists, scientists, and social scientists, have testified to the need for browsing (Rice, McCreadie, and Chang 2001, 175). According to Ayriss (1986), in several use and user studies, browsing has been reported to be an important way for public library users to select fiction and nonfiction books.

Perhaps librarians take issue with browsing because it allows users to bypass the need for librarians' services. Rice, McCreadie, and Chang stated that browsing has been valued as a way to gain access to and examine an information source without the need to specify the intent to intermediaries (e.g., librarians). "Browsing is a more flexible and adaptable means of searching than is submitting queries, and is well suited to distributed environments" (Borgman 2000, 157). It allows navigation and traversal from one access point (such as metadata) to another, as recognizing information is easier than recalling it, especially



when the resource is outside the user's knowledge domain.

Many researchers and librarians have considered browsing to be a unidimensional concept (i.e., measurable on a single scale) and often thought of it as the opposite of "searching" (Herner 1970); the latter was considered purposeful, and the former was not. In the library community, debate continues about the value of browsing. Some view it as having "intellectual purposefulness" while others question the educational value of such a "random" activity (Rice, McCreadie, and Chang 2001, 175).

Personally, I find browsing to be a very satisfying extracurricular activity. I enjoy looking serendipitously through the stacks and suddenly finding a gem that I would not have discovered on purpose. (Nothing is more rewarding than finding that bargain hidden in the sales racks!) One could say my browsing sessions in the stacks are informed and successful information searches because they lead to a satisfying and rewarding conclusion. If I had been searching with a purpose I might have overlooked something special. At this point, one might ask: "Is there anything wrong with selecting materials that probably were not chosen on purpose? Just because there is no

purpose for these materials will they be deemed worthless selections?" Often non-purposeful information proves to have some unanticipated purpose; in such a case the process of browsing has led to an informed and successful information search.

I conclude, from the literature, that perhaps the process of browsing will not always result in a more informed and successful information search, but browsing can result in positive information outcomes for persons who choose to use it. Browsers are not always purposeful in their information search; nevertheless, any information found may be useful and informed. However, it is up to the user to make that decision. Perhaps the most general conclusion is that accessing and browsing information and communication media are fundamental and pervasive human social activities, central to survival, learning, understanding, creating, enjoying, and interacting (Rice, McCreadie, and Chang 2001, 312).

Often, as the librarian on duty, I have observed a person wandering (browsing) through the shelves. I would think, "Should I offer my help?" I did not want to be that annoyingly hovering salesperson. I thought again, "Do I appear unapproachable? Am I friendly enough?" Then I thought maybe the

patron does not know what he or she wants, but all of a sudden the patron arrives at the desk with a gem found through the patron's own efforts. Beaming with pride, the patron presents the find and says, "You had just what I needed"? Should the librarian spoil the patron's joy by saying, "I would have gotten it for you if you had asked." This scenario presented what I felt was a successful browsing moment. Why spoil it with an intermediary's disapproval?

Why Browse Instead of Search?

As librarians, we sometimes forget that patrons do not have the specialized knowledge that we have. We are familiar with our collections, and we know how to formulate a search query. Some patrons are afraid to even enter a library because the thought of someone learning of their insecurities about using a library is a cause for angst. This fear is a clear argument for why a patron's use of browsing can be regarded as resulting in an informed and successful search. Then there is the patron who uses the Web to find information on a topic. Of course we can suggest Web resources if we are asked. When our help is not solicited, the patron is left alone to select from the many choices of information available on the Web. Will we discount the patron's information search if the patron

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finds information using Google, a wiki, a blog, or some incongruous site? Did the information retrieved satisfy the patron’s information needs? Rice, McCreadie, and Chang have suggested that assessing the success of browsing from the user’s perspective is appropriate, especially in terms of the user’s motivations to browse (2001, 214). To me, the perspective reported by these authors means that if the user is content with the outcome of the search, then that satisfaction should be the criterion for declaring the search a success.

I know that browsing will not always result in an informed information search or be the best way to search for materials, I do, however, feel that it is an excellent search strategy for young children to begin learning the rudiments of research. I make this statement based on firsthand experience. As a practicing school librarian, I taught my kindergarteners the art of browsing. We developed a browsing stance, hands behind our backs, paint stirring sticks ready in case we needed them to mark a space on the shelf when we pulled out an interesting book. We also made the experience fun by making up our own browsing faces; these expressions were serious with a hint of joy or pleasure when we found our *gem-of-a-book*. I have former students who have shared that they taught this technique to their own children. I find that browsing led to some great teachable moments when we

looked at what everyone had chosen. In “*No More Dinosaurs, Please*” Marvis J. Canon stated, “It seems that a whole generation of children are ending their elementary school years exclusively pursuing their own [existing] interests, cheered on by a ‘me’ generation of teachers, who also focus on their own pet themes” (1988, 56). Canon used browsing to create a scavenger hunt, giving students Dewey nonfiction topics that they would not ordinarily search. Each child would check out a book from his or her given subject area, read it, and share findings with the class.

Canon asserted that it is the job—the sacred duty—of all who influence children to keep pointing them in new directions. This redirection is possible when working with a young child, but it is much harder to expand a set mind, asserted Canon. She concluded by saying, “The goal of all librarians serving children surely can be to show them the fun in browsing, the thrill in finding new subjects, and the pleasure in learning how to locate books on a newly-discovered subject” (1988, 56).

Jennifer Coleman, another school librarian, confided that her husband admitted that, as a young boy, he regarded the elementary school library as a “giant room with mountains of things. I never knew what to look for, or where to look, if I did” (Coleman 2007, 42). She defined browsing as “casually looking over or through an aggregate of things, especially



in search of something of interest” (2007, 43). When a student, like her husband as a child, approaches her and says he or she cannot find something to read, she knows that it is time to teach some browsing strategies. She suggested nine strategies she has used (2007, 42–43) and created a Find It! sheet for her users.

Coleman used the old saying, “Give me a fish and I’ll eat for a day, but teach me to fish and I’ll eat for a lifetime.” She suggested this reality as a reason why browsing is both important and empowering to young children. Coleman expressed her belief that putting a book in a child’s hand without having the student become involved with the choosing is fine once or twice. Yet the real empowerment is teaching the child ways to browse, no matter what the library setting (2007, 42).

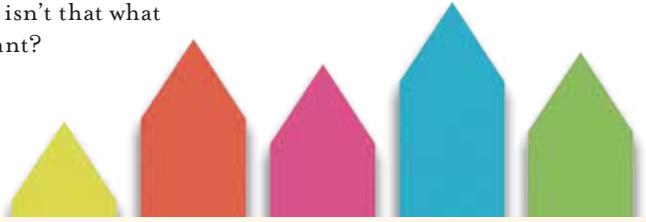
Finally, Coleman suggested that if some concentrated effort is spent on giving children strategies for navigating the multitude of materials offered to them, the payoffs will range from something as small as a smoother checkout process to larger benefits such as cultivating lifelong, independent library users (2007, 43).

I no longer feel that I have to wonder whether the process of browsing results in a more informed and successful information search; I know that browsing will not always end in an informed search for adults and young adults. However, browsing is an activity best used with young children because it enables them to see the variety of choices available to them in any library setting and helps them become comfortable lifelong users of libraries. Moreover, isn’t that what we, librarians, all want?



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