1.2. Users and their information needs

Overview

This module introduces the centrality of the user (also known as patron, client, etc.) when we develop systems to organize information. This is a brief introduction. The Users and Information Behavior Module Series provides a more detailed examination of users, their information needs, and their information seeking behavior. In this module, we want simply to have you think about users and information organization systems.

What is a user?

The term "user" can refer to any person who interacts with an information system to search for and select resources he/she needs. These people can also be called end users, patrons, clients, searchers, consumers, readers, etc. When we use the term user, often we imagine the person visiting a library or information center. It could be a child with a parent looking for resources to do a school project. It could be a college student doing research for a paper. It might be a man or woman looking for the latest bestseller. These people might use one or more information organization systems as they search for and select resources.

But we also want to include in a more expansive notion of "users" the people who work in libraries or information centers. Whether they are reference librarians, catalogers, online specialists, intermediaries, indexers, or system designers, they interact with the library's organization system in doing their work.

Finally, in the digital environment of the Web and the Internet, a user may not be a person but a software program that comes to the online catalog or library's website to search and select on behalf of the person who sent this "robot" out looking for information.

Let us define a user then as someone (or something!) that interacts with our information organization system with the goal of finding information to solve a problem, answer a question, or for other reasons.

Users and their information needs

The information needs and subsequent information seeking behavior of users is an area of research within the field of library and information sciences. In later modules you will gain a deeper understanding of some of these ideas.
For this introduction, we want you to realize that different users will have different types of needs. Users differ in their specific tasks, their capabilities and experience, and their information seeking behaviors. They have different motivations for seeking information. We want to develop organization systems that reflect how and respond to the way people use and interact with information.

People bring their own needs, personal characteristics, goals, skills, and knowledge when seeking information. An elementary school student looking for information on stars will likely have different expectations and needs than an astronomer. Sometimes a person is looking for information that will help them do something (e.g., completing a craft). At another time, that same user needs information to verify a fact or solve a work-related problem.

Users come to information systems with a diversity of skills, knowledge, expectations, and needs. We need to understand the users of our systems well enough to assist them, in all their diversity!

**Summary**

In this module, we have briefly discussed the concept of users. Since our systems are meant to be used, we should have a clear understanding of our users. We need to understand what is common among our users and what differentiates them. Only by understanding our users and building information organization systems that are responsive to them can we hope to serve them, to connect them to the information they need.