



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Want to look for books, movies or music about something you don’t know how to spell, like Orangutans or Beethoven? Click on Find It! The Find It button will let you look for subjects, authors, series and famous people and all you need to know is the first letter of what you seek!”

-From Kids’ Catalog Help Pages, Los Angeles Public Library website (kcweb.lapl.org).

Recently, I have been involved in many discussions about library websites, particularly those for children. It is amazing to realize how common it is for public libraries to have websites – even the smaller libraries have some sort of basic ones. It doesn’t seem that long ago that the Internet was just for the technologically savvy, and libraries – if they had a web presence at all – used it for more for advertising than as another location.

Now a library patron can search the catalog, request an item, check their own library card record, use the various subscription databases, take an SAT practice test, read a book online, trace ancestry, learn another language and find out what’s happening at the library – all by using an Internet connection at home.

So what about the library websites for children? How should they be designed? As part of ongoing research, I have been visiting the children’s pages of various library systems. Because many of them are

using the same software, they have a similar look for searching the children’s catalog. A good example of this is the Las Vegas-Clark County Library District “Just for Kids” (lvccld.org). From this page, children can choose the kids online catalog, which is displayed as a simple box with few choices: Type-it!, Picture It! or Help!

There are many variations on this basic idea, with libraries making choices about the pictures to be used, the placement of the search boxes and the kinds of search terms available. The goal is to be easy to understand, easy to use, not too wordy and – to my mind – multicultural in approach. One way libraries (and others) get around the multicultural issue is to use animals instead of people when choosing the graphics. Yet using photographs, like the Las Vegas library does on the main kids’ page, can give a more solid and less childish feel to the page, especially important since the children using a kids’ catalog may be as old as

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11 or 12.

One of the issues for designing any website to be used by people with a range of skills is how much information to put on each page. For a children’s search page, I think the simpler the better. A clear choice and an easy to use box makes it much easier for a child to get started. Once comfortable using the child’s catalog, a young user can always move on to the adult one.

My favorite children’s catalog so far is the Kids’ Catalog Web of Los Angeles Public Library. The type-your-search option gives an incredibly simple page with lots of white space. The large black text next to the search box makes it immediately clear where to type the words and what to do next. The contrasting primary colors of the pictures and the white on blue lettering are crisp and easy to read. The back and home buttons are the only choices at the top of the page, so it is clear

what they are and how to use them.

After looking at many other websites, I can see that this website creator has brought together an understanding of children and an eye for design – and the result is an online children’s library catalog that is welcoming and easy to use. In fact, I wish there were adult ones just like it!