

At the Last Minute

There's a method to students' procrastination

by Joseph Janes

My deadline for these columns is the 20th of each month, two months before they appear, so I'm writing this April missive in mid-February (the 16th, for the record). I know that the crack *American Libraries* staff will back me up when I say that I'm always right on time each month without fail. Okay, once in a great while, a day late. Or so. Ahem.

I figured I better get my cards on the table when writing a column about procrastination. My musings on this were provoked by a preliminary report on undergraduate students' perceptions of their own research, from a project on information literacy (www.projectinfolit.org) being run by Alison Head and Mike Eisenberg, and funded by ProQuest. (Disclaimer: Mike's an old friend and mentor, not to mention a former dean of mine, but I don't owe him anything at present.)

There's lots to chew on in this report, and it would make valuable reading for librarians of all varieties. I seized on a couple of findings: First, students use Wikipedia as an orientation device, to get the big picture on paper topics and to get the right words to use in later searching.

Other than currency and interface issues, much of what students say

they use Wikipedia for could have been said a generation ago about the *Encyclopedia Americana* (gives citations and timelines, builds confidence, etc.). They understand and share concerns about accuracy, but believe they are able to assess credibility (including the use of Wikipedia's markers like "this article needs additional citations"). They know, largely, that it's not a place to finish but it's a place to start. Smart.

Also, most of them—at least 80%—procrastinate, waiting until the last day or two to start working on 80% of their papers. Sometimes,

that's due to scheduling or workload issues; often, though, it's to provide time to contemplate or stew

on the topic, or for inspiration, motivation, focus, and even adrenaline for the work to come.

What might our services look like if we took these tendencies seriously? Friday (Saturday? Sunday? Late-night?) reference services and paper-writing workshops? "Moving beyond Wikipedia" sessions? Staff training and faculty liaison based on what students actually do, rather than what we think or hope they do? Reducing midweek, low-traffic services to support such initiatives?

Students were also remarkably canny about their environments: Those at large institutions know they've got access to gobs of stuff,

digital and otherwise, so they can afford to wait a while; those at smaller places seem to recognize their options are fewer and thus get started sooner.

Don't take offense

This sort of thing would rub a lot of us—and instructors and parents, no doubt—the wrong way, partly on professional grounds and partly because, well, we weren't that sort of student, and they should care more and pay attention more and get more out of their assignments. But if we truly want to be student- or learner-centered, then engineering services to meet their needs, situations, and work styles has to actually mean something instead of just looking good in accreditation documents or glossy brochures.

This is all still preliminary stuff, and more and deeper investigations are forthcoming that should shed greater light. For now, it would behoove us to give these ideas serious consideration, sooner rather than later (so to speak).

The *coup de grâce*? Their major finding so far is that, paradoxically, "Research seems to be far more difficult to conduct in the digital age than it did in previous times." Why? Too much stuff, too many kinds of stuff, and it's hard to find. This has been true, off and on, since Alexandria . . . but that's another story. ■

JOSEPH JANES is associate professor in the Information School of the University of Washington in Seattle. Send ideas to intlib@school.washington.edu.



Students use Wikipedia as an orientation device, to get the big picture on paper topics.