Contributing to the Global Library


In last month's editorial, I talked about the emerging Global Library. The focus was on the accumulated declarative knowledge (facts) and procedural knowledge (how to do things) that can be stored in a networked computer system. This month I focus on how students can learn to use our Global Library and contribute to it.

**The Global Library**

The emerging Global Library is widely accessible and empowers its users. Users can build on or make use of the declarative and procedural knowledge stored in it. The computer systems that store the information can help process it and carry out a wide range of useful procedures.

But what if some of the "facts" in the Global Library are incorrect or heavily biased? What if some of the procedures contain errors? What if the hardware or software malfunctions? Clearly, these can cause serious difficulties. These are, of course, difficulties that all users of the Global Library routinely face. Many adults have developed the knowledge and coping skills that are necessary to make effective use of an imperfect system.

The Internet is giving students access to the Global Library. In fact, now they can even contribute to it. It has become common for individual students or groups of students to create Web pages and post them on the Internet, where they can be accessed from throughout the world. This has created an educational challenge for both students and teachers. How do young students learn to make effective use of a Global Library (with all of its flaws) that was primarily designed for use by adults? How do students learn to make appropriate contributions to the Global Library?

**Personal Libraries**

One way to learn about contributing to and using the Global Library is to learn about our own Personal Libraries. Our Personal Libraries include the declarative and procedural knowledge that we carry in our heads. Other components may include personal documents, personal photographs and videos, books, and so on.

Some interesting aspects of Personal Libraries are how they change over time and how they are attuned to their primary users. Access to, use of, modification of, adding to, and deleting from your own Personal Library are all ongoing activities. Each Personal Library grows and changes as its user and creator grows and changes.

Many people, such as parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, friends, and acquaintances, contribute to this ongoing developmental process. Information may come from television, books, or other sources. Thus, our Personal Libraries contain multiple sources of often-conflicting information about any particular situation. Through continued use of our Personal Libraries, we can learn which parts are dependable and useful. We make decisions about what to memorize, which procedures to perfect, what to write down and carry as personal notes, and which books and other reference materials to keep near at hand.
Even very young children can think about these ideas. They can think about the multiple and conflicting facts and sources of information they have in their Personal Libraries. They can think about alternate procedures for carrying out a task. As children grow older and more mature, they can take steadily increasing responsibility for both the use and content of their own Personal Libraries.

**Contributing to the Global Library**

An understanding of how to add to and use our Personal Libraries can be a good starting point for learning to use and add to the Global Library. The Global Library contains multiple sources of information on any given topic. These sources of information may well contradict each other, contain factual errors, or both. The information may be "slanted" to represent a particular point of view. These are all things that each student has already encountered in his or her Personal Library. Thus, with appropriate education and experience, students can learn to deal with these aspects of the Global Library. This is a gradual learning process that students can pursue year after year.

Making useful contributions to the Global Library requires a shift in perception. There is a difference between adding to your own Personal Library and adding to a library that will be used by others. What knowledge, skills, and insights should you assume the Global Library user has? Is the declarative and procedural knowledge you are adding to the Global Library correct enough that others can effectively use it and build on it? What can you do to help the user assess the correctness, viewpoint, and potential value of the information? How can the knowledge be represented to best help the users? All of these questions can be addressed in an instructional program. A significant component of this instruction can be students learning from each other and learning to be critics of each other's work.

**Final Remarks**

It is increasingly common for students to help each other build their Personal Libraries, just as it is increasingly common for children to make contributions to databases that reside on local or wide area networks. Students have a major responsibility to themselves, their peers, and network users when they add to libraries. Learning about this responsibility and how to fulfill it should be thoroughly integrated into our educational system.

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