

Current Contents Bridging
the Generation Gap

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I've often asserted that there is a major gap in education for information retrieval.¹ It may surprise you to hear me extend that assertion to secondary schools. Young people badly need training in and exposure to methods of retrieving information.

I recently had a letter from Lois F. Lunin, editor-in-chief of the new *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science*, and Program Director of the Information Center for Hearing, Speech, and Disorders of Human Communication at Johns Hopkins. In it, she described an encounter on the Metroliner between Baltimore and New York.

"After I was settled, I took out my copy of *Current Contents®/Life Sciences* and began to read. The young man in the next seat said, 'Pardon me, but how come you're reading that?' He then commented that he uses *CC®/Physical & Chemical Sciences*.

"He turned out to be an engineering student at Cornell, with a major in transportation... Judging from him, you've got a new generation of people already using and depending on your services. I wish I could convey to you how delighted I was that information services such as yours are known and used by our future professionals. Please don't tell me that

he's your nephew or cousin! I want to keep this feeling that we are passing on our world of information to hands and heads ready to accept and build on it. It's such a nice feeling."

Naturally, having read Mrs. Lunin's letter, I shared her feeling of elation. Such testimonials--particularly when they suggest this type of 'long-range value'--make up a good part of the ultimate satisfactions to be found in the information business.

A similar, and equally satisfying testimonial was recently conveyed to me by a Brooklyn high school student. One of my staff contacted him when I learned that, on his own, Michael Dinnerstein, a 15-year-old student, had subscribed to *CC/Physical & Chemical Sciences*. He had requested the educational rate when he placed his subscription. Our marketing people brought the matter to my attention because they had never been confronted with this situation. I directed that Michael be allowed to subscribe at the educational rate, and suggested that ISI 'award' him some extra *OATS®* stamps as well. In our 'investigation' of this unusual case, we learned from the boy's father that Michael indeed earned the money for the subscription himself.

We investigated because we wanted to know more about our youngest

subscriber. Michael will begin the tenth grade at Stuyvesant High School in New York this September. Stuyvesant was really the first 'science' high school in New York, and as some readers of these essays may recall, is a proud part of my past. I managed to be admitted to it, even though I left after a year because I didn't take to biology and wanted to study two languages.

Michael is interested in cosmology, and is now working with a friend at the Hayden Planetarium on a computer simulation of stellar and galactic evolution. As he recently told us, "We're simulating about 100,000 stars, which means that we're using five boxes of computer paper for each output. Then we're also keeping track of all the dust and gas, so it gets a little complicated."

Why did he order a personal subscription to *CC/Physical & Chemical Sciences*?

"It's quite useful because it has all these different journals that I wouldn't normally pick up--about twenty-five astronomical journals. I'm very pleased with it. I showed the librarian my copy of *CC*, and now they're subscribing to a few of the journals that are listed."

"In fact," Michael told us, "a couple of weeks ago I was looking for evidence on the structure of our galaxy. I wanted a theoretical article linking black holes with gravitational radiation (assuming they both really

exist). I looked under *GALAXY* in the *Weekly Subject Index* and there was an article on colliding black holes--it was perfect!"

Michael plans to submit a paper on his theory this winter, possibly to the *Astrophysical Journal*.

How can a 15-year-old afford a subscription to *Current Contents*? "I babysit. I put an awful lot of kids to sleep. It is pretty expensive, but if you look at what you're getting, it's not that bad. I could have gone crazy just looking for that one black-hole article, so it's worth it to me."

Of course, Michael is unusual--possibly unique. He seems to be intelligent, well-educated, and intensely curious--an admirable combination of qualities.

With a little imagination, however, it is not difficult to envision hundreds or even thousands of high school students learning how to find the information they need. For those who wish to go beyond their textbooks, a bit of education in information sciences--coupled with access to the proper tools--could prove as valuable as any other facet of secondary school education. In addition to allowing the students to sate their curiosity, such an education would form a solid foundation from which to build in a wide variety of subject areas. Michael Dinnerstein need not be unique. We should continue "passing on our world of information to hands and heads ready to accept and build on it."

1. Garfield E. Putting our money where our needs are. *Bull. Amer. Soc. Inform. Sci.* 1(1):10, passim, 1974. Reprinted in *Current Contents* [CC] No. 39, 25 September 1974, p. 5-7.