Where ALIA's Research Advisory Committee brings you news from the world of library and information services research.
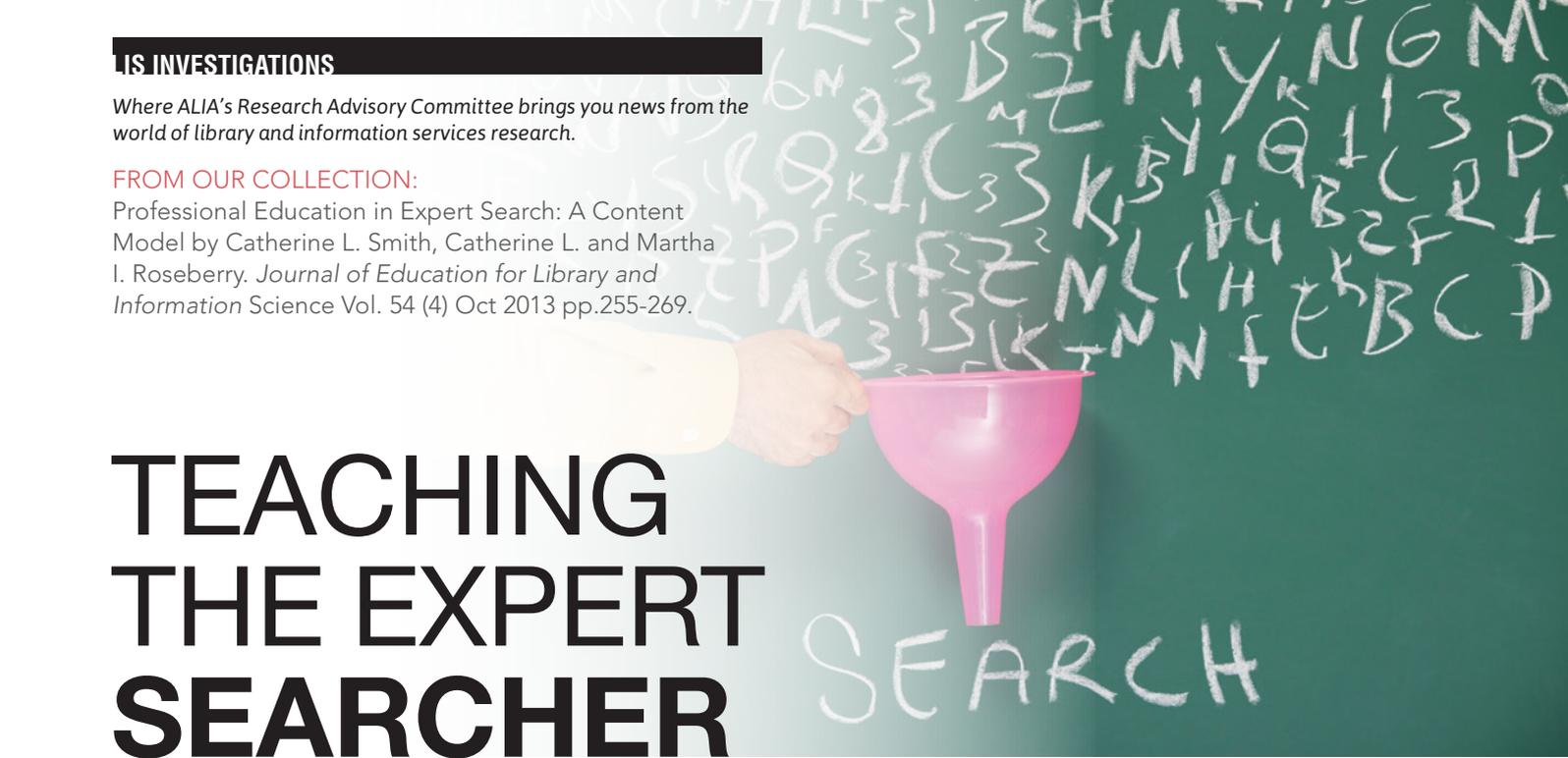
TEACHING THE EXPERT SEARCHER

Janine Schmidt's attention was caught by an article examining formal education programs for teaching library and information professionals to search effectively for information because both the topic itself, and the methods adopted for undertaking the analysis are of interest, and have changed significantly.

This study examines what is taught, rather than how it is taught, in library and information schools accredited by the American Library Association. It uses content analysis to examine the offerings of the schools, at the same time comparing the results with the literature on searching for information. The relatively recent history of search education is traced, with its initial emphasis on the use of Boolean operators, evolving to analysing source credibility and database design, the emergence of sophisticated search engines, end user searching and the decline of the role of the search intermediary.

Despite the sophistication of search engines (or perhaps because of it), novice users in public and academic libraries, and those with complex information needs, remain in need of assistance from information professionals. Many libraries conduct training programs for their users in effective searching for information. The role of the expert searcher remains important in information-intensive subject areas like law and medicine and searching is included in accreditation guidelines and information professional competencies used by organisations such as the Special Libraries Association and ALIA.

The study used content analysis and concept mapping to search and analyse curriculum content in course descriptions from the library schools. Perhaps surprisingly, the topics covered have changed very little.

Three broad areas emerged. The first is the environment, which involves an understanding of the information industry and the principles of information retrieval.

The second relates to resources, sources of information, access tools and search methods, including information visualisation, front-ends and query languages. The third area concerns analysis, evaluating the results of searches, interaction with clients and the planning of searches. Scant attention seems to be paid to the new web-scale discovery search engines and the research evidence on client behaviour.

NUMEROUS QUESTIONS EMERGE FROM STUDIES LIKE THIS ONE.

What is the role of formal education in a rapidly changing area? Does practice make perfect? How are skills best acquired and what makes effective learning? Is expert searching taught more successfully in a practical professional environment with real clients, genuine information needs and inquiries and the use of multiple databases and search engines? How are the web-scale discovery engines affecting expert searching and its teaching?

Finally, how is expert searching being taught in Australian library schools? Charles Sturt University includes Searching For Information in one of its 16 units in the Bachelor of Information Studies program. Queensland University of Technology's Master of Information Technology (Library and Information Studies) refers to "identifying, accessing, evaluating and retrieving information resources to meet specific needs" in its Information Retrieval unit, while Curtin University refers to "advanced search strategies" in its program. Perhaps closer collaboration between the practice and the teaching of the profession would bring better learning?

JANINE SCHMIDT
Director, Mukurta Solutions
janine@mukurta.com