

As an information professional, approaching a catalog is a matter of routine. For the past six years I've used them at least once a week to locate information for class projects, career development, personal research and recreational reading. To take a step back was a challenge, complicated by my decision not only to set aside my training and experience, but my research on the topic I was curious about. Thus for this project I approached the Emporia Public Libraries catalog with the mindset I felt I'd have as a young adult who was questioning their gender identity without training in search strategies or the terminology used to describe those whose gender and/or sex doesn't conform to what they were assigned at birth. My evaluation of my results and the catalog is based on the user interface for Emporia Public Libraries Online Public Access Catalog and the results of my searches.

The interface was not user friendly. The first aspect I noticed about this catalog was that beneath the search bar were boxes that displayed information about best sellers and what others are reading. These areas were distracting since it required additional time to locate the search functions. Additionally after each search I tried to open a few of the results in different windows. Each new window I opened had an error on it stating that the search would need to be rerun. When I tried to use my browsers back button I was redirected to the home screen rather than the search I had already run. I didn't notice there were "next" and "back" buttons in the catalog interface until I had already completed six searches because they were masked in a toolbar with several other options. Even after I opened the record I wanted the summary was often incomplete and I had to open another page titled "A Look Inside" to read the summary. The challenges of

trying to open the records I wanted, the inability to open records in different windows and the distraction of options and text that was irrelevant contributed to making the interface unfriendly for the novice user.

Since my character was looking for basic information about a topic I started with a subject search. The first term I used was “transgender”. This revealed one fiction book that at first glance didn’t have anything to do with gender identity at all. The main record for the item and the “A Look Inside” link stated this book was about an effeminate gay male. As a library science student I was confused why this material would come up so I opened the catalog record link. There I found a summary that identified the bullied student as being transgender. An average patron wouldn’t have opened the catalog record link and thus would never have considered this a relevant material. In order for this evaluation to be more complete I resolved to check each cataloging record as I went to discover whether the resources I found were actually relevant despite acknowledging a patron would not look for information in that location.

My next search was a “words or phrase” search of “female to male”, since I was looking for information on the female to male transition process. This returned twenty five items that didn’t appear relevant. There were books about names, the difference between men and women and sex but nothing about transitioning or transgendered individuals. Adding quotation marks to the terms dropped the results to fifteen but they were still irrelevant.

Since the keyword searches had turned up irrelevant information I decided to try another couple of subject searches. The first, “female to male” led me to a page where I could browse subject headings ranging from females to female-male relations, none of which was related to the information I was seeking. The next term, “transsexual”, gave me one result, a book about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents and families. Despite the term

“transgender” used in the title, this record was cataloged under “transsexual”, which is an entirely different identity.

Growing frustrated, but acknowledging that the Emporia Public Library had some resources on transgender/transsexual identities my next step was to try another keyword search using the term “transgender”. This led to six resources. One mentioned the term “transgender” in the summary, but was cataloged under “gender identity”. Another resource, from the ACLU on LGBT rights had a subject heading for “homosexuality—law and legislation”, but no heading for “transgender” “transsexual” or “gender identity” in relation to the law. By this point I realized that my main barrier to finding information on this topic was the lack of standardized terminology and the fact that the resources I needed weren’t being located by the terms I knew.

My next search used the keyword term “transsexual”. This gave me four results, one of which I’d encountered before. Of the next three, one was a documentary titled “Transamerica” which I have been told is a useful resource. I didn’t understand why it hadn’t come up in my subject search for “transsexual” since the term “transsexuals” was used as a subject heading. Additionally the only summary for this resource was in the cataloging page, which a patron would be unlikely to find. The next resource was a fiction mystery titled “Bye-Bye, Black Sheep” whose main record didn’t mention any LGBT keywords. The summary on the “A Look Inside” link mentioned the detective is transsexual which would be useful on the main page since I doubt a patron would dig deeper for a fiction book that doesn’t directly mention the information they’re looking for. The final resource on this term was the “Rocky Horror Picture Show” whose main record was fairly blank. I had to check the cataloging page to locate a summary which confirmed that it was irrelevant to my search.

The final searches I completed were a title and author search. The title I used was “Parrotfish”, a fiction novel about a female to male transgendered high school student who is starting his transition. I was surprised that it hadn’t come up in any of my other searches since I was familiar with the subject matter this book covers. The summary on the main page describes the main character binding his breasts, which is an important stage in the female to male transition process, but doesn’t mention the term “transgender” or “transsexual” anywhere. The “A Look Inside” mentions transgendered in the third review, but not before. The catalog link states this material is cataloged under the subject headings “transsexuals—juvenile fiction”, “transsexuals—fiction” and “identity—fiction”. Despite these headings it did not show up in any of my searches using the term “transsexual”. The author search was completed without incident, revealing four other titles by Ellen Wittlinger.

My conclusion was that the catalog interface, the terms used and the location of information made this search process exceptionally difficult. The interface kept me from opening multiple tabs for comparison, using my browsers back button to return to a results list and provided far more controls than I needed which made navigation difficult. The keyword and subject searches didn’t pull up the materials I needed. Even when I did locate a record the relevance of it was masked by the “A Look Inside” and “Catalog” links. These problems could be addressed through the use of a more user-friendly interface, including more accurate information in the main entry and ensuring that all transgender/transsexual related materials are identified with the related subjects.