

Evaluation of Reader Instruction

by J. G. BREWER & P. J. HILLS

Tuition in the use of libraries and of subject literature has a long history, dating back in a few cases into the later years of the nineteenth century. More recently, there has been a dramatic expansion of interest in this field, which is evident both from surveys of practice and from the professional literature. In the U. K. the latest survey reported in 1973 that 90 % of universities had orientation programmes, and that bibliographic instruction was provided by 59 % for undergraduates and by 86 % for postgraduate students.¹ The growth represented by these figures has been matched by a steady stream of papers reporting experiences with particular courses and advancing various opinions and theories. It would appear that reader instruction has been generally accepted (at least by librarians) as a proper and desirable function of the library in higher education. The collective experience available from the literature and from past practice is, however, surprisingly inadequate in suggesting solutions to many of the complex problems which quickly arise in any attempt to institute a systematic instructional programme. The literature up to 1972 has been well reviewed by Scrivener, who summed up the position as follows:

"Despite all the discussing and experimenting there has been little progress towards a workable solution (or set of solutions, because it is actually a complex of problems) . . . In fact we are, if anything, moving further from a solution because the problem is becoming greater, not less. The number of students in our tertiary institutions is increasing, the amount of literature is increasing, the size and complexity of libraries is increasing, and, at the same time, librarians have come to realise that a satisfactory and successful programme of instruction in the use of libraries and literature is a much more subtle, complex, and time-consuming business than it was formerly thought to be. The hoped-for panaceas are either not materialising or proving illusory . . . It is time now for rigorous research instead of mere experimentation and for some fundamental reappraisal of basic assumptions . . ."²

J. G. Brewer is Assistant Librarian, University of Surrey, Guildford England.
Dr. P. J. Hills is Lecturer, Institute for Educational Technology, University of Surrey, Guildford, England.