

NOVEL: An Evaluation Review

Interim Update: September 2006

The New York Online Virtual Electronic Library (NOVEL) is New York's statewide virtual library. It offers a collection of electronic resources that provide access from library, home, school, or office to thousands of full-text national and international newspapers and magazines, health and medical resources, business collections, Spanish-language materials, and age-appropriate materials for youngsters.

New York State residents have access to NOVEL through local public libraries, academic libraries, special libraries such as hospital libraries, and school libraries. Remote access at www.novelnewyork.org is also available to New Yorkers through the use of a borrower's card from the New York State Library or by means of a New York State Driver License or Non-Driver ID Card.

Background

New York took the first steps in building the electronic content of NOVEL through its EmpireLink pilot project, which was funded through the federal Library Services and Technology Act. Launched in January 1999 by the New York State Library, the project provided access to electronic resources for users in thousands of libraries statewide free of charge.

In July 2000, the New York State Board of Regents adopted the final report of the Regents Commission on Library Services, *Meeting the Needs of All New Yorkers: Library Service in the New Century*, as Regents policy. The first of the 10 recommendations on which this report is based is "Create NOVEL, the New York Online Virtual Electronic Library, to deliver high-quality, reliable digital information to all New Yorkers."

Since that time, NOVEL has expanded and diversified its collection of electronic resources. It has become more widely available to New Yorkers through increasing numbers of participating libraries and through remote access from homes and offices. A NOVEL Steering Committee, which includes library leaders from a broad spectrum of libraries and systems throughout the state, in partnership with the New York State Library, has been working to implement the NOVEL Plan, *Libraries Expanding Information Access for New Yorkers in the New Century* (August 2001). The full text of the plan is available at <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/library/novel/finalpln.htm> and more detailed information on the origins of NOVEL and the NOVEL Steering Committee is available at <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/library/novel/backgrnd.htm>.

NOVEL Evaluation

NOVEL continues to be supported by federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds awarded to the New York State Library by the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services. As part of the required evaluation of New York State's LSTA Five-Year Plan for 2002–2007, the State Library identified the NOVEL initiative as the focus for an evaluation to be conducted by Himmel & Wilson, Library Consultants. Himmel & Wilson has conducted planning and evaluation projects with libraries, regional library systems, and state library agencies in 35 states since 1991.

The evaluation of NOVEL includes three components:

- ***A web-based survey designed to capture opinions and comments from end-users and librarians.*** Almost 900 librarians, students, teacher/educators, business users, personal users, and other users responded to the web survey between May 21 and

- July 21, 2006, from 483 different zip code areas. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents were women, and 51 percent were between the ages of 35 and 54.
- ***Focus groups of users and librarians.*** Between July 10 and July 18, 2006, Himmel & Wilson conducted focus groups in nine regions that included all of New York State—generally a users’ group and a librarians’ group in each region—with a total of 119 participants. The nine librarians’ sessions had a total attendance of 90; the eight user’s sessions had a total attendance of 29.
 - ***Personal interviews.*** This component, consisting of one-on-one interviews with NOVEL users, is in progress.

Key Findings

The consultants provided extensive data obtained from the survey and the focus groups, as well as notes and comments from the focus groups. In brief, the findings include the following:

Most Frequently Used Resources:

- ***Survey:*** Respondents reported using newspaper databases most frequently, followed by health databases.
- ***Focus Groups:*** Librarians reported that Health & Wellness (consumer health), Consumer Reports; Business & Company Resources Center, MasterFILE Select, and Custom Newspapers were used most frequently.

NOTE: Focus groups (both librarians and users) do not distinguish NOVEL databases from other databases.

Success in Finding Information/Ease of Use:

- ***Survey:*** Respondents have a fairly high level of success (3.91 on a 5-point scale) in meeting their information needs with the databases. Eighty-seven percent said they had no difficulty in finding the information they sought. Nineteen percent of the business users indicated they had difficulties in using the databases.
- ***Focus Groups:*** Librarians and users stated that the complexity of the searching process is an issue: different access points look different; the searching strategy must vary from database to database; users want “Google-like searching.”

NOTE: Both survey respondents and focus-group participants were mixed in their opinions about federated searching (searching across all databases in a single search). Some want the ease of a single search; others complain of too many useless hits.

Most-Liked Features:

- ***Survey:*** Respondents most appreciated the accessibility and ease of use of the databases, and the fact that they are “free.” They also liked the “full-text” feature of some of the databases and the wide variety of topics covered.
- ***Focus Groups:*** Users’ groups liked the variety of resources in the databases and the fact that NOVEL provides “one-stop shopping”—an adult can use it and a child can use it. Some users also said that the free access to NOVEL is a great feature.

Level of Use of NOVEL:

- ***Survey:*** Twenty-nine percent used one of the NOVEL databases several times each week.
- ***Focus Groups:*** Librarians reported using NOVEL resources every day, but said that frequency of use is often an issue with users, who may use a database once every two to three months and forget how to do it in the meantime.

Publicity/Awareness of NOVEL:

- *Survey:* Overall 44 percent said they learned about the NOVEL databases through a librarian or a school library media specialist.
- *Focus Groups:* Librarians said that widespread marketing and promotion are needed to make potential users aware of the information available in NOVEL resources. Users think that librarians are missing a “great PR opportunity” with NOVEL and that a PR campaign should go beyond the library to bring in new users.

NOTE: Librarians’ focus groups remarked that “NOVEL” is misleading and confused with Novell and Novelist. The term “database” is also misunderstood (many users do not understand the difference between databases and the Internet).

Training in Use of NOVEL:

- *Survey:* The survey did not specifically ask about training. However, from responses to other questions involving ease of use, etc., users appear to have opinions and needs similar to those expressed in the focus groups.
- *Focus Groups:* Librarians’ focus groups said training in the use of the databases is largely “self-taught” and “hands-on.” Although vendors, library systems, and the state provided training in the use of the NOVEL databases earlier, participants did not see it as an ongoing effort being made by those sources. They also see the need for ongoing training to address the changes in the databases. Users often said they got their training in using databases and software at the library; however, many were self-taught as well, largely through trial and error.

Other (from Focus Groups):

- NOVEL is important to smaller libraries of all types, especially those less well funded. The program is most important to small public libraries and the libraries in small schools. Academic libraries generally offer access to many online resources in addition to NOVEL, but often consider the NOVEL databases as building blocks in what they are able to provide.
- Libraries have changed their buying patterns because of the NOVEL databases and no longer purchase some materials on paper; consequently, any withdrawal of NOVEL support would create holes in library collections.
- For many libraries, the NOVEL databases are an integral part of their electronic resources.