Selected Members of the CCL-EAR Committee Review of
ProQuest *History Study Center*
October 2003

During spring 2003, selected members of the California Council of Chief Librarians, Electronic Access and Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a "hands-on" study of ProQuest's *History Study Center* database. A product fact sheet and online demonstrations are available at http://historyonline.chadwyck.com/info/studycen.htm.

Selected members of the CCL-EAR Committee, independently or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staffs, reviewed and evaluated the ProQuest *History Study Center*. Assessments were submitted on a Review Reply Form specifically designed by the Committee for this purpose. Though other staff may have helped in the review process, completion of the form was by the CCL-EAR committee member(s) only and not transferred to others. Ratings were based upon the potential value of the proposal to the California Community Colleges as a whole and not solely on the needs of any specific campus.

Attributes of the information resources were assessed on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 representing the "least value" and 4 representing the "most value." The following attributes were examined:

INFORMATION DATABASE
    Consider its functionality, the appropriateness of format (bibliographic/full-text), the content of the information, the adequacy of coverage (retrospective, current), and its value to the California Community Colleges as a whole.

SEARCH INTERFACE
    Consider the functionality and ease of use of the interface. Is it intuitive or is an excessive amount of training required? Are any crucial features missing from the search interface?

USER SUPPORT SERVICES
    If documentation is required for successful use of product, is it available, comprehensive, and well written? Is online help adequate and user friendly? Does vendor supply training if it is needed? Is a telephone help line available?

COST
    If cost is available, does it seem reasonable in terms of comparable products?

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE
    Is access/connection to product reliable and stable? Is response time adequate?

OVERALL ASSESSMENT
    #1 ---- No Support

    #2 ---- No Support at this time. Future support conditional upon enhancements noted below
        in Comments Section.

    #3 ---- Support and Recommend proposal be forwarded to California
        Community College libraries for their acceptance or rejection.
        Would like to see enhancements in product noted below in Comments Section.

    #4 ---- Outstanding offer and opportunity. Recommend proposal be forwarded to California
        Community College campus libraries or their acceptance or rejection.

Following are the results of the CCL-EAR Committee's review as well as comments taken from the individual Review Reply Forms.

INFORMATION DATABASE: 3, 4

Although marketed by UMI and ProQuest, History Study Center's content comes largely from the British publishers Chadwyck-Healey and Routledge. Additional material has been lifted from other ProQuest Information and Learning and UMI sources. Photographs and video clips are included as well as text information. HSC is marketed as being "aimed at meeting the needs of undergraduate historians and their teachers and promoting historical research." ProQuest History Online is described as a portal for "online history collections, bringing rare British, American and world history resources". It is composed of the History Resource Center, Master Search and links to additional primary resource materials (*The Annual Register, Palmer's Full Text Online,* and perhaps others) if they have been licensed. The History Resource Center covers 14 centuries of world history and "acts as a gateway to historical study, acquainting students with the form and content of primary sources while supporting their study with key articles from historical journals and a library of respected historical reference resources."

It consists of six integrated resources: historical reference works, a picture collection, a video collection, introductory guides to historical topics, links to web resources, and study units which link to a variety of resources on a topic. The emphasis is greatest on British sources and heavily weighted toward modern European and North American history although it does contain Topic Trees for history of Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand, Science and Medicine, and Wars and Conflict.

This is an interesting collection that attempts to link general historical overviews with original source materials. The concept is an excellent one however the execution is uneven and would appear to require additional development and source material. Depending on the era and/or topic it can be successful or frustrating. Much of the primary source material and virtually all of the early works are in PDF format. Thus they are not searchable and are often difficult to read because of poor scanning and antique typography. The materials collected under a particular topic are of uneven quality and volume. The real plus is that this is material that community college students could not possibly have access to under normal circumstances. These are sources that are held only by research libraries. For transfer and honors students this is a real find.

The Study Units appear to be the most useful for community college students. They could be an excellent supplement to undergraduate historical study if their use were guided by the instructor. The topics reflect the typical courses taught at the lower division level. The typical community college student is likely to become lost in the variety and level of materials which result from the Master Search. Much of the original source material would appear to be beyond the level of most community college students.

The additional web links direct the user to some excellent materials; however some of the sources available via web links include commercial information, specifically links to purchase additional information.

SEARCH INTERFACE: 3, 3

In addition to the usual unadorned general search box, HSC offers users several topical finding aids, such as a "Topic Tree" with geographic headings; e.g.: "American and Canadian History". These lead to chronological subdivisions called "Study Units" ("Colonial America", "The United States of America, 1776-1865" and so on). Content modules include "Reference Library", "Picture Library", "Video Library", "KnowledgeNotes™ History Guides" and "Web Gateway". There is also an Advanced Search option with full Boolean capabilities.

To test a typical student approach, this user tried "abortion" as a general search. This yielded 140 hits in "Reference Library", of which almost all were directly relevant. The content centered around the ramifications of abortion throughout Western nations, including the impact of Roe v. Wade in the United States. The materials became less relevant thereafter, including many generic pictures such as women barristers and women's suffrage marches. The overall results, however, served to give a good picture of the relationship between abortion and women's rights movements in general. The two "Web Gateway" links opened separate windows for university archives on feminist history. The lone video clip retrieved was a 1946 newsreel explaining the institution of socialized medicine in Great Britain. (Interesting, but probably not useful for a paper on the history of abortion.) The clip played well on RealPlayer, but was audio only on Windows Media. Since most of the materials contain British spellings such as "foetus", the word "fetus" was tried as a search term. The database seems to handle American and British orthography with few problems.

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The interface attempts to make it easy for the student using the Quick Search default; however, this default includes finding related meanings, alternate spellings and is a default OR in Boolean terms. Consequently, the Quick Search returns a number of marginal or inappropriate results. Students will need to read the instructions to determine the best search terms and methods. Even using the Advanced Search it is easy to be led astray unless the user clicks on "more" to read the instructions for Title and Boolean searching.

There appear to be numerous indexing errors or the default for related meanings/spellings creates that appearance. A search for Marie AND Antoinette retrieved a result in which neither term appeared as well as a number in which only one term was included. These were in all cases related to materials in *The Annual Register* and *Palmer's Full Text Online.* The only truly useful source was a brief biographical sketch. The other side of this coin is that the interface will, if given the chance using related meanings/spellings, find additional articles for Marie Antoinette AKA Marie Antoinetta, Marie Antonia.

Because many of the sources are in PDF format the ability to resize the screen for optimum viewing is a real benefit.

USER SUPPORT SERVICES: 3, 3

To test user support capabilities, I clicked on the link for "support page" to resolve the Windows Media problem. The page gives the user a British phone number and email address for support, along with a typical ProQuest message to "contact your library administrator". After following the links, I downloaded the updated player and easily watched the video.

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There are links to a good help screen as well as numerous "more" links that help the user with the interface. These are necessary for the user to be successful with this complex interface. There is a link to technical and training support in very small print at the bottom of the "home" page. This includes a link to well developed training materials, worksheets, and manuals for each of the components of History Online. *"History Online* can be tailored to suit individual institutions, as it is possible to subscribe to as few or as many collections as desired. The homepage can also be customized, so that only the collections an institution is subscribed to will be displayed."

COST: 2, 2

The amount of content available is small compared with overall cost.

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Much of the primary source material appears to come from *The Annual Register* and *Palmer's Full Text Online* which are require additional subscription/licensing fees.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE: 4, 3

HSC was consistently stable using Internet Explorer and Netscape on a T1 line. It also worked well on our library's 100K wireless connection.

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The product was available at every attempt to access it; however, it was very slow using a 56K modem, especially when downloading PDF files.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT: 3, 3

HSC's editorial content and presentation are very British. This may be off-putting to some California community college students, but I found it useful and refreshing. It could provide a different voice from the American-centric scholarship found in many CCC libraries. For a student attempting to find a topic for an undergraduate paper, History Study Center can show context much better than a database of full-text journal articles. Once a topic has been chosen, however, the search interface will require careful instruction. Both the interface and the content may be better for upper-division students.

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This is a product with a lot of potential. It appears to be customizable for individual institutions to select modules of historical interest as well as primary source materials. The areas covered are appropriate for community college level courses and students. Community college students intending to transfer would truly benefit from the primary source material and in depth information available from this database. The one drawback is the interface which can be confusing and retrieve less than relevant materials for the novice searcher.

RATING FOR HOME CAMPUS USE ONLY: 2, 2

The central idea behind HSC is excellent: pull together original sources in a variety of media into one database, using World Wide Web-style searching techniques, with which most community college students are already familiar. However, there needs to be much more content for the price. As mentioned previously, the interface needs work as well. This reviewer hopes that the vendor will redesign HSC. It would be helpful to introduce lower-division students to original history sources, who usually see only secondary sources and textbooks.

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If there were sufficient funds this would be an ideal addition to the colleges collection of online resources. While this produce could be useful for a number of student research papers in social sciences and English courses there is come concern regarding its potential level of usage. Of particular concern is the number of history classes offered and history enrolled students. This would have to be balanced against other databases of more general interest.