

EconDesk - Getting the Content of Need at the Point of Need

I want to introduce to you the idea of interconnecting the subject-specific online reference service EconDesk¹ of the German National Library of Economics (ZBW) with the economics section of the online tutorial on Information Literacy, LOTSE².

1. EconDesk - Online Reference in Economics

EconDesk has been online since August 2005. The conception and the setup of EconDesk were funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) as part of a renewal proposal for EconBiz, the Virtual Library for Economics and Business Studies. Since then EconDesk has changed its status from project to normal routine and is financed entirely by the German National Library of Economics (ZBW).

The reference service EconDesk is integrated into the website of the ZBW³ as well as into EconBiz⁴ and is linked very prominently in every section of the two websites where help may be needed. It comprises an offer for personal assistance with literature search on site in the library (EconVisit)⁵ and a literature search service, EconTitles⁶. The main field of

¹ http://www.zbw.eu/e_services/e_econdesk.htm

² <http://lotse.uni-muenster.de/wirtschaftswissenschaften/index-de.php> (LOTSE is only available in German language at the moment.)

³ http://www.zbw.eu/e_services/e_econdesk.htm

⁴ http://www.econbiz.de/service/econdesk/index_e.shtml

⁵ http://www.zbw.eu/e_on_site/e_kiel/e_kiel_intro_literature_search.htm (As EconVisit is currently only available in Kiel and not in the Hamburg branch of the ZBW, it was placed in the section "ZBW on site - Services in Kiel" on the ZBW website and is at the moment not visually integrated into EconDesk.)

⁶ http://www.zbw.eu/e_services/e_econdesk/e_econtitles.htm (EconTitles is the only service of EconDesk which is subject to fees.)

EconDesk however is to give assistance and advice via internet chat, telephone and email for users from all over Germany and all over the world.

1.1 The idea of the subject-specific online reference service

One possibly unique feature of EconDesk is that it is a subject-specific service, which provides answers tailored to the users' questions on economic topics. The National Library of Economics counts several economists among its staff of subject librarians and holds highly specific and comprehensive literature and databases. Thus it provides an ideal basis for subject-specific online reference work.

The subject librarians of the ZBW, who are experts in the acquisition and retrieval of economic literature in various specific fields, are integrated into the reference work of EconDesk and cooperate closely with the reference librarians, providing support concerning economics terminology and the research of particular data, if needed. They also cross-read the answers to questions that require specialist knowledge before they are sent to the users, to ensure the quality of the service.

This specialization on economic topics enables reference staff members to build on and enlarge a comprehensive knowledge of the available information resources, their contents and their handling. This specialized know-how and the involvement of the subject librarians allows EconDesk to provide answers even to users who already have an advanced knowledge of their particular subject and to supply these answers quickly and efficiently.

1.2 Contents delivered via EconDesk

EconDesk provides users with individually needed information about economic topics and answers questions on how to find, evaluate and use information in order to improve the Information Literacy of users. As an additional service, EconDesk researches and delivers brief facts in economics. In such cases research paths, search terms and databases relevant to the topic of the user are described. The portfolio of brief facts researched by EconDesk staff members includes:

- Statistical data,

- Addresses,
- Information on companies and institutions,
- Biographical information,
- Country information,
- Definitions of technical terms,
- Translation of technical terms,
- Explanation of acronyms and abbreviations,
- General information from encyclopaedias,
- Verification of citations.

Already during the testing phase of EconDesk it became clear that most users ask questions that are very specific and require comprehensive answers. Requests for data delivery mostly exceed the limitation to brief facts. In such cases staff members of EconDesk research on behalf of the user but do not deliver the actual data due to copyright regulations and the high effort necessary for collecting and formatting the data. The sources of information and the means of accessing them are named to the users and again search paths and relevant databases are described, so the user learns how to search for information and how to access or order it.

If a question can only be answered by searching for literature, the relevant databases and search terms are named to the user. Usually in this context the truncation of terms and the use of subject headings etc. are explained. Additionally the service EconVisit is recommended to the user. Through EconVisit users can make an appointment with a ZBW librarian for an individual introduction to literature search on a question of her / his interest. These introductions take place on site in the library in Kiel, and if specialist knowledge is required, the subject librarians will undertake these introductions.

Below are given examples of questions that were sent to EconDesk and which represent the different types of questions described above. These questions also illustrate how EconDesk improves the Information Literacy of users.

- *"How do you define the term agribusiness?"*
The user asked for a type of data which is included in the service profile of EconDesk. The definition was found in a textbook on agribusiness and was sent to the user. The user was also informed that textbooks and encyclopaedias often contain definitions of terms. The

definition was also found in Wikipedia, but here the user was warned that usually Wikipedia does not name its information sources and therefore may not be cited in scientific works, and that information gathered at Wikipedia must be verified by other sources because of its lack of referee processes.

- *"How much water is used in different countries of the world?"*
This user asked for factual data but the amount required to answer the question in full exceeded EconDesk's limitation to brief facts. The user was informed which international organization deals with countries' access to fresh water (Food and Agricultural Organization, FAO) and was given the name and internet address of the database in which the data is available (AQUASTAT). The user was also told that international organizations are a valuable source for data concerning a large number of countries and that they often offer databases for free.
- *"I need all kind of information on the topic "job satisfaction". Can you also please supply me with statistical information? All information on the topic will be useful for me."*
This kind of question is asked rather often at EconDesk. One could get the impression that the user is just lazy and wants someone else to do her / his homework. One could assume that a library would refuse to answer such a question. This type of question can however also be seen as a kind of cry for help. Maybe this user has not got the slightest idea where to start her / his search for information on the topic and that she / he would grasp at any straw. In this case, EconDesk recommended two or three bibliographical databases to the user (ECONIS, EconBiz Metasearch, WISO). She / he was given the relevant search terms and an explanation of truncation and how to use it in these databases. She / he was asked to refine the question on statistical data at a later date if it was still needed. The service EconVisit was recommended to the user.

In this way users' Information Literacy is improved step by step through examples of a topic of their interest. Users learn that a library is a competent partner for questions concerning the search of information and they are no longer restricted to the opening hours and the location of the library. Thanks to the already mentioned involvement of subject librarians in EconDesk,

users with very specific information needs who already have a certain level of Information Literacy can also be provided with answers successfully.

2 Interconnection of EconDesk and the Online Tutorial LOTSE

2.1 Referral to LOTSE

While answering questions in EconDesk, it became clear that it is very time-consuming to explain all details of searching for literature and facts or other aspects of Information Literacy repeatedly in every single answer via email, internet chat or telephone. Although the QuestionPoint⁷ software, which is used for processing the email- and chat questions of EconDesk, allows to save scripts for frequently asked questions or frequently repeated situations, it is impossible to provide all potentially relevant material on Information Literacy through EconDesk in every single answer. Especially in phone calls or internet chats, where users are used to get information quickly, it is not possible to explain the search for and ordering of information in detail. Another aspect of the problem is that it is very hard to estimate the user's level of Information Literacy. When a question is sent to EconDesk in which the user only asks for information on how to search literature on a certain topic, you cannot tell if she / he only needs to be named the relevant databases and search terms or also needs to be instructed about Boolean operators, truncation of terms and interlibrary loan or document delivery services etc. This especially pertains to email questions which constitute the largest portion of questions within EconDesk, because here you have only an asynchronous communication and cannot evaluate the existent knowledge of the user.

The solution to both problems, the huge amount of information that must be given to the user to enable her / him to solve her / his information problem and the inability to assess the user's level of Information Literacy, was found in the referral to the online tutorial LOTSE. LOTSE (Library Online Tour and Self-Paced Education) is an online tutorial on Information Literacy initiated by the University and Regional Library (Universitäts- und

⁷ <http://www.questionpoint.org>

Landesbibliothek) Münster. It contains information on all aspects of Information Literacy: the search, access and evaluation as well as the use of information. The contents of LOTSE are generated in a cooperation of nine libraries from Germany and Austria⁸ - with the University and Regional Library Münster contributing most of the content. LOTSE does not only contain general information on Information Literacy, but subject-specific contents related to thirteen subjects⁹. One of these subject-specific tutorials is the economics tutorial edited by the German National Library of Economics (ZBW). It is possible to use LOTSE in connection with EconDesk because of its modular structure.

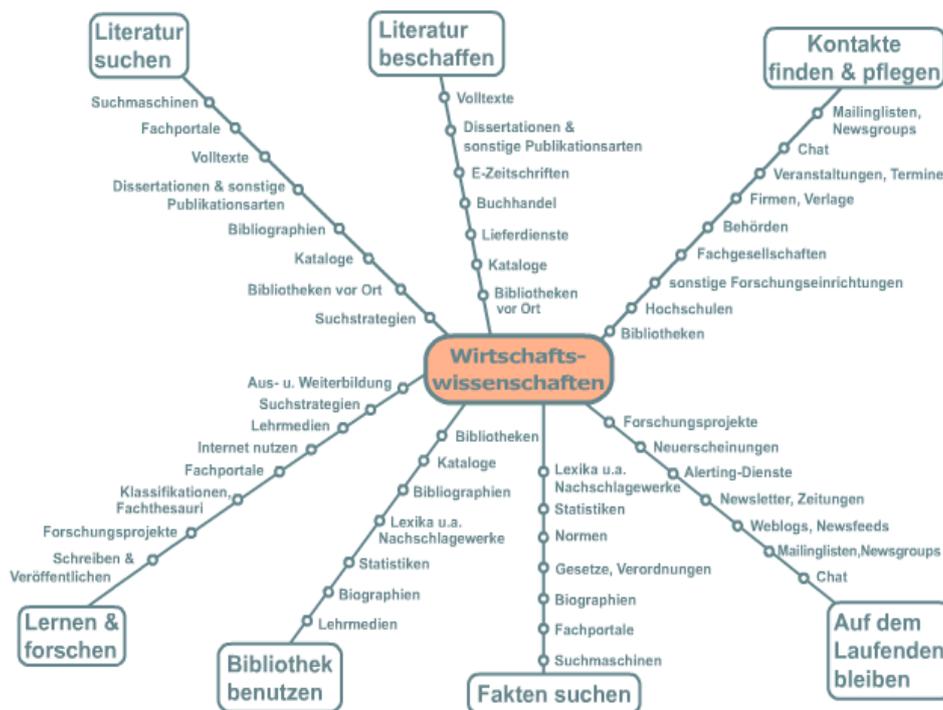


Figure 1 Modular structure of LOTSE exemplified by the tutorial on economics. It contains the main sections "search for literature" "order literature", "find contacts", "keep yourself up-to-date", "search for facts", "use the library", "learn and research"

Users can enter the content of LOTSE at any topic of interest. Since every single article in LOTSE has got its own URL, EconDesk staff can pinpoint the content that is needed for a particular user, like e.g. the use of Boolean

⁸ The libraries taking part in LOTSE: <http://lotse.uni-muenster.de/impressum/index-de.php#lr>

⁹ The subjects available in LOTSE: <http://lotse.uni-muenster.de/impressum/index-de.php#fr>

operators¹⁰, the truncation of terms¹¹, the ordering of literature from another library¹² or the search for textbooks¹³ etc. Users can decide for themselves if they need further reading before they start their search for literature or facts. They get to know LOTSE as a tool which answers general questions on Information Literacy and which also informs about topics that were not pointed out in the EconDesk-email, -chat or -phone call. The contents concerning Information Literacy in LOTSE are explained in much more detail than is possible in an answer from EconDesk and the information is available online at any time. The value of LOTSE for EconDesk can be demonstrated by the example of the three questions that were already described above:

- *"How do you define the term agribusiness?"*
In addition to the definition sent to the user, the section "search for textbooks / basic literature on your topic" and the section "glossaries and encyclopaedias" of LOTSE can be pointed out.
- *"How much water is used in different countries of the world?"*
In addition to the database relevant to this question, the section "search for statistics on economic topics" and the section "international organizations related to economics" can be pointed out to the user.
- *"I need all kind of information on the topic "job satisfaction". Can you also please supply me with statistical information? All information on the topic will be useful for me."*
In addition to the specification of bibliographical databases and relevant search terms, the section "learning literature search in five steps" and the section "bibliographical databases in economics" of LOTSE can be pointed out to the user.

¹⁰ The Article "Use of Boolean Operators" http://lotse.uni-muenster.de/wirtschaftswissenschaften/literatur_suchen/suchstrategien/exkurs_operatoren-de.php

¹¹ The Article "Use of Truncation" http://lotse.uni-muenster.de/wirtschaftswissenschaften/literatur_suchen/suchstrategien/exkurs_trunkieren-de.php

¹² Article "Delivery Services" http://lotse.uni-muenster.de/wirtschaftswissenschaften/literatur_beschaffen/lieferdienste/lieferdienste-de.php

¹³ The Article "Search for Basic Literature on your Subject" http://lotse.uni-muenster.de/wirtschaftswissenschaften/literatur_suchen/grundlagenliteratur/grundlagenliteratur-de.php

2.2 Referral to EconDesk

LOTSE was designed to improve users' Information Literacy and to help users with problems concerning their information need. LOTSE covers all aspects of Information Literacy; it is very comprehensive and available at any time. Users can use LOTSE either as a reference work where to look up information on a certain topic of interest, or as a tutorial where to learn how to search, access, evaluate and use information. However - LOTSE cannot be tailored to individual questions on highly specific topics. It does not provide dynamic contents. It is also possible that users do not understand the contents of LOTSE, have questions concerning the handling of the website or other questions. Therefore it is very important to offer personal contact regarding LOTSE and the acquisition of Information Literacy. Connecting the online tutorial with the online reference is as important or maybe even more important as a personal tutor is regarded as elementary in e-learning. This connection was realized through links to EconDesk that are placed on every single site of the economics section of LOTSE. Users are invited to turn to EconDesk personally with any question concerning information search and are directed to the EconDesk site where they can decide if they prefer to call, chat or send an email to EconDesk.

3 Conclusion

EconDesk and LOTSE, although quite different services, were both designed to increase the Information Literacy of users. On the one hand, EconDesk offers more than the online tutorial LOTSE, which is available at any time but cannot be tailored to individual questions on highly specific topics. On the other hand, LOTSE can include much more information than an internet chat, a telephone call or an email. Each of these two services serves a particular purpose and it depends on the user's individual information request which of these is more suited to the situation. The effectiveness of these two services can therefore be increased by connecting them closely, so that all possible questions can be addressed and the user can be supplied with sufficient information to solve his / her information problem.

Specialization in one subject, here the subject economics, allows to attend also to advanced users with very specific fields of interest and to

provide high-quality information efficiently. Interconnecting the two services also guarantees that users can contact a real person with whom to interact during their e-learning experience and can be given individual care in situations of information need.