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ProQuest Central and New ProQuest Interface: This Particular Review has Been Kindly Sponsored for Free Open Access and Availability by ProQuest

Ellie Dworak
Boise State University

ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

ProQuest Central and New Proquest Interface

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Reviewed by: Ellie Dworak
Boise State University
1910 University Drive
Boise, ID 83725
<elliedworak@boisestate.edu>

Abstract

ProQuest's new interface offers rich functionality without becoming overwhelming. This review uses the massive ProQuest Central database to explore the features and usability of the new interface.

Pricing Options

ProQuest Central is available as a subscription. Pricing varies by type of library, size, consortial purchasing, and bundled ProQuest product holdings. A small size academic institution would normally pay in the $25,000 to $50,000 per year range based on existing ProQuest product holdings.

Product Description

This review will focus on the recently introduced interface to ProQuest, which, the press release indicates, consolidates the best of their legacy platforms into a new interface. Platforms that have been converted include ProQuest, Chadwyck-Healey, and Illumina. Others will be incorporated over time. This review will use Proquest Central for examples and analysis. Subject specific databases may vary somewhat in features and metadata options, but the interface is otherwise stable.

Content

The content of ProQuest Central is interdisciplinary and includes a variety of source types. Further, it's easy to search all subscribed databases at once. According to the ProQuest Web site, Proquest Central includes indexing for over 19,000 titles, with almost 13,000 including full text coverage. About 7,900 publications are classified as academic journals, of which about 5,500 have full text coverage. The remaining materials include trade publications, books, magazines, newspapers, and reports (for instance, from the World Bank or trade organizations).

Critical Evaluation

I think that many readers will agree that the transition from the old to new interface in ProQuest was frustrating and confusing. Librarians in my institution who wanted to preview the new interface in order to determine how and when to implement the change didn't seem to get a clear answer as to how, or if it was possible. Information seemed to change with each official communication.

When the interface first switched, I found it jarring. Gone was the persistent tab navigation across the top of each screen. Gone was the search box with several pop-down options. In its place, we see a search box, several image-based buttons that are labeled with broad disciplines, and a bit of peripheral text. At first, the screen seemed spare to me, but after a more careful look, I realized that this is because the search box has such prominence, a characteristic that no doubt endears it to the aforementioned beginning researchers. Truthfully, most of the options from the original ProQuest interface were still available, just laid out in a more streamlined manner, with contrasting colors that direct the eye to the most important features.

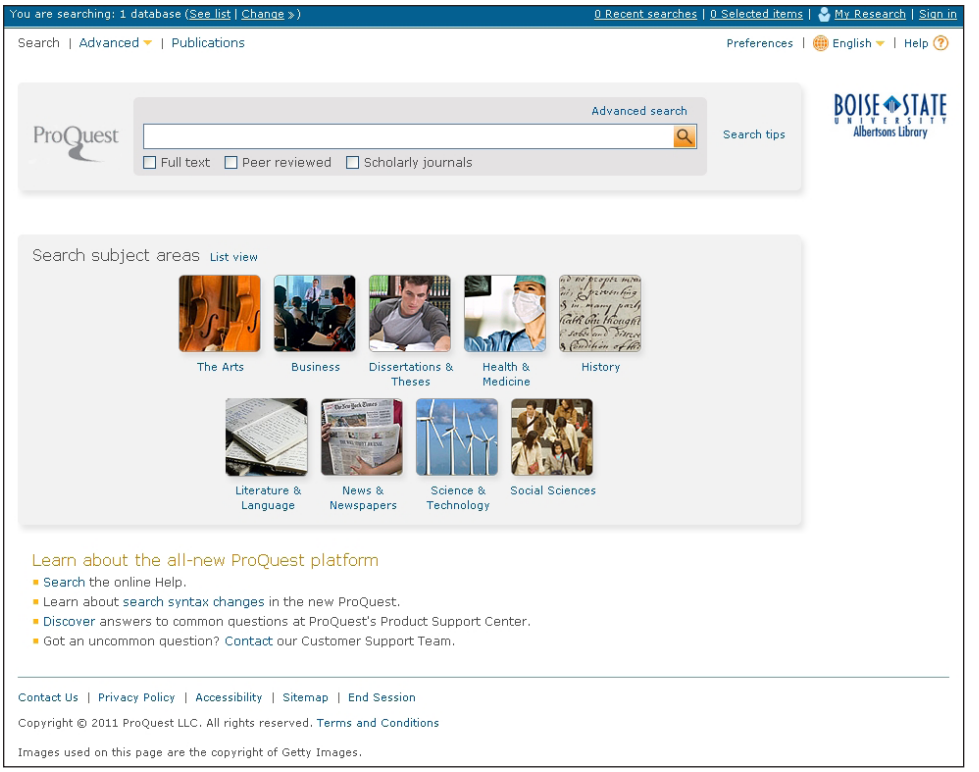
Despite the impression of sparsity, the front search page actually includes quite a lot of information [FIGURE 1]. There are the aforementioned subject buttons and the search box, but there are also links all over the place. One can get from the front page to search tips, several advanced search options, a list of databases to select from, a publication search, and several toolkit features (selected items, login, etc.). One can also limit to scholarly articles, peer reviewed, or full text.

I like all of these options with the exceptions that I don't think that students know the difference between scholarly and peer reviewed, and limiting to full text is most useful in a library where all or most databases are on the ProQuest platform. However, the full text option can be turned on and off in the administrative module, so its inclusion is up to the subscribing library. In our case, openURL linking makes it unnecessary. Finally, ProQuest offers an autocomplete feature that is either incredibly helpful or incredibly annoying, depending on your needs at the moment. It's most helpful in those situations where you just aren't sure what to type – this happens to me most in the social sciences. It's most annoying when you just want to type your search, thank you very much, and the popup suggestions get in the way. Fortunately, the interface designers offer the option of turning it off, for the instances where it's superfluous.

While the front page has changed in appearance, the results screen is what really differentiates the new interface from the old [FIGURE 2]. All of the options that I've come to expect from ProQuest are available: a persistent search box, the ability to quickly create RSS feeds or to save the search, and a prominent display of the number of results. Results can be selected to a "selected items" folder, printed, cited, exported, saved, and/or narrowed in a nearly overwhelming number of ways. There is also a section for links to lists that individuals have created on related topics, much like Amazon.com. And finally, one can search within the results or find related tables and charts.

All of these features are important and practical, but the real power comes from the list of suggested thesaurus terms, hyperlinked for quick access. This gives students who will likely never learn to use

FIGURE 1 ProQuest Front Search Page



a thesaurus access to a powerful instrument. Tim Babbitt, Senior Vice President for ProQuest Platforms, who agreed to talk with me about the new platform, tells me that in their usability testing, even advanced researchers do not use the thesaurus. Given that fact, suggesting terms seems an excellent means to make an advanced, back-end feature available in a user friendly way. I suspect that more experienced researchers will be able to mine the list and combine terms in the search box when beneficial, while beginners can simply link through to additional, and more precisely on-topic, articles.

The results themselves take up the bulk of the screen, and are brief – just an icon indicating the document type, a citation, and tiny snippets from the abstract with key words highlighted. One can either click on the link to see the full record or hover over the Preview link to see more. Any available full text options are also linked from this page, as well as an OpenURL button if the item isn't available from ProQuest.

The Citation/Abstract link takes one to the full record, which includes a citation, a generous abstract, metadata, and information about references. One can turn highlighting on and off, and some of the metadata items (such as subject headings and journal topic) are hyperlinked. ProQuest also provides a translation feature in the abstract view, though I don't know how well it works. A See Similar Items box allows the user to browse and navigate to other articles. Finally, the References section includes cited articles, citing articles, and articles that share citations, if applicable. While the citation feature is limited at this point to articles available in ProQuest, I'm told that they are working on expanding that feature. That's a great feature for faculty engaging in the tenure process as well as for researchers who have a tough topic. If users can find one good article, they can cast a wide net quickly. Overall, the article level screen is also a good combination of great features and is straightforward to use.

In order to test the results themselves, I used the search string "international monetary fund" and "developing countries" in the basic search box. This search found 66,492 items, listed in reverse chronological order (in advanced search, one can choose to sort by relevance or chronology). Of the results, about half were newspaper articles, and about one quarter were scholarly journal articles. The results were topically on target, but because I'm working on this with a graduate student who is looking for scholarly material, I clicked on the More Options link under the format type and excluded newspapers, wire feeds, and magazines. This reduced my results list to 24,000 items. I then used the nifty pull-bar to limit my results to the year 2000 forward, which cut my list down to 17,000. I limited to English language materials, which didn't do much, and then re-sorted the results by relevance. After adjusting my search, I found that the first page of results, which was comprised of scholarly and trade journals in equal numbers, were excellent.

Of course, all of these post-search options are available by navigating to the advanced search screen, which is a typical multi-search box, many check boxes and drop-downs affair, with all of the expected options. However, Advanced Search is only one of the several options in the Advanced Search menu. Other choices include a command line search and specialized searching for Data & Reports, Figures & Tables, Find Similar, Look Up Citation, and Obituaries. The utility for searching for data and reports, figures and tables, or obituaries is clear (though I would likely just limit by format), but I was intrigued by the others.

I explored the command line search page first. I honestly can't imagine the circumstance in which I would need this feature, given the options offered in advanced search, but for those who require the added power of set searching and other advanced options, ProQuest offers an 11-page database guide outlining all of the possibilities available here. This includes Boolean operators (all of the operators I'm aware of are available); phrase searching (two-word queries are phrase searched by default; three-word queries are proximity searched, quotation marks search for exact phrases); the ability to limit to specific index fields (of which there are nearly 50); and stop words.

Next I used the Find Similar feature. I was expecting to see a citation, or at least an author and title, input box, but instead I was prompted to enter some text from a document. Out of curiosity, I dug up one of my old articles (written under my unmarried name), called "Radical Usability (or Why You Need to Stop Redesigning Your Web Site)." I pasted in a paragraph of text (the seventeenth paragraph, beginning "While this is a functional design with excellent content…") and received 743 results, none of them even roughly relevant to my topic. It's possible that my example was simply not a good one, but I don't see a great utility for this search alternative. Still, I was intrigued enough to ask Tim Babbit about how the feature works, and was told that it works best for large (50-word plus) chunks of text and does some interesting things. It looks to first identify the most im-

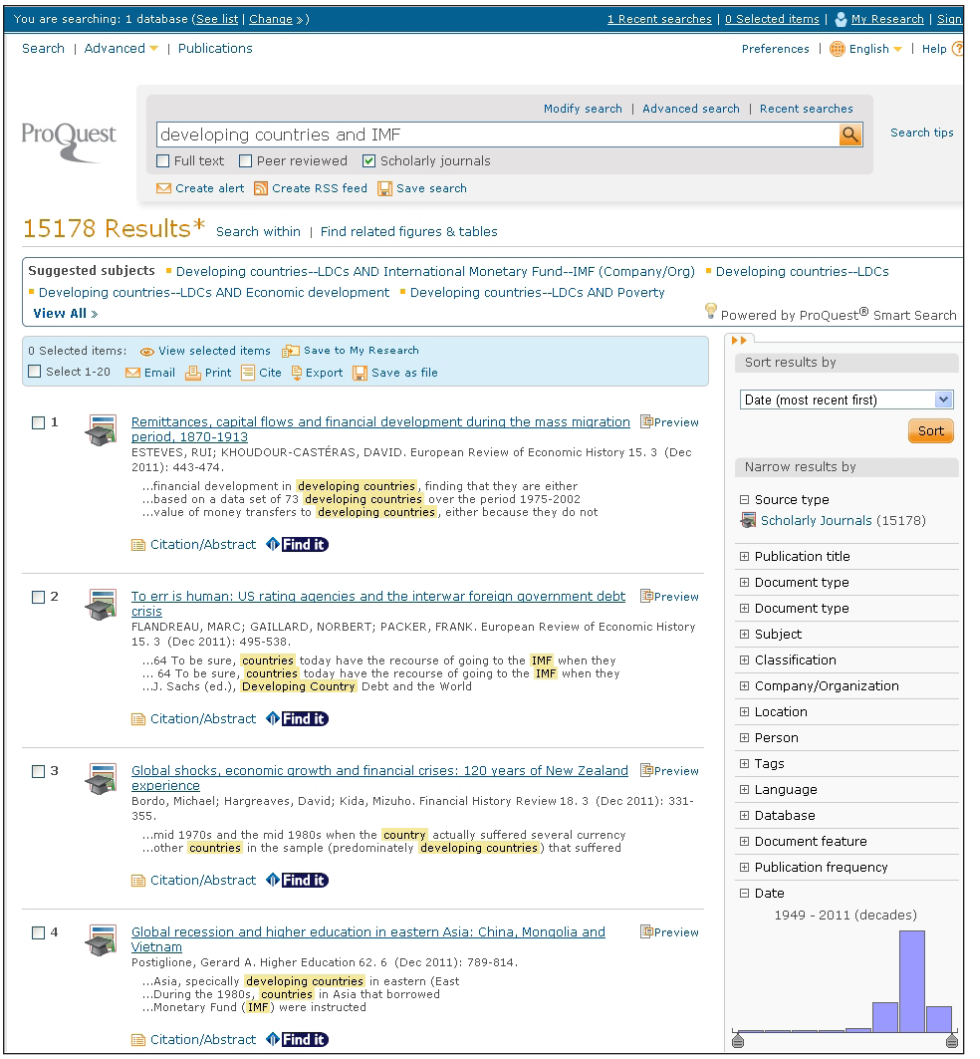


FIGURE 2 ProQuest Results Screen

among those included in the ProQuest Central database. This advanced feature is one that I'm likely to teach in my upper division and graduate level courses, and one that will be well received.

Though I don't imagine using them often, students might be drawn to the subject buttons on the main page. It appears that these buttons exist to guide the user to other Proquest databases, several of which are listed when I click on the Arts & Humanities button. A search box is also presented near the top of each subject page. I tried my standard test search, "women and clothing" and limited the results to academic journals, to try to ascertain whether the journals were pre-limited to humanities journals. I wasn't able to tell definitively, and I couldn't find this addressed in the help menu, so I tried again in the Science & Technology subject search area. I searched for "tattoos" and found that the scholarly results did indeed seem to be limited to scientific journals. An advanced search screen is also available for these subject-level searches. I think that they are a useful option for libraries that subscribe only (or largely) to ProQuest content. In fact, one could use this to do away with the need to create subject database pages on the library Web site. For those of us with more options, it isn't as helpful.

portant terms or concepts in the chunk. It then creates what's called a "document similarity vector," which is a signature that is based from the terms and concepts in the document and their "weight." The system then looks for documents that have a similar signature. It works best with larger chunks of text that are about a set of concepts, but not something that covers a lot of divergent ideas in a short space. It's definitely not for a focused search, but it can find some amazingly good similar material that a focused search would not. It's almost a vehicle to help drive serendipitous discovery.

Finally, the cited reference search is exactly what one would expect. One can search for a citation to see how many articles cite it, at least

Finally, one can also search by publication. This includes a title search or browse, and one can limit by source type, subject, language, and something mysteriously called document feature, which seems to be a list of publishers. Again, I could not find anything about this in the online help. Despite that anomaly, the publication search page is functional and useful.

ProQuest offers a range of nifty tools for the power user, including options to save items or searches to a future research folder, create RSS feeds or alerts for searches or publications, cite in a variety of styles, and export to RefWorks or another citation management program. One can also create lists of items (which are then displayed on results pages for relevant searches) or add tags to an item. I found it easy to set up an account and use all of these features, though remembering my password may prove more difficult.

Contact Information

ProQuest
789 E. Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346
Phone: (734) 761.4700

Contract Provisions

ProQuest provides a standard contract, with provisions for Interlibrary Loan and scholarly sharing. MARC records that are loaded into a publicly shared catalog such as WorldCat Local require written permission from ProQuest.

ProQuest Central and New Proquest Interface Review Scores Composite: ★★★ 3/4

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★★★

I find ProQuest Central's content useful for everything from freshman courses to helping graduate students in various disciplines (especially the social sciences). Much of the content is appropriate for public library settings, as well. However, they seem to be padding a bit with reports.

User Interface/Searchability: ★★★★★

This is a powerful tool that is also quite usable. Clearly ProQuest has put a great effort into designing an interface that works for researchers with a range of experience and needs.

Pricing: ★★★

ProQuest Central is a big database, and as such, is fairly expensive. However, one large interdisciplinary database is necessary for most academic institutions and many public libraries and this one is no more expensive than the competitors.

Contract Options: ★★★

The contract is standard fare.

Authentication

Authentication is IP validated.

Author's References

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About the Author

Ellie Dworak obtained her M.I.L.S. from the University of Michigan in 1996. She works as the Reference Services Coordinator at Boise State University, where she two-steps to keep up with her amazing colleagues. In a recent past life, she was an Electronic Services Librarian. She is interested in the intersection of people and technology. ■