Zotero: Doing (even more of) our jobs for us

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Remember the first time you saw RefWorks automatically build a citation in two clicks of the mouse? Remember feeling glad, for the nth time this decade, that computer programmers were eating the nuts and bolts of our jobs wholesale, so that we could focus on being the information mavens that we were born to be?

Zotero is like that, but for everything.

The software, available free for the Firefox browser from zotero.org, allows you to automatically build a bibliographic index for any web page – grabbing metadata wholesale with just one click. Citations can then be output in any popular citation format, or simply annotated and saved. Perhaps best of all, it plays nicely with both Microsoft Word and OpenOffice, and will add references to linked documents without even being asked.

Zotero celebrated its third birthday in October. However, it’s only in the past year or so that it has really come into its own, beginning with the capability to take an exact snapshot of any previously visited page. Speaking as someone for whom the “retrieved on” segment of a citation is shamefully often a post-hoc guess, this is a godsend, as is being able to view an online journal article when no longer connected through the university library.

With the release of version 2.0 in May, this functionality was expanded to allow access to a personal bibliography from any computer (after signing up for an optional account). This, too, is available at no cost and sharing credentials means that one can share articles with another user, a revelatory feature that it is hard to imagine having gone without.

Although not all websites or databases currently have Zotero integration, (indicated by a newspaper, book, or folder icon in Firefox’s URL bar, next to the now-familiar RSS symbol), [this only means that a user will perhaps need to fill in the “author” field manually]. For popular resources such as the New York Times or PubMed, that finger needn’t be lifted.

As the program gains the word of mouth it deserves, more and more libraries are
offering brief training sessions – UBC’s own SLAIS included. Insofar as building a user's information literacy is usually compared to the old “teach a man to fish” metaphor, Zotero resembles a supremely elegant meta-fishing: half as folksy, but twice as delicious.

Try it for yourself, and ask your friendly neighborhood system administrator to install it on your library's computers, if they haven't already!