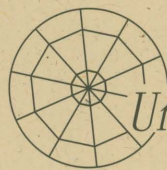


Gatherings

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A Tutorial for Today: ResearchPath

By Dianna Sachs,
Instructional Library Services

When the University community of students, staff, and faculty think about the job of librarians, they think about ordering and cataloging books, checking out materials, and helping patrons find the books or information that they need. Even if WMU library users do consider the connection between librarians and instruction, **that librarians at WMU are also faculty members who teach**, many individuals assume that the role of the librarian is to support the English or engineering or business professors. In reality, the University Libraries staff involved in the Research Instruction Program has a primary role in teaching the varied techniques and concepts behind the research process—not only to WMU students, but all library patrons.

Or, to put it more directly, research instruction and other information literacy initiatives permeate nearly everything we do in the Libraries. Indeed, our first, and often primary, goal is to educate our users to become efficient consumers of the information rich environment that dominates our society. This means that, more often than not, librarians make the effort to teach patrons how to locate, use, and evaluate information, rather than simply doing the work for them. While the process of instruction may take longer initially, in the long term our patrons, especially our students, emerge better equipped to address their information and research needs in the future, both at

WMU and beyond.

In an effort to address the needs of our patrons in a variety of formats and, whenever possible, at their convenience, the WMU Libraries has developed several programs to offer research instruction no matter where or when a patron needs it. The Library Faculty, individually and collectively, sees education as a major responsibility—whether it occurs when organizing and searching our resources; dealing one on one with a user at a service desk; electronically via phone, IM, or online; or in one of the computer-equipped classrooms. Articles in this issue of *Gatherings* address traditional and non-traditional instructional venues. This article describes one of the most valuable developments in the education of our students: **the online research tutorial.**

From Searchpath to ResearchPath

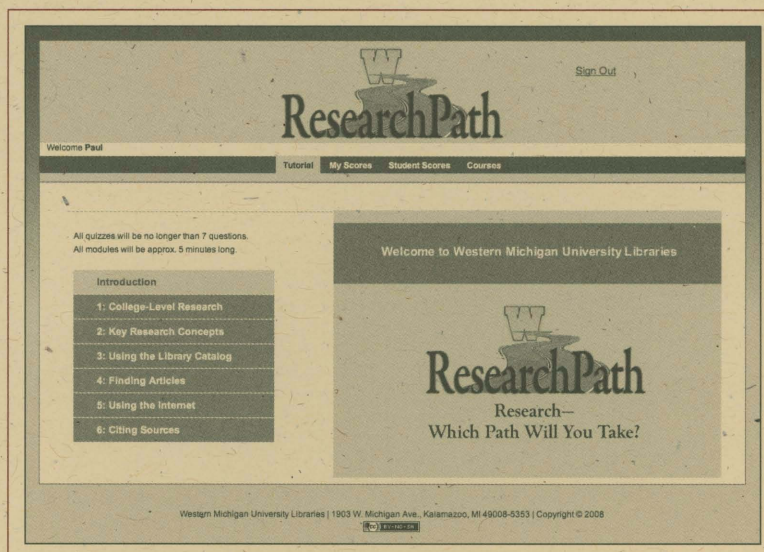
In 2001, the University Libraries, under the leadership of Professor Elaine Jayne, created an award-winning online research tutorial called Searchpath. This tutorial was designed to introduce students and other library users to the concepts behind research, the types of resources available

to them through the WMU Libraries, and strategies for effective research. Searchpath consisted of six modules, each followed by a quiz. The tutorial was well received and popular; many faculty members across the University required that students complete Searchpath for their classes. Since it was also developed under a creative commons license that allows other institutions to copy and modify the tutorial, WMU's Searchpath was downloaded over 670 times. Searchpath has served as the model for research tutorials around the country, including Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and other institutions. Jayne was honored in 2003 for her work on Searchpath when she was awarded the Information Literacy Award by the Michigan Library Association.

As the years passed, despite the undeniable popularity of Searchpath, both the content and the underlying technology needed to be corrected and updated. The advent of new technologies and the changing nature of the Libraries' resources as well as student needs meant that, by 2008, a major redesign was mandatory. Indeed, two key components

of the Searchpath tutorial were no longer viable—the “front end” of the tutorial that presents the content, and the “back end,” or the database that retains the quiz scores submitted by students.

The first overhaul of Searchpath involved the “back end” database. Two recurring complaints from both faculty and students were voiced. Faculty complained about the way in which they were notified of their students' quiz scores, i.e., the system generated an e-mail or a piece of paper for



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each module completed by each student. This meant that in a class of 50 students, a faculty member would receive 300 e-mails or papers: one for each of the six modules from each student. Students registered a related complaint in that they were frequently asked to complete the tutorial by different instructors in different classes. This meant that they were expected to take Searchpath over and over again. Students asked why they were not able to send their scores from their first test(s) to more than one faculty member.

Fortunately, the solutions to both of these issues were related. In 2008, the Libraries developed a new database to store the Searchpath quiz scores of all users. This database, which both students and faculty could access using their University ID and password, retained all student quiz scores for a minimum of two years. It also allowed faculty members to log in to the system and, with the permission of their students, view all the student quiz scores for a given class in a simple table rather than in six separate e-mails for each student.

Once the new "back end" database was in place in the spring of 2009, the time came to evaluate and redevelop the tutorial itself. The original contents of the Searchpath tutorial consisted of six modules. The user moved from the general concepts of research through techniques to locate and use information in the Libraries and online, and ends with issues of copyright and ways to avoid plagiarism. While the goals of the tutorial have not changed, i.e., these are concepts that students of all ages and all times need to master, we found that our target population had changed enough that our methods of teaching needed to change as well. Consequently, while we retained the basic structure of the Searchpath tutorial, we worked throughout the spring and summer of 2009 to evaluate the needs of our current generation of students, and to create a new series of research modules that reflected those needs. In an effort to differentiate the new version of the tutorial from the original, we renamed it "ResearchPath."

A "Millennial" Approach

After a review of the literature in library and information science, education, and website production, we identified several characteristics of the current "Millennial" generation of students. Millennials, usually defined as students born after 1982, are generally more comfortable with multiple modes of learning, and often have different preferred learn-

ing styles. Consequently, in our redesign of the ResearchPath tutorial, we sought to address visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners by designing a new set of modules that present research concepts in visual images and text, using an audio voice-over track, and through a series of interactive projects where students would have to apply concepts.

Since the original Searchpath tutorial was developed in 2001, the base level of

knowledge with which students came to WMU has changed. Students on the whole are more comfortable (1) with technology in general, although they are by no means expert, and (2) with the concepts related to how information is organized on the Internet and in database systems. We also found that some technologies that were in vogue in 2001 have subsequently

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Teach Me to Find ...

*By Maria A. Perez-Stable,
Head, Central Reference*

"Could you please help me find some books and articles about the political economy of Uruguay from the 1950s to the 1990s?" This is a typical research question that students in WMU courses are exploring—and one of the major reasons that instructors make the decision to seek a librarian's assistance for their classes. This question usually triggers a conversation between instructor and librarian to set up a library research session where the class meets in one of the library classrooms for a group tutorial. As the liaison to history, political science, Spanish and children's literature, I carry a broadly based and demanding teaching load that crosses quite varied disciplines and research areas. I am not unique: almost all of my colleagues on the Library Faculty work with multiple departments. For a listing of some of the guides that have been developed for such classes, go to: <http://www.wmich.edu/library/guides/class/>. For an even longer listing of subject guides that have been prepared by the Library Faculty for individual and class use, go to: <http://www.wmich.edu/library/subject/>. The class and subject guides are based on the print and media resources available in the University Libraries as well as online databases that access tens of thousands of full text articles, book chapters, and entire books—all available electronically.

But let's return to my class of students who need to learn how to find books and articles on a particular topic. Some faculty are, understandably, protective of their time in the classroom, but, experience has shown that, over the years, many professors have come to understand the value of focused library research instruction for their students—even if it means "giving up" a class period to go to the library. About 15 years ago, a political scientist at WMU told me, after I met with the students in his 3000-level course, that he noticed a considerable difference in the sources the students were citing and

using in their papers. They were locating and analyzing more scholarly journal articles and he felt the quality of the papers increased dramatically as a result of the single classroom session.

Although some pundits claim that the current generation of students have technology as "part of their DNA," I still find that a "one-shot" instructional session is highly worthwhile. "Knowing" technology is not the same as knowing where to go and how to search. My colleagues and I often are limited to 50 or 75 minutes in which we try to tailor what we cover to the specific assignment given to the class. As a result, I need to make every minute count, since I only have that single meeting to educate them. Persuading a professor to bring a class in is only half the battle, however. The other half is overcoming students' natural resistance to formal library research instruction in the library. Many of them come in with the mindset that they already know how to conduct research, and "Why is the professor wasting their time with this visit to the library?"

Today's college students began "researching" in elementary school by using Internet search engines such as Google and Yahoo. The patterns were established early in their schooling, and by the time they get to high school, these patterns are firmly entrenched. Yes, they often do use journal databases such as InfoTrac, but they still assume that they can find all their research materials through the public Web. When these students arrive in college and take writing-intensive 3000- and 4000-level courses, they are surprised to learn that the way in which they conducted research in high school is usually not acceptable to college professors. This is the uphill battle that I encounter nearly every time I enter the library classroom. The exceptions to this, of course, are most graduate students. They understand how much they do not know about library research and are normally quite interested and motivated to learn what I have to teach them.

One of the things I most enjoy in my teaching is opening up students' eyes to the wealth of information that is available

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been replaced by newer technologies that students expect to see and use. This is a never-ending scenario, of course, and ResearchPath or its successor will be updated regularly in the coming years.

Our research also showed that students prefer to learn concepts in short bursts, one concept at a time. Our goal was to reduce the number of concepts covered in each module to the bare essentials—this insured that students were not overwhelmed with too much information at once. Ultimately, this will also allow students to identify the areas in which they feel they need further instruction, and they will be able to get more help on those advanced concepts.

The ResearchPath tutorial remains a work-in-progress. We are currently conducting research to determine the aspects of the tutorial that are most effective and those that need to be reconsidered. As research strategies, the underlying technologies, and the educational needs of our students evolve, we will continue to evaluate and update **ResearchPath: A Tutorial for Today**. Check it out at: <https://www.wmich.edu/library/researchpath/>.



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A Class of Its Own

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organizations.

A few graduates have made libraries and archives a career. Several have attended and graduated from library science programs in Michigan and out of state. Some are employed in allied fields, such as records management (e.g., state government, corporate, medical, etc.). One of the goals of the course is that all students gain a greater understanding of the "behind the scenes" activities at an archive and how that impacts the research experience. Although the majority of the students completing History 4060 do not plan or expect to focus on archives after graduation, all historians as well as public historians--those working in museums and historic preservation--will need to consult archival collections at some point. Those students who have had the opportunity to see the foundation of archival organization and preservation have been given a "heads-up" that is invaluable to their future research efforts. And, in a very special way, the University Libraries and its librarians have once more become a force in educating our students, our faculty, and our community researchers.

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