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...
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 learning 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 died away.

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...
on the “private” Web—the 450-plus databases and 46,500 online journals that the WMU Libraries offers the academic community through its subscriptions. When I tell students how much the Libraries spends annually free and it is not cheap. One of my most important classes is the HIST 2900 “Introduction to the Study of History” course that all incoming history majors are required to take. The Libraries is embedded in this course and so, early on, I get to meet with all the history majors. I specifically adjust my instruction to the research needs of the students, and in HIST 2900, I have 50 minutes in which to tutor the students in how to find monographs, scholarly journal articles, dissertations, book reviews, and reference books on the topics they have chosen for their research papers. It is quite a challenge to cover this much in such a short amount of time, but I have fine-tuned my presentation—and still manage to give the students some free time to do their own searching. This semester I worked with a young undergraduate who was researching a most interesting topic—how Lyndon Baines Johnson’s personality impacted his presidency. We had fun with that one.

In the last several years I have changed the way in which I teach in an effort to include more active learning. Where once I would just present the students the best keywords to use in their search strategies, now I provide the overall topic and work with the students to come up with good search words. For example, when I tell students in my children’s literature classes that we want to find some poetry books about the people in the United States who speak Spanish, I wait for them to volunteer words such as “Latinos,” “Hispanics,” and “Chicanos” to put in our online search. I have found that this serves a dual purpose—it makes the students more invested in the learning process and it gets across the notion of using synonymous terms to broaden a search.

One of my favorite classes is the PSCI 3460 “Women in Developing Countries” course. In this class, each student must find a scholarly article, 15 pages or longer and written in the last six years, on the topic of women in the political arena in the developing country of their choice. While this may sound easy, it can be challenging. Here again, I focus my instruction on the best ways to find these articles, but many times students are frustrated because they cannot find something appropriate for the country in which they are interested. I thoroughly enjoy working individually with these students in the class and I am nearly as happy as they are when they find just the right article. Matching students to the best information is one of the most rewarding things about instruction—it is such a joy to see them excited about the materials they are finding.

My instruction does not stop when the class session is over. I ordinarily put together specialized handouts for each of my classes, detailing the best places to search for books, journal and newspaper articles, government documents, etc., and I always include my name and contact information at the bottom. As I tell my students, the only dumb question is the one left unasked, and I encourage them to seek further assistance after class if they need it. I often hear back from students, sometimes in person or on e-mail.

Despite my best efforts, it is impossible to transform a group of undergraduate students into mini-librarians after only one library session. However, we live in a world of information overload, and academic librarians, as information experts and educators, can help students choose and evaluate the “best” sources for their research needs, while empowering them to become independent researchers. That, in a nutshell, is my philosophy when it comes to library research instruction.

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Books (from the earlier term "weblog"), which the Oxford English Dictionary dates from 1997 in this particular context, have been used for over ten years for communication of current events, discussion forums, sharing of personal information, and informing the public about specific subject areas. The blog has taken some time to be accepted within academic circles as worthy of serious scholarly or educational interest, and indeed, in some circles, is still looked at with a jaundiced eye. However, a number of academics and librarians have used blogs quite successfully for teaching and discussion of scholarly topics. Presently, almost every scholarly society and journal has a related blog. One perceives some small humor in that the librarian blogging world has been given the informal name of "biblioblogosphere."

At the WMU University Libraries, I am the engineering librarian with primary responsibility to act as the library liaison to the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences (CEAS). Hence, my blog is called "World of Engineering" and is located at the following URL: http://parkview.wordpress.com/. This URL or Web address was chosen—and I did have a choice—because the CEAS is located five miles away at the Parkview Avenue campus, and a URL was needed that would be easy for students and faculty at CEAS to remember. For the past three years, since beginning as an engineering librarian at WMU in August 2006, I have written 165 posts and get about 1000 hits per month during the fall and spring semesters. I post about once every two weeks.

My subject matter is basically anything related to engineering information. This would include resources or services provided by Waldo Library or available for free on the Web. This is where the primary educational value of the World of Engineering lies. In addition, the blog highlights events taking place at the College of Engineering, such as the Senior Design Conferences every fall and spring semester, new books published by CEAS faculty, and interesting news items from the world of engineering. In the past, I have written about free engineering reference books on the Web, such as the Wood Handbook: Wood as an Engineering Material (available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture at http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS2988), new reference books in our Science Reference collection at Waldo Library, and links to presentations I have given and articles I have written.

I also use my blog posts to drive traffic toward library resources that we have purchased, whether online or not. For example, in June 2009, I wrote a post on a set of electronic books in engineering and computer science that we purchased from a publisher named Springer. My post provided direct links to specific sub-collections, to make it easier for engineering students and faculty to browse the collections. Looking at my blog statistics page, which tells me not only how many people view my blog, but also what links they click on while they are there, I can see which of the Springer series people have visited. This gives a measure of what people are finding useful. Since I first wrote this post in early June, 71 people have read it. There are 71 people who might not have known about the Springer eBook collection and what it contains were it not for my blog. In this way, my blog can be considered a teaching tool. One drawback to the free Wordpress blogging software is that, while I have statistics for my blog, I do not know how many of these page views or hits are from CEAS students or faculty.

Another aspect of blogging that touches upon instruction is the use of a blog to release presentation materials used in my library instruction classes. I have recently experimented with posting my PowerPoint slides for some of my library sessions to Google "docs" (http://docs.google.com/), which makes them public and gives me a URL for the presentation. I then post the URL to my slides in a blog posting. I would like to experiment further with this, as it might enable me to create short tutorials that I can then push out to the students I am trying to reach. Another free online service that also allows posting of presentation files is SlideShare (http://www.slideshare.net/).

URLs to two of my posts related to classes are:
ECEn690: electrical and computer engineering course for graduate students:
IME3160: report preparation course for sophomores and juniors:
http://parkview.wordpress.com/2009/01/27/ime3160/

The posting concept is still an idea with which I am experimenting. The first time I promoted my blog (with the presentations) in a class, my hits for the blog jumped to 122 hits that day, from my usual 20-30 hits a day. Eventually I will do blog posts for all my information literacy sessions. This idea originated from John Dupuis, a science librarian at York University in Toronto, Canada. His blog, "Confessions of a Science Librarian," was the original inspiration for my blogging efforts. You can read his blog at http://scienceblogs.com/confessions/.

As described in the previous comments, blogging has become a complementary component of my instructional sessions. Equally important, the "World of Engineering" is also a teaching tool in and of itself. After three years of exploring, five "rules of the road" that may enhance the educational value of blogs have emerged:

• Make sure you have a sense of your audience, even if you are not exactly sure who is reading your posts. Posts are simply easier to compose if you know or believe you know to whom and for what reason you are writing.

• Always make posts (however often you post) relevant to a specific audience in an educational setting.

• Link to relevant posts on other related blogs, because every blog or site to which you post drives traffic toward both that site and your site.

• Register your blog with Technorati (http://technorati.com/), the blog-searching site. This will also drive traffic toward your site.

• Have a memorable URL: short, snappy, and relevant!

The Blogger at Home: parkview.wordpress.com
A Class of Its Own

By Siteron Carlson, Director, University Archives and Regional History Collections

Every spring semester 28 to 30 students embark on an educational adventure when they begin History 4060, Archival Administration. The class is an undergraduate, three credit hour, semester length course taught out of the Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections. Most of the students take the course as one of several options within the public history curriculum at WMU. Students from allied disciplines such as anthropology or English enroll in the course, and it has also attracted a few business, journalism, and theatre students. Each one is looking for the following:

"Theory, techniques, and practice in the development and administration of archives and archival materials." Undergraduate Catalog, WMU

The opportunity to introduce undergraduate students to archival documents, theory, and aspects of administration is especially appealing to the professional personnel of the University Libraries since those involved can approach this as a full-fledged three credit hour course of study for the advanced undergraduate or even graduate student. The faculty of the Libraries does not often have a chance to provide more than a brief introduction (an hour or two) to researching the myriad resources that are available for students in every department and college. But, in this "regular" class, the instructors have the time to teach and the students have the time to learn and apply techniques and practices related to organizing and retrieving information.

The course begins with basic principles of provenance and original order that provide the foundation for how archives personnel arrange and present collections. The primary concept of archival provenance essentially mandates that collections from an individual, organization, or business will not be interfiled or mixed in with other materials from other sources. By maintaining the integrity of each collection, archivists provide researchers with context. A second related archival rule is the principle of original order that seeks to maintain the order imposed by the original creator of the body of records. Original order is sometimes a more difficult task because collections may lose order (and therefore context) over the course of time even if stored in one general location. In addition, "old" records are often physically moved or "repackaged," and the original order is lost. As a result, it is not uncommon for collections to arrive at an archival home in boxes and bags with no apparent order, i.e., no dates, topics, or source are noted on the box or on an inventory sheet. When this occurs, the archivist must attempt to determine the original order or create an arrangement scheme that makes sense or facilitates research.

One of the basic objectives of the archives administration course is to introduce students to the variety of archival documents and artifacts that may be uncovered. Most public history students bring to this course previous experiences with a number of primary sources. Almost always, however, as the "new" collection is reviewed, students discover an even wider array of potential research resources. This "happening" has proven to be one of the more enjoyable aspects of the course as document show and tell sessions lead to discussions of historical research value and preservation. Students routinely have an opportunity to examine numerous types of visual materials, including glass plate negatives, ferrotypes (tintype photos), Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps, and architectural drawings. In addition, typical archival documents such as diaries, letters, and business records in multiple written/recorded formats are reviewed.

The major class project consists of physically arranging an archival collection and creating a finding aid. Generally, teams of four to five students work on a collection that is about two cartons or four cubic feet in size. Students who have completed this course in the past have processed a number of interesting collections, including the papers of the Westwood Garden Club, the Kalamazoo Federation of Labor Stagehand's Union, and the Kalamazoo County Arts Council. Some students have also processed collections of personal papers that include correspondence, diaries, and ephemeral materials. As part of the processing, items in the collections are transferred into archival folders and boxes. Preservation issues, such as removing rusty paper clips or rotting rubber bands, are addressed. An inventory listing of the collection is augmented by information on the creator of the records, the chronological scope, and relevant information about the subject matter. Each organizational effort requires significant "hands-on" and intensive personal involvement with the history (people, places, objects) of the archival deposit. The end result, or summary, of this archival project is a tangible product that students can identify and include in a portfolio or use for job interview or graduate school applications.

One of the unique aspects of the archival administration class is its location. Since 2000, the course has been taught almost exclusively in East Hall, the location of the Archives and Regional History Collections. The East Hall location allows students to see documents that could not be transported to the West campus because of size, fragility, or inclement weather. Similarly, the location also makes the major class project feasible. As a special bonus, some students indicate they enjoy the opportunity to take a course in Western's first classroom building that was opened for use in 1904.

An additional positive outcome of the course is the fact that a number of the "graduates" go on to complete internships in the Archives and Regional History Collections or at other archival facilities. Internships typically require 120 to 240 hours of time. Student interns may process larger collections or delve into specific research projects or reference requests—all part of an archivist's work. Needless to say, these ongoing "advanced" projects strengthen each student's future chances for positions in many different types of archival

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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/.