Jen Green

Library instruction for first-year students

Following the students' path

First-year student information-seeking behaviors change as quickly as the devices they use, so anticipating the needs of first-year students feels daunting each academic year. Yet, introducing them to university-level research is important as they face academic challenges that require higher level research skills than the ones with which most of them come equipped.

Plymouth State University attempts to address the needs of budding scholars through a required First Year Seminar (FYS) course, which is designed to develop the research, writing, and critical thinking skills that they are expected to use while pursuing an education. Each FYS course is assigned an instructor, a topic, and a personal librarian who meets with the class once or twice during the semester to cover these skills.

I survived my first year of teaching FYS courses, but didn't feel that I was connecting completely with the students. Even though I designed the instruction to meet their needs, students looked bored and distracted. Strolling around the room during my sessions revealed that the students' attention was on Facebook and random Google searches rather than the skills set I was attempting to convey. Determined to foster class engagement, I tried to get to the bottom of their distraction by administering a quick online survey at the end of each session.

Not surprisingly, the surveys revealed that I was missing the mark. Students were polite to say that I was knowledgeable about the library, but they indicated that my sessions were boring and irrelevant and they did not have enough free time to find sources for their papers.

Clearly, it was time to change my approach, but I struggled during that first year to determine how. Incidentally, we'd recently discovered through usability testing that our library website was also missing the mark, as far as students' research needs were concerned, and needed an overhaul. One thing we noticed is that students repeatedly started with Google or, at times, would even navigate away from the library page to search Google for our library resources. Sometimes their Google searches would lead them to our library resources, but more often, they them to a dead end or confusion.

The students' searching behavior reminded me of a concept I'd learned while pursuing my undergraduate degree in art history: *desire lines*. In landscape architecture, desire lines are pathways people create while repeatedly walking across a green space; they usually appear everywhere except for the established sidewalks. Desire lines indicate where people actually want to walk as opposed to where design professionals think they should walk. Some landscape architects will wait for the

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desire lines to emerge across the campus green, and then lay the sidewalk along the paths that the users have chosen.

The similarities between campus pedestrians and campus researchers had finally dawned on me. Students were straying away from the predetermined research pathways available on the library website and were following their own easier or more familiar pathways. Watching student after student repeat this behavior during usability testing led me to think, "Let the students find their resources via Google (or whatever search engine they find useful)." My job was to respond to the pathways they create and incorporate this into my library instruction design and execution.

In preparation for the next year's group of first-year students, I strayed from my traditional library database searches and began with Google Scholar research inquiries—an access point that I often use for my own information needs. Clearly, students know Google, so this seemed like a logical entry point to convey how online tools they recognize can also be used to connect them with academic resources. Google Scholar not only leads to academic articles available in digital form, but it also produces item results harvested from Lamson Learning Commons' WorldShare catalog.

My revised library instruction sessions immediately revealed that Google Scholar worked just like desire lines in landscape planning: to the students it was familiar, well-travelled, and therefore easy for them to comprehend. The emotional climate in the room shifted from ambivalence to curiosity, which was easy to see as I watched students use the unstructured time I gave them during class to find resources for their papers.

As I continue with this approach, I've observed that students are surprised and curious when I start with Google Scholar and are then eager to use class time to find and use library resources from the comfort of Google Scholar's landing page. With a familiar and intuitive stage set, I start some simple searches and then demonstrate how they could dig a little deeper into their search

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findings by refining their terms and using filters available in Google Scholar. Through this, they begin to understand the connections from Google to the library catalog, but also how information resources are organized and tagged within most search engines. They also see the similarities and differences of searching Google and searching the library catalog, which is a constant source of confusion for new students. Following the students' desire lines when it comes to digital resources gives me insight into how their search logic works and gives them the confidence to discover and accept new pathways in the scholarly online community.

Since I've shifted my perspective on library instruction, I've noticed heightened curiosity on the students' part for discovering other resources once they reached our library website. In the previous semesters, I'd struggled to achieve class participation.

After responding to their search behaviors through Google Scholar, I was pleased and amazed the students followed along with each step (no Facebook pages to be seen).

This teaching approach also gave students more time to work with tools that I demonstrated, ask questions, and find resources during the instruction session that were useful for their assignment. Students also realize that librarian assistance and research instruction can be helpful beyond the FYS course and throughout their academic career.

For me, providing library instruction had always been daunting and stressful. Now that I've begun observing the students' predetermined research pathways and creating more balance between what the students need to learn about research and what they already know about it, I've developed a newfound enjoyment and enthusiasm for teaching them. ⇜