

“Why are you using the library?” or, The Real Goals of Library Research in the Academic Curriculum

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Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to be on this panel and thank you for coming. As I begin my paper presentation, I presume the following story will probably date me but I'll just take that risk.

When I was an undergraduate student, there was one photocopier in the undergraduate library. It was a marvel to us, a big hulking machine that turned out smelly wet gray copies at 10 cents a page. The machine seemed to be broken as often as it worked but some people did use it. It seemed extravagant to pay so much for copies and so I, like a lot of students, kept to our habit of taking notes and writing laborious notes on note cards. It was inconceivable that I could or should photocopy a journal article or a page from a reference book. If I wanted a copy, I would do it the old fashioned way, by hand. Chances are, I would have located the sources I needed by using one of several print indexes or the card catalog. With any luck, I would have found some things related to my topic and I would have written down citations or call numbers for those as I progressed through the research process.

When I was an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois in the 1970s, library research was a

labor intensive exercise. Many of you no doubt remember doing what I've described. It involved a lot of writing things down - call numbers, citations, quotations and other notes from sources. It involved choosing parts of the sources to use. It took a lot of time. I used lots of 3 x 5 cards. I had a system for keeping track of the bibliography cards and the related notes, of keeping it all in order. It was quite an effort. The process of putting a paper together involved shuffling lots of cards with cryptic notations and symbols, producing a draft paper and then a final paper, typed on my manual typewriter.

As I think back, I'm not sure what standards I was using to choose the material I used for my papers. My guess I was just glad to find anything and would have settled for what I could come up with. I have no recollection of a course instructor or teaching assistant providing any guidance about identifying, evaluating, or choosing sources. I was on my own. At that time academic librarians were just embracing the concept of the library as a teaching institution instead of as a self service book warehouse. I'm sure if I had asked for help, I would have received it but I don't think I did. If I had any notion of *why* I was conducting research, I would be surprised.

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Looking back at that old photocopier, little did we know that smelly, messy machine was part of the first wave in the sea change for library technology and informational retrieval. For with that photocopier came the first shift from labor intensive information transcription to technology aided information gathering. Still to come were COM catalogs, integrated library systems, DIALOG, Infotrac, file servers, networks, scanners, floppy discs, ARIEL, sound cards, AMAZON.COM, and Java applets. So many new toys are now at our disposal if we want them and can afford them. While our work life has become one of troubleshooting PC's, unjamming printers, and massaging HTML text, something else has happened and we all know it. The way students do research has changed. Students, and faculty, lead the charge for more and better information technology, for faster document delivery. As we can all attest, many students are averse to anything print and want the far more sexier and "easier" technology based material. We can all tell sad tales of wonderful print resources lying dormant while patrons pour over web sites of limited merit. Students also spend less and less time in the library building, using our networks and Internet providers to conduct research. We help that process through providing electronic reserves, full text or full image databases, and cataloged URL's on our webOPACS. And we will continue to try to keep up with patron demands while maintaining a workable balance of traditional and innovative library services and collections. In doing so, it may be said that some of us are on the cutting edge, some of us might argue we are on the bleeding edge, and some of us are on the trailing edge. Perhaps some of us are still looking for a foothold on the edge.

In thinking about technology and academic libraries, it is tempting to say that everything has changed, and indeed much has changed. But I would argue that one fundamental issue has not changed, an issue fundamental to how we conduct our business and how we interact with our constituents. And that is the question posed by my presentation title: *Why are you using the library?*

Just why *are* students given library based assignments? What is the purpose of a term paper, an annotated bibliography, or a book review? What does the course instructor expect the student to gain from the assignment? How does this project contribute to the learning goals and objectives for the course? And how is this communicated to the student? What kind of guide-

lines are presented for the completion of the assignment? What standards are put forward? Conversely, what does the student expect to get out of the experience? Does he or she *know* why this particular assignment has been given? For those of us involved in assessments and goal setting, using the vernacular of accrediting agencies: what is the desired student learning outcome? Unless we can answer these questions, our effectiveness as librarians, as libraries, and as partners in the education process will be hard to measure.

The common rationales for assigning students research assignments include (1) developing critical thinking skills, (2) gaining familiarity with the literature of the discipline, (3) reading, understanding and assimilating information, and (4) becoming an efficient and effective library user. I think we can all agree these are worthy goals and should be part of the academic experience. We certainly want to participate in helping students achieve those goals. The question is then, how can we arrive at a method that assures students learn what they are supposed to learn from the process?

If we briefly look at a research assignment, there are several components to the process. First, the instructor develops a course syllabus or outline for the entire term, listing textbooks, readings, topics to be covered, exams and due dates for papers or projects. Depending on the instructor, a document may be prepared that provides guidelines for the research project such as topic selection, scope, deadlines, etc. In some cases, guidance on information sources may be provided. Hopefully, a library instruction session helps students learn about the resources appropriate for the project. Thus prepared, students gather information, complete the project, and the instructor gives it a grade. With luck, the product fits the desired goals and the student is appropriately rewarded for his or her effort.

In considering that description, let's start with the information gathering component. We all know that technology has made finding information easier. Between online catalogs, full text databases, and web sites, students can generally find a plethora of sources to choose from. With technology, students and faculty are more inclined to do research. It seems easier; the electronic interface is attractive and eliminates much of the labor intensive transcribing of information. What used to seem tedious, difficult, obtuse, and time consuming is now more appealing, if not fun. In fact, it seems seductively easy. In the words of Tina

Chrzastowski “if you plug it in, they will come.”²¹ In short, the information gathering part of the process is generally no longer the issue. Our patrons can find plenty. The problem is finding, evaluating, and then selecting the most appropriate sources. It is now, and has always been, a matter of standards, of evaluation, of judgment. But whose judgment? The instructor’s? The student’s? The librarian’s? Without guidance and standards, the student will indeed often take the first materials located and may not understand the consequences. Any five articles on capital punishment may fulfill the assignment requirements but what if there is no common thread to those five? What kind of final project will emerge? Is this knowledge? As one group of authors put it “all too often student forays into the library are papers that consist of information nuggets strung together by flimsy (but formal) transitions indicating that one source says X and another says Y.”²² Today, almost every day, we see students choosing the first five or six citations that come up on a screen, having satisfied what they believe the assignment requires. Observing this behavior, we worry about the other items not selected because they were on the next screen or in a different database. We are concerned that ease of access has replaced thoughtful judgment and care. As an aside, I suggest that the dynamics of the selection process has certain similarities to a pre-electronic age. Take a volume of *Readers’ Guide* from the early 1970s and open it to a subject such as gun control. Look at the citations. Note the little pen and pencil marks next to the first dozen or so citations, those at the beginning of the alphabet. Then look at the end of the citation list, those whose first words in the title start with R or S or W. Chances are there are few indications students got that far. They stopped at the first few, just as they now stop at the first screen display.

Without clearly articulated objectives for the assignment students will likely make poor choices for their sources as they do not know *why* they are doing the paper. If the purpose is to find a few supporting articles to support a simple thesis in a five-page opinion paper, the issue is not as complicated. If however, the point of the 15-page term paper assignment is to gather and assimilate material on a common theme, to employ critical thinking, to produce a product that exhibits true knowledge and understanding of the topic, then the research process will need to reflect the level of intellectual effort that will be demonstrated in the final paper.

How then do we approach the challenges of improving the quality of student research and the information literacy skills important for academic success? How can we as librarians participate in the measuring of our affect on student learning outcomes as demonstrated by library research? What role can we play at our institutions?

First, we can work with faculty to more clearly articulate the goals of a research assignment. The faculty member develops the course around certain objectives for learning. The relationship between the course objectives and the assignments can be strengthened and made more clear to students. It cannot be taken for granted that students inherently understand the relationship of a project to course content. Assignment design should also be considered; there is no “one size fits all” paper appropriate for every class or course objectives. The purpose of the assignment and the nature of the research intended should guide the project design and requirements.

In a 1995 article, Kathleen Garland discusses the purpose of research and how to make its purpose clear. She offers four elements that contribute to a meaningful research task,

1. students’ understanding of the task, 2. their perceived connection between the task and other activities in the course, 3. whether they had any choices to make regarding the task, and 4. whether they felt they knew why their teacher wanted them to do this project.”²³

So, we need to encourage and work with faculty to clarify the point of the project in order to get things off to a good start.

We also need to articulate for ourselves and to others the difference between process and product. Too often students focus on the end result and shortchange the road that will get them there. As stated by Betty Dawn Hamilton,

in research, the purpose of the assignment must be clear. If teachers want only content and perfection, then the product is what they are seeking. However, if teachers want students to learn how to find, assimilate, and synthesize information into a document to meet certain technological as well as intellectual requirements,

then those outcomes must be made clear to the students and everyone who works with the students on the assignments".⁴

Second, we must find venues to provide instruction in the evaluation of sources. Faculty and students are bombarded with information choices. Making sense of these overwhelming choices should stem from the purpose of the assignment as articulated by the instructor and as understood by the student. Various criteria have been developed and suggested; the literature in this area is growing as educators face this dilemma. Many libraries provide web sites and handouts with suggestions for evaluating Internet resources and other unregulated materials. Teaching faculty and librarians need to work together to reach common understanding on what the instructor considers relevant information materials for a particular assignment so the librarian can be an informed partner in helping students in the classroom or at the reference desk. I'm sure you've had the same experience I've had of a student asking me if such and such a source is OK for a particular assignment. I am glad to give my opinion but always refer students to their instructors who can truly answer the question, and as I point out in language the student understands, I'm not giving the grade!

Third, the issue of resource evaluation leads to the arena of library research instruction. We already strive to present information skills training that is course related, and I would hope assignment related. A clear articulation of the assignment, standards, and goals ensures that our efforts match those expectations of students and faculty. Chappell et al, in discussing transforming research into inquiry, describe Evaluating Sources Workshops at the University of Washington and how students are instructed to put sources in context of the subject and to each other.⁵ This is a good model for many librarians and faculty to consider, and provides the opportunity for true inquiry and information literacy skills that we desire for our students.

We need to also be mindful of not focusing too heavily on the technological side of research in our instruction while shortchanging guidance on the research process. Blandy and Libutti address this issue in an 1995 article saying "the addition of the technology layer to skills required for searching has narrowed the focus of library instruction almost exclusively to the use of technology."⁶ Limited to an hour's presentation, we struggle

to teach the tools but are often overlooking the process. True research does not progress in a nice straight line, even with the aid of computers and websites. There is a process of starting and stopping, making choices, changing one's mind, pursuing a certain point, that makes for a messy process. The computer is a tool; the intellectual process remains the same. In her 1994 article, Christy Gavin speaks to this issue, saying "treating research skills as a rote exercise negates its true nature, which demands a continual process of selection, elimination, and evaluation."⁷

Fourth, we can work closely with faculty to make sure they understand the world of research in the 1990's so they can best develop assignment guidelines and standards that fit the intended purpose of the assignment. Assigning "the Internet" as a source is not very helpful. Conversely, banning use of web based sources is not realistic for training life long learners. In articulating the research project, both students and faculty need to have the same basic understanding of the information world. Most students today, and many faculty, are fluent in computer use and demand more and better information technology. However, problems remain in sorting out what is useful and what is not for educational purposes. For many faculty research revolves around a small world of colleagues, listservs, journals, book editors, and scholars. This so called "invisible college"⁸ is quite different from the broad, unfamiliar world of undergraduate research, and may mean that some faculty are not familiar with some basic information tools and how to use them. Faculty need to be fluent in the tools their students are using in order to help define which resources will best fit the assignment and the course goals. They need to understand what is available so they can help students make choices. Here, again, librarians play a role in educating and collaborating with faculty so that course objectives are met and these standards are articulated during library research instruction.

Fifth, we need to work towards identifying and teaching research core competencies in for students and then ways to measure students' grasp of those competencies. We should work with faculty and curriculum decision makers to make sure we are on the same page. My Mercer/ Atlanta colleagues are developing such a project that I hope we will adopt in Macon, too. Here is a perfect opportunity to directly measure the impact libraries have on student learning. If we can outline the goals and objectives for these competencies, then objective

and subjective measures of those goals can follow. It must be more than technological fluency, however. Blandy and Libutti have identified four layers of learning in research in an electronic environment :

(1) the Inquiry layer, when the student becomes engaged in the forming of the questions, (2) the Library Layer, when the student interacts with library resources and personnel for information gathering, (3) the Technology layer, when s/he can manipulate information systems efficiently and effectively, and (4) the Scholarly layer, when the student can make judgments about information sources and content and assimilate information into knowledge and personal growth.⁹

The authors argue that the technology layer threatens to overshadow the other two, but it is the 1st and 4th, Inquiry and Scholarly, which provide the backbone for lifetime learning and intellectual growth.

Finally, I think it is obvious that the true goal of research is the same as that for the entire academic experience—the cultivation and assimilation of knowledge. Students engage in exploring the nature of an academic discipline during their course of study. They learn the way that discipline operates. They learn the structure, the language, the tools of the field. In large part, libraries provide the raw information for their inquiry. We enable students and faculty to locate the information sources that they need for their course work and intellectual development. Choosing the right sources is part of the intellectual exercise. Using various technological tools is only part of the process. The overall mission in which we all share, faculty, students and librarians, is making sense of the information arena. Maybe one of the reasons I look back at the ways I did research with some fondness is that I have a sense I may have learned more in writing down notes on note cards than in just

highlighting pages. One can compress the time it takes to find information but one cannot compress the time needed for meaningful information processing, for thoughtful consideration of the text and the context of that text. These skills, the inquiry layer and the scholarly layer, are our goals. We must embrace the challenges and find the opportunities to ensure our students reach those layers for their academic success.

Notes

1. Tina E. Chzastowski, "Do Workstations Work Too Well? An Investigation into Library Workstation Popularity and the 'Principle of Least Effort,'" *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 46, no. 8 (1995): 638–41.
2. Virginia A. Chappell, Randall Hensley, and Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill, "Beyond Information Retrieval: Transforming Research Assignments into Genuine Inquiry," *Journal of Teaching Writing* 13, no. 1–2 (1994): 209–24.
3. Kathleen Garland, "The Information Search Process: A Study of Elements Associated with Meaningful Research Tasks," *School Library Media Annual* 13 (1995): 171–83.
4. Betty Dawn Hamilton, "The Purpose of Information and Technology Assignments: Process or Product?," *Technology-Connection* 13, no. 10 (1997): 18–19.
5. Chappell et al., "Beyond Information Retrieval," 217.
6. Susan Griswold Blandy and Patricia O'Brien Libutti, "As the Cursor Blinks: Electronic Scholarship and Undergraduates in the Library," *Library Trends* 44, no. 2 (1995): 279–305.
7. Christy Gavin, "Guiding Students Along the Information Highway: Librarians Collaborating with Composition Instructors," *Journal of Teaching Writing* 13, no. 2 (1994): 225–35.
8. Ibid.
9. Blandy and Libutti, "As the Cursor Blinks," 293.