

Not Enough Time in the Library

Just because your students are computer-literate doesn't mean they are research-literate

By [TODD GILMAN](#)

As an academic librarian, I hear an awful lot of hype about using technology to enhance instruction in colleges and universities. While the very word "technology" — not to mention the jargon that crops up around it, like "interactive whiteboards" and "smart classrooms" — sounds exciting and impressive, what it boils down to is really just a set of tools. They're useful tools, but they don't offer content beyond what the users put into them.

Today we have hardware and software that facilitate communication, resource-sharing, and organization. We have computers attached to projection systems for lectures and demonstrations; social-networking and messaging sites like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter; virtual spaces like blogs and wikis in which to collaborate; course-management software like Blackboard/WebCT, Sakai, and Angel to supplement or even take the place of the physical classroom; and programs such as RefWorks, Endnote, and Zotero to keep track of and format bibliographies.

Oldsters tend to associate those tools with youngsters. Many faculty members, especially senior ones, believe they are less adept at using those tools than their students are. While that much may be true, the assumption that follows — that when it comes to technology, today's students need no faculty guidance — most certainly is not.

While college students may be computer-literate, they are not, as a rule, research-literate. And there's a huge difference between the two.

The fact that some professors do not recognize the distinction means they effectively assume that their students find themselves as much at home in the complex and daunting world of information as when they upload 25 photos from their iPhone to Facebook and text their friends to announce the latest "pics."

Academic librarians are eager to offer sessions for students on what we call "research education." But the mistaken assumption that students don't need it means that many professors don't ask us to meet with their students, or even respond to our enthusiastic offers to lead such sessions. Students don't need to be taught anything about working online, because they were practically born digital, right?

Research education is not tools education. Research education involves getting students to understand how information is organized physically in libraries, as well as electronically in library catalogs and in powerful, sometimes highly specialized commercial databases. It means teaching students to search effectively online to identify the most relevant and highest-quality books, articles, microform sets, databases, even free Web resources.

Students do not come to college armed with those skills, nor are they likely to be acquired without guidance. Yet students desperately need such skills if they hope to function effectively in our information-driven economy. As Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams opine in *The Craft of Research*: "The vast majority of students will have careers in which, if they do not do their own research, they will have to evaluate and depend on the research of others. We know of no way to prepare for that responsibility better than to do research of one's own."

Professors may need to be reminded that online searching requires a set of skills that are the strong suit of academic librarians — and that we are eager to impart those skills to students. Faculty members may also need to be reminded that developing those skills takes practice. Would professors assume that students possess the critical-thinking skills necessary to make sense of an early-17th-century document related to the Plymouth Bay Colony just because they grew up in Massachusetts?

Here, then, are some tips for faculty members on how to augment students' research skills.

Spend a class period on search strategies. Show students how to find their way around the library's electronic catalog (for books) and a few general databases such as Academic Search Premier, those in the WilsonWeb platform, and LexisNexis Academic (for articles). A librarian can conduct a session with your students on those sources and, more important, demonstrate effective search strategies to avoid frustration and wasted time. Make the session mandatory, hold it during class, and be sure to attend it, to show you mean business. Even better, teach the session with the librarian, or at least chime in to stress key points.

Take a tour. Introduce students to the physical spaces of the library, especially the reference desk, the reference collection and its contents, the periodical reading room, and the stacks — including how to read a call number. Believe it or not, many students' familiarity with their college or university library stops at the study spaces.

Reinforce the lesson with an assignment. Devise a for-credit assignment that echoes what you and the librarian have shown the students. It should emphasize key distinctions that they often forget, such as the need to search the online catalog for books but library databases for articles. You might also incorporate a component that challenges students to evaluate the quality of information they find, such as comparing the top results returned by a keyword search in Google with those returned in Academic Search Premier with the peer-reviewed box checked. Which results are more authoritative, and how can students tell?

Take it a step further. Perhaps you want to do more than require a single assignment, such as encouraging students to use library materials in support of arguments in their term papers. It would be good to assign them Chapter 3 (pp. 40 to 55) of the second edition of *The Craft of Research* (available for library purchase as an e-book, so students don't have to shell out extra). The chapter covers how to turn interest in a topic into a research question that's worth trying to answer. It should reduce the likelihood that students will set out to write a paper on "the history of rowing on U.S. college campuses" and move them instead toward an argument supported by convincing data about, say, "the role that athletics plays in U.S. college admissions."

In an ideal world, students should have multiple encounters with librarians, not just the standard 60-to-90-minute session that is most common now.

Faculty members in Yale's English department clearly recognize the growing importance of research education: They have just agreed to increase fivefold the number of undergraduates who will attend library sessions as an integral part of their introductory writing and literature courses (from 350 to roughly 1,900). Add to that our new "personal librarian" program, which pairs every Yale freshman with a Yale librarian, and you see the students themselves begin to be repositioned to value learning the craft of research. Let's hope this example encourages others to follow suit.

The more time students spend with us, the further they can go beyond the basics into larger conceptual issues. Once they have determined what makes a good research question in the first place, they can move on to ask themselves (and the librarian) what is needed to answer specific questions they want to explore,

developing the confidence that comes from knowing they are looking in all the right places for answers, and actually finding what they seek.

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