I Google, You Google, We Google...

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In the Classroom

To go with Google’s growing power is our own growing dependency, which is confirmed in my classroom. Among other duties at Cal State East Bay, my colleagues and I teach a two-credit information literacy course required of all incoming first year students. My class consists of an amazing range of students. They vary by ethnicity, country of birth, preparation level, major, etc. They have one thing in common, though: they are digital natives. This, however, does not guarantee that they are digitally savvy. In fact, many are quite the opposite. They can point and click, but they lack skills in searching or in evaluating what they find. And it’s not because they aren’t bright or lively or interested in their subjects. It’s their preparation, their assumptions in this new information world, and the omnipresent Google and its ilk.

I can show students databases, the catalog, and other sources on and off the Web, but left on their own, they return to Google. Many students prefer to avoid dealing with complex databases, complex strategies, or complex scholarly articles and do so only when required by their instructors. They don’t have the time or the inclination besides, it’s harder. Many of them cope with work, school, and family obligations. Of course, there are some who like the library resources, but for most, it takes a lot of convincing. When it comes to choosing a search engine, Google comes first.

My opening approach is to start where they are most familiar. “How many of you use Google?” Up go the hands, including my own. Beyond that, I discover what many of them don’t know:

• The meaning and purpose of http and html, a domain name, URL construction, and the existence of suffixes beyond.com, .org, net, or .edu (even though they may have visited such sites)
• That you can influence search results through the use of quotation marks, truncation, and other devices
• That in addition to Google and a couple of its competitors which they know, there are other commercial search engines, and there are also non-commercial search engines that can provide some vetted results
• That in addition to Google and, sometimes, iGoogle, there are Google Books, Google Scholar, etc.

And this is before we get to concepts such as:

• The Internet is not the Web
• A search engine is not a database

• Google Scholar results don’t come from the Web; depending on set preferences, they come from Open WorldCat and our Cal State East Bay holdings
• While Google Scholar is a search engine, like its mother ship, it acts as a platform in a manner similar to those of our commercial vendors
• A platform is not a database
• Content is not the same as its delivery mechanism
• Content can be retrieved from our database through various delivery mechanisms — the database itself, other databases, federated searching, Google Scholar, commercial platforms, and even, print materials

Beyond these concepts is the issue of evaluation. In one exercise, I ask them to compare newspapers’ Websites. We discuss bias, ownership history, what each paper chooses to place “above the fold” (an interesting absorption of a print term into the Web environment), and other features. I also show them sites such as www.factcheck.org. Students easily click from Google results to Web pages, but are surprised at the differences on these news sites and need guidance in evaluating those differences and the reasons for them.

Google is also an interesting way to initiate discussions about information ethics — copyright, privacy, etc. Copyright, not surprisingly, is a mystery to them. For them privacy is irrelevant, unless they are computing majors or have personal experience with an invasion of privacy. They have grown up with a very different perspective on this topic. When I describe the use of cookies and mention that Google keeps their search queries for eighteen months, their response is “So?” Yet, according to a Google executive who didn’t want to be identified for a New Yorker article, “Privacy is an atomic bomb…Our success is based on trust.” Google understands this, whether from the principle of privacy or the potential of liability, but my students need an explanation.

All of these elements come into play with Google and I use it as a jumping off point to try to convey these and other concepts. By the end of the quarter, some of them understand that Google has its place, but that other information sources, delivery mechanisms, and strategies are helpful, at least while they are in university and have access. Some of them, however, will always prefer Google. The lure is hard to resist and, ultimately, when they will be cut off from our commercial databases after graduation, Google may give them one of the

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Using Google in Technical Services: An Unscientific Survey

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Public Services librarians use Google daily. But how many Technical Services (TS) librarians use Google, and, more importantly, how do they use it? In a recent search of the current literature, I was able to find only two citations which addressed this question: Jennifer Lang. “Have You Searched Google Yet?” Using Google as a Discovery Tool for Cataloging,” in Library Philosophy & Practice, Summer 2007, Vol. 9, Issue 3, p.1-10, and Jin Qiang, “Creating Up-to-Date Corporate Name Authority Records by Using Official Corporate Home Web Pages,” in Cataloging & Classification Quarterly, 2004, vol. 38, Issue 3/4, p.281-290. I often use Google in my cataloging work, as do some of my colleagues. I know that using Google has changed the way we do our jobs. I was curious to explore how our jobs have changed, because of Google, and the many ways in which librarians and other library staff in Technical Services use Google to inform and verify their work. I hoped I would learn how I could improve my own skills. I use the phrase “Technical Services” to include acquisitions, serials, cataloging and database maintenance.

I decided to conduct an informal survey. In February 2008, I posted the following query to five discussion lists. “For an article I am writing for Against the Grain. I would like the following information: If you are a librarian or library staff member working in a Technical Services position (i.e., database maintenance, cataloging, acquisitions, serials), do you use Google in your daily work? If so, how? (Please be specific).” Specifically, I sent this request to SERIALST (Serials in Libraries Discussion Forum), AUTOCAT (discussion list on library cataloging and authorities), LEBRIAN (Lesbian and Bisexual Library Workers), SUNYLA-L (topics relating to the SUNY Librarians Association or SUNY Libraries) and SLAVLIBLES (Forum for Slavic Librarians). I chose those discussion lists because I subscribe to all of them. I received over 150 responses. I expected to find that most catalogers who use Google used it for name/subject authority verification, as well as for classification purposes. I also expected publisher verification to be a very popular usage of Google, by acquisitions folks. Frequent use of Google to verify live URLs was something else I expected.

I received answers from people working in all sorts of libraries: academic, private, school, public, art, music, law, scientific, church, federal, medical, military, etc., and a few answers came from book vendors. Most of the responses came from North America, and there were a few from other parts of the world, as well. I was surprised at the variety of answers I received. (I should probably have been more specific and asked how people use the Google Search Engine in particular, as some people told me how they use other Google products. More on that later.) Most respondents

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The Acquisitions Category:

- Finding small-press Websites
- Finding out currency exchanges
- Subscription information; chronology; format change
- To determine latest editions of titles
- To determine release dates, especially for best sellers
- To find alternate vendors
- To find license agreement terms
- To find non-book vendors (i.e., specialty film distributors)
- To find open access journals
- To find publishers Websites, to check frequency information
- To find staff members’ names (on a journal Website) so that I can speak to an actual person and get an answer!
- To find state agency field offices
- To locate and price media
- To search book values
- To search for out-of-print material

Vendor: addresses, price, ordering information, phone number; saves money on long distance phone

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Endnotes

4. Ibid.: 181.
5. Auletta, op. cit.: 31.
7. Ibid.: 176.
8. Ibid.: 181.
10. Ibid.
12. As a side note, our university has just switched all students to an email system powered by Google.
15. Auletta, op. cit.: 33.