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People Profile: Julie Arendt

Editor

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It has been argued that the subscription database is better than Google Scholar after a user learns how to use it. For most students, especially undergraduates, this amount of database knowledge is unrealistic. Often the end users of the library’s databases have not had any formal training. If they receive training, it is often a one-time guest lecture by a librarian or informal instruction at the reference desk. Because one-shot instruction sessions and brief instruction during reference encounters are the norm, there rarely is time for most users to thoroughly learn how to use a database. Typically there is only enough time to transform a complete novice database user into a slightly-less-than-complete novice. Even when there is more time, the time spent teaching a database reduces the time available to teach information literacy skills. The Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education from the Association of College and Research Libraries lists five capacities of an information literate person. Only one of those capacities deals directly with searching techniques.

As suggested by Diane Zabel, perhaps it would be better for librarians to have regular, ongoing collaboration with faculty to integrate information literacy throughout students’ disciplinary studies. Perhaps it would be better to teach the broader information literacy concepts in a separate, mandatory course and to use one-shot instruction sessions for discipline-specific bibliographic and database instruction. In colleges and universities that manage to successfully implement either model, librarians would have the luxury of approaching reference and one-shot instruction sessions with the knowledge that students will cover the other important ideas somewhere else. I do not have that luxury, and many of my colleagues at other institutions also work without that luxury. I go to classes where students’ exposure to information literacy is as varied as the courses and instructors they have experienced up to that point. I am not the first to suggest that in a world with Google Scholar, it is time to move away from teaching the mechanics of searching databases to teaching more of the whole of information seeking. I try to approach these teaching opportunities with two questions, “What are the most important things for them to learn from my presentation?” and, “What can I teach them that will help them the most on their work for this course?” My answers to these questions are always more than I can fit into a fifty-minute session. I have to jettison the material that is less essential.

If the best reason I can find for teaching a particular subscription database to undergraduates is simply to expose them to the database of a particular discipline, it is a topic that I consider less essential. After they graduate, most students will no longer be affiliated with a university and may no longer have easy access to university-level subscription databases. Although it may be possible for graduates to travel to the nearest public university library or to find a way to purchase short-term access to a database, the time, effort, and expense involved are substantial barriers that should not be ignored. Doesn’t it make sense to introduce students to appropriate free resources rather than expecting them to find a way to get access to subscription resources? In many cases, the appropriate free resource is Google Scholar, although it could be ERIC, PubMed, AGRICOLA, or another conventional library resource that does not require payment. Even for graduate students, where familiarity with the most important databases in their field should be a part of students’ education, Google Scholar has value. Many graduate students will go on to be faculty, and even though they will still conduct research, they may not have the same library resources. At colleges with small budgets, the premier database for a discipline may be too expensive. As Yvonne Jones described, alternatives for faculty in this situation can be to search multiple subscription databases to get about half the coverage of the premier database or to search Google Scholar to get about half the coverage of the premier database. With those options, searching Google Scholar is a reasonable choice.

Another reason to teach a subscription database is to present general tactics for database searching. Students can apply skills, such as selecting keywords, leveraging controlled vocabularies, using Boolean logic, and broadening or narrowing a search, to other situations. Some of these skills are possible to teach within Google Scholar, and some are not. The trouble is that the skills are taught at the same time as the arbitrary mechanics of where to click to get a particular database to work. Even for databases with the best interfaces, it takes several steps of navigation through the library Website just to get to the database. When the database requires several additional clicks, I wonder if the core message will get buried in the procedures. Every minute spent teaching these mechanics is a minute less spent on teaching general concepts in database searching.

Sometimes those extra minutes on database navigation are worthwhile. In some subjects, the appropriate disciplinary database may produce better results with less effort for students despite the extra navigation. Google Scholar is weaker in the social sciences and humanities than it is in the sciences. Some disciplinary databases have useful search features that are unavailable in Google Scholar. When students know how to use these features, they appreciate them. On the other hand, when the interface is hard to use and the advantages over Google Scholar are small, those extra minutes spent on navigation pale in comparison to the other things that could be taught.

Although an hour is too short to build “an intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating, and using information,” it is enough time to encourage students to think critically about the information they find and to think about the legal and social issues involved. Knowing why it matters that there are differences between a white paper, newspaper, magazine, or scholarly journal article, or some other type of source will serve students a lot longer than knowing where to click in a particular database interface to find its advanced search tools. Knowing why it is important to cite sources should be useful after graduation, unlike knowing where to click on the college library’s Website.

One objection that may be raised to teaching Google Scholar is that it will direct students away from subscription databases that the library spends so much to have. In writing,

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