

Top 10 Things You Can Do To Make Your Scholarly Resources More Accessible To (and More Accessed By) Undergraduates

by **Adriana Parker** (J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah)

Column Editor: **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>



Column Editor's Note: *This installment of the "In My Humble (But Correct) Opinion" column should really be called "In Her Humble (But Correct) Opinion." I wanted to convey some useful advice to those who design, market, select, and administer online information resources, and so I turned to someone who spends much more time at the patron-resource interface than I do. Luckily, I have access to one of the smartest and most effective such librarians there is here in my home institution, so I invited her to share her insights from the trenches. I think publishers, vendors, and librarians alike will find her advice both perceptive and useful. Take it away, Adriana! — RA*

Research tells us that the open Web is the go-to "scholarly" resource for undergraduates seeking information. As early as 2002, a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project called "The Internet Goes To College" informed us that the majority of undergraduates (73% of those surveyed) "reported that the Internet, rather than the library, is the primary site of their information searches."¹ Then, in 2005, the Evaluation of the Distributed National Electronic Resource Project found that "45% of students used Google as their first port of call when locating information."² Naturally, it's other commercial search engines that round off the list of online resources that undergraduates use when seeking information, whether it's for course-related research or personal

research. So, what does that mean for us — the librarians, publishers, and vendors — who are in the business of promoting scholarly resources? I think it means a couple of things:

First, it means that now is an ideal time to reflect, adapt, and change. No more hemming and hawing, no more waiting around to see if students change their research habits, no more hoping for usage stats to improve on their own. As an instruction librarian, I work closely with students who are engaged in research, and I've never met a student who could tell me what a library database is. More than a few know about the library catalog, but only a handful knows where to find ours or how to use it. But I do know hundreds of students who take every single information search to Google first — and that's even after completing (in my humble opinion) top-notch bibliographic instruction.

Second, we need to take our resources to the places where students are already going, rather than focus our efforts on redirecting them to the places we want them to go. An increase in the use of scholarly resources is much more likely if we can integrate those resources into undergraduates' existing research processes, rather than expecting them to create brand-new processes. And making a few changes to those resources or the interfaces used to access them ... well, that's kind of a no-brainer.

Here Are Some Ideas That Are Worth Considering:

For those who Create Online Resources:

Google is *not* synonymous with Google Scholar. While undergraduates are big-time Google users, the majority don't use (or haven't even heard of) Google Scholar. According to the Project Information Literacy study, 95% of undergraduates surveyed used Google — not Google Scholar — as their preferred online resource for course-related research.³ So, even if you can find and access your resources in Google Scholar, they're still not as visible as they could be.

Well, okay, Google Scholar is pretty great. Let's not abandon our Google Scholar efforts completely. Whether you're online, at the reference desk, or in a classroom, show your undergrads how to set the preferences in Google Scholar so that they can find and retrieve materials that the library provides access to electronically. It's a win-win: they get to continue using Google, and we get to promote our resources.

Make it more Google-y ... at least, on the surface. I know it's probably counter-intuitive to you, the Seasoned Information Professional, but undergraduates will always go for a simple interface over one that's highly flexible, robust, and — okay, let's be honest here — busy. Keep all the multi-level tabs, drop-down menus, and Boolean operators tucked away on the Advanced Search page. A basic search should be basic, and not just because it's easier on the eyes; it's also familiar.

One click more is one click too many. If students can't access electronic resources directly from the main page of a library Website, consider those resources buried — even if they're only one click away. Like many libraries, the OPAC search engine is the most prominent feature on my library's Website. Sure, there are a lot of other resources linked there, too, but that search box is the first thing the eyes are drawn to; you don't have to dig for it. In every instance of bibliographic instruction, whenever I direct students to the Article Databases, at least twenty-five percent of the students never stray from the catalog. And that's in spite of my elaborate demonstrations, enthusiastic encouragement, and fun-size candy bar bribes.

TMI. Nobody likes a busy-looking website, even if that Website can retrieve five million results in a tenth of a second, put them in reverse chronological order, identify which types of sources are included, and tell you which languages the results are in. It's too much information, and even I feel a little overwhelmed by it. Interface design issues aren't the only obstacle for undergraduates; jargon is, too. We have a discourse that's all our own, but we forget sometimes that not everyone — undergraduates in particular — understands the terms we use. Try this simple experiment, and you'll see what I mean: Ask a random undergraduate what the term "database" means. What about "resource type"? Sure, we can define those terms because they're part of our regular vocabulary. But they're not words that undergraduates are familiar with, at least, not in a library context. So, in a nutshell, clean up your interfaces and your language.

For those who Select and Manage Online Resources:

If the professor says it's important, then it's important. In 2009, Project Information Literacy conducted a study involving 2,318 undergraduates from six colleges and universities around the country. They found that "[a]lmost every student in the sample turned to course readings — not Google — first for course-related research assignments."³ That's right — BEFORE Google, though Google was a close second. So, we need to reach out to faculty members (i.e. the people who mandate the course materials), read their syllabi, develop an understanding of their students' research interests, as well as *their* research interests, introduce them to our resources, and teach them how to use those resources. In other words, we need faculty awareness of and buy-in for our scholarly resources.

Collaborate with faculty to design research assignments. If you can get your hands on a faculty member's syllabus, then you also have the opportunity to weigh in on their research assignments and offer support. For every assignment that has a research component, why not use your expertise to recommend appropriate scholarly resources? And while you're at it, ask the faculty member to include a list of those resources right there in the syllabus and/or the assignment.

Promote resources at the point-of-need. Making *all* of our online scholarly resources available *all* the time from a central, easy-to-find location is a great idea. But it's also necessary to provide a little extra direction to those resources at specific times during the academic year, say, the periods around mid-terms and finals. While we can't offer a tailored list of resources for every undergraduate course — well, not unless we're really ambitious with our LibGuides — we can promote our resources more actively at well-known points of need.

"It worked for me." Picture this: You've just finished a rousing demonstration of a huge, super-powerful, easy-to-use database to a group of undergraduates who have an upcoming research project. You showed them all of the features, all of your best tips and tricks for searching, everything. You know they need this database. Nevertheless, not a single student in the class seems interested in your demonstration. Then, spontaneously, one blessed student raises her hand to tell a story about how she used that very database last semester and found an obscure article that knocked her professor's socks off, and she was wildly successful because of it. Suddenly, everyone in the class is interested. My point is: Never underestimate the influence undergraduates have over each other. Student testimonials about resources have more sway than anything you or I could possibly say. So, let's seek them out and provide outlets to those voices.

continued on page 89

And a little Something for Everyone:

Develop partnerships with course management systems. Pretty much every undergraduate course that's offered on-campus also has an online component. On a small scale, we could simply ask faculty to include links to our resources in the course materials online. On a grand scale, it might be possible for vendors and publishers to directly market their resources to faculty through a course management system. Think online advertising space in the CMS—has it ever been done before?

In 2009, **Kathy Sierra** was a keynote speaker for the New Media Consortium Summer Conference. In her address, "Creating Passionate Learners," she explained that technology users need to feel like they're good at using the products (or resources) they want or need to use.⁴ If they don't feel like they've achieved a certain level of mastery, they'll simply discontinue using the product. I think this is especially true of the undergraduate's experience with scholarly resources. They don't see the utility in learning how to use a clunky database, for example — even if they're required to use it; even if it's the only resource that answers their research questions; even if it's the greatest, most powerful database ever created — if their experience in using it doesn't make them feel like *they're* great. Their

success is the key to ours. I think that's something we need to keep in mind, whether we're creating, designing, teaching, or managing scholarly resources. 🌱

Adriana Parker earned a Master of Library and Information Science from Drexel University in 2007. She is an instruction librarian at the J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Endnotes

1. **Jones, Steve.** "The Internet Goes to College." *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. Pew Research Center, 15 Sept. 2002. Web. 13 Aug. 2011. http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2002/PIP_College_Report.pdf
2. **Griffiths, Jillian R., and Peter Brophy.** "Student Searching Behavior and the Web: Use of Academic Resources and Google." *Library Trends* 53.4 (2005): 539-554. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 13 Aug. 2011.
3. **Head, Alison J., and Michael B. Eisenberg.** "Assigning Inquiry: How Handouts for Research Assignments Guide Today's College Students." *Project Information Literacy*. U of Washington, 12 July 2010. Web. 25 Aug. 2011. http://projectinfo.org/pdfs/PIL_Handout_Study_finalvJuly_2010.pdf
4. **Kathy, Sierra.** "Creating Passionate Learners." EnhancedED NMC Summer Conference 2009. Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, 13 July 2009. Web. 1 Sept. 2011. http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/enhanced/noted/nmc_summer_conference_2009.html