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STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND: THE UNDERGRADUATE IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

A COLLABORATIVE PEDAGOGY FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

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From the Classroom: The Professor's Perspective

A number of years ago when I was still a rookie professor, I was reminding a group of advanced English majors that our next class would meet in the library reference room for a tutorial on Medieval reference sources. One serious young man, a senior, raised his hand and asked, "Where is the reference room?" While I stood, momentarily speechless, the class erupted in laughter. I retained sufficient presence of mind, however, to observe that he was not the only student who seemed to be in need of direction, even if the others had been perceptive enough not to admit it in public. I am no longer a rookie, but despite repeated evidence to the contrary, I often assume my students have more research experience than they do. The "wired generation" they may be, but few arrive on campus packing sophisticated or, for that matter, even rustic electronic searching skills. Geographically-speaking, they are at home in the virtual world, uncomfortable in the alien wilds of the academic library, and downright terrified in the dark continent of the reference room. As one distressed junior recently confessed when I enquired as to why she had failed to consult a particular print source for appropriate bibliography, "My professors tell me that stuff is there and I should use it, but it's scary."

This is not another tired lament for a Golden Age when all students were brilliantly prepared for college, but rather an elaboration of a central pedagogical reality we, the authors, had each separately (me in the classroom, Melissa in the library) faced: it is not easy to teach the complex set of skills subsumed under the heading "research," that organic, contingent, messy, recursive series of processes that can test even the most placid patience. When I develop an assignment that requires research, I know roughly or even quite specifically what I expect my students to do; my failure to come to terms with their limited research skills, however, has meant that what I want and what they are capable of giving me are all too often incommensurate. This problem is exacerbated when, attempting to satisfy my desires, they go off to the library to inflict chaos on the reference staff.

This is the story of our collaborative attempt to find an effective way to teach research skills to undergraduates. Its impetus was a May 2006 workshop, Information Literacy for Teaching and Learning, organized by James Madison University Libraries and the Center for Faculty Innovation. The workshop paired reference librarians with faculty from a variety of disciplines; each pair collaborated on the integration of information literacy into an assignment. This was a modest goal; we did not fully anticipate that in achieving it we would also fundamentally revise our pedagogical vision. In creating, piloting, and assessing the assignment featured here, we discovered that few beginning (or even advanced) English majors have learned to conduct basic literary research, they desperately desire the skills to do so, and are often profoundly embarrassed to admit they don't already have them.

Into the Library: The Librarian's Perspective

The following story, recounted to me by a colleague, exemplifies this problem. After a two-hour struggle, a student approached the reference desk for help. "I've been searching on the library website for hours and can't find anything on my topic," he told the librarian on duty. "Can you help me?" The librarian asked the student to show her how he had been searching. From the library homepage, he clicked on the link for Periodical Locator, a resource used to find periodical titles and holdings, and proceeded to type his topic "the meaning of life" into the search box. Needless to say, he was exceedingly frustrated with his lack of results. Not understanding the purpose and contents of Periodical Locator, he had just wasted two hours conducting unproductive searches.

For most matriculating college students, like this student, the tale of library research is a tale of shattered expectations. Few have experience with an academic library, and fewer still understand the significant functional differences between local public and academic libraries. Born into a complex electronic world and often possessing (or believed to possess) remarkable technology skills, few students can navigate the specialized and sometimes byzantine world of library databases and online catalogs. While Google, FaceBook, and Amazon are second nature to them, the library catalog, research databases, and interlibrary loan are unfamiliar and confusing. Having grown up in an era where Google appears to answer every question and information is only a mouse click away, college students not only struggle to make sense of the vast array of print and electronic information resources provided by the academic library, but they also fail to understand why these resources may be better than those the Internet offers for free. As a librarian, I

frequently have to explain to students that while both are accessible online, the library's online databases are not the same as the Internet. On our library's homepage, a search box allows users to search select resources such as the library catalog; however, students often believe that they are searching all of the library's print and electronic holdings. If it looks like Google, it should search like Google, right? More information resources are accessible today than ever before, and the number continues to increase. If, as a librarian, I sometimes find it difficult to keep up with this proliferation, is it any wonder that students are overwhelmed by the available options? Still, not understanding when to use particular search tools is perhaps the single most important impediment to student research.

Few, if any, beginning college students have learned the process through which scholars produce information and research. A salient example is the student who recently came to the reference desk for help finding scholarly articles on how stem-cell research is currently being used to treat illnesses in infants. Additional questioning about her assignment revealed that her problem did not begin with finding appropriate resources but in selecting an appropriate research question for the given assignment (a 3- to 5-page paper). While there are many interesting aspects of stem cell research, few can be adequately covered in a 3- to 5- page paper. She did not understand how and when scholarly information is produced; that is, at what point are conference proceedings, articles, books, and reference books on a given topic made available to the public. In selecting her topic, she did not realize that she would be looking for articles that had not yet been written but were still being researched. A variant on this problem is the student who asked me for help in finding an article containing an argument. When I asked if there was a specific topic for which she needed an argument, she responded that the article's topic didn't matter as long as it contained an argument. Her professor had informed the class that the reference librarians could help them find an argument if they had trouble doing so. The student clearly misunderstood both the nature of the assignment and the services offered by the library.

Besides illustrating an obvious need for collaboration between librarians and faculty, these anecdotes exemplify two important problems that students have with research. First, students often fail to understand the nature, organization, and scope of the resources they must use, a problem compounded when faculty assume that students know more about research than they actually do. Students can be surprisingly literal-minded, lacking confidence and curiosity in their research because they are unfamiliar with research resources and because their previous schooling has not taught them how scholars engage in intellectual exploration. Second, misguided assumptions about student research skills lead to assignments that do not clearly articulate the professor's expectations. The baffled students will then converge on the reference desk, proffer their assignments, and anxiously appeal to the librarian for clarification of the professor's intent. Sometimes assignments require that the students find a specified number of peer-reviewed articles on a topic; other times they stipulate that Internet sources may not be used, both fine requirements assuming students understand the terminology or do not interpret the assignment too rigidly. Few students know what the term peer-reviewed means let alone how to determine whether an article is, in fact, peer-reviewed, nor can they differentiate between free websites (Internet sources) and subscription research databases. Moreover, students tend to expect immediate results or select from among the first search results rather than assessing topical relevance. In piloting these assignments, however, we discovered that their impatience is an effect of limited skills and knowledge. With more training and guidance, the students who participated in this trial developed more patience for the research process.

Library instruction can provide training and guidance in using academic libraries and their resources, but the key lies in partnering with the teaching faculty. Teaching faculty and librarians do not always clearly understand each other's role. Librarians are not generally privy to the details of the teaching faculty's syllabi or the sometimes depressing results of student research assignments. Likewise, teaching faculty are not always aware of the interactions that occur between students and librarians. By sharing their experiences with and knowledge of student research habits, faculty and librarians can develop a more effective approach to teaching research to students. While library tours and instruction sessions are useful, these activities are far more effective and students retain more when they are tied to a clearly defined assignment for which students have clearly defined information needs. Even with an assignment in hand, research skills cannot be learned through a one-shot instruction session, or through one assignment, but must be practiced and developed over time through carefully designed research assignments, which are repeated over the course of a semester and a student's college career.

Mapping the Research Terrain: Creating a Research Model

As a professor, my reason for participating in the workshop was English 299: Writing about Literature, the English Department's gateway course to the major and, pedagogically speaking, its problem child. Designed to be a rigorous introduction to the discipline, the course introduces students to critical theory and critical terminology, teaches them to read scholarship and to write in the discipline, and instructs them in research and citation skills. The overall goal is to teach students what it is we do as literary scholars—the specific reading strategies and disciplinary terminology we employ and the effective stylistic approaches to writing about literature we practice. We want the students to learn how to formulate good questions, how to develop a productive research plan, how to conduct and apply that research in scholarly essays, and how to understand why and how we cite. Teaching them to develop and carry out a productive research plan has proven to be one of the more vexing challenges for faculty teaching the course, and we hoped to create an assignment to meet that challenge.

In order to become competent researchers, students first need the basic knowledge we knew, from our experience, they did not have. We concluded, therefore, that our assignment needed to familiarize students with the library (the physical building, the catalog, and the website) and to equip them with transferable research skills. We wanted an assignment that could serve as a model for conducting bibliographic research in many areas of literary studies, flexible enough to serve as a template adaptable to various genres, periods, authors, and literatures by faculty teaching English 299 (or indeed, any English course). One of the biggest challenges, it turned out, was addressing the very real distinctions between and the interconnectedness of electronic and print sources. Electronic catalogs, databases, and search engines have transformed the research landscape, but this abundant new world projects an illusion of easy wealth, a vision of infinite knowledge delivered by a keystroke. Moreover, these electronic riches supplement rather than replace print resources, often in overlapping and tangled ways. Indeed, so thorny is this problem, we decided to begin with print reference sources. Curiously, today's students seem to approach print materials, if at all, with considerably more anxiety than they do electronic sources. We hoped to disrupt their illusory comfort with computer research by starting outside that deceptively familiar virtual world, moving gradually and as systematically as possible into computer resources.

Underlying our assignment model was the general belief that students need to be able to locate reliable information that will allow them to intelligently read and explicate a poem, short story, or novel; to investigate the historical and cultural context of a literary work; and to learn its critical and theoretical history. Specifically, we wanted students to:

- (1) differentiate between primary and secondary sources;
- (2) distinguish between scholarly journals and books and between seminal and peripheral older scholarship, and select the most relevant for a particular purpose;
- (3) locate relevant research using proper search terms and protocols;
- (4) identify and navigate the various types of reference sources: e.g. biographical resources; dictionaries, handbooks, and encyclopedias; databases; and specialized bibliographies;
- (5) assess the information located for quality and relevance; and
- (6) cite using proper MLA format.

Charting the Route from the Classroom to the Library

We knew detailed direction was crucial, but we did not have a clear sense of how much guidance would be needed at any given stage. The instruction sessions became part of a larger collaborative effort to systematize the research strategies we took for granted. We were attempting to reconstruct clear directions for a complicated journey so often traced that following its twists and turns had become for us an unconscious exercise. Research is, perhaps to exhaust the metaphor, about finding different routes to one's destination. We wanted the students to learn not to limit themselves to a single route, but we also wanted to prevent too much blundering about in the hinterlands.

Our decision to compile a limited, specific bibliography of reference sources for the students was predicated on the assumption that teaching them which sources were most reliable for a specific purpose was as simple as giving them that list of sources. While we compiled focused bibliographies for all three assignments I ultimately used in the course, for the workshop we focused on nineteenth-century British poetry since an important component of English 299 is teaching the students to work with poetry and since I had selected poems written by nineteenth-century British poets for the class. The bibliography attached to the assignment [[Appendix 1](#)] featured standard and accessible reference sources for Nineteenth-Century British poetry (and poetry as genre), targeted to undergraduates. The assignment asked students to find the sources, learn how to use them, and explain their use to the class. Students were paired and each pair assigned a particular poet, selected poems, and two reference sources, each of which contained either or both primary and secondary bibliography. For example, one pair would search Freeman's *Bibliographies of Studies in Victorian Literature for the Ten Years 1965-1974* and Besterman's *A World Bibliography of Bibliographies* for references to or bibliography on George Meredith and his poem "Lucifer in Starlight"; another pair would search for information on William Butler Yeats and his poem "Leda and the Swan" in Conner's *A Yeats Dictionary: Persons and Places in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats* and Cross and Dunlop's *A Bibliography of Yeats Criticism, 1887-1965*. Other pairs would search for bibliography on John Keats ("On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again"), Alfred, Lord Tennyson ("The Kraken" and "To Virgil"), and Matthew Arnold ("Shakespeare") in such sources as *Encyclopedia of the Victorian Era*; *The 1890s: An Encyclopedia of British Literature, Art, and Culture*; *The Year's Work in English Studies: Annual; Bibliography of British Literary Bibliographies*; *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*; *Literature of the Romantic Period: A Bibliographical Guide*; *Late Victorian Poetry, 1880-1899: An Annotated Bibliography*; and *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*.

The students' task was to understand clearly what each reference source contains (its range and limits) and how it is organized, and to select appropriate references from each for the poet and poems assigned. One student would create a bibliography of primary and secondary sources culled from the two bibliographic reference sources assigned to the pair, format it in MLA style, and determine which sources were owned by or electronically accessible through Carrier Library. The other would write 150-250 word descriptions of each of the two assigned reference sources and create a "how-to" guide for using each one. The final products would be uploaded to Blackboard for class reference, and each pair would give eight-minute presentations, explaining the organization, contents, and use of each source. Assignments were to be evaluated on the various skills this exercise invoked: accurate and thorough summary; identification of relevant primary and secondary materials; organization and citation of the bibliography in MLA format; clear directions for use; clear and succinct oral presentation of findings.

Test Driving the Assignment: Results and Adaptation

My fall 2006 syllabus allocated five weeks each to short fiction, the novel, and poetry, in that order. I piloted the workshop assignment, therefore, by adapting it to Ursula LeGuin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." We compiled a bibliography of print reference sources for both the short story and science fiction/fantasy genres, but in all other respects, the assignment remained the same as the one created in the workshop for nineteenth-century British poetry [[Appendix 2](#)]. In this pilot two problems emerged—a steeper learning curve than we had anticipated, and the approach of having students work in pairs. Uneven division of work, conflicting schedules, and personality differences interfered with the central work of the assignment. We addressed the first problem by providing more preparatory and directed assistance both in class and in the library with how to understand bibliography and subject headings, and with how to read prefaces and introductions to understand a reference book's organization, scope, and abbreviation system. The second was solved by changing the assignment so that students worked individually, an approach that proved much more successful in the remaining two assignments. For example, the second assignment asked the class to research the twelfth-century Spanish Crusades for their reading of Michael Eisner's novel *The Crusader* (New York: Anchor, 2001) from a prepared bibliography of general and topic-specific medieval reference sources, again targeted to undergraduates [[Appendix 3](#)]. Each student was assigned a topic (Krak des Chevaliers or Aragon history, for example), and instructed to compile an annotated bibliography of ten items culled from the reference sources provided on the research bibliography. For example, *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* offers general information on the Crusades, but the appended bibliography leads to more specialized and more narrowly-focused sources. Because it is somewhat outdated as well, the students needed to supplement using *MLAIB* and other databases and bibliographies. With the ten references compiled, students consulted each, summarized the information, and shared the results in class presentations before uploading the documents to Blackboard [see [Appendix 3](#); examples of student work conclude Appendices 1-3]. The original workshop assignment on nineteenth-century British poetry became the final research assignment, adapted to individual work. Students researched the specific poems and poets on which they had chosen to write their final essays [see [Appendix 1](#)].

Blazing the Trail: Preparing Students for Research

To prepare the students for the first assignment on Ursula Le Guin's short story, we organized two library instruction sessions. In these sessions, then, we sought to delineate the ways in which the library's website functions as a portal for accessing electronic as well as print resources. Not only does the site contain information about the library's policies, services, and resources, but it also links to the online catalog and databases, which are tools for locating specific books and articles in both print and electronic formats. A successful library instruction session attempts to explain both the contents and purposes of various sources and the most efficient way of using the resources in conjunction with one another.

The first instruction session began with a tour of the physical library space, highlighting services and collections most relevant to English majors. Following the tour, they were shown some of the major print reference resources for locating background information and literary criticism, in the hope that they would recognize the colors and sizes of the books. A worksheet reinforced the tour, alleviated their dread of using reference materials, and provided a simple template for evaluating print resources [Appendix 4]. The second session focused on the library website, demonstrating how to access and use library services, online catalogs, and literature databases for journal articles and biographies, including *MLA International Bibliography*, *Arts & Humanities Search*, *Humanities & Social Science Retrospective*, *Bibliographic Index Plus*, *Biography & Genealogy Master Index*, *Literature Resource Center*, and *Biography Resource Center*. In an attempt to bring some coherence to the messy world of library research, we used the author and text on which the students were doing their first assignment (Ursula Le Guin's short story ♦ *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* ♦) to demonstrate all of the electronic resources. Our intent was that the students would begin to understand how the various resources work together (and are equally important) by seeing how the same search topic produces different results in each resource. Since this session was held in the library's instruction classroom, which contains computers for hands-on student work, following the demonstration the students again completed a worksheet on searching online catalogs, finding literary criticism, and locating literary biographies [Appendix 5].

Although the two sessions allowed us to cover many of the major print and electronic resources in literary studies, both felt rather rushed with too much information crammed into each. Adding a third session would help to alleviate this problem, however, it can be difficult to allot that much class time to the library. If a third session isn't possible, then presenting a more selective list of resources may be another solution. Another alternative could be to create a series of drop-in sessions outside of class time for all English 299 sections as a means of providing more in-depth library instruction or a series of targeted worksheets created by faculty and librarians which students complete on their own. The latter two options might offer improved ways of dealing with specific research issues in a course while freeing up class time and reducing the overall number of library instruction sessions taught each semester. Second, given how profoundly interconnected print and electronic sources are, we also found that the separate sessions created too sharp of a conceptual divide. Future iterations will require more careful explanation of how the sources presented in the first session connect with the sources presented in the second session. The most difficult part of both sessions was finding the right balance between equipping the students to complete their 299 assignment and preparing them to conduct literary research throughout their tenure as English majors. While they needed specific resources for the bibliography assignment, they also needed exposure to general resources that they would need in other English courses, so it was important to emphasize that the research process could be applied to different research topics even when different resources were required.

What They Learned

The students, aware from the beginning that they were piloting these assignments, were urged to be continually self-reflexive about their experiences. At the end of the semester, we asked what they had learned, what still felt unfamiliar and difficult, and what suggestions they had for improvement of the assignments. Every student admitted that considerable fear and anxiety had attended the first assignment. For example, one confessed that she ♦ found the research assignments very frightening at first ♦; another remarked that ♦ the first one was difficult since no one knew what we were doing ♦; and most revealing of all, ♦ [t]he first time we did the assignment I felt pretty confused; I was not really sure how to go about using a bibliographic source to find more sources. ♦ What did they learn? A common sentiment in all responses was a new comfort with the library and especially with the reference section; they expressed varying degrees of confidence in their ability to find resources, to use indexes, and to navigate literature databases. A student who admitted to having rarely used the library before and to having ♦ never been in the reference section, ♦ commented that he now feels at home there. One junior concluded: ♦ On a scale of 1-10 I think the research assignments were an 11 in helpfulness. Everything I had ever known about works cited and annotated bibliographies was either wrong or not nearly developed enough. ♦ Some students expressed a desire for more in-class instruction preparatory to actually doing the first assignment, which squared with our own assessment, and most indicated that the learning curve was very steep at first. Several students recognized the need for repeated practice. One felt a new sensitivity to the variety and complexity of reference sources, and another confessed, ♦ I could always use more practice because each source is different and tricky in its own way. ♦ This was an important recognition. When students begin to understand that research is a complicated affair and that each source offers its own challenge, they have taken a major step toward being capable of teaching themselves to do research.

As we were writing this article, a full semester later, and interested in the longer-term effect the exercises may have had, we again asked for the students' assessments. While not all students responded, several did. One wrote that he had been able to teach friends in other majors some of the skills he had learned. He added that he has regularly ♦ utilized my knowledge of the search engine protocols to find [appropriate] articles, ♦ and more importantly, ♦ instead of blindly trusting whichever book supports my topic(s), I now look into the dates of publication and usually cross-reference, ♦ a habit he attributes to the research experience the exercises gave him and to the class presentations and discussion of the value of different reference sources. Another suggested that he now knew enough to know how much he didn't know, but that this didn't frighten him since he knows how to proceed for a specific topic. Others, two of whom had taken an advanced course in medieval literature with me the next semester, shared this increased confidence. As one put it, ♦ I was not scared to begin research on my hagiography project because I knew how to select the proper reference sources for the topic. ♦

What We Learned

We learned as much about our own assumptions in developing this assignment as our students did in research skills.

For example, while we had accepted that few students really understand academic library organization or search terminology and protocols, we tacitly (and as it turned out incorrectly), assumed that that they did know how to navigate the library website and online catalog system. The assignment pilot proved otherwise; not one of the students who took part could do so in any productive way. Because they did not understand the organization of the library's website, they did not know how to navigate it effectively and so became lost attempting to locate something as simple as the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Thus, we concluded that an in-class tutorial and take-home exercise on the library's online catalog had to precede both library instruction sessions. We wish, of course, that our students were better prepared, but they aren't. We discovered, for example, that none were familiar with Library of Congress subject headings (one, much to our horror, had never heard of the Library of Congress), Boolean operators, keyword searches, or the difference between ◆word◆ and ◆subject◆ searches. But, perhaps more importantly, we also underestimated how keenly aware students are of their lack of research skills and the limits this weakness places on their academic potential. It is not that they don't want to do research or that they have no patience for it. They simply don't know where to begin without concrete guidance. The assignments helped us to identify important and fundamental gaps in the research knowledge undergraduates bring to our university, and thus established common ground on which to build the assignment template. Perhaps most importantly, we concluded that collaboration between faculty and reference librarians was central to developing an effective program of student research. Understanding the librarian's perspective and experience helps faculty to create better assignments; understanding faculty perspective gives librarians the structure within which to assist the students productively and efficiently, and thus to reinforce classroom instruction. Sequencing the skills students need to practice, linking that practice to a research assignment that is limited in scope, and repeating the exercise as often as possible and in as many variations as possible over the course of a semester seem to us to be crucial steps. Ultimately, we learned that students must begin in a confined universe◆with a limited assignment, a specific bibliography, and clear goals. Collaboration between faculty and librarians can expand the boundaries of that universe as far as students wish to go.

[Appendix](#)

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