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Technology and Library Research

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Technology and Library Research

When many of us were undergraduates, we never used computers at all, let alone for finding information. Finding articles or books was a time-consuming and laborious project. Now, as university librarians, almost everything we do involves using a PC, and it is almost impossible for anyone doing research not to use a computer. Technology has affected the teaching and learning of library research skills in that resources are easier for information seekers to get for themselves but the process becomes less personal since they can do many of the basic processes without the mediation of a librarian.

GVSU now uses a library computer system called "Voyager" from the Endeavor Company. Two of the components of Voyager are the "Local Catalog," which lists all the physical items owned by the University Library regardless of format, and "Databases," which allows access to hundreds of journal indexes, a few full-text (or full-image, meaning that graphics are included) databases, and electronic journals. The local catalog allows us to include World Wide Web resources as well as the more standard and familiar physical items. Since the Voyager system is Internet-based, it may be accessed at any location with a PC that has the capability and is set up to connect to the Web.

Voyager and its databases allow searching for several years' worth of material at one time. Voyager also: gives the ability to customize searches (e.g., look for only journal articles in English), allows searching for material through many access points (not just subject and author), makes

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different search modes available, and sometimes allows citations to be sorted by author, journal title, etc. In terms of information processing, it allows citations (or full text/full image) to be emailed, downloaded, or printed. For users there is online help immediately available via help screens, and it makes many more sources conveniently available—e.g., one may search Harvard's library catalog without driving to Massachusetts, for instance.

Some of the disadvantages of computerized research are that information seekers must be computer literate, libraries must make a substantial investment in equipment, and more can go wrong with machines than with paper and shelves.

How has this technology affected and how will it affect the acquisition of library research skills? Information seekers, except for those who are computer-phobic, love being able to search for articles, books, documents, websites, etc., all via one PC, from office, home, or any other location. Students, especially, are much more willing to search for and incorporate outside sources of information into their papers and the students enjoy the process, perhaps because it seems more like play than work. Students' retention of the research process seems to increase when searching techniques are demonstrated using some kind of PC and projection system, followed by immediate hands-on practice from their own workstations. These things make learning research skills much easier and more enjoyable.

The disadvantages of using technology to teach and to do research are also many. The cut and paste functions and the availability of full text do make plagiarism more of a problem. When the network is down, or when the electricity is out, it is impossible to demonstrate searching. It is also difficult to make overheads that represent all types of research. Some librarians dislike teaching how to use paper indexes and other print sources now, even though they might be helpful, because the students simply won't use them. Other librarians insist that it is all in the presentation: students will use paper resources if they

are convinced that the paper format is still useful. Students use the Internet more than they do print sources, in an inefficient way, finding a lot of junk. At least with print sources, the librarians or other instructional faculty have reviewed and chosen them. (This is, by the way, the purpose of the "Subject Searching" section of the Library's Homepage: to present websites that have been chosen especially for their value.) The faculty as a whole must emphasize to students the importance of evaluating source materials.

This past summer, some of the library faculty created a web-based tutorial for use by each English 150 class in place of a librarian who works with each class to demonstrate the basic research process. We believe that the instructors can incorporate each section of the tutorial into their schedules to suit their individual syllabi. The instructors also have more and better chances to encourage learning the research process than a librarian who sees a class only once during a semester. Yet we also feel that the tutorial is less personal, allowing for fewer interactions between the library faculty and students (except at the reference desk, where anyone may receive one-on-one assistance), and that students may get the impression that they don't need to come to the library, thus missing out on some of the available resources—including librarians' expertise. Since technology offers so many advantages, it is on the whole beneficial to research. Frankly, given its benefits, it is also here to stay. We need to capitalize on its advantages and try to minimize its disadvantages. To maximize students' learning and retention of present-day research skills as well as to prepare them for what technology may bring in the future, it is crucial that library faculty and teaching faculty work together. Only then can students be graduated from Grand Valley with lifelong learning skills. ♦