

Incorporating Internet resources into bibliographic instruction

Know your limits

by Rob Withers and Jane F. Sharpe

Introducing a discussion of Internet resources into library instruction sessions can seem like a daunting challenge. Librarians may be tempted to attempt the impossible task of discussing all things Internet-related in one hour or less. While such attempts are doomed to failure, incorporating discussions of Internet resources into instructional sessions can be done. Librarians can succeed at this task by limiting the scope of their discussion to a manageable amount of material that meets the most pressing information needs of each presentation.

In addition, librarians can extend their outreach by encouraging interaction with students outside of their instructional sessions, devising nontraditional formats for teaching about the Internet, and effectively marketing their services. By consciously following a few guidelines, librarians can effectively incorporate instruction in the use of the Internet to their repertoire.

Don't try to cover everything in an hour

If asked by a faculty member to teach everything everyone will ever know about the library, librarians should ask about the most pressing information needs of the class rather than trying to cover "everything everyone will ever need to know." Similarly, librarians shouldn't try to cover everything there is to know about the Internet in an hour or less.

Identify pertinent topics

Keep a checklist of possible topics, with the estimated amount of time needed to cover them.

Possible topics include:

- searching the Web effectively,
- evaluating and citing resources,
- using Web sites to locate materials at nearby institutions, and
- Internet resources in a particular discipline (education, epidemiology, etc.).

If you have the option of teaching the class either as a lecture or as a hands-on session, make sure to provide the estimated amount of time required for each teaching approach. Using this approach, librarians can provide a reasonable idea of what topics they can cover within a classroom session.

Know the needs of each class

If the faculty member requesting a class isn't sure what topics are most important, talk with him or her about students' assignments and their performance to date; listen for areas of concern.

Has a professor who encourages his or her students to use the Internet been disappointed by a dearth of resources? Talk about how to use search tools. Is a professor who is not particularly interested in Internet resources frustrated by inaccurate, outdated, impertinent, or barely useful resources? Talk about evaluating resources. Is a professor frustrated by limitations in your library's collection? Talk about how to find individual library catalogs, union catalogs (such as the Associated College Libraries of Central Pennsylvania Catalog, Washington Research Libraries Consortium catalog, or Periodicals in Maryland Libraries), and information about reciprocal borrowing.

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Have a back-up plan

Many librarians demonstrate Internet resources or provide hands-on sessions. This kind of teaching is wonderful—providing the equipment isn't broken, the network isn't bogged down, and the sites being discussed aren't overloaded. Since network slow-downs and malfunctioning equipment are facts of life, have a "plan B." This may include any of the following:

- using Web Whacker or similar software to create "canned" presentations,
- having printouts of the resources under discussion, and
- relying on traditional, computer-less instruction.

Preparing a "plan B" can be time-consuming, but in the event of technical difficulties, it can be a lifesaver (and a face-saver, too).

Stay on target

Define the goals and limits of each presentation and stick to them. Questions that arise during a particular session may be intriguing, interesting, and worthy of a lengthy answer. Unfortunately, these questions may be on a totally unrelated topic. Provide a brief answer, if possible; then politely but firmly explain that the question falls outside the scope of your presentation, but that you will be happy to answer it after the session, at the reference desk, or at a later time. Trying to answer an unrelated question cheats the audience by taking away from the time needed to cover the topic at hand.

Market yourself

Sadly, many faculty may not associate Internet instruction with the library. Take any opportunity available to remind users of the topics that can be addressed in library instruction sessions—and of the fact that it takes more than one hour to cover more than one topic. Formal, written memos or flyers about the topics librarians can provide may help; informal communication, however, has been far more effective in our experience. If faculty grumbles about students using inappropriate Internet resources, or not being able to find enough Internet resources, remind them that librarians offer instruction on these very topics.

A year ago, the library at Western Maryland College offered walk-in workshops on searching, evaluating, and citing Web pages. While the sessions were not well attended, they were much talked about and well appreciated by the faculty. In the year since, requests for bibliographic in-

struction have nearly doubled, in part because many faculty for the first time identified the library as a resource for help with Internet resources and training. Librarians at the college now receive requests both for hour-long classes and for brief discussions of Internet resources incorporated into traditional bibliographic instruction sessions.

Provide follow-up contact with students

No instructional session can be exhaustive; students will always have questions. Be prepared to reach out to them after the 50-minute session. Options for doing so include working together with the instructor to create follow-projects or designing Web pages customized for the needs of a particular class. If nothing else, *make sure students know to talk to librarians* if they need help with any information resource, including those on the Internet.

Seek more time for instruction

Aggressively seek out any opportunity for additional amounts of time to discuss Internet use. Depending on your institution, this could mean mainstreaming sessions into freshman composition classes or freshmen seminars, incorporating a session into freshman/new graduate student orientation, or taking advantage of short sessions, such as Western Maryland College's January term. All of these approaches depend on the willingness of administrators outside the library to furnish librarians with time previously allocated elsewhere. Think of as many approaches for non-traditional sessions as possible and try them all. Find the approach(es) that work best at your institution.

Conclusion

An astounding amount and variety of information and misinformation is available on the Internet; unfortunately, an astounding amount of time and variety of occasions for teaching students about the Internet is not. By scaling back discussions of Internet resources to the most important points, however, librarians can succeed in meeting students' needs within traditional instruction sessions. Through aggressive marketing and follow-up, librarians can expand their opportunities for teaching students and faculty alike. Maybe incorporating Internet resources into library instruction sessions isn't such a daunting challenge after all. ■

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