

Beyond Google: Improving learning outcomes through digital literacy

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The internet is often students' first choice when researching school assignments; however students' online search strategies typically consist of a basic Google search and Wikipedia. The creation of library intranet pages providing a range of search tools and the teaching of customised information literacy lessons aim to better utilise library resources and improve students' research skills and learning outcomes.

Information literacy Digital literacy Libraries and learning outcomes

Impetus for change

The Southern Cross Catholic College (SCCC) Middle and Senior Years Library is widely used by secondary school classes for assignment research using printed and internet resources. Due to limited numbers of computers per class group, students typically rotate between relevant books, journals, vertical file and computers. Most students were competent users of printed resources but their default online search strategies consisted of a basic Google search and Wikipedia. They were unaware of the type and range of search tools available, such as online databases, subject directories and metasearch engines, and often lacked skills in selecting search terms, using advanced search features, choosing the correct tool for the task and evaluating and referencing websites.

Method

Library pages were consequently added to the school intranet site to address these needs. After reading guidelines from the literature, consulting with the school's Manager of Educational Programs and analysing other schools' webpages for content and style, a library intranet was created to suit the needs of the SCCC community. Links to subscription databases, useful search tools and documents to assist students at every stage of the information process are now gathered in one place. Subscription databases such as the University of Queensland Library (UQL) Cyberschool's *eLibrary* and *Expanded academic* were barely being used, either because students were not aware of their purpose and potential, or because they lacked the skills to use a search tool which differed from the familiar Google interface. The creation of a school *delicious* page has achieved a number of outcomes – it provides students with carefully selected websites with which to begin their research, examples of quality websites for evaluation purposes, and an opportunity for students to develop their research skills in a limited, Web 2.0 setting. Pages defining, explaining and providing links to a range of search engines and subject directories seek to expand students'

knowledge and effective use of search tools. Student guides include templates for making notes, recording working source documents, evaluating sources, compiling a bibliography and avoiding plagiarism. An added bonus is that information services about the library, book club, blog and book review wiki are also within easy reach and more likely to be accessed.

A set of customisable lessons was devised to showcase the new intranet pages and give students hands-on practice in their effective use. These lessons include Reading a website, Smart keyword searching, Investigating search engines and subject directories, making search decisions, and Evaluating websites. The content of the lesson is taught in the context of the particular subject area and topic being studied by a particular year level. An overview of both the intranet resources and information literacy lessons is presented to staff at the start of the year and as part of new staff inductions. Updates to the intranet are communicated in the monthly library newsletter and at staff meetings.

Results. Despite ongoing communication of these resources, implementation has been slow and sporadic according to the willingness of teachers to involve the teacher librarian in collaborative planning and teaching. The Middle Years teachers have been interested in incorporating some of these lessons in their units, so these classes will be used to measure differences in the achievement of learning outcomes and use of library resources. While the intranet's layout and functionality are restricted in some ways by the limitations of pre-purchased software, it was easy to add and modify content without the need for HTML knowledge. The use of subscription databases has increased by an average of 7880% since information literacy lessons have begun. Feedback gained about students' knowledge and research skills from written assessments, surveys and observation over the last twelve months, along with current international practice, will be used to design a whole school Information Literacy and ICT Skills Continuum. Once students become accustomed to using the library intranet as a starting point for their research and develop the skills they need to use those resources effectively, the library will have made a greater contribution towards the achievement of learning outcomes.

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Biographical Notes

Brenda Carter is currently working as Teacher Librarian at Southern Cross Catholic College, Scarborough, Queensland, Australia. Brenda has worked in public, special and school libraries. Her special interests are information literacy, Web 2.0 technologies and staff development.

Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.