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## There's an 800-pound gorilla in our stacks: An information literacy case study of Google

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# There's an 800-pound gorilla in our stacks

## An information literacy case study of Google

by Jimmy Ghapery

Google, a household word and Internet search service, is also the 800-pound gorilla in the library world, impossible to ignore. Over the past several years library discussion lists have buzzed with Google news, from search tips to a certain amount of skepticism over the reliance on Google by the college and university communities. A recent article in *D-lib Magazine* even pitted the skills of Cornell librarians against the skills of the researchers at Google Answers.<sup>1</sup> At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Libraries, we have looked the gorilla straight in the eye and developed a 1.5 credit hour honors module in which Google is used as a case study for information literacy.

Honors students must complete at least nine credits worth of modules in order to graduate "with honors." The modules are designed to be interdisciplinary and are also seen as a vehicle for faculty to develop unique and interesting courses. Every fall an open call goes out to all faculty who might be interested in developing a module.<sup>2</sup>

Encouraged by library administration, a module was proposed and accepted for the fall 2003 semester from the VCU Libraries entitled "Google: An Information Literacy Case

Study." The course description read: "An in-depth study of Google, or an equivalent Internet search Engine, in order to gain insight into the searching, retrieval, and evaluation of information. In addition, students will look to the cultural and business contexts of Internet searching and contemplate future trends in information retrieval." Twenty-two students, from freshmen to seniors and majoring in fields from music to computer science, registered for and completed the course.

The course consisted of ten meetings and took advantage of Blackboard, VCU's course management system. All of the course readings were posted online in Blackboard and were largely drawn from current magazines and journals. Discussion forums were used within Blackboard as a vehicle for students to begin their discussions of the readings. The course content consisted of several themes:

- What is information literacy?
- Overview of Google and search techniques
- Systems architecture of Google
- Social and ethical aspects of Internet searching
- Business aspects of Google

With a subject as timely as Google, the course content often changed pending the

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### About the author

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news of the day. For example, developments such as IPO and Microsoft takeover rumors, as well as the release of the Google deskbar, were welcome additions. The students were also responsible for completing three major projects: Google service critiques, group projects, and a final paper.<sup>3</sup>

### **Google service critiques**

Students chose from a list of Google services, such as Froogle, News Alerts, AdSense, or the Phonebook search. This list was easy to compile from the choices listed at Google Labs, Google Services, and Google Business Solutions. Each student wrote a 500-word explanation of the service addressing such issues as ease of use, privacy, and marketing. The students read all of the critiques and then responded to one of their peer's postings. Further, in their response they were asked to relate the service in question to some aspect of the "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education."

### **Group projects**

Groups of three to four students completed projects related to Google and/or information literacy. The last two class meetings were dedicated to group presentations. While guidelines were deliberately open-ended for the projects, deadlines were established for submitting topics and progress reports. The presentations themselves were compelling and included such diverse areas as:

- a comparison of the Google interface to the library catalog
- an analysis of Google advertising
- creation of a college portal
- a business plan for Google API (a beta Web program for developers)
- a survey of students to measure information literacy
- a survey comparing student perceptions of Yahoo! versus Google
- An analysis of Google logos

### **Final paper**

In lieu of a final exam, students wrote a final

paper on the topic: "Using the 'Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,' convince me that you are information literate in terms of Google. Length: at least 10 paragraphs." The papers themselves took a variety of approaches from describing a specific research query to looking at the various search options within Google. One of the more interesting themes to emerge from several papers was that information literacy should not be considered an absolute, but as a continually shifting scale.

An interesting side note to the final paper was my first introduction to the power of students' ability to negotiate. On the first day of class, upon reviewing the syllabus, the final paper requirement was greeted with very little enthusiasm. The initial length was at least 15 paragraphs, which I was convinced to whittle down to 10.

After they recognized my first sign of weakness, they suggested a new wrinkle: an alternative assignment. The class had just finished examining and discussing the "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education." The student consensus from that discussion was that the standards were a bit wordy, and could be rewritten.

One enterprising student then suggested to the class that this might be a good alternative final paper assignment. Her logic was impeccable, "Basically you want us to show you if we are information literate, what better way than to rewrite these standards?" I asked the student to follow up with an e-mail outlining the potential assignment.

The e-mail was waiting for me by the time I got back to my office, and an alternative assignment was born. Seven of the twenty-two students pursued this option, and their results varied from wordsmithing to more bold approaches such as reconceptualizing the standards into a hierarchical model.

### **Conclusion**

The Google honors module was a positive experience in a number of ways. First, the module gave the VCU Libraries a new outlet for its education and outreach services. The

module allowed for extended contact with students and the possibility for developing ongoing dialogue about information retrieval, organization, and evaluation. The case study approach with a specific well-known search tool, proved to be a good touchstone and organizing principle for the class. Second, it exposed the VCU Libraries to issues faced daily by the academic teaching faculty, such as Blackboard management, student excuses, and interfacing with records and registration. Finally, as the instructor of the class, the preparation and teaching improved my knowledge of both Google and information literacy. Upon reflecting on the experience, I have another honors module proposal pending for the fall 2004 semester on the international and cross-national aspects of information technology.

While the students did demonstrate their information literacy skills through their papers, projects and daily discussions, the gorilla remains in our stacks. At its best one would hope that a more critical knowledge of Google

would transfer toward demand for a wider variety of search tools. For the final projects and papers, some students did introduce outside research, but this was not a requirement or expectation. On the last day of class, one student said, "I probably won't be seeing you again, because I never come into the library, parking is such a pain!" Interestingly, she was one of the brightest students in the class with a great enthusiasm for online searching.

#### Notes

1. A. R. Kenney, N. Y. McGovern, I. T. Martinez, L. J. Heidig. "Google Meets eBay: What Academic Librarians Can Learn from Alternative Information Providers," *D-Lib Magazine* 9.6 (June 2003).

2. More information about the VCU honors program as well as a list of current modules can be found at [www.vcu.edu/honors/graduate.html](http://www.vcu.edu/honors/graduate.html).

3. A copy of the course syllabus is available at [www.people.vcu.edu/~jghapher/google\\_syllabus.html](http://www.people.vcu.edu/~jghapher/google_syllabus.html). ■

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