

Case Study: Students Don't Use the Library¹

by
William Barnett

Dr. Marjorie Black was at her wits' end. You could tell by the tone of her voice over the phone.

“Bob, I'm desperate. Can you help me? My students in my introductory business law course don't want to do the necessary research as I directed. They keep using Google or Wikipedia to retrieve information, and that just won't cut it for legal research—as you well know.”

Bob Stupak, online database manager at Lincolnville College's Founders' Library, had received this sort of phone call before, but this one sounded particularly urgent. Students came to college with online search habits already formed: Google, Yahoo!, and, if necessary, Wikipedia were about the only items in their toolbox. Frankly, he was a little surprised that they didn't just resort to Facebook or Twitter on their cell phones!

“Well, I don't know. We just had a staff meeting yesterday to explore ways to entice students to make greater use of our online databases for their searches, but, as you know, the interface on many of the databases is inconsistent from one database to another, and difficult to master. We do have some leads on possible solutions, however. I'll make a point to get back to you in a few days.”

In truth, figuring out a way of helping students benefit more from using appropriate databases and search techniques had been on Bob's agenda for some time. And he had just recently convinced the library's director to adopt this as a high priority project. Otherwise, the library's low usage statistics might endanger the size of the overall budget for library services.

Lincolnville College's journey toward finding a solution to the problem of student underutilization of database resources involved a two-prong approach. The first prong centered on coordinating the efforts of librarians and faculty to bring about a change in student culture and habits. This was not easy, because several faculty objected to a technological intervention in students' access to Internet search engines from campus connections. Some faculty felt strongly that students should have absolutely free access to online information as a matter of right. Only when it was pointed out that the intervention would not impede students' access to information in any way were these faculty mollified.

The second prong involved finding a software vendor who could address the problem directly. What Bob desired was a software add-on that would intercept student searches when conducted from a computer connected to the campus network (of course, no interception could occur outside the campus network). Whenever anyone initiated a Google, Yahoo!, Wikipedia or other such search, the software would intervene with a question:

¹ The characters and Lincolnville College in this case study are fictional.

“Is your search conducted for a course? If so, you should know that your instructors have adopted a college-wide policy that will not accept documentation of sources except through an approved academic database. If your search pertains to a Lincolnville course, please enter the course and section number here: .”

When a student entered an active course number, he or she would be taken to a list of appropriate databases for that course on the library’s website. There the student could continue the search. The software would even log the search along with the student’s identity if the student so desired; this way, the student could demonstrate that the search was conducted in accordance with an instructor’s policy. Moreover, when accessing any of the databases, the student would encounter a uniform interface that would interact with each database appropriately: no more guessing about how a particular database worked.

Accordingly, Bob and his colleagues were looking for a solution that would meet the following criteria:

- Works with all browser platforms.
- Interacts with the college’s course management system.
- Runs on a Unix-based platform for security purposes.
- Provides a uniform interface for all major, academic information databases.
- Runs as an add-on to the library’s current library information systems software.
- Is low-cost.

Bob’s preliminary investigation, primarily through Educause and contacts at ALA meetings, revealed only three vendors who met most of the criteria. All vendors offered an add-on that would intercept student searches in all major browsers. But two of the three vendors offered a solution that would work only with their core library information software, not with competitors’ applications. Only Bookworm Information Systems offered a product, “Spider-Search,” that met all of Lincolnville College’s criteria.

Procurement and installation went relatively smoothly. Cost was a minor issue, since the initial license exceeded the library’s specified budget for the project. By working with the college to craft a multi-year license agreement, however, Bookworm demonstrated flexibility on pricing and saved the college money over the long-term. One major snag developed when the college’s library information systems vendor balked at allowing Bookworm access to part of the vendor’s source code to complete the installation. When the vendor demanded an additional license fee, the college negotiated a lower fee that Bookworm offered to split.

Virtually no training was required of faculty or library staff. Nevertheless, the faculty consumed about three months deciding to adopt a college-wide policy requiring students to document all research via traditional hard copy sources or approved databases. Only when Bob and some faculty pointed out that students could still conduct searches however they wished, but that *documentation* of sources must occur through approved channels and that this software would assist students in accomplishing that—only then was the impasse resolved.

Bookworm's "Spider-Search" turned out to be a big hit with the faculty and library staff. Almost overnight, student compliance with the new source documentation policy zoomed to about 75%. Faculty appreciated having automatic online assistance in reminding students of the new policy and in helping students meet that expectation more easily. Students at first grumbled about having to go through another step to gain access to Google, Yahoo!, and other search engines from a campus connection. But they found Spider-Search useful in presenting a uniform interface for the different databases. Over time, everyone became accustomed to the new system.

About six months after the initial phone conversation and Spider-Search was up and running, Bob called Dr. Black to get her reaction.

"Well, Bob, you just can't imagine how much aggravation you have saved me. I'm happier at my students' submissions, and they seem happier now that they don't have me nagging them about their poor research habits. They also like the fact that I can assign them higher grades!"

"That's great, Marjorie! Just remember to pass that along to the director when you see him again. I could use a raise!"