Library Instruction on the Web

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

As you start to think about how to develop a Web-based library instruction project, a primary goal will be to incorporate the characteristics of good library instruction. What constitutes the best practices for library instruction? Much research has been done over the years to identify these characteristics. This list gathered by Nancy Dewald (1999) provides a compilation of best practices:

1. **Library instruction is best received when it is course-related, and more specifically, assignment-related.** Anyone who has worked with students has found that the retention of materials is much higher when it relates to a specific subject being taught to them or when there is an assignment attached. In these situations, students are more highly motivated to learn. When instruction is delivered for some unknown future use, students tend to dismiss what is being covered.

2. **Incorporating active learning into instruction is more effective than instruction by lecture style alone.** Providing exercises or other activities helps reinforce the lessons being taught and determine whether the students are grasping the material. With straight lecture, a one-way dissemination of information, it is difficult to assess the students’ mental engagement.

3. **Collaborative learning can be beneficial.** Having students interact together in small groups to help each other learn is a powerful way to encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Although this technique may not lend itself to a one-shot instruction class, it can be used in a longer information literacy course.

4. **Information provided in more than one medium is helpful.** Students have different learning styles. Some learn primarily through visual means; others prefer auditory means. Combining a lecture delivery with a visual demonstration can reinforce the message through two mediums.
5. Establishing clear objectives is important. Students are much more likely to grasp what is being taught if they know the direction the instruction is heading.

6. Teaching concepts is preferable to simply teaching mechanics. When students understand the concepts being taught, they can transfer that knowledge to other learning situations. For example, information literacy concepts include Boolean logic, keyword versus controlled-vocabulary searching, evaluating resources, and methods for focusing a search.

7. Good library instruction does not end with the class session but includes the option of asking the librarian for help in the future. Often, library instruction is just the beginning of the research process. Students usually have a need for follow-up help and should be assured that it is available and is an anticipated part of the process.

Is it possible to incorporate these criteria into Web-based instruction? Does it make a difference if the instruction is totally online rather than a supplement to face-to-face instruction? As you start to consider how to transfer these characteristics over to a new medium, you will find, as Dewald did in her analysis of twenty online tutorials, that there are comparable techniques in Web tutorials that demonstrate the use of best practices. In this and subsequent chapters, these techniques will be identified and examples from different tutorials will illustrate the incorporation of good instruction criteria including active learning, collaborative learning, and the use of multiple mediums. A main goal of this book is to teach you how to integrate active learning and collaboration into your Web-based instruction through using interactive technologies and to use graphics, sound, and/or animation to deliver information through more than one medium.

Dewald’s list of good library instruction characteristics also covers items that are not necessarily solved by simply using a certain Web technique. Delivering course-related content, establishing objectives, teaching concepts, and providing ongoing assistance are pedagogical issues that you and your team must build into the instructional design of your tutorial. No matter what format your instruction takes, these are issues that every good instructor addresses when developing a class or course.

TYPES AND EXAMPLES OF WEB-BASED LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

What kind of library instruction can be delivered via the Web? An examination of existing tutorials shows that you are limited only by your imagination. Still, there are several major categories of tutorials. The following sections deal with each of these and provide examples.

General Research or Reference Skills

One common type of Web-based library tutorial deals with how to do research in general. Although at first it might appear that this type of instruction will not
meet the criteria of a course-based focus, it can be integrated into many different disciplines as a supplement since the research process follows a similar path in many subject areas. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Web-based tutorials can also be the primary method of instruction for distance education students who will not have an opportunity to receive face-to-face course instruction.

The tutorial shown in figure 1.1 from the University of Cincinnati Libraries is a typical example of general research instruction. It contains modules on planning research, using the online catalog, finding books, finding articles, locating periodical titles, finding items on reserve, and using the World Wide Web for research. Other popular topics that are covered in general research tutorials are evaluating information, citing resources, and differentiating between various resource types.

FIGURE 1.1
General Research and Reference Skills Tutorial


Online Catalog Skills

A library’s online catalog is its main tool for finding materials in its collection. A tutorial that instructs library users on how to search that specific system can be helpful to all concerned. Most online systems today are sophisticated enough to permit very complex search strategies. If the tutorial is developed to teach the concept of searching in one system, the strategies learned can be transferred to other online systems. Concepts that can be conveyed in an online catalog tutorial include keyword versus subject searching, the meaning of call numbers and
how they are structured, when to try different access points to find materials (author, title, subject, keyword), and how to search different fields simultaneously using Boolean logic. Students can be taught about different types of information available in the library and how to interpret and refine the results they retrieve from the catalog. Figure 1.2 illustrates an interactive tutorial from Thurmond Clarke Memorial Library at Chapman University that teaches freshmen how to use the library’s online catalog.

FIGURE 1.2
Online Catalog Research Skills Tutorial


Database- or Software-Specific Search Skills

This category of tutorials covers those that are developed to teach users to use specific databases or to master particular search-software interfaces. Because there are so many different interfaces to databases, it is necessary to help users learn how to navigate them. Some search software, such as Ovid or SilverPlatter’s WebSPIRS, provides one interface to search multiple databases. Tutorials designed to teach how to search specific interfaces can be integrated into subject-specific and course-related instruction by focusing on an appropriate database for that field. Mastery of the search software can be translated into knowledge of how to use the program in another discipline.

Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania’s Ezra Lehman Library has created two similar tutorials that teach students how to search PsycINFO (see figure 1.3)
and Sociological Abstracts via SilverPlatter’s WebSPIRS interface. In this tutorial the student is taught how to do a basic search, narrow a search, use advanced search strategies, output results, and use special features available in WebSPIRS.

**FIGURE 1.3**
**Database- and Software-Specific Search Skills Tutorial**


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**Discipline- or Course-Specific Research Skills**

Tutorials in this category zero in on teaching a student to conduct research in a certain discipline. A humanities student approaches a research project in a much different manner than a physics student does. Usually a discipline-specific tutorial supports a particular course, often a survey course with multiple sections. This type of tutorial will be very focused and provides the student with in-depth instruction on how to do research in a particular field. It will include information about appropriate sources and research processes unique to that discipline.

Australia’s Monash University Library has developed several research tutorials that are course-specific. Figure 1.4 is an example of a tutorial developed for the course Origins of Western Civilisation 1: The Bronze Age. Exercises within the tutorial use subject headings suitable for the topic and show appropriate databases for archeology research.
Assignment-Specific Tutorials

A tutorial can also be developed to guide a student through a specific assignment for a course. This is a perfect opportunity for a librarian to collaborate with a professor to create an interactive Web research project.

In an art history course at Wake Forest University, the professor had a set assignment that she used to teach students how to conduct research. The art history librarian and this author started with the written assignment and developed a tutorial that would make the assignment an interactive lesson that was much more engaging to the student than a text handout. (See figure 1.5.)

Internet Skills

In many libraries, teaching Internet skills has become a standard part of the instruction mission. This type of instruction can range from teaching the mechanics of navigating the Internet to using the Web for research. Different libraries have included a vast assortment of instruction topics about the Internet in their lessons. The following list of potential Internet topics will give you an idea of the possibilities:

FIGURE 1.4
Subject- and Course-Specific Research Skills Tutorial

introduction to the Internet
Web browser navigation
history of the Internet
communication on the Internet
Web search tools
Web search strategies
evaluation of Web resources
supplying information on the Web

An interesting example of an Internet tutorial comes from Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library, University of Utah, shown in figure 1.6. Internet Navigator is a multi-institutional Internet course that is available to all ten Utah institutions of higher learning. It contains four modules: introduction to the Internet, communication, Internet information navigation, and providing information on the World Wide Web.
General Library Orientation

Most academic libraries hold library orientation tours each semester when new students arrive on campus. An academic library can be an intimidating structure to new freshmen. Helping students learn where departments, services, and materials are located in the library is the first step to transforming them into independent information seekers. A virtual library tour can serve the same purpose. It provides the students with a map that they can use to become acquainted with the library building and its services.

Duke University Libraries created virtual tours for four of its libraries. Each tour includes floor plans, images, and a description of the services available. They offer two versions—one in which the student can browse the library by floor or decide where to go and a guided tour for freshmen that provides a short introduction to the departments that they need to know about. (See figure 1.7.)
Information Literacy Courses

As the world of information becomes more complex, information literacy has become an increasingly important part of the education process. Many higher education institutions include an information literacy class as a required part of the curriculum, often during a student’s first year. It may be offered as a separate class for credit or may be incorporated into a survey course such as freshman English. These courses allow concepts to be covered in an in-depth manner because the time constraints of a “one-shot” class are removed. In this type of forum, there are many opportunities for incorporating active learning, collaborative learning, multiple mediums to present information, and the other characteristics of good library instruction.
Fort Lewis College; Durango, Colorado, requires that students pass a one-credit information literacy class to graduate. The lessons developed by the library instruction coordinator serve as a course pack that contains all the readings for the class. The course has been designed so that students can self-pace their progression, but classes meet on a weekly basis and assignments and tests are given throughout the semester-long schedule. (See figure 1.8.)

FIGURE 1.8
Information Literacy Course


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