Research Using Primary Sources (Poster Session)

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/ann_hanlon/8/
In 2006 we created an online guide to teach students the skills they need to locate and use primary source materials. We later tested the guide to assess how effectively it conveyed these skills. The study helped assess not simply the navigability of the website, but also provided the opportunity to explore the barriers students encounter when searching for primary source materials.

**Methodology**

Participants were asked to take a pre- and post- test, to complete a survey on the navigability of the website, and to complete four tasks after exploring the website. Morae software was used to capture their navigation, and the interviewers’ interaction with the participants was recorded and transcribed.

**Preliminary Results**

* Students do not distinguish between traditional library research techniques and those skills needed to locate primary sources.
  * Almost 100% of incoming freshman receive formal library instruction within their first year at the University of Maryland
  * Students assumed that familiar tools, such as the library catalog and databases, would yield equally comprehensive results for primary sources

85.7% of students began their primary source research with the library website

57.1% of those searches provided relevant primary source results

• Students were quick to pick up on unfamiliar terms and tools when provided with specific instruction

**The Missing Pieces**

We identified four areas where students encountered obstacles that hampered their ability to effectively locate and use primary source materials

* Unfamiliar with the concept of collections
* Inability to interpret a variety of descriptive practices
* Shallow or no understanding of the relativity of primary source materials
* Over-reliance on familiar tools and techniques

**Educating Student Users**

* Collaborate with library instruction programs to provide more specific training to students and reference staff
* Create simple instruction modules for library instructors and departmental faculty that demystify the basic skills and tools students should use
* Find ways to help students visualize concepts: i.e., invite classes into the reading room or bring the “reading room” to the classes

**Online**

* Design websites and handouts that address the “missing links” in student knowledge
* Make simple, informed adjustments to interface design and examine use of terminology
* Use visuals and navigational maps

**Clarifying Jargon**

Find out what they don’t know:

“Find a finding aid. Find a finding aid... Ok. I’m a little unclear about what that means.”
- Jacob*, Graduate Teaching Assistant, History

Find out what they do understand, and use it:

“Kind of an index, or an outline, summary of the different documents that are available.”
- Kaylee*, Sophomore, Government & Politics

**Definition:** Finding aids are indexes to archival and manuscript collections.

* Not their real names