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The Scavenger Hunt As an Interactive Teaching Tool to Develop Research Skills

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The Scavenger Hunt As an Interactive Teaching Tool to Develop Research Skills

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.01 Searching Skills (return to index)

"I've tried everything, and I can't find anything," is one of the most common complaints that I hear from students working on research projects in my classes. Often, they will add that they have asked a librarian who could not find anything either. Moreover, access to the Internet seems only to have complicated research for students. Several articles in a recent issue of the AHA’s Perspectives (May 2003) speak to the necessity of providing greater guidance to students (and teachers) on ways to use the Internet effectively and efficiently. John McClymer, for example, discusses how to provide students with multiple Internet sources to “complement, contradict and confuse” textbook readings. To aid students in finding reliable websites, Kelly Schrum and William A. Paquette point to the benefits of websites such as History Matters and MERLOT as excellent sources of peer-reviewed websites for classroom use (1). While these authors provide excellent guidance and resources, they handle the free-for-all of the Internet by channeling access through a few sites. It is important, though, to teach students how to become comfortable searching for materials on the Internet at large and in the library. One
The scavenger hunt, by changing the questions, can be adapted to any variety of situations for students from high school to college, from introduction to research or first-year classes to more advanced content or theory-based courses. The goal of the scavenger hunt discussed here is to improve students’ familiarity with finding and using a variety of resources (2). If one has the opportunity to teach in a computer lab or a classroom with Internet and computer projection, the students’ answers to the scavenger hunt (and alternatives tried, whether successful or not) can be demonstrated to all the students in the class to increase learning and understanding. Students can work on the scavenger hunt individually or in groups. If grouped, they will tend to divide up the questions, but the goal is for them to work together when they get stumped. Awarding prizes to those with the most correct answers may add incentive for students to put in extra effort when they have trouble finding an answer.

The scavenger hunt provides for a variety of assignments that enables the instructor to fit different student needs. It can be conducted so that all questions are discussed on one day or students can address one question each week. The first option makes it more like a traditional hunt competition. The latter option allows the class to spend 10-20 minutes discussing the student answers to each week’s question. Either way, students can share with each other how they got the answers and discuss the problems they had. If students email the instructor before class with their answers and where (and how) they found them, then the instructor can identify successes and problems ahead of time to facilitate discussion and learning among students. If students provide the sources for their answers in correct bibliographic format, this exercise provides another skill that students can practice.

Libraries also offer the instructor multiple ways to use the scavenger hunt to respond to student needs. If possible, it would be helpful to take students on a tour of the library before the hunt begins to show them the kinds of resources available. If the tour ends in the reference section, the librarian can point out and briefly discuss a sampling of the items available. In addition, some items, including references that students will eventually need to answer the scavenger hunt questions, can be put on a table for students to browse. Another useful introduction for students would be to show them available database resources and briefly how to access and use them. Included in this virtual tour could also be information about general Internet searches (3). The scavenger hunt can be the perfect tool to encourage students (depending on their
sensibilities) not to rely only on the Internet or on the library. One caveat, though, not true even five or so years ago, is that the Internet sources and search engines now available allow students to find (or think they can find) many answers on the Internet. To encourage students to make use of the school library, it is probably a good idea—perhaps even necessary—to restrict Internet use on some questions, though certainly not on all. Learning to use search engines effectively is critical, and the scavenger hunt is one way to encourage this skill. Moreover, Internet focused questions help to show students how to access and use sources appropriate for academic research. One student at Kenyon commented, “in an electronic society, there are so many different places and types of research to be used.” Another said that through the scavenger hunt, she “learned how to assess validity of Internet sources.”

.05 Generating Questions (return to index)

The success of a scavenger hunt rests on the questions. Specific questions need to be determined largely by what kinds of resources and skills one wants students to learn. Ideally, instructors want to create a pool of questions so that they can ask different questions for each class or each year to reduce the opportunity for copying answers. Tapping colleagues and reference librarians for a few questions in their fields is a good way to expand the pool of questions. In a later issue of the BCIS Journal, I provide sample questions for a scavenger hunt, along with commentary.

Another key to a productive scavenger hunt is to involve the librarians. Once the scavenger hunt questions for a class have been set, it is helpful (and considerate) to provide the reference librarians with a copy of the questions. It is also helpful to discuss how much aid they can provide. For example, can the librarians work directly with the students to find the answers or should they limit themselves to making suggestions on where or how to look?

.06 Benefits of the Scavenger Hunt (return to index)

The scavenger hunt provides abundant learning opportunities for students. Students can improve their research skills, have their interests peaked, and make progress on class assignments.

- Students gain familiarity with the reference section, databases, and other materials available in the library and on the Internet.
- The scavenger hunt gives students greater confidence in using technology and the resources that it makes available.
- Students expand their knowledge about the types of materials and subject matters available for doing research.
- As an active-learning activity, the scavenger hunt goes beyond teacher instruction to give students the opportunity to practice and develop their searching skills on their own.
- The scavenger hunt encourages browsing. One student who took my first Introduction to Historical Research class at University of Central Arkansas (UCA) in 1998 commented, “I learned how to navigate my way around the reference section of [the library]. I perused several sources of historical information, even census books dating back to the mid-1700s.”
- A source found in the scavenger hunt may spark a student’s interest and lead the student...
to consider taking a class they had not thought about before.

- The students come to know librarians and see them as a resource to help them with their projects. One student from my UCA class wrote, “I learned from the research librarians that I should not be afraid to seek help.” Another said, “I was very timid on asking questions, just for the mere fact that I think I can do everything by myself most of the time, [which] is as I learned highly untrue. It doesn’t hurt to inquire.”
- They learn that there is more than one way to get to an answer. “I learned that information is out there; I just have to get at it and there are more than a few ways to find it. Usually one research tool will lead to another tool that will lead to useful information.”
- They learn that when they think they have exhausted all options, there are usually other ways to find the information. One student said the scavenger hunt made the student “realize all the angles a historian has open to them for research.”
- Some come to see the searching process as detective work, which may seem more fun and intriguing than just trying to complete a research assignment.
- The scavenger hunt sets up an exercise that makes it easy for students to learn from and teach each other. This type of assignment has the benefit of increasing discussion in the classroom, not only about the scavenger hunt but also about other materials covered in class.
- Scavenger hunt questions may test the ingenuity of students, and, at times, the students will find creative ways to answer a question that the instructor never considered; this kind of happenstance also adds to the unpredictability of the hunt and makes it a learning experience for both the students and the instructor.

Next issue, I will provide a sample of scavenger hunt questions with commentary. [If anyone has questions or comments, please send them. I will incorporate them into my article.]

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