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Google as teacher

Everything your students know they learned from searching Google

I will use Google before asking dumb questions." Thus writes a less-than-penitent-looking Bart Simpson, over and over again, on the chalkboard of Springfield Elementary. This image (which is likely a counterfeit use of *Simpsons* trademarks) has made the rounds of the blogosphere. Search for this phrase in Google (where else?), and you'll get thousands of results, and almost all of these point to blogs. Given that Google is generally considered the Web's most popular search engine and that most bloggers, like college and university students, are young, what does this popular cartoon say about the academic library's audience?

Google as teacher

First, allow me to backtrack a bit. I have stated that most of the search results for this phrase in Google are blogs. In truth, I only looked at the first page of results. Being an avid Google user, I rarely delve several pages into the results and usually assume the pattern set up on the first results page holds true in the following results. I would postulate that this is valid of most Google users: Google has taught us to skim only the first page or two of search results. This practice, it must be admitted, serves as a testament to the strong search capability of Google. Usually, Google offers nice results on the first page and there is no need to probe deeper.

However, when Google is elevated to the status of teacher, as the popular blog cartoon featuring Bart Simpson seems to indicate, this statement takes on new and undesirable consequences, especially for the academic library.

By stating "I will use Google before asking dumb questions," Google is promoted to the level of instructor. No longer just a search tool, Google now makes students smarter, or at least prevents them from appearing stupid. This might seem like a stretch. After all, I am taking a cartoon meant to be silly and drawing out generalizations to describe the entire student population. But most good jokes hold kernels of truth. And my experience in the classroom has led me to believe Google regularly teaches our students how to search. And these search strategies, learned in Google, are taken as universal wisdom and applied widely. The vestiges of Google's teachings can often be seen in college students.

So exactly what results do we see in students taught by Google? I've already mentioned the skimming effect: users (myself included) often skim only the first few results of a search query. On a broader level, Google teaches students that searching is usually a simple and convenient process. Students taught by Google are likely to prefer keyword searching with no Boolean operators. Searchers who attempt Boolean logic in their search queries are flatly told that this is unnecessary. Google users are also often very good at narrowing searches, but poor at broadening them. After all, there is so much information

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online, why would you want to broaden a search? These strategies, while often effective in Google, can prove troublesome and even devastating in library databases.

For example, I had a student last semester searching for information on Prozac use in children. When I suggested she broaden her search to antidepressants or perhaps use the generic name for Prozac, she was very hesitant. How could broadening the search possibly help when she needed such specific information? For a Google searcher, this can be a hard concept to grasp.

Are there stupid questions?

Underlying the Bart Simpson cartoon is also a sense of shame. Educators often tell students that there are no stupid questions. However, in the blogosphere this is evidently not true: if you can't find the information you need, you are labeled as stupid. Again, this might seem like an exaggerated conclusion to draw from a lighthearted cartoon, but I think it rings true in the library world. How many of us have been approached by apologetic students at the reference desk? The patron shamefacedly approaches the desk, and timidly utters, "I'm sorry, but I have a question . . ." Students often think they should be able to navigate the online library world efficiently without help from librarians. This belief no doubt stems at least in part from Google. Google's simplicity and impressive search prowess trick students into thinking they are good all-around searchers, and when they fail in library searches, they are ashamed as well as confused.

I don't mean to imply that students would be better off without Google. It's a powerful and effective Internet search tool; its popularity is well deserved. However, I worry about the influence of this popular search tool among our students. Google affects the very way students conceive of searching. It teaches them not only how to search, but also how to feel if they can't find the desired information online. Google teaches students what to expect from online searching. It has totally dominated many students' online searching experience, and it forms their online mindset.

The impact of Google has not been ignored by librarianship, but too often our response is defensive or dismissive. An aggressive library attack on Google is undoubtedly a poor reaction, given that students' formative experience with Web searching is usually shaped by Google. To challenge Google is off-putting to students who have a Google mindset.

Another tactic that libraries use is to regard Google as a separate entity. Though it is true that libraries offer a range of services outside the realm of Google, this is not readily evident to students. They frequently apply search skills taught by Google to library databases. Rather than combat or dismiss Google, we need to be aware of its influence both to help students search well and to understand their frustrations with library systems. Acknowledging Google's role as teacher can help us become better academic librarians and better information literacy instructors.