Library Exposure from the Prior Years: An Examination of Public High School Library Websites

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ABSTRACT

The frequent occurrence of first-year college students showing disinterest and unfamiliarity with basic library resources is a phenomenon experienced by many academic librarians. This article aims to increase understanding of student exposure to the school library, prior to college arrival, by examining the online information and tools from high school libraries. Four hundred ninety-seven (497) public high schools from New York City were surveyed for 1) online presence of their school library programs and 2) the extent of information featured on these school library websites. Findings indicate that many public high schools have not adequately embraced web development for the purpose of educating students about information literacy.

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INTRODUCTION

The frequent occurrence of first-year college students showing disinterest and unfamiliarity with basic library resources such as the online catalog and electronic databases during bibliographic instruction, with many admitting to have never visited any library up until these sessions in college, is a phenomenon experienced by many academic librarians (Islam & Murno, 2006, p. 492). Todd (2008) elaborated on the observed biases of college students toward using library research tools: they tend to bypass resources in their libraries and resort to popular search engines such as Google for most research purposes, developing preference for natural language-searching through self-generated tags and keywords, rather than the vocabulary of subject headings intrinsic to libraries, and, in turn, identifying these acquired habits and experiences as the quintessential research process (p. 23). Other studies have taken the next steps to examine this research process, uncovering some of the weaknesses exhibited by students in evaluating information effectively; in general, the students' online skills are far less developed than previously thought, coupled with a poor conceptual understanding of the extent of searchable information open through Google and the likes (Fuller, 2005, p. 27; Hardesty, 2007, pp. 35–36; Harris, 2003, p. 219; Valenza, 2007, p. 212).

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program's 2011 American Freshman Survey provides the demographics for students entering American colleges and universities full-time: about 80% of them came through the public school system (p. 19); over 80% cited regularly using the Internet for research or homework (p. 26); yet, about 40%

felt that they could evaluate the reliability of their information (p. 28), with less than 40% confident about their computer skills (p. 27), and a meager 25% admitted to knowing how to look up scientific articles and resources (p. 28). There are those in educational research most vocal about the disparity in the requirements for graduating from high school and general admission into college (Greene & Forster, 2003, p. 3; Haycock, 2010, p. 15; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009, pp. 187–189), especially when more than a quarter of college students are required to take remedial coursework in their first years (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2008, p. 3; Tierney & Garcia, 2008, p. 2).

Recognizing the role that information literacy plays in most students' college success, this article aims to increase academic librarians' awareness of the students' exposure to the school library in the high school years — in the aspect of online information and tools from their high school libraries. Taking an empirical approach, four hundred ninety-seven public high schools from New York City were surveyed for 1) online presence of their school library programs and 2) the extent of information featured on the school library websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature reveals that studies on school library websites can largely be summarized into three areas: 1) those promoting "virtual libraries" as the next-generation school libraries fostering information literacy for students and teachers alike; 2) those offering expert advice on web design and development, based on assessments of the needs of high schools and high school libraries; and, to a lesser degree, 3) empirical data on the state of school library websites delineating the strengths and deficiencies evidenced by students and other users in the secondary school community.

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BEYOND SPACE AND TIME

There were educators adamant about revamping the image and role of the high school library and librarian; and for many, an effectively developed website became both objective and signifier for the school library making the technological leap forward (Australian School Librarian Association, 2008; Hauser, 2007; Herring, 2011a; Raven, 2006). Riding on the coattails of the blended learning movement of colleges and universities to redesign their distance learning programs at the time (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Singh & Reed, 2001; Voos, 2003), these educators sought similar applications of the technology in the secondary school environment and began examining the implications of a school library, disembodied from the classroom, for their learning community (Lamb & Johnson, 2008, para. 4–10). The school library would too be re-conceptualized as a blending of the physical and virtual elements, no longer one static workspace where information resources were kept and organized (Todd, 2011, p. 64). The Web would extend the school librarian's reach to unlimited students and encourage asynchronous learning through the innovation of traditional functions such as reference and instructional support (Valenza, 2007, p. 207). By providing links to important tools and resources, the school library website would reduce the time students use to search for information, and allow them to focus on reading and thinking about it (Bussiere, 2006, p. 21). As the main access point, the school library website would represent the brave new school library. Primed with hope and aspiration, there were numerous works in this vein apparent in the literature, reflecting on the directions for school libraries and librarians. The ideology as expressed by one scholar:

> [Y]our library web page is your second front door. It meets your students where they live, and play, and work, with 24/7, just-in-time, just-for-me support and intervention. It creates online signage for students and staff. It projects the image of the librarian as a 21st century teacher and information professional.
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> [As cited in Heit (2008, p. 23)]

PAVING THE ROAD

Alongside the trailblazers with works to motivate and inspire the school community, there were also educators concentrating on helping school libraries to transition, with practical guidance on developing a useful library website (Herring, 2011b; Scheeren, 2010). Matching pace with the improvements in web technologies, the studies on valuable features and items on a school library website constituted a steady stream in the literature over the years (Baumbach, Brewer, & Renfroe, 2004; Church, 2006; Clyde, 2002; Jurkowski, 2004). Recommendations in this category, however, were often based on personal, anecdotal observations in lieu of actual statistics. Analytical research into the rankings of website features and components (i.e. by frequency of usage in a population of school libraries) was few and far between, limited to those for school websites (Harthorne, Friedman, Algozzine, & Isibor, 2006; Hill, Tucker, & Hannon, 2010; Miller, Adsit, & Miller, 2005), with only one on school library websites found (Jurkowski, 2004).

To identify the contents of school library websites, Kazanawa created her CIRRI model, which classified all contents according to primary functions deemed useful for the school library (Kanazawa & Maruyama, 2008; Kanazawa, Maruyama, & Motoki, 2011): Core contents such as the library address and hours; Information access such as links to the online catalog and database systems; Research tools such as those teaching students citation and writing; Reference support for students to learn about the library and how to locate resources; and Instructional support offering library guidance on class projects and assignments. Other research in web development included those interested in the legal aspect of copyrighted logos and trademarks on a school library website (Johnson, 2009) and the target marketing of website contents, e.g. to students of specific grades or reading levels rather than the entire spectrum regardless of user relevancy (Herring, 2011b, pp. 22–23). For school libraries about to start website development, there is much of shared knowledge and support in the literature to intrigue anyone regardless of his or her technological background.

THE STATE OF BEING

Despite the works bringing to the school community the desired vision and encouragement, there is a dearth of knowledge about the actual landscape of high school libraries in: 1) the percentage going virtual to establish web presence successfully; 2) how high school library websites have fared in the quantity and quality of library resources available against the checklist of expert recommendations for such websites; and ultimately 3) the impact these library websites have on improving the students' skills in research and information literacy. The handful of works published suggests the challenge of gathering data samples significant enough for meaningful analysis into the population of high school libraries, particularly those in the public school systems.

Devoted to an international perspective, Clyde (2004) analyzed the websites of fifty school libraries from nine different countries for broad trends across the field, finding too much variety in the library websites, in terms of the aims and purposes for which they were created, and even the users for whom they were intended. Clyde reasoned that most school library websites were developed without adequate attention to their uses and audiences, thus limiting much of their potential usefulness to school libraries. Clyde's efforts were followed by two other studies, albeit on a more domestic, local level: one by Baumbach (2005), who sampled one hundred school library websites (32 elementary school, 20 middle school, 39 high school, 9 other combinations) and found her results confirming much of Clyde's (p. 9); and another by Jurkowski (2004), who investigated thirty-four school library websites from the state of Missouri to provide more of a snapshot of prevalent website functions and features ranked by frequency.

The more extensive study came in 2008 when Meyers and Eisenberg surveyed nine hundred thirty-nine high school freshmen in five Washington (state) schools about the relationship of the students' information-seeking behaviors to their school library websites. Their alarming discovery was that although the students were online in record numbers, they were using Google or other search engines to research on periodical literature, as opposed to the school library websites despite the full-text periodical databases available there. Unless the class assignments required use of the library website, the students would otherwise skip over it as a personal tool (p. 12). They also associated their school libraries and librarians with finding books only (p. 9). There were two other studies in the literature on the quality of websites, e.g. on a school level rather than the school library: Miller, Adsit, and Miller (2005) with their analysis of the school websites for seventy elementary schools in Georgia, which concluded low rates of effectively-developed websites (pp. 38–39); and Hill, Tucker, and Hannon (2010) who reported on similarly low rates for effectively-developed websites as well as user utilization in a sample of two hundred eighty-five middle and high schools in Southern California (p. 17).

There are gaps in the literature for continuing investigations into the quality of school library websites, as students increasingly adapt to life on the Web and, more than ever, are in need of learning about online research and information literacy. More understanding into the extent to which the school library website plays in students' online education would be beneficial for librarians in both the secondary and postsecondary school settings.

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

As the largest public school system in the United States, New York City is unquestionably a center of contemporary efforts in education and educational reform. The breadth of school offerings makes it necessary for local residents to assess the quality of individual schools