First-year student information-seeking behaviors change as quickly as the devices they use, so anticipating the needs of first-year students feels daunting each academic year. Yet, introducing them to university-level research is important as they face academic challenges that require higher level research skills than the ones with which most of them come equipped.

Plymouth State University attempts to address the needs of budding scholars through a required First Year Seminar (FYS) course, which is designed to develop the research, writing, and critical thinking skills that they are expected to use while pursuing an education. Each FYS course is assigned an instructor, a topic, and a personal librarian who meets with the class once or twice during the semester to cover these skills.

I survived my first year of teaching FYS courses, but didn’t feel that I was connecting completely with the students. Even though I designed the instruction to meet their needs, students looked bored and distracted. Strolling around the room during my sessions revealed that the students’ attention was on Facebook and random Google searches rather than the skills set I was attempting to convey. Determined to foster class engagement, I tried to get to the bottom of their distraction by administering a quick online survey at the end of each session.

Not surprisingly, the surveys revealed that I was missing the mark. Students were polite to say that I was knowledgeable about the library, but they indicated that my sessions were boring and irrelevant and they did not have enough free time to find sources for their papers.

Clearly, it was time to change my approach, but I struggled during that first year to determine how. Incidentally, we’d recently discovered through usability testing that our library website was also missing the mark, as far as students’ research needs were concerned, and needed an overhaul. One thing we noticed is that students repeatedly started with Google or, at times, would even navigate away from the library page to search Google for our library resources. Sometimes their Google searches would lead them to our library resources, but more often, they them to a dead end or confusion.

The students’ searching behavior reminded me of a concept I’d learned while pursuing my undergraduate degree in art history: desire lines. In landscape architecture, desire lines are pathways people create while repeatedly walking across a green space; they usually appear everywhere except for the established sidewalks. Desire lines indicate where people actually want to walk as opposed to where design professionals think they should walk. Some landscape architects will wait for the

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Library instruction for first-year students
Following the students’ path

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desire lines to emerge across the campus
green, and then lay the sidewalk along the
paths that the users have chosen.

The similarities between campus pedes-
trians and campus researchers had finally
dawned on me. Students were straying away
from the predetermined research pathways
available on the library website and were fol-
lowing their own easier or more familiar path-
ways. Watching student after student repeat
this behavior during usability testing led me
to think, “Let the students find their resources
via Google (or whatever search engine they
find useful).” My job was to respond to the
pathways they create and incorporate this into
my library instruction design and execution.

In preparation for the next year’s group
of first-year students, I strayed from my tra-
ditional library database searches and began
with Google Scholar research inquiries—an
access point that I often use for my own
information needs. Clearly, students know
Google, so this seemed like a logical entry
point to convey how online tools they rec-
ognize can also be used to connect them
with academic resources. Google Scholar not
only leads to academic articles available in
digital form, but it also produces item results
harvested from Lamson Learning Commons’
WorldShare catalog.

My revised library instruction sessions
immediately revealed that Google Scholar
worked just like desire lines in landscape
planning: to the students it was familiar,
well-traveled, and therefore easy for them
to comprehend. The emotional climate in the
room shifted from ambivalence to curiosity,
which was easy to see as I watched students
use the unstructured time I gave them during
class to find resources for their papers.

As I continue with this approach, I’ve
observed that students are surprised and
curious when I start with Google Scholar
and are then eager to use class time to find
and use library resources from the comfort
of Google Scholar’s landing page. With a
familiar and intuitive stage set, I start some
simple searches and then demonstrate how
they could dig a little deeper into their search
findings by refining their terms and using
filters available in Google Scholar. Through
this, they begin to understand the connections
from Google to the library catalog, but also
how information resources are organized and
tagged within most search engines. They also
see the similarities and differences of search-
ing Google and searching the library catalog,
which is a constant source of confusion for
new students. Following the students’ desire
lines when it comes to digital resources gives
me insight into how their search logic works
and gives them the confidence to discover
and accept new pathways in the scholarly
online community.

Since I’ve shifted my perspective on library
instruction, I’ve noticed heightened curiosity
on the students’ part for discovering other
resources once they reached our library web-
site. In the previous semesters, I’d struggled
to achieve class participation.

After responding to their search behaviors
through Google Scholar, I was pleased and
amazed the students followed along with
each step (no Facebook pages to be seen).

This teaching approach also gave students
more time to work with tools that I demon-
strated, ask questions, and find resources
during the instruction session that were useful
for their assignment. Students also realize that
librarian assistance and research instruction
can be helpful beyond the FYS course and
throughout their academic career.

For me, providing library instruction had
always been daunting and stressful. Now
that I’ve begun observing the students’ pre-
determined research pathways and creating
more balance between what the students
need to learn about research and what they
already know about it, I’ve developed a
newfound enjoyment and enthusiasm for
teaching them.