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Anarchy and Hope

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Why on earth would anyone begin with a wacky image like this one? And what does anarchy have to do with anything? Hopefully you'll know in a few minutes. I, anyhow, will begin with the image.

This is an image of how I frequently feel when I put together and conduct “library” or “il” sessions. Maybe you can relate. For me, I feel torn between the pragmatic elements – such as library navigation, LoC classification, databases and their interfaces, etc. – and more conceptual themes such as critical unknown source evaluation, search construction, concept mapping, and so on. Your view may differ, but to me, real il needs to focus on the conceptual. I believe this because il, once “acquired,” ought to be portable; that is, we should aim to develop students who are information-savvy in many environments, not just library-resource savvy.

Getting instructors to embrace “pure” il within their classes can be tricky. Working with instructors, I've seen a real salmagundi of approaches to this. Most commonly, however, there is a widely recognized expectation that I come to classes in order to “show [students] the databases.” (Sometimes, it's even just “database.”) That is, they expect my instruction to focus on the instrumental. Students frequently seem to echo this attitude; at any rate, I'm probably not alone in having surprised students by actually teaching them something.

So, beyond obvious time constraints, there is a constant pressure in my instruction to keep it limited to the practical. The temptation is to just acquiesce: I'm not a real confrontational guy.

This kind of capitulation follows Alexander (of Macedon)'s example of slicing through the fabled Gordian knot. We use the idea of this knot as a metaphor for intricate problems, and the slicing as a stand-in for finding an unexpected solution. I, however, have always felt badly for the knot. Wouldn't it have been cool if he had actually untied it? Then we could have seen how it had been done in the first place. Alas, swords are sexier to some, and expedience trumps examination.

To me, this amounts to simplifying il instruction so that it fits within artificial, external boundaries. To borrow yet another theme from Greek lore, short-shrifting true il instruction to focus overmuch on the instrumental does what Procrustes, the villainous blacksmith, did to those who slept in his bed. If you were so tall that your feet dangled over the foot of this bed, he would gladly hack them off so that you'd fit.

My main goal in il is to show that research – academic or leisurely – is a reflective process. I want to create a space that welcomes students into that process, and I want students to feel energized to explore information environments outside the library and its web space. Unfortunately, students frequently internalize a rigid (and inaccurate) map of research. For a variety of reasons, this map is often linear: choose topic, find sources, write paper. 1, 2, 3. There are variations on this, of course, like fitting a topic to the sources found, or finding sources after the paper has been written. They're all lousy models. Ideally, I want to convince instructors to give me the space to really let students experience the authentic research process. The anarchistic

epistemologist Paul Feyerabend said that true discovery can only proceed chaotically, and could never be bound by any durable rules. Authentic research, as we viscerally know and which Allen Foster has shown, *is* iterative and disorderly. I want students to fail repeatedly as they hone their topics. I want them to kind of enjoy this process, too. To do this, I need ample space and time. I need real buy-in from instructors. I need collaboration.

I'd like to talk just a bit about a project that a colleague and I undertook this spring semester, in a class on Ovid (the poet, not the DB) at Hope. Steve Maiullo, who teaches classics, and I started talking about ways to meaningfully incorporate it into language classes. Since Steve teaches courses that are only half a term long, we thought one of these might provide a nice test case. Then we came up with a plan, which was to, in a way, set the students free in their native information landscape, the web.

I know that no one marvels at blogs anymore. However, WordPress proved to be an easy, friendly platform for the students to interact with. The idea was to abandon the traditional research-paper project in favor of a course-long evolving blog. The blog postings were supposed to include not only the research matter they were investigating, but also a discussion of the process they were participating in: why they chose or rejected sources, how they went about finding and evaluating them. In another departure from protocol, we also decided that they could draw resources from anywhere at all, whether on the web or in the library.

Library sessions were devoted to exploring this thing we call the web and scaffolding student's work. We talked about search engines (even beyond Google), search strategies, web structure, and the basic way the web "works." We spent quite a while discussing Deep Web resources and the benefits of going beyond Google when trawling the web. Each of these sessions was dynamic. The students actually seemed to enjoy the discovery process itself.

I don't have time to go through this in extensive detail, but I would like to note some patterns. The single most apparent trend and the most general benefit of this project was the thoughtfulness of many of the posts; most have a strong reflective tone. Many students tried simple things which they had previously never done, such as look at page 2 of search results or play with a "meta" search engine (Dogpile, it seems, was a real hit). Additionally, many students chose to refine their searches repeatedly instead of changing topics when results were unsatisfactory. A few students drew a number of resources from the LoC Classics database. Several wrote about why they deemed a resource trustworthy or not, some, admittedly, exposing a rather weak set of criteria for reliability.

There were, of course, some elements of the students' work that were less successful, and which indicate areas to improve in later undertakings. One student noted having search vocabulary problems, and feeling "stuck" sometimes because she found herself using the same search repeatedly. Additionally, I had hoped that students would go deeper in their searches, whereas most seemed satisfied with earlier results.

This is only one project, and a 6-week one at that. It is, however, an example of a more authentic, collaboratively developed component built in to the structure of a course. I hope to be able to do more, different projects in other courses, and focus on specific information environments. With more development, projects like this could go a long way toward getting rid of that torn feeling.