From Nothing to Something: Transforming the "Failed" Search

Students learn that a failed search does not end the exploration process and they develop strategies to continue their research after encountering obstacles. This lesson relies on feedback from students and requires a certain amount of flexibility and readiness on the part of librarians to respond to a range of search outcomes.

CONCEPT IN CONTEXT

Expert researchers are able to navigate the complex information landscape, from databases with specialized vocabularies to the not-so-well-defined online environment of social media. What sets them apart from novice researchers, though, is more than knowledge of the available resources. Expert researchers can overcome obstacles and learn from unproductive searches. They are flexible and skilled enough to look elsewhere and attentive enough to spot useful information when and wherever it appears. Students do need to learn to use sophisticated university databases. They also need to recognize that quality information doesn't exist only behind a paywall. But, the search for information is seldom as straightforward as we would like, and students will encounter difficulty along the way. How they handle that difficulty is the true measure of their learning. This lesson gets to the place where students may find themselves stuck—where they hit a figurative wall—and shows them that failure is okay. It addresses the search strategies and discovery tools students need to employ to recognize the possible reasons for setbacks and continue their research. When students are no longer intimidated by failure, they can begin to engage in real exploration.

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Level: Intermediate
Estimated Time: 30–40 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED
- Instructor computer and projector screen
- Whiteboard

- For independent searching, students should have access to a computer

LEARNING GOALS

- Students will learn that a failed search (one that retrieves no results or irrelevant results) is not something to be afraid of. Instead, failure is an inevitable and helpful part of the exploration process.
- Students will learn to analyze a problematic search and come up with a solution.

ANTICIPATORY SET

Librarian Script: "In your classes, have you ever been unable to find information for your assignments? Have you ever heard someone else say, 'There's nothing in the library on my topic'? Besides getting frustrated, how do you deal with failure? What does failure look like?"

LESSON OBJECTIVE STATED

Librarian Script: "Today you are going to search for information on a topic and learn what to do when you don't find the information you're looking for. Failed searches aren't the end of your exploration. Together we'll work to learn from our mistakes and keep searching."

INPUT/MODELING

Prior to the class, the librarian prepares one or more searches on a discipline-related topic, incorporating one or more of the following failed search triggers:

- Too narrow or focused
- Natural language, rather than targeted key words
- Too many words in a single search, or a search written as a sentence
- A search done in an incorrect/irrelevant database
- A search containing misspellings

The class examines the search results together, and critiques the effectiveness of the search. When a search 'fails,' the class works together to determine why it has happened.

The librarian divides the class into groups (groups of 3–4 are optimal). Each group is given a research question related to their assignment or course content. In their groups, the students brainstorm keywords related to the research question and write them down. Each group (or representative) comes to the instructor's computer to perform a search in front of the class. Searches should be split between the library catalog and the database.

Rather than introduce some of the potential problems before the search, like the need for targeted language or Boolean operators, this lesson allows the students to experience the common sticking places for novice searchers in order to recognize, understand, and overcome them.

They are likely to include:

- Keyword problems: Overcoming the impulse towards natural language searching; recognizing the need for synonyms; learning academic jargon and using thesauri (when appropriate)
- Adapting keywords according to the resource: Broad searches in the library catalog vs. greater detail in a database
- Considering the information cycle: Is the topic too 'new' to be covered in books or scholarly journal articles? How can students use the available scholarly information?
- Unanticipated information found: What can be learned along the way about one's topic that could inform (or alter) one's search?; How to broaden, narrow, or switch focus of topic

With each "failure," students see how a wrong-footed search is just a temporary setback, and in fact is often very useful in learning about their research topic and the organization of information. The librarian reminds students that librarians are available to help them whenever they "fail" in the future.

GUIDED PRACTICE

Students are given time to search independently using their own research topics, and to raise their hands whenever they "fail." Failures can be addressed by the instructor/professor, librarian, or peers (optimal).