Library Sandbox: An Experiment in Integrating Research Skills into WebCT

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We can't be the only academic librarians who woke up one morning and thought: "There has to be a better way". After three years of teaching 20-30 introductory library sessions to relatively disinterested undergraduate students in a span of two months, technically-minded Heather had begun to question whether she would ever make it through year four without moving some of the labour online. Having completed her B.Ed and MLIS and witnessed several crash-and-burn library assignments, pedagogically-minded Sarah had both the experience and ideas for developing appropriate student-centred learning activities. And the Library Sandbox was born.

"Library Sandbox" is the pet name for the WebCT module currently piloting in several of Carleton University's undergraduate courses. The Sandbox includes a variety of guides which step undergrads through the research process, all the way from choosing a topic and using the library to writing and creating a bibliography. All library and research-related terms that may be unfamiliar to students are hyperlinked to a glossary. For example, if students don't understand the term "scholarly journal", they can click on it to see a definition. Each guide also links to our help page which quickly provides students with information on who to consult for assistance with

library research, writing, and study skills.

The primary goal of the Library Sandbox is to support the research needs of undergraduate students by providing a single portal to research guides, integrated with class material available through WebCT. Created under the banner of our Learning Commons, this project aims to provide access to multiple services: Library Sandbox provides information from the Library as well as our Writing Tutorial Service and Learning Support Services. Where possible, we have also tried to integrate core library skills into class curricula through a brief assignment developed to be used in tandem with the Library Sandbox module.

Our assignment centres around self-directed learning. Consisting of only four questions, students are asked to:

1. choose and narrow their topic;
2. develop a search strategy;
3. locate and provide citations to one book and one journal article; and
4. annotate one of these references.

Each question refers students to the relevant guide(s) within the WebCT module. If students are unable to complete the assignment, they can seek remedial attention coordinated jointly by the instructor and the librarian.

To pilot the Library Sandbox, we gathered volunteers from various subject areas in the Humanities, shared the assignment with these volunteer instructors, and encouraged them to adapt both the Sandbox module and the assignment to suit their individual needs [1] . Several instructors have opted to use the combination of the assignment and the Sandbox module in lieu of an introductory Library session, while others have opted to simply use the Library Sandbox as a reference tool for their students. Our next step is to gather feedback, both anecdotally and through the use of a more formal survey instrument, and make this information available to our Reference Department as well as other interested parties. Ultimately, we hope to make the Library Sandbox available campus-wide for the 2007-08 academic year. To achieve this goal, we plan to provide training and support for all Reference staff who wish to use the module.

Based on preliminary feedback from students and instructors, we believe

that in many cases this active learning exercise can be used in lieu of our traditional introductory library sessions. First, because the assignment is integrated into the curriculum – and marks are awarded based on the results – it tends to gain the student attention necessary to properly acquire library skills. Moreover, because students must actively seek out the information they need using the Library Sandbox module, they are more likely to learn and absorb it than by just hearing it in a lecture. We also believe that using our assignment in tandem with the Library Sandbox will help librarians make more effective use of their time. The librarian and instructor can use the assignment to pinpoint students in need of remedial instruction instead of delivering a 50-minute one-shot introductory library skills lecture to an entire room of students, many of whom may already have been introduced to the Library. Our approach allows librarians more time to deliver advanced information literacy seminars and develop stronger relationships with faculty members in an institution where for-credit information literacy courses do not exist.

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[1] We are collecting information on changes instructors make to both the WebCT module and the assignment; these can be shared with future instructors who opt to use the Library Sandbox.