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The Digital Research Process and "Satisficing": How can writing centers help?

What is "satisficing"?

In decision-making, "satisficing"[1] is the process of considering options until "a practical

solution with an adequate level of acceptability is found, and stopping the search there instead of

looking for the best-possible solution" (The Economist, 2009). In the process of conducting

digital research many college students engage in satisficing, merely meeting the basic

requirements of an assignment. Students face challenges in establishing the context of the

research process: selecting and defining a topic, understanding multiple sides of an argument,

and "figuring out how [the topic] might best fit into the course curriculum" (Head & Eisenberg,

2009, p. 6). The frustration that results from ineffective research strategies can quickly lead to

information overload, which can cause students to curtail their research process. Without

positive intervention and constructive help from human sources student information seeking is

often characterized by confusion, vagueness and sometimes embarrassment (Rieh, 2012),

resulting in poor research methods, and writing that is unsupported by academic sources.

Why focus on digital research?

Information overload and determining the validity of online sources are commonly cited

as obstacles to finding relevant information (Weiler, 2005). Students are concerned with these

issues, but lack confidence in their ability to effectively use resources while expressing extreme

frustration at the amount of time they spend searching. Despite this frustration with online

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[1] The term "satisficing" was created by the US Nobel-laureate economist Herbert Simon (1916-2001) in his 1982 book *Models Of Bounded Rationality And Other Topics In Economics.*

information seeking, students "will usually go to the Internet first, whether it be for personal, academic, or professional information" (Weiler, 2005); a 2002 Pew Internet study "found that 71% of college students said they used the Internet as a major source of information" (Weiler, 2005). This preference for the web has developed because many students find it more convenient than traditional library research. Factors such as limited hours, distances to travel, and the time it takes to conduct library research all contribute to students' frustrations with traditional libraries and the growing partiality for digital research (Connaway, Dickey, & Radford, 2011). The mere ease of use of the Internet for digital research is also what makes it so difficult; there is just too much information on the Web and many students do not know how to effectively navigate it.

What are aspects of the digital research process that contribute to satisficing?

Students engage in satisficing for three main reasons: lack of time, lack of knowledge of the research process, and difficulty with the research process. Students consider factors of convenience when choosing an information source: their satisfaction with the source, its ease of use, and the amount of time they have for information seeking (Connaway, Dickey, & Radford, 2011). Students rate the success of most information seeking experiences based on how much time the process takes; referring to information seeking as "taking time away from other things that they viewed as more important", students will be satisfied with lower quality information or even inappropriate information if it takes less time to find (Weiler, 2005).

Lack of knowledge of the research process itself contributes to satisficing. Most students do not understand that the process of research demands intellectual inquiry, which can result in a discovery of new knowledge (Head & Eisenberg, 2009). A lack of familiarity with the library and its resources is also an obstacle to research (Smith & Hepworth, 2007), without positive

intervention students continue to experience problems while searching for information online, "achieving a kind of learnt helplessness" (Smith & Hepworth, 2007), which becomes an excuse for not learning how to be a better searcher.

The traditional multi-step research process is difficult; searching for information online compounds the issue. "High on [students'] lists of needs when seeking information [are] ease of use, reliability, accuracy, currency, availability, and cost" (Weiler, 2005), but students do not generally have a well-defined search strategy, which contributes to feeling of frustration and insecurity- leading to an inability to refine search topics (Smith & Hepworth, 2007). Many students are also not technically literate and develop an aversion to online searching (Schroeder & Stern Cahoy, 2010). These factors add more search steps to the process causing users to overlook relevant resources across different institutional boundaries. Selection of higher quality academic sources may readily occur if students are presented with a wide range of resources in a one-stop search (Lee, 2008) .

What are the consequences of satisficing?

Papers unsupported by academic sources are usually apparent. Even if the tutor does not have specific topic knowledge, obvious signs of satisficing include: glaring factual errors, no quotations and/or a failure to cite sources, (Sweetland Center for Writing, 2012), limited or no bibliography, the inability of the student to be able to verbally defend information in the paper or identify where the information came from, and- in the worst case, plagiarism. Inexperienced student researchers who have developed writing bad habits "need clarification of the skills demanded by a research paper assignment: gathering information, analyzing and synthesizing the information, and communicating one's own understanding of this information to others" (Dossin, 2005, p. 160). The research process is ultimately unsuccessful if the student cannot properly

synthesize the information found.

How can a better research process be encouraged in the writing center?

Students should be encouraged to evaluate their sources- considering the intention, relevance, and reliability of their sources. Showing genuine interest in the topic, the tutor should ask tutees questions about their sources such as, "How did you find these sources?", "Why did you choose these sources?", and "Do you need help finding sources?". By doing so, the tutee will understand how chosen sources shape and inform a paper; the tutor will understand how effective the tutee's research methods are and be able to highlight research resources available through the library. Here at the University of Michigan, the MLibrary system has a wealth of resources available to help student research for the writing tutor to point out (see Appendix A). To make this more feasible, many universities around the country have collaborated to combine research and writing services. By combining services, libraries and writing centers make it known that pre-writing services are offered to students during the course of research and students are assisted earlier in the process of writing.

Collaboration between these two departments is logical because both groups "want students to be able to craft a clear thesis, learn how to correctly incorporate research into their writing, and cite sources properly" (Ferer, 2012, p. 554). Combined services can start out small. At many institutions libraries and writing centers provide links on websites to cross-promote services, serve on related committees together, and conduct combined meetings to be aware of each department's ongoing activities and updated services (Ferer, 2012). Connections can be established simply by being familiar with each facility's hours and procedures, by visiting each other's spaces, or by attending workshops and presentations held in each other's departments (Ferer, 2012, p. 547). To further collaborate, staff from the research desk and the writing center

can speak to classes about research or writing, as well as assist faculty with the design of their assignments (Ferer, 2012).

If a larger collaboration is desired, departments can share physical space by moving the writing center into the library, by staffing the writing center with reference librarians, or by creating a new space that provides both writing and reference services in one location (Ferer, 2012). This is already happening at many universities around the country, including right down the road at Eastern Michigan University in the Academic Projects Center. With writing center consultants and librarians working together, the Academic Projects Center offers point-of-need help with research and writing to students working on research papers (Eastern Michigan University). These types of collaboration are successful because the goal of each entity is to improve student writing.

An important concept the tutor can share with the student is one of contributing to the conversation, every source has a role in a research paper, but the writing needs to not just merely reflect existing bodies of thought (Dossin, 2005). The student must understand that through the process of her research, pertinent ideas need to be identified that help the student form and refine an original and contributive opinion on the topic. Students need to understand that they must take honest notes from source materials (giving credit where credit is due) and learn how to take the cited author's words and form them into a language that is the student's own based on the student's analysis and synthesis of the information gathered (Dossin, 2005). Working in a facility that provides collaborative research and writing assistance makes this an easier task for the writing tutor, because the tutor or the student can easily tap experts in research before, during, or after the tutoring session.

Conclusion

Students "satisfice" because the research process is difficult and time consuming. Many undergraduate college students have not been instructed during their secondary school years on the proper steps to be applied to the research process. Factors of convenience are an issue, because "in some situations information seekers will readily sacrifice content for convenience" (Connaway, Dickey, & Radford, 2011). In today's academic environment, many students have limited time to dedicate towards the most important components of information seeking: learning how to best access, assess, and use new information sources (Connaway, Dickey, & Radford, 2011). The writing center and the library should collaborate in the sharing of their vast resources available to students. Here at the University of Michigan, it can start by sharing knowledge between departments. A simple beginning would be for the Sweetland Center for Writing to include links to available MLibrary research resources on its website. The MLibrary website has existing links to the Sweetland Center for Writing (University of Michigan: MLibrary, 2011) though they are not prominent features. The Sweetland Center for Writing could also connect professors whose students regularly visit the writing center with the MLibrary's classroom library instruction outreach program. Collaboration between a library and writing center has many positive effects; helping each group see what services the other offers to direct students to the appropriate resources, establishing contact between experts to provide students combined help with research and writing, and most importantly, reinforcing the connection between writing and research to the student (Ferer, 2012).

All parties whose goal is to create better student writers should work together to share knowledge and resources. By providing more assistance to students during the research phase of the writing process through collaboration with the library's research services, the writing center

can help to build student knowledge of the research process. This will save the student time, availing her more time to become a better writer- a more confident writer able to write a better paper. If students feel confident in their approach to research they might aim for the best-achievable result instead of merely satisficing.

Appendix A

Reference Service Resources available for University of Michigan Students
From the MLibrary homepage- http://www.lib.umich.edu/

Ask A Librarian Online Chat
(except for holidays)
Sun: 2pm-12am
Mon: 10am-12am
Tues: 10am-12am
Wed: 10am-12am
Thurs: 10am-12am
Fri: 10am-5pm
Sat: 10am-5pm

Other Ask A Librarian services available
Email- http://www.lib.umich.edu/ask-librarian/ask-librarian-email-service-um-faculty-staff-and-students
Phone- http://www.lib.umich.edu/ask-librarian/ask-librarian-reference-desks
In person- http://www.lib.umich.edu/ask-librarian/ask-librarian-reference-desk
Subject Specialists- http://www.lib.umich.edu/subject-specialists

Other MLibrary resources available
Research Guides- http://guides.lib.umich.edu/
Searchpath- http://guides.lib.umich.edu/searchpath
Library Tutorials- http://www.lib.umich.edu/library-tutorials

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