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# Customizing and Using a Popular Online Information Literacy Tutorial: One Library's Experience

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# Customizing and Using a Popular Online Information Literacy Tutorial: One Library's Experience

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## Introduction

Online information literacy tutorials are becoming increasingly popular. Many colleges and universities use a version of TILT (the Texas Information Tutorial) or Searchpath, a modification of TILT by Western Michigan University. Both of these popular tutorials are made available through an "open license" arrangement, which means individuals may download the tutorial files and modify them as needed. This paper describes our experience customizing Searchpath for Kutztown University's Rohrbach Library. The impetus behind the project, the process of customizing Searchpath, the project pilot, our collaborative efforts, and challenges encountered are reviewed. We also discuss why we selected Searchpath rather than TILT, how Kutztown's version of tutorial is currently being used, and our future plans for the product. We offer suggestions to those considering Searchpath for their libraries.

Like other academic libraries, Kutztown librarians struggled with the transition from a bibliographic instruction (BI) to an information literacy (IL) model. We had many meetings and included classroom faculty in the development of our information literacy plan. We decided to incorporate a web-based information literacy tutorial to supplement our in class instruction. The English Department faculty graciously agreed to pilot our online tutorial in their composition courses.

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We did not envision completion of the web tutorial as an end in itself. The tutorial presents basic college-level techniques for good research before students visit the library for additional instruction. After students complete the tutorial, professors are encouraged to schedule library-training sessions when their students are assigned a research project. We feel this approach maximizes the benefits of online and face-to-face instruction.

Two online training options were considered--building our own tutorial or modifying an existing one. After some debate, we decided to modify TILT for pragmatic reasons. The decision to use Searchpath was made after attending a conference in which two colleagues presented their work converting TILT for their library. Their biggest regret was that they had not used Searchpath. The learning modules in TILT are divided into three broad categories whereas Searchpath is di-vided into six. They felt six was a much more workable arrangement. They observed that because the TILT modules were longer, students tended to lose interest. The individual Searchpath modules could be completed in a much shorter timeframe and the division of material allows more stopping points, if needed.

Kutztown University "Teachnology" program provided an opportunity and incentive to develop our online tutorial over the summer. Teachnology is a program sponsored by the University's Center for the Enhancement of Teaching. It provides incentive to faculty to incorporate technology into the learning process. This incentive includes a stipend as well as technological support from the University's Instructional Technology department. The process involved submitting a proposal that explains the purpose of the project and how it will impact student learning. The importance of information literacy was emphasized, especially in light of the new Middle States guidelines. The proposal was accepted and work commenced in summer, 2004.

A meeting was set with the Instructional Technology team. We developed a plan that included downloading, customizing, and piloting the Searchpath tutorial. Downloading Searchpath was easy. We visited the excellent Western Michigan University website, completed necessary forms and downloaded the appropriate source materials. One choice that we faced was whether to use Searchpath or Searchpath Classic. Searchpath is an enhanced version of Searchpath Classic. This enhanced version uses a server programming language

called "PHP." The PHP environment allows students to create individualized Searchpath accounts. While this is certainly desirable, we decided to implement the simpler "classic" version of Searchpath. Classic Searchpath eliminated certain project complexities, and we reasoned that we can always "graduate" to the more sophisticated version of Searchpath as we gain experience delivering training with this tool.

We downloaded Classic, unzipped it, and went to work. The Microsoft family of products was available to us at Kutztown, so we used FrontPage to manage the editing process. Tools like FrontPage allow easy management and organization of the project. The first thing we did in FrontPage was to create a file structure to help us manage our workflow. We then proceeded to work through the entire tutorial page by page. This was a major undertaking considering that there are well over 200 pages!

We wanted to give the tutorial a fresh look. Searchpath features a plain off-white background and a lot of clipart images (Figure 1). We decided to give the tutorial a Kutztown University (KU) look and feel (Figure 2); this involved creating a template with the University's logo and colors. We also customized Searchpath's navigational arrows and replaced much of the clipart with updated imagery (Figures 3 and 4). We are fortunate to have the support of a student artist from KU's Communication Design program. Her fantastic vector artwork is certainly helping us achieve a new look.

Most of the project time was spent moving each page to the new KU template and revising content as needed. The Searchpath content was extremely well organized and usable. Aspects of the project that required the most attention were the modules that featured searching for books and articles using Western Michigan's resources. We captured screen shots of our own catalog and article databases and used Photoshop to insert explanatory text and arrows as needed.

The process went smoothly, but was not without some challenges. Officially, the librarians at Western Michigan do not provide any support, however they were very helpful and friendly when contacted for advice. One thing to be particularly mindful of if you intend to create your own template like we did is to make sure that you copy all the JavaScript code from the "head" area in the document. Copying and pasting in the "Normal" mode of FrontPage

from the original Searchpath files to our new template does not transfer any JavaScript. Familiarity with HTML and JavaScript is definitely a plus if you choose to do extensive customization.

Another challenge we ran into was with a game entitled "Think Fast." Think Fast was developed using Flash animation. At the end of the game, the student is given the choice to play again or "Move Along" which includes a link to the next page in the tutorial at Western Michigan. Certain Flash elements had to be reworked in order to properly link to the appropriate Kutztown University resources. The Searchpath survey at the end of the tutorial presented another challenge. The librarians at Western Michigan used Perseus Survey Solutions to tabulate survey results. We do not have access to this tool, so we simply created a web form that transmits survey data to the library staff via email. This works well enough, but does require time-consuming data tabulation by the email receiver. In the future, we hope to identify and purchase a web-based survey tool that can relieve some of this burden.

The tutorial was piloted in two English composition classes. Two faculty members who were regular users of the library's instruction program agreed to test the tutorial in class. Although we plan for the KU Searchpath exercise to be self-guided, we selected a setting in the library for our first test. The purpose of this cognitive walkthrough was to see how the students interacted with the tutorial and if they had any problems with our revisions. Moreover, we wanted to be there in case the students found any bugs in our coding and project changes! The students were given a handout that outlined their lesson (basically to complete the tutorial and record any problems that they experienced on the way). This worked out well. The students were excellent testers and found a few bugs in the project. Fortunately, most of them were able to work through the tutorial despite our mistakes! At the very end we had them complete a print version of the standard Searchpath survey. A total of 66 students completed the survey. The results indicated that many felt that Searchpath improved their research skills (Twenty-two rated their researching skills at the beginning level as opposed to two after completing Searchpath). In addition, the majority (34 responses) preferred learning online rather than with a librarian (10 responses). The problems included that students felt it was too long (35 responses) and only rated the tutorial as "somewhat interesting" (43 responses). The last question provided students with a chance to make opened ended comments. The

responses ranged from it was "very helpful" to "it was boring" to making it more "fun" and "interactive." A large percentage of students commented that Seachpath was too long with too much text.

Many important lessons were learned from this project. First of all, although our project seemed like a simple enough endeavor, after all Western Michigan did the real "upfront" work, the project turned out to be far more time consuming than expected. The bulk of the time was spent giving Searchpath a customized look, as this required literally visiting every single page and moving code by hand.

Many libraries we visited online that use Searchpath retained the original Searchpath look. Our project would have been a lot less time-consuming if we had done the same. With any new technology, it is important to know your limitations and be willing to seek help. Working with web technology means using html, JavaScript, PhotoShop Flash, etc. A good sense of adventure and humor is a must, and it helps to have some "techie people" to assist if you get stuck.

## Future Plans

We plan to work with English composition faculty to integrate Searchpath into their syllabi and assign students to complete it on their own. This would then be followed up with hands-on instruction in the library's computer classroom that is tied directly to a research assignment. Currently we are working with several faculty in the English Department who are interested in doing this. The plan is to win them over one by one by introducing the concept to them when they schedule their classes for the regular one-shot library lectures. We hope to turn them on to the benefits of this two-step introduction to library research.

As for the physical layout of Searchpath, we plan some major revisions. The survey results from the pilot indicated that our students found Searchpath to be too wordy and not very engaging. We plan to remedy this situation by creating a more dynamic, less verbose version of Searchpath. Our ideas include incorporating flash animation that will show students a lot of what is described in the current model and editing out a lot of text; adding more exciting graphics; and creating more interactivity and games. In addition, we plan to create an easier-to-navigate environment that incorporates fixed toolbars on

the top and bottom of every page so students will clearly know where they are at all times ([Figure 5](#)).

## Conclusion

Open-license information literacy tutorials such as Searchpath provide libraries with a convenient way to create a fully functioning online tutorial. Modifying an open license program requires a significant time commitment and basic web skills. One of the challenges in designing any online tutorial is to create an environment that not only accomplishes its learning goals but also is engaging and fun for students. Another challenge is to keep the tutorial relevant and current. We plan to make several significant changes to Searchpath and then pilot it once again. We envision Searchpath as an ongoing project that will involve a team effort but one that is well worth the effort.

## Resources

Searchpath - http://www.wmich.edu/library/searchpath/
Western Michigan's Searchpath Tutorial – the original.

YourSearchpath -
http://www.wmich.edu/library/searchpath/docs/opl/index.html
OPL License Agreement.

KU's Searchpath - http://www.kutztown.edu/library/searchpath/
Our version of Searchpath.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Western Michigan's Seachpath

Figure 2: Same page on Kutztown University's Searchpath



Figure 3: Example of clipart and navigational arrows from original Searchpath

Figure 4: Example of updated imagery and navigational arrows at KU's Searchpath



Figure 5: A view of the possible future look of Searchpath at Kutztown University