

10-1-2013

Library Scavenger Hunts: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Elizabeth G. Rugan

University of South Alabama, erugan@southalabama.edu

Muriel D. Nero

University of South Alabama, mnero@southalabama.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rugan, Elizabeth G. and Nero, Muriel D. (2013) "Library Scavenger Hunts: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 61 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol61/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Southeastern Librarian by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Library Scavenger Hunts: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Elizabeth G. Rugan and Muriel D. Nero

Elizabeth G. Rugan is a Reference & Instruction Librarian at the University of South Alabama in Mobile. She can be reached at erugan@southalabama.edu. Muriel D. Nero is a Monograph Cataloger at the University of South Alabama and can be reached at mnero@southalabama.edu.

Introduction

In the past, the library scavenger hunt was thought of as a well-respected and effective method of library or information literacy instruction; however, the scavenger hunt's glory days are over. Indeed, many academic librarians decry these hunts, often assigned by general education teaching faculty, as a waste of time or worse as a "turn off" for students from the library (Kearns 2006, Miller 2009). These despised scavenger hunts require students to wander around the library recording colors of books, asking inane questions to library staff, and using outdated or often unavailable resources. But are librarians ready to cast off the library scavenger hunt as an ineffective teaching method?

If modified to reflect real information needs and modern methods of research, these scavenger hunts can function in the way they were intended—to introduce students to library space and available resources. As many in the literature have noted, it is particularly important to introduce students early to the library space (Donald, Harmon, & Schweikhard, 2012). Others have also noted that students unfamiliar with the physical library often display increased library anxiety (Onwuegbuzie 2004). The goal of this paper is to examine examples from different scavenger hunts that have been assigned to students at the University of South Alabama's University Library, discuss what makes these tasks effective or ineffective methods of instruction, and provide suggestions for revamping the library scavenger hunt.

Literature Review

Literature on the topic of library scavenger hunts was located by searching numerous databases related to the discipline of librarianship; particularly *Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts*; *JSTOR*; *ERIC*; *Academic Search Complete*; *Academic OneFile*, and *Education Research Complete*. While extensive searches were conducted, very little relevant literature was available for academic libraries. Most of the found literature was directed towards a public or school library environment. Considering that academic librarians see these types of scavenger hunt assignments regularly, it was surprising to find so few published articles.

In the articles located, the comments regarding library scavenger hunt assignments trended toward the negative; most practitioners decried the assignments as ineffective methods of instruction. Perhaps most vehement, Kearns

(2006) in her blog post believes that "treasure hunts qualify as a level in the Inferno." She continues by stating that these "library treasure hunts do not help, not at all," but rather "causes them [students] to hate the library and think, 'I'm never using the library again. I'm going to Google'." Other librarians, however, were not quite as dismissive of the value of library scavenger hunts as an educational tool; indeed as McCain notes, "librarians cannot categorically dismiss the utility of all library assignments that cause frustrations for themselves and some students" (2007).

While librarians were quick to note that scavenger hunts can quickly become mere busy-work, they also hinted at the potential of such hunts if thoughtfully constructed. Although McCain (2007, 26) does note that "many librarians dread having to deal with the typical, ill-advised library scavenger hunt assignment," she concedes that "there are, however, other perspectives on the usefulness and effectiveness of library scavenger hunts." Ly and Carr (2010, 2) note that their "support for effective scavenger hunts comes from student centered learning theory, Millennial student characteristics, [and] the concept of library as place."

Setting

The University of South Alabama's University Library serves a total student population of approximately 15,900 undergraduate and graduate students. While there are several graduate programs on campus, the primary user population of the main library is undergraduates. As such, the focus of this paper will specifically deal with the assignments of the university's undergraduate students. The University Library is not the only library on campus; the university has separate Biomedical and Business libraries that serve very specific student populations. The majority of student users of the University Library are enrolled in the College of Arts & Sciences. The examples examined in this paper have been collected over several years at the University Library. Additionally, many of these scavenger hunts have been repeatedly assigned over the course of several academic years.

Like other institutions of higher education, the courses offered at the University of South Alabama are a diverse mix of synchronous and asynchronous classes. Many of these courses are offered only in online settings. However, many of these online courses do require, at some point, that students use the resources available at the University Library. In some cases, these assignments may be in the form of a library scavenger hunt.

The examples presented are discussed in order of the most offensive first; the reasoning behind this is the examples in the good section contribute to the paper's concluding discussion of what librarians can do to best make these library scavenger hunts effective library instruction and parallel the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. In the discussion that follows, examples are cited from actual library scavenger hunt assignments encountered at the University Library reference desk from 2005-2011. While these are not exhaustive, the chosen examples best illustrate the good, the bad, and the ugly of library scavenger hunts.

The Ugly

- "Go anywhere deep inside the 3rd floor (South) wing of the library and take a deep breath. Describe the smell in one word."
- "What is the highest floor that you can press a button to get to on the elevator?"
- "Get on a computer on the 2nd floor. What is the address of the homepage on the internet?"
- "Just after you enter the library, look right and you should see a plaque. Who is listed as Secretary of the Alabama Public School and College Authority?"

Essentially, the above examples are not constructed by the course instructor to aid a student in learning the research process, introduce the student to available library resources, or even to effectively introduce the student to the library as a place. As a matter of fact, the above questions do not reflect any of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards in that they do not have any research aspect or facet. The above questions are concerned with locating esoteric elements of the library's physical space. Although questions about the physical space of the library could be useful for students, new students in particular, such questions should be constructed in ways to aid students in locating library resource areas or librarians and library paraprofessionals. Examples could include questions regarding locating the library reference desk, reference librarians, microfilm collections, etc.

The Bad

- "Older bound journals are on the 3rd floor (South) of the library. What color was the binding of *The Journal of Personality* between 1973-2006?"

The above example does have relevant aspects (thus making it bad instead of ugly), in that it asks students to use the library catalog to acquire the call number and locate the journal. It also introduces students to a major journal in the field of psychology; however, the main crux of the question is irrelevant. The color of the journal's binding is insignificant; the color has no bearing on the journal's content or use.

- A professor required students in a course to locate an article from a list of selected print journals. He qualified the assignment by stating the article must be from a *print* source.

The problem with this assignment arose when students discovered the library no longer subscribed to the print version of any of the listed required journals; however, all of the listed journals were available electronically through library databases. This question makes it into the "bad" section rather than the ugly section because it does require students in a particular course to locate and use scholarly journals. Additionally as an unintended consequence, students, with the help of librarians, located the journals and learned that library resources were often available in multiple formats.

- A professor required students to locate articles on their chosen mathematician in an incredibly complicated, out-dated print index. Students then had to consult the library's catalog to determine if the library had access to the journal.

This above assignment utilized an out-dated resource instead of using the more applicable electronic indexes and databases. This question has valuable aspects in that the professor is requiring students to locate a specific library resource; however, the professor required students to use an antiquated method of research, thus presenting research as more difficult and time consuming than it really is.

The Good

- "What kind of information or materials can you find in a library that you cannot find online?"

This question makes students aware of the difference between valid scholarly work and unreliable internet sources (i.e. Wikipedia and Ask.com). This question also makes students aware of the scale and type of resources available to them in an academic library for free. Indeed as Cocking and Schafer (1994, 164-165) note, "the initial problem [with library instruction] is that students have a limited library schema. Their knowledge is limited to textbooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and their eventual research products reflect this limited base."

- "Where is the reference desk in the main library? How can you contact the reference librarians? How can reference librarians help you with your paper and research projects?"

This question encourages students to come to the library and become familiar with the physical space of the library. Additionally, this provides students with an opportunity to meet librarians and other library personnel, talk with them, and become aware of the research assistance they can provide.

- "Identify a book in your field using the main library catalog. List it. Go to the stacks and find it. What are the authors and titles of the three books on either side of your book? What do these books have in common? How do they differ?"

This question encourages students to learn how to access and use the library catalog. It also introduces students to

the Library of Congress Classification System and succinctly presents the concept of library resource collocation. Students also become familiar with the call number range for their particular academic discipline.

Discussion: What We as Librarians Can Do To Rehab the Library Scavenger Hunt

The following suggestions for making library scavenger hunts more effective methods of library research are guided by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (2000) and the experience of academic librarians. The majority of the paper's proposals suggest librarians build a partner relationship with the teaching faculty at their institution to better develop these scavenger hunts. These hunts can function in tandem with library instruction, which typically takes place only once during the semester, to promote student information literacy. As other librarians have done, these hunts can be brought into the traditional bibliographic instruction classroom and library tour (Marcus & Beck, 2003).

The first suggestion, if possible, is for subject specialist librarians and library instruction librarians to collaborate with teaching faculty in designing library scavenger hunts to coordinate with real assignments and information needs, indeed as Glasberg et al. (1990, 231) noted "teaching library skills need not be maligned as remedial work [...instead,] the librarian and the course instructor [should] work together to design the assignment. This cooperation produces an effective teaching tool." This first suggestion speaks to ACRL Information Literacy standard Number One: "the information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed." Particularly it speaks to the number one performance standard: "the information literate student defines and articulates the need for information." The hunt should reflect a potential assignment where the student needs to locate library resources; the "realness" of this information need is what prevents this assignment from becoming busy work.

By collaborating with teaching faculty, librarians can provide professors with the knowledge of current library resources for their students; thus preventing the types of hunts where faculty suggest the use of antiquated library resources. This suggestion aligns with ACRL Information Literacy Standard Number 2, that the information literate student "accesses needed information effectively and efficiently [, and...] selects the most appropriate investigative methods or information retrieval systems for accessing the needed information."

Independently of teaching faculty input, librarians should design sample scavenger hunts that include the most commonly asked questions and make these available to

teaching faculty. Particularly, librarian-designed hunts could address the diverse formats of some available library resources. "Canned" scavenger hunts also help to prevent irrelevant and nonsensical assignments. Additionally, premade assignments could encourage teaching faculty to reevaluate their standard hunts and create more appropriate library assignments. The above suggestion addresses both ACRL standards 1 and 2, specifically the essential ability for the student to identify "a variety of types and formats of potential sources of information."

The relevance of the library scavenger hunt can be directly linked to the information needs of the students by bringing it into the bibliographic instruction classroom. Instruction librarians can incorporate the library scavenger hunt into the instruction session, thus linking the practice of locating library resources to real assignments and real outcomes. Of course, this would take collaboration with the teaching faculty so that the librarian can construct the assignments beforehand. These particular scavenger hunts would be directly related to the course assignment; essentially, the hunt would use resources discussed in the bibliographic instruction session. These hunts differ from asynchronous scavenger hunts by the fact that a librarian is on hand to assist the students with any potential questions. Also, this bibliographic instruction hunt is more focused on the resources used for the particular course assignment and how best to use those sources.

Finally, academic librarians can and, indeed, need to use emerging technologies to revamp scavenger hunts. By using video tutorials, geocaching activities, mobile apps, and QR codes many librarians have recaptured the limited attention span of millennial students as well as meet their penchant for technology. The University Library has begun an implementation of these technologies: the library has video tutorials that provide an overview of the library catalog and a mobile app that provides users with information about University Library. The Instruction librarians at the University Library have also been investigating potential use of QR codes to introduce students to library resources. Indeed as Wells did at the University of the Pacific, librarians can use QR code technology to "link the digital to the physical [collection]" and "inspire to students to explore [the library's] physical collections" (2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, no matter the format or activity involved with the scavenger hunt, librarians should make every effort to make scavenger hunts teachable moments. Additionally, a scavenger hunt can be a useful tool for library instruction that can lead to two invaluable outcomes: library proficiency and information literacy. These outcomes will create lifelong users of libraries.

References

- Association of College & Research Libraries. (2000). Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency>
- Carr, A., & Ly, P. (2010, April 8). *The Library Scavenger Hunt Strikes Back: Teaching Library as Place*. Paper presented at CARL Conference, Sacramento. http://carl-acrl.org/Archives/ConferencesArchive/Conference10/2010proceedings/Pearl-Ly_final.pdf.
- Cocking, T. S., & Schafer, S. A. (1994). Scavenging for Better Library Instruction. *Journal of Reading*, 38, 164-170.
- Donald, M. S., Harmon, K.D., & Schweikhard, A. J. (2012). Find Your Place: Enhancing Library Relevance and Involvement Within a Campus Community. *College & Research Libraries News*, 73, 590-594.
- Glasberg, D. S., Harwood, J., Hawkes, R., & Martinsek, C. (1990). The Library Scavenger Hunt: Teaching Library Skills in Introductory Sociology Courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 18, 231-234.
- Marcus, S. & Beck, S., (2003). A Library Adventure: Comparing a Treasure Hunt with a Traditional Freshman Orientation Tour. *College and Research Libraries*, 64, 23-44.
- McCain, C. (2007). Scavenger Hunt Assignments in Academic Libraries: Viewpoints Versus Reality. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 14, 19-32. doi: 10.1300/J106v14n01_02
- M Miller. (2009, August 31). No More Library Scavenger Hunts Ever Again [Electronic mailing list message]. Retrieved from <http://lists.ala.org/wvs/arc/ilil-1>
- Onwuegbuzie, A. Jiao, Q., & Bostick, S. (2004). *Library Anxiety: Theory, Research, and Applications*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Public Relations. (2011). Quick Facts: The University of South Alabama. Retrieved from <http://www.southalabama.edu/publicrelations/quickfacts.html>
- S Kearns. (2006, September 8). Library Treasure Hunts = Tears [Web log post]. Retrieved from http://ksulib.typepad.com/talking/2006/09/library_treasur.html
- Wells, V. A., (2012). Hunting for QR Codes: Linking Students to the Music Collection. *Music Reference Services Quarterly*, 15, 137-148. doi: 10.1080/10588167.2012.700831