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Enhancing Women's Studies Action Research Projects Through Technology

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how library and Internet technology enhanced an action research assignment in a unique women's studies program, Women Involved in Living and Learning (WILL), at the University of Richmond. The Women's Studies Liaison Librarian and the Director of the WILL Program collaborated to provide a meaningful assignment that incorporated the use of online databases and the Internet. The main objective of the assignment was to provide a research opportunity whereby the students would learn to use electronic women's studies resources and actually utilize the information into some type of social action, such as writing a letter, volunteering in a community organization, or educating others on a topic of their choice.

INTRODUCTION

THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND, a small, independent, privately endowed undergraduate university in Virginia, is fortunate to have a unique program for women's leadership and development. The WILL Program (Women Involved in Living and Learning), established in 1980, is a selective four-year program for undergraduate women. WILL's mission is to help women realize their full potential individually and collectively by providing a supportive and challenging environment. Enhancing self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-awareness of women are major goals as is the promotion of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and active learning opportunities that empower women to be leaders during and beyond their university experience. Over the course of four years, WILL students complete a minor in women's studies, participate in an internship,

and attend and help plan programs for the campus community on topics related to the unique and diverse experiences of women.[1] Another way that WILL provides students with opportunities for service is through various activism projects.[1] Many WILL students organize and take part in projects that actively seek to raise awareness of issues related to women. Examples of past projects include:

- Two WILL students organized and headed the Young Feminist Conference at the University of Richmond, which drew college women from across Virginia.
- WILL women established an ongoing mentoring program with a local middle school in which the college students meet with and mentor young girls on a regular basis.
- WILL students organized and led the university's Take Back the Night Walk, which

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promotes awareness of violence and women.[1]

One part of the WILL curriculum, the Sophomore Colloquium, has become an avenue for introducing library technology that focuses on activist women's issues, such as those previously described. The WILL Director describes the colloquium as "a course about putting theory into practice—about becoming involved. It will enable you to research and take action on a woman-related subject that you feel strongly about. It will give you the time and space to read, experience and educate—to apply what you have been learning in the classroom."[2]

ACTION RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

According to *A Dictionary of Education*, "action research is the critical study of a particular situation with the purpose of simply not adding to the knowledge base, but of leading to the practical improvement of the situation being studied."[3] Many times action research is integrated with some type of social action and this reflects one of the primary goals of the WILL Sophomore Colloquium.

As part of the action research assignment in this case, the Women's Studies Liaison Librarian works closely with the Director of the WILL Program and the students enrolled in the colloquium. We have determined that this is an excellent point in the program to introduce the many databases, Web sites, and print materials that focus on women's issues.

NEED FOR LIBRARY INSTITUTION

Part of this decision was also based on the Women's Studies Evaluation Survey, which was conducted by the women's studies program in 1995 and showed that women's studies students did not feel the program was thoroughly assisting them with library research and in designing research. According to the *Report on the Women's Studies Student Questionnaire*, "two areas where the percentages should have been higher were designing research (22% well or very well developed) and library re-

search (7% well or very well developed)."[4] Steps have been taken in the past several years to provide more formal instruction in library research skills for women's studies students and the WILL sophomore seminar was a natural place in the curriculum to introduce many of these skills. Although current students are very familiar with the Internet, many of them use it primarily as an entertainment source and they have not been taught how to search it effectively, nor have they been taught how to use subject-specific Internet databases that are offered by many university libraries.

The action research project provided an excellent opportunity for students to become more involved in learning about specific sources for women's issues. Since all WILL students are women's studies minors, many of them major in another field and are familiar with databases in their major field as well as general databases, such as the *Expanded Academic Index* on InfoTrac's Searchbank. However, a survey (Appendix A) of the students at the beginning of the semester indicated that most of them were unfamiliar with the women's studies databases offered in the library as well as Internet resources related to women's issues. The instructor's objectives were to provide a research opportunity whereby the students would learn to use electronic women's studies resources and the World Wide Web effectively, and then go a step further and actually utilize the information in some type of action, such as writing a letter, volunteering in a community organization, or educating others on the topic of their choice.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION SESSION

Collaborative assignment and library instruction sessions were created after several conversations and meetings between the liaison librarian and the WILL Director. Its components are described below.

Complete an action program on a gender-related issue that you feel strongly about. Your work must include the following components:

1. State the issue and why you care about it.

2. Research your topic on the Internet and compile a list of resources for interested classmates.

3. Locate at least one community service organization/agency that addresses your issue.

4. Take action on your issue and describe what you did. The action could be volunteering at the community service agency you identified, writing a letter to a congressperson, or setting up an information table in the student center.

5. Compile your information into a report and present your issue to the class in an interesting way.[2]

One 75-minute session is arranged early in the semester for the liaison librarian to meet with the students about researching their action project. Material covered includes demonstrations and hands-on exercises of various women's studies databases, such as *Contemporary Women's Issues*. Students are also made aware of the interdisciplinary nature of women's studies and the need to use a variety of databases, such as *Sociofile*, *Psyclit*, and *Social Sciences Index*. Students are then introduced to specific women's studies Web sites found on the Internet. The liaison librarian uses the University of Richmond *Women's Studies Resources* (www.richmond.edu/library/ws.html) Web page as a beginning point for this exploration and highlights many of the useful sites in the field of women's studies (Appendix B), such as the Women's Studies Librarian's Office at the University of Wisconsin (www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/others.htm), WSSLINKS (www.library.yale.edu/wss/), and Inform's Women's Studies database (www.inform.umd.edu:8080/EdRes/Topic/WomensStudies/). Students are also introduced to various techniques of how to effectively use search engines, such as *Altavista* and *Hotbot*. Although there is not enough time for an in-depth class on search engines, students are encouraged to use appropriate key words and boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) rather than typing in a complete question or statement in the search box of a search engine. Students are shown how to search an exact phrase by using quotation marks around a phrase term. For example, if one was searching the term *domestic*

violence, it would be searched as "domestic violence" to find Web site documents that contain that phrase term, rather than searching the words "domestic" and "violence" and finding them as separate words in Web documents. Other suggestions for effective searching include the use of lowercase text because it retrieves both uppercase and lowercase results. Students are also shown that using the plus sign (+) prior to a word results in a search that includes that particular word, while using a minus sign (−) ensures that a word will be excluded in a search. Finally, students are advised to choose one or two search engines to use frequently, and to always take time to read help pages that provide searching tips that are unique to a particular search engine.

Throughout the demonstrations of various resources, the liaison librarian uses her own "action research" example of domestic violence by providing a demonstration of various databases and Web sites related to the topic. For example, *Contemporary Women's Issues* database is demonstrated as an excellent place to start for periodical articles and pamphlet literature on domestic violence by using its features of subject area headings and key word full-text searching. Students discover that *Contemporary Women's Issues* database is a multidisciplinary full-text database that brings together newspaper and magazine articles as well as pamphlets, brochures, and other alternative press material. The librarian then demonstrates and emphasizes the use of searching recommended Web sites on the *Women's Studies Resources* page. Many of these sites have been created, reviewed or evaluated by librarians in the field of women's studies and deemed appropriate and useful for student use. Examples for the topic of domestic violence include the *Violence Against Women* resource page on the Feminist Majority Foundation Web site (http://www.feminist.org/gateway/vs exec2.html) and the U.S. Department of Justice *Violence Against Women Office* Web page (http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/vawo/). After demonstrating the various characteristics of the above Web sites, the librarian emphasizes that by starting with periodical articles and recommended Web sites, it is easier to gather accurate and reliable background information, and this approach assists

one in narrowing down in a topic before attempting to use a search engine. A student can be overwhelmed with information if she chooses to begin a search on "domestic violence" or any other broad topic by using *Yahoo!*, *AltaVista*, or *Hotbot*. The search engine *AltaVista* is then used to exemplify how a search engine can be very useful when searching a specific issue or term. The example chosen is the *The Clothesline Project*, a grass roots effort started several years ago to remember women who have been victims of violence by hanging various colors of shirts on a public display clothesline, which reflects the nature of the crime committed against women. The librarian demonstrates how to combine the phrases, "clothesline project" and "domestic violence" to find specific Web sites that describe this project in various places around the country.

This part of the instruction session is concluded by the librarian describing a letter she wrote to President Bill Clinton regarding domestic violence legislation. The librarian also demonstrates the use of the university's government information page (http://www.richmond.edu/is/library/govdocs/govinfo.html) to show students how to link to the Web sites of Congress and the White House to locate address information for writing letters or sending E-mail communication to government officials.

The latter part of class is used to discuss how to evaluate information on the Internet. Criteria such as accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage are presented and the librarian uses various Web sites to illustrate how to identify each criterion. Students are then given an in-class assignment that allows them to become more familiar with the various women's studies Web sites introduced in class, and to use an evaluation checklist to determine the usefulness of at least one Web site (Appendix C). This assignment also allows time for the librarian to work with the students on their individual topics and to reinforce searching techniques that were introduced in the instructional session.

After this initial introduction and instruction session, the students continue to work in teams of two during the rest of the semester and explore resources on their own topic. Their final

project is presented to the seminar class in both oral and written form. For example, one team researched the topic of "Gender Inequality in Education: The Facts." They used a combination of print resources, such as the American Association of University Women Report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls—A Study of Major Findings on Girls and Education*, and a variety of Web sites such as the American Association of University of Women (http://www.aauw.org), and the Commonwealth of Virginia Curriculum Standards (http://www.knowledge.state.va.us/welcome.htm) to report their findings. Their written report included URLs (uniform resource locators) for the suggested Web sites so that their fellow classmates could explore the topic further on their own. The student's action research resulted in a plan to contact the president of a local PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) and encourage them to use the video, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* in various PTA meetings. The students also planned to meet with the area school superintendent and encourage the use of the video in a variety of school settings.

Another team researched the issues of maternity and childcare in the workplace. Their action project resulted in a brochure about university maternity leave policies that was distributed to each staff and faculty member at the university.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the evaluation of the action projects, student evaluations over the past three years have indicated that the library instruction session and action research assignment are very helpful in learning more about researching women's studies issues. Responses on the library session evaluation forms have included the following comments:

- "well-focused for the class and project"
- "a chance to explore all the different databases and Web sites in women's studies . . . I rarely have time to do this exploration"
- "step-by-step journey through the 'Net experience'"

- "a good time to learn about *CWI* and other specific women's studies databases"
- "provided me with ideas on how to search several women's issues on the Internet"

This initial instruction experience provides women's studies students with useful information on how to complete their immediate action research project, but it also lays a foundation for them to explore resources as they continue their formal education in women's studies. In the attempt to help shape students as life-long learners, these skills have also given women some basic Internet searching skills so they can continuing learning on their own. This experience provided the students with an Internet experience that was beyond entertainment. It laid the groundwork for them to become active citizens and to contact government officials and activist organizations for further information as well as to request action on an issue. The Internet opens up new opportunities for women to participate politically, at both the grassroots and international level, and although the technology will continue to change, this action research project will provide them with enough knowledge to ask questions of information professionals as they continue to use the Internet to pursue community action.

REFERENCES

1. Women Involved in Living and Learning (WILL) Program. (October 1, 2000.) Web site describing the components of the WILL program. Online document: http://www.richmond.edu/academics/a%26s/womens/will

2. Blake, H. (2000). *WMST 201: WILL Sophomore Colloquium Syllabus*. Richmond, VA: University of Richmond.

3. Rowntree, D. (1982). *A dictionary of education*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books.

4. *Report on the Program in Women's Studies*. (Spring 1996). Richmond, VA: University of Richmond.

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APPENDIX A

Library/Internet Workshop for WILL Sophomore Seminar

Tuesday, October 5, 4:00–5:30 p.m., Computer Classroom in Boatwright Library

Pre-Workshop Survey Form

NAME_____

1. What type of experience do you have searching the Internet? Give just a brief description of what you do on the Internet.

2. Do you have any previous experience with searching the online databases, such as *InfoTrac*, *OVID*, etc. on the Libraries' Web page? If so, what databases have you used in the past?

3. Do you have any previous experience with women's studies databases, such as *Contemporary Women's Issues?*

4. What do you expect to learn from this workshop? What would you like to know more about searching the library databases or searching the Internet effectively?

I look forward to seeing you on October 5! Thanks for completing this form. Lucretia McCulley, Liaison Librarian for Women's Studies

APPENDIX B

Selected Useful Web Sites in Women's Studies

WSSLINKS
http://libraries.mit.edu/humanities/WomensStudies/wscd.html
Provides a wide range of Web resources (Art, Business, Health, Philosophy, etc.) in support of women's studies. Created and maintained by the Women's studies Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries.

Women's Studies/Women's Issues Resource Sites
http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/links.html
Emphasizes sites of particular use to an academic women's studies program. Includes section headings such as Activism, Higher Education, International, Women of Color, etc.

inforM's Women's Studies Database
http://www.inform.umd.edu:8080/EdRes/Topic/WomensStudies/
Good Web site for film reviews, photos, articles, reports, and additional links to other women's studies sites.

Women's Studies Librarian's Office, University of Wisconsin
http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/others.htm
Provides a wealth of women's studies information and Internet links, including links to nearly 30 feminist/women's periodicals.

U.S. Government Information About Women
http://www.access.gpo.gov/su docs/dpos/topics/women.html
Excellent links to government statistics about women. It also covers topics such as women in the military, working women, and domestic violence.

Feminist.com
http://feminist.com/
A commercial site with articles and speeches by women and links to organizations, women's health information, and women-owned businesses as well as other categories.

Women's Issues—3rd World
http://women3rdworld.about.com/newsissues/women3rdworld/
Annotated directory of sites related to a variety of women's issues within third world countries. Subjects include child marriages, honor killings, health issues, marriage customs, and much more.

Gifts of Speech: Women's Speeches from Around the World
http://gos.sbc.edu/
Gifts of Speech is dedicated to preserving and creating access to speeches made by influential contemporary women.

National Organization for Women
http://www.now.org/
NOW is dedicated to making legal, political, social and economic change for women in U.S. society. This Web site provides information about both national and local activities of NOW, its publications, and current key issues affecting women.

Feminist Majority Online
http://www.feminist.org/
The Feminist Majority Foundation's Web site provides excellent information and further links on a variety of current issues (breast cancer, gender apartheid, etc.) related to women's rights. It is a good source for the latest information on legislation affecting women.

Center for Research on Women
http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/crwsub.html
The Web site for the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College provides information on the center's research, programs, and publications, which examine and help shape public policy that affects the lives of women, men, and children in a changing world.

National Women's Studies Association
http://www.nwsa.org/
National Women's Studies Association's Web site promotes feminist/womanist teaching, learning, research, and professional and community service at the pre-K through postsecondary levels and serves as a center of information about the interdisciplinary field of women's studies for those outside the profession.

Center for American Women and Politics
http://www.rci/rutgers.edu/~cawp/
The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) is a university-based research, education, and public service center. Its mission is to promote greater understanding and knowledge about women's participation in politics and government and to enhance women's influence and leadership in public life.

A Guide to Uncovering Women's History in Archival Collections
http://www.lib.utsa.edu/Archives/links.htm
This Web site is sponsored by the Archives for Research on Women and Gender Project at the University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries. It is an excellent guide to Web pages of archives, libraries, and other repositories that have primary source materials by or about women. A geographical directory to archival repositories is provided.

Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America
http://www.radcliffe.edu/schles/index.htm
The Schlesinger Library is one of the most outstanding libraries on the history of women in America. The collections document the social history of women in the United States. Materials include books, manuscripts, periodicals, photographs, ephemera, oral histories, and audiovisual materials. Personal papers of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Julia Child, Betty Friedan, Pauli Murray, and Harriet Beecher Stowe are held at the Schlesinger Library.

National Women's History Project
http://www.nwhp.org/
The National Women's History Project, founded in 1980, is a nonprofit educational organization committed to recognizing and celebrating the diverse and significant historical accomplishments of women by providing information and educational materials and programs. This site provides materials for Women's History Month as well as publicity material for national/local media to promote information on women's history.

Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University
http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/women/
This collection of 6000 manuscripts and 200,000 volumes of rare books related to women's history are housed as part of Duke University's Special Collections. Collections include plantation diaries, women's suffrage documents, the records of local Women's Christian Temperance Unions, and the papers of contemporary feminist activists. Some manuscript and print materials have been digitized and mounted on this Web site so that scholars can use the resources without having to travel to Duke.

Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1830–1930
http://womhist.binghamton.edu/
Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, this Web site is intended to introduce students, teachers, and scholars to a collection of primary documents related to women and social movements in the United States between 1830 and 1930. It is organized around editorial projects completed by undergraduate and graduate students at the State University of New York at Binghamton.

Women's Rights: 1848 to the Present
http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/womrts/homepage.htm
This web site originated in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls conference in 1848, that set the stage to gain women in the United States the right to vote. It is a composite of articles, speeches, biographies, and links relating to women's rights, with the primary focus on the United States. For example, one can find the text of the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions that was drafted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton for the women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848.

Feminist Film Reviews
http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/WomensStudies/FilmReviews/
Feminist Film Reviews are provided by Linda Lopez McAlister ("The Women's Show," WMNF-FM [88.5], Tampa, FL). McAlister is a professor at the University of South Florida and she is also a founding member of the Society for Women in Philosophy, which conceived of and created *Hypatia*, an academic journal devoted to feminist philosophy.

U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau
http://www.dol.gov/dol/wb/welcome.html
The Bureau works cooperatively with employers and other partners to improve work/family options, equal pay, benefits, training opportunities and to end all forms of workplace discrimination. This Web site provides information on a variety of tissues related to women in the workforce. Topics include childcare, elder care, equal pay, and training young women for math and technology careers. Various statistics and Bureau publications are also listed.

Violence Against Women Office
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/vawo/
The Violence Against Women Office is part of the Office of Justice Programs, United States Department of Justice. It was created in 1995 to implement the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and to lead the national effort to stop domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking of women. This site lists state hotlines, coalitions, advocacy groups, publications, laws related to domestic violence, and suggestions for local communities on how to handle domestic violence problems.

National Women's Health Information Center
http://www.4woman.gov/
The National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) provides a gateway to the vast array of Federal and other women's health information resources. This site helps users link to, read, and download a wide variety of women's health-related material developed by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Defense, other Federal agencies, and private sector resources. Provides the latest on women's health news, including pregnancy, breast cancer, and various disabilities. Includes a useful FAQ section on Women's Health.

FDA Office of Women's Health
http://www.fda.gov/womens/default.htm
The Office of Women's Health (OWH) was created in 1994 by the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA has jurisdiction over the drugs, medical devices, vaccines, blood and tissue products, foods, and cosmetics on which every American woman and her family depend. This Web site compiles effective drug information for women's health concerns. Major program activities include warnings against medication and ongoing scientific research projects related to medication.

HealthFinder's Women's Health Information Page
http://www.healthfinder.gov/justforyou/women/default.htm
Features an "easy-to-use" search engine, which provides selected links to health resources on topics of special interest to women. The "tools" section provides a reference library and a database of other women's health organizations in the government and the private sector. Hot topic information includes breast cancer, domestic violence, and depression.

Online Women's Business Center
http://www.onlinewbc.org/
An interactive business skills training Web site that is dedicated to helping entrepreneurial women to realize their goals and aspirations for their personal and professional development. The site's goal is to provide information and expertise necessary for planning women's economic independence through owning their own business. Online forums, message boards, a resource database, and informative articles are tools offered free of charge to provide the information necessary for a woman to succeed in business.

Feminist Theory Web Site
http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/enin.html
The Feminist Theory Web Site provides research materials and information for students, activists, and scholars interested in women's conditions and struggles around the world. The goals of this Web site are: "to encourage a wide range of research into feminist theory, and to encourage dialogue between women (and men) from different countries around the world." Individual theorists, various national and ethnic feminisms, and different fields of feminism (body, education critical theory, etc.) are featured at this site.

Women.com
http://women.com/index.html
Women.com is the leading network for wired women, attracting over 5 million visitors each month. Founded in 1992 when "women online" was something of a novelty, Women.com Networks Inc. was the first online company to recognize the potential of women on the Web. This site features a blend of programming, community, commerce, and services that serve the diverse needs and interests of today's online woman.

Center for Women and Leadership
http://www.luc.edu/orgs/gannon/
The Gannon Center for Women and Leadership promotes women's studies programs and progress and provides archives documenting women in leadership and education.

American Association for University Women
http://www.aauw.org/home.html
The American Association of University Women is a national organization that promotes education and equity for all women and girls. Various topics areas such as AAUW's voting record of congressional members, current research projects, fellowship, and grants are included. Access to member services and activist issues is also available.

Women's Studies programs Web sites

Women's Studies Programs, Departments, and Research Centers
http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/programs.html

Women's Studies Programs in the U.S.
http://creativefolk.com/directories.html

Searchable Database on Women's Studies Programs
http://www.library.uiuc.edu/wst/search3

APPENDIX C

Searching the Web for Women's Resources and Evaluating Web Sources

Connect to the Libraries' Web page and choose *Resources By Subject/Major*. Scroll down the list alphabetically and choose *Women's Studies*. Then choose *Web Sites for Women's Studies*. Choose one or more Web sites and search for a topic of your choice within the Web site.

Then choose one Web site from the results of your search and use the Internet Evaluator Checklist below to evaluate the Web site. Answer each question completely.

Internet Evaluator Checklist

- What is the purpose of the Web site and what does it contain?
- Does the Web site attempt to use the information to "inform," "explain," or "persuade?"

- How complete and accurate are the information and the links provided?

- Who is the author or producer of the Web site?

- What is the authority or expertise of the author, producer, or creator of the site?

- When was the information created or last updated?

- How comprehensive is the information provided? What other resources (print and non-print) are available on your topic?

- Given all the information you determined from above, is this Web site appropriate for your topic?