Promoting Interdisciplinary Resources: Teaching Scholars Portal Search

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Disappearing disciplinary borders in the social science library - global studies or sea change?

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Patricia and I are delighted to be here today in this international forum to address the issue of promoting interdisciplinary library resources and to tell you about Scholars Portal Search (SPS) and the effects of our teaching and user interaction on web design and the underlying subject analysis and organization of its databases. Scholars Portal Search, a unique interdisciplinary resource covering the arts and humanities, social sciences, natural and health sciences, and technology, was developed by the Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL), a consortium of twenty university libraries in Ontario, and is available to all participating universities.

The importance of interdisciplinary research is the raison d'etre of this conference, and promoting it is a strategic priority at the University of Toronto. As stated in the university's planning document for 2004-2010, "many of the most difficult questions that scholars wish to address and the most intransigent problems facing the world more often than not seep, flow or leap from one discipline into others."[1]

As we know, only too well, library organization is traditionally discipline focused and the major comprehensive indexes and abstracts are placed into disciplinary silos such as psychology, sociology, economics etc. In order to support interdisciplinary teaching and research, the library recognizes the need to offer new ways of making the best use of our rich collection of electronic resources. We need to support researchers who work across disciplines and find themselves exploring areas outside of their own expertise.

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[1] University of Toronto, Stepping UP: Companion Paper 3. Enabling interdisciplinary teaching and research. <http://www.provost.utoronto.ca/plans/Asset934.aspx> (February 6, 2008).

The University of Toronto Library system as a whole is the largest academic library in Canada and is currently ranked fourth among academic research libraries in North America, behind Harvard, Yale and Columbia[2] (Association of Research Libraries Expenditure-focused index 2005/06) and has over 18 million print and microform holdings. Its electronic resource collections are also substantial and include about 37,000 e-journals and almost 1,000 e-indexes. Ten years ago as our collection of electronic resources grew, we started to seek out and find solutions to questions of long-term preservation and archiving by locally loading e-journals and e-indexes and making these available to other Ontario university libraries. We also entered a contractual agreement to use the CSA Illumina platform as a single search engine to CSA and other databases locally loaded at the University of Toronto. This formed a strong basis for what was to develop.

In 2001, a partnership of 72 Canadian university libraries received a Canadian federal government grant of 20 million dollars matched by provincial and university funding, totaling 50 million. Within Ontario the federal funds were used for licensing electronic content and the provincial and university funds were used to fund the infrastructure for what was to become the Scholars Portal. The Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL), a consortium of the twenty university libraries in Ontario, had the remarkable foresight to recognize the value of having a locally implemented and managed capability for delivering and archiving scholarly electronic resources. Subsequent to the initial

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[2] Martha Kyrillidou and Mark Young, comp. and ed., "Rank Order Table 21: Expenditures-Focused Index of ARL University Libraries, 2005-06," *ARL Statistics 2005 06* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2008), 91. http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/arlstats06.pdf (accessed June 23, 2008).

injection of federal funds, the twenty university library members have continued to support this collaborative endeavor which is now funded by the OCUL members. Today the Scholars Portal e-journal service archives and provides access to 8,400 e-journals with 13.5 million full text articles.

Scholars Portal is now implementing the ebrary book system as a uniform platform to archive and provide access to locally loaded e-books. Initially this will include the more than 125,000 titles from the collections of many libraries that have been digitized in the Open Content Alliance / Internet Archive at the University of Toronto. Scholars Portal is also loading about 70,000 contemporary, scholarly e-books that have been purchased or licensed by one or more of the OCUL members.

Scholars Portal Search consists of over 100 abstract and index databases (with 250 database segments) covering over 200 million references to articles, book chapters, conferences, books and other resources, all of which can be searched simultaneously or in sections using a single search interface. The results are de-duplicated so that the user only sees a single record, but with the option to view the record in other databases. Direct links are provided from the citations to the full text articles or to the library catalogue. In addition, citations are easily integrated into Refworks, a citation management system.

Figure 1: The advanced search screen for Scholars Portal Search.

Scholars Portal Search is extraordinary not only in the quantity of scholarly content

covered, but also in its quality, as it includes the major databases for many disciplines.

For example it includes the major databases for psychology (*PsycInfo*); for sociology

(*Sociological Abstracts*); for economics (*EconLit*); for medicine (*Medline*) and many,

many more. It has the added benefit of preserving the integrity of the individual

databases with their important individualized fields and their own standardized language

and thesauruses.

However, this is a library with huge collections and resources and we have to remind

researchers that sometimes Scholars Portal Search is not the best option for their topic.

Scholars Portal Search provides only 25% of the total number of databases at the

University of Toronto, although it is important to note that Scholars Portal Search

includes <u>the</u> major databases for most disciplines. For selected subject areas e.g.

history and women's studies as well as for government documents the major databases

are not included in Scholars Portal Search at all. Furthermore, for some databases in

Scholars Portal Search, users have the option to select search engines with more

sophisticated or appropriate capabilities, for example for *Medline* or *Web of Science*.

We also point out to our users that there are other many other major interdisciplinary

databases with unique and useful features e.g. the Wilson databases are deliberately

selective; *JSTOR* has a backrun of high quality research journals and is much beloved

by many scholars.

In summary, the benefits of Scholars Portal are:

- The local archiving of library materials, ensuring long term preservation, valuable
  at both national and international levels;

- The integration of multiple resources and the ability to search across many
  databases simultaneously, of special value to interdisciplinary studies;

- The ability to link, through the SFX link resolver, directly to full text journals;

- The ability to integrate into course management systems, because of the ease of
  control of citations;

- The ability to manage retrieved results;

- The ongoing collaboration of Ontario university libraries to the benefit of all.

When first introduced to the academic community, Scholars Portal Search was

unknown to our users. To overcome this barrier, we realized that we needed to

promote Scholars Portal Search at the reference desk, in the classroom, and on our web pages. With this in mind, we embarked on four initiatives to foster the use of Scholars Portal Search in interdisciplinary searching: We provided subject analysis for each of the individual Scholars Portal Search databases. We created special subject groupings of Scholars Portal Search databases. We developed classes for faculty and graduate students on interdisciplinary database searching, and we designed a single web page access point to all of the permutations of Scholars Portal Search, thus providing a useful overview of the resource.

We are fortunate at the University of Toronto to be able to offer our users approximately one thousand article databases and many other types of electronic resources. However, this rich information landscape requires a map to guide researchers to appropriate online resources. As the first initiative in promoting our electronic resources, a group of reference librarians across the disciplines have grouped all of our article databases by broad topic.

Figure 2: Reference librarians have organized electronic resources under broad topics to assist researchers in locating the best journal indexes, text collections, electronic reference sources, and research guides.

URL: http://content.library.utoronto.ca/robarts/

For each subject, we have identified the major journal indexes—a "start here first" list of databases aimed particularly at the undergraduate student or researcher new to this subject area—followed by a list of "Other indexes for [subject]." This secondary list of indexes includes either narrowly-focused databases or broad discipline databases. For example, under the subject heading Political Science, you will find the *Worldwide Political Science Abstracts* listed as a major index, and under "Other indexes for Political Science" you will see both the narrower *Canadian Foreign Relations Index (CFRI)* and the broader *Social Sciences Abstracts.*

Major indexes for Political Science

🍁 **WorldWide Political Science Abstracts.**   1975 -
(Scholars Portal)
A major index to journals in political science and its complementary fields,
including international ...   Read more.

🍁 **PAIS International.**   1972 -
(Scholars Portal)
A major database for political science. PAIS International offers access to the
international literature ...   Read more.

And more...

Other indexes for Political Science

🍁 **America: History and Life.**   1954 -
(ABC-CLIO)
This note has been provided by Reference Dept. The major source for United
States and Canadian ...   Read more.

🍁 **Canadian Foreign Relations Index (CFRI).**   1945-2005
(Direct from the publisher)
Covers Canada's foreign relations, defence, economic relations, foreign aid,
international law, and ...   Read more.

🍁 **Population Reference Bureau (PRB).**
(Miscellaneous Eindexes)
PRB informs people from around the world and in the United States about
issues related to population, ...   Read more.

🍁 **Social Sciences Abstracts.**   Indexing 1983+, Abstracting 1984
(H.W. Wilson)
Enjoy fast access to a wide assortment of the most important
English-language journals published in ...   Read more.

Figure 3: This print screen illustrates an abbreviated list of major and other article databases for the subject Political Science and shows the partial "Read more" opening sentences. Note that we indicate whether a database is part of Scholars Portal or another vendor.

URL: http://main.library.utoronto.ca/eir/EIRsubjectresults_cms.cfm?subject_id=70&T=I

In addition to this prioritization of article databases within a subject, we provide detailed descriptions for each major database. The first sentence of these in-depth "Read more..." descriptions displays on the subject web page. These subject lists serve three purposes: they guide users to the Scholars Portal Search and other databases by topic,

they provide detailed descriptions of their contents, and they steer users to other resources when Scholars Portal Search is not appropriate. For example, currently Canadian studies and history are not well served by the databases in Scholars Portal Search, and these lists of databases by subject direct the user to the most appropriate resources.

In our interactions with students and faculty, it became apparent to us that many researchers failed to use Scholars Portal Search strategically. One group would conduct a simple Google-like search on all ninety databases and doggedly work through many irrelevant results. Alternatively, others would continue their past practice of searching the familiar database(s) in their field. For example, JSTOR continued to be a popular choice with researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences, despite the fact that current content is missing and the journals included are limited in number. Students, faculty and researchers did not realize that they could achieve greater precision than what is retrieved by a Google-like search on all ninety databases if they created a customized list of databases that served their specific interdisciplinary research needs. This strategy enables researchers to minimize large sets with little relevant materials due to false drops. However, in our instruction classes with faculty and graduate students, we saw the difficulties our users encountered when creating their own customized lists of databases due to their unfamiliarity with all but a handful of the databases in their field. This made us realize the value of pre-selected groups by discipline. As our second promotional activity, we established ready-made subject

groupings of Scholars Portal Search databases and placed these search boxes

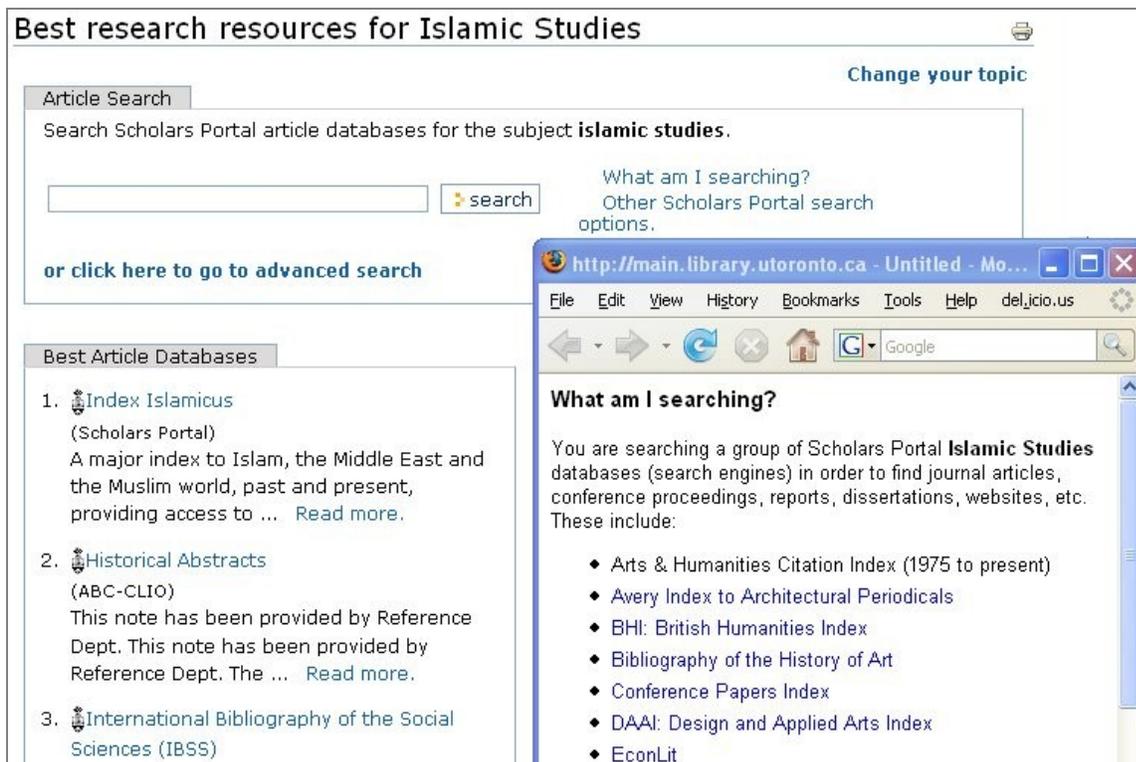conveniently on the subject pages described above.

Figure 4: The search box for the Scholars Portal Islamic Studies databases with the
"What am I searching?" window open.
URL: http://main.library.utoronto.ca/eir/articlesbytopic.cfm?subject=137

These Scholars Portal Search subject subsets allowed us to broaden and deepen

researchers' search results for a particular subject.   For example, conducting research

in the multifaceted subject area of Islamic Studies was greatly enhanced by our

Scholars Portal Search subject grouping. Now in one search the researcher can go

beyond *Index Islamicus* to search databases in the arts, economics, humanities,

political science, philosophy, and the social sciences.

As our third initiative, we offered classes to faculty and graduate students on searching interdisciplinary databases. Faculty members and graduate students were keen to familiarize themselves with the library's interdisciplinary resources since they currently work within several disciplines, or desire to do so. In light of the University's stated goal of enhancing interdisciplinary teaching and research we expect continued demand for these sessions. In our classes, one of the hands-on exercises included a comparison of search results from Google Scholar and Scholars Portal Search on a topic of interest to the faculty member. Faculty and graduate students discovered for themselves that Scholars Portal Search frequently offered more relevant scholarly articles than Google Scholar. These classes provided us with the opportunity to work with faculty in their research areas and we found that the librarians had much to offer to faculty who often were expanding their research into the new territory of an unfamiliar discipline.

Despite our efforts to promote Scholars Portal Search through teaching, subject analysis, and subject database groupings, we discovered in the classroom and at the reference desk that faculty and graduate students were still not taking full advantage of the interdisciplinary approach that Scholars Portal Search offers. To assist users in understanding the various possible approaches, we created a web page of all the search possibilities that Scholars Portal Search has to offer. This web page is the perfect jumping off point into the Scholars Portal Search databases, and it serves as an ideal tool for teaching as it provides a mental map of the resource. On one web page, users can see and access all the Scholars Portal Search options.

Scholars Portal Search Options   **Online Tutorial**

A unique interdisciplinary search engine covering the arts and humanities, social sciences, natural and health sciences, and technology. Scholars Portal is extraordinary not only in the quantity of scholarly content covered, but also in its quality, as it includes the major databases for many disciplines. Read more.

Option 1. Choose your general topic from the drop-down menu below:

For example, are you writing a paper on "panic attacks"? Choose psychology.

[– choose from this list – ▾]   [⁑ go]

Option 2. Search by broad subject areas:
- Arts & Humanities
- Natural Sciences
- Social Sciences
- Technology

Option 3. Click here to search all Scholars Portal databases simultaneously.

For comprehensive searching or for topics best covered by databases not in Scholars Portal go to **best research resources for your topic**.

Scholars Portal contains over 90 databases and can be searched in its entirety, by general topics, within broad subject areas, or by individual databases.

Figure 5: The overview page for Scholars Portal Search listing the various options for searching. URL: http://main.library.utoronto.ca/eir/scholarsportal.cfm .

The four initiatives outlined above do not mark the end of our work in promoting interdisciplinary research using Scholars Portal Search. In the near future, two new initiatives—the use of Endeca to offer new search capabilities and the provision of e-books using the ebrary platform—will further enhance Scholars Portal Search. We anticipate that these endeavors will stimulate new ideas and provide fresh opportunities for the promotion of interdisciplinary research.