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Story Telling, Learning Objects, and Scalar

Hidden Tools in Asynchronous Educational Models

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries in the higher education arena had already implemented a combined virtual/real-world service model. Books could be checked out and read in print or online; research assistance could be sought at the reference desk or via instant messaging, email, or phone; and both in-person and remote instruction existed for onsite and offsite classes. However, the pandemic forced the 2020 shutdown, and libraries had to move to a completely online environment. In the public services realm, there was an emphasis on online learning, especially asynchronous learning. The range of knowledge librarians had of online education ran from considerable experience to truly little or none.

The greater focus on asynchronous learning during this time uncovered a potential skill gap in the profession, requiring librarians to develop their expertise in online education best practices and have access to instinctive, readily available tools. One option is to use existing resources to support asynchronous learning. Although these sources could be well-known products, they could also be lesser-known ones from outside of or other areas of librarianship. This article will focus on the author's use of Scalar, a free open-source publishing platform, to create a learning module for a high-level undergraduate seminar at Indiana University (IU).

What Is Scalar?

In 2005, a quintet of close collaborators (co-editors Steve Anderson and Tara McPherson, Creative Directors Raegan Kelley and Erik Loyer, and Information Designer Craig Dietrich) developed and launched a journal name *Vectors*.[1] *Vectors* was created to experiment with and challenge the notion of traditional academic publishing by bringing together scholars, designers, and technologists to publish scholarly content that could not exist in print.[2] Based on the collective's own research and their continuing work with *Vectors*, they formulated a new goal to cultivate fresh ways of interacting with digitized archival materials in the humanities and to continue developing evolving techniques for digital scholarly publishing. In support of this new mission, the team secured funds from the Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities and built a new tool named Scalar that was released in beta in 2013.[3]

Scalar was developed to be "a free, open-source authoring and publishing platform that is designed to make it easy for authors to write long-form, born digital scholarship online."[4] It is known for key features such as its ability to add and display multimedia content by integrating it from both popular and academically orientated digital archives (e.g., YouTube

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Finding Information: Books and Articles

Introductory Screen for Finding Information: Books and Articles.

and the Critical Commons archive) and then allow extensive annotating to said content regardless of format (e.g., film, audio, and/or textual).[5]
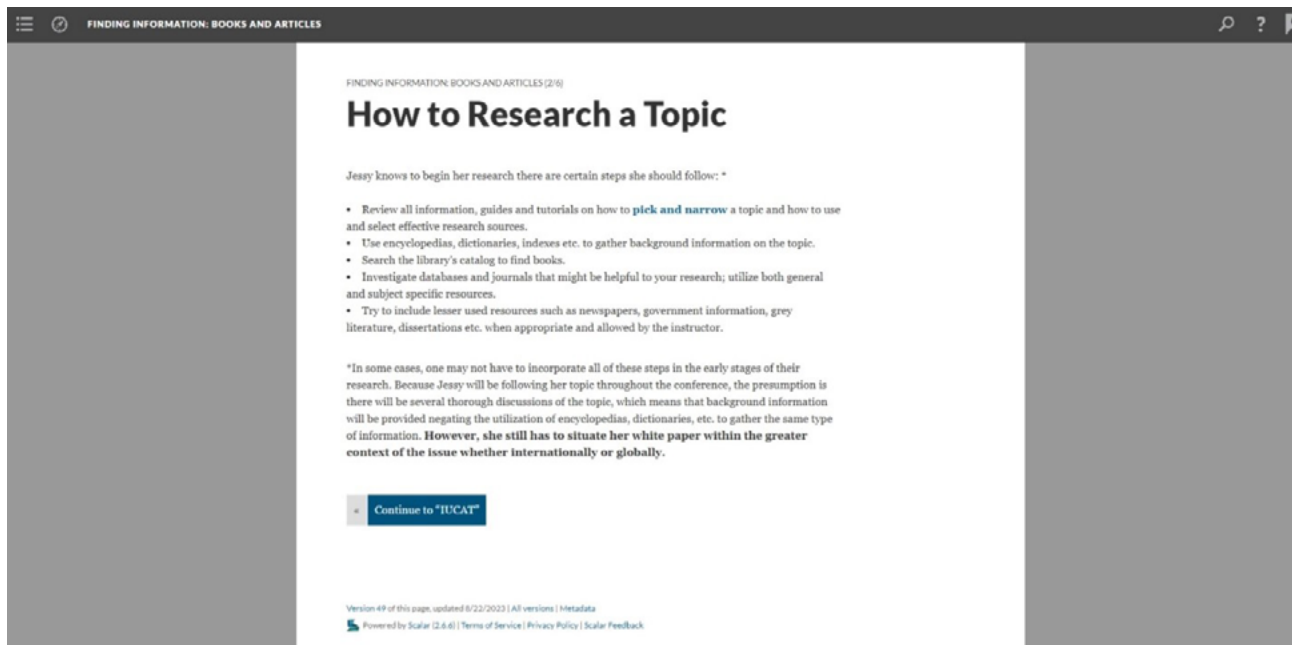
Pros and Cons of Scalar

Scalar is considered a great resource for classroom use because it is free, user-friendly, and only requires access to a computer and the Internet. The platform has a built-in editor that is handy but does not accept formatted text. Also, images and videos over 2 megabytes cannot be embedded in Scalar. Because online media files are hosted on Scalar's server instead of uploaded, it is important to use objects from a reliable archive so content will not go missing from pages within a book (projects in Scalar are referred to as "books").[6]

In July 2021, I attended the USC Scalar Summer Institute. The institute was a "free five-day workshop designed for librarians and others who wish to support the use of Scalar for born-digital scholarship and cutting-edge collections-based digital pedagogy."[7] Participants were given an overview of the history of Scalar, went over selected Scalar projects to see its capabilities, and were instructed on some of the platform's more basic features like editing pages, importing/annotating media, and creating tags, paths, galleries, and timelines.

Implementing Scalar

The Class

After attending the institute, I worked to integrate Scalar into my instruction. I chose the INTL-I 434 International Climate Governance course, a three-credit travel seminar that enrolls up to 15 students, as my first Scalar experiment. The course focuses on how the climate policies and actions of global governance institutions and NGOs affect climate issues. Those enrolled in the seminar learn about the historical origins, interpretation, and implementation of the Paris Agreement and attend the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).[8] IU is one of the few universities in the world that sends student observers to the UNFCC Conference of Parties (known as COP). In 2021, COP 26 was held in Glasgow, United Kingdom, where 13 students from INTL-I 434 made up

FINDING INFORMATION: BOOKS AND ARTICLES (2/6)

How to Research a Topic

Jessy knows to begin her research there are certain steps she should follow: *

- Review all information, guides and tutorials on how to **pick and narrow** a topic and how to use and select effective research sources.
- Use encyclopedias, dictionaries, indexes etc. to gather background information on the topic.
- Search the library's catalog to find books.
- Investigate databases and journals that might be helpful to your research; utilize both general and subject specific resources.
- Try to include lesser used resources such as newspapers, government information, grey literature, dissertations etc. when appropriate and allowed by the instructor.

*In some cases, one may not have to incorporate all of these steps in the early stages of their research. Because Jessy will be following her topic throughout the conference, the presumption is there will be several thorough discussions of the topic, which means that background information will be provided negating the utilization of encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc. to gather the same type of information. **However, she still has to situate her white paper within the greater context of the issue whether internationally or globally.**

Continue to "IUCAT"

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Screenshot of the How to Research a Topic Page from Finding Information: Books and Articles Learning module.

the IU delegation.[9] The students followed a specific issue of their choice throughout the conference. Afterword, they were required to draft a white paper using scholarly and popular sources in addition to information they garnered from the conference.

The Module
The learning module created for the 2021 International Climate Governance was simply titled "Finding Information: Books and Articles" (https://scalar.usc.edu/works/finding-information-books-and-articles/index).

It included narrative, links, videos, and images and was made up of six pages. Two of the pages were the introduction and conclusion, and the other four pages focused on research-related suggestions and actions. For example, the "How to Research a Topic" page gave advice on how to start the research process, such as using reference sources to obtain background information and incorporating lesser-used resources like government information, grey literature, dissertations, and newspapers into a research paper.

Much of the class did use the learning module, engaging with it on average for 16 minutes and 39 seconds, and all the users were from the United States, which was not surprising because that is the country where IU is located. The learning module was largely accessed by direct link, and the most popular pages were LibGuides, Introduction, Articles, IUCAT (IU's library catalog), and, of course, the title screen.

Discussion
The biggest roadblock with using Scalar in the course was the level of prewriting and project management needed to compose a book and the frustration with producing a project that can incorporate advanced design elements. The article "Assessing Digital Humanities Tools: Use of a Scalar at a Research University," a case study that assessed the use of Scalar at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, reported that those who were the most frustrated with Scalar were pupils who had problems with the arranging and writing processes

Finding Information: The Quest for Scholarly Articles

Begin with "Introduction"
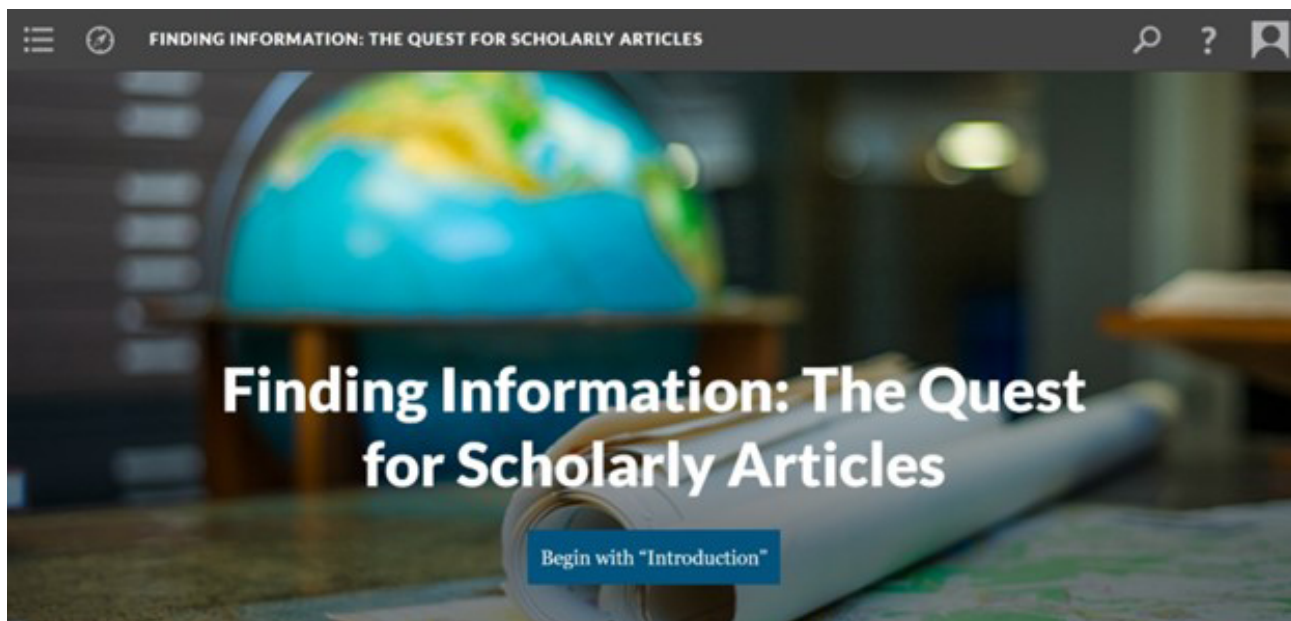
Screenshot of the Finding Information: The Quest for Scholarly Articles learning module.

needed to meet the content development conditions.[10] Librarians new to constructing learning modules may have similar feelings as students who struggled with the organizing and writing component of Scalar. But librarians are a part of a profession where they must plan information literacy sessions, evaluate collections, present at conferences, and author articles, thereby having the skills to develop learning objects.

Previous to working with Scalar, I had some basic comprehension of storyboarding but had never built a learning module or filmed/edited a video tutorial. I did some preparative work before the first day of the USC Scalar Summer Institute by gathering images, writing out instructions, and running searches that would be used in the learning module. Because I was not familiar with Scalar before the Institute and was unaware of the type of writing that was crucial when working with it, I struggled with bringing all the images, instructions, and searches together in an easily understandable and logical manner, but soon I detected that the best technique to exercise was storytelling.

"The Finding Information: Books and Articles" module highlighted an undergraduate who had to take a social science course to complete her general education requirements to ensure she graduated on time. The learning module shows the steps the central character took to choose keywords, search the library's catalog, select relevant databases, and conduct a variety of other research-related activities. The audience learns how to find information for a research paper by reading about and taking the same steps as the protagonist.

Scalar was crafted to have a low learning curve, but as users master the platform and move from their first work to their second, there is frustration with not being able to produce pieces with more intricate design like the sophisticated examples on Scalar's webpage or in *Vectors*. Unfortunately, to make more dazzling projects a stronger knowledge of Scalar's Application Programing Interface (API) is required, and interested individuals would need significant outside support to create comparable oeuvres.[11]

When I completed my first Scalar project and went on to assemble another learning module titled "Finding Information: The Quest for Scholarly Articles" (https://scalar.usc.edu/works/finding-information-the-quest-for-scholarly-articles/index), I was able to generate a

new learning module with a stronger and extensive narrative in a shorter amount of time, but I similarly became irritated with not being able to use more sophisticated style options that would deliver a fanciful aesthetic. Nonetheless, an advanced knowledge of Scalar is not needed to manufacture a great learning module.

Conclusion

The global pandemic created a situation where online education was pushed to the fore-front, and the interest from faculty, students, and librarians in this mode of instruction has not waned with the official lifting of the COVID-19 national emergency and related restrictions in the United States by President Biden in May 2023. Now that online instruction is no longer solely under the jurisdiction of distance education and teaching and learning staff and librarians, institutions will have to invest in low-cost intuitive resources to assist librarians new to the virtual teaching environment to create practical learning objects.

Scalar is a publishing platform that was built to enable the creation of multimedia digital scholarship and as such is well-known in the Digital Humanities circles. It is free, easy to use, needs no specific hardware or software, and saves organization's server space because projects created using the platform are hosted on Scalar's website and server. As previously noted, Scalar does have some drawbacks. However, librarianship is a profession where its workers are required to do a significant amount of idea organizing, critical thinking, and project mapping. Therefore, the elevated level of preparatory work needed to create any learning object would not be surprising for most public services librarians. Also, while it is human nature for people to want to advance their skill level after mastering the fundamentals of a new task, advanced knowledge of Scalar is not needed to create a remarkably effective learning module. Scalar is a cost-effective and user-friendly instrument that can help support librarians new to asynchronous learning on their path to creating valuable learning devices as higher education moves into a more digital environment. ✐

Notes

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8. Indiana University International Studies Department, "INTL-I 434 International Climate Governance," 2023, https://intlstudies.indiana.edu/courses/class/iub-fall-2023-intl-i434.

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