TechMatters

Further Adventures in the Googleverse: Exploring the Google Labs

Krista Graham, Central Michigan University

Little did I know when I set out to write my last Tech Matters column that the folks at Google were going to steal my thunder by announcing not one, but two, significant development initiatives. Over the last few months, these two projects dubbed Google Scholar and Google Print have been a major topic of conversation in libraries, on library discussion lists, and even in the national press. Discussion and debate regarding the implications and potential impact of these new search tools on libraries, librarians, and library services abound. But where did they come from? Although it may seem as though these two developments sprang fully formed from the technological ooze, they actually started in a lesser known, (but mighty powerful), corner of the Googleverse know as the Google Labs.

What is Google Labs?

Google Labs is the informal technology "think tank" of the Google organization. Staff members at Google are encouraged to experiment with new ideas and produce working prototypes that are then made available to the public from the Google Labs web page [http://labs.google.com/]. Once accessible, Google users are invited to provide feedback on how the technology might be used or improved. These experimental designs are allowed to live or die based on their merits and problems. Ideas that are deemed particularly promising may eventually be integrated into the main Google search engine and/or made available as a separate tool.

Lab Success Stories

Since its establishment in 2002, Google Labs has introduced a number of innovative search tools that have moved beyond the prototype phase and are now being actively developed and promoted as part of Google's arsenal of search tools.

Froogle

First introduced in the Labs at the end of 2002, Froogle [froogle.google.com] is a tool designed to facilitate online shopping. The Froogle search engine allows users to search product information, and then sort and limit by price as well as compare prices between online retailers. In addition, Froogle provides store and product reviews and ratings. Overall, Froogle can be a very useful tool for students and general consumers looking for product information.

Google Deskbar

Google deskbar is an application that allows users to search the web without opening a web browser. Similar in concept to the Google toolbar, the deskbar program places a search box in the taskbar that appears at the bottom of every Windows screen. Search results appear in a "mini-viewer" that allows users to preview search results prior to launching a browser session. Using the deskbar, a student writing a research paper in Word could quickly use Google's dictionary, calculator, or web search features without leaving his/her document to "check the web".

Google Alerts

Google's alert service allows users to specify and save search terms to be run against either the web or news search sites on a regular basis. Anytime new web pages make it into the top ten news sites, or top twenty web sites, Google sends an e-mail alert to the user. This service may prove particularly useful for students interested in tracking a particular news story or developing area of research.

What Else is Cooking in the Lab?

Because they are considered experimental, new prototypes come and go from the Lab on a fairly regular basis. As a result, it is worth popping over to the Lab website every now and then to see what new search innovations may be on the horizon.

Google Scholar

Unless you've been hiding under a rock for the last few months, chances are pretty good that you've already heard of and tried out Google's new scholar search engine. Designed to facilitate search for "scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, preprints, abstracts and technical reports from all broad areas of re-

search" (http://scholar.google.com/scholar/about.html), Scholar is Google's answer to the quality versus quantity dilemma associated with regular web searches.

Since its introduction in November of last year, librarians have been avidly debating the flaws and merits of this new search tool. Regardless of our opinions, however, there can be little doubt that students will very likely adopt this new flavor of Google with great enthusiasm. Since Scholar is still in beta, opportunity exists to help shape the continuing development of this tool. Google invites user feedback via (scholar-support@google.com) and provides access to an online forum for discussion of the tool (http://groups-beta.google.com/group/Google-Labs-Google-Scholar).

Google Suggest

Introduced in December 2004, the suggest tool monitors what is typed into the search box and makes real time suggestions regarding possible refinements. For example, type the word "yellow" into the search and Google suggests a variety of searches including "yellow pages", the musical group "Yellowcard" and "Yellowstone National Park." You can then quickly select a search by scrolling down the list with the arrow keys and pressing enter. This is a fun tool for exploring search options, and also has the potential to help students formulate better searches.

Google Compute

Google Compute is a distributed computing tool that allows you to donate your computer's idle time for work on research projects. Currently, the Google Compute resources are being used to help Stanford University's Folding@home project [http://folding.stanford.edu/] which is working to understand protein folding in order to develop treatments for diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

Conclusion

As the overwhelming buzz surrounding Google Scholar and Google Print has demonstrated, the innovations produced in the Google Labs can have a major impact on our work as instructors. Regular visits to this corner of the Googleverse will help to keep you aware of future innovations in searching and ready to answer your students' questions regarding these new tools when they arise!

Choosing Sources in the Library of Babel,

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able, they look for confirmation and conflict, for voices that emerge as leaders of the discussion on their research question, for dissenting voices, and for boundaries between different schools of thought. They don't need to research the authors' backgrounds to find out if they are credentialed. Instead, they look at how the authors are situated within the literature they're examining. And finally, they *read* their sources to see if the ones on which they rely offer a well-framed argument supported by evidence.

These students see themselves as players in a process of creating knowledge, not as transcription clerks. This perception that to do research is to join an ongoing conversation about ideas isn't something we can teach or hand out as a checklist. It can only be learned through modeling, hands-on experience, and frequent practice. Involvement in this ongoing conversation is one of the most important things that students can take away with them from college. The "facts" will change. The tools will change. The reputations of publishers and journals and authors will change. But having the confidence to wade into a mass of information, regardless of whether it's on television, on the web, in the committee rooms of Congress, or on the shelves of the library, and independently sort it out is something students will need for the rest of their lives.

Works cited

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