

# Virtual Tours, Videos, and Zombies: The Changing Face of Academic Library Orientation

# Visites virtuelles, vidéos et zombies : Le nouveau visage de l'initiation à la bibliothèque universitaire

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**Abstract:** In response to student expectations and the growing place of the Internet in information dissemination, many university libraries are now using online methods to orient students to the library space, services, and resources. This article defines online orientation within the context of online instruction and traditional library orientation and discusses the benefits and drawbacks of online orientation from both student and librarian perspectives. Since few data are currently available on the learning outcomes of online orientation programs, information on the pedagogical effectiveness of computer-assisted instruction (CAI) is studied and applied to online orientation.

**Keywords:** library orientation, online orientation, online instruction, academic libraries, university libraries

**Résumé :** En réponse aux attentes des étudiants et compte tenu de la place croissante de l'Internet dans la diffusion de l'information, de nombreuses bibliothèques universitaires utilisent maintenant des méthodes en ligne pour initier les étudiants à l'environnement de la bibliothèque, aux services et aux ressources qu'il offre. Cet article définit l'initiation en ligne dans le contexte de l'enseignement en ligne et de l'initiation traditionnelle à la bibliothèque et présente les avantages et les inconvénients de l'initiation en ligne du double point de vue de l'étudiant et du bibliothécaire. Du fait que peu de données sont actuellement disponibles sur les résultats de l'apprentissage au moyen de programmes d'initiation en ligne, nous avons étudié des informations sur l'efficacité pédagogique de l'enseignement assisté par ordinateur (EAO) et les avons appliquées à l'orientation en ligne.

**Mots-clés :** initiation à la bibliothèque, initiation en ligne, enseignement en ligne, bibliothèques d'établissements d'enseignement supérieur, bibliothèques universitaires

## Introduction

In the Internet age, many university students see the Web as their first go-to source for information. Libraries therefore find it vital to establish a Web-based presence to engage students and orient them to the library and its services.

Library staff often find that in-person orientation sessions are sparsely attended, so many university libraries are turning to multimedia to orient students to both the physical space and the library's resources. From virtual library tours and welcome videos to orientation games involving everything from going on scavenger hunts to fighting invading zombies, online library orientation is fast becoming a truly innovative sector in the field of library instruction.

I propose to define online library orientation to give it a clear place in the context of library orientation as a whole. For greater specificity, I will define methods of online orientation in this same context as well as discussing the pedagogical efficacy of online orientation, and how it may be implemented with reference to several published case studies. I will also discuss some particularly innovative methods.

### **What is library orientation?**

To properly discuss the concept of online library orientation, it is necessary to clearly define library orientation as a concept. It should be distinguished from library instruction, of which it is a specific sub-type. Library instruction is a very broad concept that encompasses all forms of teaching information literacy, research skills, and general knowledge of how the library operates and what it has to offer, from very basic (where the quiet study spaces are, how to use the catalogue, what a call number is) to the more advanced (research techniques, impact factors, and citation analysis).

Library orientation falls on the more basic end of the spectrum. At the most simple level, its purpose is to introduce new users to the library and its resources (Madhusudhan and Singh 2010). The key term here is *introduce*. Orientation by its very nature is not meant to give the user an in-depth understanding of the library's inner workings and resources; rather, it serves to give the user a broad overview of what the library has to offer. The information conveyed can be broken down into five basic categories:

- Layout of the library (orientation to the physical space)
- Use of the library website (orientation to the online space)
- Use of the catalogue
- Types of resources on offer
- Ways to find material

While library instruction does include all these subjects, it also encompasses information literacy as a whole. Teaching students how to conduct research and how to evaluate, use, and properly cite information is the backbone of traditional information literacy instruction (Anderson and May 2010), but it is more in-depth than the topics covered by library orientation. Students must first gain a basic understanding of how the library works and what it has to offer before moving on to master the skills necessary for information literacy as defined by the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries 2000). As computers have gone from being a peripheral presence in the library to being an essential component, computer-

assisted instruction (CAI) has become increasingly common in academic libraries. Although CAI goes back to the 1970s (Michel 2001), the concept has shifted and been updated to keep pace with technology. Today, the *assisted* portion of the name is something of a misnomer, as the instruction need not involve an instructor at all, just the student and the computer (Michel 2001). It is no surprise that as library instruction has moved online, so too has library orientation.

### **Methods of traditional library orientation**

Traditionally, academic libraries have accomplished library orientation using a variety of methods, all in person, usually requiring both students and librarians to be physically present at the library (Brown et al. 2004). I have grouped these methods into three general categories:

- Library tours: Orientation to the library space, usually guided by a librarian or other library staff member, which may also include an overview of library resources, often focusing on physical resources such as books, printed periodicals, computers, and printers, particularly their locations in the library.
- Workshops or seminars: Short “just-in-case” one-time courses introducing students to library resources, usually focusing on locating resources, physically or electronically, and using them effectively.
- In-class presentations: A library orientation session during a class (“just-in-time” instruction), often presenting the same or similar material as in a workshop or seminar. These may also emphasize academic integrity as it relates to the use of library resources, that is, proper citation, copyright law, and plagiarism.

All three of these orientation types can, using a variety of approaches, be moved online. Different methods of doing so (including some highly innovative methods employed by a few very creative librarians) will be discussed in the next section.

### **Orientation goes online**

Online orientation can be done using any number of methods. Often, moving an orientation program online involves fairly closely translating the traditional method of orientation and applying it to an online setting; for instance, an in-person library tour becomes a video tour. Videos are commonly used as online orientation tools, not only to present tours but also to instruct students in basic library use. Videos of both types are currently in use at the McGill University Libraries (McGill University 2014). Interactive maps, which allow students to get a good idea of the library’s physical layout without leaving their desks, can also serve as a form of orientation.

The closest analogue to workshops or seminars is online tutorials, often interactive in nature. In a format very similar to online classes, students are presented with material and allowed to complete it in their own time, sometimes with a quiz after completion to assess how well the student has learned the information. In online orientation, the line between “just-in-case” and “just-in-time”

instruction blurs. Students themselves effectively choose whether they take advantage of an online orientation program at the beginning of their academic experience (in which case it functions as “just-in-case” instruction) or further into the semester when they find themselves in need of library instruction (when it becomes “just-in-time” instruction).

These are the most common forms online orientation can take, but some libraries have chosen to go beyond video tutorials and interactive maps and have become truly creative, using podcasts, online scavenger hunts, and even games to orient students to the library. Games, while they take more time, effort, and possibly funds to create and implement, have the advantage of attracting students owing to their entertainment factor. The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Melbourne, Australia, and California State University, Fresno, both created unique online orientation games to inspire students to learn about the library. RMIT’s game, called “Library Amazing Race: Zombie Edition ONLINE,” is an interactive game which serves to both orient students to the physical space of the library and familiarize them with its resources. Players answer questions to “neutralise the zombie threat” (RMIT University n.d.). HML-IQ, the 2010 orientation game of California State University, Fresno, was spread out over several weeks and used a variety of interactive puzzles and games (Fusich et al. 2011). At the University of South Carolina Upstate, students were encouraged to download a podcast tour of the library with which they could orient themselves to the library on their own time (Kearns 2010). The University of California, Merced, went one step further, offering an audio-video tour designed to guide students “through the physical space while introducing them to available services and resources” (Mikkelsen and Davidson 2011, 67). With the many possibilities offered by technology and librarians’ creativity, there are nearly endless ways to offer orientation online.

Perhaps somewhat oddly, there is one method of contributing to online orientation that is largely missing from the literature: social media. Social media, as a “key feature of Web 2.0” (Draper and Turnage 2008, 16), seems a natural choice to promote and/or present orientation materials, but it seems that this has, for the most part, not been done. At least, social media have rarely been presented as a potential tool in orientation specifically, although many libraries are certainly using blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter, wikis, and other social media to promote the library and its resources and to engage the student population (Chu and Du 2013; Collins and Quan-Haase 2014). Some libraries do use social media as a platform to provide some resources that fall under the umbrella of online orientation, such as online tours (Graham, Faix, and Hartman 2009), but the potential of social media to advance online orientation programs specifically has thus far been insufficiently explored.

### **Why online orientation?**

As more and more information moves off the written page and onto the Internet, the necessity of concentrating on orienting students to the library’s online spaces becomes more apparent. Students also expect to be able to access most

information online and may be unable or unwilling to attend in-person orientation sessions, especially at the beginning of the semester, when many new students (who may be those most in need of library orientation) are overwhelmed. Not only this, but students may simply be too nervous or afraid of appearing ignorant to come to the library and ask for help in basic matters such as searching the library catalogue (Brown et al. 2004) and so never develop a basic level of competency in library use. Several university libraries have also raised concerns about the sheer number of new students requiring orientation every year, putting a great strain on the librarians (Dent 2003; Mikkelsen and Davidson 2011; Rosenstein 2013). To meet these student needs and expectations, many are making the same information accessible to new library users at any time.

Online orientation has several benefits which set it apart from traditional in-person instruction. Perhaps the greatest of these is the flexibility afforded by placing orientation materials online. By making orientation information available for students to access at their leisure (Farrell, Driver, and Weathers 2011), the time-crunch aspect is removed. Students no longer need to worry about rushing off to a library tour in the middle of trying to register for classes, moving into their residence, and keeping up with all the other activities that happen at the beginning of a semester. Instead, they can view orientation materials when time is available. This flexibility is valuable not only to frantic new students at the start of the term but also to distance-learning or non-traditional students (Gonzales 2014; Kaufmann 2003), who may not be able to attend library tours and workshops for reasons other than typical beginning-of-semester busyness: working full-time during the day or being geographically distant from the physical campus of the university, for instance. Even if distance-learning students cannot physically come to the library, the great number of resources now available in digital format makes orientation to the library's online spaces imperative to their academic success. Online orientation streamlines students' introduction to these digital resources.

There is also the perennial issue of how to reduce library anxiety in new students. Ever since Mellon's influential 1986 paper, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," formalized library anxiety as a concept, librarians have used orientation programs as a method to reduce this anxiety in students (Brown et al. 2004). While in-person orientation may indeed be useful in this area, when one returns to Mellon's original paper and examines students' own expressions of anxiety and intimidation, one recognizes that online orientation may in fact be more effective in addressing some of the issues than in-person orientation. Many students reported feeling highly intimidated by the physical size of the library, being afraid to enter it and paralysed when they did, having no idea where or how to start (Mellon 1986). Online orientation, particularly in the form of brief instructional videos or other media, can act as a comfortable stepping stone for students with library anxiety. From the safety of their rooms, students can learn where the library is located and how it is laid out, what resources are available, and where and how these can be found. Then, when they do take the step of actually entering the library, they are already broadly familiar with it. Familiarity,

as Mellon (1986) notes, is key to reducing anxiety and increasing comfort with the library. It's a pity that online orientation wasn't even a concept in the mid-1980s, because it could have been a great help to the anxious students Mellon interviewed. Fortunately, students today have orientation options that the students of 30 years ago did not. It would be interesting to redo the study today to see what, if any, impact online orientation has had on library anxiety in students.

The advantages to students of online orientation are many, but they are not the only ones for whom it can be beneficial. Librarians can also benefit. Preparing for and teaching library workshops, including orientation workshops, can take a great deal of time out of a librarian's day. While creating an online orientation program may involve a large outlay of time in the development stage (Zhang, Watson, and Banfield 2007), it can save time in the long run. Even better, as Nichols, Shaffer, and Shockey (2003, 378) note, the implementation of an online orientation program can leave librarians more time to focus their efforts on "more specialized instruction." In short, online orientation can allow librarians to serve more students with less, an important consideration in an age when many academic libraries are facing budget (and, in some cases, staff) cuts (Nichols, Shaffer, and Shockey 2003; Orme 2004).

Nothing is without its downsides, though, and online orientation is no exception. From a student-support perspective, the most obvious and problematic drawback is that online orientation by its nature does not provide personal interaction with librarians and/or library staff, leading to a disconnect between students and librarians (Zhang, Watson, and Banfield 2007). This is perhaps the most potentially problematic issue. It has been shown that personal interaction with librarians is one of the most important factors in reducing library anxiety in students (Van Scoyoc 2003), and, of course, online orientation cannot provide this. Without having that first interaction with a librarian that in-person orientation offers, students may either remain afraid to approach a librarian when they find themselves in need of assistance or conclude that librarians are an unnecessary part of the library experience and assume that they can find everything they need by themselves online. Neither of these are good outcomes, although they are by no means guaranteed outcomes.

Second, a student who has, via an online orientation program, become familiar with the library website, online resources, and so on may nonetheless still be unacquainted with the physical space and non-digital library resources. While a great many, if not the majority, of library resources may now be accessed online, many items are still available only as hard copies (Kearns 2010). Online orientation can, as previously noted, serve to familiarize students with the physical space of the library as well as the website and digital resources, but it may not do so as effectively as having the student actually come to the library and experience the physical space for herself. And, as noted above, a student who has been exposed to the library only via online orientation may assume that all the necessary library resources can be accessed online and believe that the physical library is unnecessary.

Time and money can also be issues. Although, as discussed earlier, online orientation can save librarians and libraries time and money in the long run, putting together an online orientation program can take a great deal of time. Depending on the nature of the program, the responsible librarian or librarians may need to not only decide what information the program will cover, create the content, and settle on the media they will use (video, games, etc.) but also learn new software to construct the program (Farrell, Driver, and Weathers 2011). It may in fact take the expertise of an entire group to complete the project, including not only liaison or reference librarians but also technical services staff (librarians or otherwise). In addition, funds may also need to be put into the project (Zhang, Watson, and Banfield 2007), costing the library extra money at the beginning. While, of course, none of these issues need prevent librarians from considering the possibility of implementing an online orientation program, they are things we must consider before beginning such a project.

### **Efficacy of online instruction**

Much attention has been given of late to the efficacy of online information literacy instruction, although studies focusing directly on the learning outcomes of online orientation programs specifically are rather thin on the ground. The majority of articles do not include data about learning outcomes, so definitive proof of the efficacy or otherwise of online orientation is not currently available. However, given that for the purposes of this article I have defined online orientation as a sub-type of library instruction, it is reasonable to tentatively apply to online orientation the data derived from studies on online information literacy instruction. Of course, it is to be hoped that as online orientation becomes more widely implemented, more work will be done in this area.

A study of the literature reveals that, according to most of the evidence, CAI is just as pedagogically effective as face-to-face instruction (Anderson and May 2010; Johnston 2010; Zhang, Watson, and Banfield 2007), if not *more* effective (Gonzales 2014). While Orme (2004) notes that there is some evidence that online distance learning may not be as effective as in-person instruction, when studies not focusing specifically on information literacy instruction in a library context are excluded, the former conclusion remains. It should also be noted that a preponderance of the articles which find face-to-face instruction more effective—Churkovich and Oughtredare's 2002 study from Deakin University in Australia and Holman's 2000 comparison of CAI and classroom instruction, for instance—date from online instruction's early days in the late 1990s and early 2000s, suggesting that at the time CAI in a library context simply had not yet come into its own. As the concept spread and librarians began to further refine online library instruction, it seems that both learning outcomes and student perceptions became more favourable.

A fair number of studies exist discussing the implementation and outcomes of online information literacy instruction programs at a variety of universities (Archambault 2011; Dent 2003; Fusich et al. 2011; Hess 2014; Partridge et al. 2008), and while most do not include a measurement of the learning outcomes,

those that do show statistics demonstrating that their students' understanding of the material is comparable to that of students in a more traditional information literacy instruction program. One study states bluntly that "method of instruction (online vs. FTF [face-to-face] vs. blended) does not influence students' retention of IL [information literacy] skills" (Anderson and May 2010, 498). In other words, while online instruction is not necessarily more effective than face-to-face instruction, it does just as well. It does especially well if interactive components, such as games, are present (Lindsay et al. 2006; Madhusudhan and Singh 2010; Orme 2004), giving students a chance to engage with the material and assimilate it more effectively.

Studies that do provide learning-outcome data for online instruction/online orientation programs show a positive relationship between CAI and good learning outcomes, and it is worth discussing them at a bit more length to present their data. At Hunter College in New York City, the library implemented an online orientation program called VOILA! (Virtual ORSEM Information Literacy Assessment). Participating students took a quiz upon completion of the online modules. The highest possible score was 42, and students with scores of 28 or above were considered to have good learning outcomes. Although detailed numbers are not provided, out of 158 randomly chosen scores (600 were submitted), the average score was 30, with two modes, 32 and 28 (Dent 2003). These numbers indicate positive learning outcomes for this particular online orientation program. A 2010 library instruction program for first-year English students at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles produced similarly positive results when the overall scores of students who were enrolled in an online version of the course were compared to those of students in a blended course: The average score for the students in the former group was 2.63, while students in the latter averaged 2.49 (Archambault 2011). With this information, combined with the literature on CAI, it is possible to support, if tentatively, the idea that online orientation programs can be highly effective.

### **Reception**

While papers discussing the efficacy of online orientation are not much in evidence, information about participants' attitudes toward it are certainly available. When asked to fill out a feedback form after completing an online orientation program, most students express enthusiasm for and appreciation of the experience. In two articles reporting on the development and implementation of online orientation programs at three different institutions (Hunter College, the University of California, Merced, and Pace University), students reported finding the programs to be effective and helpful in orienting them to the library's space and resources (Dent 2003; Mikkelsen and Davidson 2011; Rosenstein 2013). Perhaps just as importantly, given the role of library orientation in reducing library anxiety, students who participated in an online orientation program at California State University, Fresno, reported that the program left them feeling less intimidated and more comfortable with library (Fusich et al. 2011), despite the fact that, at that point, most of the participants had not yet



necessarily even set foot in the library. The online orientation had served to make them feel welcome and confident. Students at West Kentucky Community and Technical College liked the flexibility offered by their online orientation program (Farrell, Driver, and Weathers 2011). At Brooklyn College, a majority (61.3%) of students actually stated that they preferred virtual orientation to in-person orientation (Georgas 2014).

When students expressed dislike for the program, it was usually related to technical problems (Farrell, Driver, and Weathers 2011; Fusich et al. 2011) rather than the content or the fact that it was in an online format. Naturally, if students are unable to properly use the online orientation tools offered, they may become frustrated and fail to complete the program, leaving them not only without the essential knowledge contained in the program but perhaps also with a negative impression of the library. For these reasons, technical problems with online orientation programs should be taken just as seriously as student complaints about content, especially if a library plans to continue with the program in future semesters.

### **Conclusion**

Online library orientation is rapidly becoming the future of academic library orientation. We are still in the early days, still finding our way in with this new educational model. Creativity and willingness to move forward and develop new tools are crucial to us if we want to adopt online orientation methods and expand our library's educational offerings in this area.

There are specific areas of study that would best further our knowledge of online orientation, three of which I would identify as particularly important and potentially rich areas. The first is data regarding the efficacy of online orientation programs, especially when compared to in-person orientation programs. Currently, we have a significant amount of information, including data, regarding the efficacy of CAI and a less significant, although still relatively large, body of study looking at online orientation programs. However, the latter studies tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative. These types of studies certainly have great value which should not be discounted, but quantitative studies are needed to further this area of study and bolster the current evidence that online orientation is, in fact, a pedagogically effective method of orientation.

Second, online orientation's effect on library anxiety is an area that should be explored further. Many papers touch on this, but I believe that it could be the subject of at least a few studies in and of itself. Turning the focus on students' anxiety with regard to the digital spaces of libraries, as well as the physical spaces, could be fascinating and enlightening. It could also help librarians understand library anxiety in the digital age and inform the creation of future online orientation programs.

Finally, the use of social media as a tool for online orientation needs further exploration. It seems entirely feasible that social media could be used not only as a way to promote library resources but also as a platform for those resources themselves, especially as a way of presenting video tours. If, as it seems, this is

not being widely done, it would be interesting to find out why these potential resources are not being used by librarians. Is it for lack of interest in library social media accounts on the students' or librarians' parts? Are social media simply not seen as a useful tool for online orientation? These, as well as the concepts above, are areas that need more study. It is my hope that, in the future, academic libraries will not only implement online orientation programs but also study their impact on students and explore means to expand the ways in which orientation is offered online. This is information we need if we are to continue the growth, development, and efficacy of online orientation programs.

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