INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOR—ADOLESCENTS

After reviewing more than a dozen items from the research literature on information-seeking behavior of adolescents, the most compelling quote I found expressed skepticism that definitive conclusions could be drawn based upon the studies conducted thus far to determine the nature of this behavior:

> Our current research paradigm suggests that adults study information-seeking strategies of youth *for* the benefit of youth. We conduct research in situations *we* create to which youth often come compelled as a "last resort," in which youth may be neither comfortable nor competent, and in which we define the terms of success…. [A]dults might more appropriately study the tactics of already-engaged and experienced youth in informal information seeking situations to predict successful negotiation for all information seekers (Dresang 1999, 1123).

The author concludes that "the environment for youth has changed dramatically in the digital age, but to date, our paradigm for studying their information-seeking behavior has not.…we must seek out 'with new eyes' productive informal information seeking behavior of the youth population" (1124).

Having said that, there does seem to be a predictable pattern to those aspects of behavior that have been studied in adolescents, and it doesn't differ substantially from the behavioral studies of children. While middle- and high-school students have acquired a few more skills and marginally more discernment than grade school children, these are largely characterized by quantity rather than quality of improvement.

In fact, the criteria of quantity vs. quality is one of the shortsighted ways in which both children and teens deal with information. In his article about young people's use of paper "serials" (magazines), Andrew K. Shenton writes,

> When seeking information for school work, many middle schoolers simply did not rate magazines highly as information sources. Part of this prejudice derived from the youngsters' tendency to equate plentiful information with good information. Wherever possible, students attempted to

find a single source that would provide all the material they required. The more information contained within a certain source, the more useful that source was adjudged to be (Shenton 2004, 53).

Similarly, in Sandra G. Hirsh's study of fifth grade children, the question of quality of material was conflated with quantity: "Some students considered the amount of information contained in a resource a measure of quality of the information" (Hirsh 1999, 1274).

Shenton's research of "young people's information needs and the actions they take in response to them" attempted to "construct a picture of how youngsters' information universes develop during the years of childhood, most particularly the period between four and eighteen years of age." The evidence of all the studies I read seems to show that information-seeking behavior in adolescents is on a continuum with childhood, and that progress is quite uneven and not necessarily age-specific.

For instance, Hirsh's findings (regarding Internet searching) that "children have difficulty formulating and modifying search queries, like to browse for information, prefer to search by keyword for more focused queries, and have difficulties with Boolean logic" are echoed by Jennifer L. Branch, whose study of Canadian junior high school students concluded that "The participants tended to use search terms only from the original question, and had difficulty selecting topics and articles from the retrieved list" (Branch 2003, 47). Shenton extends this with his study specific to periodicals, in which he notes that while both children and teens read magazines for leisure interests, youths of all ages tended to stick with what they knew—books and the Internet—when it came to research for schoolwork, even when use of magazines for academic work would have benefitted them by providing both current and pertinent material.

A perception also common to both children and teens is about the nature of information available at the library: Shenton notes that "when they needed help from an assistant to find information materials, the young users invariably envisaged that they would be shown to relevant *books*" (Shenton 2004, 53). This impression that "libraries are predominantly rooms full of books," with its lack of awareness about other resource materials, has reinforced for both teens and children the idea that the World Wide Web is a more desirable path for research, because of the immediacy of information available.

Schacter, Chung & Dorr (1998) found that students perceive the materials they find from an electronic source to be more relevant and more valuable than those they find in print, and that they depend heavily on electronic resources to supply their need for information. Several studies of both children and high school students commented

that one reason they gravitate to on-line resources is that much information there is displayed in a graphic form, and that the more visually oriented were able to use graphic "cues" to help them determine relevance to their search. The Internet also seems to satisfy the aforementioned perception that quantity equals quality, but not by providing large quantities of information in one place (as in a book) but rather by convincing through the sheer number of "hits" that information on the Web is plentiful and will therefore eventually serve all their needs. But neither children nor teens seem to question the accuracy of the information they find (Hirsh 1999, 1266).

In a study done by the Nielsen Norman Group in 2005 regarding the usability of websites for teenagers, 38 users between the ages of 13 and 17 participated in the test of 23 websites. The study concluded that—contrary to many misconceptions about teens, who are heavy users of technology products and therefore are presumed to be techno-savvy across the board—"teenagers are not in fact superior Web geniuses who can use anything a site throws at them." The success rate, indicating the "proportion of times users were able to complete a representative and perfectly feasible task on the target site," was 55 percent. The study concluded that "teens' poor performance is caused by three factors: insufficient reading skills, less sophisticated research strategies, and a dramatically lower patience level [than adults, who scored 66 percent] (Nielsen 2005)."

The study also indicated teenagers "don't like to read a lot on the Web," that they prefer interactive features, photos and images, and that they will not use a web site with useful content but poor presentation. Studies of children on the Web confirm these same preferences.

Ross J. Todd's overview of the field of human information behavior divides that of children and adolescents into three streams of research: school students learning through the school library; through the World Wide Web; and everyday information seeking. In the school section, he discusses Kuhlthau's research on the Information Search Process (ISP), but concludes that "in school assignments, the early stages of the search process are often hurried, and the middle stages are frequently passed over, as students are urged to collect and complete their work." The outcome is that students "fail to move beyond perceiving the task of searching as primarily one of information gathering to a task of forming a focused perspective from the information encountered" (Todd 2003, 31). In his section on searching the Web, he cites evidence that "although young people enjoy searching for information on the Web and are motivated to use it as a communication and entertainment tool," the lack of information literacy puts up roadblocks to effective informa-

tion seeking and use. And after examining everyday information seeking, both in libraries and on the web, he concludes that "making information available does not necessarily mean it is taken up and used" (33).

Summary:

My conclusion about adolescent information seeking behavior is that before the Internet, children and teens were badly educated on how to seek out and make use of information sources, and since the Internet, that problem has been both magnified and obscured—the hit-or-miss approach used by these information seekers may be inefficient, but by reason of the sheer quantity of information available, they usually manage to find something relevant. They're not any better at seeking information on the Web than they were in the library, but because their perceived direct access to sources has increased a hundredfold, this is not as obvious as it should be, either to them or to the educators requiring it of them. An education program needs to be undertaken—but not immediately with the children and adolescents. First, the adults who guide them need to address the issues of information poverty and information literacy in the real world environment in a systematic and practical way, challenging "the assumption that adolescents growing up in rich information environments…readily make use of it" (Todd 2003, 30) and instead realizing that without skills, the presence of that information is useless.

I'd like to end on a personal note, which is that reading all these studies of information seeking behavior pointed up to me the deficiencies of my own education in this regard. Despite the fact that I attended an excellent public school system; despite the fact that I have a college education; despite the fact that I earned top grades throughout my school career; despite the fact that I read at a young age and consistently maintained this pattern of reading and library use throughout my life; I find now that I am in graduate school that my background as a student and learner is woefully inadequate to my current needs.

Based on my own lack of sophistication about the value and authority of information sources and the tools available to me in seeking out information, I'm not sure whether the findings of all these studies of information seeking behavior are specific to their subjects (the children and adolescents). I would conclude based on my readings that everyone—child, teen, adult and senior—starts in the same place, and though we have different cognitive abilities at different ages, all of us are prone to the ignorance and frustrations children experience, if we have not been properly educated in the pursuit of information.

# # #

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Pathfinder Project

The premise for my Pathfinder project is that a middle school history teacher (9th grade) has given an assignment to her students based on African American History Month, and I as the reference librarian will provide a pathfinder helpful to fulfilling that assignment. I have restricted my pathfinder to sources readily available through the public library (LAPL) through databases, from general reference stacks, from the library collection (including inter-library loan) or via online searching from a home computer. I have treated the exercise as an "information literacy" session with the student, and have parenthetically provided "selection criteria" to document the reasoning behind my selections.

THE ASSIGNMENT:

For African American History Month, turn in a report (**biography**) about an important person in African American history. Since your teacher does not wish to read 35 reports on Martin Luther King, Jr. (although he is a possible subject), please expand your search to select your person from within one of the following three eras:

1. **Abolition (Antislavery) / Underground Railroad**

2. **Harlem Renaissance**

3. **Civil Rights Movement**

The report should be about the person within the time period in which he or she lived. In other words, not a "she was born, she did this, she died" biography that you could copy from the encyclopedia—begin with the era itself and what was happening, and then discuss how your person affected his/her surroundings and other people by his/her actions.

Include details beyond just the facts: For instance, if your person is author James Baldwin, don't just include a list of his books but actually look at the books and discuss briefly what they are about and why they were important.

Try to communicate what was extraordinary about the person and his/her accomplishments, especially within the limitations imposed upon people of African descent in that era.

Instead of the obvious people (Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, MLK Jr.), try selecting someone less well known (though be sure there is enough information available on that person to write a report).

Length: six to eight pages, double-spaced.   Provide a bibliography of your sources.
Due: Three weeks from today (Friday)   Ask if you need clarification on this.

PATHFINDER

I. GENERAL RESOURCES—OVERVIEW OF TOPICS:

From the LAPL website, **<www.lapl.org>**

DATABASES:

LAPL website➜click on **Databases** in left column *(input library card # and zip code)*➜(scroll down the alphabetical listings to:) **World Book Encyclopedia**

Search **"African Americans,"** and click on **"African Americans"** (the first listing) to go to the Encyclopedia articles. Look there at the column on the left, where you will see "Main Sections," followed by "Full Article Contents." You can scroll or link down to **"Antislavery Movement"** (which will contain the **Underground Railroad**), the **"Civil Rights Movement"** or to **"Harlem Renaissance"** and see an overview of these topics. From there you can link to specific people to consider for your biography report.

[**SELECTION CRITERIA:** Although there are a couple of encyclopedias available through the LAPL databases, plus, of course, as physical volumes in the library, I selected the online World Book because of its organization and ease of use. Although I only searched to one general topic (African Americans), the set-up of the online WB is such that contained within the general entry is a substantial overview of every directly related topic, plus dozens of hyperlinks to indirectly related information. The material is clearly set out, easily navigable (you can either scroll down or click links that jump you directly to that section of the page), and many photos are included, giving the page visual interest—always an advantage with adolescents.]

LAPL website➜**Databases** ➜**Discovering Collection**

Searching by "subject" for the three eras will yield 30 to 40 informative results for each. From those it is possible to get both an overview of the era in question and also discover a few people who participated in the events of that era for further research; don't neglect looking at the **"Related Subjects"** column at the left, which gives hyperlinks to other items of interest on your topic. For your overview, also try out the **"Timeline Search"**—it's fun! If you find in reading the topic overviews that you have discovered a person of interest for your biography, **do a new search**. You can simply put the person's name in the same search window; or you can click

on the **"Person Search"** button, or go through **"History Search"** or **"Literature Search"** (if the person is an author), and then in that window do an **"Author Search."** Also in the "Literature Search" window is a feature called **"Literary Eras."** If you click on that, scroll down the list of eras to **"Harlem Renaissance"** and you will get an overview that includes a list of the prominent authors from that period. Then you can go back and do an author search on a particular person from that list.

[SELECTION CRITERIA: The search process is transparent on this database, and the option to search by category (History, Literature, Person, etc.) is particularly useful. The interactive Timeline, using photos from the eras and popping up a quote about each era as you "roll" the mouse over it, seems like a feature likely to appeal to young adults.]

Selected WEBSITES at the OVERVIEW level:

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.
    <http://www.freedomcenter.org/> Copyright © 2002 (accessed 3-9-06).

A well-organized and information-rich website. The home page unfortunately doesn't reveal the scope of this site, but once you click on the **"Learn"** window and then on **"Underground Railroad"** at the left, it is clear, easy to navigate, informative, and inspirational. See: **Timeline**—a history of slavery in America; **Places**—Cool map-driven list of historic sites and their related stories; **People**—a comprehensive alphabetical list of people—enslaved and freed Blacks, Whites, Native Americans, and others—with a historical page plus a list of at least six bibliographic resources for each; and **Resources**—a long list of website spin-offs on the subject of the Underground Railroad, slavery, and all related subjects—including lots of museums and their collections/exhibits.

Harlem: 1900 through 1940. Originally published by The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, 1991. Website developed by Cultural Heritage Initiatives for Community Outreach (CHICO), School of Information, University of Michigan, 1997. <http://www.si.umich.edu/chico/Harlem/> Last updated April 2001 (accessed 3-12-06).
Click on **"Timeline"** and you will find the Harlem Renaissance era broken down by decade and then by year, highlighting significant events in each year. An excel-

lent way to get an overview and also discover many people of interest for your biographical report. Also click on **"Resources,"** and under Bibliography, click on **"For Young Readers"** for an excellent list of books on specific people by reputable writers, which you can then search through the LAPL Catalog.

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Copyright © 2004.
   <http://bcri.bham.al.us/index.html> (accessed 3-9-06).
The purpose of the Archives Division of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is to "collect, house and make accessible records and documents relating to events that occurred during the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s in the city of Birmingham and the United States." Tip: If you click on **"Site Map,"** it makes the site easier to navigate. **"Historic Timeline"** is an interactive series of the events; click on **"Online Resource Gallery"** to hear audio recordings of people's experiences during the civil rights movement in Birmingham.

II. NARROWING YOUR SEARCH—TOPICAL SOURCES:

📖 LAPL IN-LIBRARY REFERENCE BOOKS:

These books will be in the Reference Section of the library. Ask the reference librarian for help finding them.

Williams, Michael W., ed. *The African American Encyclopedia*. New York: Marshall
   Cavendish Corp., 1993.

Look up **Civil rights**: Vol. 2, pp. 311-327. Note the items that appear in small caps—this indicates other topics you could look up, i.e., MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT, ROSA PARKS, etc. Look up **Harlem Renaissance**: Vol. 3, pp. 714-718; also see Vol. 6, pp 1624-1626 under "VISUAL ARTS," which will give you names of specific artists. Look up **Underground Railroad**: Vol. 6, pp. 1601-1604. Once you have narrowed your search to a particular person, also be sure to look up **that person** in this encyclopedia.

[**SELECTION CRITERIA:** This narrows the field from a general encyclopedia to one specifically about African Americans. The entries are quite a bit lengthier here, and additional resources are provided at the back of Volume 6, where you can find a list of **Research Centers and Libraries** that contain collections of information about African Americans; **Newspapers, Magazines, Journals and Other Periodicals** about African Americans; and a list of **People by Profession**.]

Smith, Jessie Carney, ed. *Notable Black American Women, Vols I and II.* Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., © 1992 (Vol. I), 1996 (Vol. II).

A book of 800 biographies of notable African American women, spanning 1686 to 1970. The compilers felt that notable women in general and notable Black women in particular had received too little attention or acknowledgement. The book is organized by Contents and also by Area of Endeavor, so you can look up a name, or go by "artists," "writers," etc.

Salem, Dorothy C., ed. *African American Women: A Biographical Dictionary*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1993.

300 short biographies arranged alphabetically, with extensive bibliographic information useful for extending your research. This is a resource to find the titles of books in which a biographical sketch of your person can be found. Then you can see if LAPL Catalog contains those books and check them out.

Back to the LAPL website➜**Databases**

➜**Biography Resource Center + Marquis Who's Who**
A database of biographical information on more than 275,000 individuals from many sources. The sources are cited, so you can explore those as well.

➜**Biography and Genealogy Master Index**
An index to biographical dictionaries and directories. This is also a tool to find specific book titles about your person.

➜**African American Biographical Database**
The AABD brings together in one place the biographies of thousands of African Americans, many not to be found in any other reference source. It draws its initial content from Chadwyck-Healey's *Black Biographical Dictionaries 1790-1950* and includes descriptive listings of individuals taken from *Black Biography, 1790-1950: A Cumulative Index*.

If your interests lie in art or music, you could also choose as your subject an artist or musician from the Harlem Renaissance, using:

➜**Grove Dictionary of Art** OR **Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians**
and look for your person there—you will find biographical material plus lists of their works of art or musical compositions, plus a bibliography at the end that

might suggest <u>books</u> about the person, which you could then search for in the...

LAPL CATALOG

Log into LAPL with your library card *(input number and zip code)*, and then click on CATALOG. Search your three topics under "subject headings" to find some books that explore those topics in more detail. Here are some recommended finds:

For **Underground Railroad:**

Hamilton, Virginia. *Many Thousands Gone: Americans from Slavery to Freedom.* Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, © 1996.

Virginia Hamilton has a lot of published material (fiction and nonfiction) about the African American experience and is considered an authority.

Rappaport, Doreen. *Escape from Slavery: Five Journeys to Freedom.* Illustrated by Charles Lilly. New York: HarperCollins, © 1991.

This book is from the juvenile literature section, but its clear presentation of slave laws of the era and the suspenseful accounts of the five escapes make it both a worthwhile resource and a good read.

For **Harlem Renaissance:**

Haskins, James. *The Harlem Renaissance.* Connecticut: Millbrook Press, © 1996.

This book provides an excellent introduction to Harlem that includes a discussion of the art, music and literature that were produced there in the boom years preceding the Great Depression, as well as the people, events, and social and political institutions that shaped the period.

[**Selection Criteria:** I chose this book out of at least a dozen on the Harlem Renaissance because it was mentioned by two separate reviewers of *other* books as being the "superior book" on the subject—and it is quite impressive.]

Jordan, Denise. *Harlem Renaissance Artists.* Chicago: Heinemann Library, © 2003.

Biographies of eleven artists from the 1920s.

Lewis, David Levering, ed. *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader.* New York: Penguin Books, 1995. (Viking Portable Library series)

Fiction and nonfiction works by 45 writers from the "New Negro Movement."

For **Civil Rights Movement:**

Bordewich, Fergus M. *Bound for Canaan: the underground railroad and the war for the soul of America.* New York: Amistad, © 2005.

A history of the Railroad that also highlights the real stories of its participants in a fascinating way.

Williams, Donnie, with Wayne Greenhaw. *The Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery bus boycott and the people who broke the back of Jim Crow*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, © 2006.

An unusual perspective of the boycott that focuses on organizer E. D. Nixon, along with other significant personal histories of the boycott.

III. PINPOINTING YOUR SUBJECT

LAPL CATALOG

Log into LAPL with your library card *(input number and zip code)*, and then click on CATALOG.

Search the person you have chosen. If your choice is an author and you search him/her as an **author**, you will get lists of the books he/she has *written*, which may include an autobiography; you may also get books *about* the person, but the best way to be sure of that is to also search the person's name as a **subject** or a **keyword**. If you search as a subject and get no hits, don't be discouraged; just retry your search as a keyword. (If your person is *not* an author, of course you would search them only as a subject or keyword.)

You will discover that in addition to books, you may find **video or audio recordings**, which could also be excellent sources of information about your person.

Once you have done your search and gotten a list of results, click on an item of interest. You will get complete bibliographic information about the book, including the **call number** that tells you in what part of the library you can find the book. Also available on some books are **"reviews"** and **"annotation,"** and if you click on these, you can see what other people thought of your book and get a description of what the book covers, which will help you decide which books you want to read.

You will *also* get a list of "Where to find it," which will tell you if your branch has a copy and whether it is checked out. If your branch has no copy, click on **Place Hold** (left column), give your card # and zip code, and then scroll down and click

on the bubble in front of your branch; once you have also clicked on "Place Hold," **inter-library loan** will deliver your book to your branch, and inform you by email when it's there to pick up!

Remember that in all your general sources, you have seen attached bibliographies of suggest further readings; you could search some of these books in the LAPL Catalog with a **"title" search** and see if they are available as well.

Then check out your books, and start reading!

Google, Yahoo!, Ask Jeeves, etc.

Once you have selected your person, you could also do a search on your favorite internet search engine—but use your search engine only as a supplemental tool. The reliability of material gathered from the Web is hard to establish, and the sources tend to be repetitive; therefore, don't make it your only, or even your primary source! But the Internet *is* a great place to look at pictures of your person or their art, listen to their music, or discover what other people have to say about your person. If you use material from the web, be sure to write down exactly where and when you found it, the url (website address), etc., to include on your bibliography page.

If you need help with your bibliography page, you can go to:

<http://www.noodletools.com/>

This pathfinder should give you plenty of resources to fulfill your assignment—context of the era in which your person lived, the other people by whom he/she was surrounded and influenced, and your particular person's life and accomplishments. Good luck!