This is a regular column of reader-prepared answers offered in response to a specific question posed by Perspectives. Readers are invited not only to submit "answers" but also "questions" that they would like to see addressed in future issues.

Appearing as special guest editor of the column for this issue is Christopher Simonis, Director of the Library and Assistant Professor of Law at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He is a member of the Perspectives Editorial Board.

Our Question
Should using the Internet to locate and acquire legal and nonlegal resources be taught in legal research courses? What have you done, if anything, to incorporate the Internet into your teaching?

Your Answers

"The answer, I believe, should be YES. Our students will use the Internet to obtain legal information every bit as much—if not more (because it is free)—than LEXIS and WESTLAW. Unfortunately, there are no Internet reps to handle training as there are for LEXIS and WESTLAW. Therefore, I will be doing mass training in the fall and spring using a large classroom and an LCD connection to an overhead projector. Many of our students have already been out on the Net. They merely need to know what kinds of legal information are available and how to find them."

—Steve Epstein, University of Illinois College of Law

"Nothing! I think the Internet is unstable, volatile, and characterized by phenomena that look like anarchy to me. What I know today seems to evaporate before I master it. When I do master something the '#@!%&*#@ Net goes down, hangs up, or burps and I have lost valuable time. It’s fun, it’s interesting, it may be the future, but right now it all too often seems a phantasmic kaleidoscope lacking organized substance. We make it available to students and may even use it from time to time. We are not teaching it."

—Roger F. Jacobs, Notre Dame Law School Library

"[Y]es, I teach its use in my advanced legal research class. I devoted an entire two-hour class to searching the Internet for sources this past spring. Students enjoyed having an introduction to the Internet but found the homework assignment the most difficult because of the difficulties of connecting to some sites. I think it is absolutely imperative that a unit on the Internet be included in at least an advanced legal research class, because of the vast resources that are there and the real possibility that [students] will be using the Internet in their practice."

—Darcy Kirk, Georgetown Law Library

"In most circumstances, I do not think teaching Internet research skills as part of a first-year LR&W course is a good idea. My plate is full—and the mashed potatoes runneth over. Would that I could introduce basic hard-copy and electronic research, objective style and analysis, and persuasive style and analysis in a three-credit, one-year offering!"

"I do, however, require all my students to learn e-mail (a kind of Internet?) because I have everyone on a 'list' for discussion and Q & A. So, I'm not a purist."

—Martha Siegel, Suffolk University Law School

"I think the Internet should be taught as part of the legal research course, perhaps just after ... WESTLAW and LEXIS are taught. An Internet class needs to be hands-on. ... Because the Internet can be slow and unreliable, I would suggest that a discussion of the Internet take place during the class period, with the hands-on part scheduled in the evenings and on the weekends when it is easier to connect. ..."

—Juliet M. Casper, Northwestern University Law Library

"Yes [the Internet should be taught]. But only after the basics of books and WESTLAW and LEXIS and online catalogs are learned. This sort of approach would unfortunately, but almost unavoidably, relegate such training to an upper-level course or just a bluish of an introduction to the Internet [in a first-year research course]."

"I disagree with [the proposition that] ... most lawyers will be using the Net for a great deal of their research. But perhaps I am just not up enough on the full wealth of the Net. As more legal and nonlegal resources ... become available, the need for knowing how to do research on the Net will grow. But by then most students will come to us from college ... having done significant amounts of research through the Net and we will be doing mostly bibliographic work."

—Steve Jamar, Howard University School of Law
“Should we teach the Internet? Yes, as any other legal resource. But just as we hold off CALR and CD-ROMs until after the paper versions are understood, so should we hold off Internet materials until later in the process.

“Prior to this year, we just mentioned Internet. This year, we are having a 50-minute session—Legal Research on the Internet—for Legal Research and Writing III (third-semester students). Internet sources are also discussed in library sessions for courses with writing credits.”

—John Perkins, Wake Forest University Law Library

“We hold legal research classes for our summer associates and new associates ... [and] have started including an Internet class. All our attorneys and paralegals have access to the Internet through the firm network and the firm does have its home page up. We use our home page as a jumping-off site for most of what the attorneys need. We try to add the best links by subject to each area of law. The Information Resource Center staff puts on occasional Netscape classes. ... I am currently doing a department by department meeting showing by subject area information found on commercial databases and on the Internet. ... I think it is important for attorneys to know what is and is not on the Internet and how current things are.”

—Carol Bannen, Reinhart, Boerner, Van Dueren, Norris and Rieselbach, Milwaukee, WI

“I agree that one issue the Internet raises is deciding how to best use performe limited LR&W class hours—and whether the Net is yet worthy of that time. My decision is that it is at least worth a handout to let students know what is possible, if they choose to pursue it.”

—T errill Pollman, Stetson University College of Law

“Here at Columbia, the reference librarians will do one-on-one or small-group Internet training upon request. We have discreetly advertised the service in our law library newsletters, which appear once per semester. We are considering setting up formal small-group training sessions, but are currently constrained by inadequate space. ... We usually show students Yahoo, Thomas, and Washburn. That’s usually all they need to get launched.”

—Francine L. Alfandary, Columbia Law School Library and Fordham Law School

“It doesn’t matter the source of a student’s (or lawyer’s) information—reporters, CALR, Internet, etc.—they still need to be taught to verify the accuracy, timeliness, etc., of the information they are using. The Internet is a new(er) source of legal information and does have a great potential for delivering inaccurate or out-of-date information to the unsuspecting. Since an increasing percentage of law students are arriving at law school with some Internet exposure, it is important to teach them to view legal information retrieved via the Net with a critical eye, whether or not the mechanics of seeking out such information are taught.”

—Eric Wade, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit Library

“I integrate Internet training (including World Wide Web (WWW) training) into all my legal research classes [and] also into my Legal Methods course for the students in our LL.M. [program] in U.S. Legal Studies for foreign lawyers and in the Selected Problems in Environmental Law and Policy course, which I teach with three other faculty. ... The students really love Internet training and will do almost any research exercise or engage in any search-and-destroy mission in order to play with the computers. Along the way, I hope they actually pick up some useful information! I design the exercises around a real-life problem and force them to compare print and electronic resources (LEXIS, WESTLAW, Internet, WWW, CD-ROM) and decide the most efficient way to answer the question. In that way they’re also being exposed to a little bit of law office management.

“Internet and WWW training are absolutely crucial these days. So many firms and agencies (potential employers!) have Internet access and WWW home pages. ... It’s no longer a luxury or a toy; it’s a fact of life.”

—C. A. Corcos, Case Western Reserve University Law Library

“As a private law firm librarian who teaches the new associates legal research sessions in our firm, I suggest that the law schools focus on the primary issue: legal research skills. That is what is most useful and important. It may not be timely or of that much interest to students versus the attractions of the Internet, but if the law schools don’t have the time or staff to devote to expanding the legal research curriculum, then concentrate on the basics.”

—Martha Goldman, Jones, Day, Reavis & Pogue, New York
"I think we should teach students how to use the Internet. Unfortunately, we should also teach them many other things, and something has to give. Skills coverage? The Web? Legislative history? Regulations? Pleadings? You could keep naming them for quite a while. The rate of accretion of new research techniques is accelerating, and our accretion of credit hours isn’t keeping pace.

In our three-semester, seven-hour program, we might touch on the Net in the third course. ... The sad thing is that many LR&W teachers have little time for learning new things about research and writing, and receive even less support. How many of us even teach WESTLAW or LEXIS? ... Schools fail to give LR&W teachers adequate hardware and software; they are usually years behind the national trends on technology for anyone. [Chicago-Kent] is the exception, not the rule."
—Jan Levine, University of Arkansas Law School, Fayetteville

Next Issue’s Question

It’s springtime and so one’s thoughts turn naturally to meandering in meadows, punting on ponds, strolling on [snowless] streets—and grubbing for graduation gifts. To help all those panic-stricken shoppers with soon-to-be lawyers on their cap and gown lists, what’s your “best buy” in a legal research tool or technique—the one “essential” that no new lawyer leaving the halls of academe should be without?

Please send your answers (and suggested questions for future issues) to
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LR&W–Related Internet Discussion Lists

TEACHLAWRES–L
Susan Lewis-Somers of the J.W. Long Law Library, Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, has established a new discussion list devoted to conversations about teaching legal research in all kinds of settings, using formal and informal methods of instruction. Mark Folmsbee, Washburn University of Topeka School of Law Library, is the technical wizard and co-listowner. Topics that are commonly discussed include pedagogical issues, such as how to teach LR to a particular audience; efforts to coordinate LR instruction among law school, law firm, and court libraries; integrating instruction in the use of print and online resources; and innovative teaching techniques.

To subscribe to TEACHLAWRES–L:
• send a message to listproc@lawlib.wuacc.edu
  [leave subject line blank]
• include in the body of the message:
  subscribe teachlawres-l [your first name and last name]

LEGWRI–L
A similar forum for those interested in legal writing programs is provided by the Chicago-Kent College of Law’s Internet Discussion List for Legal Writing Instructors. Technical assistance about participating in this listserv may be directed to Will Sadler, Associate Director of Computing Services at Chicago-Kent (312/906-5302).

To subscribe to LEGWRI–L:
• send a message to
  listserv@chicagokent.kentlaw.edu
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  subscribe legwri-l [your first name and last name]