Christopher Smith

WRIT 501

Dr. K

02 September, 2008

It is not really appropriate to say that the internet has influenced the way we do research for papers. Yes, that is true, but if we look closer at the techniques used by the average college undergraduate, it is more relevant and culturally defining than this. The virtual realm has influenced the acquisition of knowledge to such a degree that the web has redefined the very meaning of the research paper. Using the internet in research, papers operate like a search engine. Students seek out individual snippets of fact from the vast quantities of the up-loadable. To our generation the "traditional" research paper consists of nothing more than a mosaic of facts, conveyed with flowery language and conspicuous paraphrasing. Naturally it is the web that dumps the pieces into our laps; presorted, sometimes with citations included. Of course this is a generalization, and there are courses and assignments in which this strategy will not apply, however they are ordinarily reserved for upper lever courses, and primarily within the English Department. Over the course of four years, in my collegiate experience there have been, I think, around five papers in which the composition has been more than taking source materials and assembling them into a loosely coherent, pre-fabricated, erector set paper. For those who may not be familiar with this style of paper building, I present to you a step by step guide to your very own build-a-paper. (Yes this is often my strategy too, and yes, I appreciate the hypocrisy.)

Step One: Wikipedia! --- Like Starting at the Candy House and Following the Bread Crumbs Backwards.

Wikipedia. This is it. This is Hansel and Gretel's Candy house, but instead of gumdrop, peppermint, and lollipop architecture, it is an edifice of dates, biographies, and trivia. For the average Collegiate paper, wikipedia fulfills the first objective of research methods. Wikipedia is simply the compendium of all the information one would need to learn the basics of almost any subject. And while no, we, as intelligent students would not be foolish enough to draw any viable material for a paper from such an academically disreputable source, wikipedia provides the most important aspect of a well-developed paper: Context. No single step can boost the efficiency of research faster than establishing the subject's basic framework of knowledge. With wikipedia I can, in 8 minutes and 47 seconds (Yes, I timed it.) tell you William Blake was born November 28th, 1757 and died August 12th 1827. I can learn that Blake is known for his pre-romantic work in both poetry and painting, that Blake was a student at the Royal Academy in Old Somerset House, and that he used his own relief etchings to decorate his *Songs of Innocence and Experience.* This information was collected by typing "William Blake" into the search bar. The student arrives, in a matter of keystrokes at all of the basic pertinent facts. By obtaining the general knowledge quickly and easily students can take the context of a person, place or time with little effort. With the power of context future readings are less convoluted and simpler to comprehend, and as a result information is compiled at a faster rate.

Step Two: Making an Outline --- A Place for Everything…

With a very basic working knowledge providing a backdrop, the next step in building a typical paper is organizing and processing the information from Wikipedia. From this organization of facts, students can decide what subjects they want to use in the paper. By deciding the specific information a student wants to include in the paper, research can be optimized. This step allows the research to be conducted in very specific areas and minimized the amount of time the students spends learning about aspects of the paper. It has an added advantage of keeping the research on task, as it is very easy to be distracted working in a virtual environment, as Carr does imply in his article. This is the only step of my personal strategy that involved pen and paper. Ordinarily I will draw up an outline and physically write transitions. Once the framework of the paper is set it is time to begin…

Step Three: WIKIPEDIA!!! --- It's a Candy House, and it Gives Directions!

The most beautiful aspect of wikipedia as a research tool is that, in addition to the instant access to general information, it provides you, not only with all the context, but all the links to the sources the contributors used initially. This allows students to use wikipedia as a central informational hub. While information from wikipedia can not be used as a direct source, with the links provided, facts from articles that students want to pull from the site is in the majority of cases only one click away from the original article. Not only does this provide a simple means of accessing additional information, the linked

sites are quite often perfectly reputable with plenty of credentials. With outline in tow, I personally, begin with my first topic of discussion and generate a list of facts germane to the paragraph. One small simple transition later, the research for paragraph two follows in the same tradition. With such simple access to easy and free information, traditional research methods have become obsolete. Facts mindlessly pulled from a variety of Professors and articles are taken and inserted into the framework. After all the research data has been collected, composition moves (again, personally) at around one page every twenty minutes. So the pieces are inserted into the framework until a capriciously insightful, lusciously worded sunset ending leaves a mildly sweet aftertaste that sometimes squeezes a couple of extra points from an unsuspecting professor.

Returning to the article by Carr, I think this is exactly the reason for academia's resentment towards the cyber generation. In the pre-web society, research papers were designed to make a student or scholar go out and actively search for the materials, compile that information piece by piece manually, and from there, build a context of their own. The mental exercise of researching before the web was not necessarily the collection of random facts. The exercise lies in assembling the facts gleaned from hours of research into a context of your own. Students were expected to build their own little information houses built from blood, sweat, and breadcrumbs. With information so readily available on demand, Research papers have devolved into nothing more than little hand written search engine results. Students scan for key words and topics among a myriad of information and compile them into a record to present to the professor, as if he

were our user, and we are his spiders. These papers fail to force the user to have and use the insight and intellect to foster the application of knowledge. While we, as a generation are better and faster at gaining facts than any other, our circuitry may be less suited to the more subtle understanding that comes from deep reading and hard research. In essence, the internet has managed to reverse the objective of the research papers. Research before the web meant assembling facts to foster greater understanding. Today's research is based upon using the greater understanding to gather facts.