

Print Citator Instruction: What to Do?*

Jennifer S. Murray**

Ms. Murray discusses the University of Southern California Law School's decision to continue print citator instruction despite the prevalence of the online citator. The results of her inquiry regarding the current status of print citator instruction to the AALL Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section discussion list are analyzed.

¶1 As law librarians, we all too often must defend print resources. There is a common misconception that print resources will soon become a novelty format replaced by electronic versions of those same resources. But we know this is simply not the case. Print resources continue to serve valuable functions in legal research.¹ As a result, I was surprised in the summer of 2002 to find myself contemplating whether law students still needed instruction in the use of print citators. I wondered if the citator was an example of what heretofore I had thought impossible. Had the print citator been surpassed by its electronic counterpart?

¶2 In previous years at the University of Southern California Law School (USC), we always had taught first-year law students how to use citators in both print and electronic formats.² The students then completed assignments using both. But recently we had made major changes in the format of the legal research course. These format changes allowed us the opportunity to critically analyze the way in which we taught the course. In reviewing the course format, we questioned whether print citator instruction was still necessary. We suspected that the students might not use the print citator enough to justify instruction, making it unnecessary. Before making what seemed like a pretty radical decision, however, I posted a

* © Jennifer S. Murray, 2003.

** Senior Law Librarian—Research and Instructional Services, University of Southern California, Gabriel and Matilda Barnett Information Technology Center and Asa V. Call Law Library, Los Angeles, California. The author wishes to thank Brian Raphael, Assistant Director of the Library and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Law, Gabriel and Matilda Barnett Information Technology Center and Asa V. Call Law Library, for his helpful reviews of earlier drafts of this article.

1. For a discussion of print versus online resources in general, see Theodore A. Potter, *A New Twist on an Old Plot: Legal Research Is a Strategy, Not a Format*, 92 LAW LIBR. J. 287, 2000 LAW LIBR. J. 25.
2. At the University of Southern California Law School, the law librarians teach legal research as an individual nongraded course to the first-year law students. This course is required in both the fall and spring semesters. Citators are taught in the fall semester.

query to the AALL Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section electronic discussion list.³ In this query, I asked for information on how many schools no longer taught print citators.

¶3 The responses to my inquiry told an interesting story.⁴ Of the twenty-three responses, seventeen law schools taught both print and online citators while six taught only online citators. The reasons offered by the responding law schools to explain their approach to teaching citators can be grouped into two categories: procedural and substantive.

¶4 The first category, procedural, included the need to teach print citators because the legal writing program required it. Other schools had to teach print citators because the students did not receive their LexisNexis and Westlaw passwords until after citator instruction had already occurred. On the other hand, there were some schools that could not teach print citators because the large size of their first-year classes made the logistics of providing the necessary instruction difficult if not impossible.

¶5 The substantive reasons were more complex.⁵ Most schools still teaching print citators believe that doing so provides a fundamental background essential to understanding the online citator. In addition, some schools felt it likely that at some point in the future their students would be in a situation or work environment in which they would not have access to an electronic citator and would therefore have to rely on a print citator instead. Similarly, some schools also argued that their students might work in legal clinics or in other legal settings where cost plays an important role in legal research. When every dollar is at issue, the use of a fee-based online citator may not be an option. These schools felt they would be doing a disservice to their students if they did not provide print citator instruction.

¶6 At USC, we were particularly concerned with two facets of teaching print citators. First, would the student remember how to use print citators after our instruction? And second, how effective was lecturing as a method of teaching the citator? When using a citator during law school, students almost always prefer an electronic product. It is less complicated and typically allows free printing. As a result, we were extremely doubtful that, based on instruction in one class, students would be able to recall exactly how to use a print citator at a later date. Also, we concluded that lecturing is not the most effective means of citator instruction. It

-
3. Posting of Jennifer S. Murray, jmurray@law.usc.edu, Teaching Citators, to all-sis@lists.washlaw.edu (July 11, 2002) (copy on file with author). Responses were summarized for the list on July 30, 2002.
 4. Posting of Jennifer S. Murray, jmurray@law.usc.edu, Response Summary of Query re: Teaching Citators, to allsis@lists.washlaw.edu (July 30, 2002) (copy on file with author).
 5. This discussion has a corollary in the cancellation of print citators. Some schools mentioned that their decision not to teach print citators also coincided with the cancellation of some portion of their print versions of *Shepard's Citations*. In addition, some of these schools have changed format from a print citator to an electronic format such as CD-ROM. As a result, a discussion of electronic citators is not limited to a Web-based format.

is difficult to explain the nuances of a print citator in a lecture to a large group of students.

¶7 In light of the results of this informal survey and an analysis of the needs of our own students, we have changed our citator instruction at USC to what we hope is a happy medium. We will teach both the print and electronic citator but only require students to complete an assignment using the online version. There are approximately 210 students in the USC first-year class. Currently the students are divided into four legal research course sections, with each section meeting twice a week. Each class session is fifty minutes. Normally, one class session is lecture and the second is a small group session where we divide the students into groups of about six for hands-on instruction. For citator instruction, however, we decided to replace the lecture with eight small group sessions of about twenty-five students each. Half of the twenty-five students would first attend a twenty-five minute tutorial on electronic citators in our library computer classroom. The other half would be divided into two groups of about six; two librarians would instruct each group separately for about twenty minutes on how to use a print citator. Then the students who had the electronic citator tutorial would have print citator instruction in the same format, and the students who received print citator instruction would attend the electronic citator tutorial.

¶8 One could argue that if a student does not complete an exercise on print citators the student will not become proficient in using the tool. But should our goal in teaching print citators be proficiency? I believe that a more realistic goal is to expose the student to the print citator and ensure an awareness of what it is. Using a print citator is something that must be done regularly if one is to learn to use it effectively. A law student who does only one exercise using a print citator may not even remember how the process works. Thus students arguably would not become proficient with print citators simply by completing a single exercise. However, students receiving small group instruction in the use of print citators are at least likely to remember their existence and the purposes they serve. As a result, at USC we chose to use exposure to print citators in small group sessions as our means of meeting the goal of making students *aware of*—but not necessarily proficient with—this research tool.

¶9 USC, like most schools, is not quite ready to commit to teaching only electronic citators. But the trend has begun. Some schools no longer teach print citators and are arguably justified in doing so. We must maintain awareness of this situation.⁶ If print citator instruction is still necessary and law schools do not provide instruction on their use, then the responsibility of instruction transfers from

6. To assist in providing current awareness of the status of citator instruction, the Legal Research Instruction Committee of the AALL Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section plans to expand on my initial inquiry and survey citator instruction on an annual basis. It intends to make the data available through a Legal Research Instruction page to be mounted on the section's Web site (<http://www.aallnet.org/isis/allsis/>).

the academic law librarian to the librarian assisting the uneducated patron. Thus, the private law firm librarian, county law librarian, and court librarian would feel the impact of a premature discontinuation of print citator instruction.

¶10 There is no easy answer to my question. While some law schools are no longer teaching print citators, others could not fathom the thought of discontinuing such instruction. This dichotomy between law schools will continue until the cost-benefit analysis of teaching print citators cannot bear out the instruction. This is a subjective analysis for each individual law school to make. Law schools will factor their unique variables into the analysis, such as the number of law students in an incoming class or the number of students who go on to work in a legal research environment without access to an electronic citator. While each law school will make this analysis independently, it should not occur in a vacuum. As law librarians, our awareness of this situation will hopefully ensure that law schools have sufficient and accurate information with which to make that analysis.