Comparing research methods currently taught at ELCA Lutheran Seminaries.

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...our vision is to prepare a new generation of pastors who can strengthen the life of individual Christians and congregations even as they lead them to engage in mission in their context. We believe this requires learning both theology and leadership not only in the classroom and library but also in the contexts of congregations...
                                        from an ELCA Seminary 2011-2013 catalog

Research components have been an integral part of ELCA Lutheran seminary classes for sermon preparation, congregational bible study to more formal academic training. Traditional commentaries, theological works, and exegetical research have been mainstays in biblical and theological studies. For many years print resources were the mainstay of use, even as technology advanced well into the late 1990's. Today that model of research continues to erode with more advanced information delivery systems and methodologies being developed.

Over the last 20 years I have worked with many pastors who have struggled with research for various aspects of their ministry; most notably their sermons. This struggle comes from two main reasons: not knowing what resources to consult or overwhelmed with research choices both in paper and electronic. So I wondered; How are ELCA seminary students presented information retrieval methods and do these skills transfer to either parish ministry or classroom teaching?

My first major assumption was how ELCA seminaries are delivering, if any, research instruction. Upon a quick survey of available literature it was soon apparent that seminaries that provide instruction are mostly at the "point of need," that is, to help students find materials to complete specific assignments. Robert Phillips in his article "Bibliographic Instruction and Life Long Learning reflects on this issue and concludes that if bibliographic instruction is to move forward within theological education, it must focus on developing research skills for life-long learning as a core competency for ministerial effectiveness. [1] As theological librarians, we should be as concerned, if not more so, for our students' ability to find useful information within the first month after graduation as we are for their abilities within the first month after matriculation (Phillips, 2001).

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1. Phillips, Robert. (2001) Bibliographic instruction and life-long learning. *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 4 no 1, 6.

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My next step to answer my thesis was to review all current seminary research courses being offered at 5 of the 8 ELCA Lutheran Seminaries:

- Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota had the most course research offerings listed in their catalog:

  GR8000 Library Research Practicum
  This practicum is intended to be an overview for Luther Seminary first year PHD students to methods and tools for engaging in literary research, i.e. research done in published literature and on the Internet, with a view toward the goal of writing a dissertation. The main focus will be instruction in avenues of topic exploration, developing a search strategy incorporating the use of important reference resources and methods of access, and evaluating sources. Thesis templates and EndNote, a bibliographic management software program, will be introduced.
  Offered January term annually
  Required of first year PhD degree students
  Pass/Non-credit only

  GR8550 Research Methodology
  This course is designed to identify the various research methodologies employed in the writing of a dissertation. Dissertations are read and analyzed and preliminary considerations are given to each participant's dissertation proposal.
  Half course

  GR8620 The Vocation of the Theologian
  An investigation into the academic, professional and spiritual calling of the theologian, within the larger context of the mission of the Church, the worship of the triune God, and the Christian life. The course considers historical, philosophical, practical and theological perspectives upon our calling from God as Christian scholars.

- Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio offers one course:

  DN4001 Foundations Seminar
  Designed to acquaint thesis writers with basic tools for proposing, writing, and editing the thesis and to hone theological research strategies. Seminary guidelines relating to the thesis process, format, and style will be covered.
  One semester hour.

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- Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, Illinois:

   T-601 Graduate Theological Seminar: Sources and Resources
   This course emphasizes the study of primary texts, both historical and
   contemporary, that will help students clarify their own methodological
   styles. (For post- M. Div. Students in Christian theology; others admitted with
   the permission of the instructor.)

- Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina

   HT 495 Thesis Seminar
   A supervised research project in history or systematic theology during first
   semester of the senior year, providing the basis for a senior thesis to be
   completed during the final semester.

- Gettysburg Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

   3.747 Preaching and technology: shaping the sermon through the internet
   Today's preachers have the same goal in mind as the preachers of a hundred
   years ago: to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. Yet, today's homileticians
   have a different set of advantages and challenges, and Internet culture is a
   key to both. In this course, we will engage various means for using the
   Internet culture to invent, refine, and review sermons in the parish setting.
   We will utilize Facebook and weblogs, among other applications. A laptop is
   helpful for enrolling in this course, as we will spend significant class time in
   the online environment.

Analysis of the Courses:

	Courses						
	Library Research Practicum	Research Methodology	Vocation of the Theologian	Foundations Seminar	Graduate Theological Seminar	Thesis Seminar	Preaching and Technology
School	LTS	LTS	LTS	Trinity	LSTC	Southern	Gettysburg
Use of Internet Resources	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Library Instruction	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
MDIV /PhD	PhD	MDIV/PhD	MDIV	MDIV	PhD	MDIV	MDIV
Required / Elective	Required	Elective	Elective	Elective	Elective	Elective	Elective
Writing Component	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Evaluate Resources	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No

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The majority of the classes offered focus on academic-thesis success with only the Gettysburg Class focusing on research success in the parish and homiletics. Only one class is required, however, that is for the PhD program at Luther Seminary. Libraries take an active roll in four of the courses from the seminaries.

Use of Internet Resources: All courses made use of the Internet and from a survey of the course content Google searching comprised the most instructional attention. The Gettysburg course did include extensive use of current social media options with emphasis in dissemination of information and not so much the acquisition of information.

Library Instruction: Generally the library plays an indirect role in all seminary research only three libraries had a formal role in instruction. Contacting each library, however, all indicated they participated in some type of library instruction. Mostly, this instruction is random 'one-shot' courses or class group study projects. One librarian indicated that several of her instruction presentations are student generated and not a formal part of class syllabus. Librarians indicated usually they were pressed for time to teach and the components their courses was limited to:
> 1. Use of the card catalog – OPAC - consortiums;
> 2. Use of ATLA as a primary resource;
> 3. Familiarization with Luther's Works and other Lutheran theologians.

For the Library Research Practicum at Luther Seminary the class included extensive resource evaluations both in print and electronic. Also, this class worked on developing thesis statements for research and working through the research process on a PhD level. The graduate course at Chicago also indicated they evaluate journal articles for research and thesis purposes, but indicated they had limited time to evaluate print books. Those courses where no formal library instruction was offered the librarians noted those students enrolled did use the library extensively and made use of reference librarians. All librarians indicated that most of the seminary students were generally underprepared and not aware of information management.

MDIV's/ PhD's – Required / Elective: All courses except two were intended for MDIV's. Several courses would allow students to audit or enroll with instructor permission. The curriculums for all classes were geared for thesis or research success for specific classes. The course from Gettysburg provided the student an introduction to use the Internet and social media sites for parish work and upon further investigation the course emphasized practical application to research. The Luther course was required of all PhD candidates and by the professors discretion let MDIV students audit the class. All other classes were electives and enrollment would average 9-13 students a session (from respective registrars enrollment figures).

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Writing Component: All classes required some formal writing component. Five of the classes required the writing assignment was from another class, and two classes would do some form of original work as a project. One librarian commented that the writing component was the most compelling for students and questions in the library focused on the writing developing the thesis rather than information driven. The Gettysburg course focused on the dissemination of sermons and teaching aids through online technology and was not thesis or primarily writing centered.

Evaluate resources: The PhD specific courses spent time on evaluating resources. This evaluation centered on electronic journal articles and peer reviewed information. The course from Luther used limited time to review a basic print reference tools for exegetical work. But for all other courses formal evaluation came from direct use for their writing samples.

So, the fundamental question remains; How are ELCA seminary students presented information retrieval methods and do these skills transfer to either parish ministry or classroom teaching? There is something offered at most seminaries on research but it is not integrated widely into the curriculum. As a professional librarian over the last 20 years I have had many ELCA (and others) ministers ask for research assistance. After helping most pastors the usual reply is," If they only would have taught me this in seminary."

The most common research questions from ELCA pastors include:
1. What resource would help me understand this passage?
2. I use Google and get so much junk.
3. How can I get this online?
4. Differences between commentaries and exegetical works.

We cannot assume that the basic library skills required to survive seminary studies apply in ministry. These days call for a systematic approach to information gathering that gives attention to the variety of work roles expected of the minister, as well as the variety of sources available. 2 The resources one needs to prepare a sermon differ from those needed to make an administrative decision or to provide pastoral counseling. The differences are not just differences in title or genre, but how the information is mediated: formal vs. informal, written vs. oral, distant scholar vs. nearby associate (Phillips, 2001).

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2. Phillips, Robert. (2001) Bibliographic instruction and life-long learning. *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 4 no 1, 6-7.

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ELCA seminaries do a good job of critical thinking and analysis of theology and biblical exegesis. Pastors are prepared to think and form well-crafted sermons and biblical studies on texts and theological concepts. The problem comes earlier in the process of thinking and creating: gathering and organizing information. Pastors have a huge body of information to draw upon…thousands of years of thought and scholarship that could not even begin to be covered in seminaries. But, overall ELCA seminaries do not prepare pastors to develop, organize, and evaluate information and information tools used to be better researchers in the parish.

Overall, pastors lack the basic guidelines for making preliminary judgments about a source, such as explaining the concept of "peer review," providing information about publishers' perspectives, and drawing conclusions about books based on examining the table of contents, index, and bibliography, while reading only the introduction and key parts of chapters. 3 While at the basic information level pastors can use encyclopedic sources and Wikipedia for cursory information that helps focus on a question and discover the basic issues raised by others who have also studied the question (Phillips, 2004). This ability helps but after this step the waters become muddy.

Seminary students and those in the parish are not librarians nor should we expect them to be so. However, seminary efforts should be more than remedial, teaching students that sound information management is in itself a proclamation of the Gospel. As a general rule following graduation, theological libraries will play only a minor part in their search for needed information, especially information needed quickly. Instead, they will rely on their personal book collection and journal subscriptions (if any), the Internet, and a network of friends and church members with subject expertise. Some are serving congregations far from any academic library and more or less are on their own. I will argue instead of knowing how to use a library catalog, they need to know how to create one, based on their own personal collection of print and online information. They need to know how to develop their own personal controlled vocabulary, and create or use a relational database. They need to know how organize their library for easy information retrieval. They need to understand the basics of keyword searching and online search techniques in order to refine their searches on the Internet. In other words they must become proficient information managers. With this foundation the vision…
to prepare a new generation of pastors who can strengthen the life of individual Christians and congregations even as they lead them to engage in mission in their context. We believe this requires learning both theology and leadership not only in the classroom and library but also in the contexts of congregations… becomes a reality.

3. Phillips, Robert. (2004) Information literacy, critical thinking, and theological education. *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 6 no 3-4,9-10.

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