Instructor Notes #1 “Searching, searching, searching.....”

One of the most frequent comments that students make is that they cannot seem to find any literature about their research topic. They plug their search terms into ERIC and/or the other databases and are disappointed when they come up empty handed in their search. Let’s look at the following examples.

**Strategy #1: Use alternative search terms**

**Student:** Abby, pursuing a master’s degree in secondary education  
**Research Topic:** Abby is interested in learning whether there are any cultural barriers that might influence the use of cooperative learning groups with her ESL (English as a Second Language) students.  
**Literature Search:** Abby sits down at her computer, logs into the ERIC database, and types in the search term “multicultural students” and combines it with the search term “cooperative learning”....only to find that there are no references that match these two terms. Abby is disappointed and concludes (erroneously) that “there isn’t any information about my topic.” One way that Abby could improve her search is by using better search terms. Had she use the term “diversity student” rather than “multicultural student” the results of her search would have been different. Rather than finding no articles on her topic, she would have found 30 articles that combined the terms “diversity student” and “cooperative learning.”

**Strategy #2: Broaden your search to include other databases and other disciplines**

**Student:** David, pursuing a master’s degree in school counseling  
**Research Topic:** David has read a lot about how much violence children see on TV and in movies. He’d like to know what kind of research (if any) has looked at violence in music - such as violent song lyrics, violence in music videos, etc.  
**Literature Search:** As a graduate student in the school counseling program, David is very familiar with EBSCO host, Academic Search Complete database, and that is how he begins his search. He uses the search terms “music” and “violence” and finds 17 references. He
concludes (somewhat erroneously) that there has not been much research on this topic. He could broaden his search by using other databases. For example, using the same search terms “music” and “violence” in the ERIC database, David could have found 13 additional references. In addition, he could have searched Com Abstracts, a database in the field of Mass Media and Communications. The same search would have resulted in 19 additional references.

Strategy #3: Consider related topics

Student: Ben, pursuing a master’s degree in athletic training

Research Topic: Ben is an assistant trainer for his university’s cross-country track team. Strength and flexibility training are an integral part of the team’s injury prevention program. Ben is thinking of adding some Pilates exercises to the team’s warm up exercises, and he is curious to know if other trainers have had success using Pilates. (Note: Pilates is an exercise method for improving flexibility in strength. Developed in the 1920s, it has been used extensively by dancers and is becoming more and more popular in the larger fitness community.)

Literature Search: Ben tries two databases - Medline and Health Reference Center. He searches on the term “Pilates” and much to his surprise, he finds only 4 articles in Health Reference Center and none in Medline. Ben mistakenly concludes that there isn’t much research on his topic of research. The “problem” with Ben’s search is that as increasing popular as Pilates is becoming, it is still somewhat of an obscure term. If Ben were to search on a related topic – yoga perhaps - Ben finds 579 articles. Combining the terms “yoga” and “physical fitness,” Ben would find 22 articles.

Becoming skilled in searching the research literature takes time, patience, and practice. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Whether you are dialing into Bierce Library from home, searching the databases from campus, or even using your local community library, there are experts who can help you develop your skills. Of course, finding research articles is only the first step. Learning to critically read and evaluate the quality of published research is a skill you will want to master - and it is the major focus of Techniques of Research.