

Student-Centered Information Literacy Instruction: Gathering the Evidence

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Context

In North America, information literacy (IL) instruction at the undergraduate level is strongly influenced by and planned on the basis of external standards such as those generated by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL 2010). Alternatively, IL instructors design instructional experiences based on their personal beliefs of the learning outcomes and skills students require. In both scenarios, IL instructional experiences delivered at the postsecondary level tend to be designed with little understanding of or consideration for students' information literacy experiences developed during elementary and secondary school. Academic librarians may overestimate undergraduates' skills on the basis of their generational affiliation (e.g., as "millennials"), or librarians may assume (inappropriately) a tabula rasa, or blank slate, with which to begin information literacy education. This paper will present the results of the first phase of a study designed to investigate Grade 12 students' experiences of information literacy as they complete high school and prepare to make the transition to postsecondary study. The results of this three-year, longitudinal study will provide evidence for the design of 1) high school information literacy programs; 2) undergraduate information literacy programs; and, 3) teacher and librarian-preparation, through formal educational programming.

A Student-Focused, Evidence-based Approach to IL

A more student-focused approach to instructional design, consistent with the client-focused service delivery valued generally within libraries, investigates and accounts for students' prior knowledge and personal perspectives on information literacy experiences. Such an approach would generate student-centred curriculum and motivate appropriate pedagogy with significant potential to increase the relevancy of information literacy instruction, particularly in the digital context of students' academic and daily lives. This premise is the basis for the longitudinal study reported on in this paper; the project was designed and implemented, collaboratively, by a team of scholars (in library and information science and in secondary education) and professional librarians at a large Canadian university. The study is grounded in an inquiry-based educational context where curricula (at all grade levels) mandate development of information literacy skills developed through the use of information technology (IT) and school library resources. Thus, high school students are expected to graduate having developed IT skills and information literacy competencies. Recent research, however, suggests that these outcomes have not been fully realized for most students (Julien & Barker 2009). The project is also grounded in previous research into undergraduates' experiences with learning spaces on campus and use of IT in their academic work (Given 2007).

The present study examines the information skills of high school students, and explores their perceptions of the role of information literacy in their academic success. The study will be completed over a three-year period, exploring students' skills and information literacy experiences as they transition from high school to university and through their undergraduate years. The study's longitudinal focus, and its attention to the link between IL experiences in high school and in university, will generate novel understandings of students' perceptions. To date, educational research has focused on the stark transitions experienced by students as they shift from relatively structured, teacher-led experiences in high schools, to the more independent learning experiences (i.e., those supported by myriad information resources) common in the post-secondary context. This study's results will therefore provide guidance to high school teachers as they prepare students for post-secondary academic expectations, in addition to providing guidance for academic librarians' approaches to undergraduate instructional programming.

Study Design

This project explores students' experiences in their final year of high school (i.e., Grade 12), to reveal their preparation for further academic study. Following formal testing of Grade 12 students' IL skills, a select group of these students will be followed through their initial undergraduate years. In the first phase of the project, the IL skills of over 100 students at three high schools are being tested using the James Madison University "Information Literacy Test;" their perceptions of readiness for post-secondary study are also being explored through face-to-face interviews of students in social sciences/humanities classes. These data will be collected and analysed by the time of the conference, providing a baseline understanding of students' skill levels and expectations. The study team will follow these students at university, collecting data via journals and focus group interviews, with a view to informing design of IL instructional programs in the academic library. These data will also document those IT tools that best support students' learning (including social networking tools), with direct implications for the education of future teachers, through Bachelor of Education programs. It is hoped that future high school teachers will graduate with the skill sets required to support the IL instruction expected of them (Julien and Barker 2009), including appropriate use of information technology tools. The data collected are contextualized by an audit of existing IL instructional practices at the university, completed in winter 2010. This presentation will present an overview of the findings of the audit, along with data analysis of the IL skills tests. Initial findings from the interview data gathered in spring/summer 2010 will also be included, where these provide context for understanding students' baseline IL skills.

Implications

The study results will generate new appreciation for the IL competencies that students bring to their postsecondary learning experiences, as well as the challenges of making the transition between high school and university contexts. The results will support evidence-based design and delivery of IL instruction appropriate for the Web 2.0 world in which these students work and play. Implications for the design and implementation of teacher and librarian-preparation, through formal educational programs, will also emerge from these results. The LRS 2010 conference provides an opportunity to share the first phase results of this study, with direct implications for practice within academic and school contexts.

References

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