Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Undergraduates May Prefer to Learn about the Library Informally

A Review of:
Murphy, J. A. (2014). Library learning: Undergraduate students' informal, self-directed, and information sharing strategies. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research, 9*(1), 1-20. https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/perj/index

Reviewed by:
Robin E. Miller
Assistant Professor and Research & Instruction Librarian
McIntyre Library
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
Email: millerob@uwec.edu

Abstract

Objective – To determine undergraduate student approaches to learning about research and to seeking assistance with resources and services offered by the library.

Design – Three face-to-face focus groups received the same 12 questions to discuss over 90 minutes.

Setting – Academic library in Saskatchewan, Canada.

Subjects – A total of 14 undergraduate students majoring in a social science or humanities subject area. Of these, four subjects were in their second year of undergraduate study, four in their third year, and six in their fourth year. Subjects participated in focus groups with other students in their year of study. The researcher recruited subjects through printed advertisements distributed in areas frequented by social science and humanities students. 12 female students and 2 male students participated. 13 participants had attended a library instruction session in the past. Subjects were offered pizza, but were not otherwise incentivized to participate.

Methods – The researcher and an assistant conducted three focus groups with undergraduate students, eliciting qualitative comments later transcribed and coded manually for analysis. Requirements for participation included being engaged in an undergraduate major in the social sciences or humanities, and previous experience using the library. Subjects answered open-ended questions about their studies, research

activities, use of the library for a variety of tasks, and help seeking preferences.

Main Results – Regardless of year of study, focus group participants reported informal approaches to learning about and conducting research. All participants were confident about using the library's online resources, and preferred learning about library resources through self-directed practice and trial and error. Participants revealed that learning about the library informally was preferable to library instruction. Most participants indicated they had sought help from the library at one time or another. Participants prized sharing information with classmates, especially through collaboration and social networks, and they valued the expertise of professors, peers, friends, and family when doing research. Three factors may influence their choice to consult and exchange information with other trusted advisers outside of the library: convenience, familiarity, and knowledge.

Conclusion – Findings from this study align with previous findings about student approaches to seeking research assistance. The author reveals that assistance from the library, including library instruction, is less important to focus group participants than the research strategies they have developed informally, including trial and error and information sharing within one's personal network. The author observes that the informal learning strategies implemented by undergraduates in this study mirror the strategies of adult learners, especially in the workplace. The author suggests that intentional, course integrated library instruction in the early years of undergraduate education would strengthen students' preferred self-directed learning about research.

Commentary

The author elicits a rich discussion of undergraduate library use, painting a picture of undergraduate students engaged in self-directed learning about library resources.

The author administered a focus group questionnaire to three groups of undergraduate students. While the author hoped for more, a total of 14 subjects participated in the study. The researcher and an assistant recorded and transcribed the comments, themes, and observations from the focus group sessions, though methods of coding and analysis were not described. A test of inter-coder reliability would strengthen the evidence.

Three themes emerged from the focus groups: students conduct library research through self-directed research and trial and error; they share and exchange information with peers; and "convenience, familiarity and knowledge" (p. 7) may influence whether they seek help from the library or another trusted advisor such as a professor, peer, or family member. The author suggests that the themes discussed represent the majority of focus group participants, and direct quotes from individual subjects further illustrate the themes reported. Subjective terms like "some" or "many" are not quantified. In contrast to the themes listed above, subjects expressed less agreement about actual use of the library. Consultations with a librarian, service desks, and help guides were some of the ways subjects had sought help in the library, but the majority of subjects did not favour any one method.

Social science and humanities students who had previously used the library were specifically recruited to participate in this study. Some, but not all, subjects had extensive experience with this particular library. Including students who reported using the library at least once may have ensured that data were collected from subjects capable of deciding whether to work independently or to seek help from the library. However, further study with a group of students who reported never using the library would offer more complete insights about undergraduate help-seeking strategies.

The size of this study, and exclusion of both non-library users and students from other disciplines, prevents generalization of the author's findings. The literature review

highlights findings about student preference for working independently, consulting with peers, and using resources that are familiar and convenient. However, the literature review omits large-scale studies about student research practices, such as the Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project (Duke & Asher, 2012), and research from Project Information Literacy, including Head's (2008) study involving humanities and social science majors.

Thirteen of the subjects had participated in a library instruction session in the past, although the author does not note whether the social sciences and humanities are major users of library instruction at the institution in question. In the discussion, the author argues for course-integrated library instruction in the early years of undergraduate education. One focus group participant indicated she appreciated library-faculty collaboration (pp. 13-14); however, the author cites no other evidence to support the conclusion, and the main results indicate that subjects did not favour formal library instruction over self-directed methods.

The author also concludes that practitioners could offer self-directed programs like "student peer mentorship, internship, and first year experience programs" (p. 14), though focus group subjects were not questioned about whether they would avail themselves of these opportunities. Nonetheless, librarians may be inspired by the author's research to consider experimenting with information literacy skill-building activities outside the formal classroom.

References

Duke, L. M. & Asher, A. D. (Eds.). (2012). *College libraries and student culture: What we now know*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Head, A. J. (2008). Information literacy from the trenches: How do humanities and social science majors conduct academic research? *College & Research Libraries, 69*(5), 427-446. http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/crl.69.5.427