Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Graduate Students Reference Open Access Content in Literature Review Assignments

A Review of:
Allen, E. J., & Weber, R. A. (2014). The library and the web: Graduate students' selection of open access journals for empirical literature searches. *Journal of Web Librarianship, 8*(3), 243-262. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19322909.2014.927745

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Abstract

Objective – This study seeks to understand to what degree education graduate students cite open access, peer-reviewed journals in their coursework and whether patterns of open access referencing change over time.

Design – Longitudinal reference list analysis.

Setting – Public university in the United States of America.

Subjects – Reference lists collected from final literature review papers in a graduate-level education class (n = 382).

Methods – The authors collected reference lists from final literature review papers in a graduate-level education class for a nine-year time frame from the 2005 to 2013 academic years. The authors analyzed 2,594 reference entries from the 382 reference lists in the sample.

The authors organized reference entries into spreadsheets for analysis, creating one spreadsheet per class section and sorting references by type (e.g., book, journal article, website, etc.) and source. The authors also created a cumulative list of journal titles that they analyzed for open access status and how often the journals appeared in the sample. Other information collected about each journal included "ISSNs, national origin, journal sponsorship, frequency and years of student usage, presence of empirical research, [and] peer review status" (p. 249). Finally, the

authors organized open access journals into the following four categories based on their access method:

- Category A "OA Platform and Publisher"
- Category B "Publisher Only"
- Category C "Delay or Hybrid from Host or Publisher"
- Category D "Subscription Based, but Self Archived" (p. 249)

Main Results – A total of 594 unique journals appeared in reference lists over the study period, and 11.5% (n=68) of the total were open access journals. Of the open access journals, 96% (n=65) included original research articles, and the majority (n=51) fell into Category A "OA Platform and Publisher." Nine, six, and two journal titles fell into categories B, C, and D, respectively. The authors found no pattern or change in the use of open access titles during the nine-year study period. Open access journals appeared in reference lists an average of 14 times per year with the highest usage observed in 2009.

Conclusion – The results show that graduate students in the sample used a range of open access journals. The presence of open access resources in reference lists signals that students may use both library subscription databases and open web search tools to complete their literature review assignments. The authors suggest potential reasons why open access use did not grow during the study period, including a possible mismatch between student research interests and the topics present in open access titles, the lack of discussion about open access publishing during library instruction, or student satisfaction with the resources provided through library-sponsored subscriptions. Librarians are encouraged to include high-quality open access resources within their catalogues or other electronic resources to increase open access discoverability and to include popular open web search tools as a means to retrieve open access materials during information literacy instruction.

Commentary

Open access (OA) publishing presents a variety of opportunities and challenges to academic libraries. While some authors call for libraries to take on an active role in publishing OA works (Chadwell & Sutton, 2014), others discuss strategies for educating students about scholarly information economics (Warren & Duckett, 2010) and the OA policies that affect research funding (Keane, 2012). The current study adds to this body of knowledge related to student interactions with OA research publications.

The study's primary strength, when examined with *The CAT: A Generic Critical Appraisal Tool* (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014), lies in the choice of authentic, longitudinal assessment of student work. Collecting reference lists over a nine-year period allows the authors to illustrate OA usage trends in a typical educational setting. This evidence may be valuable for librarians looking to understand students' natural inclination toward finding and using OA content. Librarians may also wish to consult the concise review of literature related to past, present, and future OA publishing trends. Librarians should interpret results with the study limitations in mind, avoiding generalizations to other populations without considering whether the study's population (graduate-level education students), setting (large public university), and disciplinary publishing patterns and valuing of empirical research is appropriate for their purposes.

The presence of OA materials in the study sample leads the authors to the conclusion that students rely on open web search tools to conduct research and to the recommendation that these tools should be incorporated into information literacy instruction. The article's literature review references prior studies that highlight graduate students' preferences for open web search tools like Google Scholar; however, the current study's evidence does not account for OA materials that are indexed in library-subscribed databases. Without understanding the likelihood that students encounter OA materials through library-

provided search tools or the methods students in the current sample used to discover OA materials, the conclusion that open web search tools were the discovery point for OA materials is not well supported. Additionally, the balance between OA sources and subscription sources in the publishing industry over time may influence student citation patterns.

Understanding the scope of OA content found in the study sample is difficult because the four OA content categories outlined in the methodology are not used to relay the results. Instead, readers must align the findings with categories A through D for themselves, using data in the Appendix to confirm category breakdowns.

Regardless of discovery methods, whether through library subscriptions or the open web, this study demonstrates that students are finding and using open access content. The study's recommendation to include discussions about OA content in information literacy instruction aligns with the Association of College and Research Libraries' (2015) recently approved *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, which includes information as a commodity and OA publishing in the "Information Has Value" frame. Librarians may use findings that graduate students naturally include OA content in their work as another talking point in conversations about OA across campus.

References

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