

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

The New Digital Scholar: Exploring and Enriching the Research and Writing Practices of NextGen Students. Edited by Randall McClure and James P. Purdy. Medford, New Jersey: American Society for Information Science and Technology, 2013. Hardcover: 399 pages. ISBN: 978-1-57387-475-5.

Today, students are inundated with more information than any previous generation. Many educators have voiced their frustration that the assimilation of information in a comprehensible method is superficial, at best. These students are then expected to disseminate the information from their research in a coherent written fashion. McClure and Purdy present a timely example of the struggle that NextGen students are currently facing, with practical applications to help them over this hurdle. This book is meant for educators and librarians who are committed to advancing and honing how students enter the research cycle and how they write about it. Though it is not specifically geared towards health librarianship, aspects of collaboration can be integrated into instruction.

The book is a collection of essays divided into four parts. Part 1 discusses literature that has already been collected on student research–writing behaviour and students’ use of digital technologies for this task. Part 2 provides examples of students’ actual practices, thereby providing data that give credibility to the literature previously described. Part 3 provides ways to respond to the practices revealed in Parts 1 and 2 through various pedagogical ideas. One example includes positioning students as knowledge workers, which is to position them as researchers, “since many knowledge work practices involve the exploration of problems within both local and distributed environments, with attention to the technologies that mediate such interactions” (Teston and McNely, p. 214). Part 4 illustrates collaborations and solutions that can be utilized by positioning students to become better researchers and writers. Together, these parts offer insight into the current state of NextGen students and their research–writing behaviours, while offering practical ways to help their ability to find textual information and effectively compose this information into something tangible, increasing their ability for critical thinking.

Part 1: NextGen Students and the Research Writing “Problem”

Chapter 1 sets up the discussion for the book surrounding NextGen students and their information behaviour. The author describes multiple perspectives regarding influences on students’ research and writing decisions. In addition to this review of the literature, the author also suggests a framework in which educators (writing teachers, librarians, or other information specialists) can study these behaviours and skills of the new digital scholar. Chapter 2 discusses the history of the research writing assignment,

which is the main method by which information behaviour is studied. This chapter highlights the importance of the research writing assignment, though it is controversial as the “gold standard” for judging information-seeking behaviour. The author concludes by stating that, presently, research needs a new definition that reflects the nature of research practices involving the digital environment. Chapters 3 and 4 echo the previous chapters in their call for a restructuring of the way educators are currently teaching research strategies to the new digital scholar. Chapter 3 highlights the collaboration between a librarian and a writing instructor by identifying several pieces of literature where information literacy calls upon the expertise of both library and writing professionals. The author of Chapter 4 illustrates the overhaul using an example from the hacker community, proposing that the act of personalizing one’s digital environment would encourage a deeper connectivity and engagement that would drive an intrinsic motivation to improve one’s own research–writing abilities.

Part 2: Explorations of What NextGen Students Do in the Undergraduate Classroom

These essays (Chapters 5–8) examine the empirical evidence surrounding the depth of student engagement with their research skills. This part uses qualitative data to analyze students’ current research and writing skills. By investigating their research and information seeking habits, along with their research–writing patterns, writing instructors and librarians will have a better indication of how to adjust their instructional styles to better fit the NextGen student. Jamieson and Howard (Chapter 5) provide a particularly useful example in the United States, reporting on the Citation Project, “a national study of how college students incorporate sources into their work via four source-use techniques: copying, patchwriting, paraphrasing, and summarizing”. The project allowed them to pinpoint the specific areas where students required the most help in the research–writing process at the college level such as misused source material (where the material was used but not cited) and improper paraphrasing which, in turn, demonstrated a direct need to change the existing nature of this type of instruction.

Part 3: Pedagogical Solutions to Enrich the Research and Writing Practices of NextGen Students

Chapters 9–12 discuss information behaviours that students are already demonstrating within their digital spaces, with evidence-based recommendations for information literacy instruction. Students are positioned as knowledge workers (Chapter 9), researchers–writers (Chapter 10), empowered learners (Chapter 11), and primary researchers (Chapter 12) as ways to perhaps direct their future roles within information literacy. By doing so, instructors and librarians are able to recognize and validate the student’s input to the research cycle.

Part 4: Programmatic Solutions to Enrich the Research and Writing Practices of NextGen Students

In the last part of the book, Chapters 13–16 explore practical implementation techniques for the pedagogical approaches of the evidence-based information literacy teaching from Part Three. This part nicely revisits the themes from the previous chapters by incorporating potential activities such as understanding the distinction between forming a topic separate from the research question (Chapter 13), creating collaborations between librarians and writing instructors (Chapter 14), designing teaching habits that account for the “Google Effect,” which is the near ubiquitous influence of Google on students’ information seeking behaviour (Chapter 15), and going straight to the source: NextGen students (Chapter 16).

The editors of this book have brought forth an opportune collection of essays regarding the research habits of NextGen students. Much of the information provided discusses opportunities for librarians that have access to classes for longer than simply one-shot workshops. This poses a potential drawback, as most librarians have limited access in classrooms already; therefore,

a push for a stronger collaboration between librarians and writing instructors in all disciplines would be necessary. McClure and Purdy acknowledge this limitation, and thus strongly encourage the collaboration between librarians and educators to facilitate the information translation to NextGen students for the research conversation. While the transition of the skills presented in this book will not occur overnight, it does give evidence-based examples that could be utilized in future collaborations between librarians and instructors regarding information literacy. In the end, it is a win-win situation for everyone: NextGen students enhance their skills and librarians and instructors strengthen their ties in the pursuit of providing a strong research foundation for these students.

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