2017 Assessment of Library Bibliographic Instruction Sessions

The last library instruction assessment report piloted an assessment of student learning in a “one shot” library instruction session. In that assessment, students recorded their keywords and citations found in the session, so the librarian could assess process information literacy skills. However, the pilot proved disappointing because students explore in different ways and pace; their initial forays immediately after instruction are neither a reliable nor valid measure of learning. Instead, it suggested librarians assess learning further downstream of the librarian’s instruction, such as in their final research products. Capturing research process skills remained elusive.

In the fall of 2016, an instructor requesting a librarian-led session described capturing drafts of a literature review preparatory to the final paper. Did other faculty also have process assignments that could reveal students’ struggle with the research process? This question led to this year’s assessment of information literacy learning. Faculty were asked about students’ process (choice of keywords, effective use of library resources, response to information found, ability to adjust research question) in addition to questions about relevance of sources, authority of sources, ability to integrate sources, and ability to cite sources.

Method

A survey in qualtrics was created with nine questions. Two of these questions asked about process and four more were partly related to process. Did students formulate a thesis? Were their search terms successful? Did they find enough relevant and authoritative sources of the appropriate type? Did they integrate those sources effectively into their own writing in a way that supports their thesis? Finally, did they abide by discipline citation practice by citing correctly? Answers were recorded on a Likert scale, and free text box was included with each question. The survey was distributed to eight faculty who had requested instruction from the instruction coordinator for a research assignment. The courses ranged from a First Year Experience to a WP course. Seven surveys were completed.

Results

Question one asked about developing thesis statements. One instructor commented that “[T]he articulation of the research question is only partially related to the library section,” though another commented, “My students already had a research question in mind, but the library sessions helped them to refine it and research it more effectively.” Faculty were fairly satisfied with thesis statements.

Question two asked about keywords, which is an important skill in using databases to find relevant resources. Though faculty felt students used keywords successfully, they most likely base this on the quality of sources in the final paper, and so the question of how successfully students navigate library databases to locate and retrieve relevant resources (and how that can change their research direction) was not answered.
The next four questions asked if students used the appropriate number and type of resources, and whether they were relevant and authoritative. The first question is quantitative, and instructors felt students had reached the mark. The next three are more subtle skills, and faculty were not as uniformly satisfied with these results, though mostly satisfied. In comments, they acknowledged students’ emerging understanding of resource quality. Students seem to use peer reviewed sources but rely on popular sources or outdated sources: “Some students still used popular sources for their information BUT they acknowledge the fact that the source may be biased.” It would be important in a broader survey to analyze whether such emerging skills have fully emerged by the senior year. A comment regarding authority shows that faculty and librarians reinforce each other: “Some did this well, while others used more informal sources (such as Wikipedia) which I suggest to them is not an authoritative source and should be used sparingly, if at all.”

The next two questions asked whether students had integrated outside sources well into their final writing and cited them properly. Though instructors felt that students integrated resources reasonably well, they were not all satisfied about student learning of this higher level skill:

This is still something that students struggle with to some extent. They develop skills at 'cataloging' the information in literature sources they find, but most are less successful in taking the next step in synthesizing that information and integrating it into their own thinking to produce more original thoughts.

Faculty were less satisfied with citation skills: “I gave specific instruction [in citation] and after 2-3 revisions they did well. This part I think could be part of the library section. Students have also a hard time to do in-text citations, depending from their background.” Although this is not something that the librarian typically covers in detail in a 50-minute session, faculty perennially lament student citation skills and would like help with it.

Finally, the librarian asked how the library instruction session could be improved. Two mentioned again citation instruction, and one mentioned improving students’ ability to organize and manage identified resources.

Discussion

These survey results mirrored those of 2014, in which faculty generally were satisfied with information literacy in their student papers except for citing sources. In the 50-minute session, librarians can point to citation resources, but this very detail-oriented skill requires reiterative practice and reinforcement in several assignments over several courses. Librarians can help by promoting the citation resources we have and investing in a robust replacement for Easybib. Citation workshops in the past tended to be under-attended. However, several faculty do ask for an in-class citation “one-shot” session taught by a librarian, allotting valuable class time to it.
Instructor impressions are not direct evidence of learning. The instructor’s recollection of information literacy skills in the aggregate gives a general view only, revealing little that is new or actionable. Also, faculty tend to show appreciation rather than constructive criticism. Nevertheless, it is an opportunity to follow up with faculty to deepen the communication and collaboration with them.

In order to get a better sense of librarian effectiveness in teaching the session outcomes, minute papers may be a good answer. This established method of a couple simple questions (what was new to you, what is the muddiest point, etc.) can gauge what students got and didn’t get from the session. It does not directly assess learning, nor reveal skills after more practice. However, it does give the librarian a sense of what is valuable to students and what was hard for them from the presentation, and from that the librarian can adjust learning goals.

**Appendix: Survey Results**

Q1 - Based on the library research session or other preliminary evidence, were most students able to articulate an appropriate research question or thesis?

Q2 - Based on the library research session or other preliminary evidence, were most students able to formulate appropriate keywords for researching their topics?
Q3 - Based on the final research paper submitted, did most students have the appropriate number of sources?

Yes

somewhat

No

Q4 - Did most students use the appropriate type of sources?

Yes

somewhat

No
Q5 - Did most students choose relevant sources?

Q6 - Did most students choose authoritative sources?

Q7 - Based on the final research paper submitted, were most students able to integrate sources well into their own thinking and writing in a way that supported their thesis?
Q8 - Were most students able to cite sources correctly (even though this may not have been covered in the librarian's session)?

Q9 - How can the librarian-led session be different next time to improve students' information literacy?

Not entirely sure. There is so much great information out there it is difficult to identify what, if any, specific things could be used to improve. A lot of this is likely on my end to more strongly encourage students to use and incorporate the information. Mister Held does a great job introducing the resources and providing assistance when needed.

I would like to try to pre-prepare (if that is a real word) my students to be able to routinely archive key citations, abstracts, or even entire papers (PDFs) from the different biological reference databases the first day they set foot in the library.

I think the section is already very good and give students a lot of information. As mentioned earlier, maybe the way to cite should be included in the section but again depends on the course objective helping them understand that MLA is one citation guide among many and that it differs from ASA or APA, and different scenarios that they may be asked to cite (web page, journal article, book, report...).
The previous format worked great. Information about access to the library and search engines as well as how to locate academic journal articles made a big difference.

At this point, I feel the library instructional sessions work very well. Sessions are tailored to meet the assignment requirements, and the librarians always coordinate efforts with me prior to the session.

Submitted 6/29/17 by TJH.