

Faculty/Librarian Collaboration: a Faculty Perspective on Information Literacy Instruction

Debra Hoffmann and Dr. Virgil Adams, California State University Channel Islands

Abstract

Library literature continues to address the value of librarian/faculty collaboration and its impact on student learning. However, faculty often have a negative impression of librarian-led information literacy (IL) instruction for their students. Using a pre/post design, this study examined the effectiveness of IL instruction for History & Systems of Psychology students. Results indicated that there was no significant difference in grade distributions between pre and post groups. However, there was a significant qualitative impact from IL instruction on student learning and overall confidence in the classroom. This paper discusses the positive experience, from the faculty perspective, of librarian-led IL instruction. This study differs from previous studies in that the faculty member discovered not only the value of targeted library instruction for students, but how this instruction positively impacted his own teaching and assignment design.

Keywords: information literacy instruction, librarians, faculty, collaboration, interdisciplinary

Introduction

Library literature continues to address the value of librarian/faculty collaboration and its impact on student learning.¹ Yet this literature often paints a negative picture of faculty's impression of the effectiveness of librarian-led information literacy (IL) instruction for their students in the classroom and highlights the obstacles many librarians face as they attempt to collaborate with faculty.^{2,3} This study discusses the positive experience of librarian-led IL instruction for History & Systems of Psychology students from the faculty's perspective. This instruction positively impacted student learning and overall confidence in the classroom, and these sessions informed the faculty member's own teaching and assignment design. It echoes the conclusions of Bury of the positive impact of targeted IL instruction on student learning and confidence.⁴

Background

Founded in 2002, California State University Channel Islands (CI) is part of the 23-campus California State University system with approximately 3600 FTE undergraduate students. The mission of the university is founded on four "pillars", one of which is interdisciplinarity, the idea that blurring the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines is beneficial to both the disciplines and the students in these disciplines. As a result, faculty members frequently collaborate with other faculty outside of their discipline. Librarians at CI have faculty status; the library is considered its own campus program. At CI, information literacy is seen as a campus responsibility. Three information literacy standards are included in the university's General Education student learning outcomes: the information literate student accesses information effectively and efficiently; the information literate student evaluates information sources critically; and

the information literate student explains legal, ethical, and social issues associated with information.

Each semester the library's Information Literacy Coordinator targets specific lower and upper division courses that are research intensive for library instruction. As a result, approximately 1700 students come into the library for instruction each semester resulting in IL sessions for over 3400 students each year. Instruction librarians craft each IL session around specific research assignments that students have for their courses. All IL sessions are targeted and assignment-specific- librarians do not conduct library tours or deliver "canned", one-size-fits-all instruction. These sessions range from targeted "one-shots" to scaffolded, multi-visit sessions throughout the semester.

History & Systems of Psychology is an upper-division core course that examines the historical development of psychological thought from its roots in philosophy and science to its emergence as a distinct discipline. The major schools of psychology are explored in context of their philosophical, cultural, and ethical influences. The course is comprised of 80-100 students each semester. Students are assigned an APA-style research paper that requires them to demonstrate the ability to write utilizing the standards of the discipline. This is accomplished by writing a 7-10 page paper, which examines some aspect of psychological thought. Students are required to review the literature on a topic of choice from scientific journals or books (no use of course texts), and are required to include a bibliography of at least thirty unique sources. Students are prohibited from using sources acquired through the library's interlibrary loan system (to control cost), and thus are confined to full-text resources available in the library's journal databases and print collection.

IL Instruction for History & Systems of Psychology students

A tenured psychology professor has been assigning this paper to his students each semester since 2003. From 2003-2008, dozens of History & Systems students would seek help from librarians to complete this assignment each semester. More often than not, students required help understanding the scope of the assignment and how to begin, not simply where to find sources. Librarians became particularly adept at navigating the nuances of the assignment, deconstructing it for students, explaining what the professor was looking for and teaching students the necessary skills to progress through the research process. The impact of these transactions on traffic at the reference desk, the repetitive nature of students' questions as well as the scope of these interactions (20-45 minutes with a librarian per student, on average) led librarians to conclude that an IL session for students in this course was needed.

In fall of 2008, during a discussion between the librarian (who also serves as Information Literacy Coordinator) and the History & Systems faculty member, the librarian asked to teach an IL session for History & Systems students, crafted completely around the research assignment. The faculty member agreed, and a collaborative partnership was born. Since spring of 2009, librarians have taught IL sessions for History & Systems students each semester. The initial semesters utilized a "one shot" approach where a single IL session was conducted early in the term. More recently multiple IL sessions which "scaffold" or build upon one another have been utilized. Both the librarian and faculty member were interested in seeing if one or more IL sessions during the semester would impact the way students navigated the research assignment and help them produce better papers. The following analyses examine empirically the question of

whether these IL sessions had an impact on student learning as well as the implications for the instructor.

Methods

Participants

Five hundred fifty-one participants were included in the study. These participants were enrolled in an upper division History & Systems of Psychology course. The participants ranged in age between 18 and 50 with the median age of twenty-two, and sixty-five percent of the students were female. Fifty-five percent of the participants were identified as Caucasian, thirty percent were Hispanic Latina/o, seven percent Asian American, two percent African American, and one percent identified as Native American.

Procedure

The participants were divided into two groups: those who completed the paper assignment prior to the initiation of IL sessions (pre-IL, n=254) and those who completed the assignment with IL instruction (post-IL, n=297). For clarity, grade distributions were created for each group by placing scores on the paper assignment into one of five categories based on the percentage to which assignment objectives were completed correctly: the 90 to 100 percent correct (A); 80 to 89 percent correct (B); 70 to 79 percent correct (C); 60 to 69 percent correct (D); or those who received 59 percent or fewer correct (F). The two grade distributions were then compared to assess if there were statistically significant changes between the two groups. Following a quantitative comparison of the distributions, the qualitative comments of the students were also compared.

Results

The Mann-Whitney U for non-parametric data was used to test the differences between the grade distributions (shown in Figure 1) because it is free from underlying assumptions (i.e. that the scores are normally distributed).

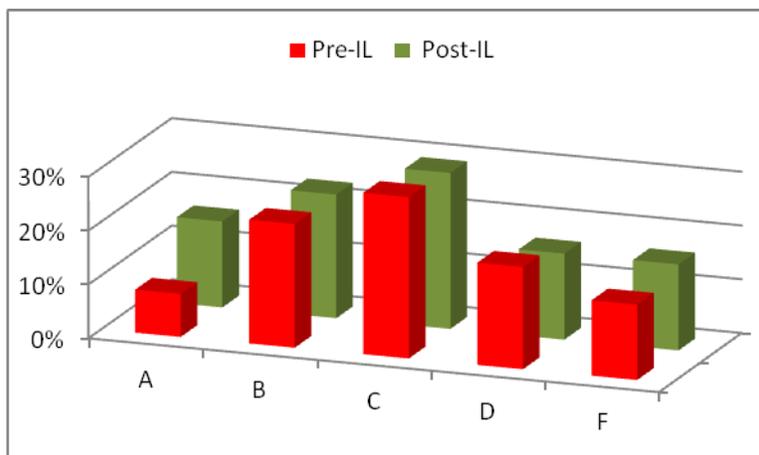


Figure 1. Grade distributions of Pre and Post IL session.

There were no significant differences in the proportion of As ($U(1) = 11, n.s.$), Bs ($U(1) = 25.2, n.s.$), Cs ($U(1) = 21.0, n.s.$), Ds ($U(1) = 26.0, n.s.$), or Fs ($U(1) = 17, n.s.$) between pre-IL session students and post-IL session students. Turning to the qualitative evaluations of students, comments from pre-IL session students were harsh. Many did not understand why the assignment was given and more importantly, what exactly they were being asked to do. Comments included, “What is the paper assignment supposed to accomplish?”, and “The assignment is not clear and there were no guidelines established for how it would be graded.” In comments from the post-IL session students, the tone changed dramatically. “I like the idea of the detailed requirements for the APA style paper, I learned ALOT from it. Thank you for strongly advising us to start the paper early” ; “The paper was difficult, but a good challenge”; and “Thank you so much for showing us how to find sources in the database for this paper.”

Discussion

As can be seen in the results, there was no significant difference in the grade distributions between pre-IL session students and post-IL session students. Closer examination of the grade distribution indicates that the percentage of “A” grades doubled, however all other categories were virtually unchanged. While one-fifth of the categories showed visible change (the “A” category), when combined with the other four categories (“B”- “F”) that failed to show a similar pattern, the overall comparison became non-significant. Despite targeted IL instruction, a significant portion of the participants were either ill-prepared to complete the assignment, or for other reasons not indicated within the data, they just didn’t perform well on the task. This result surprised the librarian, who had anticipated that IL instruction would have a positive impact on student performance. As noted by the faculty member, “a good assignment should separate those who master the skills from those who do not.” This result may also be partially linked to characteristics of the student population. There are a significant number of transfer students who enroll in the History & Systems course as part of their first semester at the university. Some of these students are not well prepared for university-level curriculum. While the IL sessions can (and do) help, for students with serious skill deficits these sessions are simply not enough. This is a more global problem that is beyond the scope of the current paper. Systemically there is a need to address how junior colleges are preparing students for work at the university level.

Considering this caveat, both the faculty member and librarian concluded that grade distributions will likely stay similar, however the impact of the IL sessions will be reflected in students’ ability to navigate the assignment with confidence, as well as improvements in their overall research experience. This is reflected in the comments

provided by the post-IL participants: they recognize the difficulty of the assignment but it no longer feels like something that is beyond their capability.

Improvements in the research experiences of post-IL session students can be seen in a variety of ways. The faculty member saw how IL sessions taught his students the process of developing a good research paper. Students were armed with a clear set of criteria on which they would be graded and discovered that their choice of topic mattered less than their understanding of how to construct a good paper. For the librarian, reference questions related to this assignment decreased dramatically. Questions from post-IL session students who did seek reference assistance were more focused and research-orientated than reference questions from pre-IL session students. Post-IL session questions often built upon concepts addressed in IL sessions, suggesting that these students understood the scope of the assignment and what they were being asked to do. During reference interactions, post-IL session students often articulated a confidence and comfort level with the research assignment. This contrasts with pre-IL session reference interactions where students often expressed confusion, anxiety, and hopelessness in relation to the assignment.

The most dramatic improvement, from the faculty member's perspective, was the impact of IL sessions on his teaching and assignment design. In the beginning, the faculty member felt that although his paper assignment was well-developed, it may have appeared vague to the students. Upon reflection, it was perhaps too much to expect students to be able to complete successfully. After participating in IL sessions where the librarian taught students the specific research skills to complete the assignment, the faculty member discovered that

...there are specific skills that I want students to develop with this assignment. Students develop critical thinking skills only when they must sift through the good and bad sources. The paper assignment is now an integral part of the course because it helps students grasp not only the mechanics of the class but more importantly they gain an appreciation for the scholars that have written the literature they are reviewing. The assignment has evolved into the type that teaches far more than how to find good sources, it teaches students to critically evaluate sources and more importantly to understand the research that has led to their own writing and clarity.

For the faculty member, the IL sessions prompted him to think about what he wanted his students to achieve in writing the paper, where he wanted them to “get to” in their research process. To that end, both the librarian and faculty member agreed that for this course, scaffolded IL sessions were more effective than “one-shots”, as they allowed students to build upon previous concepts and conduct more deep rooted research over the course of the semester:

...Early in the semester, students go to the library to learn about foundational resources such as the *Encyclopedia of Psychology* and the PsychInfo and JSTOR databases, but also what the difference is between a peer reviewed, scientific source vs. someone’s blog. Later in the semester students return for an important next step of the learning process, namely how to summarize and critically evaluate articles to build a ‘story’ of their topic that will lead to insight.

Indeed, student grades in semesters with scaffolded IL sessions were higher than from students who only attended one IL session during the semester. Scheduling and classroom availability prevented students attending multiple IL sessions during some semesters. Both the librarian and faculty member agreed that even one IL session in a semester was more beneficial to students than no session at all.

A word about collaboration: CI is unique in that one of its founding principles is interdisciplinarity. Collaboration is part of our campus culture. Librarians have faculty status, sit on Academic Senate committees, and teach credit-bearing courses in

disciplines outside of the library. Librarians are seen as faculty colleagues, not simply “librarians”- there is no “us” vs. “them” that often occurs at some universities. The librarian was comfortable in approaching the faculty member about IL sessions for his course; equally, the faculty member was receptive to the idea and was open to collaborating with the librarian on the content of the sessions.

Conclusion

Continued collaboration is grounded in the understanding that the ultimate goal of IL instruction is doing what is best for the student. Yes, our campus culture is unique. However, academic librarians are encouraged to continuously reach out to faculty members. They will discover that faculty who are interested in growing their skills as an instructor will see the benefit of IL sessions on student learning outcomes.

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