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We May Be Teaching Information Literacy, but Are the Design First Year Students Actually Getting It?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the outcomes of information literacy instruction for the Design first year students at the Temasek Polytechnic Library. Also of interest was whether or not the librarian was being seen as easily approachable, and if the students were deeming the lessons to be worthwhile. A participant action research approach was used, with the data being collected from multiple choice tests delivered via the institutional learning management system, group exercises, and a diagnostic assessment that was delivered before the workshops. It was found that the students did see the librarian as someone who was eminently approachable, and the majority of them found the lessons to be of value. It was concluded that the use of a diagnostic tool can be very useful in highlighting the gaps in students' knowledge, and that it would be beneficial to use it for all information literacy instruction at TP. Suggested future research could include a study of how much the students retain of IL skills into their third year of study.

Introduction

Established in 1990, the Temasek Polytechnic (TP) is one of five such institutions of higher learning in Singapore. The student body consists mainly of high school graduates, usually starting from the ages of 16 or 17, who are offered a choice of almost 50 full time diplomas from the disciplines of applied science, business, design, engineering, humanities and social sciences, and information technology. There are also currently 25 part time programs available for those working adults who wish to further their studies. For those not familiar with the way in which the Singapore education system works, Foo, Majid & Chang (2017, p. 339) have a wonderfully detailed diagram of the Singapore education system.

The Library has been supporting the students from these six different disciplines or schools at TP for many years now. Lectures, hands-on workshops and, increasingly, online tutorials are used to help the students and the staff find the information they need for their projects, assignments, and work. While the Library's efforts to teach information literacy (IL) skills to the Design students in particular have usually been met with very positive feedback, no systematic efforts have been made to find out whether or not the students have been absorbing anything useful. Feedback from the students on how enthusiastic they feel about the classes, anecdotal evidence from the academic staff on the high quality of the student assignments, and multiple choice tests are not always able to measure what learning has taken place with any degree

of accuracy.

The purpose of this study was to use action research in an effort to ascertain whether or not the Design first year students are learning the IL skills the Library is trying to teach. Action research was used because it takes a collaborative (Aytac, 2016) and interventionist approach (Saunders, Severyn, & Caron, 2017) that allows researchers to explore, examine, and investigate (Jefferson, 2014) their own practices in order to better understand what they are doing and thereby make improvements. Action research was also used because of its spiral approach (Vezzosi, 2006, p. 292) to problem solving. That is, an approach of continuous improvement where one is constantly trying to understand, improve, and make changes to one's teaching.

Although the study made use of both a control group of students and a test group, nothing was withheld from the control group. Their scores were simply used in an effort to see if the improved classes had a positive effect on the scores of the test group. The main research question and alternative hypothesis of this study were:

1. Question – To what extent are the classes being offered to the first year Design students at TP helping them learn the necessary information literacy skills?
2. Hypothesis - Changing the lesson according to the diagnostic findings will have a positive effect on the student information literacy scores of the test group.

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Also of interest were the following sub-questions:

1. Is the TP librarian coming across as someone who is easily approachable?
2. Do the students feel the lessons are worth their while?

This study was conducted with the permission of the Director of the TP Library and under the auspices of the TP Learning Academy as part of the Teaching in Higher Education Certificate Plus (THEC+) program. Permission to include the Design first year students in the study was obtained from the leader of the Design School Contextual Studies program for first year students.

Literature review

Information literacy

Everyone, it seems, has their own ideas on how to define information literacy, even though the concept has been around for more than 40 years. In fact, librarians and other researchers have been debating terms and definitions for almost as long as the concept has been around. Reference has been made over the years to library skills, information literacy, radical information literacy (Appleton, Grandal Montero, & Jones, 2017), information fluency (Lombard, 2016; Walczak, Reuter, & Sammet, 2009, p. 197), informational competency (Pinto & Fernandez-Pascual, 2017), metaliteracy (Garcia & Labatte, 2015; Witek & Grettano, 2014), digital, visual (Bent & Stubbings, 2011) and even media literacies (Beutelspacher, Henkel, & Schlögl, 2015). Different models have also been developed in various parts of the world, including both the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). No one, however, is disputing the importance of the concept.

The term “information literacy” (IL) was first used by Paul Zurkowski in the early 1970s in reaction to the emerging information age (Foo et al., 2014). Used mostly within the academic library world, various bodies have tried since to develop a working definition and model of IL that makes sense to the wider community. In 1989 the American Library Association (ALA) made one of the first attempts at such a definition. According to the ALA, an information literate person is one who would first realize that they needed information, and then be able to effectively find, access, and use that information (American Library Association, 2018).

Ten years later in the UK, the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) defined information literate people as those who have “an awareness of how they gather, use, manage, synthesise and create information and data in an ethical manner and will have the information skills to do so effectively” (Bent & Stubbings, 2011, p. 3). Both the ALA and SCONUL definitions of IL are very similar and, although the ALA definition does not specifically identify the ethical use of the information found, the original ALA framework for IL, developed in 2000, did include a section on ethics.

This original IL framework developed by the ALA, approved by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and endorsed by the American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Independent Colleges (American Library Association, 2018). This framework, the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, consisted of a set of five standards, performance indicators, and outcomes and were used as guidelines for IL programs by librarians all across the world. In the face of increasing criticism, however, about it being far too simplistic (Saunders, 2018) it was scrapped almost 27 years later in 2016 and replaced with another more conceptual framework based on six core concepts:

1. “Authority is constructed and contextual” - the ALA may be considered to be the leading authority on IL in the United States, for example, but they may not be considered to be so in the United Kingdom.

2. “Information creation as a process” – a process that could result in a variety of different delivery methods which makes the format of much less importance.
3. “Information has value”.
4. “Research as inquiry”.
5. “Scholarship as conversation” – a conversation among students, researchers, and professionals.
6. “Searching as strategic exploration” - exploration that includes “inquiry, discovery, and serendipity” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018).

SCONUL in the UK, on the other hand, seemed to recognize the complexities of the information landscape a little earlier and started constructing their own less reductionist framework in 2011. This framework, which adds “concepts such as digital, visual and media literacies, academic literacy, information handling, information skills, data curation and data management” to their initial definition of IL (Bent & Stubbings, 2011, p. 3), has seven basic pillars at its core. These pillars were labeled identify, scope, plan, gather, evaluate, manage, and present (Bent & Stubbings, 2011, p. 4). In other words:

1. Identify – know when there is a need for information.
2. Scope – identify what knowledge is needed.
3. Plan – develop search strategies.
4. Gather – locate and access the necessary information.
5. Evaluate – weed out the chaff.
6. Manage – organize the information in a professional and ethical manner.
7. Present – apply what has been learned from the information found.

Various other countries have come up with their own adaptations of the existing IL definitions and frameworks; each country attempting to use their chosen framework in a way best suited to their own needs. One of the more interesting adaptations comes from Singaporean researchers who called it the “i-Competent model”. This model looks at the five stages of:

1. Knowing when and what information is needed.
2. Deciding what sources to use for the information search.
3. Finding and deciding which resources to use.
4. Organizing and using that information.
5. A period of self-reflection with a view to improving the whole process (Foo et al., 2017).

Pretty much standard fare for IL but the interesting part comes in with the three added and yet “essential qualities of collaboration, social responsibility, and positive attitudes” into which their five stages are embedded (Foo et al., 2017, p. 338). The researchers are suggesting here that the truly information literate individual, one who is able to effectively find and use the most reliable information, cannot be one who ignores their role and their place in society.

Action research

More than 30 years before Paul Zurkowski started talking about IL, the concept of action research was brought to light with Kurt Lewin's work in the mid-1940s (Jefferson, 2014). Although action research does not appear to be the first choice for librarians when conducting research (Aytac, 2016), it is eminently suitable for use in academic libraries because it can allow librarians to use this interventionist approach to take an in-depth look at their teaching in order to improve understanding and make meaningful improvements. According to Jefferson (2014), action research can take a number of different paths but the underlying principle is that one first identifies a problem and then ones takes action to solve that problem.

Participant action research, the approach most used by librarians

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