The Search for Landmark Works in English Literary Studies: A Citation Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The authors of the current study set out to test for the presence of landmark works in a certain area of English literary scholarship with collection development in mind. By conducting a citation study on a specific niche within English literary studies, the authors hoped to identify core groups of scholarly works that could be used as a tool for collection development and provide a picture of literary scholarship on a more granular level. The data, though representative of a smaller sample size, indicated diversity in the use of sources with no clear core distinguishable, mirroring macroscopic trends in English literary scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

For many disciplines in the sciences and social sciences, scholars can identify a focused core collection of most-cited journals through the use of Bradford's law or Trueswell's 80/20 rule. In addition to a pattern of core journals, researchers in some disciplines are even able to document the presence of highly cited landmark articles—studies of such great impact that scholars consider them foundational to the discipline.

Landmark articles and journal scatter patterns can be useful for focused areas of collection development since they provide insight into patterns of use and may identify core resources for particular disciplines. But can these patterns and concepts be applied to disciplines where they have not been traditionally used—such as those in the humanities—to identify core or even "landmark" resources as well?

Researchers have used citation analysis to describe certain characteristics of citation practice in many of the humanities disciplines, such as the tendency to cite monographs and other book-format resources more heavily than journal articles. However, humanities scholars incorporate a diversity of information-seeking practices, topics, methodologies, and even disciplines in their research, making it difficult—if not impossible—to reach overarching conclusions about the research needs of humanities scholars on the whole. Previous studies of the humanities or even specific disciplines within the humanities have not been able to identify individual books, book articles, or other resources that are cited so frequently by scholars in the field that they become considered landmark works. If these highly cited resources

exist and can be identified, then these works could be considered core resources and could be used as a helpful tool for collection analysis and development by librarians.

Although citation studies of patterns in broader, discipline-wide contexts have not found core resources, the question may be asked another way: can a core collection be defined for a very specific subfield in the humanities? Are there core collections for the various research communities within a humanities sub-discipline that can be seen when the field of examination is more narrowly defined? This study seeks to explore these questions via bibliometric citation analysis targeted to a very specific field of study in English literary scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Debates about the mere presence of core collections are common in library literature. Hardesty and Mak (1994) trace a history of librarians consulting lists of core resources to the 1930s with Shaw's *A List of Books for College Libraries*, and argue that even though a true core collection is more of a myth than a practical ideal, it is imperative to continue the pursuit of a timeless library collection. They ultimately maintain, "While research collections should have considerable diversity and depth reflecting the research interests of local scholars, undergraduate libraries should have a higher degree of similarity built around a core collection," even though their findings showed that less than 10% of sample libraries held comparable collections (p. 362). Bodi and Maier-O'Shea (2005), while also recognizing the difficulty of defining a core, emphasized the value of a core collection targeted toward the needs of a specific audience.

Conversely, Joswick and Stierman (1997) seem to embrace the chaos that can be collection development, especially in journal literature,

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arguing that an academic patronage is too diverse and complicated for an "ultimate" list of core titles. Echoing the incongruence between these lists and actual library holdings, the authors argue that the "dissimilarity … emphasizes the folly of making local collection development decisions based on national or international data" (p. 53).

Although an overall core collection may not be an attainable goal, a discipline-by-discipline approach that examines "landmark works" may provide a structure around which a particular collection may be built. Citation studies of landmark articles in the sciences demonstrate their influence on subsequent literature and argue that bibliometric analysis, in addition to illustrating the influence of landmark works according to citation patterns, can provide a robust depiction of the research landscape for a discipline (Quental & Lourenço, 2012; Zhou, Xing, Liu, & Xing, 2014).

While this perhaps proves useful in the sciences, the literature has not favored these methods for finding a landmark work or developing a core collection in humanistic disciplines. Perhaps the greatest example of this is McCain's (1987) study, which attempts to identify core resources in the sub-discipline of history of technology by means of citation analysis. The study, which argued for the existence of a core collection, identified only 3 books that were cited in 2 or more articles in a sample of 27 journal articles as being core resources. However, the threshold for defining core resources was very low: these books received fewer than 30 combined citations from a sample of more than 1100. Neither the overall citations nor the overlap of sample sources citing strongly indicated the presence of a well-defined group of highly cited resources. In fact, the author even noted that "a substantial 'core literature' was not identified and the results provide general rather than specific insights" due to the nature of humanists' research (McCain, 1987, p. 55).

In addition to McCain's (1987) work, Lindholm-Romantschuk and Warner (1996) also identified what they considered a core collection in philosophy, sociology, and economics literature. However, the authors concede that "[a]ttempts to differentiate beyond a simple core: non-core distinction … could only be artificially imposed" (Lindholm-Romantschuk & Warner, 1996, p. 396). A number of studies point to the lack of or difficulty in finding evidence for a core collection in their analyses (Budd, 1986; Knievel & Kellsey, 2005; Thompson, 2002; Watson-Boone, 1994). With the demonstrated preference of monographic literature in the humanities over journal literature, the idea of a "landmark article," or landmark work in general, is even more complex. Authors studying the citation patterns of humanities literature note that while there is a clear majority of citations to books in most publications, the most consistent factor of humanities publications is in fact the wide variation among titles, publication dates, and topics, many of which can reach across disciplines (Collier, 1999; Kellsey & Knievel, 2012; Knievel & Kellsey, 2005; Thompson, 2002; Watson-Boone, 1994).

Studies of citation patterns show that literary scholars are not much different from scholars in the wider humanities: they prefer the monograph, they do not generally choose resources based on currency, and the scope of their research is so broad that pinning down a group of core resources for literary scholarship has proven difficult (Budd, 1986; Cullars, 1985; Heinzkill, 1980; Stern, 1983). Thompson (2002), who conducted a citation study on a sample of books in nineteenth-century English and American literature, found that "[t]he breadth of the academic fields in this study—the coverage of both American and British Literature across the entire nineteenth century (as opposed to one particular period)—created a broadly distributed group of authors," but "[n]o core group of either was evident" (p. 129). In an updated look at his 1980 study, Heinzkill (2007) examined 555 journal articles in English and American literary studies and found the research profile to be consistent with almost 30 years of citation studies, with English literary scholars citing monographs 77.1% of the time. Yet again, Heinzkill (2007) observed that "there were not any works that could be considered to be heavily cited" (p. 145).

Perhaps the breadth of content examined in these citation analyses could account for the equally broad expanse of citations. Factors that may also explain these habits may be evident in studies of how humanists pursue their information. Barrett (2005) and other scholars have written on the "haphazard," "serendipitous," and "incidental" ways that humanists seek information (p. 326). Stern (1983) pointed out that humanities scholarship tends to be "cumulative" in nature, often disregarding what is most current, making it "least susceptible to obsolescence," but also less focused in scope (p. 205). This, in addition to the often inter-disciplinary nature of humanities research, leads to information-seeking behaviors that are best described as browsing, or what Watson-Boone (1994) calls "grazing." She defines the grazer as one who "accumulates, selects, and interprets information in a way that transforms it into knowledge," which privileges individual interaction with the text over other methodologies (p. 212). The combination of these research habits, the diversity of their topics, and the controversial aspect of attempting to define a "core collection" provide very real barriers to identifying, selecting, and acquiring stand-out publications for a library collection in the humanities.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Except for McCain's (1987) study, most of the previous studies listed here have applied bibliometrics at the macro level, searching for a discipline-level core collection. The authors of the current study hypothesized that if there in fact was a core, it would not be within a discipline or group of disciplines, but within a smaller community of scholars focused on the same sub-discipline. They agree with Bodi and Maier-O'Shea (2005), that "it would be simplistic to assume that there is one, set assessment formula [for collection development] that applies to all disciplines and their print and electronic resources" (p. 146). Therefore, the authors used bibliometric analysis to examine citations of literary publications for patterns of recurring sources within a specific area of scholarship.

In contrast to most of the last 40 years of research on humanities citation patterns, the current study pinpoints a specific area in the field of English scholarship. By doing so, the authors hoped to test, at a granular level, the idea of landmark works or a core collection in not just a general area of scholarship, but within a specific scholarly community. For that reason, the authors opted to focus their citation analysis on the scholarly literature published on a specific literary work, hypothesizing that researchers publishing on the same text would be more likely to respond to each other, drawing from a common core group of resources, rather than those publishing research on a variety of literary texts.

The authors determined to select a sample small enough to be manageable but large enough for meaningful analysis. They also wanted a sample that would be relevant to their own collection development needs and could serve as a tool for informing collection development decisions if a core collection could be identified. Therefore, they started with the reading lists for the comprehensive exams for the MA in English at their institution over a three-year span (2011–2013) for their sample. These reading lists, compiled by faculty members in the English Department at the institution and posted on the department website, provide a window into the literary texts that the department expected its students to thoroughly comprehend by the time of their completion of the graduate program.

From these potential works, the authors selected Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, a title included on the department reading lists each year from 2011 to 2013, as the work to examine. The authors searched *Persuasion* in the *MLA International Bibliography*, limiting results to records that listed it as "Primary Subject Work" and were book-format resources (those whose "publication type" was listed as either "book" or "book article") published since 1990. The authors used the *MLA International Bibliography* because of its comprehensive and systematic indexing of books, book chapters, and journal articles of literary