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Information Literacy in Practice: Content and Delivery of Library Instruction Tutorials

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Introduction

Information literacy is widely recognized as critical to student success in college and beyond. Abilities associated with understanding a research need, and being able to locate, access, evaluate and use relevant information to meet that need are obviously necessary for completing many research and writing assignments in school, but are also necessary for good informed decision-making in everyday life, and are increasingly sought by employers across job categories and fields (Burrus, Jackson, Xi, & Steinberg, 2013). Academic librarians have long championed the importance of information literacy, and have worked to integrate learning outcomes for information literacy into their library instruction, as well as the wider curriculum when possible. Indeed, instruction for information literacy provides academic librarians an opportunity to align their activities with the educational mission and learning outcomes of their institution, while assessment of learning for information literacy offers evidence of the library's value to the campus community.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has been a leader in defining information literacy competencies and developing programs and guidelines to assist academic librarians to integrate information literacy into their instruction and the wider college curriculum, both with the original ACRL *Information Literacy Competencies for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2000) and the more recent *Framework for Information Literacy Competency for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2016a). While widely adopted throughout academic libraries, the original standards were criticized as being “reductionist” (England, van Couvering, and Thumim, 2008; Walsh, 2015) for focusing more on process-based tasks than higher order thinking skills. The newer *Framework for Information Literacy* is more conceptual, representing “a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards or learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills” (ACRL, 2016a). The expectation is that libraries will develop local learning outcomes appropriate to their institutions and programs based on the broad abstract concepts presented in the *Framework*.

Previous research suggests that librarians spend the bulk of instruction time teaching students search strategies and discrete resources such as subject-specific databases, with significantly less time devoted

to evaluation of information or other “big ideas” emphasized in the new ACRL *Framework*. However, this research relied on librarian self-reporting of their instruction activities (Saunders, 2013). No studies have analyzed existing instructional materials as a way of examining which skills and competencies academic librarians focus on in their teaching. Which skills and competencies are given the most attention in library instruction? To what extent do librarians focus on higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation of information or other “big ideas” presented in the new *Framework*? Do librarians attempt to assess learning in their instruction? This study begins to address these questions by analyzing existing online library tutorials as a method of determining what skills are the focus of publicly available online instructional materials. The study identifies the content and learning outcomes of these tutorials, LibGuides, and instructional videos to determine how they align with higher-order thinking skills from the ACRL *Framework* and as identified by Bloom's taxonomy. The results of this study could inform curriculum development within the library and at the larger college level, and will be of interest to instruction librarians and library administrators, as well as college administrators interested in learning outcomes for information literacy.

Literature review

While they do not indicate whether such content is actually taught, a number of studies identify areas of instructional need related to information literacy from either a faculty or a student perspective. Faculty tend to view information literacy within the context of their disciplines, rather than as a generic set of skills (Farrell & Badke, 2015). Indeed, different disciplines and subject areas tend to prefer different sources of information, employ different methods of searching, and evaluate information against different criteria (Bruce, 1997; Cope & Sanabria, 2014; Woolwine, 2017). Nevertheless, faculty across different disciplines do express common concerns related to their students' information literacy abilities, including a perceived lack of proficiency with searching, evaluating information and sources, and over-reliance on freely available resources (Bury, 2011; Dubicki, 2013; Jackson, MacMillan, & Sinotte, 2014). Overall, faculty indicate they are more concerned with information literacy competencies related to critical thinking and higher-order skills like evaluation and academic integrity

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than they are with lower-order tasks such as searching (Bury, 2011; Dubicki, 2013).

Research also suggests that students need instruction in a wide range of information literacy areas. A recent study by the Stanford History Education Group of over 7000 middle, high school, and college students described these students' ability to evaluate online information as "bleak" (2016, 4). This aligned with an earlier nationwide test of information literacy abilities by the Educational Testing Service that found nearly half of students failed to accurately assess web site objectivity and about one-third could not evaluate for authority. Students also struggled to identify appropriate strategies to broaden or narrow a search or to increase precision (Katz, 2007). Indeed, while most students express confidence in their own search abilities, Gross and Latham (2013) suggest that students tend to over-estimate their abilities. In general, students tend to rely on unsophisticated searches of one to two search terms, typically not using Boolean logic at all, or using it incorrectly (Brusilovsky, Ahn & Rasmussen, 2010; Jansen & Pooch, 2001; Jansen & Spink, 2006; Lau & Goh, 2006; Yu & Young, 2004). Despite their reported confidence in their search abilities, choosing keywords and refining searches is one of the most difficult aspects of information-seeking for students (Hoffman, Antwi-Nsiah, Feng, & Stanley, 2008). Research reports from *Project Information Literacy* indicate that college students were particularly challenged by conducting background research needed to understand and narrow a topic (Head & Eisenberg, 2009a), but also report difficulty with sorting through irrelevant results, determining credibility and evaluating sources (Head & Eisenberg, 2010).

The role of online tutorials

As online offerings continue to grow in higher education in general, academic libraries have also kept pace by not only offering remote access to resources but by also offering online instruction through various platforms. ACRL offers *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services* that emphasize equity for distance learners, including that the "library must provide information and digital literacy instruction programs to the distance learning community in accordance with the ACRL standards" (ACRL, 2016b, part 2, section 3, paragraph 4). These standards list as part of essential services "online instructional and informational services in formats accessible to the greatest number of people, including those with disabilities" (ACRL, 2016b, part 3, section 7). Research has shown that well-designed library tutorials can be effective for learning (Greer, Hess, & Kraemer, 2016; Henrich & Attebury, 2012; Silk, Perrault, Landenson, & Nazione, 2015), and has established best practices for delivering information through online tutorials. In general, design of online tutorials should follow and build on best practices for face-to-face instruction (Dewald, 1999). Blummer and Kristskaya (2009) conducted a thorough literature review of and summarized best practices for online teaching and learning in five areas, including identifying objectives, using standards or competencies as a guide for content development, involving collaborators, allowing for user engagement and active learning, and incorporating evaluation and assessment. Blevins, Deberg, and Childs (2014) reviewed tutorials throughout the University of Iowa's library system and developed a set of guidelines for tutorial development based on best practices, which included recommendations for software, tutorial length, and use of captioning for videos. Other recommendations for best practices include chunking materials and providing options for skipping to relevant content within a video, being conscious of the clarity and pace of the narration, providing captions for those who would prefer text to audio, and making tutorials easy to find on library web pages (Bowles-Terry, Hensley, & Hinchliffe, 2010), as well as ensuring content is up-to-date, increasing interactivity, and integrating web design principles to make the tutorials aesthetically pleasing (Foster, Shurtz, & Pepper, 2014).

Higher and lower order thinking skills

Bloom's Taxonomy offers a hierarchy of learning where understanding and application of knowledge represent the basic or lower-order skills, while evaluation and synthesis of knowledge represent higher-order skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Related to information literacy competencies, skills such as locating and accessing information or formatting citations (as opposed to deciding when a citation is needed) would be considered lower-order, as these tasks are process-based and generally do not require students to analyze or synthesize information. Competencies such as evaluating sources and content, identifying plagiarism, or applying fair use guidelines to decide when to use materials would be considered higher-order. Keene, Colvin, and Sessions (2010) offer an overview of information literacy through the lens of Bloom's taxonomy and a map of specific information literacy competencies to Bloom's levels of learning. While students need to master lower-order skills, ideally instruction will scaffold learning to advance students to higher-order skills. Although information literacy has been linked to critical thinking and lifelong learning, critics lament that too often librarians favor an approach that emphasizes the lower-order process-based skills like searching over higher-order skills like evaluation of information. They view this approach as reductionist (England, van Couvering, & Thumim, 2008; Walsh, 2015), and one that turns "the research process into a formulaic and production-oriented concept" (Elmborg, 2012, 87). Pagowsky (2015) laments the focus on skills-based education which focuses on transfer of content, driven in part by employer demands for certain skills and concerns around student outcomes like employability. She notes that information literacy instruction has traditionally been tied to a skills-based approach to pedagogy but contends that the new ACRL *Framework* provides opportunity for more holistic and deeper learning. The *Framework* is described as a "continuum of deepened engagement" where "foundational ideas...about scholarly influence, the process of inquiry, and types of authority can serve to "frame" discussions of tools and resources, whether databases, citation manuals, or social media sites" (Jacobson & Gibson, 2015, 103), while deeper engagement incorporates self-reflection and metacognition. While the original *Information Literacy Competency Standards* were more prescriptive with their six standards expanded on with objectives and indicators, Jacobson and Gibson (2015) note that the *Framework* allows librarians much more leeway to adapt and formulate their own learning outcomes based on the frames, and encourage aligning those outcomes with discipline-based knowledge.

With both the original *Standards* and the new *Framework*, there is plenty of advice on what content could or should be addressed in library instruction, as well as guidance on how to address that content. For just a few examples, monographs like *Not Just Where to Click: Teaching Students How to Think about Information* (Swanson & Jagman, 2015), *Teaching Information Literacy Threshold Concepts: Lesson Plans For Librarians* (Bravender, McClure, & Schaub, 2015), and *The Library Instruction Cookbook* (Sittler & Cook, 2009) offer step-by-step overviews for providing library instruction based on information literacy learning outcomes. Jacobson and Gibson (2015) provide a few specific examples of how to adapt learning outcomes based on the *Standards* to fit the *Framework*. Other writings suggest curriculum mapping as way to align library instruction with course learning outcomes or discipline-specific outcomes for information literacy (Charles, 2015; Maybee, Carlson, Slebodnik, & Chapman, 2015). While helpful as guidance, these texts only advise on content, but do not indicate whether or not such content is actually covered in practice.

A few studies examine the content and learning outcomes for information literacy for specific courses or disciplines. Ferrer-Vinent and Carello (2011) describe integrating outcomes for finding reference information and proprietary literature and learning proper citation into biology classes. Zhang, Goodman, and Xie (2015) identified six information literacy learning outcomes including creating and implementing search strategies, tracking research through logs, and

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