



Information needs of students in Israel – A case study of a multicultural society

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ABSTRACT

Students turn to a variety of sources when searching for information for their academic assignments. This study uses findings from a survey given to 151 Israeli students attending a university in Israel. A questionnaire comprising 12 questions was administered regarding their information needs, information behavior, and difficulties in searching and writing an academic assignment. A special emphasis of the study was on the multicultural environment of the Israeli students and its effect on their information behavior. Results show that there is a significant difference between native language groups with regard to the use of search engines, the use of library services, and in the patterns of conducting their academic assignment.

The findings imply that when the language of instruction and assignment delivery is the students' second language, they have special needs and should receive particular attention from the library and information services.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies indicate that as online information resources proliferate, students are making fewer visits to the campus library to retrieve information. Students turn to a variety of sources for information when completing academic work and they increasingly rely on the Internet as their primary information source. For students, the Internet allows access to a rich store of readily available materials that can be cited in a manner similar to the more conventional sources, such as books and academic journals (Biddix, Chung, & Park, 2011; Metzger, Flanagan, & Zwarun, 2003; Radia & Stapleton, 2008). There is growing concern among higher education professionals regarding how students' information search and retrieval skills are negatively influenced. Easy access to digital information raises concerns related to whether students put forth the effort expected of them and if they know how to find scholarly resources that measure up to academic assignments (Denison & Montgomery, 2012).

Using an information behavior questionnaire, the goal of this study is to describe how Israeli students from the university of Haifa study conduct research, and find information. We asked about their needs, strategies, and preferred use of information sources for academic assignments, what difficulties they encounter with course-related research from start to finish, and how students evaluate the information they choose to use. We also tried to understand how students from

different native language groups from varied cultures and backgrounds seek information, the differences in their information behavior, and their difficulties in overcoming language barriers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the prevalence of literature in the field, we have chosen to discuss the literature selectively. Studies conducted over the last decade indicate that for their academic assignments, students tend to use Internet search engines more than searching library resources (Currie, Devlin, Emde, & Graves, 2010; De Rosa, Cantrell, Hawk, & Wilson, 2006; Graham & Metaxas, 2003; Jones & Madden, 2002; Kim & Sin, 2007; Metzger et al., 2003; Thompson, 2003). In their academic searches students turn first to their easiest, time saving, familiar and accessible option (i.e., Internet search engines) rather than the library's qualified academic sources (Lee, Paik, & Joo, 2012). Accessing library resources takes much more time and is therefore reserved for larger projects such as research assignments. Accessing information on the Web is much faster, and although it may be less reliable and credible, it offers students the answers they need to review information quickly (Biddix et al., 2011; Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Pérez, 2008).

Students tend to save themselves the effort of dealing with the library's discovery tools and databases. We cannot be sure whether they choose to do so because other sources are more convenient to use, or because they lack the necessary literacy skills (Thompson, 2003). According to Niu et al. (2010), research students use citation or bibliographic databases as their first source, while their second choice is Web search engines like Google or Yahoo, but they specifically added that the library databases are not user friendly or easy to work with (Niu et al., 2010).

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In most previous studies, most of the students are young in age (in their early 20's) and define themselves as savvy Internet users. However, they conduct basic shallow searches in natural language and do not spend time locating keywords or using effective search strategies. They often conclude the search without having retrieved the best quality resources (Rowlands, Nicholas, Williams, Huntington, & Fieldhouse, 2008; Williams & Rowlands, 2007). Most of the students define themselves as qualified in searching for information; they are satisfied with their searches; they learn from their own experience and do not need any instruction. Yet some noted that they cannot find the precise academic information for their needs and view the process of searching for information as laborious but necessary (Denison & Montgomery, 2012; Gross & Latham, 2007; Head & Eisenberg, 2010a, b; Niemand, 2010).

The age of the students as an influencing factor has been studied extensively but the findings are inconclusive. Some results indicate (Graham & Metaxas, 2003) that older students do not perform better searches than their younger peers – they rely on the sources of information found on the Internet and do not check their credibility – while other studies (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Gratch-Lindauer, 2007) indicate that older students have the ability (and experience) to choose more reliable sources and to critically examine the information they retrieve.

The students report that the main difficulties in carrying out their academic assignments are to begin work, to define the research subject, to choose and evaluate the information source, and to understand their professor's requirements (Head, 2008). However, the results of Head's study indicate that the most dominant factors in students' information behavior are their tight schedules and lack of time. They decide to finish their search when the time set aside for the assignment ends or when, in their opinion, they have spent enough time on the task in comparison to the credit they receive for it. They are driven by efficiency, and have a consistent method of working that allows them to find their way around the information overload to which they are exposed when they search for information for an assignment. This fact may result in them using a limited number of the same "permanent sources" for all their assignments (Head & Eisenberg, 2010a,b; Prabha, Connaway, Olszewski, & Jenkins, 2007; Urquhart et al., 2003).

Second language (L2) students find it even more difficult to cope with seeking information. They find it hard to search, retrieve, and access the needed sources, and have different information needs than that of native language students (Bhatti, 2010; Zhixian, 2007). These students need to take the extra step to linguistically decode information they have found. Although L2 undergraduate students have some awareness of differences in quality of research literature and are familiar with scholarly searches of electronic sources, they continue to cite inferior sources (Radia & Stapleton, 2008; Stapleton, 2005).

Israeli students come from a multicultural society; as such, they have special characteristics. Multiculturalism is defined as "relating to or containing several cultural or ethnic groups within a society" (Multicultural, n.d.). In this survey we refer to students coming from diverse cultures and linguistic backgrounds as "multicultural society students". In Israel there are some major ethnic groups, including Israeli-born Jews, Israeli-born Arabs, and immigrants. One of the largest immigrant groups is from the former Soviet Union (Central bureau of statistics, 2012). These groups differ in the first language they use; Hebrew, Arabic, and Russian, respectively.

The literature makes some reference to these students but only rarely in the context of academic assignment behavior and information needs. Most of the studies refer to specially customized library services or to technical systems relating to multilingual searching and retrieval (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010; Hughes, 2010; Notess, 2008). One can also refer to international students and immigrant students as multicultural society students. Most of the studies (Liao, Finn, & Lu, 2007) identify barriers such as language and culture (social class and religious differences). The international students show a stronger

interest than the American students in reference instruction/ orientation/workshops and reference (Liao et al., 2007). International students are described in the literature as having fairly good information skills but they find it hard to use them due to the linguistic and cultural aspects of their information use (Hughes, 2009). Mehra and Bilal (2007) claim that foreign language students lack awareness of the multiple language interfaces provided by Google, and of foreign language resources available on the Web (Mehra & Bilal, 2007), while other studies indicate that they prefer to use their native language web sites (Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007).

ISRAELI STUDIES

In Israel, several studies have been published on the usage patterns, literacy, and information needs of the Israeli students. In two studies of Israel college students (Avigdori, 2000; Chai, 2008) there was no correlation between ethnic group or mother tongue and information resources usage. Differences were found between students studying in various fields or faculties, especially in their approach to searching and using academic databases and their attitudes towards the use of English-language sources. In another study (Mizrachi & Shoham, 2004) on students studying in teaching colleges, there was a correlation between information and computer technology expertise and English language information sources usage. In a study of Israeli nursing students (Zafir, 2011) a correlation was found between English language proficiency and information search and usage. Furthermore, the Arab students found it more difficult to use keywords and search strategies in English, as it is their third language. In their study about information seeking behavior of Arab students in a teaching college, Chai & Shoham (2012) note that the Arab student population learns their preliminary studies in elementary and high school in their native language of Arabic. This radical transition from the Arab speaking environment to the Hebrew speaking environment of the college or university leads to alienation and difficulty integrating into the academic system. In their study they found that the subjects preferred people (friends, colleagues, teachers, and librarians) as their first choice of information source.

MAJOR ARTICLES ADDRESSED IN THE DISCUSSION

In our study we specifically mention three recent studies on the information behavior of students. Head and Eisenberg (2010a, 2010b) conducted a large-scale survey of college students from twenty-five US campuses as part of the US "Project Information Literacy". They received 8353 responses and their survey concentrated on information seeking strategies and research difficulties. The major findings relevant to the current study were the use of the same information sources for all the academic assignments. The most difficult stages in the process of preparing the assignment were beginning the assignment, defining the subject, and narrowing down their search results. In the search process the most difficult task was searching the library databases. The most important factors for the American students in this survey were passing the course, finishing the assignment, and getting a good grade; although many of them also declared their desire to find the course interesting and learn something new.

Niemand (2010) explored the information seeking behavior of 289 knowledge information students from the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, through a questionnaire. The major findings relevant to the current study were that the respondents met their information needs by utilizing the Internet as their primary source. The majority of the respondents indicated that they used search engines to find relevant information for their tasks and only 20% declared using the library as their source of information. Most of the respondents indicated that their basic Internet usage skills were gained through self-exploration.

Lee et al. (2012) used a self-generated diary method to investigate how 233 undergraduate students coped with their academic search tasks at the Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea. The major findings

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