Uncovering the IL Disconnect: Examining Expectations among Librarians, Faculty and Students

Sheila Cunningham, Allison Carr, and Stephanie Sterling Brasley

Introduction

Since the emergence of bibliographic instruction, and later, information literacy (IL) instruction, librarians have generously proffered anecdotal evidence of students' gaps in information and library research skills; their perceptions emanate from interactions with students at reference desks and within classroom settings. Moreover, the librarian liaison model is pervasive in many higher educational institutions, thus permitting librarians to work closely with discipline faculty to facilitate students' acquisition of information-based skills. Although librarians work closely with both discipline faculty and students, are their anecdotes accurate with respect to the information literacy skills that should be acquired? Are their perceptions of students' information literacy skills and needs aligned with those of the faculty or of the students? The results of a needs assessment of librarians, faculty, and students of the California State University (CSU) system illuminates the incongruity of librarian perceptions, revealing surprising results. This paper examines the needs assessment, survey findings, and offers suggestions on how practitioners can use the results to inform and improve collaboration with faculty and enhance their work with students.

Literature Review

A recent review of the literature suggests that research on librarian, faculty and student perspectives on information literacy focus around definitions of information, the importance of acquiring skills, and search behavior of students.

Bruce's seminal work on the seven broad conceptions of information literacy provides the framework for many studies that have been conducted since.[1] She found that university faculty see information literacy as fitting into one of these conceptions: information technology for information retrieval, finding information, executing a process, controlling information, building a new knowledge base, working with knowledge, or using information to benefit others.[2] Andretta, Pope, and Walton's comprehensive survey, conducted in the UK, examined the differences between librarians', faculty and students' definitions of information literacy, and found a significant disconnect between the groups.[3] Each group had a slightly different perspective on an information literacy definition. Singh[4] and DaCosta[5] examined faculty perceptions regarding the importance of information literacy skills, exploring how and when students should acquire them, including consideration of integrated

Sheila Cunningham is Instruction Librarian at Sonoma State University, e-mail: sheila.cunningham@sonoma.edu; Allison Carr is Social Sciences Librarian at CSU San Marcos, e-mail: acarr@csusm.edu; Stephanie Sterling Brasley is Manager, Information Literacy Initiatives at California State University, e-mail: sbrasley@gmail.com

information literacy programs. Each of the studies found gaps between what faculty expect and what they are doing to facilitate information literacy skills among their students.

The most recent study on student perception came from collaboration between faculty and librarians at Miami University.[6] Instead of measuring students' specific information literacy skills, the survey gathered students' level of confidence in completing library and research related tasks. The researchers found that students prefer online sources, and see research as a series of searches, rather than as an in-depth process. Maybee examined how students use information as a way to examine students' conceptions of information literacy. Converse to the results of the study at Miami University, he found that students see information use in terms of sources used, processes used to find information, and using information to build a knowledge base.[7] Gross and Latham found that students see information literacy and information seeking as the product not the process used to get there.[8]

Although the aforementioned studies provide complementary information on faculty, librarian, and student ideas regarding information literacy, Gullikson's work best correlates to and informs the findings of the CSU needs assessment findings. Gullikson[9] surveyed faculty on the importance of skills outlined in ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. The top three responses were "demonstrate an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism," "organizes the content in a manner that support the purposes and format of the product," and "integrates the new and prior information, including quotations and paraphrasings."[10] However, Weetman's results were slightly different. In her study of faculty, the top three skills that students should acquire by the end of a specific course were *the ability to recognize an information need*, *the ability to organize, apply and communicate information*, and *the ability to locate and access information* [italics added].[11] The skills that librarians found more important for students to learn differed slightly still. In a survey of academic librarians, Schroeder found that accessing information effectively and efficiently (ACRL Standard 2) and determining the information need (ACRL Standard 1) are the most important skills for incoming freshman to have learned during their high school years.[12]

Environment

The California State University (CSU), with twenty-three campuses across the state, is the largest public university in the country, serving nearly 443,000 students. Each campus serves the specific needs of its community, offering baccalaureate, masters, and professional doctoral degrees.

Information literacy (or information competence) has been regarded as a critical concept for CSU students for over fifteen years as evidenced by strong system-wide faculty and monetary support for advancing this concept[13]. As a pioneer in the information literacy movement, the CSU has completed many successful initiatives to integrate this vital framework and skill-set into the curriculum. Although library faculty can be proud of the advances they have made, their achievements have also surfaced problems; librarians can no longer keep pace with the demands to reach all levels of students for information literacy instruction. CSU librarians, working independently on their individual campuses, have created online tutorials addressing similar information literacy content. This was found to be an inefficient use of staff and monetary resources. In an effort to reduce these inefficiencies, the ICT/Information Literacy Digital Learning Objects Core Development Team was formed and charged to investigate and create digital learning objects (DLOs) that support information literacy instruction across the system. Collaboration underpinned the planning and implementation phases of the team's work. A needs assessment survey was developed in order to determine the topic areas for which DLOs could be developed.

Methodology

In Spring 2008, the development team distributed targeted surveys to faculty, librarians, and students across the 23 campuses of the CSU. Information literacy coordinators at each campus were the primary conduits for distribution of the survey to faculty, librarians, and students. They forwarded survey invitations to their faculty (estimated total population 4,600) and librarians (estimated total population 446) via email. These two surveys were open for 23 days and ended on April 11, 2008. Student surveys were distributed based on campus norms for student communication; via email, posting to the library website or the learning management system were most common. Librarians distributed surveys to students (estimated total population

422,143), asking them to complete the survey after information literacy instruction sessions. The student survey was open for 30 days and ended on April 18, 2008. This longer period accommodated student access to the survey on campuses with different spring break calendars. The survey was administered using the professional version of the SurveyMonkey software available from www.surveymonkey.com.

The distribution plan for students varied at the participating campuses, resulting in a different response rate at each of those campuses. In addition to reaching students in instructional settings, distribution activities included providing a link to the survey directly from either the campus home page or from the library homepage, and adding the survey to the course management system. Other campuses chose not to distribute the student surveys at all. As evidenced by our distribution methods, the development team sought to acquire a convenient sample, rather than a random sample, in order to conduct a system-wide needs assessment for the creation of relevant, task or skill-based DLOs. Ideally, consistent distribution of the student survey would have produced more consistent results across the system.

Findings and Discussion

A total of sixteen CSU campuses opted to participate and a combined total of 2763 survey responses were received: 493 faculty surveys, 193 librarian surveys, and 2,077 student surveys. Faculty responses came from a variety of disciplines and covered the spectrum of programs offered throughout the system.

Though not the original intention of the needs assessment, several of the survey questions allowed the development team to compare the perceptions of librarians, faculty, and students. Librarians and faculty were asked questions regarding their expectations: "What IL skills do you want/expect students to acquire in GE/lower division courses?" The question comparing perceptions of librarians and students pertained to levels of difficulty. The librarian survey asked: "What are the areas in which your lower division students have the most difficulty regarding searching, locating and using sources?" Students were asked: "When an instructor gives an assignment requiring library research, what do you find most difficult?"

Faculty vs. Librarian Perceptions

Our findings demonstrate that librarians and faculty feel differently about what IL skills should be a priority for students to acquire by the end of their lower division courses: 94% of librarians surveyed indicated that their top priority for students was that they understand the difference between scholarly and popular articles, whereas 87% faculty surveyed indicated that their top priority was understanding how to quote and paraphrase information in students' research assignments, which was similar to the findings in Gullikson's study.[14]

The differences in ranking indicate that librarian and faculty priorities, while not at odds, have significant differences in foci, which can lead to competing learning outcomes in instructional sessions.

Librarian vs. Student Perceptions

The findings in table two were also suggestive of a disconnect between librarians and students in some areas. The most telling misalignment was revealed in the *choosing a topic* skill. Among students, *choosing a topic* was found to be the most difficult part of the research process (38%). The inverse was found in the case of librarians; they felt that this skill proved to be less difficult skill for students to master. This might not be all that surprising; often it is assumed that students will come to the sessions with their topics chosen, and thesis statements written. However, when asked, stu-

TABLE 1 Librarian and Faculty Ranking* of IL Skills: What IL skills do you want/expect students to acquire in GE/lower division courses?		
IL Skill	**Librarians**	**Faculty**
How to choose/narrow a topic	3	2
How to distinguish between scholarly and popular articles	1	3
How to evaluate websites, relevant books and periodical articles	2	
How to document their information ethically		1
*1=highest rank (most important); 3=lowest rank (least important)		

TABLE 2 Librarian and Student Ranking* of IL Skills: What IL skills do students find the most difficult?		
IL Skill	**Librarians**	**Students**
Choosing/narrowing a topic idea	3	1
Creating a search strategy/choosing the right research tool	1	2
Citing information correctly in a bibliography	2	3
*1=highest rank (most difficult); 3=lowest rank (least difficult)		

dents report not understanding how to choose a topic, or go from a broad topic to a more focused topic.

There was tighter alignment between the groups concerning *creating an effective search strategy*. Librarians felt that this was the major difficulty students faced, and similarly, students ranked this second 37%.

Based on our data, students may not be getting what they need if the concepts they perceive as being the most difficult are not being addressed by librarians who recognize different challenges.

The most surprising and gratifying outcome of the needs assessment was the data collected; this information holds promise for improving information literacy teaching and learning in the future. The project was a system-wide effort targeted, primarily, to the needs of faculty whom the team hoped would embed the DLOs into their courses and instructional activities. The information regarding the differences in perceptions of the three closely tied groups was a serendipitous discovery.

When the development team met to discuss the results of the surveys, a collective "a-ha!" moment was experienced when the analysis elucidated the differences in perceptions of each of the surveyed constituents. Though it was not the initial intent of the needs assessment, the knowledge acquired from the survey data had an immediate effect on the instructional approaches of some team members. The team members discussed how this information changed their pedagogical approach to library instruction sessions. Specifically, team members were more direct in their communication with faculty prior to instruction to clear away assumptions. Faculty were asked specifically about what expectations they have for their students upon completing the library instruction sessions and informed them of their expectations and worked toward creating a better dialog. Team members also enhanced communication with students before and during library instructions sessions by allowing them to share what parts of the research process they are most

worried about at that point in time and addressed specific issues during and after class time, as well as sharing the information with the faculty member.

As the analysis of the data drew to a close, several limitations emerged. Sample size was foremost as a limitation to the needs assessment. Time factors, availability of individuals to facilitate distribution of the survey, and timing of the quarter/semester for the campuses impacted the data-gathering phase. However, as stated earlier, for purposes of assessing the need for information skills, the data collected was nominally sufficient. The faculty response (493) reflected a little over ten percent of the overall faculty population. Since the faculty feedback was critical for development of the DLOs, the team was underwhelmed by the response. However, given the short time frame under which the team had to operate, this data did supply some valuable guidance. Although the student response (2,077) was not statistically significant given the nearly 444,00 overall student population, the team was gratified that students took time to answer the survey, despite the lack of incentives. Not surprising, nearly forty-four percent of the librarians (446) responded to the survey. This was an excellent response rate considering it reflected participation by only sixteen of the twenty-three campuses.

Another limitation noted by the development team was that the bulk of the questions were asked to elicit information about online learning materials that could concretely be developed; expressed differently, the questions focused on skills rather than higher-order concepts. The team understood the difficulty of creating DLOs to help student with more complex information needs such as synthesizing information, or learning how social, economic, and cultural considerations might impact the ethical use of information. Therefore, this data falls short in identifying the full range of information literacy skills that faculty might have identified as being important.

Conclusion

The results from table one illuminating the incoherence in what librarians and faculty expect students to know should be a wake-up call for librarians. In the majority of instructional situations, librarians are tangential to the course, at best, teaching one or two IL sessions to students. Faculty are the architects of curricular and instructional activities. As such, librarians and faculty must be in agreement about the most important content for students to learn. The absence of this concurrence damages curriculum planning and collaborative efforts.

The findings obtained from the needs assessment bring to light a need for more studies on faculty/librarian/student perceptions of basic IL skills, and provide a first step toward a more careful examination of this issue. Additionally, the findings foster an opportunity for librarians to reexamine avenues for collaboration with their faculty and how they work with their students.

These results raised awareness of the incongruity of library perceptions of information literacy skills instruction and acquirement compared with that of faculty and students can inspire a new dialog for building stronger collaborative ties between all constituents. Librarians can change the conversation we have with our faculty and let our students tell us what they need and what they are having difficulty with in the classroom setting and reference interactions. This awareness can foster a larger conversation on our campuses about collective expectations for students' research skills.

Notes

1. Christine Bruce, *The Seven Faces of Information Literacy* (Adelaide: Auslib Press, 1997).

2. Ibid., 110.

3. Susie Andretta, Alison Pope, and Geoff Walton, "Information Literacy Education in the UK," *Communications in Information Literacy* 2, no. 1 (March 2008): 36–51.

4. Annmarie B. Singh, "A Report on Faculty Perceptions of Students' Information Literacy Competencies in Journalism and Mass Communication Programs: The ACEJMC Survey," *College & Research Libraries* 66, no. 4 (July 2005): 294–311.

5. Jacqui Weetman DaCosta, "Is There an Information Literacy Skills Gap to Be Bridged? An Examination of Faculty Perceptions and Activities Relating to Information Literacy in the United States and England," *College & Research Libraries* 71, no. 3 (2010): 203–222.

6. Eric Resnis et al., "Information literacy assessment: a case study at Miami University," *New Library World* 111, no. 7 (2010): 287–301.

7. Clarence Maybee, "Undergraduate Perceptions of Information Use: The Basis for Creating User-Centered Student Information Literacy Instruction," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 1 (January 2006): 79–85.

8. Melissa Gross and Don Latham, "Undergraduate Perceptions of Information Literacy: Defining, Attaining, and Self-Assessing Skills," *College & Research Libraries* 70, no. 4 (July 2009): 336–350.

9. Shelley Gullikson, "Faculty Perceptions of ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 6 (2006): 583–592.

10. Ibid., 587.

11. Jacqui Weetman, "Osmosis—Does It Work for the Development of Information Literacy?," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 31, no. 5 (September 2005): 456–460.

12. Robert Schroeder, "Both Sides Now: Librarians Looking at Information LIteracy From High School and College," *Educators' Spotlight Digest*, Spr-Sum 2009, http://www.sosspotlight.com/site_creator/view/419.

13. Susan C. Curzon, *Information Competence in the CSU: A report, submitted to the Commission on Learning Resources and Instructional Technology*, 1995, http://www.calstate.edu/ls/FinalRpt_95.doc

14. Gullikson, 587.