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The Relationship of Undergraduate Students' Self-assessment of Library Skills to Their Opinion of Library Instruction: A Self-reporting Survey

Christopher A. Freeman

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Abstract

College students, in general, are known to be lacking in their ability to effectively make use of academic library resources, yet in many previous studies these same students have estimated their library-use skills at inflated levels. Neither do college students in general often willingly take advantage of library instruction opportunities. A self-reporting survey was administered to forty first-year college students in order to investigate whether students' tendency to over-estimate library use skills has an effect on student opinion about library instruction in general. Results from the survey not only indicate that such a relationship may exist, but also strongly support earlier findings that students rate their library use skills highly.

Introduction

Academic librarians often observe that university undergraduates have a difficult time using the resources available at the library to find the information they need for classroom assignments (Lombardo and Miree 2003, Maughan 2001, Quarton 2003, Rehman and Mohammad 2001). Yet students display a reluctance to enroll in library workshops designed to improve students' understanding of effective library use. Furthermore, college students as a group show a marked tendency to over-evaluate their own set of library skills (Geffert and Christiansen 1998, Maughan 2001, Ren 2000). This pattern of behavior raises the question of whether a relationship exists between a student's perception of his or her ability to use library resources and a belief about the basic value of library instruction.

Problem

The study reported here was designed to investigate the relationship between college undergraduates' self-assessment of library skills and their opinion of library instruction. An

examination of this relationship will contribute to an understanding of how college students view their ability to use library resources within the wider context of their educational development at the university level. This knowledge will also provide insight into the motivations behind students' choices about actively pursuing self-improvement in this area. Furthermore, the results of this study deepen our understanding of the factors affecting students' willingness to take advantage of library instruction opportunities.

Understanding the factors related to why students choose to neglect improvement of their library skills is important since we already know that many students lack what most librarians consider an adequate level of development in this area (Lombardo and Miree 2003, Maughan 2001, Quarton 2003, Rehman and Mohammad 2001). The results of the current study would have practical relevance as well. This information could facilitate the creation of library instruction courses that are more attractive to college students. By considering students' perceptions and opinions about library instruction when working on course design, it is likely that performance in these classes would be generally positive.

At the onset of this investigation, it was expected that those students who have assessed their own library skills favorably would also have a negative opinion about the value of library instruction. This belief was based on the assumption that students who believe they already have a firm grasp on the use of library resources are less likely to see a need for further assistance. Since a significant body of literature exists demonstrating that library instruction is effective in improving students' understanding of how better to make use of library resources it would be valuable to better understand the nature of this relationship (Franklin and Toifel 1994, Leverence 1997, Lombardo and Miree 2003).

Additionally, it is known that a majority of undergraduate students need refinement of their library skills (Maughan 2001, Quarton 2003, Rehman and Mohammad 2001, Seamans 2002)

and that it is unlikely these same students will seek out formalized library instruction (D'Esposito and Gardner 1999). It stands to reason that if students are unwittingly exaggerating their own ability to effectively make use of library resources, many do not even know that they should be asking for help.

Literature Review

To date, little has been written addressing the effect of students' perceptions of library-use ability on their perceptions about the value of library instruction. However, results from studies in related areas have provided some information of use to the current study.

Geffert and Christensen (1998) conducted a study among college freshmen at St. Olaf College in Minnesota meant to correlate student attitudes about many aspects of academic libraries with student demographic information. Among the results of this was the implication that students as a group both feel "somewhat" confident about their library skills and consider library instruction to be "somewhat" important (Geffert and Christensen 1998). In a statement that lends credence to the purpose of the current study, Geffert and Christensen say "[f]or bibliographic instruction...to be truly effective, it is essential to know more about the attitudes and skills that incoming students bring with them as they encounter our libraries" (1998, 279).

Kurbanoglu (2003), in discussing the relationship between self-efficacy (one's ability to perform a given task) and information literacy development, also bolstered the need for the current study. According to Kurbanoglu, "perceived self-efficacy can be accepted as one of the psychological factors which has an impact on information literacy" (2003, 637). In other words, if one perceives his or her ability to use library resources as advanced, little motivation will be felt to seek improvement, regardless of the actual level of efficacy present in the individual. Thus, investigating students' perceptions of self-efficacy and how those feelings affect other aspects of educational development is important.

Franklin and Toifel (1994) designed a questionnaire meant to test the efficacy of library instruction. The questionnaire was administered to graduate and undergraduate students at the University of West Florida both before and after the students received library instruction. Results

from the evaluative portion of the post-test indicated that both groups of students felt strongly that library instruction could help them to "better understand how to use" (1994, 232) library resources.

In a study similar to that of Franklin and Toifel, Lombardo and Miree (2003) measured the attitudes of business students at Oakland University regarding different information formats both before and after library instruction. A byproduct of this study showed that students who received library instruction demonstrated an increase in their self-confidence about their ability to use the library. Lombardo and Miree cited several studies supporting the theory that student self-confidence in the library can be affected by library instruction. Here, again, a correlation between student self-confidence in the library and library instruction is demonstrated.

Research reported by Davidson (2001) is closely related to the current study. In an attempt to simply answer the question of whether students feel library instruction is important, Davidson determined that "students clearly find instruction...of library research important" (2001, 157). However, when asked to rank various methods of instruction delivery, students showed the least preference for formal classroom instruction. Online tutorials were the most popular, suggesting that even among students who claim to value instruction, a sense of self-reliance is important (Davidson 2001).

In reviewing the literature relevant to the current study, many reports were identified that addressed the impact that library instruction can have on student perceptions of the library. None, though, appear to have addressed the effect of student perception of library skills on student opinion of library instruction. As Kurbanoglu reasons, self-perception of ability is important when making a conscious decision to seek self-improvement. Further, if students perceive library instruction as unimportant, they will certainly never take advantage of the available library instruction opportunities. Thus, the students will never benefit from a service proven to enhance research skills. The fact that library instruction is effective makes no difference if students are unwilling to give instruction a chance.

Present Study

The lack of known research addressing the relationship between students' self-assessment of library skills and their opinion of library instruction implies that this is in fact an area in need of investigation. The ten-item questionnaire included here was designed to elicit information from survey participants that would reveal perceptions about their ability to make use of specific library resources as well as opinions about the value of library instruction.

The questionnaire was administered to forty students enrolled in three different first-year English classes at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia. All three classes had previously attended a basic, one-hour library orientation class earlier in the semester but information regarding any other library instruction experience was not sought.

Specifically, participants were answered each question by choosing one of five ranked scores designated as such: 1 – Strongly Agree, 1- Agree, 3 – Not Sure, 4 – Disagree, 5 – Strongly Disagree. The presence of a “Not Sure” choice in this survey had little effect on the reliability of the results. Choosing “Not Sure” in response to questions about one’s ability to perform a given task implies that the individual is probably unable to perform the relevant task. Also, in response to questions about the value of library instruction, “Not Sure” implies doubt that library instruction is helpful, thus revealing a negative opinion. Thus, in both cases, the “Not Sure” choice seems to represent a logical progression of feeling along the continuum presented in the scale as opposed to a response that negates the value of the answer in general.

###

Library Opinion Questionnaire

Instructions: Please read each question and circle the appropriate response:

- 1 Strongly Agree
- 2 Agree
- 3 Not Sure
- 4 Disagree
- 5 Strongly Disagree

I am able to use the library effectively to find information I need.	1 2 3 4 5
Library instruction is important in learning how to use library resources.	1 2 3 4 5
I can tell the difference between scholarly and popular journals without problem.	1 2 3 4 5
I can tell the difference between a citation to a book and a citation to an article.	1 2 3 4 5
I would benefit from a class about library research.	1 2 3 4 5
Librarians can teach me a lot about the library.	1 2 3 4 5
Using the library catalog to find books on a topic that interests me is easy.	1 2 3 4 5
It is easy to find books in the library using call numbers from the library catalog.	1 2 3 4 5
I can find useful articles for my assignments using online databases.	1 2 3 4 5
I would like assistance from librarians on how to find information in the library.	1 2 3 4 5

Results

For each of the ten questions on the survey, there is a related summary that includes a frequency count for each possible choice. Each summary also shows the percentage of the total sample population represented by each frequency count. At the end of each summary is the mean response of all participants.

Questions regarding self-assessment of library skills:

#1) I am able to use the library effectively to find information I need.

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	11	27.5%
Agree	22	55%
Not Sure	5	12.5%
Disagree	1	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.5%
Mean response for all participants:	1.98/5.00	

#3) I can tell the difference between scholarly and popular journals without problem.

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	7	17.5%
Agree	15	37.5%
Not Sure	11	27.5%
Disagree	6	15%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.5%
Mean Response for all participants:	2.48/5.00	

#4) I can tell the difference between a citation to a book and a citation to an article.

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	4	10%
Agree	18	45%
Not Sure	15	37.5%
Disagree	3	7.5%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Mean response for all participants:	2.43/5.00	

#7) Using the library catalog to find books on a topic that interests me is easy.

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	10	25%
Agree	22	55%
Not Sure	8	20%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Mean response for all participants:	1.95/5.00	

#8) It is easy to find books in the library using call numbers from the library catalog.

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	10	25%
Agree	23	57.5%
Not Sure	6	15%
Disagree	1	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%

Mean response for all participants: 1.95/5.00

#9) *I can find useful articles for my assignments using online databases.*

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	9	22.5%
Agree	19	47.5%
Not Sure	11	27.5%
Disagree	1	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%
Mean response for all participants:	2.05/5.00	

Questions regarding perceptions of library instruction:

#2) *Library instruction is important in learning how to use library resources.*

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	12	30%
Agree	21	52.5%
Not Sure	3	7.5%
Disagree	1	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	3	7.5%
Mean response for all participants:	2.05/5.00	

#5) *I would benefit from a class about library research.*

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	4	10%
Agree	19	47.5%
Not Sure	9	22.5%
Disagree	4	10%
Strongly Disagree	4	10%
Mean response for all participants:	2.63/5.00	

#6) *Librarians can teach me a lot about the library.*

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	13	32.5%
Agree	18	45%
Not Sure	5	12.5%
Disagree	3	7.5%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.5%
Mean response for all participants:	2.03/5.00	

#10) *I would like assistance from librarians on how to find information in the library.*

Questionnaire Response	Frequency	%
Strongly Agree	9	22.5%
Agree	16	40%
Not Sure	8	20%
Disagree	6	15%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.5%
Mean response for all participants:	2.35/5.00	

###

A review of the information included in the summaries above and the table that follows reveals several points worth mentioning. Perhaps most notable is the fact that out of 40 participants, not one had a mean self-assessment score over 3.0 while a score as high as 5.0 was possible. Also interesting is that for no question on the survey was a mean response for all participants found to be higher than 2.63 (#5 "I would benefit from a class about library research"). Furthermore, in response to no question did fewer than 55% of participants choose either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree". This implies that while students clearly feel that they are competent library users, they also believe that librarians are knowledgeable. Participants chose either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" more than 80% of the time in response to four questions on the survey (#1 "I am able to use the library effectively to find information I need", #2 "Library instruction is important in learning how to use library resources", #7 "Using the library catalog to find books on a topic that interests me is easy", and #8 "It is easy to find books in the library using call numbers from the library catalog").

Eighty-two and a half percent of participants either "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement that they are "able to use the library effectively" while only 57.5% of participants "agree" or "strongly agree" that they "would benefit from a class about library research". It is interesting to note that while students acknowledge the subject area expertise of librarians, these same students consider the idea of attending classes designed to improve library research skills as fairly unattractive.

Table 1 graphs the relationship between students' self-assessment of library skills and their opinion of library instruction. In order to create this table, the mean score for each participant was calculated individually, for both the answers given in response to questions regarding self-assessment of library skills and to questions regarding opinion of library instruction. As a result, each student had a pair of mean scores that were used in the creation of Table 1. Next, the students' self-assessment of library skills mean scores were arranged from lowest to highest and used as the independent variable in the graphing of Table 1. Table 1 shows that as students' self-assessment scores rise, opinion of library instruction scores fall.

Discussion

Based on a review of mean response scores and frequency counts for each question included in the summary individually, it is clear that students have a very positive view of their own abilities to make use of the library in general. For example, 82.5% of participants either agree or strongly agree that they are "able to use the library effectively." It is interesting, though, that while students definitely rated themselves highly in general library use terms, when it came to specifics, such as telling the difference between scholarly and popular journals or identifying a citation to a book versus one from a journal, the overall confidence level dropped. This could be interpreted as contradictory in nature but it is also possible that these students have simply not yet had much experience in higher-level library research. That is to say, they are rating themselves in general terms based upon the way they perceive their ability to perform simpler tasks such as using the catalog to find titles of interest and finding items in the library using call numbers from the catalog.

Not only is it clear that students see themselves as effective library users but, based upon survey results, they also seem to value library instruction somewhat more than had been anticipated. In another seeming contradiction, though, students were very positive in support of library instruction as a concept (#2 "Library instruction is important in learning how to use library resources" and #6 "Librarians can teach me a lot about the library") but much less so when reporting opinions about actually receiving library instruction (#5 "I would benefit from a class about library research" and #10 "I would like assistance from librarians on how to find information in the library"). These results appear to support the findings of D'Esposito and Gardner (1999) and Davidson (2001) that students are unlikely to seek out formalized library instruction regardless of how they actually feel about it.

As reported earlier in this paper, all of the participants of the current study attended at least one library instruction session within a two-month period before filling out the questionnaire. It is possible that one unintentional result of the current study was to replicate the findings reported in Lombardo and Miree (2003) in which the authors showed that student self-confidence

in library-use skills rose after receiving library instruction. The participants of the current study were not asked to assess their ability to use the library both before and after the instruction they did receive, though, so this is purely conjecture.

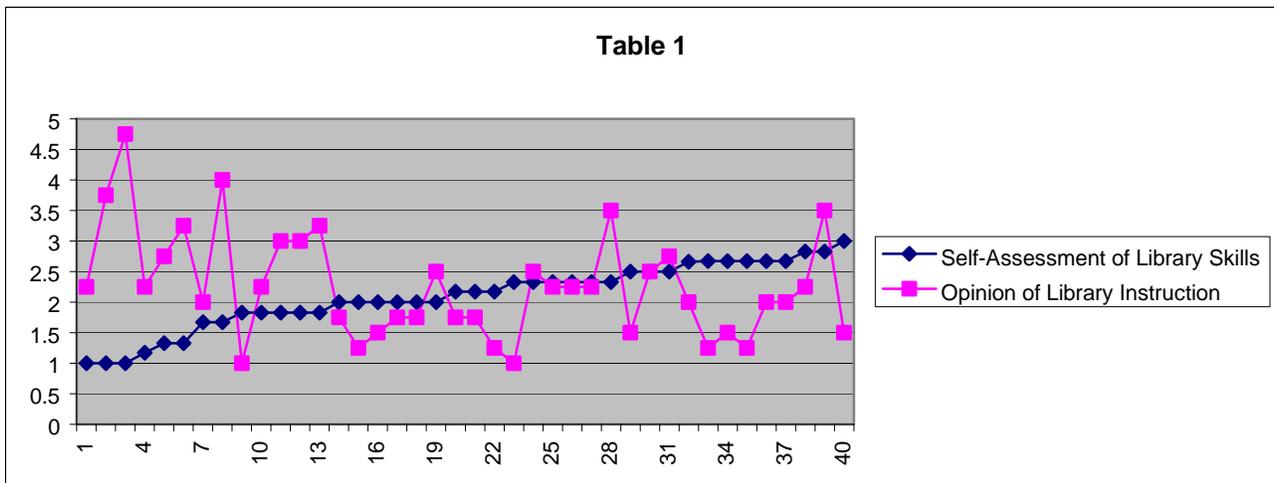
Results from this study suggest that a positive self-assessment of one's library skills generally will have a negative effect on one's opinion of library instruction. This can most clearly be seen in Table 1. However, while the results of the current study suggest that students' opinion of library instruction is dependent on how well they rate their ability to use the library, it would not be accurate to say that this has been proven.

In attempting to further clarify our understanding of how students' self-assessment of library skills affects their opinion about the value of library instruction, it might be useful to construct a survey that allows for more explanation on the part of the student participants. The current study, while laying an important foundation, gave participants a narrow range of choices that

may be responsible for some of the apparent inconsistencies in survey responses. Open-ended questions might give students greater flexibility in explaining their behavior as it pertains to the question at hand. Conducting a case study with in-depth interviews could also reveal students' attitudes about more specific issues of relevance.

It may also be of value to take into account in any future study in this area the actual level of expertise that participants have in the area of library use skills, as well as the students' level of exposure to previous bibliographic instruction. This could be accomplished through testing students' abilities to perform specific library-use tasks after having administered a survey similar to that used in this study. It is certainly feasible to suggest that those students who have accurately assessed their own level of library use expertise may have a clearer picture of whether library instruction would be of any benefit.

Table 1 – Relationship of Student Self-Assessment of Library Skills to Opinion of Library Instruction



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