

How Do Humanities and Social Science Majors Conduct Course-Related Research?

- SUMMARY -

May 7, 2007

Submitted by:

Alison J. Head, Ph.D., Principal Investigator
Communication Department | Saint Mary's College of California

Neeley Silberman, MA | Communication Department | Saint Mary's College of California
Sarah Vital, MLIS, MA | Academic Library | Saint Mary's College of California

All Communication about this Study May Be Directed to:
Alison J. Head, Ph.D.
ajhead1@gmail.com
Saint Mary's College of California
Moraga, California
Version 3: October 10, 2007

Table of Contents for Summary

▪ Summary	3
○ Information Literacy and the Student Research Process	3
○ Major Findings	4
▪ Inside the World of Humanities and Social Science Majors	4
▪ What Works for Students Conducting Research	5
▪ Challenges and Obstacles: Student Limitations	5
▪ Challenges and Obstacles: Research Assignment Handouts	6
○ Concluding Thoughts	6

Summary

From January through May 2007, a research team at Saint Mary's College of California (SMC) conducted a study about information literacy.¹ In particular, we studied how undergraduates majoring in Humanities and Social Sciences at SMC conceptualize and operationalize research tasks for course-related assignments.

The study was carried out in three phases: (1) discussion groups with undergraduates with Humanities and Social Science majors about conducting course-related research, especially their experiences, behaviors, and opinions, (2) a content analysis of research assignment handouts professors distributed in their Humanities and Social Science classes, and (3) a student survey, administered to Humanities and Social Sciences majors for collecting data about their research processes (see Appendix A for the research project plan and timeline).²

Information Literacy and the Student Research Process

Information literacy can be a complex and ambiguous term. Most scholarly definitions describe information literacy in terms of the competencies and skills students need to have in order to locate, retrieve, evaluate, select, and use information. These competencies are developed over time and are essential for lifelong learning.³

To date, scholarly research has focused on the standards and measures of information literacy among college students. Determining standards, which meet the needs of a cadre of college administrators, faculty, and librarians, has comprised a majority of the research about information literacy (Arp, Woodard, Lindstrom, and Shonrock, 2006; Harrison and Rourke, 2006). Other research has reported test results of information literacy skill sets among a given population, such as undergraduates enrolled in the California State University system (Dunn, 2002).

This study had a different focus. We have explored information literacy from the “inside out” or from the perspective of how students think about carrying out requisite research and how they put their information literacy skills into practice—regardless of how well they may (or may not) measure up to the competency standards set in place by college authorities. Above all else, our research questions were *student-centric, instead of administration-centric*.

¹ The research team for this study at Saint Mary's College of California (SMC) included Alison J. Head, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, Roy and Patricia Disney Visiting Professor of New Media, SMC Communication Department; Neeley Silberman, MA, Research Associate, SMC Communication Department; and Sarah Vital, MLIS, Research Associate, SMC's California's Academic Library. Micheline Sabatte, former SMC Web Coordinator, and Margaret Dick, Ph.D., SMC Communication Department, were ad hoc researchers, lending assistance in editing the report and administering the student survey to the classroom samples. This study was generously sponsored with funds from two sponsors, Tom Carter, SMC Academic Dean of Academic Resources and Ellen Rigsby, SMC Communication Chairperson. SMC is a Catholic, Lasallian Christian Brothers Liberal Arts institution in Moraga, California with an enrollment of 2,489 undergraduates and 1,473 graduate students. All communication about this study may be directed to Alison J. Head, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, ajhead1@gmail.com.

² The size of each sample were as follows: Student discussion groups, n = 13; content analysis of research assignment handouts used by professors in the last two years at SMC, n = 30; and student survey, n = 178. For more information about the individual sample segmentation for each phase, see the Appendices at the end of this report.

³ The definition of information literacy cited in this paper is a compilation, derived from definitions by different college libraries, <http://tinyurl.com/yvhpvj>, [retrieved: April 24, 2007 and a “tiny url” was adopted for the otherwise, lengthy Universal Resource Locator (URL) from the original site]. For a much more detailed definition and discussion of what information literacy means, see the American Library Association's “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” <http://tinyurl.com/yw6j9>, [retrieved: April 20, 2007 and a “tiny url” adopted for the otherwise, lengthy URL from the original site].

We studied three primary areas of the student research process, as they are related to information literacy:

- (1) How do students define and conceptualize the research process?
- (2) How do students conduct research tasks (i.e., where do they look for materials, how much time do they spend, and how do they determine quality during the evaluation of resources)?
- (3) What barriers and obstacles do students encounter while conducting course-related research?

Our motivation for conducting this study was to provide an insider's view of the student's research world, which many faculty and librarians may have, unknowingly or inaccurately, assumed is similar to their own (Leckie, 1996). Overall, the goals of this research project were threefold: (1) to provide deeper insights into the study of information literacy through the lens of understanding the students' research process, (2) to understand what gaps may exist between how professors and students consider what the research process entails, and (3) to explore how student information literacy competencies may be improved.

...an insider's view of the student's research world, which many faculty and librarians may have, unknowingly or inaccurately, assumed is similar to their own.

Ideally, the findings contained in this report will have value to a number of different constituents on the SMC campus. These colleagues include professors, librarians, and administrators, who are imparting information literacy training and competencies through their curriculum development. These findings, too, may provide a deeper understanding about the student research processes and how it relates to a growing population of students who are heavily influenced by the convenience of Google and the ubiquity of research resources on the Web. Lastly, we anticipate potential value for these findings in the academic community, at large, well beyond the SMC campus, especially those who are involved in liberal arts education at other institutions.

Major Findings

Inside the World of Humanities and Social Sciences Majors

According to data from our survey, Humanities and Social Sciences majors live in a world filled with completing four- to six-page argument papers (30 percent), literature reviews (17 percent), and theory papers (16 percent). The so-called argument paper, the signature assignment for majors, requires students to conduct scholarly research about a topic and present clearly sound evidence that advances a proposition or proposal.

Professors frequently ask students to work alone on assignments and allow them a certain amount of freedom in choosing a topic they would like to explore. As a result, there is a diverse swath of "real world" topics students select for their argument papers. Our discussion group participants recalled writing about working mothers and feminism, Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans, college athletes and self esteem, iPods and their impact on human isolation, teen suicide, divorce, Satanism, and the gay rights movement, among other topics.

For most students, the research process starts with accessing resources that are nearby and convenient. The majority of students in our survey (40 percent) reported that the first step they took during the research process was turning to a course textbook or other readings from the class. The most frequent next step was varied. Some students turned to the campus library's Web site and accessed online resources (24 percent). Others reported turning to the Web and

with used a search engine, such as Google or Yahoo! (13 percent) or the Wikipedia site to narrow down their topic (3 percent).⁴

What Works for Students Conducting Research

Throughout the study, we found that students felt they had the best chance of succeeding on research assignments when given a certain set of circumstances. One key factor for success was when a research assignment included some “high touch” features (i.e., dealing with a person), instead of only “high tech” ones (i.e., dealing with a computer screen). In order to meet their “high touch” needs, students turned to professors and librarians. In particular, students in our survey agreed with the statement that one-on-one sessions were helpful, especially when professors offered individual coaching on an assignment (72 percent).⁵ Students also saw the option of writing and rewriting drafts as a factor leading to their success. Over half of the surveyed students (82 percent) agreed with the statement that writing drafts of certain sections was helpful to them, especially when professors reviewed and made comments on drafts, so that students could then revise and resubmit their papers.

One key factor for success was when a research assignment included some “high touch” features, instead of only “high tech” ones.

A key resource for students needing assistance with assignments was the campus library—both the reference librarians and the online vendor databases from the library Web site. Over two thirds of the student survey sample (68 percent) agreed with the statement that the campus reference librarians were helpful when they needed to write a four- to six-page research paper. We also heard discussion group participants sing the praises of the campus library. In those qualitative discussions, more than two thirds of the participants (69 percent) told us they turned to reference librarians when they needed help narrowing down a topic and more than two thirds (69 percent) also said they relied on the online databases posted on the library’s Web site (e.g., Link+, PsycInfo, and Expanded Academic Index). Likewise, over three fourths of the surveyed students agreed that the online databases available through the campus Web site were helpful to them (88 percent). But only about half of the surveyed students (53 percent) found bibliographic instruction or in-class “library talks” as much help to them.

Challenges and Obstacles: Student Limitations

In our discussion groups and student survey, most students had a grade point average (GPA) of a B or B+. Despite their ability to garner measurable success in terms of grades, students were frequently frustrated and eluded by the research process for a variety of reasons. From the survey and discussion group data, a profile of a fairly hypothetical student can be drawn. The majority of students we talked to in discussion groups were concerned about the ethical use of information, especially how to avoid plagiarizing materials and how to determine the credibility of sources, including those gleaned from Web sites. From the survey data, we also found the typical student struggles with research assignments because of: (1) his or her own tendencies to procrastinate (73 percent), (2) his or her feelings of being overwhelmed by all the information that is “out there” (60 percent), and (3) his or her inability to narrow down a topic and make it manageable (59 percent). When combined together, these data support a finding that a majority of students, in general, are challenged by tasks requiring specific information literacy competencies, especially retrieving, evaluating, selecting, and using information.

⁴ Frequencies about the first step students take in the research process and their use of Google, Yahoo!, and Wikipedia were readjusted on October 10, 2007 by the authors, who discovered a minor error in the statistics originally reported.

⁵ The data reported in this section were taken from responses to student survey questions 10, 11, and 12, which used five-point Likert scales (i.e., a statement that asks the respondent to rank their level of agreement to disagreement with the statement). The percentages we report here combine the percentages and collapse two response categories, those who “strongly agreed” and “somewhat agreed” with statements about their what worked for them when they conducted research and what challenges they faced.

For many students, the research process is a barely “tolerable task,” usually delayed until a few days before a drop-dead due date. From the discussion group data, all but one of the participants agreed that they were indeed self-described procrastinators. As with any procrastinator, time is always of the essence and for students who procrastinate on research assignments the situation is no different. Students we surveyed only spent one to five hours of time (77 percent) conducting research and collecting resources. After the research is completed, most students also spent one to five hours of time (72 percent) writing and editing a typical four- to six-page research paper. What concerns students the most when they are working on assignments is the grade they will receive from the professor (44 percent) and less so, getting the assignment finished (20 percent) and being creative (10 percent).

Challenges and Obstacles: Research Assignment Handouts

Students in the survey reported that one of their most significant obstacles is interpreting the requirements of the research papers that professors have assigned. Students agreed with the statement that a lack of information from the assigning professor thwarted them the most, sometimes keeping them from beginning an assignment all together (48 percent). We heard the same sentiment from participants in both discussion groups—trying to figure out what exactly constituted a professor’s expectations, from one class to the next, caused nearly all, or 12 out of 13 of the participants, the most frustration when trying to work on research assignments.

...there is indeed a lack of detail and guidance offered in many research assignment handouts.

Our content analysis of the handouts professors distributed for research assignments lends more insight into understanding students’ inability to decipher what professors expect from them on research assignments. From our systematic content analysis, we found there is indeed a lack of detail and guidance offered in many research assignment handouts.⁶ As a whole, the handouts offered little direction about the research process in three primary stages necessary to completing a typical assignment: (1) plotting the course for research, (2) crafting a quality paper, and (3) preparing a paper that adheres to a known grading criteria.

In the majority of the handouts we analyzed there was no mention where to look for research resources. In particular, most handouts had no information about whether or not to use resources such as the Web (87 percent), a SMC librarian (83 percent), online resources from the school’s library site (73 percent), or library resources, pulled right off the shelf (70 percent). Secondly, guidelines for crafting a quality research paper, if provided, were often terse and formulaic. Only about a third of the handouts (30 percent) included some reference to plagiarism and the ethical use of information. Among those that did, most handouts only referenced the College’s Honor Code and advised students to consult the code on their own for more information. Lastly, grading criteria—many students’ major concern when working on a research assignment — was sorely underrepresented. Only four out of 30 (16 percent) of the handouts included either a grading rubric or a point breakdown for an assignment.

Concluding Thoughts

Results from this study shed light on what students experience when they are asked to conduct research for a Humanities or Social Sciences assignment at a small Liberal Arts college, such as SMC. The following snapshot of the student research experience emerged from our findings, based on students’ own accounts, experiences, and opinions:

⁶ Note that our content analysis was of research handouts professors have distributed in SMC classes over the last two years. We did not collect or analyze data about the information and explanations professors may verbally provide to students in class or in office hours about research assignments and how to conduct research.

1. Most students are flummoxed by what college-level research entails. Students face a variety of obstacles working against them, including their own procrastination with getting started on assignments.
2. Other challenges are related to accessing resource materials, especially what students describe as their own inability to narrow down topics and make them manageable and their tendency to become overwhelmed by the plethora of eligible resources, including many from the Web, which are available to them.
3. The most significant obstacle for students, however, is figuring out what each research assignment entails, especially what a professor's expectations are for an assignment from one class to the next.

This study is a departure from most of the research literature that addresses information literacy. By collecting data from students' own accounts instead of testing students' competencies against certain information literacy standards, we have found that retrieving, selecting, and evaluating information presents a variety of problems for students. Overall a majority of students are often unprepared to take on the research tasks, which college courses, in turn, most always require. To overcome their challenges with carrying out course-related research, many students rely on convenient and "tried and true" resources, such as the course textbook, other class readings, or online resources from the campus library's Web site. Students also heavily rely on "high touch" coaching from professors and librarians in order to satisfy their own top concerns with completing a research assignment—getting a good grade and finishing the paper.