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The library research process: theory and reality

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In 1994, Helen Clarke, Saundra Lipton, and Maureen Hunter took over a project to investigate how students actually used library tools and services to do research. We wanted to know, among other things, if the preconceptions that drove our design of library instruction were correct. We have tended to suggest that students first refine a topic through use of reference tools and books before proceeding to consult indexes of journal literature for more current, focused material.

Because we were interested in actual behaviour and opinion rather than numbers, we chose the qualitative research tool of detailed interviews of randomly selected volunteers. We approached three professors of third- or fourth- year courses in geography, psychology, and religious studies where research papers were required; they kindly permitted us to solicit volunteers. Students were told the purpose of the exercise and that they would be contacted after completion of the course in order to schedule an hour-long interview. Professors recorded the final marks of volunteers, which were later attached to transcripts by a code to respect confidentiality. Transcripts of the 21 interviews (approximately seven from each course) were analyzed using Nudist software to facilitate categorization of the wealth of detail.

We discovered that students do not follow a linear path. Instead, they revise and refine constantly as new material is located. Some took notes directly onto a computer and rearranged these to form the skeleton of the paper. Not one followed the time-honoured command to prepare an outline and flesh it out as research progressed.

While there was no direct correlation between high marks and a particular research pattern, students who used the widest variety of strategies for finding information (such as consulting the library catalogue, browsing shelves, asking friends, and searching CD or print indexes) tended to get As. The students who used only three strategies or less, compared to five or seven, got Cs.

Some findings with direct implications to the library were that students found the old DOBIS system awkward. We trust that the more versatile CLAVIS system will alleviate this problem: the search mechanism is similar to that used in the CD databases students preferred. While library staff strive to be helpful, we found that students are determined to be independent and regard the Information Desk as a last resort. Those who had received library instruction specific to a topic area noted the usefulness of handouts. In response, we are attempting to revive and revise subject guides, putting them on the Web to

increase availability.

None of these undergraduates reported using Document Delivery/Inter-library Loan, although several commented that they located key material not owned by the library, which they had no time to request. This tells us that undergraduates work within very tight time lines, and that the library staff must do what they can to keep appropriate material on site.

It also indicates that faculty should consult with a liaison librarian before composing an assignment to ensure that information exists locally. The "pick what you want and do it" method is unnerving to students and may cause them to waste time. Many students expressed frustration in trying "to read the professor's mind," which they believed they had to do in order to get a good mark. Getting the mark they wanted was more motivational than the pleasure of learning. Students who reported the least difficulty in narrowing and refining the topic (the greatest hurdle they believed they faced) were those whose professor had worked closely with the Liaison Librarian to ensure that material was available and who was specific about expectations for each section of the paper.

Only a few of our findings and recommendations appear here, but the full text of our report, entitled *Undergraduate Library Use Strategies: a Qualitative Report*, can be found in the library pages at: http://www.ucalgary.ca/~jsday/its/ILG/surveytxt.html

Please send comments and questions on the report via e-mail to: hclarke@acs.ucalgary.ca, lipton@acs.ucalgary.ca or mhunter@acs.ucalgary.ca