

Study of the Information Seeking Behavior of Theology and Religious Studies Students

by

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Introduction

Context plays a key role in how students respond to information. One of the authors had the opportunity to experience student reactions to a text from the Christian scriptures, Ephesians 5:22-33, which presents the concept of a wife submitting to her husband. At a faith-based Bible college, discussion was engaged, animated, controversial, and serious. This group intended to apply the text to their lives, so it made a big difference. At a university class called Women and Families in the Greco-Roman World, there was no discussion. To them, it was simply historical facts about the ideals for marriage in primitive Christianity; it had no impact on their lives. Kari, in his article on the spiritual in information studies, notes that “there exists another, equally legitimate perspective, however: to look at certain contexts (e.g., the spiritual) as containing sundry types of information phenomena and processes.”¹ This is further reinforced by Bates in her work on an integrated model of information seeking where she refers to a spiritual layer that is also important to include in the development of our understanding of information seeking behavior.²

How does this spiritual layer play out in the information seeking behavior of religious studies and theology students? While both religious studies and theology students study religious texts, practices, and history, theology students seek information within the framework of their role as future religious leaders and/or theological teachers and scholars, while religious studies students focus their study solely towards the completion of academic credentials. Does the discrete context of information need result in different patterns of information seeking behavior for each of these groups?

This study had its genesis in a paper on the impact of research behavior of theology students for digital reference services completed by one of the authors for a spring 2008 University of Alberta MLIS class taught by Dr. Heidi Julien. In the process of researching this paper, Nyrose discerned two things: 1.) There is little in the literature that reports on actual studies of the research behavior of theology students and 2.) Saundra Lipton was reputed to have one of the best religion subject pages online. This discovery led to a collegial relationship between the authors to further exploration on the impact of faith on the research behavior of theology students³ and ultimately to this co-study.

Literature Review

A search in a variety of databases for studies on information seeking behavior of religious studies and theology researchers, combined with citation tracking, yielded few results, especially for studies on undergraduate students. Michels verified this gap in the literature in his 2001 thesis research which studied how biblical scholars used people as information resources.⁴ Penner more recently confirmed the same in her literature review on the information behavior of theologians.⁵

Humanities Scholars

Both Michels and Penner chose to broaden their scope to the information needs of humanities scholars in general and even further to human information seeking. Both make note of three significant studies which stand out among the others: Stone,⁶ Watson-Booth,⁷ and Wilson.⁸ Stone's early work on the information needs and uses of humanities scholars highlights the individualistic nature of humanities researchers, who do not collaborate as much as those in the sciences.⁹ Watson-Booth in her review of the 1983-1992 literature on information needs of humanities scholars notes that a number of studies highlight humanists' reliance on browsing, colleagues, and references in source materials rather than on bibliographic tools.¹⁰ Wilson's observations on human information behavior in general began in 1981 but have continued for three decades. In Wilson's 1981 work on user studies and information needs, he comments that "the search for determining factors related to needs and information-seeking behavior must be broadened to include aspects of the environment within which the work-role is performed."¹¹ He goes further to note the importance to focus on "the ends served by the information-seeking behavior."¹² Penner reports that Wilson's work was a catalyst for new initiatives in information-seeking research.¹³ In addition to these three studies, Head, in her exploration of the research methods of humanities and social sciences majors, discovered that students are frustrated by experienced difficulties in locating material and recommends that "the value of human over computer-mediated services should not be underestimated, especially when it comes to developing practices and initiatives for improving the information literacy competencies of students taking humanities and social sciences courses."¹⁴

There are also a few interesting studies within specific fields of the humanities. Stieg's observation of historians suggests that they do not take advantage of resources available to them and confirms the tendency for working alone.¹⁵ Brown, in her study of music researchers, points out that librarians should carefully look into the context of the information needs of these scholars to better assemble appropriate materials and tools by which to find them.¹⁶ A 2011 study by Korobili et al., of information seeking behavior of Greek graduate students in the faculties of philosophy and engineering discovered that discipline did not seem to play a critical role in defining the information seeking behavior.¹⁷

Theology and Religious Studies Researchers

While the article written by Kapoun¹⁸ appears to be the only study focusing on the information seeking behavior of religious studies students, there are a few works investigating the behavior of theological students. Can these studies be applied to religious studies students? What is distinctive about theological research? Hamilton suggests that its uniqueness lies in that it "integrates intellectual and spiritual formation."¹⁹ He presents a model where theological students move beyond the positivist approach, which separated the researcher from the object of study, to a hermeneutical phenomenological (interpretive) model which allows context to influence interpretation. "Theological research by definition speaks of the divine/human encounter, and takes place in a community of people."²⁰ Hamilton suggests that theological students should seek after academically challenging ideas that also "reflect their path to knowledge as a journey with God."²¹ While theological research involves the rigorous, academic, critical approach that goes beyond simply unfounded opinions, it still takes into account the context of research and "recognizes the decisive role of the researcher's soul on reading and writing."²²

Penner's recent literature review of works on the information seeking behavior of theologians at academic institutions discovered only the four following studies specific to theology and religious studies.²³ Gorman's quantitative study of Australian theologians showed that theologians are largely independent researchers who utilize personal libraries as much as institutional holdings.²⁴ In his study of how biblical studies researchers in Canada use people as information sources, Michels discovered that colleagues are an important information source.²⁵ Bronstein examined the information seeking behavior of Jewish studies scholars within the framework of Ellis'²⁶ behavioral model, applying grounded theory approach to her analysis of the data.²⁷ She notes that "participants judge information not only by its characteristics but also by the perceived quality of information provided by the information channel."²⁸ Wenderoth, in her study of eight theology faculty members, discovered that "faculty use the library to obtain resources and occasionally to locate them but not to identify them."²⁹

In her Presidential address to the 2006 American Theological Library Association conference, Wenderoth charged that "we need to get beyond anecdotes to a real, serious, wide and deep study of contemporary research behaviors in the theological community."³⁰ Penner responded to the gap in studies on information seeking behaviors of theology students with a study of information needs and behaviors of graduate students at a theological seminary in the Czech Republic.³¹ Of particular interest to this study was her discovery that theological or denominational focus of sources was not an important factor for the students. "They are open to use any source as long as it is academic, relevant to their topic and accessible."³² Two years prior to Penner's work, Brunton's study of theology students in Australia and the effects of library user education programs noted that theology students generally experience a more significant relationship with the theological librarian.³³ Nyrose conducted semi-structured interviews with seven senior undergraduates at a faith-based college to seek further information regarding the role of faith in theological research. He discovered that when students needed research help, they tended to approach the instructor, classmate, or pastor/priest.³⁴ Nyrose further comments on the influence of faith on the choice of topic and notes that students "recognized the influence their faith had but worked to not let it limit their research."³⁵

Context

Fry notes an emerging recognition of the need to look at the variables of individual researchers—to consider their environment.³⁶ In their 2007 study of the characteristics influencing the information seeking behavior of students, Urquhart and Rowley group these factors into micro and macro categories.³⁷ While they do not explicitly list religiosity, Urquhart and Rowley include organizational leadership and culture in the macro category and under micro they include discipline—both areas where the aspect of religion may be a factor. Whitmire, in her 2003 study of the impact of epistemological beliefs, discovered a strong correlation between the number of information seeking activities engaged in by the student and the level of the epistemological belief.³⁸ She suggests that it would be useful to have further study of background characteristics that affect epistemological beliefs. In Whitmire's 2001 study of first-year undergraduates, she discovered that "absolute believers selected information sources consistent with their own views and rejected information sources that were in opposition to these views."³⁹

Our study is a preliminary exercise in trying to determine if, in the case of theological and religious studies students, specific context does make a difference. A student could be studying in a faith-based seminary, like Regent College in Vancouver, or a divinity school with a university, like McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, or at a religious studies department in the faculty of Arts at a secular university, like the University of Calgary. This study, taking place in a Canadian context, asks the question: Does an undergraduate student studying at a faith-based Bible college seek information in a different way than a religious studies undergraduate student at a secular university? In our study, we focus on stage five of the Kuhlthau model—information collection.⁴⁰

The Alberta Bible College, located in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, is a private religious college affiliated with the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, providing education to support religious leadership. It is fully accredited with the Association for Biblical Higher Education and offers certificates, diplomas, and bachelor degrees. It is a very small school with about seventy FTE. Both of the Alberta Bible College courses that provided the data for this study are part of the required curriculum of all degrees and contained second- and third-year students. Of the five students participating in this study, three were female and two male. The University of Calgary is a public institution of over 31,000 students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs. Approximately forty students are currently in the religious studies major program. The class used in this study is a required course for all religious studies majors, and the eleven students (nine females and two males) in the winter term 2011 course ranged from second to fifth year.⁴¹ While the University of Calgary Library has significantly more research resources for religious studies students, its holdings are available to the Alberta Bible College students as part of a reciprocal arrangement, and all databases can be accessed on site. The Alberta Bible College is located near the University of Calgary campus.

During the 2010/2011 academic year, Alberta Bible College students enrolled in G321, “History of Christian Spirituality,” and B211, “The Pentateuch,” and University of Calgary students enrolled in RELS 377, “Research and Critical Inquiry in Religious Studies,” were asked to complete a bibliographic essay outlining their research process. For the University of Calgary students, this was required as part of their marked assignments, while Alberta Bible College students were invited to do so on a voluntary basis. While the students were given some direction as to the content of the bibliographic essay, they were not provided with a structured format, nor were they selecting responses from a set list of answers (*see the appendix to this paper*). From these assignments, the authors compiled a list of tools and techniques employed by the students.

Because of the difference in on site resources, the comparison of tools used was limited to those that are available on both campuses. It should be noted that, in addition to variance in scope of access on site, Alberta Bible College does not have IP authentication, so students need to go through a bit of process to obtain passwords to access the databases from off campus. It is interesting to note that Alberta Bible College just started subscribing to *ATLA Religion Database*[®] three years ago, and that this tool has, since its introduction, elicited considerable use by the students. Both groups of students have received intensive library instruction sessions. The RELS 377 students received ten hours of information literacy instruction during the January 2011 block week course. The students from Alberta Bible College, in addition

to the one-hour session offered during the each course, had participated in a required ten- to twelve-hour section on library research during their first year at the College.

Findings

Undergraduate students studying at a faith-based Bible college do not, in any significant way, seek information differently than undergraduate religious studies students at a secular university. While the faith-based affiliation, allowing for differences in depth of resources, does not seem to influence the manner of information seeking activities, it is clear that it does appear to have an impact on the selection of topic. For the Alberta Bible College students, topics were selected because they informed personal religious experience. One Alberta Bible College student researching Dietrich Bonhoeffer indicated that he chose this topic because he “was curious to find out what he had to say about Christianity and what I would be able to take from him.” Another student, researching grace in the Pentateuch, noted, “My personal journey with God is what drew me to the topic of grace in general.” For at least one Alberta Bible College student, topics were chosen to challenge beliefs: “This subject had me question my own views of how I incorporate my Christian worldview to my everyday life.” For University of Calgary students, topic choices were sparked by class discussion, personal interests such as dance and psychology, and personal experiences such as suffering from pain. It is interesting to note that the one University of Calgary student who did indicate that personal religious experience influenced topic selection was from a theological background.

If theology and religious studies students are not so different in their information seeking methods, in what ways are they the same? And how can this inform our information literacy programs? As Figure 1 indicates (*see below*), the library catalogue and *ATLA Religion Database* are the preeminent sources of information for all the students, with a number also reporting the use of Google. It is in line with the findings of the 2009 JISC report “Students’ Use of Research Content in Teaching and Learning” which concluded that “although Google, Google Books, and Google Scholar are heavily used, the library catalogue is still the preferred first choice for most students,” and that “some students will use a discipline-specific database to access research.”⁴² Google Scholar and *Encyclopedia of Religion* are tools used heavily by the University of Calgary students. It may be that the limited access of Alberta Bible College students to the resources linked to on Google Scholar could be one reason for their unreported use of this search tool. The University of Calgary students were exposed to exercises highlighting the value of encyclopedias, and this was further reinforced during their required one-hour meetings with the religious studies librarian to discuss their preliminary research assignment, so it is to be expected (hoped for) that they would be heavy users of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.

Certainly, for the University of Calgary students, it was most interesting to note that a significant number of these mostly third-, fourth-, and fifth-year majors in religious studies had never before used specialized databases for their research in religious studies. While alarming, this lack of familiarity with databases has been highlighted by a number of studies.

A 2004 study by the British Academy on e-resources for research in the humanities and social sciences discovered that only twenty-seven percent of faculty rely the most on abstracting and indexing services for discovery mechanisms; key reported tools were bibliographies and library catalogues.⁴³ The OCLC report “Perceptions of Libraries 2010” discovered only thirty percent of college students use online databases.⁴⁴ One of the University of Calgary students

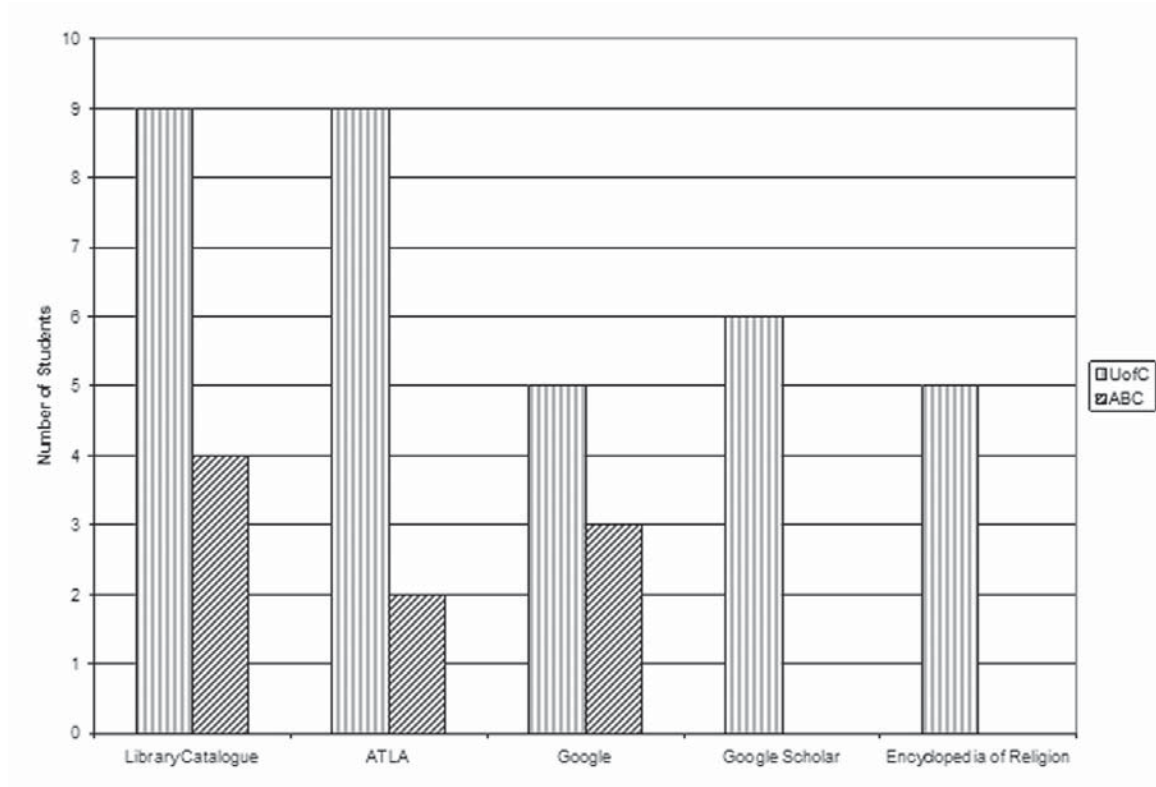


Figure 1: Core Tools Used in Searching for Information

researching dance and religion found the use of subject databases (*ATLA Religion Database*) to be most helpful and noted that “before this class I would have only used Google Scholar and try to find seemingly relevant articles.” She was not alone in this unfamiliarity with the major indexing tool for religious studies. A fellow classmate researching a particular religious scholar commented, “The largest benefit for me in all of this has been accessing ATLA and JSTOR, two resources of many that I was unaware of before this course.” A University of Calgary student researching the insider/outsider problem also highlighted the ability to search a specific subject database as the most important skill she learned from the class. “I did not know you could do this before this class and it has made finding sources so much easier.” It is clear that as students depend more and more on Google for their research needs, it is ever more important to provide instruction that introduces them in an engaging way to more useful options such as *ATLA Religion Database*. In our enthusiasm for creating information literate students, we need to remind ourselves, as Ammerman notes, that few students are coming to the library in order to hone their research skills for future needs, but rather, “They come seeking information with a specific task in mind, whether it is a paper to write, a sermon to preach, or a lecture to prepare.”⁴⁵

Figure 2 (*see below*) highlights the resources and techniques that the students reported learning from the class. When reporting on new research techniques acquired, the Alberta Bible College students talked about approaching the instructor for help and needing to

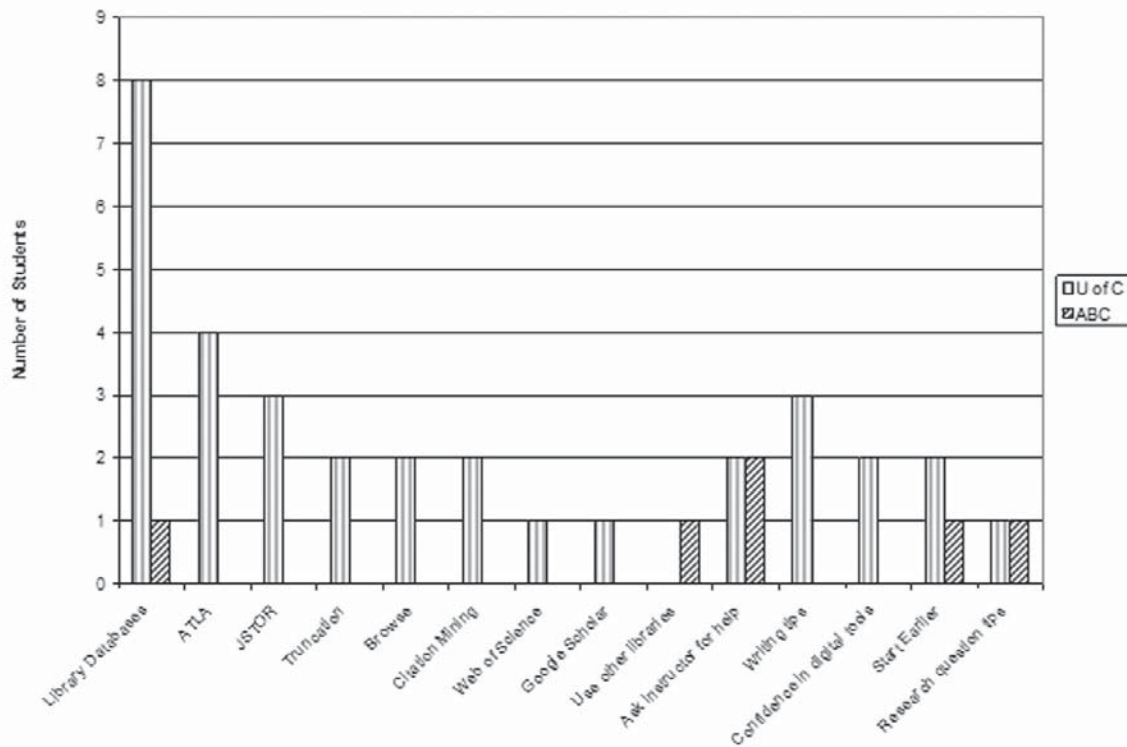


Figure 2: New Things Learned

take advantage of resources at other libraries. A few of the University of Calgary students mentioned seeking help from the professor as a new technique, but many more also noted specific resources that they had not been familiar with before, such as the library’s specialized databases, particularly *ATLA Religion Database* and *JSTOR*. The fact that Alberta Bible College is so small may make it much more comfortable for students to approach professors for help. As Brunton notes, in most theological libraries, modest enrollment facilitates ongoing relationships with the library staff. However, because the librarian is often a very busy and sole proprietor of the library, accessibility to the librarian may be limited.⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that while all students were introduced to their librarian through library instruction sessions, very few in either library approached the librarian on their own initiative for help. This is in accord with the observation from the ERIAL Project, which, in 2010, reported the “near-invisibility of librarian within the academic worldview of students.”⁴⁷ The report will be published by the American Library Association in fall 2011 as part of a book entitled *College Libraries and Student Culture*.

Brunton highlights another inhibiting factor, that of the students’ reluctance to admit to lack of knowledge, and, we would add, that of the students making do with what limited sources they can discover and not knowing what they don’t know.⁴⁸ As Timothy Lincoln pointed out in the presentation on his study of how seminary students do research, students may not be good searchers but think that they are.⁴⁹ Therefore, those with a high level of self-efficacy may not ask librarians for assistance because of false assumptions. Nevertheless, the OCLC study found that when students do seek assistance from a librarian, they are ninety percent satisfied with the

help received.⁵⁰ A number of University of Calgary students commented on their use of online library subject guides. Nicholas et al. studied log data from library networks and discovered that “undergraduates and postgraduates were the most likely users of library links to access scholarly databases, suggesting an important ‘hot link’ role for libraries.”⁵¹

Timmers and Glas, in their development of an instrument to measure information seeking behavior of undergraduate students, asked students whether they had consulted discipline-specific databases and noted that “a large number of students—for some databases over 50 per cent of the respondents—answered these questions using the ‘what is that’ response category.”⁵² It is clear from our study that while most students were not familiar with discipline-specific databases prior to a library instruction session, once introduced to subject databases, particularly the *ATLA Religion Database*, there seemed to be general incorporation of this tool into the research toolkit (see *Figure 1, above*). In a brief written reflection of past research practice, completed prior to the class, the University of Calgary students reported Google as the primary resource for locating material.

One of the students from Alberta Bible College consulted the library catalogue and *ATLA Religion Database* initially to locate material, but in the end she mostly used Google for resources because she claimed that she could not access the college resources from home (college resources are available off campus, but students need to get the password from the library). The key implication here is that students prefer to work in their comfort zone and that convenience and quick access are crucial factors in their search for information. This is very much in line with McKnight’s statement that “convenience is the new local.”⁵³ As Given has pointed out in her study of mature undergraduates and their information seeking behaviors “Sources that were reliable, trustworthy, and comfortable for their everyday information needs were immediately chosen as preferred information sources for their academic work.”⁵⁴ As the previously mentioned JISC report noted, students are “irresistibly drawn to the ease and immediacy of access that the internet offers.”⁵⁵ We all prefer to be in our comfort zones. Unless we acknowledge and work with the students to enlarge their comfort zones for library research tools and techniques, there will be limited uptake of tips and tricks pointed out in library instruction sessions.

While limiting to subject, truncation, and other search tips were also stressed in our in-depth instruction classes, the majority of the students chose to incorporate just a few new techniques. Though it is a bit disheartening to see the limited student uptake of tools and techniques highlighted in our instruction sessions, we can take comfort from the findings of the ERIAL Project: Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries, which discovered that “furthermore, students who had participated in instruction sessions with a librarian exhibited markedly better research skills than those who had not (although even these students often did not remember basic or specific concepts or apply them correctly).”⁵⁶ This was also confirmed by Gaba’s Chicago Area Theological Library Association (CATLA) sponsored study of Master of Divinity students, which found that forty-nine percent of the students that had received instruction were more likely to use the library.⁵⁷

The ERIAL project further noted that “in fact, easier information access and more robust search capabilities provided by tools such as federated search, Google scholar, or Web-scale discovery tools may actually compound students’ research difficulties by enabling them to

become overwhelmed even more quickly by a deluge of materials they are unprepared to evaluate.”⁵⁸ One Alberta Bible College student who found the number of hits for her topic on Google search too overwhelming to choose from experienced this information overload. The OCLC study noted that although students begin searching using a search engine, twenty-seven percent of students indicated that the search engine led them to a library website. Sixty-nine percent of these students reported returning to the library website, and fifty percent of these returning students reported increased utilization of the library and its website.⁵⁹

Penner noted a high percentage of respondents in her study of graduate theology students indicated a reliance on personal collections of books.⁶⁰ While this was not noted in the research logs or bibliographic essays completed by the sixteen students in this study, prior students have indicated personal collections as preferred sources of research material. In the self-assessment of past research practice completed by the students in RELS 377, one student remarked that she started her research for a paper on Zeus and the Athenian Acropolis by looking for “every book in my house which had ‘Greek’ in the title and that is normally the first step to my paper” and it would appear that she is not alone in this technique! As most students would have very limited collections of material, this reliance is cause for concern. Korobili et al., in their 2008/2009 study of Greek graduate students (engineering and philosophy), noted a low level of information-seeking skills among the graduate students they surveyed: “17.1% of the graduate students of both faculties have never used any of the information retrieval activities (e.g., searching search engines/e-journals/databases/library website, browsing library shelves, etc.).”⁶¹

It is interesting that the students report far more research time than writing time (see Figure 3). While most students from both institutions note lengthy research time, it is particularly pronounced for University of Calgary students. This could be a reflection of the length of paper—ten to twelve pages at University of Calgary as compared to eight to ten pages at Alberta Bible College—or it could also be influenced by the fact that University of Calgary students were required to write a paper on a methodological issue in religious studies, a topic which, in itself, students were having a hard time understanding. Time estimates could also be skewed depending on whether students included research time or writing time with reading time (Figure 3).

Conclusions

Our study has demonstrated that theology students from faith-based colleges and undergraduate religious studies students from a secular university seek information in very similar ways. Both groups were initially unaware of discipline-specific resources, but, once introduced to resources such as *ATLA Religion Database* and the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, the students used these research tools along with the more typical library catalogue and Google search engine. Theology students tend to select a topic to question or reinforce their beliefs. Further results of our study, especially the list of new things learned, strongly validate the need for library instruction. This is very much in line with Brunton’s 2003 study of pre- and post-test results regarding theology student familiarity with databases, where she discovered a significant increase in student familiarity after a library instruction session⁶² (Figure 3).

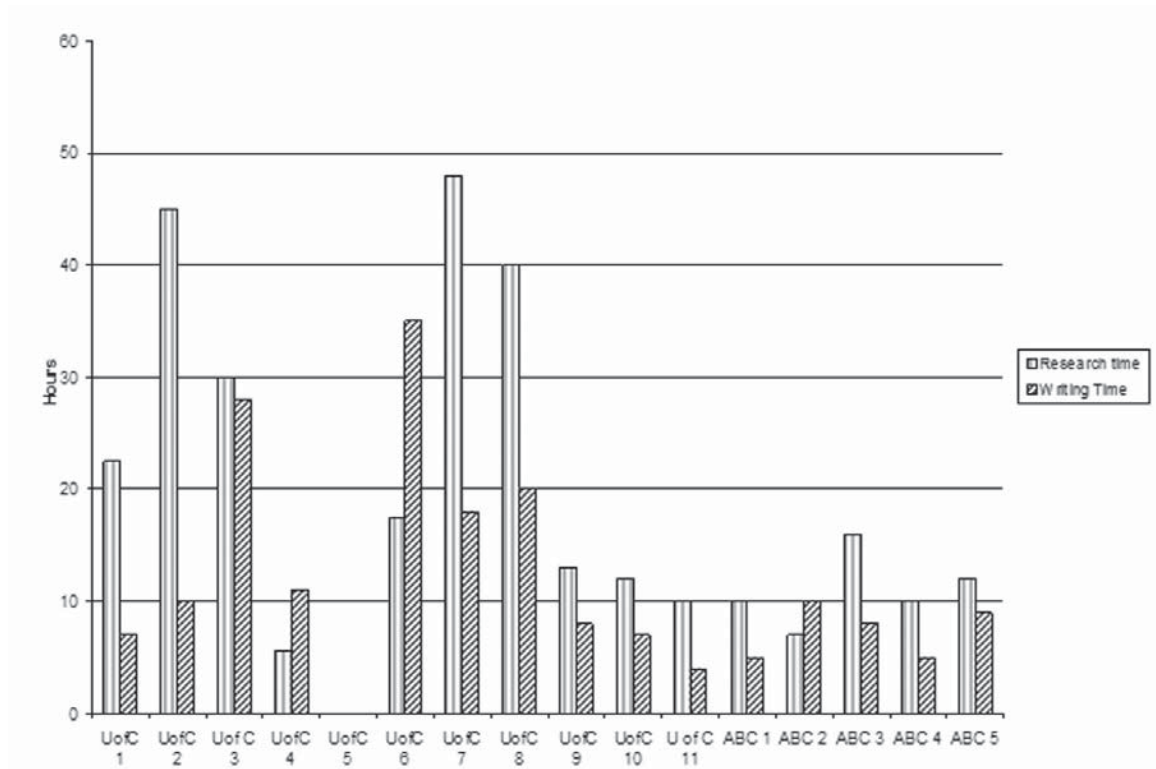


Figure 3: Research versus Writing Time

Limitations and Further Study

While the number of participants in the study was small—five from Alberta Bible College and eleven from University of Calgary—we believe that these students collectively represent a persona of religious studies/theology undergraduates. Our data were gathered from information recorded by the students, and, as such, we are at the mercy of trying to interpret their words. Some did not explicitly state that they used the library catalogue (sometimes using terminology such as “the library website”), yet it is clear from the list of monographs on their reference list that they had searched the catalogue. Additionally, it is unlikely that the students remembered every information seeking activity. In particular, for the RELS 377 students who were submitting a marked assignment, what they chose to record was influenced by what they thought the librarian instructor wanted to see in their assignment. It would therefore have been very helpful to have had the students create a detailed log of all their information seeking activities as they happened, and then follow up with interviews with each student.

A more precise survey instrument that would elicit student familiarity with a broad range of tools and techniques and include questions to measure epistemological beliefs such as those asked by Whitmire⁶³ would also be a helpful adjunct to the other methods of data collection. The use of questions geared to assess epistemological belief would also be a neutral way of ascertaining faith-based implications in a secular context. Additionally, ours was a very simple study. A more complex analysis of the impact of factors such as gender, personality, year of study, geographic location, faculty attitudes, and level of previous information literacy instruction may possibly reveal other interesting connections.

Dervin noted that information seeking behavior must be viewed within its social and physical context and that this context affects the methods students employ in seeking information.⁶⁴ While anecdotal evidence indicates that there may be environmental differences that affect how theology and religious studies students approach research and select their sources, there is not enough data from this study to support this thesis. Further research is required to test whether spiritual context has a real impact on the information seeking behavior of theology students and religious studies students. A deeper study surveying students from a variety of theological institutions may provide hard facts to support the anecdotal evidence.

Appendix: Bibliographic Essay Assignment

Bibliographic Essay (Research Process Reflection)

The Bibliographic Essay should be two to three pages in length (approximately 500 to 750 words) and will be assessed for form (grammar, organization), presentation (spelling, etc.), and content.

1. What led you to select the topic you chose for your paper? Did your personal⁶⁵ or academic experience play any part in the topic selected? Did your personal experience influence the way you went about researching the topic?

/1 point

2. Describe and assess your research process and the methods you used to find and evaluate your sources. You are required to include reference to the particular tools and search terms that you used in your research.

Questions to consider might include:

- What background knowledge did you have that helped you begin your research?
- Where did you start? Reference tool? Library catalogue, indexes, web? Indicate titles of reference tools and research databases used.
- Explain your search strategy. What search terms did you use? Did you refine your search by modifying your search terms? Did you use the same terms in all venues or did you vary them?
- Did you find it difficult to locate books or articles on your topic?
- What tools (indicate titles) did you use to locate journal articles? Is your topic well-indexed?
- Did you consult with other people (instructor, TA, library staff, classmates, etc.?)
- Did you find most of the material you needed in the library collection?
- Did you use the interlibrary loan service? How did that work for you?
- Did you recall any books?
- Did you find the internet useful? Which search engines did you use? What differences did you find in material located on the web versus library research databases?

/5 points

3. Reflect on your research process: indicate successes and problems. Did you use what you learned in 377 to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of your research process? How? What might you do differently next time?

Questions to consider might include:

- Did you need to revise your initial search terms?
- At what point in the process did you finalize your research question?
- Did you have problems determining correct search terms?
- What is the most important idea or skill you have learned about finding, using or evaluating information?
- Did you discover useful tools that you never used before? Indicate titles.
- If you were to do it over again, how would you conduct your research differently?
- Summarize the changes that you have made or will make in your research process as a result of this course.

/4 points

4. Estimate time involved in preparing your final paper. (Two points will be deducted if you don't provide a time estimate for the research and writing process.)

Research (in hours)

Writing (in hours)

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