



Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Undergraduate Students Do Not Understand Some Library Jargon Typically Used in Library Instruction

A review of:

Hutcherson, Norman B. "Library Jargon: Student Recognition of Terms and Concepts Commonly Used by Librarians in the Classroom." *College and Research Libraries* 65.4 (July 2004): 349-54.

Reviewed by:

Lorie A. Kloda

Instructional Technology Librarian, Life Sciences Library, McGill University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

E-mail: lorie.kloda@mcgill.ca

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Abstract

Objective – To determine students' level of recognition for 28 commonly used terms in library instruction.

Design – Survey, multiple-choice questionnaire.

Setting – Large state university library in the United States (this is assumed from the author's current affiliation).

Subjects – 300 first- and second-year university students enrolled in a library skills course between September 2000 and June 2003.

Methods – Two 15-question multiple-choice questionnaires were created to verify students' understanding of 28 terms

commonly used in library instruction, or "library jargon". Each questionnaire included 12 unique terms and, in order to ensure consistency between questionnaire results, three common terms. For each question, a definition was provided and four terms, including the correct one, were offered as possible answers. Four variants of each survey were developed with varied question and answer order. Students who completed a seven-week library skills lab received one of the two questionnaires. Lab instructors explained the objective of the survey and the students completed them in 10 to 15 minutes during class time. Of the 300 students enrolled in the lab between September 2000 and June 2003, 297 returned completed questionnaires. The researcher used Microsoft Excel to calculate descriptive statistics, including the mean, median, and standard deviation for individual

questionnaires as well as combined results. No demographic data were collected.

Main results – The mean score for both questionnaires was 62.31% (n=297). That is, on average, students answered 9.35 out of 15 questions correctly, with a standard deviation of +4.12. Students were able to recognize library-related terms to varying degrees. Terms identified correctly most often included: plagiarism (100%), reference services (94.60%), research (94.00%), copyright (91.58%), and table of contents (90.50%). Terms identified correctly the least often included: Boolean logic (8.10%), bibliography (14.90%), controlled vocabulary (18.10%), truncation (27.70%), and precision (31.80%). For the three terms used in both questionnaires, results were similar.

Conclusion – The results of this study demonstrate that terms used more widely (e.g. plagiarism, copyright) are more often recognized by students compared with terms used less frequently (e.g. Boolean logic, truncation). Also, terms whose meanings are well-understood in everyday language, such as citation and authority, may be misunderstood in the context of library instruction. For this reason, it can be assumed that students may be confused when faced with this unfamiliar terminology. The study makes recommendations for librarians to take measures to prevent misunderstandings during library instruction such as defining terms used and reducing the use of library jargon.

Commentary

The study sample was presumably drawn from a single unidentified institution in the United States. No demographic data were collected from the participants, making it difficult to generalize results beyond first- and second-year undergraduate students at

that institution. The response rate of 99% is large enough to make estimates, however the sample size in relation to the size of the population is not known, making the statistical significance of the data unclear. The author does not include information about the sample group's enrolment in the information skills lab – was participation voluntary or a requirement of the program? Possible confounding factors include self-selection of participants in the lab, previous library instruction, and students' areas of study.

The author states that the questionnaire was piloted in the first semester of its use, and some terms were replaced on the recommendation of faculty and students. The consistency of the three common terms used in both variations of the questionnaire also confirms the survey's internal reliability. However, the lack of inclusion of the instrument, including the definitions employed for each of the library jargon terms, makes it difficult to assess the external validity of the instrument. There is no way to determine whether students' correct answers confirm their comprehension of the meaning of a particular term, or conversely, whether their incorrect answers translate to their lack of comprehension. The article does not provide an overview of the content or outcomes of the lab, and it is unclear at what point surveys were administered -- during, before, or after the skills lab. It is assumed that the lab included the use of most, if not all, of the terms in the survey, but it is unclear as to whether definitions were provided for any of these. The study does not attempt to measure the success of an educational intervention.

This study employs a quantitative methodology to answer a question about understanding or meaning of terminology used in library instruction. A qualitative research design, such as one using focus

groups, would have also been appropriate for discovering more information about the students' perceptions of library jargon. Do students want to learn the correct definitions, or would they prefer that librarians select simpler terms? For those terms which they identified incorrectly, what do they think the terms mean? These questions could not be addressed using the multiple-choice questionnaire format employed.

This study attempts to answer an important question for academic librarians: How well do our students understand terms and concepts presented during orientation and information literacy instruction sessions?

While many librarians already suspect that some students do not know the meaning of some library jargon, this study attempts to quantify the proportion of students who can and cannot correctly recognize 28 terms. These results suggest that those involved in the design and delivery of library instruction as well as those involved in the design of websites and library signage need to consider providing alternative terminology or definitions for commonly misunderstood terms.