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A Pilot Study of Student Perceptions of Embedded Library Instruction

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Abstract

Research in the field of education strongly supports that collaboration among professionals in the field will enhance students' educational experiences. While this is true at all levels of education it is particularly true in higher education where professionals from various areas of expertise work together to ensure their shared students receive instructional supports that will allow the students to reach their fullest potential. The reality is that many instructors become primarily focused on their own courses as opposed to reaching out to colleagues whose knowledge and skills might act as a complement to their own. The result of which means that college students are left to seek out the individuals who are best able to help them to be successful when meeting assignment

requirements. While there is a value to this approach the benefits of college professionals working together closely can offer invaluable support to the students not only as they meet the objectives established in their courses, but as they develop their networking and collaborative skills – skills they will take with them beyond their college experiences. One of the key collaborators essential to any teachers' success as they head out into field is librarians. Introducing them to academic librarians throughout their college experiences is the first step in fostering this lifelong practice.

INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of education strongly supports that collaboration among professionals in the field will enhance students' educational experiences. While this is true at all levels of education it is particularly true in higher education where professionals from various areas of expertise work together to ensure their shared students receive instructional supports that will allow the students to reach their fullest potential. The reality is that many instructors become primarily focused on their own courses as opposed to reaching out to colleagues whose knowledge and skills might act as a complement to their own. The result of which means that college students are left to seek out the individuals who are best able to help them to be successful when meeting assignment requirements. While there is a value to this approach the benefits of college professionals working together closely can offer invaluable support to the students not only as they meet the objectives established in their courses, but as they develop their networking and collaborative skills – skills they will take with them beyond their college experiences. One of the key collaborators essential to any teachers' success as they head out into filed

is librarians. Introducing them to academic librarians throughout their college experiences is the first step in fostering this lifelong practice.

Librarians are essential to student success, and their skills and knowhow have the potential to enhance teaching and learning experiences for both teachers in the field as well as their students. Traditionally however, the role of the librarian has been perceived as passive "guardians of the books." This Puritanical stereotype leads people to view librarians as simply individuals who maintain the library's resources and who sit behind desks waiting for people to ask reference questions where their obscure knowledge can be brought to light (Fagan, 2003). This outdated perception of the roles and expertise of 21st century librarians results in missed potential for meeting one's own personal and professional goals – much less enabling students' to do the same.

The collaborative nature of the course instructor and librarian in this study has developed gradually over time – from a more traditional "library day" meant to introduce students to the physical resources found in the library to the point of co-creating and co-teaching key course assignments. While there is a value to providing students with exposure to the physical resources in the library as well as an introduction to how to locate and cite resources, limiting the students to such general experiences with librarians results in missed opportunities for truly understanding the myriad benefits working with librarians may have. Additionally, if college professors maintain such a limited view of the librarians they work with the same results will be actualized. Much of the library-related research on this topic gave mention to the importance of integrating information literacy into the curriculum (Cunningham & Lanning, 2002; Doskatsch, 2003; Figa, Bone, & Macpherson, 2009; Kesselman & Watstein, 2009). This integration can come in various formats, such as one-shot instruction sessions or embedded librarianship. An essential component to any integration of information literacy into the curriculum requires faculty buy-in, mutual respect, and trust (Doskatsch, 2003; Figa et al., 2009; Kesselman & Watstein, 2009).

Librarians are responsible for student learning outcomes that are infused into the curriculum. They integrate information literacy into the professors' areas of study/courses/programs, and stay up-to-date with learning technologies in support of teaching and research. Further, they foster connections between campus resources, and build relationships with students in order to inspire lifelong learning.

The purpose of this study was to explore how, if at all, students felt having an embedded librarian in one of their courses impacted their abilities to successfully meet course requirements. While the course instructor and librarian had felt positive results from the students based on past experiences it was decided that the true measure of whether or not the close collaboration was having an impact on student perceptions and performance could only be determined through surveying the students themselves.

Prior Literature

Student Perceptions of Librarians

When searching for literature to support student perceptions of librarians, very little work appears to have been done. Fagan (2003) worked to update results from a 1977 article by Hernon and Pastine, but found no empirical data concerning students perceptions of librarians between 1977 and the time she wrote her article. Fagan surveyed 48 undergraduate students at various stages in their academic pursuits. Most of her findings, however, are related to student perceptions of librarians in general, apart from classroom instruction. Along this aim, Fagan found that "students know librarians are there to help them but often consider librarians' knowledge as limited to the familiarity with the physical library" (p. 139). Also of importance is her summation that "Swope and Katzer found 65% of students with a specific need would not ask for assistance from the librarian" in part because "they were dissatisfied with the previous performance of the librarian" (Fagan, 2003, p. 132). Both of these assertions

give a clear picture of the current expectancies students may have of academic librarians.

Some work has been completed since Fagan's 2003 article. Edwards, Kumarn & Ochoa (2010) surveyed graduate students in an online course about the value of librarians and found that in their study (N=5) "all five responses contained positive remarks about the embedded librarian project and included examples of how students' searching changed" (p. 283). This work echoes the previous findings of Dugan (2008) and Hall (2008). More recently, Meredith and Mussell (2014) surveyed students after embedding their instruction in an online course. They, too, had a low participation rate (12%), but did find that the majority of students agreed that an embedded librarian did help them complete their course assignments.

Embedded Librarianship

One area of research that provides insight into collaboration between teaching faculty and librarians occurs within the context of embedded librarianship. Embedded librarianship is best defined for the purpose of this study as "participating in a group, community, or organizational unit primarily made up of non-librarians, providing knowledge and information services as part of the group" (Shumaker & Tyler, 2007, p. 31). Kessleman and Watstein (2009) expanded this definition to include that an important ability is "knowledge and understanding of the research needs of customers" (p. 394). Shumaker and Tyler found that providing instruction was one of the most important contributions of an embedded librarian. Several research projects show benefits of embedded librarianship in specific contexts, including the increased use of a librarians, an increase in the quality of student work, and an increase in the number of quality sources used to complete assignments (Becknell, Moeller, & Pope, 2016; Heathcock, 2013; Jacobs, 2009; Kumar & Edwards, 2013).

In order to provide an example of faculty buy-in and mutual trust, one must look at the work of Hearn (2005). The director of his/her the college's

writing program approached Hearn to help with an introductory writing course. Hearn elaborated on how mutual agreement was reached so that the students would receive eight sessions of library instruction during the writing intensive course. The professor introduced Hearn to her class as a co-instructor, and trusted Hearn to provide feedback to students as well as grade the research portion of selected assignments. Hearn found that students who received in-depth library instruction actually did rely on more acceptable sources for their research-based writing assignments.

   Through their study, Figa, Bone, and Macpherson (2009) supported a few useful arguments about embedded librarianship that translated to the face-to-face world. The researchers found that students think that having a librarian in the classroom is helpful. They ground this finding on the earlier work of Markgraf who found that "students preferred to direct their library questions to a specific person" (2004, p. 8, as cited in Figa, et. al, 2009, p. 77). The researchers also discussed the benefits of a long-term academic relationship with a librarian in an online course. This study lends credibility to conclusions derived from Avdic and Eklund (2010) that a lasting relationship with a librarian can result from receiving meaningful and relevant help from that librarian.

Methodology

To measure student perceptions of embedded library instruction, a qualitative approach was used to analyze open-ended course surveys that were already part of scheduled course instruction. Participants for this study were 22 students enrolled in a secondary social studies methods course that included both undergraduate and graduate students. No distinction was made between class standing when completing the surveys. The first survey asked students to reflect on the following prompts:

1. Reflect on your interactions with librarians who have taught during previous courses, and how, if at all, you feel it impacted your experience completing assignments.

2. With regard to the first Content Knowledge Portfolio, please reflect on the ways, if any, having a librarian connected with the course impacted your experience completing the assignment.

The second survey asked students to reflect on the following prompt:

1. Please reflect on the ways, if any, having a librarian connected with the course impacted your experience completing course requirements.

Informed consent was delivered and collected by the librarian concurrently with course evaluations and was kept under lock and key until final grades were submitted by the instructor of record. The data was analyzed collaboratively by the librarian and the instructor using a grounded theory approach. Student responses were printed off and simultaneously coded using notes in the margin, while being discussed in order to ensure inter-rater reliability. After an initial round, axial codes were developed to determine themes and trends. Since this is an pilot study, the researchers concluded that no further data analysis was warranted at this time.

Results

This study was conducted as a way to gain insights into how, if at all, students perceived having an embedded librarian in their course impacted their abilities to successfully meet course requirements. While the course instructor and librarian have felt the strong collaboration between them was positively impacting student learning outcomes they wanted to get a greater sense of whether or not the students shared these perceptions by implementing pre and post surveys. The initial survey simply asked students to reflect upon their previous experiences working with librarians during their undergraduate and graduate courses. While the post survey asked students to reflect on ways, if any, having a librarian connected with the course impacted their experiences when

completing course requirements. The participation rate for this study was 100% (N=22). This high participation rate is likely due to the co-delivery of informed consent and course evaluations, a practice students are accustomed to participating in. Out of the data analysis, four major themes emerged:

"Library Day"
Students reported that their previous experiences with librarians have been limited to "library day," and not connected to the rest of the course instruction. While all students reported on their "library day" experiences, many of them spoke about what they felt were the shortcomings of infusing basic library instruction into multiple courses as minimally effective and repetitious. One student stated:

> "I have never been a fan of "library day" in previous courses…Just about every course had a day set aside for "library instruction." All the sessions were well done and very helpful, but our professors need to collaborate and decide in which classes would this instruction be most beneficial."

From this it can be surmised that while students understand the value of being introduced to basic library skills and resources an over reliance on simply infusing one library day into each course is seen by the students as repetitious and is not adequate for meeting the students' more advanced needs for library instruction based on the specific learning outcomes for specific requirements. Additionally, while the students felt that basic library instruction has a place in the curriculum it is clear that they would like their course instructors to collaborate more fully with librarians to ensure the right library instruction is being implemented at the right times to avoid "repetition."

   While the students had varying degrees of interactions with librarians based on personal experiences throughout their degree programs the theme of library day as too basic was common as this student's response suggests:

> "Previous to this class, as a history major in my undergrad I only interacted with a librarian one time. We were shown how to find a variety of both primary and secondary sources using the library website, online encyclopedias, and Google. It was basic stuff that I had already gained a grasp of in my first 2-3 years of college, so to me it was kind of pointless."

Again, despite the frequency of the basic library day approach to library instruction the students felt that it was so basic and general that the benefits were minimally realized. Another student additionally commented:

> "I haven't had any interactions with librarians at the college."

What this seems to imply is that, while library day is seen as basic, some of the students do not even have the benefit of having any library instruction at all based on their personal experiences and who they happen to have as course instructors. These inconsistences in when and how library instruction occurs during programs can potentially result in inconsistencies in how well prepared students are to meet course requirements. This seems to echo the sentiments shared with the first student who advocated for course instructors to collaborate more closely with librarians to decide when and how library instruction should be infused into the curriculum.

The Need for Stronger Collaboration Between Instructors and Librarians

Another theme that emerged from the data is that students felt that more course instructors should collaborate with librarians to ensure the library instruction is aligned with course objectives and requirements. They felt that embedded librarians should be part of more classes but only when effectively combined with an assignment. One student stated:

> "I have never had any librarians "co-teach" in my previous courses. So far, I have had a very positive experience. Rather than spending time wondering what I should research...the librarian acts as a

> "steer" if you will, into the more appropriate direction. Also having a librarian has made my time more efficient in my research. I hope to see his presence in more future classes."

Clearly the student has felt a positive impact with his ability to meet course requirements when an embedded librarian was present to help "steer" him in the right directions. What he also articulates is the fact that he would like more of this level of collaboration in his future classes which would require more college instructors to collaborate with librarians to assess what aspects of their courses will be most positively impacted by such a close collaboration. Another student responded similarly:

> "I felt that having Logan be a part of the class was a great resource for us. The second half of the course, the Unit Plan and the Lesson Plan were greatly impacted by Logan's presence. He brought about very knowledgeable information that was helpful in looking for sources and resources to complete assignments."

Again, it seems clear that the student perceived that having an embedded librarian as part of the daily instruction "greatly impacted" the student's ability to successfully meet requirements. Knowing that the students perceive this level of collaboration as so positive, and wanting it to continue, promotes the idea that college professors should seek out opportunities in their courses that will allow for meaningful collaboration to occur so that students' needs are met and they can excel to their fullest extent when meeting requirements. As one student stated more directly:

"I would highly recommend that a librarian be attached to future courses at the college."

While some college instructors worry that they will be "giving up" what is already limited instructional time to library instruction, when steps are taken to ensure the role of the librarian is closely aligned with course objectives and student learning outcomes the instruction becomes enhanced in the eyes of the students as opposed to feeling as though it is a "waste of time" and "repetitious." The students felt the benefits of

the embedded librarian approach as they completed course requirements and felt that more of this type of instruction can be equally as beneficial to them in future courses with future instructors.

Positive Student Perceptions

Students reported that having the librarian available during multiple class sessions did help them to meet the requirements of their course assignments during the second half of the semester. Student responses to the second reflection included phrases such as "good," "great," "outstanding," "beneficial," "all around awesome," and "immensely valuable." These are all indicators of positive perception on the part of the student. Specifically, one student directly stated that:

"The Unit Plan and the Lesson Plan were greatly impacted by [the librarian's] presence."

This remark shows the student's perception of the value of embedded library instruction because it was connected to specific class assignments. In naming two such assignments during the second half of the course, the librarian's help was perceived as a tangible benefit to his presence in the course. Multiple students were also able to name specific assignments or skills covered in class when responding to the prompts. One student went so far as to say:

"Without the librarian involvement I would probably have not been given these opportunities."

This student's reflection as more metacognitive in nature and ties in nicely with another student's response:

"The library instruction was over the course of the semester which allowed him to develop our skills in researching and looking for teacher sources.... I loved having his knowledge and resources available to us."

These reflective comments demonstrate a metacognitive awareness of the benefits of embedded library instruction. With regard to the second

student's quote about having a positive perception due to both the length of time that the instruction occurred (over many days instead of one "library day") as well as the scaffolding nature of the instruction. That is to say that the timing of the instruction was as important as the sustained nature of the instruction.

Strengthened Relationships with the Librarian

The final finding from the analysis of reflections confirmed the work of Avdic and Eklund (2010) in that there is a perceived increase in strength of the students' relationships with the librarian. This includes an increased comfort asking additional questions. When students first described past library experiences they used the generic term "the librarian." Conversely when responding to the prompts for this specific course, students used either "our librarian" or the librarian's first name. Specifically, this perception is also demonstrated through this student's response:

"It was nice to know that if I had any questions, Logan was available to answer them," and "he was helpful in answering questions and concerns that came up."

Another student wrote that:

> "Having a librarian in the classroom for every class is a very positive experience as a student. The basic 30 minute talk that librarians usually give is effective in a general sense, however having the librarian available for every class just allows for continued questioning. The continuous availability and the generous help was more than good, great. Honestly, the way the class was run with the librarian should be continued."

This student's quote compared the difference between having limited exposure to the librarian versus a more substantial, sustained exposure. Based on this positive perception, it can be inferred that if the student did not have this perception, he would not continue to ask questions. This willingness to pose additional questions to the librarian demonstrates a

level of comfort that is not present when a relationship has not developed between the librarian and the student. Lastly, a few students even went out of their way to thank the librarian for his efforts without specifically being prompted to do so. This, again, is a feature that can indicate a more established, comfortable relationship.

Conclusion

Research up until this point has largely examined faculty collaboration with librarians, but not through the lens of student perceptions. The present study contains limitations in that it is a pilot study and therefore a snapshot in time of one section of one course. The ability to replicate the study has not come about due to changes in teaching assignments. Additionally, since the nature of the study was to determine student perceptions before and after direct library instruction it was necessary to identify the students' responses. Given the fact that the students knew the researchers would know the students' responses by name it may have affected the students' comfort levels causing them to feel they could be less authentic when answering the prompts due to the personal relationships established with the researchers throughout the semester. Given these obvious limitations, the findings still stand.

The evidence from this pilot study does demonstrate that student perceptions of embedded library instruction were positive. The students favor more embedded and collaborative relationships between their course instructors and librarians as opposed to simply having the same "library day." However, they did in fact advocate for intelligent alignment of library instruction with specific course objectives and assignments. Overwhelmingly it can be concluded that students see the value of library instruction when tied to specific course assignments. The fact that the librarian and the course instructor already had a strong relationship allowed for the opportunity to positively impact the students' perceptions of embedded library instruction. The proximity of the librarian throughout the second half of the semester helped the students to build mutual

respect and trust with the librarian that successfully laid the groundwork to embark on future collaborations beyond this one specific class and its course requirements. The knowledge and skills the students took away from this experience has the potential to impact not only their future classes as they complete their degree programs, but also to inspire future collaborations in their jobs as teachers with the librarians at their schools. While this pilot study provided insights into student perceptions regarding embedded library instruction more in depth research would be able to examine to a greater degree the effects of embedded library instruction and the impact that it has on future educators as they enter their career field.

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