

Library Spring 2020 Assessment

Background

Though the HWC library does not house any programs that lead to degrees or certificates, we value student learning, nonetheless. Traditionally, we have assessed student learning in single-session and credit-bearing courses using direct, skills-based assessments attuned to our departmental outcomes. However, as can be corroborated by our experiences, researchers have typically found little or no change in deep library learning after students attend a single instruction session (“one-shot”) Hsieh and Holden (2010) and Portmann and Roush (2004). Likewise, information literacy literature has documented millennials’ and/or digital natives’ negative or neutral attitudes about libraries and librarians, as well as their specific research dispositions. These students prefer to do research online for its ease and convenience, will accept inexperienced sources if they are easier to find than expert sources, and will value information or information-seeking advice supplied by peers if it is easier than consulting a librarian or professor Gross and Latham (2009). Unsurprisingly, these students also overestimate their actual information literacy skills Jackson (2013).

With these things in mind, we were intrigued by a comment in our last ICCB report that we presented entirely as an academic department and neglected to mention anything about our student support function. Though we are an academic department, and librarians are teaching, student-facing faculty, realistically, we often also serve in the capacity of student support. Even as professors, we most often help students complete tasks for other professors. In that sense, our role is unique: we assist, coach, train, and even, at times, nurture. Yet, we were not assessing the impact of all these roles.

R. Wang’s *Assessment for One-Shot Library Instruction: A Conceptual Approach* (2016) recommends teaching and assessing “research readiness skills,” which may be briefly summarized as students’ understanding of their assignment, having clarity about their topic, recognizing where to look for sources, being willing to ask information professionals for help planning their research, and learning the mechanics of searching (621). This approach corresponds to the roles that we naturally play, so we decided to take elements of Wang’s thinking and combine it with our skills-based questions, alongside some questions meant to gauge student feelings of comfort.

In Spring 2020, HWC library began assessing students in this new way. We paired skills questions with corresponding confidence questions. For instance:

- **How confident do you feel about your ability to identify the keywords in the following research question: How will global warming impact animals living in the oceans?**

is paired with

- **What are the keywords in the following question? (select all that apply): How will global warming impact animals living in the oceans?**

Other questions include:

- **Where would you look to find books in the library?**

- Where would you look to find full-text articles from scholarly journals?
- You want to write a research paper on the current best practices for combating the AIDS epidemic in the United States. Which item(s) will be most useful?
- Which type of question would be most useful for researching the causes of gun violence in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood?

The answers offer a range of choices, showing whether students demonstrate no, some, or complete mastery of the library's outcomes.

Overview

In Spring 2020, we taught 42 one-shots and 21 multiple-class sessions. The multiple-class sessions were taught as part of our new embedded librarian program and are not included in these results. There were 140 respondents in the one-shots. It was often the case that we ran out of time before being able to administer the measure, so the number of students assessed is lower than hoped for. Moreover, some students may have simply elected not to complete the assessment. The students we assessed were predominantly enrolled in English 102 classes. Other students we instructed were in courses such as literature, speech, and history. The questions on the assessment tool fall into three categories: direct, indirect, and research readiness. The direct questions attempt to measure student performance on a specific outcome; the indirect questions attempt to measure student expressions of confidence about those skills; and the research readiness questions attempt to measure a new kind of student learning: how prepared students feel to complete a research task following an instruction session. The results indicate that, after a library one-shot, students are broadly more confident about their skills, as well as more comfortable with library research, and the library, in general. At the same time, the direct measures of research skills show room for growth.

Skills-Based Questions

The direct and indirect assessment questions correspond to the library's instruction outcomes and gauge both students' feelings about what they learned as well as their actual skills. Students rated their feelings of confidence on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from "not at all confident" to "very confident." Each question from the assessment is presented below and the results are paired:

Questions 1 & 2: Identifying keywords in a given research question

- 85% of students were confident or very confident of their abilities at this skill.
- 46% of students correctly named all the keywords in the research question

The fact that only 46% identified the five correct keywords is initially alarming. However, this may not be as bad as it appears because choosing all five correct keywords would represent *complete* mastery. Many students correctly identified, in one combination or another, *most* of the keywords. Specifically, 94% correctly identified one of the key phrases, 86% correctly identified another, 76% a third, and 69% the fourth. Only 11% chose the incorrect keyword options. Thus, there are varying shades of correctness in the answers that are not being picked up by the instrument. Still, this points to an age-old problem with indirect measures: that they tend to inflate actual abilities.

Questions 3, 4 & 5: Finding library resources to complete a research project

- 81% of students were confident or very confident of their abilities at this skill.
- 38% of students correctly identified the online catalog as the correct place to find books in the library
- 78% of students correctly identified the library databases as the best place to find full-text articles from scholarly journals

The low percentage of students who understand where to find a book may be the product of any number of issues, some of which can be addressed in the classroom. For instance, librarians tend to briefly introduce the online catalog first and then spend the majority of the time on different databases. The order of presentation or the amount of time delegated to each search system may make the databases seem like the most obvious answer. Likewise, the fact that some databases have e-books in them may introduce uncertainty about the correct answer.

Questions 6 & 7: Choosing good information sources for your research assignments

- 78% of students were confident or very confident of their abilities at this skill.
- 64% of students correctly identified both correct answers offered, one an academic research article and the other an in-depth secondary source.
- 16% of students chose one or the other of the two best choices.
- 19% of students chose one or both of the incorrect answers.

The fact that 64% of students show mastery of this skill and that 80% show at least partial mastery of the outcome is encouraging.

Questions 8 & 9: Focusing your research with an appropriate research question

- 73% of students were confident or very confident of their abilities at this skill.
- 69% of students correctly identified the correct type of research question for getting started on their research.
- 19% chose a question that might be useful for finding a specific example as a subtopic.
- 11% chose a broad question that might be useful to learn broad and basic information
- 4% chose the question that would provide the least amount of useful information.

The fact that 69% of students show mastery of this skill and that a larger percentage show at least partial mastery of the outcome is encouraging.

Research Readiness

The questions assessing student research readiness offer encouraging news showing that the library does indeed offer valuable academic student support. Students leave one-shot library instruction sessions with a better understanding of their research assignments, a clearer and more focused research topic, a more systematic approach to completing their research assignments, and with greater confidence about approaching librarians for help.

- 84% felt the library session helped them understand their research assignment.

- 79% felt it helped them find a clear and focused research topic
- 76% felt that it helped them develop a systematic process for completing their research assignment
- 84% felt that it made them feel more confident about approaching a librarian for assistance with their research.

These findings show that students leave instruction sessions with a clearer grasp of what research entails, how to think productively about the process, how to approach research, and where to go to get help if they need it

Discussion

In light of student attitudes, perceptions, and abilities, the library should strive not only to teach information literacy skills but to instill in students a willingness to access and accept the expert guidance of the librarians. Greater and more in-depth exposure to information literacy concepts and the critical thinking about information and sources that we engender will hopefully shift student dispositions away from convenience and toward accuracy. In this regard, the most encouraging findings from our assessment are that students feel more prepared to undertake a research assignment and more willing to consult a librarian for help with it.

In future semesters we plan to modify this assessment slightly by changing the question about Chicago's Englewood neighborhood, which may bias student responses. We likewise plan to invite our research analysts to explore the data more fully. We are interested in a clearer understanding of our students who achieved partial mastery but not complete mastery. Specifically, we hope to gain insight on which correct answers were chosen in tandem and which were not. We likewise wish to better understand any correlation between confidence and skill.

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