Guest Editorial

Impact? What Three Years of Research Tell Us about Library Instruction

I keep returning to a question librarians in my line of work have asked ourselves many times during the course of our careers: "Are we having an impact with library instruction?" We can judge our success by talking to colleagues or hearing anecdotal feedback from our students after any library workshop. But what does the literature tell us? I decided to peruse issues of *C&RL* published over the past three years (January 2009 to November 2011) to locate articles addressing library instruction, or information literacy more broadly, and found a total of eighteen articles. Over the three-year period, this represents almost twenty percent of the ninety five articles published in *C&RL*.

What can these studies tell us about what we are doing and where we need to go in library instruction? Three practical topics emerged from sixteen of the articles: the impact of library instruction on learning, collaboration with faculty or other units on campus, and perceptions of information literacy among faculty and/or students. Two articles were refreshingly theoretical.

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In the two more theoretical pieces, Stamatoplos (May 2009) asks us to consider our role outside the curriculum by encouraging us to get involved with mentored undergraduate researchers and the programs that support them. In another article, Mackey and Jacobson (January 2011) argue that with the advent of social media and digital technologies, we should re-frame information literacy as a "metaliteracy." These conceptual pieces are appreciated, as they prompt us to consider how and where we might provide library instruction and what terms we employ to discuss it. I would like to see more articles like these. For example, I wonder what we could learn from a discourse analysis of the professional documents that guide the library instruction of many academic librarians. We should understand what it means to use, and even embrace, terms such as "value," "accountability," and "standards." After all, these are not terms that are free of a dominant ideology within academic librarianship.

Nevertheless, with the stress on accountability and the recent entreaty in the "Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report" (www.acrl.ala.org/value/ ACRL, 2011) to measure our work, many librarians are looking for research studies that are more practical. So, what proof do we have of our value as it relates to our instructional work?

Authors of the other sixteen *C&RL* articles on library instruction speak to this. They each used a mixed methods approach, tending to favor qualitative research, but all used one or more of the following methods: surveys, interviews, pre-/post-testing, citation analysis, and statistical techniques (e.g., correlation). Only one study addressed the needs of graduate students, showing that we have a real emphasis on the undergraduate population. The majority of studies were based in the United States, though one of these looked at both England and the U.S (DaCosta, May 2010) while two were based in Hong Kong (Wong & Webb, July 2011; Wong & Cmor, September 2011). We have a very bounded perspective on library instruction, and I would encourage researchers to extend their cultural and geographical reach beyond U.S. borders.

The most predominant theme in the articles was whether or not library instruction has, in fact, had an impact on the learners. Readers will be happy to note the authors of eight of the studies show that library instruction can have a positive impact, whether it was one-shot, assignment-based, or curriculum embedded. In every study, there was a positive correlation between instruction and learning. Two studies show a correlation between an increase in Grade Point Average (GPA) and library instruction (Wong & Webb, July 2011; Wong & Cmor, September 2011); a third demonstrates a positive relationship between library instruction and student retention rates (Emmons & Wilkinson, March 2011;), and the remaining five discuss the increased understanding by students of various research skills after attending library instruction sessions (Hufford, March 2010; Rempel, November 2010; Chen & Van Ullen, May 2011; Cooke & Rosenthal, July 2011; Johnson, et al, November 2011).

With such encouraging results, what can we learn about the pedagogical approaches described in these studies? Authors Hufford (March 2010), Johnson, et al (November 2011), and Gaspar & Wetzel (November 2009) are involved in for-credit courses and provide rich details about activities, assignments, and session content that can inform our teaching practices. Additionally, Roselle (March 2009), found sound pedagogical practices among librarians' surveyed, such as guiding students through activities, scaffolding learning, and providing hands-on activities and feedback. Nichols (November 2009) suggests that his research on students' information seeking behavior could inform the design of online tutorials. This complements the finding by Mestre, et al (May 2011) that librarians want to learn how to create

effective online learning objects. Finally, Imler and Eichelberger (September 2011) articulate the difficulties students have using SFX (a link resolver that helps users link from a citation to the full-text of an article) even after instruction, and suggest that their findings could inform search interface design.

Collaboration was the second most common theme. Five articles reported on partnerships. Not surprisingly, the majority of these were discussions of cooperation between librarians and faculty. Two of these were case studies in which the authors describe working with faculty to develop, implement, and assess for-credit courses (Johnson, et al, November 2011; Gaspar & Wetzel, November 2009), while another surveyed faculty for input on their online tutorials (Appelt & Pendell, May 2010). One very interesting approach to collaboration required faculty to provide students' research papers from first-year and upper-year courses in order to determine the quality of sources cited after library instruction (Cooke & Rosenthal, July 2011). Only one author discussed collaboration with another unit on campus, an undergraduate research center (Stamatoplos, May 2009).

The final theme that emerged was about student and faculty perceptions of information literacy. Of the four articles, two addressed students (Gross & Latham, July 2009; Nichols, Nov 2009), and two addressed faculty (Gaspar & Wetzel, November 2009; DaCosta, May 2010). Gross and Latham found that although students were confused by the term 'information literacy', their perceptions of their own research skills were realistic. Similar to Nichol's findings, they also concluded that students felt they had to make the

effort to learn research skills. Faculty perceptions of information literacy are positive. In both studies, faculty indicated that they feel it is essential for students to be information literate.

Each of these studies can inform, and to some extent affirm, our library instruction work. We are having an impact, but this should not make us complacent. I believe we must continue to study information literacy and the most effective ways of teaching and share our findings through publication. We especially need more conceptual pieces that provide a theoretical framework in which to think about information literacy, and we should be looking beyond our borders in order to learn from others.

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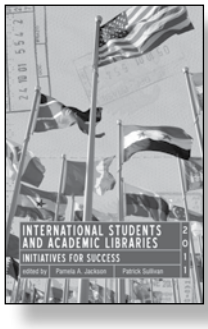

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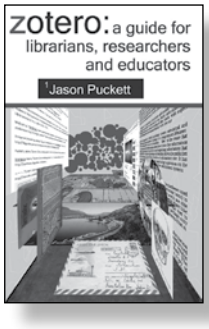

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