Exploring Faculty Perceptions of Information Literacy Learning: A Qualitative Study

Catherine Baird, Online and Outreach Services Librarian
Montclair State University, NJ, USA

Introduction

This qualitative study investigates faculty members in First Year Writing (FYW) courses at Montclair State University (a graduation requirement) and their perceptions of how their students learn information literacy (IL) skills.

The results contribute a current, unique and deep understanding of students' information literacy learning from the perspective of First Year Writing faculty. The study fills a gap in the literature where only a few recent qualitative studies exist and simultaneously recognizes the important voice and perspective of First Year Writing faculty. This study was completed as part of the author's participation in the Institute for Research Design in Librarianship.

Research Questions

1. **How do First Year Writing Faculty perceive that their students learn information literacy skills?**
2. **What are the teaching and assessment strategies used by FYWF that contribute to their students' information literacy learning?**
3. **How do FYWF view their students' information literacy abilities?**

Methodology

Population and Sampling
Using a non-probabilistic purposive sampling method, the author conducted 16 private, semi-structured interviews (35-95 minutes in length with the average length being 1 hour) with FYW faculty at MSU. Both part-time and full-time faculty were represented in the sample as were faculty who regularly worked with the library's teaching program as well as those who did not.

Data Collection
In addition to the interview, all participants complete a short survey describing their teaching experience and provide their own definition of information literacy. The subsequent interview begins with a discussion of their definition of IL along with reviewing and commenting on other definitions of IL, the latter taken largely from the ACRL Framework. Interviews are recorded and then transcribed by a graduate student research assistant.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions (Selected):

- What do you expect your students know when they arrive in your class? What do you find they actually do know at that point? What are you looking for in early assignments?
- Can you draw me a timeline of how a typical student evolves and acquires information literacy skills over the course of a semester?
- What evidence are you looking for that tells you that a student has acquired these skills or not?
- I see in your assignment that students have to have a clear and specific argument. How do you think they come up with that argument?
- In this assignment, how are students prepared to find the sources they require?
- Can you recall a student who struggled with this? What contributed to that struggle?
- Can you recall a student who did this successfully? What contributed to their success?
- Overall, what do you think is the biggest barrier to your students' improvement in this area?

Data Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed using a qualitative inductive coding method. The author identified common themes as well as outliers. NVivo software was used.

Faculty had an understanding of the term *information literacy*, though this understanding appeared to broaden as the interview proceeded. Faculty described a progression in student IL learning over a semester, but noted they still had much to learn. Faculty struggled to describe concrete assessment measures for IL. Below is a list of enablers and barriers to IL learning, according to faculty.

Enablers:
- Scaffolding and Feedback (reading/comprehension activities, annotated bibliographies, source evaluation activities, jigsaw reading and source evaluation, pool of sources, group searching)
- More teaching time to devote to IL topics
- Student time to practice, ideally throughout university
- Let students use less than perfect sources and work through them
- Student interest (agency, personal connection, voice)
- Understand evidence and argument

Barriers:
- Time to teach
- Coverage
- Student time spent on IL learning
- Weak preparation (i.e. high school)
- Don't know what you don't know
- Failure to recognize own voice (student) and own role as contributor to a conversation
- Research is for citing (not learning); a rule-driven process
- Students don't value information skills

Discussion

- How could this list of enablers and barriers be useful to you? What's interesting about them?
- Soundbites from the ACRL Framework were fruitful starting points to discuss IL. How could we use the Framework more to engage faculty and curriculum committees in a broader view of IL learning at our institutions?
- Faculty recognized there was more they could do to enable IL learning; it wasn't just put on the shoulders of their students, though students have to show up and engage, too.
- Faculty still expressed surprise when even after IL learning activities, student behaviour didn't change. Some faculty expressed that learning IL is not difficult. How do we use this kind of insight to gain more buy-in from faculty?
- Secondary sources can both help and hinder the development of a student's argument. Students adopt the argument of the source as their own, rather than developing their own. Students reverse engineer an argument to fit with sources. How does this insight change how we approach teaching information literacy?
- How could the insights presented from this study change the way you approach information literacy teaching?

Project Significance

If we are to make more significant advances in integrating information literacy instruction into FYW teaching, obtaining a deeper understanding of FYW faculty's perceptions and understandings of information literacy is very important. The recent qualitative studies in this area are multi-disciplinary in nature and both found that IL learning was connected to both disciplinary learning and to other academic literacies (Bury, 2016; Cope & Sanabria, 2014; Saunders 2012). Therefore, deeper study of disciplinary faculty is a natural next step, especially disciplinary faculty with whom the library already significantly collaborates to teach information literacy to students.
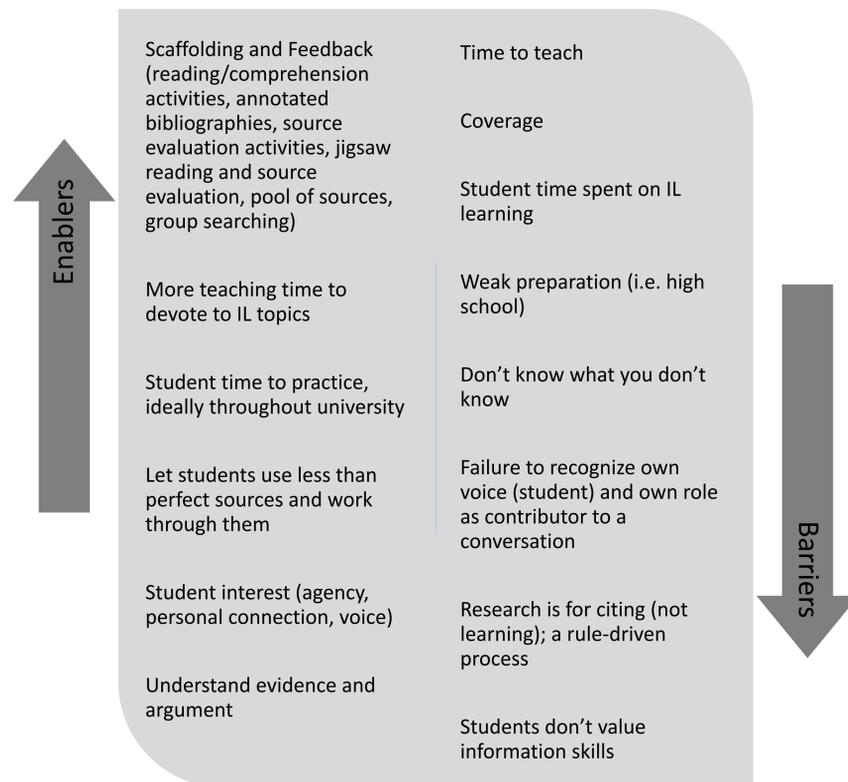
Though the findings are not generalizable to a larger population, other post-secondary institutions with similar First Year Writing programs and populations will benefit from reviewing our methodology and findings and could pursue a similar study.

Ultimately, the goal of this study is to see the results benefit the students of First Year Writing Programs through local program interventions and changes (though this level of action is not detailed in this study). In addition, the authors hope this study contributes to both theoretical and pedagogical understandings of information literacy.

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