

Assessment of information literacy skills, some experiences from University of Bergen

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Abstract

In many universities in Europe, the teaching of information literacy is the domain of the library, in larger or smaller degree in cooperation with faculty. Information literacy may be included as a small part of ordinary courses, or as a subject that the library has control over. The information literacy skills of the students are therefore not assessed especially. One of the consequences may be a lack of understanding of the importance of information literacy skills among the students, and following lack of participation in the training opportunities.

Pedagogical research has found that students place more emphasis and more importance to subjects that are assessed and given feedback. Maybe, to find a way of assessing the information literacy skills will be one of the ways for institutions of higher education to ensure that the students have these important skills?

In this paper different ways the students' level of information literacy can be assessed will be explored, with practical examples of different assessments methods. We will also see how the assessment must be depending on and closely connected to the learning goals/learning outcomes. Thirdly, it will be discussed what assessment methods will be most useful and relevant, depending on whether the teacher of information literacy is the subject teacher or the librarian.

Introduction

Information literacy is widely recognized as an important skill that is needed for citizens today:

"To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." [1]

Information literacy has become a task especially for Institutions of higher education, as they recognize their own crucial role as providers of learning and skills for young people. However, studies have shown that the students only partly recognize that they have a need for information literacy skills. [2] [3]

Information literacy at the University of Bergen, Norway

At the University of Bergen, as in many universities in Europe, the teaching of information literacy is the domain of the library, in larger or smaller degree in cooperation with faculty. At the moment the library offers information literacy courses for students at most subjects. First term students and students at bachelor, masters and ph.d-level are being offered some kind of information literacy training. As part of the information literacy, we have developed an online tutorial called "Søk og Skriv" (Search and Write) in cooperation with other institutions of higher education in Norway and Denmark.

Some of our own experiences with the teaching of information literacy run by the library show that “ordinary” information about information literacy courses only to a limited degree are successful when it comes to motivating the students to attend the courses.

In the following I will use select examples from the Arts, Humanities and Social Science library at the University of Bergen.

In this library, which serves the scholarly needs of researchers and students from the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences – approximately 6.000 students and 1.000 faculty – the library offers special courses for students at the first term study, as well as for many of the other subjects. Typically, the library will offer a course of 90 minutes (2 teaching hours) in connection with a course module that has an essay, bachelor theses or what we call “home exam” as the final assessment.

Situated learning – collaboration with subject teachers

Part of the learning philosophy behind the program for information literacy, and behind all the teaching in the library environment, is based on the idea of situated learning; that the students will learn more, better and faster if the teaching or training is given to them at the same time as they are doing the relevant task. So if the students have a deadline for an essay at mid September, they will learn about relevant resources in late August/early September.

This way of thinking and planning trainings makes the library dependent on good and close cooperation with the teaching staff at the departments. They are the ones that plan the courses and the exams and know about the timing. The academic staff at departments is the ones that have control with the type of exam or essay to be written and assessed. Are the students given a broad field from where to write? Then they must be taught how to narrow the task. Are they given an already formulated hypothesis to answer? Then they need a different content of the teaching and training from the library. The learning outcomes are discussed and set in cooperation with the subject teacher, and the subject teacher will arrange for smaller groups to be sent to the library. [4]

The subject teaching staff is very positive to the library courses of information literacy. To quote former Dean of the humanities, Professor Gunnstein Akselberg:

“In recent years the University Library has developed excellent courses which focus on central topics related to the use of library sources and information in text production. These courses concern for instance quotation and reference techniques, the treatment of information and information ethics. In recent years the problem of using reference texts and reference ethics have increasingly become a challenge at all academic levels; from the graduate level to the postgraduate/doctoral level. The university library has been actively involved in this department, offering tailor-made courses for our academic users of the library. Today there is a great need for this kind of competence, which is still not met, and there will be an increased need and demand for this kind of teaching in the future.

We are presently integrating these courses in the programme descriptions/curricula so that they become an integral part of the teaching offered at the faculty and in the respective subjects.” [5]

However positive the Dean and department heads, the teaching of information literacy will normally be included as a small part of ordinary courses only, and unfortunately often seen as a subject that the library “owns”.

This does not help the integration of information literacy teaching in the ordinary subjects of the University.

What else can one do? Students are busy and tend to optimize their use of time. If something is not seen as relevant, they will not do it. How can we ensure that the teaching of information literacy is seen as important and relevant enough for the students to participate?

From our experiences, we see that the impact of the subject teacher from the department is crucial. If the subject teacher clearly informs the students that this is expected of them, more of them will come. The teacher can do this in several ways. He/she can tell the students to go. He/she can make sure the library is clearly marked in the students' schedules for the relevant subject. He/she can inform the students that this will be relevant for the assessment of exams and grading of papers.

Let us stop there for a moment, and explore the assessment idea.

University exams

What is the idea behind an exam at university level?

The exams are needed for selection, certification and control. We must however also remember the other aspects of exams: standardisation, reliability, relevance, practical knowledge, justice in the grading, confidentiality etc.

Pedagogical thinkers and developers as well as policy makers are looking more and more to the need for alignment between the learning goals and the assessment in the university situation.

Assessment in context is most important. If the assessment is done out of line with the task or fact that we as a university want to assess, the assessment will not be successful. We will be measuring something else than what we want to measure. [6]

By thinking of assessment in the form of exams as a carrot rather than a stick we will be able to redesign the traditional exams into a more learning-friendly task, and enable the students to show their potential and what they have really learned from our teaching.

An example from the Arts and Humanities Library

The first year students are offered a two hour course in information retrieval and ethical use of information. We have had this course since the autumn of 2005. Attendance has varied from about 25% (2005) to about 40% of registered students.

We are not satisfied with these figures. Maybe there is a group of students that has gone through similar training at the University of Bergen and other places, but from what we observe in other areas we think that students choose to not take this course due to experienced time pressure, or a misunderstanding about the value of the course. Seminar leaders and coordinators at the Department for the first semester studies believe students should prioritize this course, as they consider the skills the students learn to be vital for their university studies. We've even got the signal from one of the coordinators of the course that it should be extended to 3 school hours, from 2 today.

The discussion about making the library course mandatory has begun. In the discussion we also want to bring in methods that will make us able to assess what, if anything, the students are learning from the course. Assessment can of course be seen from several aspects – are we assessing the quality of the students' learning, or are we assessing the quality of the library's teaching? As long as the library course, or the library component of the subject course, is not graded separately, the main focus of the assessment will probably be the quality of the library's

teaching. For the library it is actually more interesting and relevant to try to gauge the impact of what the library is teaching than anything else

An argument for making the course mandatory that this is an important and useful course that cover information and skills the UiB are obliged to teach new students, especially in relation to citation and ethics. Still, we see that the number of students who attend the course is smaller than the University likes, from their point of view of making sure students are equipped with skills for ethical and efficient research.

Arguments against making the course mandatory may partly be that it is undesirable to have compulsory education at all at this stage, partly practical, how this should be arranged, and partly probably a misunderstanding, that some of the students may have this knowledge already. Feedback from coordinators and seminar leaders, however, suggests that there are very few of the students in the first semester that can be said to have some degree of knowledge of citation and ethics at the university level from before.

If the course should be compulsory it must be done in line with the modern university pedagogic thinking, and we would also like to see some useful way of assessing the learning outcomes from our teaching.

We will in the following outline five possible ways to cover the practical control aspect if the course is mandatory.

1. Name lists, either by giving the course teacher a name list from the first semester study administration to check, or that the lists are sent around in the classroom, and students sign. Then the administrative must enter in the Student System that this mandatory requirement is completed. Another similar option is that the seminar leader is with the group as they take the library course.
2. Towards the end of the activity students go into the My Space / Kark, where there is a multiple choice test developed by the library that they fill out and that will be corrected automatically. Questions may for instance be about numbers of Plato-versions from a particular year, the placement of literature or loan statuses, or examples of incorrect quoting for the student to point out and correct. The administrative responsible will then pick up the results and post in the Student System that this mandatory requirement is completed.
3. Students will be given a task with some questions that they should respond within a given (short) deadline. Librarians access unto the My Space-area, correct the assignments and send a message to the administrative coordinator who post in the Student System that the claim is complete.
4. In the final essay the students will write one page reflection note on ethics and ethical use of information, or a reflection note assessing his/her own use of supporting information / support literature in the essay. Course teacher *and* librarian will evaluate the quality of the reflection as part of the grade.
5. In the final grading of the essay the student will also be measured and assessed on the quality of use of information and references / bibliographies.

All these examples of ways to deal with the control aspect of a mandatory course have their advantages and disadvantages. They are neither all "secure" in relation to students responding or signing for each others, or that answers to the assignments in example 3 can circulate to the students who were not on the course. We believe however that this can be a starting point for further discussion on the issue with the faculty.

Another question is how they will work as assessments of the learning done by students, following up after the library course in information retrieval and ethical use?

The course is only two or three hours long, and the assessment can therefore not take a disproportionately large amount of time or work for the students. We must bear in mind that “Information retrieval” and “Ethical use of information” are two quite different skills. Will it be possible to design one single assessment activity that can cover both the control aspect, and assessing learning both kinds of skills?

The first option, to use name lists that the librarian teaching reads out or send around in the classroom, has the benefit of being very quick and easy, does not disrupt the teaching, and, especially if the seminar teacher is also there, will probably be quite correct. Of course, if somebody decides to “aye” or sign for another student, and the teaching librarian notices when doing a head count, it can take a longer time and will be disturbing. And worse, from the library point of view: It will give the library absolutely no feedback on the teaching provided.

The second option, to do a multiple choice test while still in the classroom situation will show if the student is there and has been awake enough to learn some of the technicalities about use of the library. Depending on the phrasing of the questions for the multiple choices, it may also show what the student has learned in terms of ethical and correct use of information.

The third option, where the students will be given a task to do away from the library but rather quickly (short deadline) after the teaching is completed, we see clearly both the risk of cheating in the control-part, and in the answering part. This may be designed to be a better assessment form for master students, who easier can be given individual tasks, related to their master theses.

The fourth option, where the students write a reflection that is included in their final essay, either about the ethical use of information or about his/her assessment of some of the information used in the essay, will probably be able to try to do also for students that have not actually taken the course. As a control mechanism in a mandatory course it would therefore not work. However, if the students had learned this already, it would not be a problem. Unfortunately, the feedback from seminar leaders at the first term study suggests that a sizeable group of students are quite overconfident when it comes to their ability to manage information retrieval and use of information on their own, so to speak.

Unless we could control for which of the students that had been at the course, we would also not be able to find out what the impact of the library teaching had been, since we would not know who of the students had attended the course and who had not. But if we could find out who had been at the course or not, the possibility of really assessing the impact of the library teaching in information retrieval and ethical use of information would be quite large. If the reflections were “graded”, and afterwards divided into “attended course”/“not attended course” we would be able to see and show the impact.

In this option the library takes on a bit more work; to assess the reflections with the subject teacher. At the same time, it will provide a very good collaborative and networking opportunity, and as such, a possibility for influence for the library.

The fifth option, where the subject teacher grades the essay and also bases the grading on the quality of the student’s use of information, the control aspect is not covered, and unless the subject teacher finds out and tells the library, we will not be able to know about the impact of our own teaching. If, however, the subject teacher informs the students that “this is part of the exam, and you learn it by taking the library course”, most of them will probably want to attend the course anyway. But again, we have the group of overconfident students.

Who teaches?

From the fifth option, where the subject teacher includes the information retrieval and use when grading the exam, we can also reflect over who is doing the teaching of information literacy; the librarian or the subject teacher. How will it be possible for the library to ever be fully integrated in the teaching of the subjects? In Norwegian Universities, we have academic librarians; library staff that has an academic and non-librarian background. For most of the library teaching, they are the teachers, especially on Masters level, within the subjects for which they have a special responsibility.

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