

First-Year Students' Understanding of Research and Their Information Literacy Skills Change Over Time and in Four Different Ways

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Evidence Summary

First-Year Students' Understanding of Research and Their Information Literacy Skills Change Over Time and in Four Different Ways

A Review of:

Kirker, M. J., & Stonebraker, I. (2019). Architects, renovators, builders and fragmenters: A model for first year students' self-perceptions and perceptions of information literacy. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 45(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2018.10.009>

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Abstract

Objective – To explore students' perceptions of their information literacy skills and how these change during the first-year experience.

Design – A longitudinal qualitative study using cognitive dissonance theory.

Setting – Two large public universities in the United States of America.

Subjects – Students enrolled in research methods and information literacy-based courses in their first semester.

Methods – Students were required to submit two written self-reflections as part of their course; the first was completed in the first two weeks of the semester and the second at the end of the semester. Informed consent was obtained for all reflections used for the study. The authors selected 12 students (6 from each institution) to participate in semi-structured interviews at the end of their first year. A total of 178 self-reflections were included in the analysis.

Main Results – The study found that students' understanding of research changed during the first-year experience, and that students had four main journeys related to their information

literacy skills and perceptions. Instances of cognitive dissonance were observed. Students can consider themselves both good and bad researchers at the same time. The study also revealed the research process as an emotional labour, not just an intellectual one.

Conclusion – The study concluded that a shared understanding of “research” between librarians and students is needed in order to teach information literacy effectively. It is also important to recognise that students transform their information literacy over time (not just from a single class or program) and that teaching needs to meet students where they are on their journey, depending on their “developmental paths.”

Commentary

Librarians are well-placed to see and understand connections (and their importance) between students’ development as scholars and competencies such as information literacy (Kirker & Stonebraker, 2019, p. 1). Existing literature often evaluates students’ information literacy skills as outcomes of a one-off class, pedagogical tool or program (Karshmer & Bryan, 2011; Kim & Shumaker, 2015). Little is known about the students’ perspective on research and information literacy skills within their overall study experience. Kirker and Stonebraker’s study, which focuses on the first year experience, begins to fill this gap.

This study was appraised using the *Critical Review Form* by Letts et al. (2007). A thorough and logical review of the literature creates a compelling argument for the study and defines its scope and its contribution to existing knowledge about the impact of information literacy instruction in academic settings. Using the cognitive dissonance framework as a lens through which to view information literacy development is an approach unlike other studies. Research questions and aims prescribe the longitudinal qualitative design. Students who did not complete both written self-reflections were excluded from the analysis process.

Participants who were selected for the semi-structured interviews were representative of their institutions’ student populations, however Kirker and Stonebraker are careful to note that findings of the study cannot be generalised and applied to all student populations.

Kirker and Stonebraker provide the self-reflection prompts that were given to students and state that similar questions were asked at the semi-structured interviews. This is particularly helpful in understanding more about the data that was collected and how data collection was linked to the research questions. Although a comprehensive description of the data analysis process is provided, including quote samples and tables to illustrate findings, the actual process that the authors used to explore and identify patterns and themes in the data was not defined. Given the qualitative design, thematic analysis and constant comparison is therefore assumed and should be considered a limitation of the study.

Findings of this study present evidence that students’ understanding of research and perceived information literacy skills evolve over time and so librarians cannot simply assume that students arrive at information literacy classes and programs with a blank slate. Information literacy skills are then exercised, developed, and integrated throughout the broader picture of the student learning experience. Kirker and Stonebraker suggest that librarians meet students where they are on their information literacy journey to ensure instruction is effective.

Kirker and Stonebraker also identify emotional labour as another factor involved in students’ development of information literacy skills. This is something librarians may need to keep in mind when designing and implementing information literacy programs. While the researchers don’t comment on differences between the two student cohorts involved in the study, this may be worth exploring with further research in order to develop more targeted and refined ways in

engaging faculty and students in information literacy instruction or programs.

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