

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Bridging the Information Literacy Communication Gap: Putting PIL Studies to Good Use

By Steven Bell

Imagine two speakers of different languages trying to converse on a topic. They'd like to communicate and reach agreement on their mutual concerns. The language barrier prevents them from doing so. Instead they toil away with the same problem, failing to achieve a productive collaboration. You can imagine the frustration. Now apply that to a challenge all higher education institutions confront – improving students' research skills.

Both academic librarians and faculty acknowledge, and research studies now confirm, that college students begin their research using search engines and free, web encyclopedias. Google and Wikipedia are the top choices. Some students do move on to library databases. Many find themselves challenged to construct effective search questions that lead to quality content. Others are stumped by their lack of familiarity with academic research databases, and often give up or use only surface level resources, never pushing themselves to make new discoveries among the library's wealth of offerings.

Academic librarians and professors share the same goals and outcomes for their students. Both parties are invested in wanting students to build the research skills that enable them to achieve academic success. The language gap creates barriers.

The librarian's information literacy lingo fails to connect with or engage the faculty. From the faculty perspective, all the talk of information literacy standards and outcomes is simply more administrative bureaucratic blather designed to make more busy work for faculty. Many faculty respond to information literacy the same way they do to calls for more intense student assessment. They resist being forced to participate.

The solution may reside in finding a common language. Ironically, the answer may be a new set of research reports issued by the aptly named **Project Information Literacy (PIL)**. For the first time academic librarians have at their disposal research findings that are well suited for sharing with faculty. In common sense ways, they get at the heart of those strategies that can help students build their research skills. The beauty of it is that the findings are based on the everyday research experiences of students, and communicated in direct ways that make the issues and solutions crystal clear to faculty.

How PIL Works

According to its website [<http://projectinfolit.org>], the Project began in 2008 at the University of Washington iSchool. It was founded by two researchers, Alison Head and Dean Emeritus and Professor Michael Eisenberg. Head and Eisenberg formed PIL to conduct research to better understand student research behavior, and in doing so provide librarians and faculty with insights to help them help students become information literate. Since then PIL has produced multiple reports and articles. Their findings are nothing less than a revelation about our students, how they really conduct their research and how they feel about using libraries. In addition to the reports, PIL has produced several slick videos to transmit the major findings of each research project.

Coming Soon —

The Library as a Recruitment Tool

To conduct their research, the project leaders identify a set of institutions that wish to participate in the study. Students and/or faculty, depending on the nature of the research, at those institutions are then surveyed, interviewed or participate in focus groups. The number of institutions and participants can vary widely depending on the focus of the research. Some of the earlier studies involved fewer than ten institutions, but others involve between 20 and 25 institutions. Surveys can include thousands of students.

Alison Head says that what “makes PIL unique from a number of other studies about students is that we use social science methods (surveys, interviews, content analysis) to investigate how students find and use information through the lens of their experiences—that is, through students’ accounts, reports, experiences, and processes. We also research “across” institutions and look for patterns (and gaps) that may exist in institutions as different as Harvard College and Shoreline Community College. Even though our findings are not generalizable to all college students everywhere (given our sample size), our findings do and have shown robust relationships and similarities across the samples we have used at very different institutions across the U.S.”

PIL’s comprehensive reports clearly describe the nature of the research and the findings in language that gets directly to the point. First, the reports are easy to find on the PIL website. Second, they are easy to read and understand. Third, there are brief videos produced to support efforts to share this information with faculty.

The authors go to great lengths to bring the most important findings, with text and charts, to the reader’s attention. For those with little time to digest all the research details, such as busy and distracted faculty, the PIL approach enables the packaging and sharing of the salient discoveries.

According to Head “The data have told us a great deal about how today’s students find and use information for coursework and in their personal lives. For readers who want to apply our findings in their own settings so that students become better researchers,

it may make sense for these readers to conduct their own gap analysis. Librarians of all stripes—deans, provosts, reference, systems, and information literacy librarians—may want to treat the gaps PIL has discovered as signposts on a map that can serve as a basis for evaluation, improvement, and opportunities on their own campuses.

Closer Look at the Studies

First Report. In the first report, from February 2009, the goal was to better understand how college students navigate the information landscape. In focus groups, 86 full-time students at 7 institutions revealed what frustrates them about everyday research and course-related research.

1. Big picture. Students need to have a “big picture” understanding of their assignment. Without it they struggle to find an appropriate research topic.

2. Procrastination. The findings reinforce some of what is already known about student research behavior, for example, procrastination. “A large majority of students reported spending three hours on research and another two hours on writing—one or two days before a 5-7 page course-related research paper was due.”

3. Negative feelings. One eye-opener is the words students use to describe how they feel when they get a research project: angst, tired, dread, fear, anxious, annoyed, stressed, disgusted, intrigued, excited, confused, and overwhelmed. What could faculty and librarians, working together, do to alleviate such negative feelings about college-level research?

Second Report. The second report, from December 2009, is based on a survey of 2,318 full-time students at 6 U.S. four-year colleges and universities and community colleges. There are two significant findings:

1. Students rarely ask librarians for assistance.
2. In a form of habitual research behavior, college students stick to just a few familiar resources; they rarely venture into new territory.

This report further explores the resources students use, and how and from whom they seek assistance. Whether it’s everyday research or course-related research, students rarely ask librarians for assistance. Faculty are rated more highly than librarians, yet not as high as friends.

Part of the problem librarians may have created themselves by putting the focus on the resources – the content – because that’s what the report shows college students know about academic libraries. What they know little about is the librarians and the services they provide. Librarians may get better results from building relationships with students that will establish greater trust.

Third Report. The third report, from July 2010, is a content analysis of 191 course-related research assignment handouts from 28 U.S. four-year and two-year institutions. The goal was to investigate the extent to which the syllabus serves as a guide to the research process. This report resonated strongly with academic librarians because it pointed to a problem they are all too eager to prevent: the lack of research guidance in faculty assignments.

While the majority of the assignments pointed students to the library shelves, few recommended seeking out librarians for assistance. When assignments did suggest online library resources, they rarely specified the appropriate databases to use. What we learn from Report 3 is that faculty research assignments offer rich opportunities to improve student research skills, but academic librarians receive few opportunities to make it happen. These findings suggest that academic administrators should promote greater collaboration between faculty and librarians on assignment design and research guidelines provided to students.

Fourth Report. The November 2010 fourth report is based on a survey of 8,353 full-time students at 25 institutions. The focus is on student evaluation skills. The good news is that students report evaluating web-based information, but may neglect to seek help when doing so. When they

do, they are far more likely to consult family and friends than librarians. We also learn about students' largely self-taught evaluation criteria (e.g., currency; authors; references). To evaluate sites they also look for bad spelling and grammar or poor site design. This is also the first report to offer comparative data, between 2009 and 2010. It reveals little shift in student research behavior between the two years. Use of the library and librarians dropped slightly in 2010. This report also provides detail on the tools students use for their research process. Surprisingly over half use citation management tools, such as RefWorks or Endnote.

Fifth Report. The latest PIL report, published as this issue was going to press, focuses on multitasking and technology management as the semester heads into its final weeks. Head said this report describes an identifiable gap between the age-old mission of the campus library as a destination of knowledge and expertise and why today's students go to the library—as a refuge from everyday distractions and the temptations of their ubiquitous IT devices. The new report is accessible at http://projectinfolit.org/pdfs/PIL_Fall2011_TechStudy_FullReport1.1.pdf

Top Findings for Faculty

Given the time constraints and workloads of faculty, academic librarians must do more than simply point them to the PIL reports and videos. Librarians may want to create learning packages that distill the most important results from PIL into an easily digestible format for faculty. Those findings could then be pushed out to faculty as a “top things you need to know” brochure or communicated in a short program at a faculty meeting. Each report contains a section on the key findings and makes recommendations if appropriate. Multiple products and presentations could help transfer that knowledge directly to the faculty. To facilitate that process, here are key PIL findings and suggestions for using them:

Finding: Librarians are tremendously underutilized; only 20% of students report ever turning to librarians. (Report 2)

Recommend: Put the name of your

department's librarian subject specialists on all communications related to research assignments. Encourage students to seek out these librarians and consider rewarding them for doing so.

Finding: Research-based assignments are long on procedural details and short on advice for research support. (Report 3)

Recommend: Collaborate with a librarian when designing research assignments, and add to the syllabus more details on how to accomplish the research.

Finding: Library instruction sessions are helpful at the time of delivery but the lessons learned are soon forgotten and of little help when research is being conducted at a later time. (Report 1)

Recommend: Curriculum committees should integrate instruction across the disciplines to ensure constant reinforcement of research skill development at the course level.

Finding: Students rarely seek out librarians for assistance with evaluating content for course-related assignments. (Report 4)

Recommend: Faculty should invite librarians to class to meet students as a trust-building exercise in order to increase the likelihood that students will seek out librarians for help with evaluation.

Finding: Students need help with the “big picture” before they can get started with research assignments. (Report 2)

Recommend: Provide students with more context for assignments and how they fit into the larger scope of the course and discipline; ask a librarian to provide a good overview of or guide to the subject or assignment.

Finding: Research assignments provide little advice for specific databases to use to gather information. (Report 3)

Recommend: Consult with a librarian subject specialist to identify the top three databases for the assignment; ask the librarian to create a short tutorial showing students how to find and get started with the databases.

Finding: Students do recognize librarians as “information coaches”. (Report 1)

Recommend: Faculty and academic administrators can work with the library staff to promote librarians as “information coaches” to the students.

Finding: Students tend to use the same limited research resources no matter what the topic or assignment requires. (Report 2)

Recommend: Collaborate with librarians to identify appropriate resources that expose student to new options that expand their research horizons; assignment-based research guides are desirable.

Finding: The most difficult phase of the research process for students is getting started by formulating a manageable research question. (Report 1)

Recommend: Organize a class session where students receive individual consultations with a librarian subject specialist who can help students with question formulation, resource selection, and starting tips.

The WIFM Factor

What's In It For Me? That's where these top finding for faculty can make a difference.

What will faculty get out of it? For starters, better papers that demonstrate effective research by students. Faculty want students to write papers that reflect smart, effective research. If faculty use the findings to first change their own behavior, based on a better understanding of student research habits, the results will benefit the faculty by rewarding them with papers worth reading.

Furthermore, faculty need not implement all ten strategies. Even just modifying research assignments to provide more specific guidelines or introducing the library liaison to the class has the potential for great change. Faculty and librarians share the same goal; better student research that leads to student academic success.

Sharing PIL's research in a top-ten format is a step forward in enabling faculty to save their own time, improve student time on task and raise the quality level of their student's

research projects and papers. To learn more about how this can be accomplished, read how librarians at Temple University are sharing the findings with their faculty through a workshop and a research guide See http://www.temple.edu/newsroom/2011_2012/09/stories/Research_tips.htm

PIL in Action

Harvard. Susan Gilroy, Librarian for Undergraduate Programs for Writing, Lamont and Widener Libraries at Harvard College, knows the work of PIL about as well as any librarian. Gilroy was involved with PIL from the very start in 2008, has participated in three of the four PIL studies, and serves on the PIL Advisory Board.

According to Gilroy "PIL has proved to be—as one high-level administrator described it—“nothing short of transformational. Its importance has made us more aware than ever of the need to assess the value of the work we do.” Prior to joining the study, Gilroy says that her library’s understanding of student research behaviors was largely derived from anecdotal evidence: The difference now, says Gilroy, is that “PIL captured the student perspective on the information-seeking enterprise, and...the research process as undergraduates themselves imagine it, operationalize it, struggle with it, and evaluate their success (or failure) at it.”

Gilroy and her colleagues are discussing PIL’s research in conversations with academic deans and program administrators. They draw attention to the data itself, sharing what they know about Harvard’s profile from the reports. With individual faculty members, course instructors and graduate teaching staff, their approach is subtler. They

may not even mention the Project itself or talk directly in terms of information literacy. But the PIL reports are source material for collaborating with instructors about creating a research activity or devising strategies that might make the whys and hows of research papers and term projects more transparent and meaningful overall.

Claremont Colleges. Char Booth, Instruction Services Manager and E-Learning Librarian at The Claremont Colleges Library, also values the PIL Reports and is actively using (PIL) research toward a number of outreach and education ends.

Booth observes a general impression that no standard level of “information literacy” is shared by students at any tier or type of institution, and that their knowledge is often piecemeal and dependent on their library and research experiences in primary and secondary education. Her own experience instructing students in research skills, resources, and strategies supports this. She cautions against any expectation that entering students possess a common skill set in scholarly inquiry. “When I enter a classroom I tend to assume a level playing field of least experience, and PIL findings provide confirmation of my experience.”

When Booth engages faculty and administrators about these challenges, which she considers to be a shared reality facing students using information resources at the college level, she advocates for the importance of research and information skills instruction and the value of academic libraries and library staff to the ongoing work of the academy. PIL progress reports, “smart talks,” articles, podcasts, and videos have acted as conversation starters,

supplements for presentations, and discussion prompts at professional development events.

How is Booth applying what she’s learned from PIL? “I refer to the findings with first-year seminar faculty at Pomona College. A colleague and I used PIL research on student IL competencies and assignment prompts to challenge assumptions and model best practices in research assignment design. We also played one of their short videos at the beginning of this session to engage faculty in a discussion about perceived/actual first-year student research abilities. I have shared PIL documents and media with librarians in similar ways, and refer to PIL findings in my own research and presentations in the field.”

Conclusion

PIL presents the academic community with a nearly limitless field of opportunity for learning when it comes to college students, their faculty and the ways in which they conduct research. PIL offers a process of discovery that few institutions or library consortia could accomplish independently.

In 2012, PIL will branch into new territory by reaching out to our alumni to learn what impact information literacy initiatives have on post-baccalaureate lives. This may provide some clues as to whether academic librarians’ instruction efforts are having the desired impact. Are we creating lifelong learners? Whatever becomes of PIL, one thing is certain, the academic librarian community along with professors and academic administrators will have benefited greatly from the fantastic research findings provided by PIL. How we use it to improve our institutions and our students is up to us.

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