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Study shows undergraduates need more help with basic research skills

College students are among the savviest users of Web 2.0, right?

Well, yes and no. New research finds plenty of students use social networks, like Facebook, to find information in their everyday lives, but few are using other Web 2.0 tools – blogs, wikis, video sharing sites – to manage or collaborate on course research assignments.

The latest Project Information Literacy report sees this as part of a larger problem: colleges and universities may be failing their students at a time when research skills and collaborative learning are becoming more and more important and prevalent. In today's information-driven workplace, people spend much of their time formulating questions, finding relevant information and drawing conclusions, often working in virtual teams scattered across the globe.

Alison Head, a research scientist at the University of Washington Information School, and Michael Eisenberg, a professor and former dean at the school, surveyed 8,353 sophomores, juniors and seniors at 25 U.S. campuses this past spring, finding that many students fumble research assignments. According to Head and Eisenberg, their new report is the largest scholarly analysis of information literacy among college students.

The researchers found that although many students consider themselves fairly adept at finding and evaluating information, especially from the Web, 84 percent are often stymied at the outset of a research assignment. They've been asked to formulate a research question without understanding what the process entails or requires. Of all the steps necessary in a course research project, survey respondents had the most difficulty determining the nature, scope and requirements of the assignment.

“Students grapple with what college-level research assignments mean and what is expected of them,” Head and Eisenberg write.

In other words, they have big trouble just getting started, even though many have ideas. They also wind up using the same research routines over and over, particularly for written papers. They’ve simply transferred high school skills to college, researchers found in follow up interviews.

Nearly half of students, 49 percent, frequently checked course research with professors; almost two-thirds, 61 percent, reported checking personal research with friends and/or family members. Few turned to campus librarians for help of any kind.

Overall, students studied reported far fewer problems finding information for personal use, though sorting through research results hamstrung 41 percent.

To manage large amounts of information, the report says, “students in both large universities and small colleges use a risk-averse strategy based on efficiency and predictability.” In other words, students avoid drowning by limiting the sources they turn to and the amount of information they take in.

At the same time, however, those students worry how to sort what they’ve found, when to stop looking and whether they’ve done a good job.

As the result of their research, Head and Eisenberg make recommendations:

- Integrate research rubrics into research assignments. Define what makes for “A quality” research, especially selecting and using multiple and diverse sources, ranging from blogs to collaborative wikis to traditional scholarly journals and books to data collected from the field.
- Rethink librarian training so it focuses on strategies for framing inquiries and dealing with the abundance of information that exists on campuses, rather than just instructing what’s available, which tends to overwhelm many students.
- Hold students more accountable. Assign tasks that help define the students’

topics. Consider assigning an annotated bibliography or requiring students to compare several sources, setting the sources into the larger research conversation about the topic.

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