Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Skills Gained from University Library Instruction Sessions Are Perceived as Useful Four to Eight Weeks Later

A review of:
Wong, Gabrielle, Diana Chan, and Sam Chu. "Assessing the Enduring Impact of Library Instruction Programs." Journal of Academic Librarianship 32.4 (July 2006): 384-95.

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Abstract

Objective – To assess the impact of a university library instruction program.

Design – Survey questionnaire administered post-intervention.

Setting – A mid-size science and technology university in Hong Kong.

Subjects – Student and staff participants in either course specific or open (elective) library instruction workshops.

Methods – Surveys were conducted to measure the perceived effectiveness of the library instruction program, including various types of course specific (CS) and open workshops (OW). Librarians responsible for teaching nominated the sample of workshops for evaluation. Students in all but one CS workshop were provided with a 14-question paper questionnaire in class by their course instructor, while participants in all of the open workshops and one CS workshop received the same questionnaire via e-mail. The questionnaires were distributed between four to eight weeks following the workshops in order to gauge the "enduring" impact of the instruction. Most questions were closed, forcing participants to choose an answer from a list or select from a 4- or 7-point Likert scale. Comments were also solicited. Results were summarised and analysed using SPSS software. The CS and OW questionnaires were studied separately to allow for comparisons between groups.

Main results – Out of 133 workshops taught in the fall of 2004, 25 were included in the sample: 15 CS and 10 OW. The overall response rate was 68%, with 466 participants completing questionnaires. Most participants indicated that the workshops were useful for learning about sources and search methods for finding information quickly. The majority (72.2%) responded that they felt an increase in confidence when conducting library research and slightly more than half (57.9%) agreed the workshops led to an increased interest in using the library. The responses differed significantly for the CS and OW groups: OW participants consistently rated the usefulness of the workshops higher than CS participants. In regards to retention of skills, 68.5% of participants responded in the affirmative when asked of they had continued using the skills taught, with rates ranging from 56 to 83% depending on the workshop. There was little difference in perceived retention between the CS and OW groups. The skills most frequently identified as having been learned included the abilities to "form better search strategies" and "find better Internet resources." Written feedback included remarks on reducing class size and length, and increasing practice time and the number of handouts.

Conclusion – A "delayed perception survey" revealed positive feedback from library workshop participants on questions about confidence, usefulness, and retention of skills learned. There was a significant difference in confidence levels reported between CS and OW groups, with OW participants reporting higher levels of confidence. The researchers surmise this might be a result of self-selection, as OW participants volunteered both to attend the library instruction workshops and to respond to the survey questionnaire. The short questionnaire is an efficient tool for assessing the perceived usefulness of library workshops for both course-integrated sessions and elective workshops.

Commentary

This study attempts to assess the quality of a university library's instruction program in a given semester. Assessment on such a large scale is a difficult undertaking, especially considering the lack of validated standardised assessment tools available to librarians. The authors selected a reasonable method, the perception survey, to conduct their assessment. Their questionnaire is also made available in the publication, thus enabling others to adapt it for their own use. While this study makes a contribution to assessment studies of library instruction programs at institutions of higher education, it falls short in several areas.

The convenience sample was not randomised, making it difficult to assume representativeness. In addition, there is no indication that the results of the survey are normally distributed, and that the 2 groups exhibit homogeneity of variance – requirements for parametric testing such as the t-test employed. It is therefore questionable as to whether the results have any statistical significance. Also typical of many assessment studies is the absence of a control group or testing prior to the intervention. This also makes the results less conclusive. The article omits an explanation as to how class size was determined, placing into question any conclusions on the impact of class size on retention. It is also important to keep in mind the survey did not assess actual learning, but the perception of such learning. While the authors state that the survey assessed the "enduring impact" of the instruction program, further assessment is required to conclude that any long-term learning has taken place beyond the four to eight week period.

Assessment initiatives are rampant in LIS, particularly for information literacy programs at the university level. Librarians are asked to justify resources spent on such programs to administrators, who in turn use the quantitative data as a means of comparison with other teaching and for decision making. It is understandable that universities wish to make comparisons across the institution using standardised measures, such as the 7-point Likert scale for evaluating instructors used in this study. The end, however, does not necessarily justify the means. Students and other workshop participants should not be forced to switch from 4-point to 7-point Likert scales in order to accommodate bureaucratic requirements. To assess library instruction at the programmatic level, a more complex design is required, one that ideally involves qualitative methods and multiple data sources. In addition to workshop participants, course instructors and librarians should also be interviewed individually or in groups to provide richer data. The authors of this study attempted to include some qualitative data by leaving space for comments on the survey, and as a result received some very useful feedback. A follow-up study delving further into these comments would be very welcome in a literature already overflowing with numbers.