

Information Literacy Course – The Perception of Students and Professors: University of Zadar Case

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Abstract. Since the academic year 2011/12 University of Zadar's Department of Information Sciences and the University library have jointly organized an elective course - Information Literacy. The purpose of this research was to examine students' and professors' opinions concerning the information literacy competencies represented in the Information Literacy course curriculum, and the possibility of future collaboration between professors and librarians to help students gain information literacy competencies in the context of subject courses. Students and professors from different departments participated in the surveys and interviews. The results show that both the professors and the students are aware of the students' insufficient competencies and that the professors consider these competencies to be important. The students believe that the Information Literacy course could help them with their coursework. The professors are willing to collaborate with librarians in order to improve their own courses. It can be concluded that the Information Literacy course itself is insufficient - but can be a significant first step in developing cooperative programs of information literacy education.

Keywords: Information literacy, information literacy course, academic libraries, University of Zadar

1 Introduction

Information literacy is most often defined as a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed, have the ability to access the information sources, search and locate the needed information and to evaluate and use it ethically. [1]. Information literacy assumes different levels of thinking skills which are associated with various learning outcomes. In recent interpretations of the information literacy concept the need for developing higher-order thinking skills is emphasized. It requires a cooperative learning environment [2]. Such skills are negotiation, comprising, comparing, analyses and synthesis, all of which creates new knowledge.

Many academic libraries have taken an active part in development of information literacy competencies as is demonstrated through examples of good practice in libraries that educate through individual instructional work, workshops and formal university curriculum [3]. In terms of organization, incorporating information literacy into the curriculum can be done in several basic ways, one of which is a standalone course. Such course is offered as an elective where librarians participate in the teaching. The described form of education can be helpful to students in mastering necessary generic information literacy skills needed in the higher education environment. However the downside of this kind of information literacy education is that students learn and practice the information literacy skills outside of their specific disciplinary context. Numerous authors point out the necessity of teaching information literacy skills within disciplinary contexts, because it facilitates comprehension and gives deeper meaning to the contents [4], [5], [6]. Hence, contextualization of information literacy skills is important and it can be achieved through collaboration between librarians and professors, as the professors contextualize these skills in their classes through appropriate teaching strategies [7].

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The Croatian university system underwent certain changes due to the Bologna process which promotes new methods of learning where students have more independent and responsible roles. Croatian university students' technical skills of information searching are insufficient, and intensive participation in the search process with the engagement of higher order thinking skills is necessary. At the same time university libraries around the world tend to participate in developing virtual university frameworks which require information literacy education [8].

2 Information Literacy Course at the University of Zadar

Until the academic year 2011/2012 information literacy education at the University of Zadar had been taught in the framework of librarians' individual work with students and through research methodology courses taught by the professors of various departments. There was a need to enable students to acquire the skills that will systematically help them with mastering the university curriculum. Since the academic year 2011/2012 the professors from the Department of Information Sciences and the librarians from the University library have jointly taught an Information Literacy (IL) elective course. The course is based on the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards [1] and is structured as a set of practical exercises in 14 teaching units taught in the course of one semester. The subjects range from library literacy (getting familiar with and using library services and resources) to information literacy. The course is an elective course for graduate and undergraduate students of all majors (excluding the Information Sciences majors). This course was originally intended for first year students only, however, due to the decision of the University Senate, whose members thought information literacy was important and that student competencies were insufficient, students of all levels are invited to take this course. Because the course is designed for students from various departments it remains on a general level - it teaches generic skills and does not encroach on individual study areas.

The importance of the IL course introduction is twofold: one is to improve students' competencies for learning to learn, and the other is to increase the visibility of the University library whose educational role is carried out through participation in the University curricula. It is the visibility of the University library's educational role in the information literacy area that is necessary so that the professors become aware of the potential of collaboration with the librarians, and to include information literacy education in their teaching context. Such research and experiences have been present in the world for years, but in Croatia the role of academic librarians in the educational process is rarely recognized, and their role is mostly perceived within the traditional model - the librarian who acquires materials, builds the collection, organizes information sources and enables access.

Since the academic year 2011/2012, two generations totaling 53 students participated in the IL elective course. Student interest in the course was even higher but space in computer labs was a limiting factor.

3 Methodology of the Research

This study had two basic objectives. The first objective was to explore what students expected from the class and to have them self evaluate their own information literacy competencies covered in the IL course, and also to have the professors evaluate students' competencies and assess their importance. The second objective was to find out what are the professors' attitudes toward the collaboration with librarians regarding the information literacy education in their teaching context. The results of this study have a dual purpose: 1) to be used for further development of the IL elective course which should take into account the professors' perceptions of the students' information literacy needs as well as the students' own perceptions on the subject; 2) to be used for the development of other, more advanced, forms of information literacy education directed toward collaborative work of professors and librarians, in other words, toward information literacy within disciplinary context.

Research questions: 1) What do students expect from the Information Literacy course?; 2) How do students evaluate their own information literacy competencies?; 3) How do professors evaluate students' information literacy competencies and how important are these competencies for the courses they teach?; 4) How do professors perceive the elective IL course?; 5) How much and why are the professors willing to collaborate with librarians in teaching their courses?

Methods used were surveys for students and professors, and an interview for a number of professors. Students from two generations of course attendees (53 students) from the departments of social sciences and humanities, along with 20 professors from some of these departments, participated in the research. To gain further insight into the attitudes of the professors 10 out of the 20 participating professors were selected for a semi-structured interview. We interviewed the professors who are presumed to be more experienced in teaching and in curriculum development. A questionnaire was given to two generations of students during the

introductory lecture (March 2012, and March 2013). For the purposes of this study we only presented the data relevant for the research questions. The survey for the professors was conducted in spring semester of the academic year 2012/13. In a Likert scale type questionnaire they were expected to evaluate the students' information literacy competencies in the areas covered by the IL course curriculum. The professors also evaluated how relevant are these competencies for the courses they teach. The student and the professor questionnaires covered the same competencies (matched items) for comparability between the two questionnaires. The semi-structured interview that was conducted with a number of the professors (10) gave insight into their attitudes toward information literacy and their stances on the potential collaboration with the librarians in order for students to acquire the information literacy competencies within the disciplinary context.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Students' Expectations from the Information Literacy Course

The majority of the students enrolled in the IL course expect it to help them with coursework in their other courses – i.e. to write term papers and theses (74%), to learn how to use information resources and to be more independent while studying (68%). Students enrolled in the IL course because they felt the need to acquire knowledge and skills in researching literature, databases and the web. The results indicate that the students are aware of the need for such a course and its potential. It is possible that in the course of their past studies they encountered the situations where it would have been useful to have such skills.

4.2 Students' Information Literacy Competencies – Student and Professors Perceptions

The professors assess information literacy competencies (information searching skills, evaluation and ethical use of information) relevant to their courses (see Table 1). These assessments of importance are statistically significantly higher in comparison to student self-evaluation of their information literacy competencies. Thus, the professors expect much more than what the students believe they know. The most significant difference between the professors' perceptions of competence and the student self-assessment is evident in the category of "evaluating the validity and relevance of information sources." The professors assess these competencies as highly important (4,55), while the students answer that they have moderately high competences (3,30). Furthermore, the students believe they use the information ethically and are able to structure their term papers, while the professors score their competencies much lower. These findings are going to be used for further development of the IL elective course – those topics that showed a big difference in the perceptions of professors and students and indicate students' uncertainty should be intensified. In the survey questionnaire the professors scored the importance of searching the databases relatively low as compared to other competencies – as a moderately important skill (3,55) (see Table 1). We can assume that this is so because it was an estimate of their existing courses, many of which do not include that specific segment. However, the interviews show that professors want database searching skills to be included in their courses in the future and are willing to collaborate with the librarians in the teaching process.

In the interview, the professors (P), while explaining which student information literacy competencies they consider to be insufficient, list poor information reading skills (P1 & P3), scientific illiteracy (P4) and lack of independence in learning (P3, P4 & P5) most often blame these insufficiencies on the fact that these competencies are not acquired in earlier stages of education (P1, P3, P4 & P5).

Table 1. Assessment of student competencies and the importance of particular competencies

Competencies	Students' self assessment of competencies	Professors' assessment of student competencies	Professors' assessment of competence importance
Using online databases	2.48	2.45	3.55
Formulating search queries	3.45	2.85	4.45
Finding the relevant information	3.51	3.05	4.60
Evaluating information sources	3.30	2.84	4.55
Structuring the term papers	4.19	3.58	4.50
Using information ethically	4.21	2.75	4.50

*Results are expressed on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 - *strongly disagree*, 5 - *strongly agree*)

Some professors associate information literacy solely with methodology courses within the principal departments. So, for example, professor P4 states: *“We teach them information literacy in the first year methodology courses, but once they pass those exams they forget it all (P4)”*. Professor P2 states that *“there is no time for information literacy because students have too little time for classes in their principal areas and they have to read their basic literature.”* This attitude clearly shows the lack of understanding of information literacy, which is seen as additional burden on students and as a set of skills that is separate from learning and study of a specific subject.

Although professors do not understand the essence of information literacy, most of them are aware of the importance of particular information literacy competencies (see Table 1) for the courses they teach. However, some admit not using the strategies that promote development of these competencies although they expect from students to have them, e.g. *“for my courses it is not important to know how to search (for information) because I give them the readings I selected as valuable although I am aware that maybe it is not the best way. For their final thesis it is important that they know how to do their research independently”* (P3). This clearly indicates that even when the professors are aware that the strategies they apply are not good, they are not aware that the students will not be able to develop the competencies without the appropriate teaching strategies. It is similar to the professor’s P6 statement who is not aware that information literacy competencies will not get developed on their own. – *“Perhaps these are the competencies that cannot be expected before the graduate level”* (P6). Professors look for reasons students lack competencies in some external circumstances – too many students (P4 & P7), time constraints in the teaching schedule (P1, P2, P4 & P7) – all of which actually show that they do not understand that the acquired information literacy competencies can facilitate learning and teaching, not hinder them.

4.3 Professors and Librarian Collaboration

The majority of interviewed professors (8 out of 10) said that before being interviewed they were not aware of the Information Literacy course or of the possibility of collaboration with the librarians which could contribute to teaching information literacy skills in their subjects' context. At the same time almost all of them expressed interest in collaboration with the librarians. Up to that point they had not perceived the University library as a partner in education and some perceived it merely as having a “storage” function – *“I see University Library as a place that has information resources...educational services are not visible”* (P3). This illustrates how important the IL course is for the affirmation of the University library. Some professors become aware of the library’s educational role only through the IL course. Without such awareness of the educational role of librarians, the upgraded models of information literacy education based on professor and librarian collaboration are not possible.

While assessing information literacy competencies (see Table 1) most of the professors stated that they find information literacy competencies useful, and that they will continue to recommend the IL course to their students, especially to the first year students. Also, two professors stated that they have already recommended the IL course to their students (P8 & P9). As a possible form of collaboration they identified focused in-class workshops with librarians presenting topics such as searching databases. The professors themselves admit to having insufficient information literacy competencies for searching and using databases (P3, P6, P8 & P10) and that they need the librarian’s help primarily for that reason, i.e. *“I learned to do it all myself and I did not know that our library offers such service, that someone can help me with that.”* (P3) Some are of the opinion that information literacy content should be incorporated in methodology courses– *“I think that the collaboration with the librarians is needed, especially within the course Research Methods. I think five hours could be devoted to teaching information searching and other information literacy skills, customized especially for the students of Ethnology because every disciplinary area has its own peculiarities”* (P10). Only one professor pointed out the need to integrate generic information literacy skills into the subject context - *„It is important for us to know what you cover with them in the Information Literacy course so that we can build on to it”* (P5). The research findings indicate that a standalone elective course in information literacy can be a significant first step toward better cooperation between librarians and professors.

5 Conclusions

Information literacy is tied to *learning to learn* competencies; thus it is one of the important subjects that should be included in the university curriculum, because academic level studies should train the students in various disciplinary areas, and also prepare them for lifelong learning.

The results of the research conducted at the University of Zadar show that students are aware of their information needs and that they expect that the elective course in Information Literacy will help them develop

the skills they identify as important. The results of this research indicate the need for more intensive teaching in online database searching, evaluating of information sources, formulating search queries and using information ethically.

Both the professors and the students are aware of the students' insufficient competencies of information literacy. The professors considered these competencies to be important for successful learning and relevant to their courses, but they did not expect librarians to be included in the teaching process. Before being interviewed, most of the professors were not aware of the IL course or the University library's educational role, and thus were not aware of the possibility of collaboration and partnership with the librarians in creating the students' learning environment. The results of the interviews have shown that only after getting familiar with the IL course curriculum did the professors become aware of the help they could get from the librarians, and that librarians could enrich their course curricula and teaching process. Therefore, this research has shown that the IL course is needed, not only because of the direct benefits for students, but also because it sets the stage for development of advanced models of IL education which are based on professor and librarian collaboration.

Future research should focus on comparison of survey results conducted before and after taking the course. This will provide insight into students' perception of their own progress and will help estimate the efficiency of applied strategies and IL course's improvement. At the same time these findings can be a basis for a dialog between the professors and the librarians about the most effective strategies for teaching information literacy on generic level and/or in the subject context.

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