



Evidence Summary

Too Few Articles in the Journal Literature on Instruction in Academic Libraries are Research-Based

A review of:

Crawford, Gregory A., and Jessica Feldt. "An Analysis of the Literature on Instruction in Academic Libraries." Reference & User Services Quarterly 46.3 (Spr. 2007): 77-87.

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Abstract

Objective – To discover which journals publish a preponderance of the literature on instruction in academic libraries, and to further learn what topics are discussed in the literature and what methods of inquiry are used to explore those topics.

Design – Comparative analysis.

Setting – The *ERIC* database.

Subjects – Journal articles published between 1971 and 2002, found in the *ERIC* database via the descriptor 'library instruction.'

Methods – Journal articles published between 1971 and 2002 were searched in the *ERIC* database using the term 'library instruction,' because the term has been used by *ERIC* since the inception of the database. Article characteristics such as year of publication, journal in which a given article was published, and types of articles were identified. After normalizing the identification of article types by comparing individual codifications of a random sample of articles from the results list, the researchers coded all of the articles according to the articles' main topics. These article topics were then condensed into broader topics (e.g. articles coded initially as

addressing the topics of instruction to “graduate students” or “high school students” were condensed under the heading “instruction of specific populations”). Those articles deemed to have a research component were further analyzed in terms of research methodology, scope, and use of statistics. The questions guiding the authors' study consisted of:

- In which journals are articles on instruction in academic libraries published?
- What are the topics of the articles that have been published?
- How has the literature of instruction in academic libraries changed over the years?
- What is the nature of *research* [authors' emphasis] articles on instruction in academic libraries?
- For research articles, what are the research methods used and what types of statistics are utilized? (77-78).

Main results – The search found 791 articles appearing in 90 journals. However, only six journals were responsible for publishing 60% of the articles on the results list. Based on the categorization into topics or types, five article types – “general essays,” articles on “instruction for searching online catalogs and databases,” “articles on course- or assignment-related instruction,” “programmatic and management issues,” and “specific institution instruction” – accounted for 54% of the total articles; eleven other topics are represented in the remaining articles. Only 24.5% of the articles could be considered “research-based.” While nine types of research methods were used, 62.3% of the research-based articles relied on surveys or questionnaires. However, taking into account what could be an expected decline in interest for studying instruction for microforms, and an increased interest in studying instruction for the Internet, the types of articles published each

year between 1971 and 2002 remained generally static.

Conclusion – The authors conclude that, unsurprisingly, a select few journals are responsible for publishing the majority of articles on instruction in academic libraries, and note that these journals are “closely associated with academic librarianship and instruction” (85). The authors' findings concerning the types of articles published over the course of the date range examined, although interesting, are equally unsurprising. What is surprising and alarming, is that only a quarter of all articles published are research-based. Furthermore, those articles that were found to be research-based did not often employ sophisticated research methods, preferring for example, the use of descriptive statistics over inferential statistics. Ideally, this article will spur the development and publication of more, and more rigorous, research-based scholarship in addition to pointing authors both to the journals most likely to publish their research and to the topics that have been historically (since 1971) underrepresented in the literature.

Commentary

The authors look at a sample of articles covering various topics in instruction in academic libraries. They do well to lay out the parameters of their study: that their sample was arrived at solely by searching the *ERIC* database, that their search was performed using only the descriptor “library instruction,” and that the search was limited to articles published between 1971 and 2002. Readers may remain curious as to how and by whom the descriptor was generated in the first place, and assigned to articles in the second, just as they may question whether *ERIC* was the right choice in database, but neither an explanation in the case of the former questions, nor a comparison with other databases in the case of the latter is

provided. However, the authors satisfactorily explain the reason for limiting their search in the fashion they did, and also admit the imprecision inherent in any analysis of article subjects. In fact, the methodology of the study is admirably laid out, and given the constraints of the search, the resulting article provides a good analysis of what types of scholarship have been done in the realm of library instruction, and therefore will prove interesting to most librarians, educators, and scholars engaged in that arena.

In addition to the major findings of the study, many tidbits of information are provided, such as the fact that only three articles on instruction for audiovisual materials, multimedia, or microforms have been published since 1994; or that articles concerning Internet instruction began being published in 1993 and peaked in 1996. It is the major findings though that will prove the most useful to students, scholars, and

practitioners of library instruction. These findings effectively point authors to the journals most likely to publish articles on a given topic; illustrate which topics are the most popular, therefore indicating trends on the one hand and areas that may need further exploration on the other; and provide what amounts to a wish list on the part of the authors for the types of research they feel the field needs in order to grow. This last element, concerning research or the lack thereof in the scholarship on instruction in academic libraries, is really the thrust of the article. The authors assert that data has been collected regarding issues in library instruction but that it goes unused. In order for library instruction to continue to contribute to the larger missions of education and information literacy, scholars must do a better job of more rigorously researching their ideas and supporting their conclusions with properly applied statistical evidence.