

# I SAW THE LIGHT: USING A SURVEY OF FRESHMEN ENGLISH FACULTY TO “ILLUMINATE” THE WAY TO A BETTER INFORMATION LITERACY COURSE

STEPHEN A. SANDERS AND MARY LOU STRONG

## SCHOOL AND COURSE BACKGROUND

Library Science 102 (LS 102) is a one-credit hour freshmen-level information literacy (IL) course. It is taught by the reference librarians at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, a public college with over 15,000 FTE students. LS 102 is required in about half the majors, therefore approximately 1,400 students per year register for the course. It is delivered through traditional in-person and internet formats.

## INTRODUCTION

Who’s missing from your ongoing assessment program? At Southeastern, we were already doing a lot: we peruse our “Student Evaluation of Teaching” forms, so that student feedback is taken into account; by means of a colloquy held at the close of every semester, we pore over the latest publications in order to consider their findings, so the experts are consulted; we administer a common final examination and regularly review trends in student performance. Even so, we always had the uneasy suspicion we were forgetting someone. Then one day in a flash of insight we realized it was fellow-faculty. After all, our program is ostensibly designed to help students with their work from other courses. What needs do instructors in other departments see that we might overlook?

We began by reviewing the literature to see if something similar had been done. The most helpful article we found was a study conducted by Sophie Bury at York University (2011). We contacted her and received her gracious permission to adapt the survey.

Needing to focus our research, and because they teach a similar demographic, we decided that Freshmen English Faculty could potentially offer us a unique perspective on our

students’ IL abilities. (Southeastern requires two semesters of Freshmen English, so these teachers are well-positioned to observe these skills.) Knowing that it is absolutely imperative to get “buy in” from the department to be surveyed, we began by meeting with the Head of Freshmen English, Dr. Natasha Whitton. She, in turn, invited us to attend the all-important initial faculty meeting so we could explain our goals, request their help, and describe how it could assist them in their ongoing work with the same target audience. Additionally, as our plans moved ahead we communicated regularly with Dr. Whitton and kept her apprised of dates, deadlines, and goals.

The survey, designed to take approximately 15 minutes, was comprised of 21 questions. While the participants were anonymous, we started by asking background questions such as faculty status, years at Southeastern, and previous courses taught. However, the heart of the survey focused on their: perceptions of the relative importance of various IL skills; estimations of student IL skills by means of Likert-like scales; and judgments concerning the types of information resources they want their students to consult.

We utilized the online tool SurveyMonkey to host our evaluation. In order to reinforce the idea that the survey had the full support of the English Department, both the request for participation and the survey link were sent by Dr. Whitton, rather than from us. This had the additional benefit of allowing our email to stand out from the multitude of campus messages that inundate instructors daily. The result was an astounding 73% return rate.

After reviewing the results of the survey, we decided to conduct a focus group with a smaller group of Freshmen English faculty volunteers in order to both clarify and explore some of their responses *and* provide more opportunities for

discussion and reflection. With the assistance of our campus “Center for Faculty Excellence” we were able to record the session. Our group turned out to be small (four faculty members), in part because of inclement weather. Nevertheless, we received rich data and illuminating insights into the needs of our students.

Our partnership continues as we’ve been invited to present an overview of our findings at their final department meeting in May. We expect this collaboration to continue growing and flourishing, perhaps leading to joint presentations and experimentation in cross-registration of students into English 102 and Library Science 102.

## THE SURVEY/FOCUS GROUP

Our first question asked: Do you think your students make sufficient use of Sims Library resources in preparing coursework for you? At first glimpse, the results seem to indicate that 42% answered this question negatively, and 30% affirmatively. However, when given the opportunity to expand on their answers, we got an image of faculty members attempting to breach the tide of students who first hunt for information through search engines. One instructor put the problem very succinctly: “Yes, when I force them to—otherwise, most will use the internet.” Thus a closer look at this opening question draws a picture of faculty who are very much our allies in teaching students to expand their IL skills by incorporating library resources into their work.

The next set of questions asked the participants to rank eight IL skills, placing them in order of importance. We were then able to derive an average ranking for each skill (See Appendix 1). When asked this kind of question in other contexts, instructors have struggled to prioritize these competencies and rated each skill as equally essential. Because of the wording of this question, however, they were “forced” to provide a ranking.

One of the more surprising results came with the number one ranking of “focusing a research topic effectively.” The instructors drew a vivid yet disheartening picture of students diving into “research” before they have a broad understanding of their topics, including appropriate search terms. Because of this poor beginning, the students go on to struggle with incorporating sources into their own studies while simultaneously finding and/or maintaining their own “voice.” Although they ranked this skill first, in the focus group we learned that they saw the development of this skill as falling more within the purview of the English Department, with appropriate support from the LS 102 faculty.

Their number two priority (able to identify appropriate search tools) also demonstrated the importance of a focus group follow-up. Because of the caveat mentioned above, the focus group participants thought this response probably should be ranked first for LS 102 faculty.

The third-ranked skill was for students to understand how to critically evaluate sources. We also learned more about

the critical thinking response through the focus group. When questioned about their thoughts on high school preparation on source evaluation and critical thinking, the faculty noted that seniors are no longer required to write an essay using research sources, but rather do a literature analysis and reflection paper. This means they arrive at Southeastern with even fewer critical thinking skills than we assumed. This also indicates that we, in turn, will need to place even more emphasis in this direction.

The fourth ranked skill concerning citing information was also clarified by a discussion in the focus group. For the most part, they don’t expect LS 102 to teach the rules of citation; rather, they want us to teach that a citation manual is a means used to help readers track down a writer’s sources. They also want us to stress that different disciplines use various style manuals.

When asked to rate their students on specific information literacy skills on a Likert-like Scale, with 1 equal to “poor” and 5 equal to “excellent,” the results were unmistakably obvious. Using the skills rated either “poor” or “fair,” the bottom-most answers, we figured a simple percentage and ranking (See Appendix 2). The skills ranked poorest were the ability to: critically evaluate information sources; formulate effective search strategies; distinguish popular and scholarly sources; and identify appropriate search tools to find needed information.

While by and large confirming the findings discussed above, the focus group discussion expanded on a factor we have long suspected. Namely, because of the demise of a “paper-based” background and the loss of visual cues obtained thereby, today’s students struggle to differentiate the origination and quality of the information they find through a computer-based search. These faculty members need our assistance in the quest to point (especially Freshmen-level) students toward reliable information. Additionally, the exponential growth in information makes an effective search strategy even more critical.

Another interesting conversation developed around the findings summarized in Appendix 3, which deal with the information resources English faculty want students to consult. In addition to the usual suspects (library catalog, subscription databases, and reserve readings), we noted a surprisingly large 42.4% wanted their students to consult statistics and data for their English assignments. It seems that the Freshmen English instructors are dealing with a recent-emerging characteristic of the current generation of college students. Specifically, in opinion pieces these students will make wide-ranging claims, but not feel the need to back up their positions with facts and figures.

## CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration the Freshmen English faculty’s answers, written notes, and the focus group comments, we inferred the following overall conclusions. First and foremost, these instructors want their students to possess the

ability to differentiate the free Internet from scholarly, proprietary databases. In other words, the students need to see the value of the latter when it comes to finding sources for their papers. Second, these teachers reported that their students need skills in utilizing these databases, especially when it comes to formulating a search strategy and narrowing a topic. Third, they expressed the need for undergraduates to critically evaluate both the origin *of* and the information found *in* various sources. Fourth, the students should be more capable of backing up their claims with appropriate statistics and data.

To anyone considering a similar study, we encourage the additional step of having a focus group follow-up meeting. We learned some very powerful truths that made this extra activity very much worth the trouble. For example, this is where we had a chance to examine the pre-understandings we as librarians bring to IL instruction.

An illustration of the above was seen when an English faculty member shared the fact that “critical thinking” is difficult for today’s students because they feel they have no “voice.” She argued that standardized testing in high school often constricts the students’ creativity, largely silencing their perspectives. As a result, their first question is, “What’s *the* answer?” not, “What do *I* think?” Yet in a fascinating split, a different instructor voiced the opposite conclusion, noting Millennials tend to believe “my opinion is as good as anyone’s” and hence need help appreciating the necessity of backing up their comments with facts and figures. In the memorable phrase of a participant, the typical student in this group needs to learn to look back and see if there’s “anyone behind me” sharing a particular position or viewpoint. We think the polarity depicted above needs to go into our planning for all phases of IL teaching.

For researchers who might want to use some of our ideas, we would bring to your attention one strength and one change we would make in the future. Our assessment, because of the way we asked our first set of questions (Appendix 1), *obligated* the faculty to rank IL competencies. This, in turn, allows us to see if our emphases match those of instructors in other departments. The change we plan to make concerns a clarification of the question ranking the importance of IL skills to avoid the confusion expressed by focus group participants. We want to make certain faculty understand the ranking has to do with LS 102 and not their own courses.

Two additional notes concern critical thinking skills and popular/scholarly sources. Concerning critical thinking skills, we sadly cannot assume that our students have received even the most rudimentary training in this area of their high school education. Further, when it comes to discerning the quality of information, the computer screen “flattens” information and makes a book chapter, web site, and scholarly or popular article *look* the same, making it necessary to rethink our means of teaching this. In other words, the visual clues that were present in a paper-based culture are now missing, but we tend to teach critical thinking in the same way.

So much of what we do is designed in a relative vacuum. Unless our BI sessions or IL courses are embedded in another class, we do not have a chance to view first-hand the applied IL competencies of our students. Making faculty insights a component of assessment helps to correct this deficiency and assists us as we chart long-term changes. In order to explore whether the insights provided by English Faculty hold true for the information needs of students in other courses of study, we plan to expand our analysis and administer the survey to faculty in the science and social science disciplines.

This summer, as we evaluate the components of our course, we will look continue to look at student evaluations. Additionally, we’ll persist in examining the latest ideas in IL theory and research. However, and unlike in the past, we’ll also take into account and benefit from the insights and suggestions of fellow faculty.

---

## REFERENCES

- Bury, S. (2011). Faculty attitudes, perceptions and experiences of information literacy: A study across multiple disciplines at York University, Canada. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 5(1), 45-64.

## APPENDIX 1

5. To what extent is it important that your students possess the following information literacy competencies? Please rank the items in order of their importance, with **1 being the most important competency** and **8 representing the least important**.

Competency	Rank	Avg	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Capable of focusing a research topic effectively	1	2.73	45.5% (15)	9.1% (3)	12.1% (4)	9.1% (3)	12.1% (4)	9.1% (3)	3% (1)	0% (0)
Able to identify appropriate search tools (e.g. databases, online catalog) to find needed information	2	3.82	15.2% (5)	9.1% (3)	24.2% (8)	24.2% (8)	6.1% (2)	6.1% (2)	9.1% (3)	6.1% (2)
Understand how to critically evaluate information sources.	3	4.0	15.2% (5)	9.1% (3)	15.2% (5)	18.2% (6)	12.1% (4)	27.3% (9)	0.0% (0)	3.0% (1)
Capable of citing information sources correctly	4	4.18	6.1% (2)	21.2% (7)	15.2% (5)	15.2% (5)	18.2% (6)	9.1% (3)	3.0% (1)	12.1% (4)
Capable of formulating effective search strategies when looking for needed information (e.g., keyword selection, use of truncation and Boolean operators, etc.)	5	4.85	0.0% (0)	18.2% (6)	15.2% (5)	12.1% (4)	18.2% (6)	6.1% (2)	15.2% (5)	15.2% (5)
Understand issues relating to academic integrity	5	4.85	12.1% (4)	12.1% (4)	6.1% (2)	9.1% (3)	15.2% (5)	15.2% (5)	15.2% (5)	15.2% (5)
Understand the differences between scholarly & popular information sources	7	4.91	6.1% (2)	21.2% (7)	6.1% (2)	6.1% (2)	9.1% (3)	18.2% (6)	21.2% (7)	12.1% (4)
Able to distinguish between primary and secondary sources of information	8	6.67	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	6.1% (2)	6.1% (2)	9.1% (3)	9.1% (3)	33.3% (11)	36.4% (12)

## APPENDIX 2

### Survey Question:

The next 8 questions give you the opportunity to rate your students on specific information literacy skills on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Poor, and 5 = Excellent.

**Results:** The following skills were rated “Poor” or “Fair” by respondents.

Rank	Percentage of Respondents Rating Skill of Students “Poor” or “Fair”	Information Literacy Skill
1	72.8%	Ability to critically evaluate information sources.
2	69.7%	Ability to formulate effective search strategies to find needed information, (e.g. keyword selection, use of truncation and Boolean operators, etc.).
2	69.7%	Ability to distinguish scholarly and popular information sources.
4	57.6%	Ability to identify appropriate search tools (e.g., databases, online research tools) to find needed information.
5	51.5%	Ability to distinguish between primary and secondary sources of information.
5	51.5%	Ability to cite information sources
7	42.4%	Ability to focus a research topic effectively.
8	39.4%	Understanding of issues relating to academic integrity.

### APPENDIX 3

19. Which of the following information resources, if any, do you want your students to use/consult for assignments in your classes? Please choose all that apply.

Information Resource	Response %	Response #
Library subscription databases (e.g., JSTOR, MLA, Academic Search Complete) for articles	97.0%	32
Library catalog to find books (print or electronic)	90.9%	30
Reserve Desk at Sims Library for readings placed on reserve	45.5%	15
Statistics and data	42.4%	14
Films or videos	39.4%	13
Specific resources on a freely available website you have recommended	33.3%	11
Freely available web resources located using a browser such as Google/Bing.	30.3%	10
Government information	18.2%	6
Sound recordings	18.2%	6
Specific library materials you have asked students to consult (not on reserve.)	15.2%	5
Archival sources	15.2%	5
Legislation or legal publications	15.2%	5
Scientific and technical reports	15.2%	5
Dissertations and theses	9.1%	3
Conference proceedings	6.1%	2
Maps or atlases	0%	0
No outside sources are required for assignments	0%	0