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What Are Students Saying About Their Reference Needs?

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ABSTRACT

Libraries and publishers rely on transactional data to support evidence-based decision-making. However, by itself quantitative information does not provide a full picture. To anticipate the evolving needs of our audience we also need to hear from the individual users themselves. In this article, I will review the findings from several recent examples of survey-based research into the question of how students use reference materials in and outside of their libraries. What are students actually saying about their needs and preferences when it comes to reference? While some uses cases for reference are moving out of the library into the open Web, not all have. What we hear students say is that they continue to have an unmet need for long-form, contextual guidance. They say they have trouble locating this content, but that the library is the first place they look for it. This is a risk because if students cannot find in-depth summary content in their library, they will migrate to the open Web where they lose the benefits of librarian intermediation as both a curator of sources and as a guide via instruction.

Libraries and publishers rely on transactional data to support evidence-based decision-making. In my own area, as the scholarly reference publisher at Oxford University Press, I closely monitor visits and view on OUP's reference websites in order to understand, for instance, the size of our audience, how those users discover the content, what they do with the content once they are on the website, and what topics generate the most interest. This sort of transactional data is essential. However, by itself quantitative information does not provide a full picture. To anticipate the evolving needs of our audience we also need to hear from the individual users themselves. What are they saying about their research habits and their unmet needs?

For this paper I will review the findings from several recent examples of survey-based research into the question of how students use reference materials in and outside of their libraries. What are students actually saying about their needs and preferences when it comes to reference?

I would like to start with a one-question survey put out by Cengage in 2015. They asked, "What do you do when you're at your college library?" Nearly 3,000 undergraduates responded. The top five responses are shown in Figure 1.

Just shy of 40% of the respondents say that "use of reference materials" is what they do at their library. It is the third most common response. I know what you are thinking. You're incredulous. You want to know more about the research methodology, about the sample set of students, and so on. Indeed, when the results were published on the Cengage blog a librarian wrote in to say, "Our reference collection

Figure 1. Top five reasons students use their college library.

has shrunk nearly away to nothing because it wasn't being used . . . so 39% seems super high." What could be happening here?

I want to come back to this example later in the paper. My theory is that the students in this survey have provided accurate meaningful feedback, and that it is also true that a large portion of the reference collection at most libraries does not get used.

Oxford University Press has done its own research into the question of how undergraduate students use and perceive of reference resources. We do this research as a matter of course given the scale of our reference program, but in more recent years we have begun sharing the results of this research in white papers.

Our first white paper, *Navigating Research: How Academic Users Understand, Discover, and Utilize Reference Resources*, was published in 2017 (Oxford University Press). We focused on a mix of students, faculty, and librarians. First, we found that there

is a substantial degree of confusion around the term “reference,” especially among students. The category—which includes atlases, A&I services, encyclopedias, databases, indexes, dictionaries, and much more—is so broad as to be nearly meaningless. However, when students were questioned in detail about their research needs, they clearly described wanting information that provides a summary of complex topics, wanting contextual guidance. Without giving the content a name, what they seem to be requesting is a scholarly encyclopedia article.

We followed up on the initial findings with a second white paper entitled *Paths to Reference: How Today's Students Find and Use Reference Resources* (Oxford University Press, 2018), which centered on a survey of over 1,000 undergraduate and master's students from five countries. I will focus on the U.K. and North American respondents for this paper because most librarians at the Charleston Conference are based in these regions, but OUP's research also included students from India, South Africa, and Australia. To get around the confusion with terminology, for this survey we focused on standard reference research journeys and research needs rather than traditional terms like *encyclopedia article* or *dictionary definition*. Instead, we asked, open-endedly, what resources the student would use if they needed, for example, brief factual information, and then the OUP research team took the reported examples and categorized them as *freely available* or *library acquired*.

The overwhelming majority, 95% of students, said they relied on library-acquired materials when they were trying to understand the lay of the land with an unfamiliar topic (Figure 2). Their responses differed significantly, however, depending on the specific research need. We found that the vast majority of students go to the open Web, bypassing their library altogether, when they are checking a fact. However,

Figure 2. Paths to reference: How today's students find and use reference resources.

when they need more in-depth contextual guidance they would look in their library.

These findings are echoed in research conducted by Neil Selwyn and Stephen Gorard (2016) into the question of how undergraduates use Wikipedia. Their work draws on a survey of 1,658 undergraduate students. Selwyn and Gorard find that 88% of students in their study use Wikipedia for their research. There is no surprise in that finding except perhaps that it is not 100%. Wikipedia is an embedded feature of most students' study habits.

The authors also found that Wikipedia plays a very specific role in research, used to clarify new topics and for checking basic facts. One of the students quoted in the paper says, “If I don't understand a word that's in a [law] case or something that the lecturer used, I will just type in Google and it'll give me a definition on Wikipedia.” While nearly all students report using Wikipedia, only 24% of the respondents rate it as “very useful.” Of possible interest to readers, Selwyn and Gorard also found that 98% of students reported using their library website while 40% classified it as “very useful.” Similarly, 99% of students said they used a search engine to find information as part of their university studies and 68% said it was “very useful.”

In addition to making distinctions between types of reference content, we need to make distinctions among the student researchers themselves. Carol Perruso (2016), a librarian at California State University, Long Beach, has produced a fascinating longitudinal study of 386 undergraduates over their four years at college, which offers a window into how research habits change over the course of a student's college career.

The study confirms that all students use Google as a starting point for research. This is expected. What's unexpected is the fact that *how* students use Google changes over time as they become better researchers. These are encouraging findings for those of us who care about information literacy. Here are three intriguing data points from Carol Perruso's paper:

- Whereas only 30% reported using library resources for the majority of their research in their first semester, by the end 71% used majority library resources.
- In the first semester 30% start at the library, and in the last semester 45%.

- Students are more likely to start with journals/books in the library's collection when they had library instruction.

So what have we learned? Access to reference materials is one of the top reasons that undergraduate students say they use the library. Students recognize different use cases for reference; it's not a monolithic category. For some reference needs students turn to the open Web (checking a fact), but for others they turn first to their library (contextual guidance). We see this pattern reflected in undergraduate use of Wikipedia. We also see that the further along in their academic career, the more likely students are to use the library as a starting point for research. Last, library instruction has an impact on student utilization of library resources.

Now I want to return to Cengage's finding that nearly 40% of students surveyed said access to reference materials is one of the reasons they use their library, and our librarian commentator's concern that this finding can't be right because students are not using the collection at her institution.

Let's clear away some of the background noise so we are better able to hear, really hear, what those students users of the library are actually saying.

First, let's agree that there are very few instances nowadays when an undergraduate is going to access material from the library's print reference collection, whether it is circulating or not. Expectations have evolved. We all want reference content that is more accessible and more up-to-date than print can accommodate. A lack of use of the print reference collection does not, by itself, indicate that students don't look for reference content at their library.

Second, let's accept that some core use cases for reference, such as *checking a fact*, have migrated to the open Web, and there is no reason to bring them back into the library. With some basic training in information literacy, this user journey is well served by resources easily accessible on the open Web.

Last, on that count, let's agree that Wikipedia is a critical tool for undergraduate research and useful for the clarification of terms and concepts.

While some uses cases for reference are moving out of the library, not all have. What we hear students say is that they continue to have an unmet need for long-form, contextual guidance. They say they have trouble locating this content, but that the library is the first place they look for it.

It is important that we really listen to this feedback and respond in kind. If we are not perceiving the nuanced distinctions in these student responses, then we will fail to meet their needs. For a publisher, not making distinctions will result in commissioning content that doesn't serve a genuine need. For a library, not making distinctions means collecting the wrong sort of reference content, or worse, pulling back on acquiring reference materials for which there is a clear demand. Not recognizing these distinctions leaves us with a one-size-fits-all discovery environment that only supports finding print reference books or ready-reference definitions, but does not surface the long-form reference content students say they want from the library.

Why does all this matter? The risk is that students are driven out to the open Web to accommodate *all* of their reference needs. That would be an unfortunate state of affairs. Scholarly reference summary essays give students a way into an unfamiliar topic. The problem with driving students to the open Web for this in-depth content is that they lose the benefits of librarian intermediation as both a curator and vetter of sources and as a guide through instruction. For long-form summary essays library involvement has a significant impact because this is content students use when they do not yet have the knowledge to judge whether the narrative is accurate and unbiased.

As has been noted by others before, while most traditional gatekeepers are viewed with suspicion, librarians are not. This is an opportunity and responsibility for both librarians and the publishers that work with them. Libraries have been effective at addressing "fake news" through teaching information literacy. But there is also a role for content curation. Offering a highly relevant, high-quality, digital reference collection that meets a genuine research need among student users will have a positive impact on learning and lead to the formation of good study habits.

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