

First-year Student Essays Shed Light on their Experience of ACRL Framework Threshold Concepts

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To synthesize student narratives on searching for an item in the library and to identify information literacy threshold concepts students encountered during their searching.

Design – Constant comparative analysis.

Setting – Academic library at an urban American university.

Subjects – A sample of 97 1-to-2 page ungraded first year student essays.

Methods – A library assignment was developed for first year students in a required academic skills course. Students wrote the essay for peer mentors. After completing the essay, students were asked if they wanted to participate in the study. For the assignment, students were asked to find a library item of interest and write a reflective essay on the process. Essays were analyzed using NVIVO software. The researchers developed codes independently, then came together to review, discuss and recode the essays. Using the constant comparison method, themes were identified from the coding. Narrative analysis

was used to understand the coding in the context of the students' experiences.

Main Results – The authors outlined various search paths that the students described in their essays. The main emotional responses in the essays were surprise, confusion, and excitement. Three ACRL Framework IL concepts were identified in the analysis: Scholarship as Conversation, Searching as Strategic Exploration, and Research as Inquiry. Scholarship as a Conversation was exemplified through students' selection of a library item. Students chose topics that were of academic interest or associated with personal identity. In the essays, students explained their connection to the item they found, making the connection to the ongoing scholarly conversation. Searching as Strategic Exploration was expressed through student descriptions of connecting the call number to the subject classifications. Some students sailed through, whereas others encountered challenges. Some found that previous library mental models failed, found the catalogue overwhelming, or thought the organization of material was at fault rather than their own skills. Some students described how they overcame their challenges. Students also discussed balancing self-reliance and seeking help when searching for an item. This related to the ACRL frames of Research as Inquiry and Searching as Strategic Exploration. Attitudes on seeking help ranged from complete reliance to anxiety.

Conclusion – This library assignment offered students the opportunity to pursue their own interests and goals. It also encouraged exploration, problem-solving, and reflection. The assignment design allowed students to grapple with information literacy threshold concepts in a safe and independent environment, demonstrating learning and engagement with academia.

Commentary

This commentary uses the CAT critical appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014) to guide the appraisal. This paper is the second part of a study; the first part was presented as a poster (Jagman, Davidson,

Dietz, Falk, & Fitzpatrick, 2013). The authors do not clearly articulate a research question for this paper. Their stated goal is to provide a synthesis of student narratives showing how students learn to navigate the library, the challenges they face, and their emotional responses to these challenges. The authors present a succinct and clear introduction to the topic, discussing student engagement, reflective learning, and the ACRL framework threshold concepts.

The authors selected a qualitative approach to analyze student essays. Given their focus on exploring students' feelings and perceptions of their experiences navigating the library, qualitative analysis is an appropriate choice. The authors provided a detailed explanation of their methods, although an appendix of the codes and how they were translated into the narrative would have been helpful. The authors explained that the sample they used was not meant to be a representative sample; rather, their goal was to study the richness of this sample and explore the various threshold concepts encountered and experienced. There is no discussion of ethics approval in this article, which seems odd considering they are using student essays as their data source.

The findings presented a detailed account of the students' experiences. They are presented in a variety of formats – flow charts describing navigation pathways, emotions expressed in a word cloud, and narrative with quotations – allowing the reader to understand the results easily. In addition, the assignment and representative samples are included in the appendix. The narrative analysis follows the stages of the assignment, identifying the ACRL threshold concepts encountered along the way. This logical progression is easy to follow. The authors provide extensive quotations supporting their interpretation of student experience with the threshold concepts.

Whereas the findings focused on the navigation pathways and the threshold concepts experienced, the discussion and conclusions emphasized the instructional design aspects of the exercise. This comes across as disconnected from the findings. If

there had been a specific research question, this section could have referred back to it. In its absence, linking the findings back to the literature on the ACRL framework would have strengthened this section. The discussion about instructional design was interesting to read but not what was analysed.

The lack of a research question weakened this paper. The analysis was well executed, showing that students do encounter the threshold concepts, but was not discussed further in the discussion and conclusions section, making the paper disjointed. The findings will benefit those interested in learning about first year student experiences of threshold concepts and the discussion on instructional design will help those interested in designing assignments to capture student library experiences.

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