Independent Research Skills: How and why can they be measured?

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The Skills Context

Research skills which constitute a component within the skills set of Information Literacy, at the most basic level outline the effective use and organisation of information in order that individuals can attempt to answer questions and tackle problems (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), 2010). They are also however, closely associated with the development of Independent Learning, in which self-motivated students carry out their research without being prompted (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008). Both skills sets are intended to widen a student’s knowledge base in terms of personal development and preparation for life. Hence the further interconnection of research skills within the parameters of Lifelong Learning (Bundy, 2004, p.5):

- The relationship between research skills and information literacy.
- The skills set for information literacy within the broader paradigm of information literacy.
- The concept of information literacy as a component of the conceptual framework of the Lifelong Learning mission.
- The broader context of the learning function which includes the development of independent research skills.

Cruelly, the development of independent research skills is not about students working alone, but about working within a supported/scaffolded environment (DCSF, 2008), (Streetfield, Shaper, Markless, Rae-Scott, 2011). However, contrary to this definition, it is reported that due to the demands of the curriculum, students are being given too few opportunities with limited provision for this to take place (Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), 2006), (Bent, 2008), (Herring, 2011). As a result, in the first instance, it is teaching staff and librarians within the domain of Higher Education that are faced with the task of guiding students in such skills development (Bent, 2008), (Streetfield et al, 2011), (Anderson and Bull, 2014). However, should it not be the responsibility of schools to ensure that the foundations of these skills are at minimum embedded to the extent that students can see the reason for their learning and be able to utilise their knowledge in future learning experiences? The developments in Web 2.0 technology and social media alone would suggest this is imperative given the increasing number of resources students now have to sift through and decipher (Herring, 2011).

Strategies for Development

In order to widen provision and offer greater opportunities for students to develop their skills, it is advisable that planning is discussed openly by a collaboration of staff and written into policies and action plans for stakeholders such as members of Senior Management Teams and School Governors (Streetfield et al, 2011), (Herring, 2011).

It is suggested that a policy should encompass the whole curriculum, as both research skills and independent learning skills are regarded as transferable (Anderson and Bull, 2014). Furthermore, there is no reason why they cannot be introduced systematically within both Primary and Secondary schools and delivered directly into the classroom by both teaching and library staff (Bent, 2008), (Streetfield et al, 2011). However, it is suggested that this process is more manageable when each year group is teaching either with Year 5 or equally starting in reverse with Year 13, as learning at this latter stage will have more of an immediate relevance when students progress into Higher Education (Streetfield et al, 2011).

Both frameworks are prevalent in the underpinning research and subsequently form the basis of student resource packs offering examples of good practice; a useful alternative if schools do not deliver the EPQ (Streetfield et al, 2011), (University of Birmingham, 2011), (Anderson et al, 2014). Although the number of research skills embedded within both frameworks is broad, to aid manageability, only one aspect has been selected for measurement in this instance: the production and management of citations and references. As these are both compulsory within Level 3 coursework, initial evidence should be both visible and quantifiable. However, in order to aid validity, supporting staff could additionally formatively assess the qualitative attitudes and behaviours of students through direct observation. Although such evidence is subjective, it could provide potentially informative feedback (Kusek and Rist, 2004), (Claxton et al, 2013).

Why do we want to measure referencing skills?

An essential element of independent research is for students to be able to retrieve a resource which has the potential to impact on their future learning, whilst at the same time nurturing organisation and planning skills. As a result, the proposed long-term goal of this project is: For all students studying at Level 3 to receive instructions on the creation of reference lists and to understand the value and relevance of their use. Mid-term outcomes are expected to measure: An increase in the inclusion of references generated by each student in preparation for Higher Education using their current assignment as a baseline. Short-term performance indicators will measure: The production of a reference list using the 4 key components based on the Harvard style of referencing; to reach such percentage of students; to make at least 1 minimum number of items to be negotiated between each student and staff member depending upon the length of their reading list. Carl to the guidelines issued to each student, the following pro forma aims to monitor progress by providing a formative assessment that can be attached to an assignment. It will be put to use by the staff and their students within the focus group:

- In your latest assignment, have you included a reference list at the end of your work containing the minimum amount negotiated?
- Have you attempted to use the 4 Harvard components (Author Name, Year of Publication, Title, Name of Publisher) within all references?
- If there are any items in your reference list of particular importance to your future learning, have you made a specific note of it/them?
- In addition...
- Whilst reading through your assignment, has all work that is based around the ideas of others been cited?
- Have you checked that all your cited authors are included in your reference list?

Conclusions

In the short-term, if students are given appropriate scaffolding and regular feedback, formative assessment has the capacity to develop their confidence in the use of independent research skills (DCSF, 2008). In the longer-term, it is hoped that students will reflect on the relevance of their previous learning and demonstrate awareness and adaptation techniques piece of research; to include a minimum number of items to be negotiated between each student and staff member depending upon the length of their reading list. Central to the guidelines issued to each student, the following pro forma aims to monitor progress by providing a formative assessment that can be attached to an assignment. It will be put to use by the staff and their students within the focus group:

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Of most significance is the hope that this process will bring about an understanding that these skills are perceived as valuable, transferable, relevant and measurable and worthy of incorporation into the curriculum. The development of these skills has the capacity to encourage students to become more organised and independent in their learning, a priority for stakeholders, particularly those who teach Level 3 and above.

References


DCSF (2008), Independent Learning Literature Review, DCSF: Nottingham


The Independent Research Skills Continuum: Where are you? (DCSF, 2008, p.15)