

# **Understanding international students' information research behaviour**

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Using an academic library is one of the numerous challenges that international students face as they undertake undergraduate studies abroad. Library anxiety, previous access to resources, different practices for acknowledging sources and first-time exposure to English-language library terminology can impact the quality of work they produce. This short document highlights some of the key findings from two focus groups held in March 2007 at Concordia University and provides a selective bibliography.

## **Purpose of conducting focus groups**

- Methodology provides immediate answers, open responses and group dynamics that can enrich the conversation
- Two objectives: to learn about past and current library experiences on different levels; to inform and improve instructional design and teaching
- Six themes were explored during focus group discussions (from general to specific)

## **Theme 1 – Past experiences using libraries in home country**

- All participants had previous experience with open stack systems
- Use of libraries was for research/school and leisure purposes
- Online services, resources and subscriptions were limited and, when available, most were accessible only in the library (although some had off-campus access)
- Focus, in most cases, remained on print material (books and magazines)

## **Theme 2 – Noticeable differences between libraries (home vs. Concordia)**

- Physical space: more study areas, better hours, more computers
- Online space: electronic subscriptions are greater, search systems more powerful
- Services: ILL, CREPUQ card (for grad students), more help available, online renewals

## **Theme 3 – Difficulties or challenges in using Concordia's libraries**

- Browsing the collection for leisure is not really possible (magazines, novels, videos)
- Organization of materials (LC classification is not obvious at first)
- Size of the library is overwhelming
- Concept of "course reserves"
- Searching for information (many places one can go to)

## **Theme 4 – Searching for information**

- A few students described the "perfect" search process (having attended a workshop)
- Majority of undergraduate students talked about haphazard approach that changed with every new assignment
- Trial and error as well as the principle of least effort were noticeable approaches
- Graduate students talked about more advanced strategies and sources (more time devoted to searching; use of theses, proceedings, government info; synonyms; explore topics from general to specific)
- Web is preferred starting point for research (even for those who had a workshop)
- Students turn to the library only when the Web has not yielded anything
- All students familiar with Google and Wikipedia; a few with Google Scholar

#### *Theme 4, continued*

- Most students were aware that not all info found on the Web should be trusted; however, they could not explain how they evaluate Web sites beyond looking at currency and esthetics/design
- Experience and knowledge in citing sources differed between students
- Most students were not aware of the different citation styles when they began
- Many agreed that they needed to learn why and how to search and “use” information
- Many mentioned that past assignments were critical appreciations not research
- Students from Asia: plagiarism was a new concept as research wasn’t expected

#### **Theme 5 – Learning to use the library**

- Main methods used by more than one student: teachers, independently, friends, in-class workshops
- Other methods mentioned: Web site, signage, organization of the library, tours, handouts, asking questions, librarian
- Things students wished they had known sooner: off-campus access, library has much more than books, interlibrary loans, using an article’s bibliography to find more info
- Note – these observations would probably be similar to those of “national” students

#### **Theme 6 – Suggestions for improving instructional services**

- Presentations with departments, info in student handbook, more links within portal

#### **Observations**

- Reconsider assumptions: students are computer savvy and have used libraries
- Avoid segmentation: some characteristics are not any different than other students
- Address the use of the Web: build on current foundation and stress evaluation
- Citing and plagiarism: overall lack of awareness that should not be overlooked
- The literature: look beyond LIS to include ESL, education and multicultural studies
- Learning styles and strategies: cultural differences should be further investigated
- More research needed: mix and match methodologies to confirm observations

#### **Selective bibliography**

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