Distance Students’ Attitude Toward Library Help Seeking

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A B S T R A C T

Distance students’ attitude toward seeking library help was examined in a medium sized university. A web-based survey was conducted for indentifying library help seeking attitudes among distance students. A 30-mile radius of the campus was used to arbitrarily distinguish between near campus and far campus groups. The study concluded that distance students who visit library and seek help more frequently are more likely have higher self-efficacy on learning. Among all types of library help sources, Libguides were the most used. Near campus students preferred face-to-face consultation more than virtual service, and they also tend to seek help from peers. However, far campus students were more likely seek help with a distance librarian. Email continued to be the most common way of distributing and receiving library information. Social network tools for information seeking were not appreciated as had been anticipated. Implications of the findings for providing effective reference service are discussed. There is not one reference service model that fits all. A library should determine the best reference service that meets the changes of their communities and library’s function over time.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

People encounter various difficulties in their everyday lives. One way to resolve those difficulties is to seek help. Ames and Lau (1982) defined help seeking as “an achievement behavior involving the search for and employment of a strategy to obtain success” (p. 414). Help seeking behavior occurs when one faces challenges or difficulties. Help seeking behavioral processes include deciding to ask for help, identifying potential helper(s), formulating and expressing questions, and evaluating help seeking episode (Ableen, Stahl, Schworm, Fischer, & Wallace, 2003; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; Ryan & Pintrich, 1998).

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2010) defines distance education as “a formal education process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place” (p. 1). Literature review retrieved a considerable number of surveys that focus on distance students’ perception of using the academic library. Dew (2001) examined distance graduate program students at the University of Iowa. He found that 71% of the students ranked web or email reference service as the most valuable service. McLean and Dew (2004) expanded the survey population to undergraduate students, and they observed that the values of reference service continued to be rated highly among graduates. However, undergraduates considered full-text database accessing more important to them. Eighty percent of distance students at the University of Illinois claimed that email was their preferred method seeking help from the library (Hensley & Miller, 2010). McLean and Dew (2004) also found that distance students reported higher instances of formal help seeking than traditional students. In other words, students in online courses would seek help from multiple electronic sources and become more proactive participants in a classroom. In addition, Kitsantas and Chow (2007) discovered that self-efficacy, defined as perceptions of one’s capability and confidence for performing a task or complete a project, is highly correlated with help seeking behaviors. According to previous research (Newman & Goldin, 1990; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), students with high self-efficacy beliefs about their learning capability tend to seek help more frequently because they are less likely to interpret their need for help due to lack of ability.

Although more and more online degrees and courses are offered to students, distance students who live on campus or near to campus prefer to seek help from visiting the library in person. In this study, we explore library help seeking attitudes of distance education students, with a particular focus on the stage of identifying helper(s). How frequently do students seek help from the library? What is the relationship between frequency of library visits and learning self-efficacy among distance students? What are their preferred ways of communication with...
the library when asking questions? Who is their targeted helper(s)? Does physical location affect their choice of seeking library assistance? The findings will provide insight on distance students’ attitude toward the library’s reference service. It will aid librarians in developing library marketing strategies and tactics in order to promote awareness of library services and resources to distance students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research showed evidence that personal and contextual factors influence a person’s decision on whether and how to proceed for help (DePaulo, Nadler, & Fisher, 1983; Karabenick, 1998; Spacapan & Oskamp, 1992). In academic settings, instrumental help seeking is considered to be an active, multifarious social-cognitive activity (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). It is an essential, positive, and important academic self-regulation strategy that benefits learning. Motivated learners are more likely to seek help when needed (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991) and a student’s achievement goals are also related to help seeking (Kitsantas, 2002; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997; Tanaka, Murakami, Okuno, & Yamauchi, 2001). Studies showed that factors such as the helper’s knowledge and competence, attitude (i.e., willingness to help, impression of help seeker), approachability, and relationship affect a help seeker’s choice for a helper (Ryan & Pintrich, 1998). In the classroom, teachers and peers are often chosen as targeted helpers (Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005).

For the past few decades, the academic library has been devoted to marketing itself as not only a house of collection, but also a facility that provides services for finding information. Samuel Swett Green (1876), in the article of “Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers”, mentioned that librarians should be able to answer patrons’ inquiry, and assist patrons to find books in the library. Reference service handles inquiries and assists a library’s clientele use its collections and external resources to effectively meet their information needs. In the era of overwhelming information, reference service becomes more sophisticated than ever. High quality reference service helps users find obscure data and cut through information effectively. Traditional reference service is offered through phone and in person. With the development of technologies, e-mail, text message, chatting and virtual classrooms have been widely used in academic reference services. The various service delivery forms make reference service more approachable to patrons, especially to distance students who may not able to come to the library very often. However, it has been reported that students are reluctant to ask for help even if the help is available (Swope & Katzer, 1972). This is considered as a phenomenon known as library anxiety (Fister, 2002; Mellon, 1986). The cause of library anxiety is associated with many factors. For instance, students are unsure whether librarians understand and are able to answer their questions, whether librarians are available and willing to help when needed, whether the librarian is the right person to ask for their course work, and whether librarians will judge their capability negatively (Ruppel & Fagan, 2002).

METHODS

Survey items were selected based on a literature review of other relevant studies, and were customized to fit the actual function settings of the library. Sample questions included: How would you prefer to contact a librarian? What types of assistance have you used this semester? A 3-item self-efficacy for online learning scale was selected and modified from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993).

The survey was emailed to students enrolled in one or more distance education courses for the Fall term of 2012 three weeks prior to finals week, and it was left open for four weeks. Six point three percent of students (N = 220) completed the survey. Half the students (N = 110) lived within 30 miles radius of the campus. Seventy-six percent of participants (N = 166) were female, 59% (N = 130) were undergraduate students, and 69% (N = 150) were full time students. The majority of respondents (N = 66) reported being in the 21–29 age range. A 30-mile radius of the campus was used to arbitrarily distinguish between near campus group (NG) and far campus groups (FG). The statistical software Package SPSS 18.0 for Windows was utilized to perform the descriptive and cross tabulation analysis. Means and Standard Deviation of student’s learning self-efficacy were reported and percentile of sub-categories of each asked research questions was presented in a figure.

RESULTS

ONLINE LIBRARY VISITS

Data revealed that the majority of distance students use the online library 1–3 times a semester (NG = 30%, FG = 27%), and only a few students visit the library on a daily basis (NG = 3%, FG = 2%). Twenty nine percent of the students in each group reported that they never went to the online library during the semester (see Fig. 1). Students who visit the library more frequently also reported higher self-efficacy on their learning. Students who reported that they never visited the library had low learning self-efficacy (M = 3.72). Students, who indicated that they visit the library 1–3 times a semester, a month, or a week, reported a similar level of learning self-efficacy ranging from M = 4.04 to 4.13. It was no surprise that students who visit the library on a daily basis report a high learning self-efficacy (M = 4.53) (see Table 1).

HELP-SEEKING PREFERENCE

Reference service has not been used very often among distance students (see Fig. 2). A large number of students, sixth-three students (57%) in the near campus group and fifty-three students (54%) in the far campus group claimed that they had not used any library assistance. The second largest group of students commented that they would have sought help if they knew it had been offered. (NG = 21%, FG = 27%). Approximately 20% of distance students used library assistance, such as library tutorials, Libguides, webinars, and face-to-face consultations. Libguides were the most common library assistance tool that students use, while face-to-face consultation was used more by the near campus group (NG = 9%, FG = 3%).

The top three preferred ways of seeking help in the near campus group were in person (75%), email (69%), and online (Ask-a-Librarian) form (25%). The top three methods among the far campus group were
email (76%), online form (42%), and via telephone (31%). The majority of students who preferred help in person lived near the campus. Far campus group students preferred online form, email, texting, and IM more than the near campus group. However, the near campus students favored old-fashioned ways of communication such as telephone and in person (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 4 shows the different help seeking preferences between the two groups. The near campus students’ primary choice was their classmate/friend (46%). Their second and third choices were instructor and subject librarian (38%). The far campus students’ first option was distance librarian (39%), followed by subject librarian (33%), and then instructor (28%).

FOLLOWING LIBRARY NEWS

Students were asked how they would prefer to learn about the library’s services and resources. The top three choices were email, web, and Blackboard. Email was chosen by 64% of near campus students, library web site was chosen by 58% of the far campus students. Blackboard was the second choice of being contacted in both groups. (NG = 52%, FG = 56%). Very few students chose social networking tools (NG = 13%, FG = 13%) (See Fig. 5).

DISCUSSION

The library collections are only valuable when patrons are aware of them and are able to access them. The same situation applies to the services that a library provides. The Internet and mobile technology have given new dimensions to communication. It is ideal to open all communication channels in order to meet different patrons’ demands. Unfortunately, budget cuts during the economic downturn caused a workforce shortage in the library. Therefore, it is critically important for the library to focus on communication platforms that would be the most useful, usable, and desirable according to patrons in their institution.

LIBRARY USAGE AND HELPING NEEDS

The survey asked students how often they used the online library and whether they have used any assistance that the library offered in the semester. The results showed that nearly one-third of the students have not visited the library online. The reason why they have not used the library resources and how they survived without using the library resources for their course work were unclear. Future investigation will be needed. In term of distance student’s learning self-efficacy, the result revealed that students who visit the library more frequently are more likely to have higher self-efficacy on learning. This finding is consistent with Kitsantas and Chow’s (2007) contentions that self-efficacy is highly correlated with help seeking behaviors. In this study, self-efficacious students were more likely to seek help from pre created, self-learning guides such as Libguides, and tutorials, as well as seeking help from instructors and librarians. A plausible explanation would be that they have less worry that others will attribute it to their lack of capability and know that seeking help is a necessary process of learning and improving their knowledge of information resources.

More than 50% of the students reported that they have not used any type of reference service offered, and nearly 22% expressed that they would have used one if they were aware of it. The high percentage of students not using reference service is not necessarily a bad thing. Students may have a high self-efficacy on information seeking through information literacy training in their previous educational experiences. They are confident about the information they find. However, library anxiety may be another reason. Students worry whether the librarians will judge their knowledge capability. Some are uncertain whether librarians understand their needs and are willing to help. The library has created web page and Libguides to help students navigate through library resources and services on their own. The distance education librarian also distributes emails to distance education students. However, it seems that not all the distance students receive or read the message. In order to encourage students to ask research questions, faculty, technology support staff, and librarians in a distance education program should actively collaborate with each other. A librarian can establish connections with students through faculty referrals. A librarian can use the discussion board and announcement features in the course management system to generate, facilitate, and engage effective learning experience.

PREFERRED WAYS OF COMMUNICATION WITH THE LIBRARY

Contemporary students use the Internet and mobile technology for means of communication, information access, and social connections. This study found that distance students preferred to receive information from the library through email, the library’s web, and Blackboard. The usage of popular social mediums such as social networking (Facebook, Twitter), texting, and instant message for course-related

![Table 1](image)

| Frequency of online library visits and learning self-efficacy. |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 | Never           | 1-3 times a semester | 1-3 times a month | 1-3 times a week | 4-5 times a week | Daily           |
| Mean            | 3.72            | 4.13              | 4.04             | 4.08             | 4.47             | 4.53            |
| SD              | 1.21            | 1.04              | 1.27             | 1.13             | 1.26             | 0.51            |

Note. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
communication were low. Previous researches have shown that even with the acceptance of social mediums, university students have been using email communication more than other methods (Judd & Kennedy, 2010; Li, Finley, Pitts, & Guo, 2011; Littlejohn, Margaryan, & Vojt, 2010; Uddin & Jacobson, 2013). Vrocharidou and Efthymiou (2011) reported that students rely on email communication with their peers and instructors for course-related discussions. Burhanna, Seeholzer, and Salem (2009) stated that students set clear borderline between learning and social spaces on the web. They prefer different communication methods for work/school than methods used for social purposes (Rishi, 2007; Robinson & Stubberud, 2012). Students interact primarily with friends who have a pre-established relationship in their real life on Facebook (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). The majority of the academic libraries use Facebook as a marketing tool to distribute information, and engage students with interactive communication in order to establish a positive connection with students (Phillips, 2011; Riza Ayu & Abrizah, 2011). Some libraries reported using it as a virtual reference service tool (Graham, Faix, & Hartman, 2009; Reichardt, 2008). However, library Facebook sites have appeared to be unappreciated by their prospective users as indicated by the low number of “likes” and lack of interaction activities based on “comments” and “shares” (Gerolimos, 2011).

The powerful connect and collaborate tools in the Learning Management Software (Blackboard) give instructors an alternate way of engaging, connecting, and collaborating with their students. The relatively high number of students that prefer receiving information from the library shows that they have started accepting this communication method.

Overall, distance students rely on email to receive help from the library. There is no surprise that far campus students favored Internet related technologies. However, it is interesting that near campus students were more inclined to traditional ways of communication such as face-to-face and over the telephone. Kitsantas and Chow (2007) reported that students nowadays prefer to use electronic means to seek help and that they find it more effective. On the other hand, Sobel (2009) found that 69% of undergraduate students would rather engage in face-to-face reference help than use a virtual medium. Robinson and Stabler’s (2012) research of university students in the United States and Norway revealed that despite the popularity of technology, students still preferred face-to-face communication over any other method. This study confirmed that when students have options for either seeking help virtually or physically, they would prefer the latter.

**PREFERENCE OF FINDING A HELPER**

College students often look to the aid of their parents in selecting courses, and editing papers etc. It is not that students do not seek help with their academic work, it is just that they are used to seeking help from someone with an established trust. Curzon-Hobson (2002) wrote: “…trust is a fundamental element in the pursuit of higher learning… without this sense of trust, the dialogical learning experience will be restricted” (pp. 266–267).

In this study, the near campus students’ first targeted helpers were their peers and the last was a distance librarian, while the choice results were just the opposite in the far campus group. Student interaction is one of the most significant challenges in distance learning (Liu, 2008). The distance education librarian distributes self-introduction emails to distance education students encouraging them to use the library’s resources and services. The promoting effort seems to be more effective among the far campus students. Students who live close to campus have more chances to meet peers and instructors in person and access the campus. Peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student relations are easier to establish than students who are not able to come to the campus.

**CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Distance education students who live close to the campus demonstrated similar help seeking characteristics as on campus students. Even though virtual services are available, students would rather use the physical facilities if they can commute to the library without a lot of effort. On-site reference continues to be very important in the current academic library setting. Librarians should be aware of the fact that...
students who come to the reference desk could be distance students. Librarians should prepare themselves to be more familiar with the advanced information technology skills involved in the e-learning environment that can help students in solving basic technology problems during reference sessions. Email is the most common way of distributing and receiving information. Social networking tools provide an alternate way of communication. However, it would be effective only when it is well publicized and maintained. Librarians should take great efforts to ensure that all help sources, both formal and informal, function as effectively as possible. Moreover, when facing needs, distance students with high self-efficacy in this study tend to use resources from the library more and manifest high help seeking behavior. This would recognize librarians’ contributions on providing help and would encourage them to build a trust and less anxiety help seeking environment so students are willing to visit more often as they need help.

Some percentage of distance education students do not take advantage of personal assistance that the library offers due to the unawareness of it. Reference service should be actively and consistently promoted to distance students. Promotional materials can be sent out to students on the first day of class, before mid-term and final to tell/remind them that the library is here to help them with their study needs. Students are more likely to receive help if it is offered to them. Encouraging students to ask questions and helping them solve problems with evaluated resources would intend to positively influence better learning and thus better achievement. Librarians must enhance their information and technology literacy in order to be conversant with information sources and understand students’ need. The “word of mouth” marketing is very powerful. If students are satisfied with the services they received, they will come back and bring their friends. Trust should be established among librarians, students, and faculty for helping students reduce and eliminate their library anxiety. Finally yet importantly, the reference services should be critically assessed, so that an effective, high quality user-centered reference services can be provided.

This study presents a snapshot of distance education students usage and attitudes toward a library’s reference service in a public university. Further research would collect qualitative data that can be used to further explain distance students’ help seeking behaviors. There is not one reference service model that fits all. A library should determine the best reference service that meets the changes of their communities and library’s function over time. Moreover, future research needs to focus on how to structure the library’s help seeking process and services to reduce threat and anxiety, and on how to use technological platforms effectively to remove language and learning style barriers of distance help seekers.

REFERENCES


Fig. 4. Preference of finding a helper.

Fig. 5. Preference of being contacted by the library.


