

THE INTEGRATION OF INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS INTO THE CURRICULUM

Abstract

This poster summarizes the work-in-progress of the evaluation of the Information Literacy Skills Modules that were integrated into the curriculum of five Early-European History undergraduate online self-paced courses in the humanities. The Skills Modules were incorporated in these courses with the view of improving students' research skills, informing students how to avoid plagiarism, and raising their awareness of the rigorous principles of academic integrity. The focus for this exploratory survey is to learn about students' perceptions in terms of how they think the Skills Modules assist them on completing their research paper assignments. The final evaluation results are expected to inform how to enhance the design of the modules and their integration in history courses. The results will be disseminated at AU and beyond with the view of improving course design practices. In particular, the results aim to assist professors looking for solutions to address academic integrity issues in courses where Chicago style is used to write research papers. The evaluation is still in progress and the instrument will remain available until the end of 2015, but preliminary findings already show students perceive the information literacy skills as a useful and helpful aid for completing their research assignments.

Athabasca University Undergrad Model: Context

- Open education
- Online distance education
- No face-to-face experiences
- Continuous monthly enrolment: oo cohort groups
- Self-paced
- Individualized studies
- No deadlines for assignments
- 6 months contract (paid extensions)
- 1 Tutor per group: groups up to 30 students
- Tutors assist/guide students and mark assignments

The Problem

For a long time, professors and tutors have been complaining about students' performance in writing research papers. They also think that many students are not fully aware of the rigorous principles of academic integrity. As in other humanities and social science courses, many students in history-type courses tend to perform poorly because, when they enroll in their courses, they have not sufficiently mastered the IL skills they need to complete research assignments satisfactorily. Some are unfamiliar with the study of history at a university level, and others have under developed skills in research and writing. There is a strong indication that the lack of IL skills not only limits students' performance and learning but also results in academic misconduct, such as cheating and plagiarism. Instructors have tried various preventive and remedial measures hoping to enhance students' performance and alleviate their frustrations—and their tutors'. However, none of these measures have provided a satisfactory solution.

The Solution Adopted — The integration of IL skills into the curriculum of history courses

Information literacy (IL) skills modules were integrated into the curriculum of history courses to assist students in producing their research assignments satisfactorily, improving their performance, and avoiding academic misconduct and plagiarism. Keeping in mind past unsuccessful practices, a multidisciplinary group (a librarian, an editor, and a learning designer, the course coordinator) got together with the course coordinator to assess the context, discuss previous experiences, and identify a better and more effective solution. Instruction was designed, the skills modules were documented, and learning materials were developed. After that, the skills modules were integrated into history courses, along the study guide, and strategically connected to the work students have to produce, the criteria they have to meet, and the expectations they have to satisfy to complete their assignments. Since experience has shown that students tend to avoid non-credit materials (tutorials, style guides, etc.), the skills modules were linked to credit assignments so that students could not ignore them. Automated quizzes were designed to reward students' knowledge acquired in the skills modules without creating extra work for tutors. The skills modules are made explicit in the instructions, rubrics, and evaluation criteria for assignments. Sequenced small assignments throughout the course reflect the research process. Last but not least, the skills modules are reflected in directions and instructions for final exams, which include essay questions.

Theoretical Framework

The Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ACRL, 2000) framework was adopted to design the information literacy skills instruction. It became clearer that a new attempt to enhance students' performance needed the information literacy skills instruction aligned to learning activities, assignments, and evaluations. The information literacy skills follow the ACRL principles where "an information literate is able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed,
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently,
- Evaluate information and its sources critically,
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base,
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose,
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally." ACRL(2000)

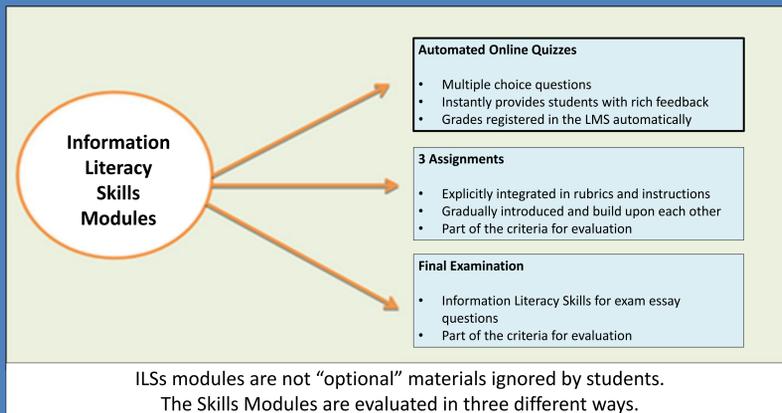
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Learning Units	Assignments	Information Literacy Skills
1 Introduction		Skills Module 1: Library Research Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifying scholarly writings: books and articles• Searching AU's online library catalog• Searching AU's online journal databases• Research exercises
2 Ancient Greece	Assignment 1: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of a Scholarly Article• Select from one of 3 scholarly articles about the Early Middle Ages<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Critically read the essay• Write a report analyzing and appraising the article following detailed instructions• Use library search tools to find at least 3 more writings by the article's author	Quiz 1: Library Research <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepares students for written assignment Skills Module 2: Reading Scholarly articles <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognizing a scholarly essay• Critically reading a scholarly essay• Analyzing its parts• Following a historical argument in a scholarly essay• Appraising essays• Prepares for Assignment 1 and 3
3 Ancient Rome		Skills Module 3: Chicago-Style Documentation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reason for documentation• When to cite• Using Chicago-Style• Documentation exercises Quiz 2: Documentation Quiz <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepares for Research Essay (Assignments 2 and 3)
4 Post-Roman Europe	Assignment 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Essay Plan and Proposed Bibliography• Choose from among the assigned research paper topics	Skills Module 4: Organizing a History Essay <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Purpose of essay assignments• Features of essays• History essay elements (No quiz: prepare for Research Assignment 3 and final exam)
5 Early Middle Ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write a 1 page essay proposal• Attach a bibliography of 6 or more scholarly books or articles• Indicate how the items were found	Skills Module 5: Using Evidence in a History Essay <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When and how to<ul style="list-style-type: none">• summarize• paraphrase• quote Quiz 3: Using Evidence <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepares for Assignment 3 (Research Essay) Skills Module 6: Academic Integrity: Avoiding Plagiarism <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding plagiarism• Common questions about plagiarism• Detecting plagiarism• Mastering the techniques for giving fair credit Quiz 4: Academic integrity <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepares for Assignment 3 (Research Essay)
6 High Middle Ages		
7 Middle Ages II		
8 Late Middle Ages		
9 Renaissance and Reformation		
10 States and Capitalism	Assignment 3: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A research essay in response to the student's choice of topics from a list of assigned questions.	
11 Wars of Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Must use at least 4 scholarly books and/or articles	
12 Absolutism and the Limits of Early Modernity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Must use Chicago-Style documentation• Must conform to History essay norms<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Must avoid plagiarism	



Methodology

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The main purpose of this evaluation is to inform course design practices at AU. It is important to assess the modules strategy and verify if it works the way it was planned, if it needs to be enhanced, or if it brings unintended benefits that may have arisen. This evaluation intends to enhance the modules and to inform course design practices in AU. Beyond AU, we intend to disseminate the findings in national and international conferences to discuss the Skills Modules with academics in other institutions— who may be facing the same issues. We intend to publish in national and/or international academic journals. Also, we intend to release the information literacy skills modules to the public under a creative commons license so that anyone in the public can use/adapt them in their own courses.

Delimitations of the Study

This study involves five undergrad, online, self-paced, individualized three-credits courses:

- History 215: Europe: Ancient to Early Modern
- History 371: Early Medieval Europe: 400—1000 (Rev. A2)
- Humanities 312/ Classics 312/ History 312: Ancient Rome (Rev. C1)
- Humanities 313/History 313/Religious Studies 313: Early Christians (Rev. C1)
- History 383: The Vikings (Rev. C1)

The Information Literacy Skills modules were integrated in these courses. The modules are focused on Chicago style for students who are conducting research in the field of history.

The Survey

A survey was designed to collect data about students' perceptions concerning the use of the information literacy skills and how they assist students on:

- searching for academic sources
- identifying peer-reviewed scholarly articles
- distinguishing between primary and secondary sources of information
- organizing and writing their research papers
- quoting and referencing properly their sources of information
- using Chicago style properly
- avoiding plagiarism
- applying academic integrity principles in their papers

The organization of the survey reflects the research process students have to go through to complete their research assignments. Questions were designed based on both the ACRL framework and the skills modules. To increase the reliability of the survey, it was reviewed by the same multidisciplinary group of experts who participated in the design of the skills modules.

Core Evaluation Questions:

To what extent do students perceive their performance improve because of the IL skills standards integrated into the curriculum of history courses?

- What are students' perceptions of the skills modules?
- To what extent do students think the IL skills modules inform them on using the library efficiently?
- To what extent do students consider that the IL skills modules improve their understanding for completing their assignments?
- To what extent do students estimate that the IL skills modules guide them in adhering to principles of intellectual integrity?

Preliminary Results: Tendencies

- **N=15, 1—5 Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree**
- Respondents are adults, likely in their late 30s, who enrolled in the course with more than moderate experience in research (3.47), but somewhat limited experience using Chicago style (2.33).
- So far, no one enrolled in the junior course HIST 215 has responded to the survey
- Students seem to agree that the information literacy modules helped them to enhance their skills in areas related to their research assignments (3.74).
- Students somewhat agree that the skills modules helped them to carry on with their work in completing their research assignments (3.66); however, they tend to strongly agree that the skills modules increased their proficiency in using Chicago style to document their sources (4.07).
- Students agree to some degree that the modules helped them in differentiating among the different sources of information (3.8), raising their awareness of academic integrity (3.66), improving their competence in conducting research (3.73), and understanding teachers' expectations for assignments (3.8).
- Students somehow agree that the modules improved their understanding in identifying, assessing, analyzing, and selecting scholarly articles (3.66).
- While students seem to be unsure if the modules were useful in writing their research essays (3.44), they agree the modules were useful in documenting their sources correctly (4.33), and they still see the modules as somewhat useful in differentiating between how to use primary and secondary sources of information (3.66), developing arguments supported by evidence (3.66), and outlining their papers (3.66).
- Despite students not fully agreeing that the modules facilitated their work in writing their papers (3.81), they agree the modules helped them in using Chicago style properly (4.06) and acknowledging the work of others adequately (4).
- Students somewhat agree that in writing their papers, the modules facilitated their work in citing sources (3.8) and integrating quotations (3.8) properly, as well as formatting the bibliography of their sources (3.86).
- Overall, students strongly agree that the modules were beneficial in improving their skills in understanding Chicago style (4.33), documenting their sources (4.2), and completing their assignments successfully (3.8), as well as reporting evidence and avoiding plagiarism (3.66).

What did you like the most about the Skills Modules?

"The questions pertaining to Chicago style were the most useful."

"These modules are well put together, easy to follow and absorb and, I think, are exceptional for students just beginning their university experience. With each one I was thinking that I wish I had studied these modules early in my university experience."

"For me the skills modules were a good refresher for how to write a proper research paper. ... Also it was good to learn how to use the online library and research available. This was not possible when I was in School."

"They were simple, but effective."

"I admit that at first I was a little annoyed that such basic information was included in a senior level course! However, I still found that I learned from the skills modules and in the end I found them to be valuable."

What did you like the least about the Skills Modules?

"The Skills Modules were generally informative, but none of them were in-depth enough for my needs. I mainly wrote my research papers by applying my professor's feedback, but even then that was difficult to deal with. The Chicago Style citation could be flushed out a great deal if there were more examples, such as how to cite someone who translated the book, how to cite a quote from an author who is quoting someone else, and so forth."

"To understand them thoroughly, too much time was required, and I found the course quite too full of material already to finish it reasonably within six months."

"They occurred in a course that has come late in my degree program, so they have been ill-timed. I have already learned what the skills modules teach, having written dozens of essays and having received much criticism from my tutors, so they did little for me other than offer review of what I already know. The exception to this criticism concerns Chicago formatting, which no previous course had required of me, so that particular module was very helpful."

How to improve the Skills Modules:

"An example of someone's research essay would be particularly helpful."

"Provide some complex examples of how to format bibliographical entries and footnotes in Chicago Style."

"Improve the specificity or tailor each skill module to the content of the course. The question banks in Moodle would expand exponentially but the benefit to the student would be worth it. For instance, if the demographics bear out that most students are like myself and make use of a local university library, it may be useful to provide practical instruction in the regard. If, for example the skill modules are part of a Roman History course, it may help to have skills testing in research pertaining to Roman history. While radically different than research for other fields, the variety of material available on the fall of the Roman empire ranges from National Geographic articles to the highest levels of scholarly research. Narrowing search parameters becomes vital, yet uncovering the proper search terms takes hours at times."

"[...] more details re: Chicago style - I ended up printing out the guide manual from the library site and that was definitely helpful."

"More information on what exactly a librarian can help with would be helpful."



Participants

All students who complete the last assignment are invited to participate in the survey. After submitting the last assignment, an invitation and a link for students to access the survey become available. Participation is on voluntary basis and completely anonymous.

Data Collection

The five history courses where the modules and survey are placed may get 130 students a year in total. Students have six months to complete the course. Since the survey is only available to students once they submit the last assignment in the course, data are coming in slowly. The survey has been available since October 2014 and is expected to be in place at least until the end of 2015; maybe longer.

Data Analysis

Since the evaluation has not been completed, it is too early to make solid conclusions at this time. The survey is available and data collection is ongoing. For this poster, the preliminary findings come from 15 respondents and reflect the tendencies found in the data.

Future Research

Before jumping into final conclusions, we will continue collecting data until the end of 2015. Then then, we will triangulate the results of the survey with students' final grades. We plan to interview tutors and the course coordinator to learn about their perceptions and experience concerning how the skills modules work for students. We may conduct a focus group to further investigate particular areas. At the end, we will triangulate all the data collected, which will provide us with more concrete conclusions. Further research may be required in specific areas.