IL Instruction in the Graduate Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine a Masters in Education (MEDU) cohort at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) to measure their perceptions of the value of information literacy instruction in the graduate classroom. Findings indicate that MEDU students recognize the importance of information literacy skills and value the information literacy instruction they received in the masters program because it not only improved their information literacy skills but their overall achievement.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine a Masters in Education (MEDU) cohort at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) to measure their perceptions of the value of information literacy instruction in the graduate classroom. This paper will supply background information on both IUP’s MEDU Program and IUP’s Education Librarian, provide a review of the literature related to information literacy in higher education, present the research questions that were investigated in this study, describe the methodology and findings of this study, and provide recommendations for future studies of information literacy in the graduate classroom. It is the author’s hope that this study’s findings heighten faculty awareness of the importance of information literacy instruction to graduate student achievement.

Background: IUP’s Masters in Education Program

The current MEDU Program in the Department of Professional Studies in Education at IUP was conceptualized and developed as six 6-credit courses to be team taught and offered in fall, spring, and summer over two years. All applicants to the program must hold an Instructional I or II teaching certificate (or the equivalent if certified to teach in a state other than Pennsylvania). Enrolled students take all of their classes together as a cohort and learn to design an integrated curriculum across the content areas enhanced by the effective use of instructional technology. Required courses include: MEDU761- Community and Culture, MEDU762- Instruction and the Learner, MEDU763- Teacher as Researcher, MEDU764- Educational Change and Technology, MEDU765- Curriculum and Instruction, and MEDU766- Teacher as Leader (IUP’s Dept. of Professional Studies in Education, 2011).

Since the first cohort began, ten cohorts have completed the program, and one cohort remains active at IUP’s Northpointe branch campus. From the fall of 1997 to the spring of 2010, numerous combinations of teaching teams have been assembled from the faculty of the Department of Professional Studies in Education. However, in the summer of 2010, the MEDU teaching team was made up of one faculty member from the Department of Professional Studies in Education and one faculty member from the university library (the education librarian). These faculty members collaborated to incorporate information literacy instruction into the curriculum of the cohort’s first summer course, MEDU763- Teacher as Researcher.
Background: IUP’s Education Librarian

In January of 2006, IUP Libraries began a successful embedded librarian program in the university’s College of Education and Educational Technology (COE-ET). The program has improved the library’s relationship with faculty and students; created a more relevant collection of print, media, and electronic resources that meets curriculum, instruction, and research needs; and, most importantly, has improved the quality of teaching and learning in the College of Education (Felder, 2010). The overwhelming success of IUP Libraries’ embedded librarian program can be attributed to several factors:

- There was buy-in for the creation of the education librarian position on the part of both the university library and the COE-ET.
- COE-ET administrators and faculty were included in the interview process.
- The individual who was hired for the education librarian position possesses leadership skills, is a strong advocate for both the library and the COE-ET, had prior experience with collaboration and outreach, had prior work experience in the field of education, and held a doctoral degree in education (in addition to an MLS).
- The education librarian has developed a presence in the college by holding office hours in the COE-ET two days a week, attending COE-ET department meetings, serving as bibliographer to COE-ET departments, and teaching bibliographic instruction sessions and guest lectures for, not only main campus students, but COE-ET students who are taking classes at the branch campuses and centers.
- The education librarian has strengthened the working relationship between the university library and the COE-ET by developing collaborative programs, publishing scholarly works with COE-ET faculty, and presenting at professional conferences with COE-ET faculty (Felder, 2010).
- The education librarian has equal tenure status to faculty in the COE-ET.

At IUP, librarians go through the same processes as departmental faculty to achieve tenure and promotion. Departmental faculty must provide evidence of effective teaching, scholarship, and service. Librarians must provide evidence that they have fulfilled the responsibilities outlined in their job descriptions (including teaching), as well as evidence of continuing scholarly growth and service (IUP’s Division of Academic Affairs, 2011). Historically, librarians have been regarded by departmental faculty as skilled professionals but not peers (Blake, 1999). However, equal tenure status, as well as the doctoral degree in education and the commitment to collaboration and outreach, has earned IUP’s Education Librarian “peer status” with her COE-ET colleagues, enabling her to teach credit courses for the Department of Professional Studies in Education.

Literature Review

The American Library Association (1989) refers to those students who manage information effectively as information literate. Information literacy instruction has been a priority in many secondary schools since the American Association of School Libraries published the Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning in 1998. Although the Association of College and Research Libraries published its own Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education in 2000, information literacy was still not a focus in many college classrooms. However, in 2002 the Middle States Commission on Higher Education published Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation. In this publication, information literacy was clearly defined and described as “vital to all disciplines and to effective teaching and learning in any institution” (p. 32). The most recent edition of Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation, published in 2009, states that “information literacy is an essential component of any educational program at the graduate or undergraduate levels” (p. 42).

Colleges and universities eager to receive Middle States accreditation have begun to take notice and focus on the importance of information literacy. Many universities have developed undergraduate, credit-bearing information literacy courses, but graduate programs still lack an information literacy component. In addition, students seeking entry to graduate programs must often “meet stringent language literacy requirements but these do not stipulate requirements for, and there is no evaluation of, information literacy levels” (Kiflik & Kutnoff, 2006, p. 129).

However, “graduate students are held to a higher caliber than undergraduate students. Graduate students are expected to have better research skills and more in-depth and applied knowledge” (Lelli, 2010, para. 3).

Many college professors have similar expectations of their graduate students but fail to recognize the lack of information literacy skills that plague students who have been out of school for ten, twenty, even thirty years or more. Because of rapid advancements in information technology, the academic library they once knew as undergraduates is barely recognizable. Without ICT skills and the knowledge of advanced search techniques, graduate students lack the self-efficacy to become information literate (Patterson, 2009). According to Iremped and Davidson (2008), “graduate students, like undergraduates, come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds, and frequently have knowledge gaps about finding and using information that can impede their success as researchers. When librarians and faculty advisors simply assume that these students are comfortable navigating library resources or properly evaluating information, we miss an opportunity to help them transition from novice researchers to expert scholars” (para. 2). In fact, Patterson (2009) suggests that librarians have a direct role in teaching faculty how to incorporate teaching information literacy skills into the graduate curriculum, 10.

Research Questions

The research questions that were investigated in this study are as follows.

1. Prior to taking the third course in the MEDU program (MEDU702—Teacher as Researcher), to what extent did Northpointe MEDU students recognize the importance of information literacy skills to student achievement in a master’s program?

2. To what extent did Northpointe MEDU students perceive that having a university librarian as one of their professors improved their information literacy skills?

3. To what extent did Northpointe MEDU students perceive that having a university librarian as one of their professors improved their achievement?

4. To what extent did Northpointe MEDU students perceive that having a MEDU702—Teacher as Researcher, team taught by a university librarian and a professor from the Department...
of Professional Studies in Education, would be more effective as the first course in the program?

(5) After completing the third course in the MEDU program (MEDU76X: Teacher as Researcher), to what extent did Northpoint MEDU students recognize the importance of information literacy skills to student achievement in a masters program?

Method

This study was a one-time collection of data after students completed the third course in the MEDU program, MEDU76X: Teacher as Researcher. The Northpoint MEDU cohort, comprised of 18 students, was a focus of this study. Cohort members are all adults ranging in age from approximately 22 to 35 years. This study was conducted at JUP’s Northpoint branch campus (located 12 miles north of the city of Pittsburgh) in the fall of 2010 during the MEDU students’ MEDU76X: Educational Change and Technology course. The researcher enlisted the help of Dr. Deanna Laverick and Dr. Crystal Maddox, team-teachers of MEDU76X, to administer the survey. Northpoint MEDU students were made aware of the study during the first week of class. Dr. Laverick and Dr. Maddox distributed two copies of the consent form to each student at this time. Students who wished to participate signed and dated one copy of the consent form and returned it to Drs. Laverick and Maddox. They kept the other copy for their records. Any student who did not wish to participate was instructed to retain both copies of the consent form (unmarked) to Drs. Laverick and Maddox. During the second week of class, Dr. Laverick and Dr. Maddox took those students who gave their consent to participate in the study to the Northpoint computer lab to complete the survey online. Dr. Laverick returned all consent forms to the researcher, and the researcher tallied the results of the survey.

Findings

All 18 students enrolled in JUP’s Masters in Education Program at the Northpoint branch campus gave their informed consent to participate in this study. In addition, every student completed the survey. Results of the survey are broken down by question below.

Survey Question #1: Prior to taking the third course in the MEDU program, I recognized the importance of information literacy skills to student achievement in a masters program. Response: Strongly Agree-11, Agree-4, Neutral-3, Disagree-0, Strongly Disagree-0

Survey Question #2: Having a university librarian as one of the professors in the third team-taught course of the MEDU program has improved my information literacy skills. Response: Strongly Agree-11, Agree-7, Neutral-0, Disagree-0, Strongly Disagree-0

Survey Question #3: Having a university librarian as one of the professors in the third team-taught course of the MEDU program has improved my achievement. Response: Strongly Agree-4, Agree-6, Neutral-3, Disagree-0, Strongly Disagree-0

Survey Question #4: I feel that the third course in the MEDU program, team taught by a university librarian and a professor from the Department of Professional Studies in Education, would be more effective as the first course. Response: Strongly Agree-13, Agree-3, Neutral-2, Disagree-0, Strongly Disagree-0

Survey Question #5: I now recognize, after completing the third team-taught course in the MEDU program, that information literacy skills are crucial to student achievement in a masters program. Response: Strongly Agree-12, Agree-0, Neutral-0, Disagree-0, Strongly Disagree-0

Open-ended Question: If you feel that you need to elaborate on any of your responses to the above statements, please do so below. Response: One of the 18 students enrolled in the MEDU program requested to open-ended question. The student wrote about his/her lack of information literacy skills prior to taking MEDU76X. The student explored, “I feel it extremely frustrating to know there was more information out there but did not have the knowledge to research this information. During the third MEDU class, we were given a thorough explanation of all the library resources.” A discussion of this comment is included in the following section of this paper.

Discussion and Recommendations

Two-thirds of the students in this study strongly agreed (and the rest agreed) that information literacy skills are crucial to student achievement in a masters program, and all of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that having a university librarian as one of the professors in the third team-taught course of the MEDU program improved their information literacy skills. In addition, all but three of the students in this study either agreed or strongly agreed that having a university librarian as one of the professors in the third team-taught course of the MEDU program improved their achievement. Based on these findings, it was the researcher’s recommendation that the coordinator of JUP’s MEDU program continue to ask the education librarians to team teach the MEDU76X course so that information literacy instruction remains a part of the curriculum.

Because of the results of this study, the researcher also recommended that the coordinator of the MEDU program change the sequence of the program’s courses. Over two-thirds of the students in this study strongly agreed that MEDU76X, team taught by a university librarian and a professor from the Department of Professional Studies in Education, would be more effective as the first course. Since the MEDU program is research-intensive (and information literacy instruction fits nicely with the MEDU76X course theme of “Teacher as Researcher”) it only makes sense that students would want to acquire information literacy skills as early as possible in order to apply them to the rest of their coursework. As one student wrote in his/her response to the open-ended question, it is “frustrating” to try and complete coursework in the MEDU program when information literacy skills are lacking.

It is also interesting to note that only three of the students in this study strongly agreed that they recognized the importance of information literacy skills to student achievement in a masters program prior to taking MEDU76X. After completing the course, however, two-thirds of the students strongly agreed (and the rest agreed) that information literacy skills are crucial to student achievement in a masters program. These responses suggest that the students in this study placed great value upon the information literacy instruction they received in MEDU76X.

Although the students in this study felt that their information literacy skills and overall achievement improved as a result of the information literacy instruction they received in their MEDU76X course, new studies should be conducted in order to determine whether or not collaboration between department and library faculty, for the purpose of integrating information literacy instruction into curriculum, improves information literacy skills and student achievement across graduate levels, disciplines, and institutions of higher education. Instead of examining student perceptions, other studies might focus on instructor perceptions of the value of information literacy instruction or grade/achievement ratings in relationship to information literacy instruction.

Conclusion

Academic libraries, and the resources they provide, have changed drastically over the past twenty to thirty years. Card catalogs have been replaced by online catalogs, print collections have been replaced by online databases, and interlibrary loan has been replaced by document delivery. Unlike today’s undergraduate students who were brought up in the Digital Age and, because of their interaction with technology from childhood, are categorized as “digital natives,” many graduate students are “digital immigrants” who adopt technology skills later in life. Graduate faculty tend to assume that their students know how to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively when, in fact, the graduate student’s need for information literacy instruction is often greater than the typical undergraduate student’s need. The graduate students in this study realized the information literacy instruction they received because they felt that it not only improved their information literacy skills but their overall achievement in the classroom. These findings warrant additional studies that examine the effects of information literacy instruction on graduate student achievement. Because the goal of many graduate programs is to produce scholars who can...
conduct independent and significant research, it is imperative that faculty consider incorporating information literacy instruction into their graduate curricula.

References


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