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Recommended Citation
Kacy Lundstrom and Flora Shrode. "Undergraduates and Topic Selection: A Librarian's Role" Journal of Library Innovation 4.2 (2013): 23-41.

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January 2013

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JOURNAL OF LIBRARY INNOVATION

Volume 4, Issue 2, 2013

Article

Undergraduates and Topic Selection: A Librarian's Role

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Abstract

Research shows that undergraduate students struggle with the initial stage of the research process, mainly identifying and defining a topic. Little current research addresses how undergraduates engage in this process, including how and where they seek help. The results of focus groups indicate that students have individual and varied methods for topic selection, but that many of them choose topics based on their perception of a few major characteristics, mainly perceived ease, pleasing the instructor/following the assignment, personal relatability and/or interest, and the ability to locate sufficient resources to research a topic. Many students identified their instructor as a person to ask for assistance, but fewer recognized a librarian's role in this process. This article identifies how embedded librarians might better assist students with this difficult piece of the research process.

Librarians and instructors often hear students mention potentially difficult topics at the beginning of a research writing assignment, e.g., "I want to write about immigration." Often, when prompting students to narrow the focus of their questions, the result doesn't improve much ("Immigration in Europe?"). Many times students tend to choose topics with very little understanding of the context surrounding the primary issue. This lack of context leads students to choose topics that are difficult, broad, or simplistic and overused. Librarians often encounter students at the point that they are choosing research topics, simply by the fact that topic selection never really ends until the entire research process is over. Topics constantly change, being shaped and reshaped as more information is gathered and evaluated. At least this is what writing instructors and librarians hope for their students. Librarians, in their traditional role of helping students find resources, can have significant impact on the direction students take in sizing up potential topics. Some students, despite our urging, cling tightly to their original topics and an unsupported thesis they determine before reading or conducting research. Considering the impact that topic choice can have on a student's research experience (not to mention on the written product, the grade, or the personal value resulting from the writing), careful consideration should be given to the librarian's role in assisting with this particular aspect of the research process.

Utah State University's (USU) library instruction program uses a course-integrated, embedded librarianship model, especially in first and second year English composition classes (Engl1010 and Engl2010). A librarian is assigned to every section of those courses, most classes tend to visit with a librarian three to four times a semester, and students schedule numerous personal research consultations. Occasionally, students will come to the library without having selected a topic or with a very loose idea of what they want to write about. Usually, students are instructed to have a topic in mind before their class visits the library. While most instructors encourage students to be flexible with their topics and to redefine them as needed, many students have a hard time navigating the process of making a topic workable or determining when to discard their initial chosen topic altogether.

Our research goals emerged in response to these issues. The purpose of this research is to learn more about how students choose their topics for research papers. Understanding this will help our librarians provide more effective library assistance during the brainstorming process and will also help us revise our current library instruction curriculum. Research questions include:

- what process do students engage in when selecting a topic for a persuasive research paper;
- what factors contribute to this decision; and
- how can librarians effectively assist during this process?

Literature Review

While much research has been conducted on the research behaviors of undergraduates, little research has been conducted specifically on undergraduates and topic selection, especially in relation to a persuasive research assignment. The interdisciplinary nature of this topic lends itself to research in composition teaching throughout all educational levels and in library and information sciences. The necessity for students to choose a topic to write about in English composition classes has led to research at all educational levels. Most of the research done specifically on topic selection has been from the perspective of writing instructors and much of it is quite dated.

There is some literature about graduate students dissertation and thesis topic selection, but the focus is removed from most undergraduate's research motivations and needs. In a piece that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2008, Robert Hampel discusses doubts about the topic process he encouraged for his graduate students, which was to "fill a gap in the literature, identify a problem that has not been studied adequately, and add a brick to the wall of knowledge" (p. A72). He decided to consult his colleagues and found that the course of their research stemmed from four main factors: future research often is a reaction to questions that arise from current research, autobiographical themes inform future research, that future research is often the product of current conversations with colleagues, and that it is often a reaction to others' wants and funding opportunities. Lei (2009) writes a step-by-step recommendation for how to approach the thesis or dissertation topic selection process, including strategies like consulting professors, considering research funding, and reading the literature. Ziegler (1992) gives a list of criteria that include more emphasis on scope and publication potential. However, many of these considerations are more comprehensive and particular than those encountered by undergraduates writing a basic research paper.

Some studies examine topic selection and younger researchers' writing in the creative and nonfiction genres, including assessing the effectiveness of providing topics for students or allowing them to choose their own topics (with few or no limitations). Graves (1991) and Atwell (1990) both emphasize that important benefits can come from allowing students to have ownership of their own topics through selection.

This perspective is supported by other composition instructors, such as Manning (1999), who shares a list of ways to get students thinking about topics from their own experiences. In contrast, McKenna and McKenna (2000) suggest offering children topics to help guide students through the massive amount of information, especially information found on the Internet. Figuring out which information to use can be a stumbling block for students when they are given the opportunity to choose their own topics (p. 54-56). Hidi and McLaren (1991) state, "From an educational standpoint, it is necessary to get children to write about topics other than those of personal, individual interest and especially school-relevant topics. It is in this area that we have to be careful and not simply assume that if children choose a topic as interesting, this choice or rating guarantees that a sufficient knowledge base is available for writing" (p. 195).

These conversations raise the question, if students are not ready to choose their own topics in K-12, are they ready to select topics as undergraduates? Of the students we spoke to, only one instructor had given students a pre-chosen topic. Students could choose an angle or focus within that topic but they had a prescribed focus to start from. Because many students are given free reign with their topic choices, librarians and instructors often see the same, repetitive topics appear. Students may also not realize how much information is available on nearly any topic and instead reach for ones they know will have ample published research. According to one librarian, “Sometimes I feel as if I could meet 80% of the demand for research materials in my library if I collected materials on about a dozen topics...with more available in more interesting formats on more topics, too many students show an inclination to retrench--to force us to create, for their daily assignment use, a collection too heavy on a limited number of topics" (Boardman, 1995, p. 23).

From the writing instructor perspective, Trocco (2000) reiterates this problem: “[It is] tough to persuade undergraduates to delve deeply into their research topics” (p. 628). Trocco (2000) continues to discuss how this reluctance often translates into students writing superficial papers (p. 628). In response, Trocco encourages his students to study weird things: “Students are often intrigued by scholastic questions closely tied to their unconventional pursuits” (1998, para. 6) He defines “weird” as topics loosely relating to science and health, especially topics relating to alternative medicine and healing, but his discussion about helping students to find unconventional topics to research is relevant in a broader context as well. In our experience, when conversing with students who have not yet chosen a topic, they often tell the librarian that they are not interested in anything. Perhaps librarians could be of more help by coming to class prepared with ideas about unconventional topics that could spur students’ thinking. More modeling of unique topics by the librarian and instructor might be useful to students at the very beginning of the brainstorming process.

Scope is a major issue for students when determining the appropriateness of topics. Shenton and Dixon (2004) discuss students’ tendency towards broad themes rather than topics (p. 182). Ribar (1998) discusses instructor strategies for guiding students towards appropriate topics and scope in a history class, such as providing students with continuing questions that help students identify larger themes and issues relating to historical discourse. Diaz and O’Hanlon (2001) discuss their strategies for helping students with the process, including using the Web as a resource, particularly for controversial or “hot” topics. They conclude generally that, if evaluated effectively, it can be a useful source for undergraduates engaging with these types of topics.

Other authors focus on outside factors that may have an impact on a student’s topic decision. Whitmire (2003) discusses the relationship between epistemological beliefs of undergraduates and its influence on information seeking behavior, including in the topic selection stage. In this study, researchers rated undergraduates somewhere on a scale of low to high epistemological believers, low being defined as students who would reject conflicting information; medium as students who believed that conflict can exist between varying pieces of information; and high as students who understood the importance of

context, viewed themselves as creators of knowledge, and used critical thinking to evaluate information (p. 5). They found that this scale related to how topics were chosen (i.e., two students with low ratings allowed their instructor to choose for them) (p. 13). Their research begins to hint at some of the factors involved in students' topic choices.

According to Head's and Eisenberg's 2010 report, *Truth Be Told: How College Students Evaluate and Use Information in the Digital Age,* 84% of the students surveyed agreed that the most difficult part of the course-related research process was getting started, and 66% agreed that defining a topic was the most difficult (p. 3). While it is clear that students struggle with this aspect of the research process, librarians are not usually called in for instruction or consultation at this point.

Head and Eisenberg (2010) conclude,

> Simply put, we are proponents of rethinking and revitalizing library instruction so it gives students guidance for overcoming what many reported was the most difficult part of the entire process—getting started and developing a topic that carries them through the entire research process, in addition to using the best sources. (p. 39)

Likewise, our research seeks to learn more about how students engage with this difficult process of topic selection and how and when librarians can effectively assist with navigating this barrier.

Methods

We wanted to hear students talk freely about their topic selection process and thus conducted four focus groups. We invited students enrolled in English 2010 (sophomore composition) or Honors classes in which they had written persuasive research essays during the spring 2012 semester. We marketed the opportunity to participate in a focus group during library English 2010 instruction sessions, ensuring that each student was already familiar with the idea of having a librarian assigned to their class to assist them with their research.

The focus groups were structured as 90-minute recorded interviews, with each group including five to seven students and two reference and instruction librarians, with one moderating and one as an observer who monitored the recording equipment. The librarians led the discussion from a pre-determined list of questions (see Appendix A) that related to the initial research query about the processes student use to choose research topics, but the librarians branched out from these questions in follow-up discussions during the sessions as needed.

By nature, research conducted with focus groups results in data that is general and exploratory, which was our experience. However, what we learned about students' reasoning and perceptions of the topic selection process and about a librarian's role in this process has value for both practical applications and future research in this area.

Discussion

The majority of time spent with each focus group involved discussing factors leading up to a student's decision to explore a particular topic for a research essay. We began each interview by asking students about their general research goals. Some students associated their research goals immediately with the writing experience: "I'm not a writer. I don't care for the process," one student noted. Another student stated personal and professional goals that led to her topic, truancy: "To get a better understanding. I work as an aide at a charter school. It's so strict. I felt there's gotta be a way to let students and parents know this is a serious issue."

Not surprisingly, getting a good grade featured as a primary goal for many students. A few students expressed goals that went beyond their final course grade, such as to learn more or to make an impact on others' ideas or for a policy decision. One student described his motivation this way: "It comes down not to how much you learn in college but getting good grades to get my diploma." A subset of focus group participants, including one student previously mentioned, were students whom we classified as "mature researchers." The main difference between these students and their peers was that they were more willing to do research for the sake of learning and focused less on doing it just for the grade in the class. They were eager to say something new about their topics, as opposed to students who conducted research in hopes of stumbling upon a publication that would confirm everything they already believed. These mature researchers also seemed more readily aware of their passions, whereas others described feeling disengaged no matter what the topic.

Once students in the focus groups had discussed their goals and motivations for their research, we asked them to discuss where they were in the research process. A few students had already finished their persuasive research papers and submitted them to their instructors. Most students were in the process of revising drafts, and all of them had already chosen topics. Most considered themselves "done with the research part."

Student topics varied from broad to specific and from the often-discussed to the unique. The danger of aggressive driving was a topic chosen by a student who wanted to determine whether Utah's reputation for poor drivers was true. Another student researched the disintegration of the family unit, which she found by searching Google for a list of papers that gave her examples of possible topics. She continued, stating, "Google answers pretty much every question I ask." Another student began researching torture, but he was having a hard time focusing his topic, so his teacher helped him narrow it to a few specific points. Another student had completed several assignments on why designated bike lanes are not beneficial to cyclists or motorists, but when he had to commit to the final topic for the persuasive research essay, he changed to focus on why Iran is not a nuclear threat to the U.S. He had learned about this in other classes and had a feel for the research sources available; he didn't think that wading through those sources would be overwhelming. He thought that locating research on the bike lane topic would be more challenging and too time consuming for his schedule and the English 2010 paper deadlines.

One student chose the topic of high-stakes testing and its effects, which he chose simply because he had an opinion on it. Another student based his topic on his personal experience with quitting smoking. That student also considered writing about the existence of aliens. Another student said choosing a topic was easy for him; he chose to research the validity of the college football Bowl Championship Series (BCS), a topic which he clearly knew a lot about and had debated extensively with friends. One young man wrote about the importance of family mealtime, a topic he chose because he wanted to have kids someday and "wants to be sure to do it right." Another student had a similar family connection; he chose to write about Iran because his grandmother used to live there, and he wanted to see how people were treated. Other students spoke of making lists, talking to friends or family members, and watching documentaries for topic ideas.

When asked about whether or not they had rejected or reconsidered a topic, most students had a couple of topics in mind and settled on the one that seemed the easiest and the most viable for a persuasive research paper. One student discussed how his issue, which focused on why the U.S. should not be so reliant on corn, began to get so political that he became annoyed with it and wished he had written about daylight savings time instead. It is unclear whether or not the student would have found daylight savings time equally political if he had learned more about that topic.

One student explained how he had noticed religious discrimination in his workplace and described his topic selection process as "an easy project…helping change happen quickly on a small level." This student and others described the initial process of finding an interest as fairly easy. This implies that they associated their topic selection process, at least in answer to our question "tell us about your topic selection process," as that initial moment when they recognized an interest. They did not necessarily discuss all the shifting, rethinking, and refocusing that continued throughout their research process in their answers.

Contributing Factors

We specifically asked how the following factors contribute to their topic selection process: controversy (discussed in more depth below), perceived ease, pleasing the instructor/following the assignment, personal relatability/interest, ease of doing the research, and creativity. We also asked participants to respond to the following example topics: the validity of the romance novel genre, carrying concealed weapons on campus, assessing the US-Cuba trade embargo, racial implications of differentiation in punishment for using crack vs. using cocaine, and the impact of genetic modifications in food. These topics were chosen from student papers that were submitted for previous assessments of English 2010 persuasive research essays. Basic reactions to our suggested topics varied. Some students chose a topic based on a personal interest or experience (e.g., one student had personal experiences relating to drug use, another already had a strong interest in food modification, etc.). Others chose topics they thought were intriguing and researchable, but didn't necessarily have any previous

experience or connection (e.g., the US-Cuba trade embargo and racial implications of differential punishment for crack vs. cocaine).

A few topics elicited reactions. As an example, students tended to react negatively to the validity of the romance novel genre topic, which falls into the area of literary studies and investigations of how scholars and ordinary readers value different genres of fiction. Students questioned its "academic-ness." A couple of students said they'd be interested in reading such a paper, but then reaffirmed that they wouldn't want to research or write about it. This is an interesting paradox: students acknowledge something is interesting and worth reading, but that acknowledgement alone is not enough to fulfill their notion of what constitutes a legitimately academic topic for their own research paper. One student referred to the romance genre novel topic as immature and juvenile; while another student commented that he was concerned the research would not have an impact.

The idea of legitimacy warrants notice. Students want to research topics successfully with minimal frustration while satisfying what they perceive are the instructor's requirements. Nearly all the students in our study, and most of the students we work with in our library instruction classes, were given very few limitations as to their topics. The one exception was that a number of the instructors banned a few of the overly broad, overused controversial topics, such as abortion, gun control, and gay marriage. Despite this, considering the range of topics available to students, students tended towards more basic and "standard" topics. Elements of pop culture did not feature in any of the students' Persuasive Research Essay (PRE) topics. Creativity as a factor in the decision generally did not rank very highly, highlighting students' perceptions about academic legitimacy that may discourage them from topics that might be more creative and appropriate for a sophomore level writing course.

As students expanded on other possible topics they had considered but rejected, a number of them discussed a tension between personal interest and finding a topic that would get them a good grade. One student remarked, "Ease comes from interest." Personal interest ranked highly for all four focus groups, but it was nearly always discussed in tandem with whether or not it could help them be successful with the assignment, an assessment that usually directly translated to earning a good grade.

Ease in doing the research also ranked highly as a factor, but students discussed this characteristic alongside successfully completing the assignment. Students related perceived ease to whether or not they could readily find published research on the topic. One student considered pursuing the issue of removing children from a home without ample evidence of parental neglect, but he changed his topic because he could not find enough published research, even though he was more interested in it than the topic he ultimately chose.

Controversy.

The interview questions concentrated on controversy in multiple ways. The subject often came up at the beginning of the session when students were asked to describe their topics and how they chose them. Some students mentioned controversy as a factor in rejecting topics, and they discussed it in response to the final focus group question regarding characteristics of research topics (controversy being one of them). Students tended to have strong opinions about controversial material, but this entirely depended on their personal definition of controversy. Most said they avoided it. When prompted further, students revealed that by controversial they meant “hot topics” and often specifically stated topics such as abortion and matters relating to race as examples. Every group mentioned staying away from racially charged topics, in part because they did not want to have to censor themselves and feared being labeled racist by their peers during peer review. One student mentioned how he did not trust other students to give good feedback if they didn't agree with the premise of a controversial essay.

Another student expressed discomfort with offending people or being too critical. She viewed others' opinions on controversial topics as egotistical and so avoided those topics herself. She and others commented on a general lack of desire to be persuasive, or as they referred to it, argumentative. One student stated simply, "Controversy other people can worry about." This student seemed to consider some types of writers or writing are appropriately expected to tackle controversial issues, such as journalists and reporters who write for news publications and broadcasts.

There were a few exceptions to concerns about choosing a controversial topic. One student stated, "I would never shy away from controversy," and a few students mentioned that they found controversial topics appealing. Other comments implied that students’ comfort level in addressing controversy also related to their instructor and the environment established in their classroom.

Alternatively, one student who attested to loving controversy commented that he steered clear of controversy in his topic choice because he needed to pass. Towards the end of each conversation, students started to recognize that controversy is inherent in almost anything and that the definition did not apply only to topics like abortion, race, or gun control. This shift in thinking appeared to surface as students, prompted by the moderator to explain their idea of controversy, began to reflect on other topics they thought were relatively controversy free and to recognize how even those topics could be controversial.

Instructor participation.

Recognizing that instructors are the authorities who assign and grade research papers, we wanted to hear students’ impressions about their teachers’ approaches since, even though we provide library instruction in dozens of classes annually, we have limited knowledge about different instructors’ requirements. One of the authors followed up in spring semester 2013 by leading a discussion with English lecturers and graduate

instructors about their concerns with students' topic selection. The instructors found this useful and recommend revisiting this matter regularly. Also, the collaborative roles of the instructor and the librarian in assisting students make it necessary to examine the role of the instructor, particularly as it is perceived by students.

The instructor's presence and influence is detectable both in the focus group discussion and students' description of their topic selection process. In a direct sense, instructors were very engaged. Students mentioned that instructors required proposals and personal consultations as steps in defining their topic. One student discussed the level of support he felt from his instructor in this process: "For our research essays we did proposals to see if our idea would work. He was open with his time – he was great because we could talk to him about it. He encouraged us to push ourselves." Many instructors also facilitated generating ideas during the brainstorming process, using various exercises designed to help students identify topics and issues that mattered to them. One instructor handed out a sheet with questions to help spark topic ideas. Another had students make lists of things they were passionate about. Other students mentioned writing prompts and writing journals that helped them brainstorm topic ideas. Only one instructor was mentioned as giving specific parameters; he gave his classes a larger topic relating to advertising in the 1960s, and students chose subtopics within those parameters. As mentioned earlier, a few topics such as abortion, gun control, and gay marriage were banned as well.

Indirectly, the instructor's influence was evident in other ways. One student expressed his love of controversy: "I love running smack into the middle of it. You know you'll not change others' minds, but it's cool to see how others think." He commented that he regretted backing off his original, controversial topic, stating that he "didn't know the teacher well enough to take the leap and wanted a decent grade." This was perhaps the strongest evidence of instructor influence – students' continual emphasis on getting a good grade. Students chose topics that they thought the instructor would approve and therefore give them a good grade, and they shied away from ones that they thought might stir disagreement from the instructor, which included topics they identified as controversial. Another student reported how he originally wanted to write a religious paper, but he also wanted a good grade and figured his teacher had read too many religious-based papers. He wrote a paper he thought would fulfill the assignment and get him a good grade, and he wrote a second paper for himself on his original, religious topic. He said that he realized he probably could have turned in his second paper and received a good grade after all, stating "I probably could've just sneezed my paper and got an okay grade…the teacher likes my writing style."

Librarian Roles

Discussion regarding the librarian's role in the topic selection process reveals a lot about how students view librarians in general. In fact, it was difficult to get students to focus on how librarians could help with topic selection; they often naturally veered to how librarians could help with the more traditional aspects of research, such as finding and citing sources, especially once a topic had already been chosen.

Only one person mentioned discussing topics with a librarian. This student was an honors student and seemed particularly motivated. Most students talked to an instructor, family member, or friend about their topic. Occasionally, the instructor required a consultation regarding the topic, but many students consulted their instructor on their own as well.

Some students believed that librarians could help with topics but that a librarian's main role occurs after students have chosen a topic, mainly helping them find books and articles. One student summed up a librarian's role this way: "They're like a tour guide for research." Another student said librarians could show you places to go and how to find books.

A couple of students were clearly aware that they had an embedded librarian associated with their class, while others said more marketing of services offered by librarians was needed. One student commented, "I don't feel like it's made aware to the English students that librarians are at your disposal, how to get a hold of them, where they are." While librarians at USU make efforts to place their contact information and availability in multiple places, including in syllabi, on library websites, in specific class section's course management software, and by face-to-face interaction, many students were still unaware of how to get help from a librarian. One mentioned he knew his librarian's contact information was in the syllabus but that he "didn't tend to pay close attention to that." Another said that his teacher harped on the librarian and her contact information in the syllabus, but he wasn't sure that his fellow students were clearly aware of what that meant.

One student related this lack of awareness of the librarians' availability and capability to what they saw from librarians in high school, where they knew about the local collection, and the emphasis was on finding and checking out books in the collection. Another student noted, "[There was] not a lot of research going on."

Other comments probe at larger issues in librarianship, including perpetuated stereotypes that limit the librarian's ability to assist students. One student said, "It's kind of confusing. When I think of a librarian, it's someone who knows where the books are and reads the books. When I'm thinking about the topics, I think of my teacher because she majors in English. Maybe people are confused about the role of the librarians and don't realize they have backgrounds similar to the teacher as having done a lot of research - more than just knowing where the books are." While many perceptions have

moved beyond seeing librarians simply as people who “read books,” most perceptions of librarians’ roles do not encompass the librarian’s expertise in helping with the entire research process from topic selection and brainstorming to information use and synthesis.

An obvious step librarians could take to help students become aware that these professionals are available and interested in helping with any and all aspects of research is to visit every section of English composition in person. Librarians at USU do this for freshman English, taking only a few minutes of class time in the regular classroom to introduce themselves. We could expand this to include second year composition because students are assigned to write more extensive persuasive research papers and the potential may be greater for students to benefit from a librarian’s assistance. In these brief introductions we could emphasize how librarians could help at the topic selection stage of research.

Librarians Versus Instructors

When we suggested that librarians might assist in selecting topics, the students admitted that a librarian might be a good person to talk to because a librarian might know about what topics are researchable. Two students mentioned the idea that librarians are experts in locating sufficient resources to research a topic. Students recognized that librarians could be useful in choosing a topic, but they had little experience to draw from. Most of their English 2010 classes visited the library after they had already selected their topics. Students tended to compare the usefulness of consulting a librarian with the benefits of consulting their professor. One student said librarians play an important role because instructors couldn't do everything, but that helping students choose a topic was the teacher's role; the librarian helps with research after the topic is selected. One student said she would rather go to her instructor to be sure she was following the assignment. Another student said librarians might be “safer” to consult with depending on the rapport a student has with the instructor. Another student echoed this idea, expressing the view that librarians rarely know students personally as well as instructors do. One student mentioned that one benefit of consulting a librarian was that a librarian might know more about the topic, which again assumes librarians have considerable knowledge on a very wide range of topics. Other students recognized the benefit of consulting both resources: “I go to the librarian and then go talk to the teacher.” It is likely that other students also consult both their instructor and one or more librarians, and this approach seems like it would be quite fruitful. Librarians could emphasize more strongly how steps in the research process are iterative and how students can benefit from multiple conversations throughout with both their teacher and reference librarians.

Student Suggestions for Changes in Practice

Students had a few suggestions for how librarians could incorporate themselves more effectively into the process of topic selection. One student suggested talking to students individually and suggesting places to find inspiration for topics. Many librarians already

do this during library instruction sessions, but those classes are often scheduled after students have taken the initial steps in the topic selection process. Students also mentioned that librarians could enter the process earlier if they market themselves better. The one student who had consulted a librarian during his initial topic selection process found her very helpful. He suggested that students should have a few topic ideas in mind before they approach a librarian. Other suggestions related to aspects of the research process other than topic selection, including some ideas for changes a student thought would make the library website easier to navigate.

Conclusion and Future Study

Simply declaring that librarians can and should help students during their research topic selection process does not adequately address all of the issues revealed in our focus groups. One student mentioned that his class had come into the library for help with research, and he would have liked to talk to his class librarian individually, but there was “not enough librarian to go around.” This statement encapsulates many of the challenges in library instruction. There is acknowledgement of a librarian's ability to be useful but with an immediate recognition that this help has limitations. Every discussion about spending more time with students should certainly be predicated with the question, do librarians have time and resources, and are they best spent in this particular area?

In consideration of our own embedded librarian program, we wondered if having students come into the library before they had a topic would be useful. The likely answer is that it would be useful to some students. However, upon more reflection, it seems that recognizing and engaging in the "process" aspect of the topic selection is more significant. As mentioned earlier, librarians could seek additional opportunities to introduce themselves to students and begin explaining that our purpose is to assist them and to describe ways we can interact, e.g., in person, via email, through text or chat. One lesson used that attempts this is a short activity that has students brainstorm all the aspects of the research the students have struggled with. The librarian can then discuss how librarians can assist in each of those processes, including in the topic selection and redefining stages. Emphasizing topic selection as a process might be equally, if not more, beneficial to students than focusing on the final choice. This places librarians in an already strategic place for helping students consider their topics during the time that they are finding information. We frequently hear the following question from students looking for information for their persuasive research essay: "Can you help me find research that proves....?" And we respond: "Are you certain that the information out there on this topic supports that?" By reading information sources and noting what they learn along the way, students can allow the information they find to shape their topic and their perspective. This iterative approach is central to learning how to use information effectively.

We often tell students to be flexible with their topics, but students still struggle with the various tensions that exist because of their perception of which topic will be successful. The focus group discussions indicated that most students perceive success based on a

grade and what they are most interested in researching and writing about, which could lead to genuine personal benefit resulting from completing the assignment.

Changes in Practice

The results of this research, while exploratory, clearly demonstrate that students are confused about where to seek help and how to choose and redefine research topics that lend themselves to inquiry and to successful research papers. At USU, librarians have shifted the focus in instruction sessions from emphasizing how to search various databases in order to discover a long list of information sources. Now we suggest that students use their time in the library to find one or two good articles to read carefully. We talk individually with students about what constitutes a “good” article for their topic, and we encourage students to be alert to questions that arise from their reading that may inspire them to adjust their topic or argument.

We structure our instruction time so that the majority of time is given to individual consultation. In order to avoid long demonstrations, we have created videos for students to watch as homework prior to visiting the library. This allows us to dedicate almost all of our in-class time with students, one-on-one, with their individual topics. During these brief individual consultations, librarians are able to help students brainstorm topics and think about ways to refocus their ideas. Many students, in the initial phases of research, are aware that their topics are broad, but they are not sure what to do about it. This is where we attempt to reemphasize the importance of reading as a way to direct research, which inevitably affects the formation of the topic.

In response to the findings of this study, we are in the process of reconsidering best ways to use this class-time. While individual consultations have been successful in many instances, individual consultations are often rushed or we are simply unable to speak to all the students in a class. We are continuously rethinking how to use that time most effectively, including creating learning activities that directly address topic selection, which still draw upon the context of student’s individual research interests. For example, we are currently creating learning activities that help students evaluate information for usage rather than just for credibility. Similar activities can be built to help students brainstorm unique topics, and more explicitly, identify various subtopics and research directions available to them in their original topic. For example, creating an activity that requires students to scan headlines in a newspaper, such as *The New York Times,* and to begin to identify what interests them and why can be a good way to get students to broaden their ideas.

We also need to collect more data about what instructors at our institution are already doing; i.e., learning what activities they are utilizing in their classroom to help students at this stage, what problems they see arising in students’ choices of topics, and how they view collaboration with a librarian in this area. This will help us determine where we can embed ourselves within their teaching processes. We can also work with instructors to create new activities that target topic selection more directly. One example may be to have scaffold activities throughout the process that alert students to the notion that their

topics are fluid and to help give them ways to think of reframing their argument and topics based on what they read. Research activities can help students follow trails of information to redefine their topic as a more organic process. As an example, students identify the most interesting article they read and then track down one person or piece of information referenced in that paper.

We also learned from these findings that while we feel like we are embedding ourselves in ways that reach students, such as in their online learning systems, in their syllabi, and in the classroom, many students are still unaware that librarians can help them. In response, we are reassessing our marketing strategies. Students have indicated that a combination of print and online resources is useful. We created a "Where to start" handout that students can take with them, in addition to the online guides we offer. These changes demonstrate our shift from helping students find sources to an emphasis on helping them with the more difficult task of learning, which includes assisting with reading strategies, thinking critically throughout the process, and defining (and redefining) a topic.

There are barriers for librarians as we shift our focus, mainly the preconceived ideas of our role from all parties: ourselves, students, and instructors. Allowing librarians to effectively integrate into these processes requires a shift in theory and practice and a rethinking of the role of the librarian. It also requires clearer communication between instructors and librarians as we assume redefined roles with students. Student responses revealed that they are aware of the barriers that surround seeking assistance, particularly in terms of the instructor's influence in this decision. However, our work suggests students would benefit from librarians' and instructors' blurring the boundaries of their information literacy roles in order to integrate themselves into the research processes that students are struggling with the most.

While our research provides an important context and discussion for a librarian's role, especially within an embedded librarian instruction model, future research is needed to develop a methodology to assess the "read a few sources first" approach to topic selection. Important assessment data might include observations and impressions from instructors, students, and librarians. Librarians could also assess students' research papers, as they have done in the past at our institution, with an eye toward identifying how this modified approach to information literacy instruction affects students' topic selection. More research is also needed on instructors' methods in supporting topic selection and how and where librarians can integrate with ongoing attempts to assist students in the writing classroom. This research brings us closer to understanding students' expectations and processes for choosing topics and to understanding how librarians can increase their effectiveness in assisting with this difficult and essential piece of the research process.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Where are you in your research? What progress have you made?
2. What are your goals for a research assignment?
3. Tell us about your topic selection process.
    a. Did you discuss your topic with anyone?
4. Did you reject or reconsider your topic at any point in the process? Why?
5. How easy was it for you to choose a research topic? Was the selection process difficult or easy?
6. What did you your instructor do to facilitate this process?
    a. How helpful did you consider their suggestions to be?
    b. Did your instructor outlaw any topics? Which?
7. Sample Topic Activity. Rate these topics in terms of which you would most likely select to research?
    a. The validity of the romance novel genre.
    b. Carrying concealed weapons on campus.
    c. Assessing the US-Cuba trade embargo.
    d. Racial implications of differentiation in punishment for using crack versus using cocaine.
    e. The impact of genetic modifications in food.
8. Factors in the Selection Process. The following words were written on pieces of paper and placed in the center of the table. Students were asked to discuss the importance of each in their selection process:
    a. personal relatability and/or interest
    b. opportunity for creativity
    c. researchability [1]
    d. pleasing the instructor/following the assignment
    e. controversy
    f. perceived ease

[1] *Researchability* is the ability to locate sufficient resources to research a topic.

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