# Short-Term Library Skill Competencies: Arguing for the Achievable

**Richard Feinberg and Christine King**

*Leaders in the bibliographic instruction field advocate high performance standards for librarians and students involved in the library use education process. The focus of these standards has shifted over time; however, today librarians are urged to teach at extremely dynamic levels and students are encouraged, through this teaching, to become lifelong, expert library researchers. The authors of this article question the practical nature of these standards and affirm for themselves a simpler, more achievable set of goals and objectives.*

Over the years, leaders in the bibliographic instruction field have advocated that undergraduates become competent, independent library users and learn enough bibliographic skills to be able to conduct effective library research throughout their lives. One writer states that "the aim of the library instruction program is to produce an independent library user who has developed a successful problem-solving research strategy."[1] Another writes that the teaching library must maintain "a commitment to bringing all library resources to bear on the development of college students into life-long learners."[2] For another, the question is "how best to give students the ability to acquire their own information thereby enabling them to become independent learners."[3]

Other leaders in the field stress that if long-term competencies in independent library research are to be achieved, librarians must use educational theory and systematic methodology. Instruction librarians are urged to make their teaching more effective by using "conceptual framework," "guided design," and other problem-solving techniques.[4] Topsy Smally states that

> it is vitally important that in our bibliographic instruction programs we impart to the student those conceptual skills which will enable him to search out and gain access to pertinent, relevant information suited to actual needs. If the student is to learn how to use a library competently and independently, we should aim at doing no less.[5]

In the same vein, Florence Hopkins stresses the importance of exceptionally high-quality teaching by arguing that

> to use library resources effectively, students must connect the resources with a basic understanding of how knowledge is created, communicated, and synthesized within subject disciplines, how knowledge differs structurally from one field to another, and how bibliographic resources reflect the various stages of the learning process.[6]

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While these and other leading writers present forceful and thought-provoking ideas, the authors of this article doubt the ideas are practical. What these writers exhort us to do, e.g., teach logic, abstract reasoning, the organization of literature in different disciplines, and critical evaluation of sources, are the things we seem to do least well. And those things we do best, such as teaching students library mechanics, helping them to achieve short-term competencies, and developing confidence in using the library, are what the leaders disparage as having limited value.

If there are practitioners in the field who can actually teach at such dynamic levels, they are to be commended. But alas, our efforts at Stony Brook, while certainly earnest, do not approximate these standards. We notice that the advocates of strict methodology and long-term competencies, while implying that their teaching is more effective, do not provide evidence of superior results. For that matter, only a handful of articles has appeared that describe attempts at measuring program effectiveness. While some of these offer statistical evidence of learning retention, there is still no compelling body of literature to indicate that one method is superior to another for teaching library skills, whether for the short or long term.[7]

## THE PROBLEM OF RETENTION

Several writers cited above believe that long-term retention is rare in library instruction because librarians fail to use a teaching methodology that allows students to make conceptual associations about what they are learning. Therefore, things taught hang by themselves instead of becoming part of a symmetrical, organic structure that can be better understood and remembered. While this argument undoubtedly has merit, another factor that is not sufficiently considered is the frequency with which students use their library. This can affect the degree to which what they have learned can be reinforced and built upon. Because most Stony Brook students are not required to use the library on a regular basis, they do not practice what they have learned. Thus, their learning is neither maintained nor reinforced.[8]

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It is unreasonable, therefore, to expect many of our students to remember the specifics of what we teach. For that reason, we do not teach for long-term results.

Our emphasis in teaching is on a select number of skills for the short term. We know when our students return to the library, they remember what was taught imperfectly, but there is some retention and we can relate to these traces of memory for better reference interviews and better user response. This is quite acceptable to us. Our objective is to expose students to our library so that during later contact at the reference desk they can *recognize* what needs to be done to research a question. In contrast to many B.I. writers, we do not expect our students to be able to *recall* independently how to design a research strategy for each question. This is expecting far too much of the sporadic library user. The formulation of an appropriate library research strategy is a complex intellectual process that is best accomplished by the reference librarian who draws on expertise gained from years of experience. While the exceptional user may master a particular library for his or her research needs with little or no help from librarians, *independent library use for lifelong learning* is not an achievable goal for the majority. Nor is it a necessary one.

The leading authors contend that students should retain library skills throughout their lives so that they can tap this ability whenever they do research. The articles suggest that, as tomorrow's adults, our students will have the same research needs they had as undergraduates writing term papers and will require the same skills to meet those needs. This literature seems to assume that people will do their own research and will do it in a library.

Is this what really happens? Are people unable to answer personal and professional questions because they lack the

knowledge of proper library use? Are they unable to learn because of this deficiency? And when confronted with technological changes so profound as to alter the way libraries work, is it reasonable to think that we can teach our students long-term competencies when the skills they will need tomorrow (presuming they do their own research) are largely unknown to us today?

Difficulty in identifying with the picture presented in the literature and uncertainty about how libraries will be used even five or ten years from now further persuade us to concentrate on what we do best: (1) teach for short-term research competency; (2) raise students' confidence in using the library so they will develop a positive attitude about libraries in general; and (3) demonstrate that librarians are information specialists who can direct users today and, by implication, tomorrow, toward the best approach to research a particular question.

## THE TEACHING MODEL

Bibliographic instruction, as prescribed by many writers, teaches conceptual relationships, information structure in subject fields, and problem-solving techniques. Its success depends on a librarian's superior ability to deliver ideas and information as well as manage classroom group interaction. The classroom component of this method is obviously important to the entire process.

Our strategy is different. Because we feel that librarians have not been successful in teaching at a dynamic cognitive level, we have de-emphasized the classroom presentation. In three of our four library-credit courses we do not present any lectures, and we use instead a self-paced workbook. On the other hand, when we meet with classes on request, we prepare and deliver lectures. While we are concerned with the quality of these presentations, the cornerstone of our teaching approach has been a combination of brief lectures and active student involvement with materials and methods.

This approach resembles the three-part teaching model that Kirkpatrick described as effective for introducing students to new skills for short-term retention.[9] His plan puts a premium on active learning. The elements are presenting the material, allowing the group to interact with the material, and personalizing the material.

We adhere to this model by limiting our lectures to half an hour and, in the class time remaining, by sending students to the reference room with their librarian and instructor as resource people to work on research assignments. Although our lectures are good, most learning takes place in the reference room.

The material is personalized for the students (one of Kirkpatrick's principles) by focusing on their specific needs. The conditions we establish for personalizing enable us to exert control over our presentations. These conditions are:

1. The librarian evaluates the research requirement of the class as defined by the instructor and designs a presentation of materials and methods to meet its needs.
2. If the librarian feels that the instructor's expectations for what will be accomplished in the library are either too broad or too narrow, he or she will suggest that the assignment be modified so that the presentation can better address the students' needs and abilities.
3. We prefer to focus on one group of related competencies per lesson. Therefore, we usually need to arrange for more than one library session per class. For instance, if the students need to know how to find books and articles, the class will have two sessions in the library.
4. We ask that each student come to our presentations with at least preliminary research ideas already approved by his or her instructor.
5. The sessions are scheduled when the class's library research is to begin, not days or weeks before.
6. The students are informed by their instructor before coming to the library that they will begin work on their research immediately following the librarian's brief classroom lesson.
7. The personalized feature of the presentation continues in the reference room during the active part of the session when

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students have ample opportunity to work one-on-one with their librarian and instructor.

## WHICH COMPETENCIES?

The competencies we teach vary with the class. But, overwhelmingly, the basic research skill needs demonstrated by our undergraduates relate to obtaining books and articles on specific topics. Therefore, we tend to teach the competencies that cluster around these needs.

Many of the skills that other instructional librarians advance as being basic to library use competency, such as understanding the nature and use of encyclopedias, newspaper indexes, biographical sources, and government document indexes, we consider to be important as well, but in a secondary sense. In fact, we teach these skills and more in our semester-long courses for credit. But when we do, our goal is to *introduce* students to additional approaches, not necessarily to make them expert library users for the long run. When we hold classes on request, we purposely limit the number of skills presented. We teach what we consider to be the immediate research needs indicated by the nature of the class assignment. As mentioned, we often persuade instructors to schedule additional class meetings with us to address separately other apparent group needs.

## COMPETENCIES FOR THE SHORT TERM

As already stated, we do not expect long-term retention of what we teach because our students, as a group, do not regularly use the library and therefore do not strengthen their skills over time. We teach for the short term, that is, for the tasks at hand. Some of our students return to the library, reinforce their skills, and even expand upon them. For these students, some of their short-term skills may evolve into skills for the longer run. But we have already expressed our reservations about the value of long-term library competencies in a rapidly changing information world. In short, teaching *long-term competencies* is not one of the goals of our program.

## CONCLUSION

Leaders in the B.I. field advocate the development of long-term competencies through a teaching methodology involving problem solving, critical thinking, and abstract reasoning. The authors of this article doubt that it is possible, regardless of teaching method, to establish long-term library skill competencies in a population that is not required to use libraries on a regular basis. While teaching methodology is certainly important, frequency of use is also a critical factor in skill retention. If students cannot regularly reinforce what they have learned, their level of skill will erode. And most of our students at Stony Brook are not required to use the library regularly during their undergraduate careers.

For that matter, proof that long-term retention of library use skills is possible has never been clearly demonstrated in the literature. But even if it was demonstrated, doubts would remain about the efficacy of this goal. We see little evidence that, after graduation, former students come flocking back to academic libraries to answer questions in their personal and professional lives. Nor do we believe that the specific skills that are taught to students doing term-paper research are necessarily the same ones they might need later on.

In addition, it seems clear that the skills taught today, whether conceptual or mechanical, are not likely to last long. Technological change is altering the way we evaluate and answer reference questions. This state of flux leads us to believe that attempts to inculcate skills today for the long term are of little pragmatic value.

Therefore, in our program, we teach for short-term competency. We expect that when students return to the library after

class sessions or even after an entire library course, they will need further assistance. But this is not discouraging. We do not expect students to be able to devise their own search strategies. We want our students to feel comfortable in our library and to perceive librarians as approachable, expert resource people. Our emphasis is on reasonable performance standards for both student and librarian. This philosophy has allowed us to establish and meet realistic goals.

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7. Richard H. Werking, in "Evaluating Bibliographic Education: A Review and Critique," *Library Trends* 29:153–72 (Summer 1980), discusses many of the methodological problems associated with measuring retention in bibliographic instruction as well as the lack of such studies. Three studies since Werking's that claim statistical evidence of skill retention are Larry Hardesty, N. P. Lovrich, Jr., and J. Mannon, "Library-Use Instruction: Assessment of the Long-Term Effects," *College and Research Libraries* 43:38–46 (Jan. 1982); David F. Kohl and L. A. Wilson, "Effectiveness of Course-Integrated Bibliographic Instruction in Improving Course Work," *RQ* 27:206–11 (Winter 1986); and J. C. Selegean, "Long-Range Effectiveness of Library Use Instruction," *College and Research Libraries* 44:476–80 (Nov. 1983).
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