



Evidence Summary

Digital Resource Use and Non-Use in the Humanities and Social Sciences Academic Settings is Multifaceted

A review of:

Harley, Diane. "Why Study Users? An Environmental Scan of Use and Users of Digital Resources in Humanities and Social Sciences Undergraduate Education." *First Monday* 12.1 (Jan. 2007). 7 May 2007 <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue12_1/harley/index.html>.

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Abstract

Objective – (1) To map the digital resources available to undergraduate educators in the humanities and the social sciences, (2) to survey faculty about their use of digital resources, and (3) to examine how understanding use and users can benefit the integration of resources into teaching.

Design – A mixed-methods approach, which included a survey, conducting discussion groups, and in-depth interviews.

Setting – Academic institutions in the United States.

Subjects – (1) "Various stakeholders"; (2) 31 instructors from three institutions, and 4500 full-time and part-time faculty and graduate students (at California public research universities, liberal arts colleges and community colleges); and (3) 13 digital resource providers and two other stakeholders, and 16 site owners or user researchers.

Methods – (1) A literature review, combined with discussions with various stakeholders.

(2) Four sessions of discussion groups with 31 instructors from three institutions formed the basis for developing a faculty survey instrument. The survey was distributed both on paper and online. (3) Collection of data on cost and collaborative development strategies, in-depth interviews with 13 digital resource providers and two other stakeholders, combined with a two day workshop with 16 experts, both on the subject of online educational resources.

Main results – (1) Concerning the humanities and social sciences digital resource landscape, the main results of the literature study were the conclusions that the field of online education studies is complicated by a lack of common vocabulary, definitions, and analyses; and that different stakeholder interests and agendas also influence the understanding of how digital resources are used. With the help of discussion groups, an attempt at creating a typology for digital resources available to undergraduates was made, looking at type of resource, origin, and type of role of the provider or site owner. From the article, it is unclear whether or not this attempt at classification was successful.

(2) Concerning faculty use or non-use of digital resources, the most important result was the insight that personal teaching style and philosophy influence resource use more than anything else, and this also seemed to be the most important reason for not using digital resources. Faculty use digital resources for a number of reasons, to improve student learning, provide context, and also because it is expected of them. More than 70% of faculty maintain their own collection of digital resources. However, the lack of efficient tools for collecting, managing, and using these resources in teaching is seen as a problem. There is also a variation between scholarly fields, where faculty in different disciplines require different types of resources and use them in

different ways, and for different educational reasons.

(3) Concerning how understanding use and users can benefit the integration of resources in teaching, the results of the interviews show a lack of common terms, metrics, methods, or values for defining use and users; but a shared desire to measure how and for what purpose digital resources were being used. Few of the providers had any plans to evaluate use and users in a systematic way.

Conclusion – The digital landscape is complicated. Faculty use is determined by personal teaching style and philosophy. Digital resource providers would like to know more about how and for what purpose digital resources are being used. Experts see a number of areas for further research, the results of which might help clarify the situation.

The only way to understand the value of digital resources is to measure their impact and outcomes, but further work is needed to provide common vocabulary, metrics, and methods for evaluation.

Commentary

The article provides a comprehensive overview of the problem area, and can be especially valuable for someone new to the subject of the use of digital resources in teaching. For the reader working in an academic library, the description of the results of the faculty survey investigating the reasons for use and non-use of digital resources will provide useful insights for discussing potential support to faculty concerning these issues. The reviewers, however, highly recommend that readers refer to the original report by Harley et al. where a very comprehensive description of the project is provided. The following comments therefore refer to the article as an

independent piece of writing. All of the comments are answered by referral to the original report.

The article describes the very complex reality of faculty use of digital objects, and the problems concerned with measuring use.

The article lacks important information concerning the set-up of the different parts of the study, which seriously influence the readers ability to determine the reliability of the study, such as how the respondents for the different studies were selected, the questions used in the survey, how the information from the group discussions was collected, as well as how the collected information was analysed.

With the information in the article, it is hard to determine the validity of the study, but to anyone working in an academic setting the description of faculty use and non-use seems familiar. The results from the faculty survey seem useful, especially the insight into the impact of personal teaching style and philosophy on the use of digital resources.

Insight into reliability and validity would have been improved by a more scientifically structured presentation, and would have added value to readers not able to find time to read the final report from the project (a total of 326 pages).

The three objectives of the study and the methods used to investigate them are all described in the article. However, in the conclusion the author states that there are three interrelated questions that she chooses to clarify: how to assess if education within the humanities and social sciences requires different educational technology solutions than other subject areas, if investments in digital resources are worth it, and how to share knowledge about users effectively. Even though the questions are interesting,

and the discussion deepens the understanding of the problems surrounding the use of digital resources, one wishes that the author had focused on the opening objectives and discussed the findings of the study.

The conclusion that there are many challenges when it comes to supporting the management and integration of digital resources into teaching, but that it is definitely worth working on, is potentially interesting for libraries planning to increase services in this direction. The Australian "MIRE" (Multimedia Interactive Research Environment) project may also in the future provide some solution to these challenges.

Works Cited

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