

Soc 110 : Introduction to Sociology

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Project Description

With the wide array of jobs that sociology majors obtain after graduation, information literacy is an important tool in helping students reach their fullest professional and personal potential. The proposed project was a tutorial for sociology majors (which can also be used by non-majors) that would help them better learn how to access and evaluate information relating to social issues that they find.

More specifically, this project was designed to help students define their needs and then do the following:

1. Learn how to find relevant sociological information (e.g. use the library data base).
2. Learn which sources of information are academically vigorous and appropriate (e.g. peer reviewed articles are generally vigorous, Time Magazine articles generally are not. Students will compare / contrast these sources).
3. Distinguish between primary and secondary sources
4. Learn how to identify and find the primary information that is used in secondary sources (e.g. how to trace statistics in articles to a government web page if the statistic was generated by the government)
5. Learn how to evaluate the information in primary and secondary sources (e.g. How was the primary information measured and gathered? What are the implications?)

To accomplish this, a tutorial was designed that was organized around the following sections:

1. Define your need
2. Choose information sources
3. Conduct a search (in key sources)
4. Use the Internet
5. A follow up project to assess students' ability to use these skills

Implementation

In the second week of class, Librarian Clara Hudson visited Dr. Wolfer's Introduction to Sociology class (she also visited two sections of Research Methods for the Social Sciences, but this will be discussed later). To inform students of the Sociology resources available she discussed the various sociology related electronic indexes, how to search on them, and how to use the library's vast resources in other ways. She also discussed appropriate citation format for Internet sources and for scholarly work found on the internet (e.g. journals found in electronic databases). Initially I planned to require students to complete the on-line tutorial prior to the submission of their first paper. However, due to various technical issues with getting the tutorial on-line, the tutorial was not available to students until close to the last week of class. Therefore, it was not really appropriate to mandate the tutorial to be completed during "dead week" so students were given the option of completing it for extra credit. As a result, 16 of 33 students (48.5%) completed the tutorial.

Follow-Up Exercise Results

Question (in truncated form)	Correct	Incorrect	Unanswered
1. Match encyclopedias, books and journals to appropriate use	15	1	
2. Write an appropriate thesis or research question	13	3	
3. Identify key terms in thesis / question presented in Q2	13	3	
4. Use on-line catalogue to find a book on topic in Q2 and be able to record relevant information about that book	16		
5. Use the Wilson Web to find a journal article relevant to Q2	15	1	
6. Look up information regarding the nature and availability of the journal listed in Q5.	14		2
7. Go to the U.S. Bureau of the Census and find a government document related to the topic in Q2	11		1
8. Find a resource on the Web relating to sociology, using the Internet Resource Guide to Sociology.	16		
9. Using FastStats A-Z from the National Center for Health Statistics find information regarding the trend in teenage birth rates since 1990 and record relevant citation information.	16		
10. Using FastStats A-Z from the National Center for Health Statistics find information find what age group had the highest birth rate in 2003 (properly citing the answers)	5	5	

Further feedback to specific questions:

- Question 2: Two of the wrong answers were too broad. One had multiple errors
- Question 3: Two of the wrong answers were too broad. One had missing relevant key terms.
- Question 5: The individual who answered this incorrectly put a popular magazine as the answer as opposed to a journal.
- Question 7: The U.S. Census Bureau was not an appropriate governmental source for four of the topics stated in Question 2. Therefore this question was not relevant to four respondents.
- Question 10: All of those individuals (n=5) who had the answer incorrect provided the appropriate answer (indicating that they could find the information), but had that answer incorrectly cited (indicating that they were still unclear how to reference the material). The remaining people (n=6), gave the correct answer, but did not attempt any citation at all.

Assessment

Based on these results it appears that most of the students were able to define their needs in

a manner appropriate for research (Tutorial section 1, Exercise question 2). When they had trouble, they generally had topics that were too broad. They were also able to conduct searches (Tutorial section 3, Exercise questions 3-6) and distinguish between different information sources and their uses (Tutorial section 2, Exercise questions 1, 4, 5, 7, 8). Results indicate that they were also able to use the Internet (Tutorial section 4, Exercise questions 7, 8, 9, 10) since everyone was able to find the answers to questions 9 and 10. However, it does appear that most of these students were still unsure how to cite that information, as only 5 of the 16 respondents did so correctly.

Future Implementation

The tutorial has illustrated that it helps students locate various sources of sociological information and distinguish between those various sources, consequently it is likely to be adopted in all Introduction to Sociology classes (of which there are usually 2-4 sections every semester). However, it is also clear that the tutorial, as designed, has not given students enough skills with how to cite the information found. As protocol for Internet citation format may change relatively frequently, it may not be appropriate to work more of that into the tutorial itself. However, it is clear that this topic will be something I (and other faculty teaching Introduction to Sociology) need to address more directly and concretely in class.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, Librarian Clara Hudson also came to both of my sections of Research Methods in the Social Sciences to discuss with them how to find information and how to cite the information found. These students reported that her presentation was helpful in the preparation of the literature reviews for their semester-long papers. I did not have these students complete the tutorial since, by the time it was available, they had long since moved beyond that stage of the course and were instead focusing on more concrete concepts of research (e.g. data coding and analysis). I would like to see all my research methods students do this tutorial in the beginning of the semester as a means to assess how much they remember or know about information literacy. I would then be able to use those results to 1) determine what I need to cover in class regarding information literacy; and, 2) to determine whether I needed someone from the library to enter the class and give a "refresher". In the future, a sub-tutorial may also be developed that will more concretely address evaluation of different primary and secondary sources.