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Redefining Information Literacy: Information Ethics in First-Year Seminar

Description

Traditional information literacy instruction has focused on research, with little emphasis on information ethics. However, today's web-savvy students must not only be trained in conducting research, but also at navigating the ethical boundaries for the use of others' information, and for the creation and use of their own information. To this end, library faculty at Pacific University developed a pilot interactive information ethics workshop that was offered as part of the First-Year Seminar.

Keywords

first-year seminar, information literacy, information ethics

Disciplines

Library and Information Science

Comments

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Redefining Information Literacy: Information Ethics in First-Year Seminar

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INTRODUCTION

"The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally."

ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education – Standard Five

Students' need for competency in the areas of ethical/legal use of information is clearly delineated in the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards. However, this vital area of instruction often finds itself overlooked as librarians with limited opportunities to reach students must perform curricular triage. This is reflected in the preponderance of "traditional" information literacy instruction for undergraduates, which focuses only on basic research skills (identifying information sources and conducting searches). While this emphasis may have been justifiable twenty years ago, today's web-reared students require a re-evaluation of information literacy priorities.

For the current generation of undergraduates, the concepts of plagiarism, intellectual property and freedom of speech have become increasingly vague as Ctrl-C/Ctrl-V, file sharing, social networking and online anonymity have become second nature. Though basic research skills are still important, it is equally (if not more) important for students to be taught to successfully navigate the ethical, legal and social issues surrounding the use of others' information and the creation/use of students' own information (whether that information is expressed in text, pictures, video or audio) online or offline. To meet this need, we developed an "information ethics" workshop and offered it to first-year students enrolled in Pacific University's First-Year Seminar (FYS).

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Pacific University's First-Year Seminar (Humanities 100) is a required course for all incoming freshman (approx. 300/year). Traditionally, library involvement has been limited to a 50 minute in-class presentation to each section. Past presentations have focused on relevant research materials and the use of Library resources.

The removal of a Pacific professor for plagiarism and the firing of a student RA for compromising photos on his Facebook page provided an opportunity to propose offering an additional library session to each FYS section. FYS faculty approved our proposal even though it required participating instructors to give up an additional classroom session. There was general agreement that students needed to be aware of the importance of the issues raised by the use and creation of online content.

COURSE CONTENT/FORMAT

GOALS

- Avoid student perception of the librarian "preaching" about ethics.
- Increase student understanding of ethical issues/concepts; promote ethical behaviors.
- Generate discussion and promote student ownership in conclusions.
- Deliver content in a manner that will be engaging/familiar for students.

CONTENT

- Freedom of speech
- Social networking/Privacy
- Academic honesty
- Intellectual property/Copyright

FORMAT

- Google Sites was selected to host course content; content was arranged in small "chunks" to allow students to read and browse quickly.
- Content was related to recent news stories or to Pacific-related events.
- An online polling system, *PollEverywhere*, was selected to help generate real-time student feedback (especially from students reluctant to speak in class).
- Polls were integrated into the content on Google Sites, and student responses helped lead/focus class discussion of issues.

STUDENT ATTITUDES

PRE-SURVEY

To assess student's attitudes and beliefs about ethical/legal issues prior to attending the FYS Information Ethics session, a pre-class survey was sent to all FYS students via *SurveyMonkey*. Of approximately 300 students, 103 responded (34 male, 69 female).

| Question | Response |
|--|---|
| Should there be limits to free speech? | Yes: 58.4% No: 41.6% |
| If you do use social networking sites, do you post photos of: (Select all that apply) | Yourself: 96.7% Friends: 87.8% Family: 66.7% |
| How confident are you that information/photos you post online will remain private? | Very confident: 12.8% Somewhat confident: 54.2% Not at all confident: 33.0% |
| A website has been created for students to share copies of old exams. If exams for a course you are taking are on the site, would you? (Select all that apply) | Look at old exams: 55.8% Post my exams: 14.7% Wouldn't use the site because I don't need to: 26.3% Wouldn't use the site because it's cheating: 26.3% |
| Is it OK to copy and paste a piece of information from a website into a paper you're writing? | Yes, if it's online, it's fair game: 0.0% Yes, if you put it in quotes: 1.0% Yes, if you put it in quotes and cite it: 75.3% Not without permission: 14.4% |
| If you own a DVD, is it OK to rip a scene and post it online? | Yes: 30.2% No: 69.8% |
| Is it OK to post pictures that you find online to your personal website without asking permission from the picture's owner? | Yes: 41.1% No: 58.9% |

BOTTOM LINE

Student responses (particularly free-text comments not shown here) indicated marked variance in the level of understanding about appropriate/safe/legal/ethical online behaviors. Some responses were encouraging (most students knew what to do when cutting and pasting sources), others were expected (ripping DVDs, using pictures found online), and others showed familiarity with terminology (copyright, DMCA) but not with correct application of that terminology/concept.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

91.3% of the students who responded to the survey use Facebook, MySpace, or other social networking sites – making them slightly above average (a 2008 EDUCAUSE survey found that 85.2% of college students use at least one social networking site).

DISCUSSION

While students' technological skills are unquestionable, their ability to navigate their legal and ethical responsibilities in an online environment remains uncertain – even if many students believe they already know everything they need.

Based on faculty and student response, this session will be offered again in the fall of 2009. Though the technological tools used to deliver content and facilitate the course were largely successful, it is clear that the content needs to be revised to take into consideration the following observations:

- Incoming students are more aware of the basic issues – privacy, intellectual property, plagiarism, freedom of speech – than was anticipated.
- It is more important to address the "why" of ethical behavior than the "what".
- Students hold varying views about what constitutes ethical behavior and about the justice of certain laws (e.g. intellectual property).
- Student beliefs/assumptions about the nuances of the issues need to be tested/challenged.
- The more sensational the real-life example associated with an issue, the more engaged students will become.
- The biggest challenge – students who get it but who don't care.

Assessment of the effectiveness of this instruction has not yet been addressed, and needs to be considered as we move forward. We cannot expect to change students' character/ethics in 50 minutes, but we do hope to raise their awareness – and encourage them to consider their online actions (and the offline implications!).

FURTHER READING

De Rosa, C., Cantrell, J., Havens, A., Hawk, J., Jenkins, L., Gauder, B., et al. (2007). *Sharing, privacy and trust in our networked world: A report to the OCLC membership*. Dublin, Ohio, USA: OCLC.

EDUCAUSE. (2008). *The ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology*. Available: <http://connect.educause.edu/Library/Abstract/TheECARStudyofUndergradua/47485>.

Gardner, Stephanie F. (2006). Preparing for the Nexters. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 70(4): Article 87.

Szabo, Attila and Jean Underwood. (2004). Cybercheats: Is Information and Communication Technology Fuelling Academic Dishonesty? *Active Learning in Higher Education* 5(2): 180-199.

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STUDENT RESPONSE

FROM "I ALREADY KNEW THAT" ...

Based on student responses to post-class evaluations, it is clear that, though engaged in the discussions, many students felt the issues covered were old – or irrelevant – news. The tag cloud of responses to the question "After this course, will you change your online activities/practices in any way?" is quite telling:



...TO "I'VE LEARNED NEW THINGS"

While the majority of students professed prior knowledge, the session clearly provided new information to some, and generated specific questions, e.g.:

"I've learned new things about copyright infringement and that personal websites are sometimes used for reference."

"Can employers see my facebook even if they aren't my 'friends'?"

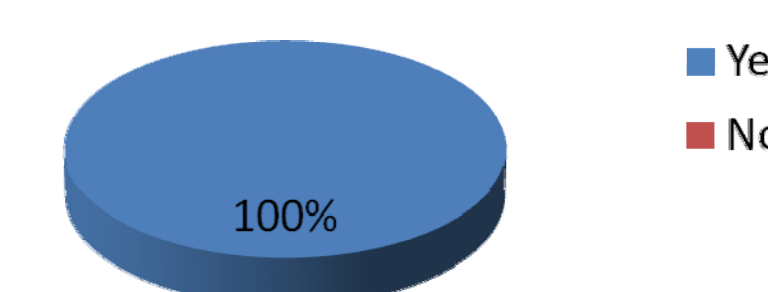
"How can you get in trouble for quoting yourself?"

"Can I download things from limewire even if I use them for personal use i.e. music?"

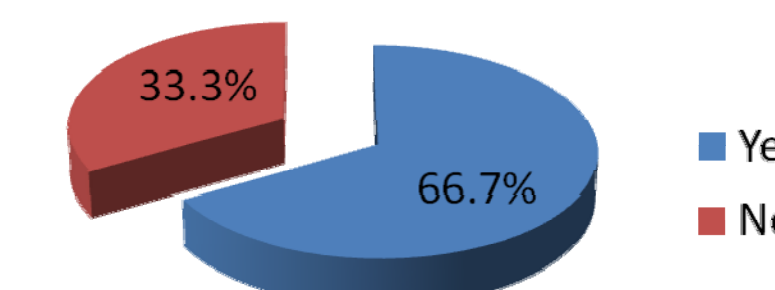
"The fair use policies I was not aware of."

FYS FACULTY RESPONSE

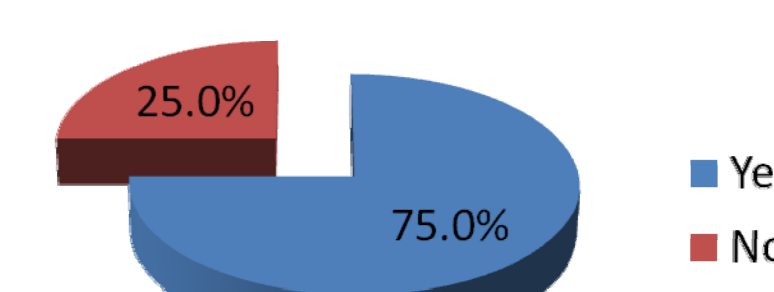
Should the Library offer this session again for First-Year Seminar students?



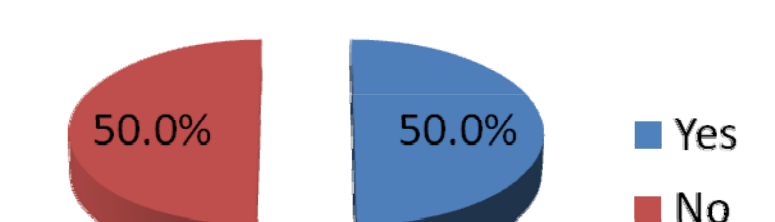
Do you believe your students have a basic understanding of copyright and plagiarism?



Were the in-class polls effective in promoting discussion?



Was the Google Sites page an effective teaching mechanism?



BRING IT BACK!

FYS faculty whose classes received the Information Ethics session (10 out of 18 sections) were surveyed about their impressions of the course content, delivery and effectiveness. While there is room for improvement in some areas, there was overwhelming support for bringing the session back next year.