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ELib 520

Reference Information Seeking Behaviors of Middle School Students

Group Description

Daniel Webster Middle School is located in Los Angeles Unified School District, District 3, in West Los Angeles. There are 673 students in grades 6-8. Eighty percent of our scholars are on the free/reduced lunch program. Our 2010 API is 658 and has moved forward every year I’ve been there, since 2003. DWMS operates on a traditional school year. Student demographics by ethnic group are as follows:

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| --- | --- |
| Student Enrollment by Ethnic Group | Percentage |
| Hispanic/Latino | 63.2 |
| African American | 29.9 |
| White | 3.9 |
| Asian | 2.1 |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 0.2 |
| Filipino | 0.2 |
| Pacific Islander | 0.1 |

There is not much of a focus on reference or research in the school culture. Students are not required to do much research and it is not taught to a level that would make them feel comfortable doing so alone. Citation use is expected but not taught in depth.

Scholars rarely use the library for research use on their own time. When a teacher brings them in for a research lesson, they thumb through encyclopedias and other books I have brought out for them, but they don’t really seem to know exactly what to do with the information. When using the computer for research during class time they go straight to Google, which usually leads them straight to Wikipedia. On the whole, they think Wikipedia is a solid source. Students do not keep track of their references and when I ask about citing sources, they usually look at me blankly.

Students seem to tire of research quickly and have little attention span for it. It seems that they believe an assignment is to find an article on a topic rather than to find an article to utilize as research in the assignment. Once the article is found, it either isn’t read, but, if assigned, the citation information is meticulously copied down on a 3x5 card to present to the teacher, or they will plagiarize the text and meticulously copy that down, and turn that in. There doesn’t seem to be a connection between researching, reading the research, and writing (or creating) the assignment.

I also notice that students will come on their own to the circulation desk to ask for help to find a book, or how to get to OPAC or the Accelerated Reader website, but they rarely ask me for research information help. Students are much more likely to get information online elsewhere, from television, a smart phone, their friends, or even family before they come to a library.

Literature Review

Most urban teens don’t view the library as a comfortable place to get information or view the librarian as a resource to help them find information. (Agosto, 2005) In a study of 27 urban youths in Philadelphia, the library ranked 13th in the list of places/sources to find information while the librarian ranked 6th on the list of people sources for information. (Agosto, 2005)

“An estimated 54% of urban households use the Internet, with use highest among youths aged 9 to 24 years.” (Bleakley, 2004) While this number certainly has grown in the last six years due to computer and internet access costs coming down, it is still a low percent of this population who have easy access to information for research purposes.

Services for teens need to support the entire person: physical, cognitive, affective, and social being. (Agosto, 2006).

Urban teens want and need information to support their emerging sexuality, their pressing financial needs, their attempts to understand the social worlds n which they live, [and] their self-doubts about who they are and what role they can play in sociality.” (Agosto, 2006).

Teens need more than a place to do school work and find a book to read; they need a place that supports all their information seeking needs.

Most students do not deviate from their original search terminology. (Shenton, 2005) Once a topic is chosen, and the search words decided upon, students will continue to use the same verbiage without any change whatsoever. A very few students had experiences when their entire topic shifted or changed during their research, usually due to realization that selected topic was “too broad.” (Shenton, 2005)

According to a study done in 2007, of 418 Greek students interviewed between the ages of 12-18 and still living at home, 70.6% had a personal computer at home, while only 52.8% had access to the internet from home. (Aslanidou, 2007) 17.8% of the 70.6% did not have internet access from home.

Comparison of research and models

The Big 6 Research Model is “the most widely known and widely used approach to teaching information and technology skills in the world.” (Eisenberg, 1987) There are 6 stages: Task Definition, Information Seeking Strategies, Location and Access, Use of Information, Synthesis, and Evaluation (Eisenberg, 1987) that students are supposed to follow as they gather their research.

Most young scholars research on their own for “subject information in response to a desire or awareness within their heads that such material was necessary. “ (Shenton, 2005). They look for information for subjects they are interested in, for example, dogs, cars, or the Titanic. However, when it comes to research for topics other than is necessary or interesting, they tend to shut down.

Students I have observed use some of these stages in their research, but they do not follow that order, and most of them get stuck at Use of Information. Even when they are clear about the first three stages (task definition, and given information seeking strategies and location and access, in the form of a stack of books and specific websites to go to), they have trouble figuring out exactly which information to use or how to use it, which makes any synthesis and evaluation impossible.

Implications for LMTs

A library has to address students on several levels, not just a scholarly one, or one where they can just find a book, if the urban student is going to feel comfortable enough to use it for schoolwork.

It appears that many students know how to find basic information online using Google, and some using texts, but once found, they don’t really know what to do with it. If a LMT were able to look up specific subjects and give students printouts of needed articles, and a lesson on what to do with them, time—and their energy level—would be saved. Additionally, giving students a handout like Eisenberg’s *The Big 6 Guide for Students* (1987) to use as a research action plan would give them a sort of “cheat sheet” to refer to when needed, rather than having them rely on their notes which, like their research, they are probably in the habit of ignoring. Middle and high school students do not like to do research, and usually don’t do it correctly; giving them scaffolding support would help them be successful in projects that require it.

Since many students do not have working computers with internet access at home, having accessible computers in the library with internet access, along with a clearly arranged ready reference page, would also support their research process. Teen-friendly signs and posters describing citation use around the library would be helpful reminders of the importance of citing sources.

One implication for the LMT is that libraries need to appear neat and welcoming and librarians need to appear to be knowledgeable and friendly. (Agosto, 2005) If we—library and librarian— are not viewed as an accessible information resource, we will not be utilized as such, and students will not come to either school or public libraries to do their research.

Finally, knowledge of information that scholars need and the types of information they seek can impact collection development, programming, and budget allotment practices. (Agosto, 2005). LMTs need to know what students need, and provide that service to them.

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