

A Comprehensive Q&A with Lisa Hinchliffe



Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, Professor/Coordinator for Information Literacy Services and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, joined us to answer some questions relating to her forthcoming study, *Predictable Information Literacy Misconceptions of First-Year College Students*. In this interview she discusses how a better understanding of student misconceptions around information literacy could lead to more effective FYE programming and better research assignments, and shares her hopes for further areas of inquiry into this topic.

C Your study addresses first-year students' misconceptions about information. How do you define misconceptions?

LH The study used a definition of misconceptions based on the explanation offered by Wiggins and McTigue in their book [Understanding by Design](#), in which they say that "such misunderstandings, as opposed to confusion or inattention, typically flow from prior experience and a plausible inference based on that experience." In other words, a misconception is a belief held by students that is incorrect but is held to be true based on prior experience. We also distinguish misconceptions from things not-yet-known. Lack of knowledge is not a misconception though it is an absence of understanding.

C What were the most significant misconceptions you found, in terms of changing how librarians approach information literacy education?

LH At this point we do not yet know how librarians will use the results of our study. I am looking forward to hearing feedback from the library community about which of these misconceptions are most problematic or prevalent as well as how librarians use the results of the research. This is really just the beginning of this line of research.

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C Did you notice any different assumptions for traditional first year students vs. non-traditional first year students?

LH The research study did not probe that aspect of this topic but it would be a great follow-up study. In many ways, this research raises more questions than it answers. There are many possibilities for studies to build upon our findings.

C Your work looks at first-year students overall, but how can an instructor find out what misconceptions are held by a particular student or class?

LH Rather than using this research as a diagnostic tool for individuals, I would instead recommend that instructors use this as a lens to reflect on their own experiences as instructors and on their lesson plans. In particular, if you are teaching a specific concept or skill and students struggle or are resistant, is that possibly explained by a misconception? If so, it might be necessary to create a scaffolded set of learning experiences that first, has students encounter their misconception and then, introduces the next concepts.

Also, instructors should review their materials to make certain that they are not inadvertently teaching or reinforcing misconceptions. Here's an example with the misconception that 'first year students believe that all library sources and

A Comprehensive Q&A with Lisa Hinchliffe

discovery tools are credible.’ I wonder if the emphasis on evaluating Internet-based information resources inadvertently led students to believe that library resources were already evaluated for credibility.

C You state that, “correcting misconceptions and establishing a foundation of conceptual understandings may be a precursor to Framework-based information literacy instruction.” What would this precursor look like?

LH Some of the concepts in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education are quite complex. Students may not be ready to engage that complexity if that foundational knowledge they have is flawed by misconceptions.

So, for example, if a student holds the misconception that ‘research is a linear, uni-directional process,’ then we can imagine them struggling with the concept of ‘Searching as Strategic Exploration’ that states “searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops.¹” The student will have to give up the misconception in order to learn this frame and then develop skills and abilities that flow from the frame.

Similarly, the same misconception will be an impediment to any instruction that is based on the premise that a student recognizes ‘Research as Inquiry,’ which states that ‘research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.²’

C What are the implications of this study for librarian-faculty collaboration?

LH As my co-authors and I suggest in the article, **librarians might use the list of misconceptions to work with faculty to design assignments and instruction** that address first year students’ misconceptions about libraries, information access, and the research process. Librarians could also use the misconceptions to open a dialogue with faculty about whether they too observe such misconceptions in learners and if they would add any others to the list.

C How would one explain these misconceptions to faculty who are unfamiliar with information literacy and how it could help their students?

LH I find that most faculty have an intuitive sense of information literacy even if they don’t know the specific term. I would likely start a conversation around the misconceptions by framing it as a discussion about whether they notice students struggling with library research, what do they notice, etc. and then drawing connections between their experiences and the misconceptions.

C Are the expectations of higher ed institutions too high with regard to incoming students’ information literacy skills?

LH I am not certain that there is a monolithic set of expectations about skills and abilities. I think the most important thing is to remember that students are students - they are in college to learn and so finding out what they need to learn and creating learning experiences that meet their needs is the best approach. We might wish they knew more but if they don’t, they don’t. Our role is to teach the students we have, not the ones we might wish we had.

¹Association of College and Research Libraries, Searching as Strategic Exploration, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

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C Given that librarians have such limited opportunities for instruction, are some of these misconceptions more urgent to address earlier than others?

LH A key part of addressing the misconceptions is not falling into the trap of thinking that as an instructor you can just assert that there is a truth different than what students believe. Students need to encounter the misconception failing them. So, the misconceptions to address earlier are the ones that would impede their learning earlier, i.e., those that would fail them. This will depend on the campus curriculum and so I can't prioritize these in the abstract but would have to be considered in context of the first-year curriculum.

C How should research assignments change as a response to this new information?

LH Some research assignments inadvertently reinforce misconceptions so the first change would be to revise the assignments to avoid doing that! I think the other change that becomes very obvious is the need to create assignments that have scaffolded learning experiences that allow students to encounter the problems with adhering to the misconceptions and then support them in developing accurate conceptions.

C How persistent are these misconceptions? In other words, do you think they will be easy to correct during instruction sessions, or will they require repeated interventions across multiple settings to break through to students?

LH It is difficult to predict how persistent a misconception might be as we cannot control other life experiences that might be reinforcing the misconception at the same time that we are trying to teach to correct it. In general though, changing what someone believes is something that requires repeated engagement in comparison to simply adding new facts or skills that are consistent with things that one already believes.

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C If librarians are interested in conducting a similar study in their own campus, where should they start? Any recommendations?

LH My co-authors and I provide our focus group protocol in the appendix to our article. They could adapt that protocol to serve as the basis for a general conversation/brown bag lunch or for a local research project - in either case, using the list of misconceptions as the starting point. I am interested in collaborating on research projects that build off of this study and so would be happy to hear from anyone that might like to work together.

C Do you anticipate that these misconceptions will continue to change over time?

LH That is a great question! I would hope that over time we might be able to see fewer misconceptions but it is of course possible that new ones will emerge. Given open access practices are changing, what is available on the open web and how difficult it can be to determine if a preprint has been peer reviewed, it seems entirely possible that we could see the emergence of misconceptions in this area.

Be sure to read the full article by Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, Allison Rand, and Jillian Collier, "Predictable Information Literacy Misconceptions of First-Year College Students", which will be published later this year in *Communications in Information Literacy*.