# Another perspective on library use Learning from library non-users

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to provide insight into the reasons why students do not use the library for research in order to improve library services. The case study encompasses a mix of two methods. First, it used an in-class survey among undergraduate students at the American University of Paris to measure how many students do use/not use the library in a situation of information need. Second, the researcher conducted 11 interviews with students that said that they had not used the library or its resources (print or online) for researching and writing one identified paper. By taking into account the situation of research, it is possible to describe students' behavior in different situations providing a more specific picture in comparison to other studies focusing on general patterns.

**Keywords:** Library use, library non-use, user study, library research, mixed method, triangulation, in-class survey, ethnographic interviews.

#### **1. Introduction**

Why do library non-users matter? Because there are AUP students that do not use the AUP Library! Non-use exists, but we do not see it. In fact, it is not simply the observation that students do not use the library but rather their reasons for library non-use that matters. The following case study seeks to take non-use on its own terms and examine the ways in which non-use might be relevant, conceptually and practically, for libraries' future use.

Nicholas et al. (2008) share the importance of understanding users today. They argue that information professionals have not sufficiently taken into account the changes caused by the Internet in matters of understanding library users (and non-users).

"Worryingly, while most people in the information professions are alert to the technical changes that have taken place in the virtual information space, when it comes to users many are going about their business as though nothing really fundamental has happened. [...], but they have not really made progress in understanding them, certainly not their behavior at the coal-face." (Nicholas et al. 2008, pp. 3-4)

Despite the pessimistic view they take on their colleagues, the authors have a point. Without understanding the social dimensions of technological change, information professionals may become blind to user needs and risk losing the

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library's role as a major information provider. Consequently, explanations of library non-use become important in evaluating the library's future role.

Various studies in technology stress the importance of non-use for the understanding of use. In their book *How Users Matter*, Oudshoorn and Pinch (2003) investigate how the understanding of technology use has to take non-users into account as well. They conclude that "an adequate understanding of socio-technological change should include an analysis of resistance and non-use" (Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003, p. 19).

Similarly, Sally Wyatt (2003) examines Internet use and comes to the same conclusion. Non-use "is premised on the idea that there is something to be gained [...] through an examination of those who choose not to travel down particular technological roads" (Wyatt, 2003, p. 69). With this logic, she links Internet non-use to future improvements. In other words, the reasons for non-use could inspire improvements that would lead to future use (Wyatt, 2003, p. 78).

From a historical perspective, Horx (2000, pp. 176-180) illustrates the importance of non-use by referring to the introduction of the automobile at the beginning of the 20th century. The automobile's use was not something automatically given, but took time to build: a comfortable and sophisticated automobile, paved streets, and lessons on how to drive created a time lag between the introduction of the car and its practical use by the broader public.

Horx picks up Naisbitt's argument (1992) that technology only matters if it takes into account human needs and concerns. In regard to libraries and its web resources, the non-use can tell us a lot about how they should be shaped in order to be used. In this way, it is not the user that matters but the non-user.

However, most library studies focus on how libraries are used (Stoepel 2010, pp. 10-17) and there are good reasons to do so. Yet, "a narrow focus on use [...] inherently renders insignificant populations analytically invisible." (Dourish and Satchell, 2009, p. 4) Non-users stay at home, go to the computer lab, or sit down in the cafeteria to research, study, or write their papers. But why do they prefer staying at home or studying in a cafeteria if the library can provide all the information they need?

To paraphrase Dourish and Satchell, using libraries is only one way of relating to libraries, and only one dimension from which librarians can learn about interactions between users and libraries. The focus is on not using libraries – ways not to use them, aspects of not using them, what non-using libraries might mean, and what librarians might learn by examining non-use as seriously as use.

# 1.1 Research questions

The aim of the research project was to study undergraduate students at AUP who do not use the AUP Library or its web resources for their class assignments (Stoepel 2010, p. 45). It is about studying their information seeking behavior in a situation of information need (courses).

The opening focus will be to measure the use/non-use of the AUP Library: where do students find information to fulfill their class assignment? In this way, library use and the library's' involvement in research can be measured.

In a second step, the study will draw attention to the information seeking behavior of students who do not use the library as a place to study and do not

use the library resources (print and web). The central question is: why do students not use the AUP Library and its web resources, and how these students do research for their class assignments?

The aim in the present study is to identify roadblocks that are linked to the context and the situation of the research process. The findings will contribute to the discussion about the role of the library in academic research and the evaluation of libraries and their web resources today.

# **1.2 Research methodology – a mix of two**

This study is based on a mix of two research methods - each backed up by research methodology - since the objective is to obtain high quality information. Deacon et al. (1999) supports such methodological undertaking. He proposes a mix of approaches for data-gathering (Stoepel 2010, pp. 27, 44) and data-analysis. "[...] when quantitative and qualitative approaches are used methodologically in combination with each other, the resulting analysis is invariably stronger." (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 134).

The first methodology is a quantitative approach (an in-class-survey) in order to measure the size of the non-user group. The survey was conducted in different classroom settings chosen in a simple random cluster sample (sampled 14.43% of students out of the undergraduate student population and 67.48% average response rate per in class-survey). The survey was not handed out in courses that did not mention explicitly a need for research but were part of the sample (Stoepel, 2010, pp. 32-35, 93).

The advantage of handing out questionnaires in class is that it avoided creating bias by conducting the survey within the library or online only (Dollinger, 2003). Second, it is easy to add more meaning to the class room setting either by talking to the professor or analyzing the course syllabus. Third, students who might never reply to online surveys or use less technical equipment were better represented in the survey. Professors also indicated the number of students missing during the survey (who may represent a big part of library non-users).

The second research methodology is a qualitative approach that draws attention to the group of non-users only. It is an ethnographic approach (semi-structured interview) that follows students through different steps of their research process until the moment of having to hand in the paper (Stoepel 2010, p.45). The aim of the qualitative interviews is to get a more detailed insight about library non-users researching behaviors and the roadblocks to library use. The interviews add more details to the in-class survey about how non-users complete their class assignments.

The qualitative part follows in the footsteps of Gilbert Ryle (1971) and Clifford Geertz (1973) applying the method of 'thick description' to analyze interviews (Stoepel, 2010, p. 48). It is by adding layers of information to the context that meaning is added and the researcher obtains a better understanding of the information seeking behavior and its situation (Ponterotto, 2006, pp. 542-543).

Both research methods and research questions were linked to one specific paper assignment. In the case of the in-class-survey, the questions were only related to the assignments for that particular class. In the case of the semi-structured interviews, the questions of non-use were only in regard to one paper that was

defined at the beginning of the interview. The linking of the questions to a particular paper assignment allowed to get more information about the situation and to establish a link between information need and information seeking behavior.

# 2. Quantitative analysis – general findings

According to the survey, 79.1 % of students claim to use the library when they have to write a paper for a particular class. Only 20.9 % declare not to use the library or its homepage (web resources).

However, only 45.1% of the 79.1% users use the library regularly ('one time a week or more') while 40.2% of library users visit the library only 'once a month' or 'twice per semester or less'. The online use of the library resources does not differ significantly. 37.1% regularly use the library web resources ('one time a week or more') and 35.2% use them 'only once a month' or 'twice per semester or less'. These figures show the intensity of library use in regard to their specific information need.

At a first glance, it is a 'good' result seeing that 79.1% of students use the library. Four out of five students use the library in a situation of information need. Yet, this finding must be viewed in the light of the different classroom settings. Library use and non-use varies in different courses (see table 1: Library use/non-use by course).

The differences are significant especially in regard to the replies of the AH and BA students. 100% of the AH students reported to use the library materials for research (response rate 85.7%). On the contrary, in the BA class, 50% of the students declared that they wrote their papers without library materials (and another 5 out of 13 students in the class were absent on the day of evaluation).

Out of the 50% of BA students using the library, 75% reported to use the library only two times per semester or less as a place to study. In comparison, AH students show a much higher rate of library usage. 40% of them use the library two or more times a week as a place to study and 40% use the library resources once a week.

 Table 1: Library use/non-use by course



Another aspect to keep in mind when comparing the courses' library use is the professors' expectations and assignments. In the AH course, students had to write a 15 page research paper. In addition, AH studies at AUP (and in this particular course) require readings on reserve. The fact that the professor sets high standards for the research paper explains the high use of the library. In contrast, typical assignment types in Business studies at AUP are case studies or power-point presentations that require less research than research papers. Furthermore, the topic of the BA course was 'Cyber Marketing'. In other words, the professor asked the students to perform internet research related to 'Cyber Marketing'. This may explain why students did less research using library resources. Also, the professor did not put any of the required readings on reserve in the library.

In conclusion, library use differs according to the different class-room settings. The role of the library in researching and finding information varies according to the academic disciplines. As previously seen in the analysis of the course syllabi, certain disciplines do not require research at all as it is not part of the learning objectives. In the same logic, the class room setting and the subject determines the level of engagement in research.

# 2.1. Reasons for library non-use

The reasons why students do not use the library homepage to satisfy their information needs are varied (Table 2). The main reason seems to be that the library homepage is not easy enough for them to use (43.5%). These replies accompany the assessment of 13% of students who claim not to know how to use the site or that they are unaware of what they can find there (8.7%). Furthermore, for 13%, the webpage is 'not fast enough'.

Additionally, the open reply provides other explanations for non-use on a conceptual level. Either, the student perceives no real need to use the library (no1: "Do not need to"; no2: "depends, whenever I have papers, I will use the library"; no6: "no reason"), or the library non-use is associated with the library

building (no4: "Like to work at home"; no5: "The Library is a bit far from my place"). Furthermore, the student may doubt whether s/he will find what s/he seeks in the library (no7: "Not many books available. Library does not have a wide variety of books"). They may claim that searching elsewhere is more effective (no3: "Finding research online is much easier and more effective"). **Table 2:** Question 8 - Why don't you use the library homepage?



It was interesting to discover where students find their information since they often experience a situation of information need. When asked, where they find information, most non-users responded that they use the Internet as an information source.

**Table 3:** Question 9 - Where do you find your resources or information to write your paper?



Google beats Yahoo as the search engine and Wikipedia is used by every other non-user. These replies must be related to question number three of the questionnaire involving where students begin their research ("How likely are you to start your research with?"). 91.7 % of respondents were 'likely' (33%) or 'very likely' (58.7%) to start their research with Google. It may be possible to conclude that in information seeking behavior, the student will start by using Google and if satisfied with the results, they will not turn to the library resources.

The same logic applies to the other replies. From this perspective, 46.2% of non-users declared that their professor gives them articles/books and 34.6% buy their books directly in a book-shop (Amazon or the university bookstore). The open questions confirm this logic as well. Students satisfy their information need elsewhere before seeking the AUP library. They might use their 'old' libraries (no3: "Home university"; no4: "GWU Library is easier to use") or go to known places (no5: "Online Journals"; no7: "JStor"). Surprisingly, they do also mention the AUP library as a place to find information.

In summary, the survey reveals that students do not use the library for various reasons. This mix of reasons turns the non-users away from the library and makes them look for information in other places. These places are numerous but Google, Wikipedia, the Internet in general, and the professor are the major ones. The survey also shows that when comparing courses, there are significant differences in regard to using the library or not. This is certainly due to the underlying concepts of methodologies in the academic disciplines (Capurro, 2006), hence the relation to information that determines the role of the library is different (Boon, et al. 2006). The question that remains is: what is the role of the library in the disciplines that rely less on library use?

# 3. Qualitative analysis – general findings

The analysis of the interviews starts with a thematic analysis, which "is generally at the core of qualitative research. Unlike quantitative, you must use your own best judgment about it [...]" (Priest, 2010, pp. 174-175). The leitmotif of the qualitative analysis is to 'speak for the students' (Priest, 2010, p. 174) and to illustrate the reasons for their non-use. In adopting their perspectives and following their footsteps from situation to situation, non-use makes sense and becomes comprehensive.

The reasons for library non-use are numerous. Numerous because barriers for library use are not only situated in the research process, but are also there before they start researching and writing (Figure 1). It is "all the fuzzy stuff that lies around the edges – context, background, history, common knowledge, social resources" (Brown and Duguid, 2002, p. 1) that matters. Explanations of non-use are linked to the context and the different situations of research in the 'social life of information' (Brown and Duguid 2002).

Figure 1: Key situations in the research process



Students already have research experience and everyday knowledge about where and how to find information. After choosing their courses for the semester, the students find themselves in the classroom where they are exposed to a situation of information need. After the definition and recognition of information need, students engage in research having to fulfill the course requirements. The research process goes hand in hand with the writing process – research and writing cannot be isolated from each other. Therefore, 'following the actors' means to follow the students in their research process with the aim identifying the roadblocks for library us.

# 3.1. Roadblocks to library use

The first significant aspect that comes into mind when analyzing the interviews is that students find information in a variety of places. Secondly, they may not use the library for one research paper, but may use it for another. Thirdly, reasons for not using the library are diverse and can be allocated to the different situations (figure 1).

Finally, in nearly all interviews, students stress a combination of reasons to explain non-use of the AUP Library. On the one hand, there is a negative library experience and on the other hand, there is a positive experience with other services, providers, or facilities.

*I: And the articles, where did you find them? In your old library? S: Yeah.*  *I:* So you went back to - because you said 'you're familiar, you know how to use it'.

S: Yeah, [...] I never come across roadblocks with my old school. I never have a hard time finding articles I need. And if they have something that's just the abstract and not the full-text, I know I can send an email to my librarian there and within a day, I'll have it in my inbox. [...] And here [author's note: AUP Library] I don't know the system as well, and whenever I go to do searches online it's always telling me, 'oh I have to pay for this article', or it'll show me just the reference. It'll say that it's available online, but we don't have it and here's the reference, so -

*I: You only have the abstract?* 

S: Right. It's kind of like, alright, this isn't helpful, I can click a button and go to my old school and have access to quite a bit more.

Yet, for students, the major criterion to determine library use or not is 'usefulness', as expressed in comments such as 'being productive' or 'this isn't helpful'. This can be a quiet, comfortable, inspiring and solitary space where students can complete their work or, it can be a fast, easy, and efficient interface for students to find and connect to information. Anything that is counterproductive – such as time-consuming activities, complicated interfaces, no access to full-text – is perceived as a roadblock and a reason to turn away from the library to other information providers.

Seeking other information providers can also be attributed to reasons for nonuse prior to library use, such as habits, satisfying experiences, and the vast information offerings. Students bypass the AUP Library on account of satisfying everyday searching (i.e. google searching), more time-efficient services, and the knowledge of more satisfying alternatives to libraries. Thus, the AUP Library is thrust into a situation of competition with other information providers (i.e. special web pages, Google, Wikipedia) and learning spaces (i.e. home).

Another factor amplifying competition is the new types of information that the Internet offers. While the library suffers from a gap in its collection, the Internet enlarges its advantages with new types of information such as 'fresh information', videos, music, speeches, etc.. These new information types are crucial for certain academic disciplines which condemn the library as a secondary information provider. The Internet's role as information provider goes up while the library's role declines.

Finally, the role of the professor explains the non-use of the AUP Library and its web resources. Almost every student in the survey (89.8%) talks to the professor about their course-related assignment. As seen in the interviews, often the professor provides the students with articles, books, and web resources that are important for the assignments. In this sense, the professor is the subject specialist who knows which source is 'of value'. Thus, the professor is recognized as an important source of research help rather than the librarians. Students see the AUP Library as secondary to the professor's role.

4. 'Moving away'?

Putting the findings of this study in relation to other studies is simultaneously simple and difficult. Simple due to the fact that the survey design resembles other study designs (Booth, 2009; Chapman, et al. 2007; Head and Eisenberg 2009) in measuring library use, and yet difficult since online surveys might not be the most accurate way of data-gathering and measuring library use in comparison to the in-class-survey.

It is made even more difficult by the fact that non-use is not a common subject among information professionals. Ethnographic studies concentrate in general on students who use the library for their course-related assignments (Head and Eisenberg 2010, Warwick et al. 2010) since the non-user is invisible.

From a quantitative point of view, the findings of the at-hand-study are in line with recent library studies claiming that libraries and their web resources are highly used by students (Chapman, et. al. 2007, Booth 2009, Head and Eisenberg 2009).

However, as discussed in the literature review (Stoepel, 2010), the online surveys tend to bias the findings of those studies. The question of whether the findings represent most library users is legitimate. This raises questions about online surveys in general as Dollinger (2003) has clearly pointed out. Library studies do not want to risk drawing inaccurate pictures of their user populations on which they base their development decisions. Their findings make them blind to taking these user groups into account, especially if it is a growing (non-) user group.

Furthermore, the at-hand-study reveals the importance of distinguishing the role of the library for different academic disciplines. As seen in my findings, in almost 50.77% of courses, there was no need for researching. In certain academic disciplines, there is no research required since the learning objectives do not ask for it. For instance, Head and Eisenberg's study (2009) concentrated only on humanities and social sciences courses finding a high need for library use and its web resources. Yet, the question of library use in other academic courses is not subject to discussion. It would be interesting to see what role the library plays in other courses and if the findings would correspond to those of the humanities and social sciences.

These findings lead to the question of what today's learning objectives are. In each academic discipline, this has to be asked in order to see what role the library plays as an information provider and as a learning space. It is obvious that in language or lower level courses, libraries will not be of high use as no research is requested. However, the question of learning objectives is also linked to the fact that the emergence of the Internet may have an impact on learning objectives. What is learnt today? What skills should students practice in order to be well-prepared for the future? What role does the library play if the learning objectives change?

Given the fact that the focus of the study at-hand was explicitly on non-use, it is difficult to put its findings in relation to the findings of the aforementioned library studies (surveys or ethnographic studies) since they do not expound the problem of non-use.

And yet, these studies identify current students' research methods and the importance of Google and Wikipedia. These studies conclude that students combine the use of library resources with Internet research. Head and Eisenberg (2010) describe students' ways of doing research today as follows:

"As a whole, these findings suggest that course–related research is a complex and a multi–step process. Students consistently employ preferred problem– solving strategies for course–related research, based on efficiencies and using a mix of self–taught workarounds and some formally learned research methods." (Head and Eisenberg 2010)

Clearly, it is not only the formally learned research methods that are important for researching and writing but also the self-taught workarounds. Consequently, these findings indicate that different information providers as well as new research strategies are becoming more important.

Research undertaken in the UK claims that information users are "moving away from the library as provider" (Moss, 2009, p. 72). They state that the Internet will replace the library as information provider and the library may stop being seen as a repository where the book is the king. However, the findings in this study cannot confirm this trend of 'moving away'. This is primarily due to the fact that the design of the present study is not longitudinal. Nevertheless, the study at-hand confirms that there are students that are not using the library ('they are away') but this has existed for a long time as Line's study confirms (1971). Researchers do not only use formal information channels but, as well, informal ones to find information.

The findings of the CIBER study (2008) are in line with Moss when they underline the importance of the Internet. They see "Google Scholar as a real and present threat to the library as institution" (CIBER, 2008, p.13), expressing the place where information seekers will go in the future. This is linked to their findings that "there is much evidence that young people are unaware of library sponsored content" (CIBER, 2008, p.20). The interviews are partly in concert with these findings. Only 8.7% of non-users declare to be unaware of library resources and 13% do not know the URL of the library homepage. On the contrary, the competition over more satisfying alternatives clearly shows that there is a challenge to libraries and information provision, which in turn feeds the argumentation that there is a 'moving away from libraries'.

Nicolas, et al. (2009) supports the thesis that digital information consumers, as they call the information seekers and users today, are moving away. They go even further than this, saying that libraries are only secondary as information providers today: "[...] in a ubiquitous information environment, information professionals and knowledge providers are no longer the dominant players nor the supplier of first choice". (Nicolas, et al., 2009, p.5).

Still, the present study does not agree with these conclusions, in terms of seeing such a fundamental change. Certainly, "the information landscape has been totally transformed. Google now channels millions and millions of people to the information they need, on a scale that dwarfs any library [...]" (Nicolas, et al. 2009, p.5). This is true for Google as they have understood what the user needs

are and what they want. According to Nicholas et al., this is not the case for the information professionals.

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