

English Composition Students: How are They Using Their Sources?

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Abstract

Based on papers collected from eight sections of an English Composition class at a liberal arts college, researchers identified un-cited sources within the papers, and compared sources listed in bibliographies to sources cited within the papers to see if all sources were accounted for. Researchers tabulated how sources were used, including paraphrasing, stand-alone quotes, and quotes either preceded by an introductory comment or followed by analysis or both. The goal was to discover how students were (or were not) using sources listed in their bibliographies and to determine the degree to which students were integrating sources into their writing. The overall purpose of the study was to help both composition instructors and librarians adjust their instructional strategies to address the problems highlighted by the study. This research project was also an excellent vehicle for partnering with Faculty who teach the English Composition course to learn how library instruction and composition instruction interact and overlap.

Introduction

Improving student research writing proficiency is a common goal for faculty and librarians. Based on data collected and analyzed in our study, researchers were able to evaluate students' citation performance and their ability to integrate sources effectively. The overall purpose of the study was to help both composition instructors and librarians adjust their instructional strategies to address the problems highlighted by the study. Researchers hoped their study could promote on-going collaboration between English Composition faculty and librarians in research and writing instruction.

Research Question

Our research question is: How do English Composition students cite and integrate sources? Researchers assessed how English Composition students used their sources by looking at whether students cited their sources and the way they integrated sources within the papers. The research study conducted a content analysis of the papers collected based on four rubrics: (1) in-text citations and bibliographies, (2) type of sources used in bibliographies, (3) paraphrasing vs. quoting, and (4) how quotations were integrated.

Study Objectives

Based on their assessment of students' citing behaviors, student citation performance, and student ability to integrate sources, researchers hoped to determine if students' writing proficiency was consistent with their faculty's expectations. We also compared the key data of our current study to the pilot study (Radcliff) conducted in 2008.

Saint Mary's College of California

Saint Mary's College of California (SMC) is a Catholic, Lasallian, and liberal arts college. The College offers undergraduate and graduate programs. According to the 2011-2012 statistics (SMC facts and figures, 2012), the total enrollment is 4,099, consisting of traditional undergraduates and graduate students, as well as students enrolled in professional programs.

Among the incoming SMC students in Fall 2010, 87% of freshmen are from California. 36% of traditional undergraduates are first generation college students. 61% are female, 39% are male. 48% of freshmen are minorities, including 25% Latino; 46% are White.

There are three levels of writing requirements at SMC: ENG3 Practice in Writing (exempt for most students), ENG 4 Composition, and ENG 5 Argument and Research. Researchers looked at the SMC Composition program and found that the learning outcomes for ENG 5 fall within the focus of our study (SMC Composition, 2012).

The SMC new core curriculum, scheduled to launch in Fall 2012, also supports the goals of our study. One of the learning goals of the curriculum: information evaluation and research practices, states in its learning outcomes that students will be able to integrate and cite evidence appropriately with increasing proficiency (SMC Core Curriculum Committee, 2011). The new core curriculum also specified that in addition to English Composition courses, an upper-division course in a specific discipline would need to have a research and writing component built into the course.

Literature Review

In best practices for research writing, students need to know how to integrate sources into their writing. There are three ways to incorporate sources into writing: summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting (Shields, 2010; Harvey, 2003). Paraphrasing is generally preferred to quoting. Experts advise students to paraphrase whenever possible – to only use quotes when the exact wording is important.

According to Hubbuch (2005) and Quaratiello and Devine (2011), quotes are meant to function as supporting evidence and not replace the writers' own words. Whether it is paraphrasing or quoting, students need to acknowledge sources within their papers. Quotes should be introduced with signal phrases and analyzed afterwards. Stand alone quotes or "dropped quotes" are improper use of quotes. Shields (2010) and Harvey (2003) discouraged putting too many or lengthy quotes in papers.

Robillard (2006) emphasized that good citation practices are essential. Nienhaus (2004) claimed that classroom discussions of citing, ways to cite sources, and proper citation styles have helped improved his students' citation performance. In his class assignments, the author also required his students to paraphrase their source information in their paper. Shi (2010, 2011) explored the association between students' motivation to cite and their citing behaviors. Students who did not cite claimed that they did not need to cite everything. The author identified three factors why students did not cite: the notion of common knowledge, knowledge acquired from classroom learning, and unidentifiable prior learning. Students did not always know how to cite.

They often preferred quoting to paraphrasing because they were not sure how to paraphrase. Shi (2011) concluded that faculty's evaluation of students' citing behavior and students' citation practices were not in sync.

History of Collaboration in SMC

Librarians and composition faculty have a long history of collaboration at Saint Mary's College. Typically, librarians do one to two sessions for each Composition 5 class and also do sessions by request for Composition 4 classes. Composition faculty are also encouraged to assign a research skills tutorial to their students in both Composition 4 and 5. The benefits of collaboration include librarians sharing their expertise in helping design the research component of the course and in teaching students the best ways to do research.

Librarians and faculty have also collaborated via research projects, the first being a bibliographic citation analysis which was piloted in 2004 (Radcliff & Birkenseer) and then continued in 2006 (Radcliff, Brown-Salazar, Birkenseer) with a larger study that included interviews with faculty and an analysis of their research assignments. Both librarians and composition faculty benefited from of this kind of collaboration by getting feedback on how well their teaching strategies were working.

The results of the study, which showed that students were using about one third books, one third websites and magazines and one third journals and newspapers, were shared with all librarians and composition faculty who could then adjust their teaching strategies accordingly.

Reference Materials	6%
Books	28%
Journals	8%
Magazines	9%
Newspapers	21%
Web sites	22%
Other	6%

Table 1: 2006 Bibliographic Study Results

Methodology

The current study was preceded by a 25-paper pilot study in 2008, which followed the same set of procedures. Researchers presented the pilot study to composition faculty at their annual conference, and, based on faculty interest, a larger study was planned. In 2010, researchers collected 105 papers from 7 different composition classes. Of these, researchers discarded 20 papers for lack of a bibliography. The total number of papers in the study was 85.

Researchers analyzed the bibliographies of these papers, dividing sources into categories, such as websites, magazines, journals and newspapers, and books. They also checked to see how many of the sources in each bibliography were cited in the paper and how many factual (citable)

statements in the paper were cited. Researchers also coded all internal citations as being instances of paraphrasing or quoting. For those that were quotes, researchers did a more fine-grained analysis and determined if the quote included an introduction (IQ), was followed by analysis (QA), had both introduction and analysis (IQA), or had neither (Q). The purpose in following this procedure was to quantify the degree of integration of sources into the paper. Paraphrasing shows the highest level of integration, followed by IQA; a quote with no introduction or analysis represents the lowest level of integration.

Results

The bibliographies from the papers showed the following results:

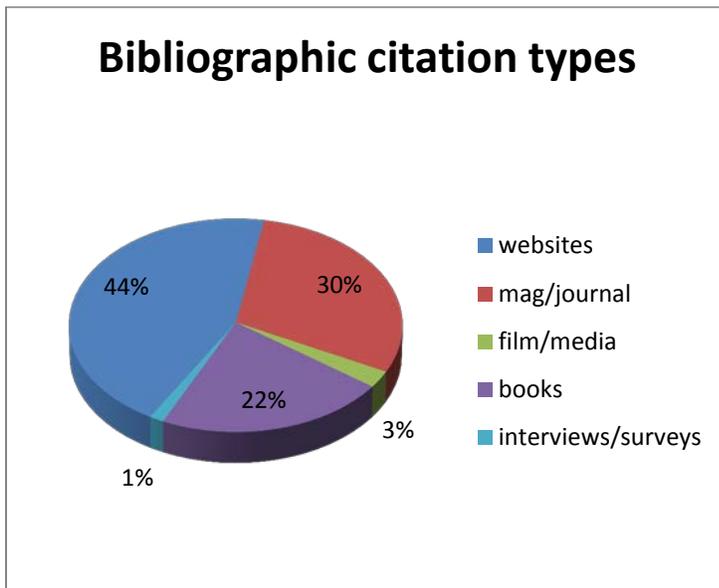


Figure 1: Bibliographic citation types

These results were similar to those from the 2006 bibliographic study and the 2008 pilot study, though the percentage of websites out of the total increased.

Type of Source	Current Study	2008 Pilot Study	2006 Study
Books	22%	24%	32 %
Websites	44%	34%	22%
Media	3%	2.6%	n/a
Magazine/journal/news	30%	38.2%	38%
Interview/survey	1%	9.8%	(other) 6%

Table 2: Comparison of bibliographic citation types found in studies

The next major result from the study was the percentage of paraphrasing (42%) versus quoting (58%) for all the papers.

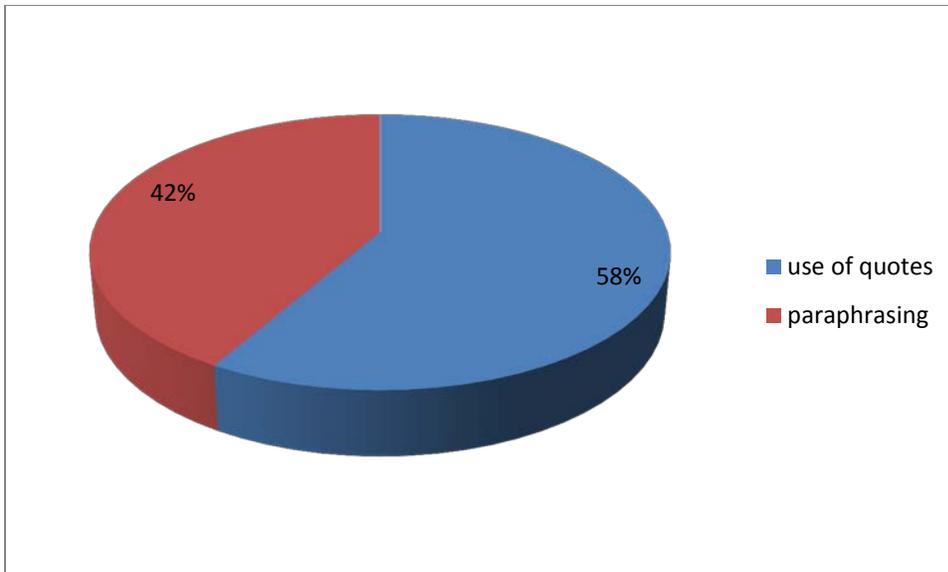


Figure 2: Use of quotes versus paraphrasing

The frequency distributions below illustrate how many papers had what range of paraphrasing and quoting. In both of these figures the results are somewhat skewed in opposite directions, showing many papers are relying heavily on quoting.

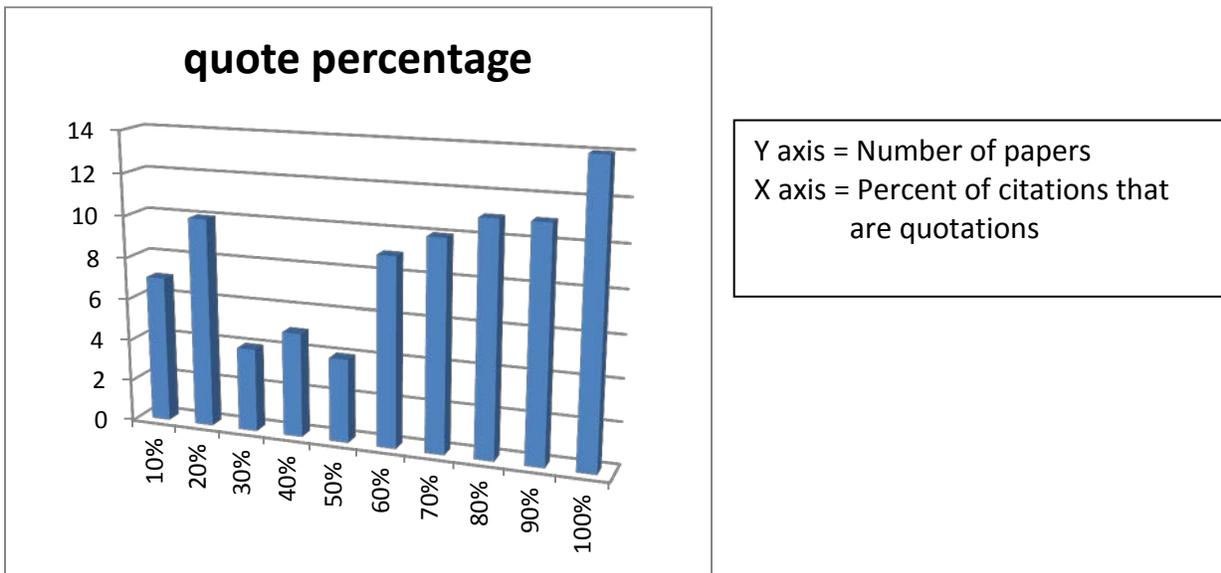


Figure 3: Frequency of quoting

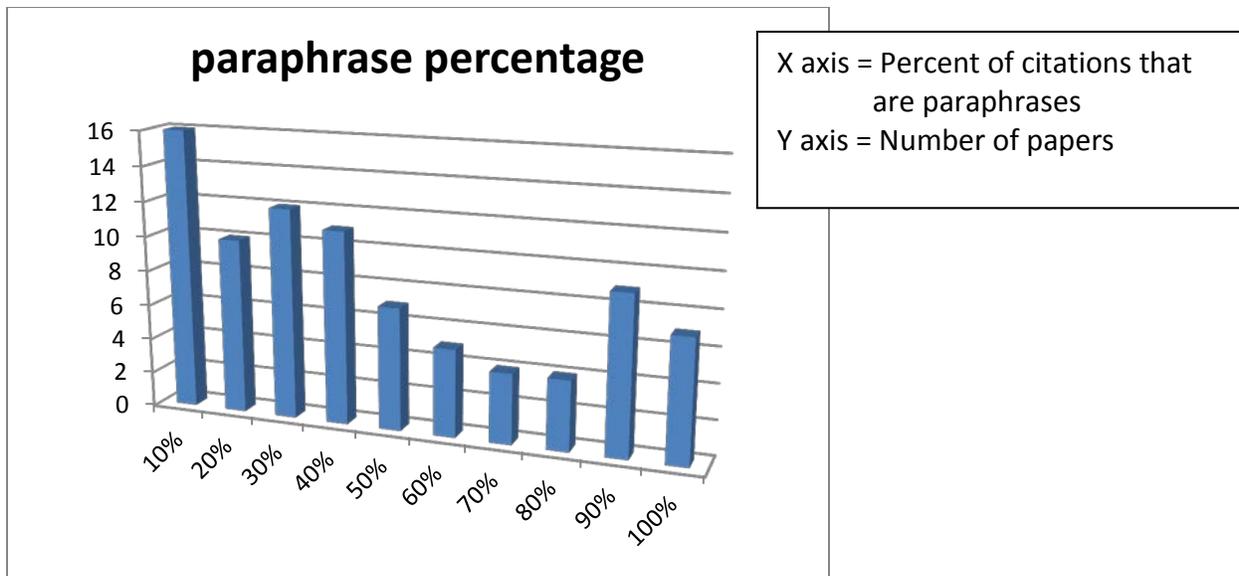


Figure 4: Frequency of Paraphrasing

The basic percentage of quoting versus paraphrasing was very similar in the pilot study as this table below indicates.

Internal Citing	Current Study	Pilot Study
Quotes	58%	57%
Paraphrasing	42%	43%

Table 3: Quoting and paraphrasing

The figure below shows the percentages of IQA, QA, IQ, and Q as defined above. 53% had both introduction and analysis while 13 % had neither.

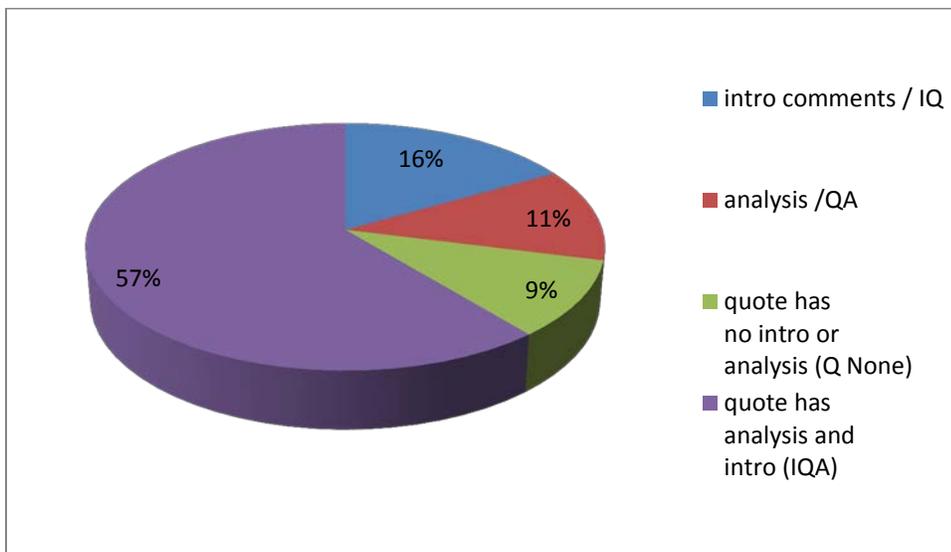


Figure 5: Quoting contexts

Another key result from the study was the percentage of the bibliographic sources that were actually cited in the papers. The figure below shows that 22 percent of the sources were not cited.

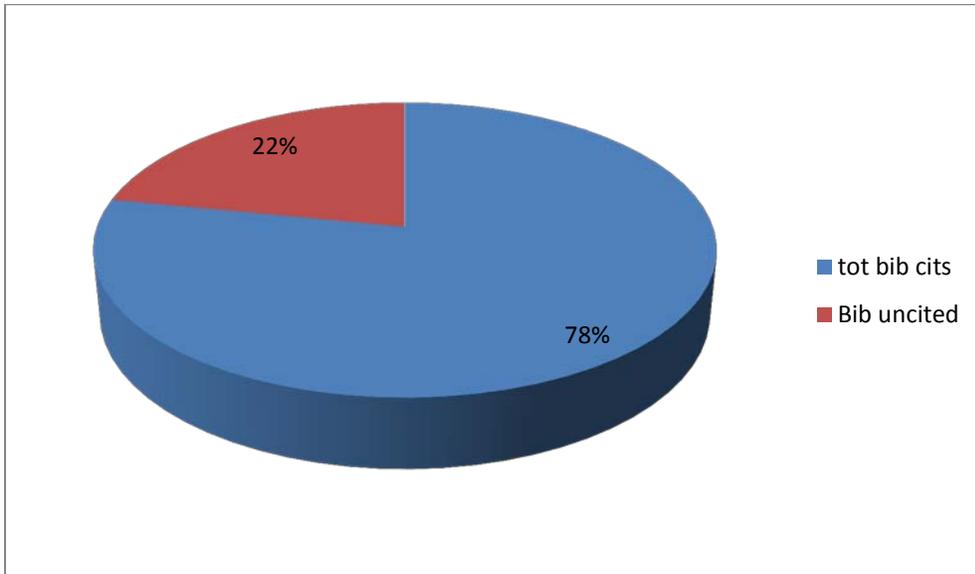


Figure 6: Percentage of bibliography cited in papers

The figure below gives the frequency distribution for the above result.

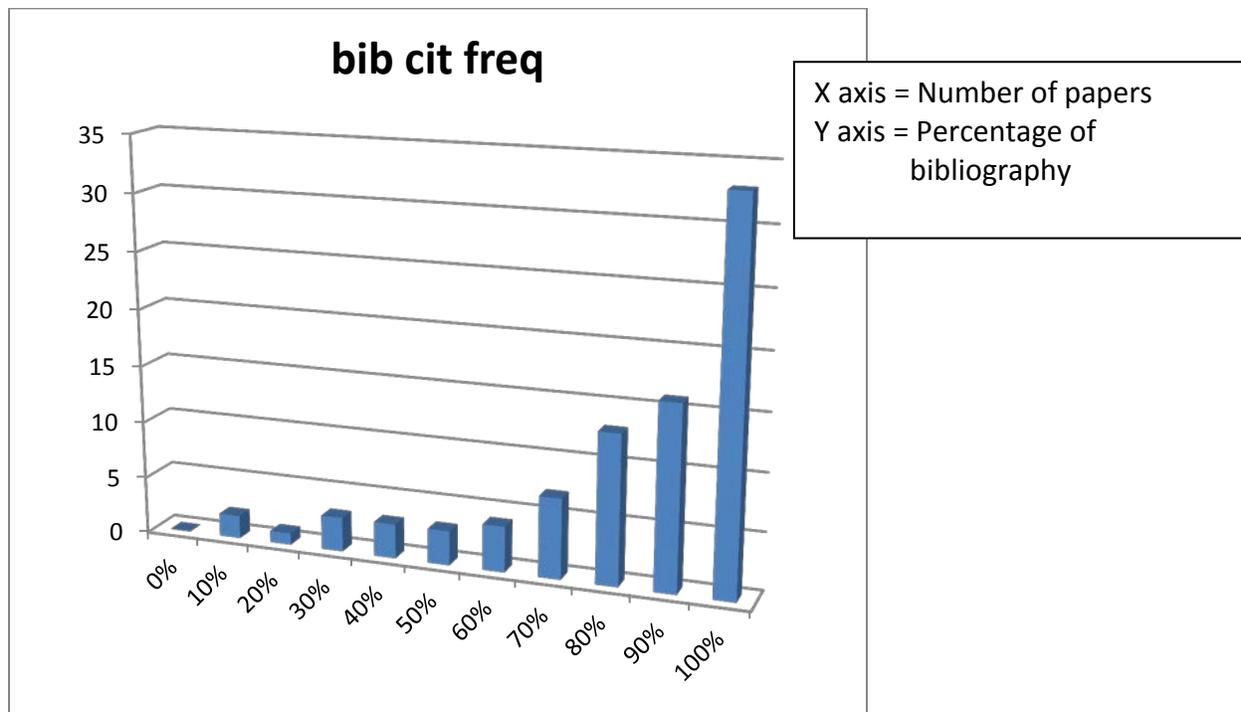


Figure 7: Frequency of bibliography cited

Researchers also analyzed how much citable material in the paper was not cited. Without making a determination of plagiarism, the researchers concluded that 14 % of data that should have been cited was not.

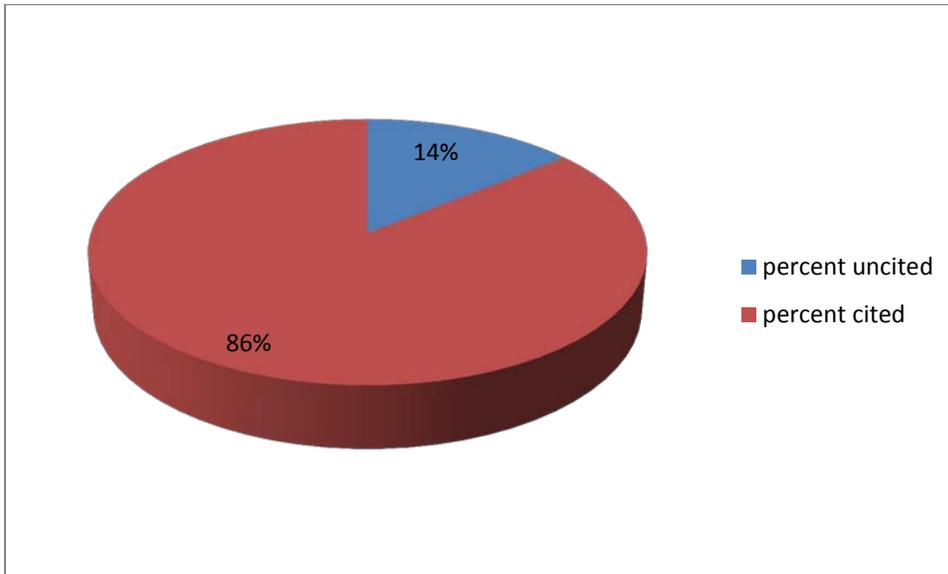


Figure 8: Percent of data cited

Below is the frequency data for data not cited per paper.

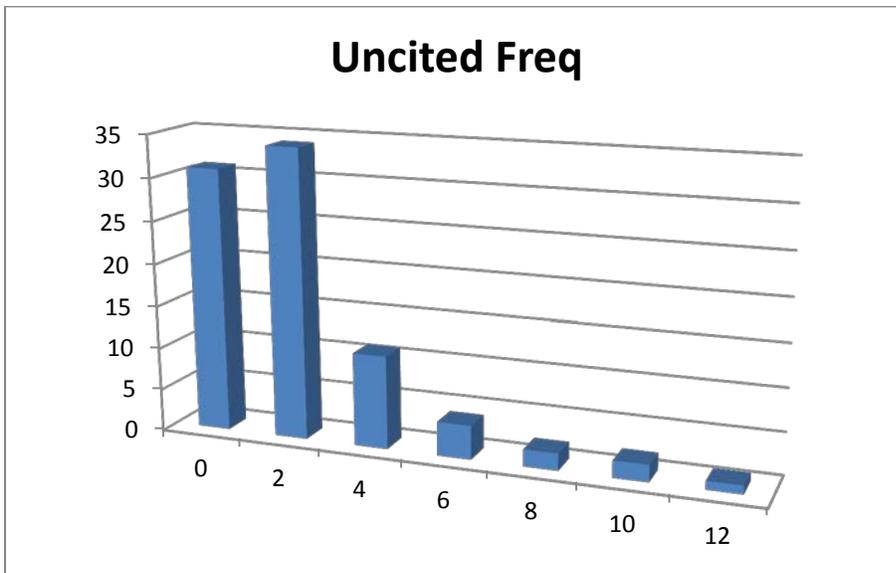


Figure 9: Frequency of uncited data

Analysis

Sources in the bibliographies were fairly evenly distributed between books, articles, and websites, with websites taking the lead. Results were similar for the pilot and new study. The

researchers see this as an expected and fairly good result: students are not limiting themselves to the web. They are using library resources though faculty could change these percentages via their paper requirements. Also, since the percentage of web sources did go up since the last 2006 bibliographic study, librarians and faculty should try to make sure students use more library than web sources in their papers.

The ratios of quotes to paraphrasing were almost identical in both studies (60/40) and show a strong preference for quoting. Generally, paraphrasing is preferred by faculty as it requires students to integrate the material into their papers. However 53 % of the quotes did have an introduction and analysis which indicates the next strongest level of integration. 13% of all quotes are quotes without I or A. This group is the one of most concern (in addition to data not cited) and should be addressed by faculty via instruction.

The percentage of sources from bibliographies that were cited was a high 78 %, but should really be 100%. This element can be addressed by both faculty and librarians. The percentage of factual statements and/or data in papers that was cited adequately was high: 86 %. But this should be 100%. Instruction in the importance of citing data needs to be addressed by both librarians and faculty.

MLA format was not followed exactly in most cases though most students did include the essential elements to uniquely identify sources. In some cases, citing was not counted by researchers, because it was too incomplete to indicate a unique source.

Implications and Discussion

Researchers hope their study has offered some insights to faculty, librarians, and instructors regarding student citing behaviors. Analysis showed that faculty expectation of student citation performance was inconsistent with student citation practices. The study prompted SMC librarians to review the library's information literacy learning outcomes. This study suggested that there were several areas where instruction by both librarians and faculty could be improved and faculty-librarian collaboration needed to be strengthened.

This study could be used to create more collaborative opportunities for faculty, librarians, and writing instructors to improve students' research writing proficiency. Researchers believe that breaking down the citing process into steps and having students work in groups on various elements of research, citing, paraphrasing, and quoting would be effective. Ongoing dialogue and division of labor among faculty, librarians, and writing instructors could lead to productive workshops, exercises, and tutorials embedded in the classroom.

Limitations of This Study

The sample papers collected were written by different sections of SMC composition students. These papers were not random samples because they were given by composition faculty voluntarily. 85 papers is not a small sample. However, if the study were to be replicated with another student group in another academic setting, the results might be different. The distinction between paraphrasing and summarizing was not made in the data analysis. The

researchers were primarily interested in the distinction between using one's own words and exact quoting from a source within the papers. While the various types of sources used in the bibliographies were identified, the implications were not further discussed. The association between uncited information in the papers and plagiarism was not addressed. We did not analyze the papers by sections, although differing instructional strategies used by various instructors could certainly affect our results. In our study, we assumed but did not attempt to prove that varying instructional strategies could improve results for all sections.

Directions for Future Research

One of the potential directions of future research could be to develop several instructional strategies for teaching citation and integration of sources, and to design a study to test these strategies across several composition courses. Results from the new study could be compared to the current study or a control group using a traditional method of instruction. Another approach could be the design of a new study that adds specialized library instruction to several sections of first semester English Composition courses, and a comparison of the results with sections not receiving instruction. Researchers could track the progress of students who received library instruction in the first semester, throughout second semester Composition.

Conclusion: Improving Students' Research Writing

Faculty, librarians, and writing instructors offered their ideas and recommendations on developing collaborative opportunities and improving student research writing. Librarians welcomed the idea of working with the writing center to support faculty's teaching needs. During library instruction, students were shown how to use the citation tools featured in databases as a starting point. Librarians often conducted short class exercises or group work on citation practices. Citation software like RefWorks or Zotero has been recommended to students who needed to compile extensive bibliographies.

The writing instructors were surprised to see that 60% students preferred quoting to paraphrasing and that the percentage of "dropped quotes" was high. Writing instructors were already working with librarians on developing online library tutorials. The director of the Center for Writing Across the Curriculum at SMC was enthusiastic to use the research data to collaborate with librarians in developing discipline-specific workshops that include teaching citation and integration of sources for upper-division courses.

Faculty members favored adding specialized library instruction on citing to first semester English Composition classes to "get students' feet wet." Faculty also agreed that alerting students about citation tools is helpful. However, students need to learn how to build the citations. To help students understand the basics, a faculty member formulated quizzes and in-class discussions to reiterate the importance of citing and quotation formatting. The faculty member also asked students to compare paragraph examples and examine how the effectiveness of paraphrasing and the use of properly integrated quotes could enhance the quality of their writing. Faculty members recognized the importance of making their expectations and requirements explicit in their assignment instructions to students.

Collaboration is the key to success. It is only by working together that faculty, librarians, and writing instructors can help students achieve their academic goals.

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