Critical Analysis:

McCaskie, Lucie. 2004. “What are the implications for information literacy training in higher education with the introduction of federated search tools?” MA diss., University of Sheffield.

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In this dissertation, Lucy McCaskie “investigates the implications for information literacy training in high education with the introduction of federated search tools” (p. 2). McCaskie’s dissertation provides readers with an overview of the changes caused by new federated search tools from the opinions of academic librarians in the United Kingdom, as well as other countries. This particular project was chosen for appraisal due to its subject matter. Although federated search tools are becoming outdated, understanding how new search technologies affect information literacy is a vital area of study in academic libraries. The choices for methodology and analysis, as well as the results and recommendations for further study may prove beneficial for future studies surrounding information literacy or new searching tools. While this dissertation outlines many important issues arising from changing search tools for librarians and information literacy, the author fails to critically analyze the previous literature and falls short of providing readers with a clear and focused piece of research. Here, it will be critically assessed based on its focus and context, engagement with the literature, methodology, analysis and discussion of data, and conclusion.

McCaskie introduces her dissertation with a list of the research objectives and aims. These objectives range from understanding how federated search tools have affected librarian opinions and changed information literacy training, as well as the general success of the tool in regards to its usability, necessity in searching, and acceptance by students. These objectives, as well as the definitions of key terms are the underlying foundation for the rest of the research. This introduction finishes with the context of the research, sharing that the project was inspired by practical needs of the Open University in the United Kingdom. Further, McCaskie demonstrates with references that this is a new topic, so little or no research has been conducted on federated searching and information literacy.

Because no research has been published about these topics, the literature review focuses on analyzing publications mostly about information literacy. While the review is organized thematically and ordered logistically, the actual review of the literature is minimal, with evaluations such as “the issues raised… are interesting but more work is needed” (p. 23). Rather, McCaskie provides readers with a detailed summary of pertinent publications surrounding information literacy, its definitions and relationship to technology, and a history of the implementation of federated search tools. This dissertation demonstrates an understanding of the available literature, but communicates little perspective or evaluation of the research. While McCaskie avoids criticizing her sources, her presentation of the significant themes surrounding this topic indicates that her dissertation could become a beneficial addition to the current research.

In regards to the methodology, the author begins the section by identifying the kind of approach—qualitative—and justifies the method by stating that “raising issues and concerns that may be applicable to other libraries implementing federated search tools was a potential outcome of the research but creating generalizable results was not a primary aim” (p. 24). This line of reasoning illustrates that the author understands the general aims of qualitative research and presents her research with an understanding of the various kinds of research methods and their most appropriate uses. She then documents her choices for group interviews, “purposeful samples [, and]… interviews over questionnaires” because the samples and personal, open questioning would lead to a more in-depth investigation (p. 27-8). Further, McCaskie realizes the challenges associated with the case study, surveys, and interviews, such as the possible bias in interviews, as well as the general lack of survey responses received. Later, the possible ethical issues and how they were handled, are documented, as well as a detailed, honest realization of the research limits. These immediately subdued some critique, because the author provides reasoning for every decision, as well as recommendations for future studies with similar methods.

When the results are presented and analyzed, the general credibility of the research begins to dissolve. Here, McCaskie utilizes three chapters to present and discuss the analysis of her results—each one corresponding to a different type of methodology she practiced, including a case study, separate interviews, and email surveys. Initially, the compilation of multiple methods seems like an appropriate approach; they are all types of sound qualitative research and have been successfully in some studies. Ludrigan, Manuel, and Yan (2012) also utilize different types of methodology—focus groups, questionnaires, and online surveys—to fulfill their research aims. Like McCaskie, the authors chose this mixture to gather more in-depth understanding of how Serials Solutions Summon would work for the Ryerson University library users.

However, McCaskie’s results from the methodology prove that the study methods may have been overambitious, and completing too many types of methodology spread the research thin. The dissertation may have had more in-depth, significant results if the researcher focused more closely on one or two methods. Moreover, while the results are organized and well detailed, the manner in which the information is presented—each idea is separated into sections, subsections, and some even separated further—eliminates a cohesive report.

Although this dissertation seeks to understand how federated searching affects information literacy, the results chapters stray from the research objectives. For instance, the author details why the universities surveyed subscribed to federated searching. She then provides specific information about each type of federated search tool before providing any results. Rather than being a helpful supplement, it distracts readers from the central objectives and aims. In regards to the analysis and results, the reader gathers little knowledge of the statistical or technical procedures for analysis in the case study and the email survey. This may be a result of using only qualitative analysis, but the analysis is mentioned so rarely that readers are unsure of how the research concludes. Denscombe (2010) recommends that researchers must share “what we have found. Then…we will move on to considering what significance the data might have” (Denscombe 2010, 314). This advice is relevant for the dissertation appraised, because McCaskie’s presentation of the data is minimal. The research would benefit from better presenting it to readers so that the study’s significance may be realized. Fortunately, the author provides some reprieve by discussing the major themes that arise from the analysis. This, however, may not be enough.

One of the most positive aspects of the study is McCaskie’s constant engagement with the literature. Although there are excessive limitations in the research, various studies are mentioned and detailed to bring not only the research objectives into context, but also to provide justification for the methodology. In the concluding sections, McCaskie discusses the main themes recognized throughout her work, such as how the search tools have raised awareness and may have negatively affect student search habits. While the dissertation does not provide readers with new theory, the results do provide readers with an exploratory look into the field of federated searching tools. It also highlights key themes for the topic discussion and numerous recommendations for the Open University, as well as future research opportunities.

Despite the detail regarding the steps taken throughout her research, McCaskie avoids explicit explanation of how her work contributes to the field, leaving the reader to make the decision. The conclusion highlights suggestions for how federated search tools may influence information literacy based on the results of the study, but the analysis ends here. Not indicating how this study will influence the field minimizes the significance of the results. The results find that “students were found to be lacking an awareness and knowledge of information resources” and there is a “need for information literacy training” (p. 64). These themes are critical for information literacy, understanding search behavior, yet the authors fail to communicate the magnitude of such themes. Konnur, Rajani, and Madhusudan conduct a similar study evaluating library websites in India. They conclude that the sites evaluated are “lagging behind in exploiting the full potential,” a theme that solidifies the significance of this study about Indian library websites (Konnur, Rajani, and Madhusudan, 2012, 12). McCaskie’s dissertation would benefit greatly if more focus surrounded the significance of the study rather than the description of each federated search tool.

In conclusion, the dissertation analyzed is an adequate introduction to the potential implications for how federated search tools, as well as more advanced search tools, will influence information literacy in academic institutions. The report itself is organized well, with a thorough knowledge of information literacy studies and a detailed report of the research. Unfortunately, the research itself causes challenges that question the significance of such a report. For those considering replicating the research, recommendations include narrowing the approach down to one or two methods and to be more explicit about the data analysis, as well as discussing the significance of the study. Overall, this dissertation is one that can be used as an introduction to the relationship between federated (or other) search tools and information literacy, as well as the ways that new search tools may change information literacy from the point of view of information professionals.

References

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