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Researching an essay:
Undergraduates' ways of
experiencing information
literacy

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of Canberra in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Acknowledgments

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken)*

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Abstract

This thesis presents a study of students' ways of experiencing information literacy when researching an essay in a first year university course. The aims of the study were to contribute to an understanding and awareness of information literacy from the students' experience, and to inform curriculum design for information literacy education.

The study involved semi-structured interviews with 20 undergraduate students enrolled in a first year environmental studies course at the Australian National University in 2002. A phenomenographic approach was used as the methodological and theoretical basis for the study. This research was modelled on Limberg's (1998) study of Year 12 students researching an assignment. It is positioned between Limberg's study and Bruce's (1997) study of higher educators' conceptions of information literacy.

The experience of information literacy included the interrelationship between the essay, information and learning. The way in which students experienced a focus on learning, focus on the essay task, use of information in the course, use of information in the essay, use of contrasting perspectives and development of argument formed the qualitative differences in experience. Students experienced information literacy when researching an essay as: looking for evidence to backup an existing argument; using background information to develop an argument; and applying learning to help solve environmental problems. A further outcome of the study is that information literacy is framed as a learning approach. These outcomes may have significance for students, teachers, librarians, academic skills advisors, academic developers, policy makers and administrators in higher education.

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