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Referencing: Student choice or Student voice?

Lillis (2001: 53) calls referencing an 'institutional practice of mystery', a frequent cause of student anxiety and complaint. It is an area in which a vast perceptual gulf exists between academics and students, one in which academic support staff can see both sides. Students, not wanting to look 'stupid' in front of academic staff, will often express their concerns only to librarians and other support staff, so academics do not see the full range of anxieties. This paper reflects on this problem and reports on a successful project to alleviate student fears by decreasing the number of official referencing styles at the University of Bradford.

Perceptions of referencing

'Is there no way that one standardised practice can be agreed for the University? With one guide that can be used by all? Or is it more important that each member of staff has a dot or bracket in a certain place at the potential cost of student grades, University statistics and the overall perception and experience at the university? I have come to university to learn about psychology and management, not to find myself wondering what type of Harvard everyone prefers.'

The anguished email from which the above quote is taken worked its way by circuitous means to the library, accompanied by the polite incomprehension of her programme leader:

'I don't understand what the problem is, we just use standard Harvard'.

On investigation, it transpired that the student had if anything understated the problem – she had, in her first two years of study, been subject to no less than four sets of referencing guidelines, all variants on Harvard. Whilst her programme leader, only seeing the guidelines for his own modules, assumed that his version was 'standard' there is in fact no 'standard Harvard': Endnote contains 6819 referencing styles, of which 3074 are Harvard/author-date variants (Clarivate Analytics, 2017).

Academic staff generally purport to be unbothered by details of referencing style, as long as they are able to trace the source: 'any style as long as it's numeric' was the sole advice previously given to chemistry students. Students, on the other hand, obsess about the minutiae of punctuation and formatting: I have witnessed students in tears trying to understand why there is a semi-colon in one referencing template but a comma in another. There is some evidence (Neville, 2009; O'Hara, 2010) that some students prefer to omit a reference, risking a plagiarism charge, rather than reference incorrectly.

Academic staff often consider that students should be exposed to a variety of referencing styles and given a choice of referencing style as to which they use, some even regarding it as a vital part of academic freedom. Students want to be told exactly what to do, and would like guidelines that cover all details and templates for every conceivable type of information source.

What did we do?

In January 2015, I mailed the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and asked if I could convene a group to address the issue of multiple referencing styles. Somewhat taken aback, she nonetheless agreed. The group included representatives from all areas involved in referencing: academics from all faculties, academic skills advisors, educational developers, the student union and, of course, the library.

Our first step was to prove to sceptical colleagues who were convinced their personal style was 'standard' that there were indeed many variants in use. The group scoured referencing guides from all of the university departments, divisions and faculties, about twenty in all, for guidelines on the four most commonly used sources: books, chapters from edited books, journals and websites. For each, we enumerated the differences in each element, and also general points such as the format of authors' names and case of titles. We identified nine distinct versions of author/date referencing, three numeric and two numbered note systems, a catalogue that a formerly unconvinced colleague described as 'sobering'.

Example of differences in style

General variants					
Format of author's name	Persaud, A.L.	Persaud AL	A.L. Persaud		
Two authors	Persaud, A.L. and Sedgley, M.T.	Persaud AL and Sedgley MT	Persaud, A.L. & Sedgley, M.T.	Persaud AL, Sedgley MT	A.L. Persaud and M.T. Sedgley
Three authors	Persaud, A.L., Sedgley, M.T. and Goodliff M.L.	Persaud AL, Sedgley MT and Goodliff ML	Persaud, A.L., Sedgley, M.T. & Goodliff M.L.	A.L. Persaud, M.T. Sedgley and M.L. Goodliff	
Number of authors named	All	Seven then et al	20 then et al	Five then et al	
Format of date	(2000)	(2000).	2000		
Position of date	After authors	At end / before volume and issue			
Format of title	Italics	No italics			
Book					
Between book title and publisher	Comma		Full stop		
Edition	2nd edn.		2 nd ed.		2nd ed
Place of publication, publisher	Cambridge: Cambridge University Press		(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)		

Having determined which variants were in use, our next step was to decide on a preferred style for each. We first looked at the various published styles but each seemed to have their own oddities

that we could not rationalise to each other, let alone explain to the students. So with a heavy heart, we decided to add to Endnote's 6000+ styles and invent our own system based on practices within the university, attempting to maximise consistency and simplicity.

Rationalisation or Radical change?

Before we could decide on the fine details of the new style, we had to consider a few philosophical issues. Firstly, did we want to make referencing as simple as humanly possible, or keep our style looking reasonably similar to existing styles? The first option would ease the pain for new students but would make the style particularly alien for students arriving from other institutions. We finally decided that we should respect most academic norms so our students would be able to recognise them in published sources, and if they went onto further study elsewhere would not have an additional mountain to climb. We had particularly vexed conversation about the place of publication for books and book chapters (cf Levin, 2009). Though present in every referencing style, not one of us could articulate why it was there and what it tells the reader (except in books from the pre-mass printing era). There was a broad divide between those of us (librarians and academic skills) who regularly had to help students on increasingly futile quests to find the place of publication, and academic staff who marked the results. The final decision was a typical committee fudge – the place of publication is still part of our book reference template but is now optional. Similarly, dots after initials are grammatically correct and part of academic convention, but many of us felt they add to potential confusion and make referencing much more complicated for print-impaired students, especially those relying on audio (one of my annual tasks is to provide voiceover to slides on referencing, and just reading out 'smith comma j dot m dot' makes me lose the will to live, I can't imagine what it's like having to listen to it). Again, academic norms prevailed and they were kept in.

These discussions led to further contemplation about the role of referencing and what we are trying to teach the students. Are we trying to make them into mini-academics and give them a degree in referencing? If the source of the information is clear, should we be bothered about the format? So to accompany the style we laid out a set of principles: that the ability to identify the source and the quality of the information is more important than matters of punctuation, and that undergraduate students should only ever be made to use one referencing style. We argued that it is easier for, say, a chemistry academic marking the work of a biomedical student to learn to mark Harvard referencing than it is for the student to learn to use numeric referencing.

Outcomes

The new styles were implemented just in time for the start of the 2015/16 academic year. There are now single Harvard and numeric styles (University of Bradford Library, 2015) with accompanying Endnote Styles. Departments can still seek waivers on academic grounds if the standard style in their area, arbitrarily taken to be the style in use in the top 20 journals in the most relevant category of Journal Citation Reports (Clarivate Analytics, 2017), is radically different from either of these. Electronic Engineering and Law both successfully sought waivers on these grounds.

Staff response to the changes has been mixed. Some have welcomed the clarity and comprehensiveness of the new guidelines as an aid to marking:

‘The new simplified system for referencing has already made a difference to the students. Additionally, I have found marking much easier as a result of a clear, single style’. Archaeology lecturer

Others have suggested that the impact on staff has been minimal: some who had assumed there had always been a single style are doubtless wondering what the fuss had been about!

‘The impact on staff was minimised, and students who were previously expected to use a confusing range of slightly different referencing styles have undoubtedly benefitted from a more simplified institution-wide approach’ Curriculum development fellow

We still get reports of academic staff marking to their own guidelines, but students can appeal against marks docked in such cases and can (and do!) complain to Student-Staff Liaison committees. It has certainly made life a lot easier for academic support staff, who now have to deal with four sets of guidelines rather than 14 and can consequently give more consistent advice. The new Harvard referencing guidelines are far more detailed than any of their predecessors, containing templates for every information source we could think of and a few we could not – every time anyone receives an enquiry about a source not in the guidelines, we add a template for it.

In contrast to the mixed reaction from staff, student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive:

‘There was a massive need from the students for a single referencing style which would make the lives easier. We had a lot of students providing us extremely positive feedback’ Hazmin Ahamed, Student Union Academic Affairs Officer (2015/16).

We would urge other institutions to look at streamlining their own referencing styles: it can be done with political will, a group of student-focussed staff and a lot of cake! The impact on student satisfaction is out of proportion to the amount of effort involved. The student whose anguished howl initiated the process was particularly pleased:

‘For me personally, I cannot regain my first weeks which were filled with irritation and confusion at the lack of clarity around referencing. However, I am now hopeful that new students will be able to know exactly where to look and should be better able to concentrate on their studies than I was.’

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