Beyond the Hyperbole: Information Literacy Reconsidered

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Abstract

Information literacy, as a concept, has suffered from terminological confusion and has been burdened with untenable expectations. In addition, insufficient attention has been given to the place of information with the context of information behavior or information practices generally. Significant challenges remain to developing information literacy, but its value remains relevant.

Keywords: information literacy; digital literacy

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Introduction

Information literacy has been lauded as a potential savior for multiple global challenges. The United Nations enumerates our primary, current global issues (http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/index.shtml), which include a range of challenges, from aging and climate change to environmental sustainability; human rights; peace and security; refugees; and terrorism. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) makes significant claims about the key role of information literacy in addressing these challenges and achieving goals such as good government and democracy (2009). Such claims may excite librarians, who rightfully lay professional claim to information literacy expertise, but they place unmanageable burdens on information literacy as a concept. Information literacy remains elusive for much of the general population, and information literacy instruction is challenged by significant barriers to success. Before exploring these issues, this paper discusses the fundamental challenge of definition.

Conceptual Confusion

The concept of "information literacy" is troubled by terminological confusion and frequent messiness. In library and information science we use a very wide range of terms in this general topic area: information/digital/media/ICT/computer/ computational/technological/trans-/meta- literacy/fluency, among others. Although particular authors, organizations, or institutions will insist on specific and unique meanings for these terms, in practice they overlap in their meanings, and, importantly, are employed differently by different speakers, authors and agencies. Thus, understanding of a particular term's meaning, from any single perspective, requires careful investigation, and assumptions of mutual understanding are perilous. There is cachet in using the term "digital," so "digital literacy" is perhaps a term to be preferred, unless one wishes to include non-digital literacies. The concept of literacy itself has broadened in contemporary usage, from traditional notions of reading and writing, to a more expansive definition that includes a range of texts, written or otherwise. Thus, "text" refers to the traditional written word, recorded on paper or digitally, but also to a range of multi-media. In addition, competencies

with "text" have also expanded beyond traditional consumption to include interpretive and creative competencies. It is now well understood (in theory, if not reflected in practice), that these competencies are culturally situated within particular social conditions. So, literacy is meaning-making within a social, economic, political, technological (etc.) context (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012). This meaning-making will, therefore, differ in profound ways for people of different ages and educational backgrounds in different cultural and economic circumstances, supported by different technological affordances.

From a pragmatic perspective, and particularly in the context of higher education, information literacy may be defined as the set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to access information effectively, efficiently, and ethically. More broadly, information literacy ought to include knowing how to interpret and evaluate information, and how to use it to make meaning across a range of contexts: in decision-making, in creative activities, in academic pursuits, in daily life, and in the workplace. Crucially, information literacy must go far beyond the narrow confines of competence with academic information sources, the traditional purview of those information literacy super-fans, academic librarians.

Burdens

In addition to terminological confusion, it is also important to recognize the immense burdens that we have placed on the term "information literacy" (and its synonyms). From the UNESCO perspective (UNESCO, 2009), media and information literacy (the preferred UNESCO term) is fundamental to freedom of expression and information, and empowers citizens to recognize how media and other information providers function. For UNESCO, media and information literacy supports the ability to critically evaluate information and to make informed decisions. UNESCO emphasizes citizens' dual roles as consumers and as producers of information and media. The expectations placed on this concept, however, are quite particular: for UNESCO, media and information literacy is essential to sustainable human development, participatory civic societies, sustainable world peace, freedom, democracy, good governance, and fostering of intercultural knowledge and mutual understanding. These goals are laudable but lofty, and they place a range of serious burdens—intellectual, political, and practical—on a concept such as information literacy.

While some of these claims may have merit, there is no doubt a significant element of hyperbole within them. When similar claims come from the lips of librarians, perhaps a

motivation for self-promotion or even self-preservation is palpable, for it is our community of practice, the community of librarians, which has most emphatically claimed ownership of information literacy. Deconstructing the motivations for those claims will be left to others, but the fact remains: we see ourselves at the forefront of these great goals when the notion of information literacy is invoked.

Information Practices

Although librarians like to "own" information literacy, the place of traditional approaches (that is, the standard introduction to information searching and evaluation that comprises the majority of "information literacy instruction" in academic libraries) merits attention. In particular, consultation of formal information sources (published materials) and rational searches reflect a relatively small proportion of information behavior (or information practices). The expertise of librarians typically lies in facility with formal information sources, and with efficient and rational approaches to information searching. However, it would be wise to contextualize information literacy within a larger context of information practices generally, since information literacy is really all about information practices. People's information practices are socially and culturally situated, mediated, and co-constructed with others in their social and cultural milieux. Thus, information practices are situated, social, and embodied. They are culturally and contextually bound, so information literacy therefore takes very different forms, depending on context. In addition, as we seek to develop information literacy skills in our clients, we need to remember that information seeking is a dynamic process—information needs may arise or dissipate quickly, and "need" is changeable. We ought not to assume simple, linear models of information seeking (Case, 2012; Cole, 2012).

Our information literacy instruction also needs to be informed about other aspects of information practices. For example, people tend to favor habitual practices, and very often act on the principles of convenience and efficiency, which strongly affect those information practices that librarians might call "ideal." We also know that source memory is fragile and easily confused. That is, people have a hard time recalling the source of "facts," of what they "know" to be true; thus, subjecting preconceived ideas or opinions to critical evaluation is a very tricky business. In other words, teaching people to evaluate information is not as straightforward as simply providing lists of evaluative criteria. "Education" of any kind does not work on a banking model; as Brenda Dervin noted decades ago, people's brains are not

empty buckets into which we can toss "bricks" of useful information, such as information literacy skills (Dervin, 1983).

Human Nature

We also know that a significant driver of decision-making is social conformity, so that if one's neighbors are doing something, one is more inclined to do the same. This is important when considering what techniques will encourage behavior change—information literacy is a necessary but insufficient basis for change. More important is appealing to social norms; those are key to changing behavior.

So, my claim is that if we account for social conditions and context, for the complexity of information behavior or information practices in general, and for common cognitive confusions, this diversity of complications and limitations reduces significantly the potential claimed for information literacy to ameliorate social and political challenges.

We also need to keep in mind that while some level of information literacy may promote pro-social behaviors and attitudes, people balance meeting their own needs with a more altruistic focus on social benefits. We need to seriously ask whether we really expect that information literacy alone can shift that balance of attention towards the social good. Would a stronger grounding in information literacy change the attitudes and behaviors of terrorist extremists? Could enhanced information literacy alter violent worldviews? Or promote sustainable environmental practices? Unfortunately, it is quite common for perfectly well-educated, and information literate, individuals to hold beliefs that many other, equally well-educated and information literate individuals would abhor.

Challenges to Developing Information Literacy

We also need to understand how information literacy skills are developed. These skills are not developed through experience alone; this holds true especially for evaluation skills. Equally, effective and efficient information-finding skills take time and effort to learn. Information is organized in complex ways, and can be difficult to find and to evaluate. We recognize that, for most people, confidence in information skills exceeds actual skill level (Gross & Latham, 2012). Many people do not understand the context of information—how or why it is produced, nor the purposes for which different types of information are made available. Thus, critical evaluation is difficult. In addition, many people do not understand

(or respect) ethical boundaries on using others' ideas and writing, relying on cut-and-paste techniques to bring disparate information together. Given this status quo, what can be done? Presumably, information literacy skills can be learned from teachers in school; however, there is ample evidence for the challenges associated with that goal, and the paucity of solid outcomes (Julien & Barker, 2009; Smith, DeLong, Given, Julien & Oullette, 2012). Many school teachers are not information literate themselves, and even when curricular mandates are in place, information literacy instruction is typically not tested, and so is given short shrift. Thus, students graduating from secondary school are not typically information literate. At the post-secondary level, information literacy instruction is often limited, or is unsystematic or poorly implemented. Similar concerns apply to opportunities at public libraries and other community centers, where typically few formal information literacy instruction opportunities are offered, and where librarians are not viewed as information literacy experts.

An ongoing challenge is that there are widely-held but unsupported beliefs about the information literacy skills of "digital natives," as well as inappropriate assumptions that experience with computing technologies without formal information literacy instruction will lead to information literacy. Another challenge is unfounded assumptions about the capacity of libraries to play significant roles in developing citizens' information literacy skills. Libraries often face severe resource challenges, library administrators may place relatively little emphasis on client training in information literacy, library patrons may lack confidence in the potential for librarians to contribute to information literacy training, and librarians are often poorly prepared for instructional work (Julien & Genuis, 2011). Typically, there is limited coordination between school teachers and librarians in public libraries and academic libraries, as well as insufficient numbers of teacher-librarians in schools. In many jurisdictions globally, librarian positions in schools have been eliminated entirely. Where potential exists for librarians across contexts to work together to develop community capacity in information literacy, actual cooperation or coordination is not the norm.

The True Potential for Information Literacy

As a scholar who has been thinking and teaching in the area of information literacy for over two decades, I am convinced that information literacy is critical to many important social phenomena, including positive health outcomes (of particular importance when so much

health information is now obtained online), workforce development, and participative governance (since participatory citizenship is dependent upon relatively sophisticated information-finding skills). Increasingly, governments are delivering information and services online, and online only, which requires citizens to be at least minimally information literate in order to access that information. In addition, participation in the "commons" and in "civil society" depends on citizens' ability to find and evaluate information. Information literacy is also recognized as an essential competency for job performance, since information gathering, manipulation, and application are key work tasks. Those without good information literacy skills will be marginalized in private and public life, including employment.

In order to promote these positive outcomes, I propose that librarians need a solid understanding of information practices or information behavior, and the place of information literacy within that theory. This is the work of educators in library and information science, and curricula in these programs of study should graduate information professionals who are fully versed in that theory and its application in information service contexts. In addition, there is significant need for collaboration among all stakeholders, including funders and policy makers; libraries and librarians; schools and teachers; and parents. None of these entities can ensure development of information literacy alone: collaboration and participation from all these perspectives is needed to cultivate information literacy among citizens of all ages and backgrounds. Above all, what is needed is a sense of perspective. Information literacy is not a silver bullet to slay the world's ills, nor sufficient to achieve all of humankind's loftiest goals, but it is an important goal, and should remain on our practice and advocacy agendas.

Acknowledgments

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