

Information Literacies at the intersection between Information Seeking and Learning — contexts and values

Introductory paper for the International Information Literacies Research Network seminar at CoLIS, London, June 23, 2010

Louise Limberg

Swedish School of Library and Information Science and The Linnaeus Centre for Research on Learning, Interaction and Mediated Communication in Contemporary Society (LinCS), University of Gothenburg and University of Borås

The main positions adopted in this paper are that

- Information Literacy (IL) is a construct closely related to the concepts of both Information Seeking and Use (ISU) and Learning. I view it as placed at the intersection between the two. Information and communication technologies (ICT's) and new digital media profoundly reshape the conditions for ISU and learning on both macro and micro levels of society, emphasizing the connection between the two phenomena. This reshaping has multi-layered implications for research and practice in the IL field.
- Information Literacy is imbued with normative values as regards appropriate ways of interacting with information for particular purposes in various contexts. It is worth observing that IL is not an activity but concerns competence, knowledge and abilities. Norms and values are shaped by the cultural contexts in which information activities are embedded.

The paper will be devoted to discussing these two items in an effort to provide some coherent arguments for further research in the field.

Information Literacy, ISU and Learning

According to a sociocultural perspective learning happens through interaction between people, and between people and tools. This view implies that human beings cannot avoid learning while they are together. It also implies that learning is both a social and an individual phenomenon. Likewise ISU may be seen as a constantly on-going human activity mediated via interaction between people and between people and artefacts. The relationship between ISU and learning is multidimensional. An analysis of various aspects leads to a range of interconnected dimensions pertaining to the following;

1. Seeking information for learning purposes — associated with the common practice of information seeking and use related to carrying out learning tasks in formal educational contexts as well as in work-life or everyday life. In this respect, ISU is strongly linked to the notion of lifelong learning. This aspect illustrates the idea that information seeking is not carried out for its own sake but for a purpose beyond itself (cf. Sundin & Johannisson 2005).
2. Learning information seeking and use — a notion closely connected to the concept of information literacy, implying learning how to seek, evaluate, and use information in purposeful ways for various tasks, problems or situations. This dimension involves ISU as objects of learning.
3. Teaching information seeking and use — reflects the perspective of learning ISU, and is a matter of interest in the area of IL education. This requires thorough analysis and awareness of what constitutes and shapes IL in various practices and situations.
4. Learning from information — may be associated with information *use* rather than seeking, including a range of various aspects such as understanding the contents of information, critically evaluating and relating sources and statements to one another as well as to the topic of a task. This dimension reflects item #1 and implies the transformation of information to knowledge,

where possible (subject) content and abilities shape the object of learning. (cf. Limberg & Alexandersson 2010)

I identify the relationship between ISU and learning as a rich ground for further exploration of IL with regard to deepening our conceptual understanding of IL and for designing more appropriate ways of shaping IL education. As regards conceptual understandings of ISU and IL, learning theories have had great impact; e.g. Kuhlthau's ISP model based in a constructivist view of learning; various models of IL (Bruce 1997; Boon, Johnston & Webber 2005) and findings on the relationship between ISU and learning (Limberg 1999), all based in a phenomenographic approach; more recent studies of IL based in a sociocultural view of learning, emphasizing social interaction and cultural contexts for information practices (cf. Hedman & Lundh 2009).

It goes without saying that effective teaching should be based in educators' deep understanding of various aspects of the object of teaching/learning. A lot of IL instruction and tutorials tend to focus on ways of searching, seeking, finding and evaluating information sources via various tools (cf. Bruce 1997; Sundin 2008). Based in research findings of users' ways of practicing and experiencing ISU, researchers have proposed a need for a shift in teaching practices from less focus on searching and seeking to more focus on evaluation and use of information (Bruce 1997, 2008; Limberg 1999; Williams & Wavell 2006). Researchers adopting a sociocultural perspective of learning have highlighted social aspects and the need to focus on the situatedness of IL, with the research interest directed at the interaction between humans and tools for studying, teaching and learning IL (Pilerot 2007; Sundin 2008; Sundin & Francke 2009).

Based in the view of a close relationship between ISU and IL, researchers suggest that IL education might benefit from applying research findings from the ISU field for teaching aspects of IL (Kuhlthau 2004; Limberg & Sundin 2006; Lloyd & Williamson 2008). If IL is conceptualised as something different from ISU - and in some research it clearly is (cf. Lloyd 2006; Tuominen, Savolainen & Talja 2005) - this further strengthens the case for reshaping the contents and practices of IL education. For this to happen it seems that researchers and professional practitioners in the IL field should approach each other and that the two communities need to collaborate for developing the IL field. At the moment I consider this as a key issue and would like the seminar to devote some time to discussing possibilities in this direction.

Information literacies — norms and values

My emphasizing a connection between ISU and IL does not imply an interest in establishing a hierarchical relationship between the two, claiming one or the other as the "umbrella concept". In my view, ISU and IL are interrelated since the concept of IL is often defined as certain ways of interacting with information (cf. above). The concept of literacy is originally connected to abilities, such as reading and writing, and thus to learning. Literacy has always been associated with abilities to use certain tools, originally text, but gradually other media, and in our days with a strong focus on ICT and digital media. The challenges posed by new media to our basic assumptions about information, reading and writing practices are vital. On a discursive and political level IL is competing with other literacies such as digital, computer, media, etc literacy. It is obvious that stakeholders of IL are found mainly within the LIS area, with a longer history among professional practitioners than among researchers.

The notions of literacy and learning are associated with norms and values about what is good (approved) and bad (disapproved). I believe it is essential to acknowledge the normative features of IL implying better or worse ways of practicing information seeking and use, according to some norm. Such norms are shaped within the cultural practice in which ISU is undertaken. In educational contexts norms are shaped by learning goals in specific curricular units or assignments and grounded

in the cognitive authority of curriculum and academia (cf. Limberg 2007). Nonetheless recent research has found variation in norms and values also within academia and related to various disciplines and future professions (e.g. Hedman, Lundh och Sundin 2009; Pilerot 2007). In work-life, norms are shaped by effective practices, embraced by and embedded in various communities and contexts. I suggest that further investigation of various norms and values shaped within different communities of practice might contribute significantly to a more in-depth understanding of information literacies, and ways of appropriating such literacies within different communities. This might be further connected to a research focus on impacts of information literacy in various practices.

In formal education, assessment forms a constituent part. Previous research of assessment practices related to IL education indicates that more precise and discriminating assessment of students'/learners' ISU connected to learning tasks need to be developed for providing meaningful feedback to students on their ISU (Gärdén 2010; Limberg 2006). Criteria of assessment might be linked to the above discussion about norms and values within different practices.

Information literacies — differences and common features?

In this text I have emphasized information literacies, in the plural. The plural form is underpinned by theoretical and empirical studies with a major focus on contextual issues related to IL. It reflects the emphasis on the situated nature of information literacies and contrasts with the generic skills approach manifested in various IL standards. From this follows the challenging question whether the concept of IL is meaningful at all. What might be some common features of IL that are valid across contexts? I regard this as a question of momentous importance for further IL research and would be happy to discuss ideas about research on this issue.

References

- Boon, S., Johnston, B. & Webber, S. (2005). A phenomenographic study of English faculty's conceptions of information literacy. *Journal of Documentation*, 63(2), 204-228.
- Bruce, C.C. (1997). *The seven faces of information literacy*. Adelaide: Auslib Press.
- Bruce, C.C. (2008). *Informed learning*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Gärdén, C. (2010). *Verktyg för lärande: Informationssökning och informationsanvändning i kommunal vuxenutbildning. [Tools for learning: Information seeking and use in municipal adult education]*. Borås: Valfrid. Diss. GU
- Hedman, J. & Lundh, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Informationskompetenser. Om lärande i informationspraktiker och informationssökning i lärandepraktiker. [Information literacies: on learning in information practices and information seeking in learning practices.]* Stockholm: Carlssons.
- Hedman, J., Lundh, A. & Sundin, O. (2009). Att lära informationssökning för yrkeslivet: om bibliotekarier, lärare och sjuksköterskor. [Learning information seeking for professional life: on librarians, teachers and nurses.] In J. Hedman & A. Lundh (eds.) *Informationskompetenser. Om lärande i informationspraktiker och informationssökning i lärandepraktiker. [Information literacies: on learning in information practices and information seeking in learning practices.]* (pp. 133-158). Stockholm: Carlssons.

- Kuhlthau, C.C. (2004). *Seeking meaning: A process approach to library and information services*. (2nd ed.) Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Limberg, L. (1999). Three Conceptions of Information Seeking and Use. In T. Wilson & D. Allen (Eds.) *Information Seeking in Context (ISIC '98) Conference Proceedings*. (pp. 116-132). London: Taylor Graham.
- Limberg, L. (2007). Learning assignment as task in information seeking research. *Information Research*, 12 (4). [Available at <http://informationr.net/ir/12-4/colis/colis28.html>]
- Limberg, L. & Alexandersson, M. (2010). Learning and Information Seeking. In M. Bates & M. N. Maack (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*. 3rd Edition. (pp. 3252-3263). New York: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Limberg, L. & Folkesson, L. (2006). *Undervisning i informationssökning: Slutrapport från projektet Informationssökning, didaktik och lärande (IDOL)*. [Teaching information seeking. Final report from the project Information seeking, didactics and learning (IDOL)]. Borås: Valfrid.
- Limberg, L. & Sundin, O. (2006). Teaching information seeking: relating information literacy education to theories of information behaviour. *Information Research*, 12(1) paper 280. [Available at: <http://InformationR.net/ir/12-1/paper280.html> <2010-05-05>]
- Lloyd, A. (2006). Information literacy landscapes: An emerging picture. *Journal of Documentation*, 62(5), 570-583.
- Lloyd, A. & Williamson, K. (2008). Towards an understanding of information literacy in context: Implications for research. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 40(1), 3-12.
- Pilerot, O. (2007). *Skriva och referera: En studie av designingenjörstudenters och sjuksköterskestudenters informationsanvändning i samband med uppsatsskrivande*. [Write and cite: a study of product design engineering students' and nursing students' information use in connection to thesis writing.] Master Thesis, University of Borås, SSLIS.
- Sundin, O. (2008). Negotiations on information seeking expertise: A study of web-based tutorials for information literacy. *Journal of Documentation*, 64(1), 22-44.
- Sundin, O. & Francke, H. (2009). In search of credibility: Pupils' information practices in learning environments. *Information Research* 14(4) paper 418. <http://InformationR.net/ir/14-4/paper418h.html>.
- Sundin, O. & Johannisson, J. (2005). The Instrumentality of Information Needs and Relevance. In F. Crestani & I. Ruthven (Eds.). *CoLIS 2005, LINCS 3507*. (pp. 107-118). Berlin Heidelberg: Springer Verlag.
- Tuominen, K., Savolainen, R. & Talja, S. (2005). Information literacy as a socio-technical practice. *Library Quarterly*, 75(3), 329-345.
- Williams, D. & Wavell, C. (2006). *Information literacy in the classroom: Secondary school teachers' conceptions*. Aberdeen: Department of Information Management, The Robert Gordon University.