

CoLIS 2010: Unity in Diversity

Information Literacy Research Seminar 2010

Position Paper

“Re-Conceptualizing Information Literacy as a Metaliteracy for Social Media”

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The rapid expanse of social media challenges us to re-conceptualize information literacy as a metaliteracy for related literacy types. Web 2.0 has transformed the static Web into an active social network for people to create and share information in collaboration with others. Several literacy formats have been used to describe changes in technology, including digital literacy, media literacy, ICT literacy, visual literacy, cyberliteracy, critical literacy, health literacy, and information fluency. All of these literacy frameworks share common characteristics with information literacy but the similarities are often understated. We are interested in locating the relationships among different literacies, with a particular emphasis on information literacy as an overarching, self-referential, and comprehensive framework for related models. Metaliteracy acknowledges the relevance of information competencies in a social media age, challenging us to raise questions about the evolution of information literacy in an era of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Google Wave, and other Web 2.0 technologies.

Although information literacy has been previously examined in relation to changes in technology, it has not been fully discussed as a metaliteracy for related literacy types. In our research we found that most of the characteristics identified with information literacy are present in other literacy models.¹ For example it is necessary for media developers to access and

understand information for the production of new media, and given the abundance of online resources it is critical to make informed choices about which application to use.² Similarly, health literacy requires individuals to determine when there is a need for health information and to make choices about where and how to access that information. Visual literacy has been expanded for the Web to emphasize the abilities to understand, organize, and use visual information online.³ Digital literacy is focused on the abilities to access, organize, use, and reproduce digital information in the form of data and images.⁴ ICT literacy is closely aligned with digital literacy emphasizing skills in accessing, evaluating, and communicating information.⁵ Cyber literacy is focused specifically on understanding Internet content so that individuals gain skills to actively participate and articulate opinions online.⁶ In many ways, information fluency was a response to information literacy but with a particular emphasis on gaining competencies to continuously adapt to new technologies.⁷ We are interested in re-conceptualizing the information literacy characteristics to include specific reference to new media and to expand these competencies to include sharing digital information.

There are many literacy frameworks in higher education that emphasize the critical thinking and lifelong learning goals of information literacy. For example James Elmborg argues for a “critical information literacy” model based on the influence of critical pedagogy and critical literacy theory. He argues that “by developing critical consciousness, students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and to the world around them.”⁸ Similarly, Troy A. Swanson argues that in making a transition from a print-based culture to a Web environment, we must provide students with a critical perspective to learn more about information itself and how to use it in an empowering and participatory manner.⁹ Health literacy shares this emphasis on critical

competencies because according to the National Network of Libraries of Medicine “it requires a complex group of reading, listening, analytical, and decision-making skills, and the ability to apply these skills to health situations.”¹⁰ This is an integrated approach to literacy that leads to problem-solving and informed action, not just access to information. The health literacy model shares some common characteristics with information literacy (evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, locating) while also calling for a combination of other literacy frameworks to inform it, including visual literacy, computer literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, and numerical or computational literacy.¹¹ From our standpoint, we see information literacy as a metaliteracy and argue that the core principles of information literacy are central to these other approaches.

This metaliteracy framework for information literacy raises several questions:

- How does metaliteracy challenge traditional information literacy constructs?
- What are the most common information literacy characteristics embedded in related literacy frameworks?
- To what extent will information literacy advance in a digital age?
- As technology changes, what other literacy frameworks might evolve from looking at information literacy as a metaliteracy?
- How might metaliteracy be applied in the virtual world of Second Life?
- In a metaliteracy framework, do we need to further expand the information literacy characteristics beyond sharing information to also include issues related to cybersecurity, identity, and online privacy?

- How will an emphasis on metaliteracy affect how these skills are taught?
- Will it alter our understanding of who is best suited to teach the skills?
- Will additional education or professional development be necessary to teach information literacy as a metaliteracy?

Information literacy is a foundation skill set that includes the ability to determine an information need as well as related competencies to access, evaluate, understand, organize, use, and incorporate information. Today's emergent technologies require us to reconfigure these characteristics within a social media framework for producing information in collaborative learning environments. This expanded metaliteracy model must include sharing information as an essential part of the skills set, to further emphasize the critical thinking required when producing and publishing new media online. By exploring information literacy as a metaliteracy we argue that this approach is distinct from looking at the combination of multiple literacy types. In the framework we are proposing we argue that information literacy provides the fundamental knowledge set that informs related literacy models, such as visual literacy, digital literacy, ICT literacy, and cyber literacy. This situates information literacy as a set of core competencies for the digital age and challenges educators to develop effective strategies for teaching with social technologies. It also has the potential to better prepare our students to critically analyze, collaboratively produce, and communicate new knowledge online.

¹ Thomas P. Mackey and Trudi E. Jacobson, "Reframing Information Literacy as a Metaliteracy" College & Research Libraries [Accepted: January 2010; Expected publication date: January 2011]. Pre-print available online at:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/crljournal/preprints/crl-076.pdf> [Accessed 4 June 2010].

² Center for Media Literacy, “Literacy for the 21st Century: An Overview and Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education.” (2008). Available online at http://www.medialit.org/pdf/mlk/01a_mlkorientation_rev2.pdf. [Accessed 5 August 2009].

³ Barbara R Jones-Kavalier and Suzanne L. Flannigan, “Connecting the Digital Dots: Literacy of the 21st Century,” *Educause Quarterly* 29 (Nov. 2006): 9. Available online at <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0621.pdf>. [Accessed 6 August 2009]

⁴ Paul Gilster, *Digital Literacy*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997): 1.

⁵ International ICT Literacy Panel, “Digital Transformation: A Framework for ICT Literacy.” (2007). Available online at http://www.nocheating.org/Media/Tests/Information_and_Communication_Technology_Literacy/ictreport.pdf [Accessed 18 August 2009].

⁶ Laura J. Gurak, *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet with Awareness*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁷ Committee on Information Technology Literacy, “Being Fluent with Information Technology.” (1999). Available online at http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=6482. [Accessed 7 August 2009].

⁸ James Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32 (Feb. 2006): 192-199.

⁹ Troy A. Swanson, “A Radical Step: Implementing a Critical Information Literacy Model,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no.2 (Apr. 2004): 259-273.

¹⁰ National Network of Libraries of Medicine, “Health Literacy,” (2008). Available online at <http://nnlm.gov/outreach/consumer/hlthlit.html#A1> [Accessed 13 August 2009].

¹¹ Ibid.