Affective Dimensions of Information Seeking in the Context of Reading

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Introduction [A]

A growing body of research in Library and Information Science (LIS) points to the importance of affective variables in both information seeking and information retrieval. Wilson (1981) was one of the first to acknowledge the role of affect, incorporating it in an early version of his model of information seeking behavior where it was presented as one of the personal contexts giving rise to information seeking. Kuhlthau’s (2004) Information Search Process (ISP) postulates that feeling, or affect, plays a role in each of the six steps associated with the information search process. Savolainen’s (1995) framework of everyday life information seeking is inclusive of affect in its four ideal types of mastery of life. The work of Diane Nahl is particularly notable. Starting from the position that positive affect influences cognition and learning, Nahl (2004) identifies self-efficacy,
optimism, uncertainty, time pressure, expected effort, task completion motivation and expected difficulty as important affective dimensions. A number of individual studies have also explored affect including Mellon’s (1986) examination of library anxiety in college students, Metoyer-Duran’s (1991) investigation of affective dimensions in her study of the information-seeking behavior of gatekeepers in ethnolinguistic communities, and Bilal’s (2002, 2000) consideration of affective states in children searching with Yahooligans.

The importance of reading to LIS is clear (see Wiegand 1997; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer 2006). Yet, as Davis and Scott (2002) so concisely tell us, “Reading is not adequately taken into account in its own right as a legitimate step in information seeking (IS) models...” Outside of work that has looked at the impact of reading levels on information seeking (for example, Baker, Wilson & Kars 1997) and recognized that information seeking occurs during reading (Ross, 1999) very little work has been done in this area. As researchers of reading and readers working within an LIS framework, we agree with Davis and Scott and we begin with the motivation to take reading out of its metaphorical “Black Box.” This chapter seeks to explore affective dimensions of reading as they apply to information behavior practices.

**Method [A]**

Collectively we have over four hundred in-depth qualitative interviews with readers, including over two hundred with adults (Ross 1999, 1995, 1991), about fifty
with young adults (Rothbauer 2004c, 2004b, 2004a) and over one hundred and fifty with children 4 - 12 years old (McKechnie 2004, 2000, 1996). Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998), we analyzed the transcripts of our interviews to identify themes related to affective dimensions of reading as an information behavior practice. Not surprisingly, emotions or affective dimensions have much to bear on the reading choices and reading practices among our research participants.

Affective Dimensions of Reading [A]

In an article that explores information encounters in the context of voluntary reading, Ross (1999) presents six claims that readers make about the power of reading: an awakening or new perspectives; models for identity; reassurance, comfort, confirmation of self-worth, strength; a connection with others and an awareness of not being alone; courage to make a change; and, acceptance. Ross’s more general claim, that for avid readers reading is an important way of finding out about the world, is one that underpins the research reported here. The claims that readers make rely on affective dimensions of information seeking and of reading itself. What counts as information is filtered through emotional responses and memories of how reading certain kinds of texts at certain times made readers feel. The value of information, the measure of how useful information found through voluntary reading practices can be, is assessed using affective variables that emerge from what readers themselves have to say about the role of reading in their lives.

Lynne Pearce’s (1997) concept of the relationship between the reader and what
she calls the “textual other” (found both inside and outside of the text itself) is another way to explicitly articulate the affective dimensions of reading. Her theory allows us to move an analysis of what readers say about the books they read beyond interpretative processes to focus on the intensity of the emotional experiences of reading - experiences that we emphasize in the remainder of this section.

Several themes emerged from our data that illustrate the emotional density and that extend the affective dimensions of Ross’ typology of information found in the process of avid engagement with texts. While space does not permit a nuanced presentation of these additional themes as articulated by our readers, we do offer some exemplary excerpts from the transcripts.

**Shared Reading as an Act of Love [B]**

One of the most dominant themes concerns the close, loving relationships that are bound up in the sharing of texts. This is clearly seen in the data collected in McKechnie’s studies of young children and reading that shows that those books identified by young people as having special significance are often those in their personal libraries that have been inscribed by beloved family members. Sometimes the intensity of this loving relationship forged by a shared engagement with texts is communicated as a simple expression of love, as in the case of 5-year-old Fatima whose mother made a point of bringing home a copy of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* from the public library. When her mother gave her the book, Fatima said, “Mom, thanks for *Mike Mulligan*, I love you.” When asked what she likes best about *Stuart Little*, Sarah (4 years old) replies, “It’s
best that we read it together. With Mommy and…with Mommy and that’s all.” Another reader, a 10-year-old girl, identified as her special book the one she is only reading with her Dad when he comes for a visit.

Similar themes are evident in interviews with much older readers. For example, an avid 18-year-old reader, Nicky, had this to say about one of her all-time favorite books that was received as a gift from her best friend: “…it’s our book, it’s us. We are this book. She read it and she gave it to me for Christmas and now we’ve both read it.” Nicky takes this powerful connection through textual engagement further when she describes the communication between readers as a being possible because “you speak the same language,” or “we speak the same writers/readers language.”

**Emotional Connections to Textual Worlds [B]**

Sometimes the most powerful relationships emerge from memorable connections that readers make with fictional or textual characters. The author is a special kind of textual persona especially, but not exclusively, among readers of non-fiction. For example, Truus (40 years old), said that after her daughter was born with Downs Syndrome, she looked for books written by parents of children with chronic conditions: “Sometimes…you think that you’re the only person in the world who ever felt this way. And then you can go out, pick up a book, start to read it and go, ‘That’s me!’ That is somebody else who is doing the same thing and felt the same way and maybe I’m not so…alone. It’s a way of reconnecting.”

Laurie (24 years old) describes this feeling of connection through reading using
Nicky’s metaphor of communicating through a shared understanding of language:

“[Finding yourself in the text] means a lot because when you’re looking for somebody to speak back to you and you can say, ‘Oh! That’s me.’ Like you can find [it] through writing, that this text in particular speaks to you. And you feel a connection to it… Then, you can explore that feeling more in depth because somebody has written it down.”

This connection with the text is not always a pleasurable experience however, as some readers strongly resist this close identification; but at the same time, they describe the powerful sense of recognition. For example, it is a gradual process of acceptance for Madeline (20 years old): “The character, the girl, was very much [as] I saw myself, especially going through her childhood and the kind of experiences she had and how she dealt with them. Like it was just kind of slap in the face, you know, that’s me…It is shocking to see yourself on the page and have it leap out at you. The first instinct is ‘that’s not me. I would never do that.’ But when you think back and you realize it is you, it’s kind of a more gradual thing where you come to accept it.”

**Reading for Coping Information [B]**

Over and over, the readers in our studies have told us that they read because it is an activity that gives them comfort in their lives. Even 4½-year-old, Shrek (a self-chosen pseudonym) pointed to a book entitled *First Experiences: My First Day at Pre-school*, explaining that it was a good book for reading when you are scared about starting school. Similarly, Emma (20 years old) looked for books to help her understand her emergent homosexuality: “I was searching for something that I needed to know…I looked for books
to help me. And the same, it’s an experience, when you’re reading something and you can relate to it, and you’re like, ‘yes, yes, go on. Tell me what I’m going to do next!’” Joanne, (27 years old), takes a different approach illustrating that an affinity with the textual characters is not always necessary to learn from their fictional experiences: “I think just seeing other people’s lives is helpful, so that if that experience ever comes up…I know what kind of reaction would be appropriate or expected. This is how this person coped with it; it didn’t work for them, so maybe I should try something else.”

**Mastery and Control of Emotions [B]**

An emotional engagement with texts means that for some readers, some books are “too much to handle” at a certain times in their lives. One reader literally put books that were too upsetting into deep freeze: “I’ve re-read it a couple of times. Sometimes, because it is a really intense, emotional book, you just have to not read it. And in our house, when books are too much we literally put them in the freezer…where you can’t read them. It goes in the freezer usually maybe once a year and I don’t take it out until I’m ready.”

Another reader, describes a similar process of reading that allows her to manage negative or overwhelming emotions: “Sometimes I think books are more important to me than people and I don’t think that’s very good…I think sometimes that reading is my way out of relationships or interactions. Books are lovely companions. They don’t talk back. They’re very accessible. They give you what you want out of it. And if you don’t want it, you can close it and hand it back. If it’s uncomfortable, you don’t have to read it;
The Book as an Emotional Touchstone [B]

The object of the book itself plays an important role in the reading accounts of real readers. Earlier we cited Nicky’s emphatic statement that *Summer Sisters* by Judy Blume came to be a kind of holding place for her relationship with her best friend (i.e. “We are this book”). A young reader, Gillian (6 years old) looked forward to a special book at home, waiting for her like a best friend, “Mum, *The Cake That Mack Ate* is waiting in the house for me.” Ross (1994) has explored the role of L.M. Montgomery’s books as childhood favorites especially at times when readers are seeking reassurance, comfort or courage. At least one reader in Rothbauer’s study found familiar comfort in her Anne of Green Gables collection: “…I’ll see [them] and I’ll remember, ‘oh yeah; when I was 10, you know and that happened.’ There’s comfort just to have them.” Not all of our readers referred to Anne and Emily, but many of them did describe books that were freighted with personal significance and emotions. Books become touchstone artifacts through their association with special people, special moments and situations in life, or special places. Joyce (19 years old) describes how this works for her with her favorite book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*: “…[It] has different meanings…so that it changes according to what’s going on in your life, so it’s not like the same book; [it] helps me to figure out things…to get back on track.” Laurie’s articulation of the same theme illustrates just how powerful these kinds of books are to their readers: “…I was attached to that book; my life was in this cover. Even though it’s exactly the same book, I put
myself in it.”

Discussion and Conclusion [A]

We have presented some representative claims from readers about the affective significance of reading. Our empirical studies of the role of reading in the lives of real readers as told to us in their own words lend support to the idea that elicitation of emotions can yield transformative insights. Our readers chose to read a range of texts: fiction, easy readers, picture books, comic books and graphic novels, web zines, magazines, memoirs, biographies, armchair travel and science books, histories and gaming manuals and more. And in case after case, they made sense of their reading choices and reading practices by speaking of their emotions, by describing how they felt when they read specific texts or kinds of texts. The effects of this kind of reading should be taken seriously by those designing information systems to aid readers and those who help readers.

The affective dimensions of reading also have implications for LIS professionals seeking to serve readers. For example, it is apparent that human relationships (with family, friends and librarians) influence what an individual may read and how they experience the reading process and therefore the information seeking process. Affective variables play a strong role in reading-related information behavior especially in the domain of everyday life. This is also consistent with the principles of information seeking as articulated by Harris and Dewdney (1994) in the early 1990s which indicate that
individuals prefer interpersonal sources of information given with empathy or affective support. The readers’ advisory interview and readers’ advisory tools need to be revised to take into consideration and to provide access to materials according to affective as well as content characteristics.

Our findings suggest that it should be imperative for electronic readers’ advisory tools that aim to match reading interests and reading materials to incorporate the affective dimensions of relational aspects of reading into interface design and navigational strategies. New interactive, participatory digital technologies can play a role in the design of information access systems: readers can be given the option of creating and articulating relationships that rise up around reading practices. The desire to make connections with other readers, with authors, and even to express an affinity with textual characters is a serious factor in the reading choices and reading practices of all the readers in our studies from those who are very young to those who are expert, avid lifelong readers.

Our research gives credence to the notion that reading constitutes a memorable \textit{event} in the lives of those who do it. This notion disrupts the pervasive conception of reading as a process of finding (or being directed) to a book whose contents can then be assimilated to a reader’s existing state of knowledge. Reading is more than just a process of making sense, of interpretation, of decoding. It is an experience of overlapping worlds that is made meaningful to readers through affective responses and processes as they engage with textual materials.
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