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Information Literacy from Australia to Allendale

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Information Literacy from Australia to Allendale

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Examining two frameworks for information literacy—the skills-based and a more holistic teaching approach—could lead all faculty to approaching the teaching and learning processes differently, finding, evaluating, and using information more effectively.

Information literacy (IL), finding, evaluating, and using information effectively, is an international construct, but the relational theory of information literacy is uniquely Australian. The relational theory concentrates on the changing relationships between people and their experiences with information. It is based on phenomenography, a teaching and learning approach which analyzes the meaning that people ascribe to the world. Phenomenography emphasizes understanding the underlying meaning of concepts, synthesizing new ideas, and applying them in real-world situations. Information literacy understood in this way began in Australia, and I learned about it during my sabbatical there in 1999. It was postulated by Christine Bruce (see references)—and now has proponents and primary researchers not only in Australia and the U.S., but also in Sweden, South Africa, Singapore, the U.K., Canada, and New Zealand. What does the relational approach mean for GVSU? How is it relevant for non-library faculty? It has the potential to change how all faculty approach the teaching and learning process.

In the past, the library faculty have often been asked to focus on teaching the “finding” part of IL, which is the most behavioral aspect, and now we want to move into the relational. In the behavioral view, information literacy was a separate thing and librarians were almost solely responsible for teaching research skills. The relational approach integrates pedagogical theory and information literacy. (See Appendix 2.)

We want to work more closely with the classroom faculty because this has teaching implications for all faculty. As faculty, we hope to teach students to think

critically to evaluate information, data, and the quality of research; to synthesize and integrate new information with their previous knowledge; and to use information valid to their conclusions to create whole, well-written products, whether in the university, personal, or workplace settings. The huge amount of information available makes choosing good material vital, instead of using the first documents or data found using the quickest and easiest search methods. Previously, the library has often been seen as an autonomous unit, and librarians were thought of having a place in the curriculum only as teachers of research skills. Part of this article's purpose is to help all of us see information literacy as an integrated part of the curriculum and librarians as co-planners in the process of creating and refining curricula.

Affective Activity

One of the ways to prepare ourselves for learning is to acknowledge our initial feelings about the subject matter. Take a minute to consider what your first reaction is when you hear or see the phrase "information literacy." Would call your reaction positive? negative? neutral?

My sabbatical in Australia was a very joyful time—I felt incredibly alive! Yet at the same time, some deeply painful things happened both in my personal and professional life. I found I had to deal with my feelings about those events before my ideas for this workshop began to flow. Brain research has shown that people's feelings about events in their personal and academic lives can and often do create resistance to learning. For example, many of our students have a fear of research. We can help decrease their resistance by drawing out their first reactions, which are often based on emotions, and by sharing something of ourselves in relation to the topic. We don't often get to express feelings in educational situations, but it can help us prepare to move into something more cognitive and also help us connect to ideas in a very personal way. If we can get our feelings out into the light of day and see that they're not as huge or scary as we might have thought, then we can move on. Just as our emotions cannot be separated from our human selves, learning cannot be separated from the learner.

Where Are We Now: Behaviorism Segues into Relationalism

Definitions. This is not to simplify B.F. Skinner's theories, but he did leave us with the impression that humans are a collection of behaviors which can be trained and modified. Our emotions can also be trained and modified, according to Skinner's theories. Behaviorism translated into the education arena gave us skills-based learning theory. But the ability to perform a skill does not equal true understanding and an ability to apply knowledge to other situations. That is, one might have the skill to use the mirrors in a car to judge the relative distance of surrounding vehicles on the road. But, if one needs to back up a different type of vehicle without side or rear windows, using only the mirrors, and one doesn't really understand that depth perception is not accurate using mirrors ("objects are closer than they appear!"), unless one already has experience with the actual length of the vehicle, one is likely not to judge the distance accurately. We need to use both skills and knowledge to do an adequate job. We make the connection between theory and real-life practice. Relational theory focuses on embedding the ideas, not just the skills or behaviors.

Australians are deeply practical, pragmatic people. So real-world applications are a vital part of their educational system. Being able to extrapolate to new situations is necessary for survival—thus, deep, true understanding is also vital. Our ability to distinguish good information from poor quality research, our ability to

use that knowledge to good end, the transformation of knowledge into wisdom, and the communication of that wisdom to others—that is relational information literacy.

A U.S. example of a master educator who also espouses these ideas is Parker Palmer (*The Courage to Teach*), devoted to equality, integrity, community, and responsibility. This field has immense teaching and learning implications.

Teaching Implications

Phenomenography in practice means that if we want students to know more, we have to teach less. We have to provide time for students to contemplate and discuss, make connections, and learn theoretical ideas in terms of common sense and give them ample opportunities to use their knowledge to solve or explain problems; we must test with open questions and problem solving rather than test with fixed answers. We can ask learners to explain rather than describe, and list similarities they perceive. We have to emphasize the meaning that can be drawn from activities. We can measure learning in terms of the quality of understanding, changes in how students interpret the subject content, changes in the level of understanding of key concepts.

Library/bibliographic instruction programs and the educational movement in the 1980s and 90s emphasized skills and their transferability. However, we're more than just stimuli and responses. Phenomenography's premise is that if learners synthesize and integrate discipline-embedded concepts, practicing with real-world applications, and thus have a deep understanding, then they will be able to extrapolate to other situations. But when we focus heavily or exclusively on behavioral outcomes, and assessment, there is too much leeway for misconceptions.

Performance indicators, behavioral outcomes, etc., are good, but not enough. There is something indefinable and unique about each of us as human individuals. So we can't just use behavioral means of assessment or behavioral teaching and learning processes.

Toy Activity

By sharing with each other, we not only help ourselves to understand more deeply on an individual basis,

but we also create a relationship with knowledge as a group.

The Writing Center has containers of construction toys, such as “Builders, Benders and More.” During the workshop, each person picked at least one piece out of the containers. I asked the participants, “What do these have to do with IL?” There were several volunteers. I followed up by stating, “These are parts without context. But, if I give you a framework—and that framework is your research process, and then I tell you that the toy you’ve just taken represents one part of your research process, how would you describe it?” Participants took a few minutes to write. Then volunteers addressed the importance of the shape, size, color, type, and what the piece/s represented for them. The answers were quite discipline-specific, e.g., a faculty psychology member stated that the piece represented a conversation. A biologist emphasized the importance of the moving parts and the different configurations possible. After the first volunteer, each person following not only described what his/her piece represented, but also physically connected it and verbally related it to the previous parts. At the conclusion of the exercise, we had a large, complex, colorful “sculpture” representing the whole IL process. The exercise gave participants an idea about how individual yet collaborative and dynamic the IL process is and how we build a relationship between the information and ourselves. If they had volunteered in a different order, the structure would have looked very different. This toy exercise could be used in any discipline to help students build a representation of their topics, their writing or projects, or information tools and sources.

IL AS RELATIONAL: Why this makes sense; why this is better for our students.

Society’s understanding of humanity and community is changing. We are becoming more global; we have entered the post-modern age. Generation Y perceives and processes information differently. One example: many of us look for and read text first. Our students tend to look at graphical representations first, and may not even read accompanying text. They prefer non-linear visual representations like mind or concept mapping to linear web pages. [E.g., see WEBBRAIN at <http://www.webbrain.com/> and search for information literacy.] This is why we

need to change our teaching.

Phenomenography is qualitative, hypertextual, fluid, quantum, post-modern. IL conceived of in this way is very relational. Previous educational theory and practice approaches to IL were behavioral, standards- and skills-based. When approached this way, IL is left-brained and sequential, quantitative, mechanical, dualistic.

The U.N. published guidelines on incorporating information skills into curricula in 1986! IL really took off in the U.S. in 1989, with an American Library Association report, but ALA’s view of IL is very behavioral. IL is seen as quantifiable (asks how much has been learned), is portrayed in terms of skills, and focuses on the qualities of an individual apart from the environment. The ALA’s Association of College & Research Libraries’ “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education” exemplifies my saying that “competencies beget competencies.” It has five standards, or goals, twenty-two performance indicators (objectives), and eighty-seven outcomes. If we talk about using information in a socially responsible way, for example, we have to define what this means—one might define it as not plagiarizing. In a behavioral objective, this means that students will quote, footnote, and create bibliographies. Here’s the problem—once we start defining behaviors, and a student does something that is not on the list, what do we do? We would have to define and make rules for all human behavior. The solution may be to accept a holistic rule, e.g., “be kind” or “be responsible.” We can

all agree on this larger standard and then we don't have to micromanage behavior and have one hundred rules or skills defined to meet this goal.

The view of IL as being relational took off in Australia with Christine Bruce's book, based on phenomenography, which focuses on deep understanding and a holistic approach to teaching and learning. Phenomenography concentrates on the changing relationships between people and their experiences and conceptions of the world. Bruce sees IL as not quantifiable (she asks what has been learned, not how much has been learned) and focuses on qualities of the individual in relation to the environment. For example, Australians emphasize the equality of human beings. Each person is important, so kindness and courtesy are important in the social and business environments. Americans define individual behaviors that are forbidden and subject to litigation.

Phenomenography is about providing a framework for specifics to fit into, and constantly moving back and forth between the parts and the whole—the trees and forest. It incorporates paradox. What IL is depends on context. We're meant to learn with others who are carrying out the practical applications. Learning is a very individual process, yet rooted in the disciplines, and cannot be separated from the real world.

How This Impacts Us As Teachers

Much of teaching has been left-brained. Phenomenography is right-brained, and about the whole person. Just as current educational thought values student-directed learning and knowledge construction rather than the "pouring" of knowledge into students' heads, now in higher education we understand librarians as a vital part of the educational team, from curriculum development to assessment. That makes perfect sense when viewed from the phenomenographical standpoint. We can't separate the finding, evaluation, and incorporation of information from the learning and knowledge creation process. Finding is a creative, nonlinear process. Evaluation is equivalent to critical thinking. Incorporation equals the knowledge creation/learning process itself. Sharing means teaching and thus learning more fully. Using info wisely requires the deliberate placing of oneself in the context of community values. It is rela-

tional, inseparable from context and environment. IL is rooted in the individual, flowering in the context of community—humans creating and sharing in a living, changing world.

Even though Bruce resides in Australia, is the Australian approach really more relational in practice? Have their librarians embraced this idea? Some certainly have. Judy Peacock, IL Coordinator at Queensland University of Technology, says that although the U.S. has been leading the IL charge, perhaps the Australians, simply because there are fewer institutions of higher education, have been able to move more quickly and more productively towards their desired IL outcomes. However, they have also all embraced the behavioral “Standards of IL” and are working hard to implement them.

Unquestionably there are librarians and researchers who are proponents of the relational approach in the U.S. Are there really any significant differences between the current IL practices or beliefs in Australia and the U.S.? Not really. There is just the problem of figuring out how to apply the theory in practice, and how to combine both the relational and behavioral.

By providing a framework for finding, evaluating, and using information, relating the differences between behavioral and relational approaches, we can discover new ways of understanding IL, and relate these to the practical aspects of teaching.

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Appendix 1

Behavioral Approach

measurable
definable
quantifiable (how much has been learned)
 quantity of knowledge
skills-based
individual apart from environment
left-brained
dualistic, fragmented
standardized across all disciplines
education-related applications
sequential
quantitative, mechanical, assessment-based
transferability of skills
knowing what to do
teacher-focused
lecture/demonstrate/practice
emphasize skills
competencies
individual knowledge
librarians as "masters" of research skills
objective
legalistic
learning as an event

Phenomenography/Relational Approach

not measurable
describable
qualifiable (what has been learned)
 quality of understanding
conceptual, cognitive
individual in relation to the environment
right-brained
holistic
contextual, rooted in disciplines
practical, real-world applications
hypertextual/hyperlinked/interconnected
fluid, quantum, post-modern
deep understanding necessary to extrapolate
understanding key concepts
learner-focused, learner-directed
contemplate/discuss/solve problems
emphasize meaning of activity
deep understanding
community-based knowledge creation
shared ownership for teaching
subjective
shared values
learning as mysterious process
learning transformation
interpret & understand relationships

Appendix 2

