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Investigating information literacy: Fool's errand or new message?

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Abstract

This short think-piece describes my journey of discovery through the information landscape (from 2004 to present) and the development of a theory of information discernment which unpacks aspects of information literacy (IL)—the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and physiological states that shape how people make judgements about the information they encounter. Tracing my own path through developments in the field in recent decades sheds light both on wider changes and on shifts in my personal understanding of IL, from an initial perception of it as a relatively simple and obvious phenomenon to my current understanding of IL as something much more complex and contested.

Keywords

information behaviour; information literacy; information practice

Information literacy (IL) discourse tends to place the birth of the concept in the year 1974 and attributes it to the late Paul Zurkowski. Yes, I quite agree, the concept most definitely entered the *discourse* and the term was subsequently coined at this point, but I'm not entirely convinced that was the start of what we think of as IL. The practice of IL, if not the name, has a much longer history. Andrew Shenton's recent article (2023) argues that Alvin Tofler in his book *Future Shock* (1971) predates Zurkowski by 3 years. Andrew Shenton demonstrates that Tofler describes IL in all but name. Andrew Whitworth (2024) travels further back in time: his illuminating paper on medieval manuscripts establishes that information practice (the ways in which IL is enacted) has been around for far longer than we might immediately think.

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Putting that aside, when I started thinking about the anniversary of Paul Zurkowski's paper I realised that I have been writing about IL for 20 years now (but alas no further back in time). In 2004 IL seemed rather uncomplicated and obvious. As time has progressed, I have come find that it is far from uncomplicated and obvious but a slippery, opaque, complicated and contested idea. Am I any closer to understanding what the phenomenon of IL is and how it is enacted or manifested? Not really, but that's the beauty of research, one keeps on trying. What follows is an intellectual journey from 2004 to today, through a personal IL landscape that has modified and progressed since those naïve early days.

The context I worked at the time was as an academic librarian in higher education. I gave no thought to the idea that IL could apply to other contexts, whether it be work or everyday life. Zurkowski's instrumental notion of IL as part of the "maintenance of the mutually supportive role of industry and libraries" (Zurkowski, 1974, p. 2) and its sole aim of creating a more productive economy seemed reasonable. Later writing, with the exception of the work of authors such as Annemaree Lloyd, indicated that IL research seemed to be only relevant to, and situated in, education and more specifically the tertiary sector. In the UK, models of IL such as the SCONUL 7 Pillars (1999) and the Big Blue Project (2002) made the process of becoming information literate appear straightforward: linear or circular and made of discrete logical packages of activity. We librarians knew best; it was only a matter of opening the eyes of the world and everything would be fine. Two things began to change my mind and awaken me to the possibility that IL was not like this at all. First of all, enrolling on a postgraduate teaching qualification and then, more significantly, in 2003 enrolling for a PhD. What became apparent was that at best IL models appeared to be a set of heuristics for successfully obtaining information within an educational setting.

Led by my then supervisor, the late great Mark Hepworth, I began a journey which took me towards my first epiphany, that IL is as much a social as an individual phenomenon. At first my thinking was couched in the rather narrow context of considering the impact of subject area in higher education on IL, in that psychology students have a different route to IL to sports science or business students and so on. IL is very much part of the learning process although most definitely not a 'learning style' nor shaped by them. The rather blind alley of learning styles was a bit of a distraction, a set of notions that have been comprehensively challenged (Coffield et al., 2004; De Bruyckere et al., 2015). What was more useful and apparent was that, like learning, IL is not linear but unstable and 'messy'. Unstable in that there are potentially so many processes at work, social, cognitive, metacognitive, behavioural and source (people or artefacts), that it is unlikely to be a sequential process in the way that the SCONUL Seven Pillars or other similar models of IL imagined.

What further guided me down this route was an introduction to information behaviour theory, especially that of Tom Wilson (1999) and Hepworth's information behaviour model of informal carers (2004). Although these are essentially two-dimensional graphics of what is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, they recognised that emotion and context are key factors in the equation and how this might affect the ways in which people engage with information—something, at the time, omitted from all IL models. Furthermore, IL models are 'success models' and don't recognise that looking for information can be about failure too. This led me to the rather bold presentation of my paper "Demolishing the 7 Pillars: a warning from research" (Walton, 2010) which challenged the SCONUL model for its lack of detailed recognition of the interplay of the social, cognitive, metacognitive and affective processes in becoming information literate. Even the revised model of the Seven Pillars did not seriously advance the model. What

was particularly disappointing, and remains the case, is that there were so few underpinning citations to support the reasoning behind the revised model. A case of an IL model with a demonstrable lack of IL—a case of do as I say and not as I do perhaps?

The book by Mark and I (Hepworth & Walton, 2009) attempted to add a significant degree of theory to the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of IL but still lacked a sufficiently articulated socio-cultural dimension, especially around notions of power and discourse. In joining forces with Jamie Cleland in 2017 and conversations with Michael Olssen, we used Foucault's theories of discourse analysis (1972) to examine the online discourse of students in a Sport and Exercise Science module and found an interesting set of power relations which perhaps, at least partially, explained why librarians at times find themselves unheard, or even silenced, in the higher education classroom and curriculum. It also indicated why IL is not as empowering as claimed, given that power relations regarding western intellectual discourses are reproduced rather than challenged. It became clear that, even in the negotiated space of an IL class, students were led by the discourse of their tutors rather than librarians. What emerged from the meanings that the actors (students, tutor, librarian) negotiated and exchanged was the demonstrably weak discourse of librarians against the strong discourse of tutors. This power relation appeared to underpin librarians' inability, at times, to become heard in the classroom. Nevertheless, what did emerge was that discourse analysis provided a means for examining IL practice by revealing the constraints imposed by specific discursive contexts and provided a more nuanced approach to IL research. It also provided the basis for re-envisaging IL (both at the learner and theoretical level) as a means for critiquing academic discourse. This enabled students to become participants in classroom discursive practice rather than merely conforming to it. The text-based discussion in the online peer assessment also became a means for evidencing IL capabilities as part of a socially enacted practice.

This area of IL research remains rather neglected by both my fellow researchers and myself. My call to arms is that we should re-examine the utility of discourse analysis, especially in light of the threshold concepts developed by the new ACRL IL framework (2015). This, I believe, would be put to good use in exploring the particular part of the ACRL framework (2015, p. 13) which states that "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual". In this challenging part of the framework there is a real danger of a collapse into unproductive relativism which opens the door for anyone to justify their spurious knowledge claims. There is also the risk of turning people from sceptics to cynics where they end up not believing anything at all—the complete opposite of the equally uncritical default position of trust. How we enable people to reach scepticism without cynicism is a challenge which remains unanswered.

I returned to the theme of cognition in 2014–15 for a British Academy project co-led with Ali Pickard (Walton et al, 2018). We developed the notion of the pro-active sceptic and the need to build personal cognitive rather than online firewalls. Working with 16–17-year-olds in a school in the north east of England, we spent a couple of days exploring with them what they thought they should look for in good quality information. What emerged was these young people's sophisticated thoughts about online information. It was clear that giving them time to think about the issues and draw on their existing knowledge together, rather than assuming they were empty vessels, provided the opportunity for them to question what they were encountering rather than passively accepting it. As confirmed by their teachers and school librarian, this 'questioning state' was new to these students and demonstrated to us that engaging with learners in their own context and discussing the issues in a participatory way was far more

productive and successful than using IL models, frameworks or checklists to tell them how to make judgements about information.

Again, drawing from the field of psychology I have attempted to determine what shapes people's prior knowledge to foreground barriers and enablers to IL—specifically, how people make judgements about information. What has emerged is a picture of a series of factors which appear to influence people's prior knowledge. The research seems to indicate that the centre of gravity is worldview, fashioned by a number of cognitive processes which may dictate levels of confirmation bias, epistemic beliefs and motivated reasoning. This research is captured in three research papers (Pointon et al., 2023; Walton, 2017; Walton et al., 2022) and is theorised as the process of information discernment, a sub-set of IL. The process includes social, psychological, behavioural and source factors in a recursive relationship. Each factor has a number of states which contribute to the information discernment process. Although all of this has revealed some interesting indications, it seems that it cannot be the whole cognitive story given that what is missing are measures of personality, motivation and memory amongst other psychological factors. Is it a fool's errand to even attempt to map all of these processes into a grand cognitive theory of IL?

During 2016 I met with former Sport and Exercise and Psychology colleagues where we talked informally about our then-current research interests. What I found interesting was, at the time, they were investigating stress in elite athletes by using a particular theory called "challenge and threat" (Blascovich & Mendes, 2000). In essence, the theory is that we react physiologically to stress in one of two ways, either as a challenge (coping and well-adapted), or threat (not-coping and mal-adapted). It struck me that this resonated with Wilson's stress/coping component in his information behaviour model of 1999. What emerged was a research study to find out whether there was a psychophysiological aspect to IL. We explored whether there was a relationship between levels of information discernment and stress, the hypothesis being that there is a relationship between high levels of information discernment and challenge. Similarly, we expected to find a relationship between low levels of information discernment and threat. We did find that these relationships existed. This has implications for embodied information practice as discussed by Hicks and Lloyd (2023), Lloyd (2010; 2012; 2017), and Olsson and Lloyd (2017). It is my view that this indicates that these markers are potentially the physiological evidence for the link between the physiological and the cognitive in embodied information practices including IL. There may be other physiological indicators and it would be an interesting avenue of research to open. By a similar token the proxy measure of cognition via eye-tracking could also add weight to this exploration.

This walk through my information discernment landscape, if nothing else, shows that all knowledge (and research) is provisional, and it was ever so with IL: there is much to do in terms of grounding it in theory and building a substantial body of good quality empirical research. However, the notion of attempting to build an IL theory of everything does feel like a fool's errand to me. The complexities of the human mind are largely unobservable, and the proxy measure I've used, such as the eye-tracking explored here, seem less than adequate in even approximating an effective explanation of how we, as self-reflexive human beings, engage with information. A triangulation between these proxy measures and the external embodied manifestation and practices of IL provides a more productive, observable and, arguably, more meaningful way to articulate and negotiate the phenomenon of IL.

Declarations

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