



## Information Literacy is a Two-Way Street

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### Abstract:

*Information literacy is a strong library concern. To libraries, information is recorded and published. Nonetheless, people have many information practices, needs, and behaviors. Social networks impose a set of practices upon their members; these practices mediate their information seeking and use. We studied information practices in two non-traditional communities: the Latino community of Kansas City, Missouri, and the community of university women in Kenya. Different views of a library's community can enhance understanding of and service to that community. Living with community members and learning from them about how their information use can broaden libraries' abilities to serve that community.*

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### Introduction

Libraries have long been concerned with helping people navigate the world of information. To libraries, information takes on a particular shape and form: citations, previous studies, and synthesis of previous discoveries. "When we in academic libraries think of the information-literate user ... [we] think of a person who has all the skills required to access the vast quantities of information that we have carefully collected and arranged for them" (Campbell, 2008, p. 18).

Nonetheless, people have many information practices, needs, and behaviors, though, and some of the information people need is not recognized by the library. In her day-to-day life, a woman may need to know how to earn extra cash, where to go to find employment, or which streets to avoid for fear of being attacked. The definition of information literacy put forward by the American Library Association was the ability to recognize information needs, then locate, evaluate, and use various sources of information to meet those information needs (1989, para. 3). This broad definition covers information needs that would spring up from day-to-day living just as well as those that would be pursued exclusively in libraries.

Various statements of information literacy standards have been produced, and these standards tend to be bound to the contexts of the organizations that authored them. The Association of College and Research Libraries' *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* does mention that information literacy is a skill students will use in their personal lives (ACRL, 2000, p. 2); however, the higher education context limits this document. Each of the five standards begins, "The information literate student..." The operative word in this document is "student," and the person who undergoes the information literacy in this document always functions in that student role. The 1998 *Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning* authored by the American Association for School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology is geared toward primary and secondary students, and the person doing the evaluation and use is again referred to as a "student" who uses logic and critical thinking. This document seems to divorce the information literate student from a social context in which information is shared, produced, and reproduced. Even the IFLA *Guidelines on Information Literacy for Lifelong Learning* (Lau, 2006, p. 1) acknowledge that their information literacy standards are geared toward "information professionals engaged in educational programs," though it acknowledges the interpersonal and cultural role of information literacy shortly afterward.

In focusing on academic information literacy, the library often misses out on a more fundamental "life information literacy" that people use every day. Several authors have recently broached the idea that information literacy goes beyond mere academic knowledge. Campbell (2008, p. 19) describes the information literacy practices of the Inuit population and how they retrieve and evaluate knowledge of ice floe formation in order to plan sea journeys. This, she says, is information literacy without books and librarians.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social networks impose a set of practices upon their members, and those practices are learned, modified, and reiterated in light of changing circumstances. These networks influence the way people understand and value objects, and communicate that object to others. They influence the way their participants use literacy and create literacy products.

Literacy is a social practice. In some cases, literacy is used to function within a dominant society – an immigrant may apply for a job, fill out a tax form, or write a letter to her child's teacher. In other cases, literature is used within a community as part of a social practice. A daughter may read her mother's hand-written recipe and make that food as part of a holiday ritual. Teenagers may tag buildings with statements of personal identity. In this sense, literacy practices are statements of identity. Each of these literacy events – filling out the job application, tagging a building – is founded on literacy practices. These literacy practices are values and beliefs that help people decide how and when to respond to literacy challenges, including the medium of communication, language, style, and speed of response.

Information practice is born from the idea of social practice and focuses on the information-related activities of a particular group. Information practice is the way a certain group of people understand and value information, and communicate that information to others. Savolainen (2007) has helped define information practice as the institutionalized ways communities acquire, use, evaluate and share information. Different communities have different information practices. In a way, the idea of information practice is a more acute way of defining a social practice, one that is information-based. For example, literacy is a social practice, and it can also be viewed as an information practice because literacy is an

institutionalized way of how people learn to get and value information, especially written information.

Information literacy has also been conceptualized as a social practice and, more specifically, an information practice. From this perspective, information literacy is the way someone learns how a particular group ‘does things’, or produces knowledge, within a particular environment, an environment connected to particular values, technical technologies and ways of communicating. It is learning how to interact with information in a way a specific community recognizes as legitimate.

## **Methods**

The authors used two models to examine information practices and needs in non-traditional communities: the Latino community of Kansas City, Missouri, and the community of university women in Kenya. The first model was an examination of the literacy environment and literary practices of the community, as evidenced by signs, flyers, and even graffiti (Adkins, Bossaller, & Thompson, 2008). The second method asked university women to find things that were meaningful to them, photograph those things, and explain the significance of those photographs to others. While these two projects were undertaken with different methodologies and for different reasons, findings were similar in terms of the communities engaging in their own information literacy practices.

In the study of Latinos and their information environment in Kansas City, we used ethnographic field methods to document “environmental literacy” – that is, the written products available in public space and intended for widespread consumption (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). These products were created by individuals and by companies, with specific messages and intentions to communicate. The community we looked at used both English and Spanish to communicate, both in speech and writing. We compared environmental literacy products to our observations of community interactions.

In the study of Kenyan students and their information environment, we used a qualitative methodology that combined phenomenological and hermeneutic methods to explore various information practices, or patterns of information-related activity. We looked at what students identified as relevant in various social and environmental contexts. We grouped information practices around various identity roles participants used to negotiate every day situations.

## **Results**

Looking at information transactions and environmental literacy in these two environments allows us to make some inferences about information literacy as it is practiced by people in these communities and contexts. We can identify how they assess their information needs, locate information, evaluate that information, and use it to create new information. Further, we can see how some practices were culturally constrained, and others were perhaps inappropriate for the larger cultural group.

The Kansas City Latino community was distinct from the larger Kansas City community. Storefronts, vehicles, and even cultural institutions showed clear signs of cultural differences. Storefronts were reminiscent of those in Latin America, and vehicles were often used to declare statements of pride in culture or ancestry. Information needs were inferred from trends in the information resources available. Residents of this community needed to know how to earn money and support themselves; in addition to supporting themselves, they needed to know how to send support to relatives in other countries.

Information was found in particular locations, and not in others. The library was a source of generic, mass-produced information: flyers from the health department, community college enrollment information. Materials had to be approved by library administration prior to posting. Social services agencies and churches also had mass-produced information, as well as social workers to consult or basic education classes. The bakery and the grocery store had bulletin boards for people to post sales of goods and services (for instance, puppies, automotive repair, and rental rooms). Small businesses (restaurants and import shops) often had free Latino-oriented newspapers near the door, and while these small businesses sold goods and products, their staff were consulted about other information needs while we observed. We observed skepticism about some information, and acceptance of other information. Further, we saw clear evidence that people were using their skills and abilities to create new opportunities for themselves, either for economic support or displaying cultural pride.

Kenyan university students' needs vary according to their everyday situation. As students, women needed information to complete assignments. Locating relevant information did not seem to be an issue in most cases, although contradictory views about the value of some information sources did emerge. The library, computer, and Internet were standard elements of the students' information practice. Music and plays were also important sources of information.

Students also identified information needs related to other social identity roles. While information about culture and society were available in the library, participants elicited information from family and friends to satisfy such needs. Information-sharing through personal interaction was common. Textual literacy, storytelling and application of metaphors were commonly employed when discussing identity, values and relationships. Dance, music and drama enactments were also referenced as important sources of information on social values and as a way of relieving stress, an important life skill for college students.

### **Conclusions**

What difference would it make to librarians and information professionals to recognize vernacular cultural differences in information literacy practices? Indeed, if libraries limit themselves to providing traditional information in traditional ways to traditional clientele, it will not make a difference. However, the world is changing. Concepts of information society and information access are expanding beyond books and journals. Contests over copyright, intellectual property, data privacy, and intellectual freedom are being played out in the media, rather than the library literature. Today, the library is only one of many places where people go to get information on different topics.

Librarians have always understood that information literacy goes beyond library practices, but now we have to act on that understanding, leave the library, and learn from our users what their concerns are. Knowing what the library's community needs is one important requirement. However, libraries must also know how different communities place value on different kinds of information and kinds of interaction.

Library patrons have a variety of information needs related to multiple, usually overlapping, identity roles and accompanying social practices. Furthermore, people learn to value certain sources and formats of information more than others. For example, maybe personal interaction is valued more than written text. Notions of authority about certain topics, such as employment, responsible drinking or travel, might be tied to a sense of personal trust rather

than impersonal expertise. Consequently, information literacy practice could focus more about how trust in different practices is built and why. In this scenario, patrons also teach librarians how to evaluate information. Librarians might also consider when non-textual sources might be a more effective means of providing information. For example, the growing trend of living libraries, where patrons ‘check-out’ a relevant person, reflects the value of face-to-face interaction over text.

Libraries need not be blind to these types of information and the strategies that people use to acquire this information. Knowing what users value may influence what libraries provide. This could lead to changes in information, resources, and service provision. At the very least, it will provide an informed context for the discussion of library change and growth. We do not propose our view of social networks and life information to negate libraries’ traditional information literacy efforts, but rather, to enhance those efforts and develop libraries as places that foster the community and help them to achieve life satisfaction.

Understanding communities’ authentic information practices broadens the library’s relations with its users. In addition to the standard community analysis or needs assessment, librarians also need to assess the environment and do field work with the community: talking and living with community members and taking the opportunity to learn from them about how they discover information and how they use their time and connections to share information.

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