What are we missing?

By Dr Ross J. Todd

The concept and practice of information literacy has been part of the LIS field for four decades now, presented as a significant concept in school and academic libraries, as well as in a range of social contexts, and advocated as foundation for contemporary education, workplace sustainability and social engagement. Yet, amid competing discourses including transliteracy and digital literacy, something is missing.

The historical roots of information literacy go back to the1960s, embedded in discussions surrounding the growth of knowledge, calls for education systems to address *learn how to learn*, as well as the large scale funding of libraries in many countries and revisions in the training of librarians, and the growing use of libraries in teaching and learning. The *Information Society* construct of the 1970s and 1980s, emerged out of developments of mass computerisation, educational concerns about physical and intellectual barriers to information access, and the release of the key publication of the National Commission on Libraries & Information Science (Washington DC). This report, titled: 'The Information Service Environment, Relationships and Priorities', explicitly positioned information literacy as a social and educational construct, providing foundation for the American Library Association's (1989) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy and its definitional stance that has pervaded the discourse for two decades now.

The information literacy agenda of the 1990s focused on itsglobalisation and operational expansion, particularly centering on articulating sets of skills deemed necessary for people in all walks of life to effectively engage in the rich information landscape. It also identified the attributes of 'information literate' people. As well as this it was the decade of the quest for meaning, struggling to distinguish between information literacy, bibliographic instruction, user education, information skills, library skills, library literacy, information literacy skills, information literacy skills instruction and other literacies such as visual, media, computer – all amid some considerable scepticism from scholars regarding the validity of the concept. There was also evidence of power positioning around the argument that since literacy is fuelled by information all literacy is information literacy.

And now, the 2010s, the era of *Re-Quest for Identity*, in my view. Somehow the early struggles surrounding the distinction between multiple conceptions (such as bibliographic instruction and library skills) have faded somewhat into the background. The bombardment of other conceptions of literacy has seemed to reframe the struggle for dominance, rather than moving the agenda forward. At the COLIS 2010 conference in London, Mackey & Jacobson (2010) proposed a reframing of information literacy as metaliteracy, amid the continued flurry of competing terms: media literacy, digital literacy, ICT literacy, visual literacy, cyberliteracy; information fluency, critical literacy, and transliteracy. The strongest voices currently converge on digital literacy.

What's missing?

First, research-based, research-validated models are missing. We seem to be drowning in an extensive range of practice-centric models and schemas of information literacy. Skills-based models and standards as frameworks for instruction: research models, process models, attribute models, skills typologies, literacy standards, experience-based models and the like. And now we are also seeing a bombardment of digital literacy

models. Many of these models are without theoretical foundation and not derived from systematic research. Yet they are presented as tested and validated models. They often do not take into account research-validated patterns of information-seeking. For example, a number of models have central information concepts such as defining, locating, selecting, organising, presenting and evaluating information. They typically start with 'defining information needs' whereas research indicates that information users often lack well-formed statements of information needs and are unable to articulate gaps and anomalies in their existing knowledge that enable them to interact with information systems, services and sources in meaningful ways.

I have great respect for Christine Bruce's work on experience-based conceptions of information literacy. Bruce presents a research-based holistic portrayal of how people experience information literacy (Bruce, 1997). I am drawn also to the transliteracy focus, currently being developed by the Transliteracy Research Group based at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, in the Institute of Creative Technologies and the Faculty of Humanities (http://nlabnetworks.typepad.com/transliteracy/). The group coordinates theoretical and practice-based research into transliterate materials and behaviours. This group has posited a working definition of transliteracy as 'the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks' (Transliteracy Research Group, 2011).

The challenge is to ensure that the capabilities/standards emerge out of a coherent and cumulative body of research, and are developed, at least in the educational context, by validated information-centric instructional models.

The second focus I feel is missing is pedagogy. Amidst the terminological confusion, the plethora of understandings, definitions, descriptions and models of information literacy, digital literacy and the like, there is little exploration of what constitutes meaningful pedagogy for literacy instruction. There is also limited engagement with the need to engage with research-based pedagogical frameworks to deliver instruction. I have no real problem with articulating capabilities as outcomes of effective teaching and learning – skills, abilities and habits of mind that underpin engagement with information in all its forms, across a range of platforms, tools and media. This does not diminish the diversity of conceptions (rich research is being done with phenomenographic, experience-based and socially-constructed conceptions of information and digital literacy, for example Lloyd [2006]). The challenge is to ensure that the capabilities/standards emerge out of a coherent and cumulative body of research, and are developed, at least in the educational context, by validated information-centric instructional models.

This means that we need to go beyond teaching discrete lists of skills proposed by some selected model, to situating instruction within the holistic experience of learners constructing new understandings and meanings of their curriculum content. Kuhlthau's model of the Information Search Process, developed in the 1980s and refined in the 1990s, is a research-developed and validated model of the holistic journey of students engaging with information in all its forms to develop deep knowledge and understanding (Kuhlthau, 2004). Since its conceptualisation and development, the model has been used as a framework and diagnostic tool for understanding the information search experience of people in a variety of library and information settings, and as a framework for developing instructional interventions to support the information-to-knowledge journey of people in a range of library settings, particularly school and academic libraries.

The model is founded on the belief that learning is a process of personal and social construction first developed by influential 20th century educational thinkers such as John Dewey (1859-1952), George Kelly **(**1905-1967**),** Jerome Brunner (1915-), Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Howard Gardner (1943-) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). The stages of the model provide opportunities for instructional interventions that integrate cognitions, emotions and behaviours, and enable students to progress on their information-to-knowledge journey through their engagement with information in all its forms. It is learner-centric,

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rather than information literacy- and or digital literacy-centric, and focuses on the progress of learners, rather than the skills.

The Australian Council of Educational Research's (ACER) series 'Learning in a Changing World' (https://shop.acer.edu.au/acer-shop/group/LCW/X) is a significant series responsive to the changing information landscape. The series acknowledges the central importance of constructing a strong, integrated and research-based instructional framework that takes into account the holistic development of learners. I encourage all teacher-librarians to engage actively and thoughtfully with this important resource.

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