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EUROPEAN STUDENT CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR  
INFORMATION SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

### ASIS&T-ESC

The European Student Chapter (ESC) of ASIS&T was established in May 2005. Student members of ASIS&T studying at academic institutions within Europe are automatically members of ESC. Other Student members of ASIS&T can apply to join ESC as associate members. Here are some reasons for joining ESC:

- Network with European students of information science and related disciplines.
- Strengthen connections and network with ASIS&T students throughout the world.
- Form links for student exchange at universities and other institutions in information science.
- Publish student essays in E-LIS open archive (<http://eprints.rclis.org/>)

ASIS&T EC Web site is maintained by Boris Bosancic.

### ACTIVITIES ON THE LIST

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The list was really dynamic last months, there was two topics one launched by Hamid and the other by Jonathan :

#### 1. Discussion Phd topics on our list :

##### Hamid's topic :

Some people believe that 'research methodologies' is one of the weakness points of Library and information studies (LIS) [a kind of Achilles' heel]. The reason is that LIS communities do not have a long and well-established research history and tradition as for example scientific communities such as chemistry and physics have. Most of the methodologies we are applying in our research, we owe them to other fields such as social sciences or computer science or etc. although there are already a couple of books about research methods in LIS, (and some of them are really good e.g. Gorman's on qualitative research), however there seems to be a gap in this area, both in terms of a systematic approach to research methods and their development, and in the literature particularly developed and written for LIS professionals.

This might be a good topic for discussion in the list, from different aspects for example why is it we are not very good at research (or maybe we are! Are we?)? is it because the philosophy of our discipline which is based on providing service (service-oriented) etc..?

Also it's good to encourage people to write about research methods in LIS. JASIST is known as a methodological journal and many of its papers are methodologically driven, and it's already made a good contribution in the development of research methods in LIS, especially the areas that are more computer-oriented.

Anyway, what I'm going to say is that SLAIS and UCL centre for advancement of learning and teaching are trying to develop learning materials on research methodologies for graduate students in LIS. they will be eventually available on the web. So the idea is

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to find out about less developed areas and see how research methods courses are conducted in different schools and what material is available and etc., I was thinking to ask all of you who :

1. have taken or are taking a research methods course,
2. know about available web-based material that are useful for research methods courses (about different methodologies or etc..) to let me know about them. Would be good if you send me the syllabus of the course or tell me how the course was conducted and what was your experience, then we can compare to see what is taught in different schools or how courses are run or what features work well or don't etc.,

Also I'll be grateful if you send me the link of any useful resources in this area you are aware of, or tell me about.

**Koraljka's answer:**

My impression is that we try to argue today that we need to move positivistic approaches to research, such as system-driven evaluation of IR systems, but that we should instead rely on real situations that involve users. On the other hand, I just ran into an article by B. Hjørland from JASIS&T (<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/89015619/HTMLSTARTW>) in which he argues that information science cannot primarily rely on user studies, since users cannot express their information needs and relevance criteria very well. Instead, he argues for epistemology.

There still seem to be a lot of issues to discuss and agree on in information science...

What do you think?

**Hamid's reaction :**

1. Hjørland is known for his domain-analysis theory that is applied in different research areas especially information behaviour research (e.g. see works by J. Fry (IP7M, 2006), or Talja, S & Maula, H (2003)). The key concept of the theory is that instead of looking at users individually, we may look at a domain, say for example biochemistry. I should mention that there is no consensus on the definition of the domain yet and different people applied different operational definitions for their research. I may use the domain-analytic approach for investigating intradisciplinary differences in information seeking behaviour.

2. moving toward system-oriented approach means going back to 1980s and before that. Most of studies back then used to be system-oriented i.e. the assumption was that the study of the systems or the groups to which the users belonged would reveal the users' needs and etc., then some people like Devin & Nilan in their review article in ARIST called for more focus on users, hence users became the focus of studies more and more. the good thing that happened was that the field was enriched by many theories and conceptual frameworks that could be applied for studying users.. A positivistic movement existed a few decades ago in some of the subfields of humanities and social

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sciences due to effect of pure sciences but that was weakened later on. Now studies are more diverse. Qualitative or quantitative studies are not favoured over each other. and also triangulation or mixed-method studies are more popular these days. however, I think deciding about these things in a study really depends on several factors, most of all the goal of the study.

**Kora's reply :**

How about computer scientists who do information retrieval experiments, as well as the Semantic Web community -- aren't they still system-oriented? My impression from conferences is that there is not much connection with users, let alone domain analysis...

**Jonathan's reaction :**

Hamid wrote "*A positivistic movement existed a few decades ago in some of the subfields of humanities and social sciences due to effect of pure sciences but that was weakened later on.*" Positivism has been around much longer than a few decades. *Système de politique positive* (1851-4) was published by Auguste Conte more than 150 years ago and positivism was supported by Bertrand Russell (1872-1969).

Hamid wrote "*Now studies are more diverse. qualitative or quantitative studies are not favoured over each other.*" Some fields do have a preference; in my experience sociology favours qualitative, and economics favours quantitative.

Hamid wrote "*Triangulation or mixed-method studies are more popular these days.*" Yes. But in my view the way the methods are implemented is more important than the number of methods used.

Hamid asked "*Why is it we are not very good at research (or maybe we are! Are we?)?*" My response is that, compared with sociology, (1) there is more methodological diversity in information science, but, in the UK, (2) less methodological training.

(1) More methodological diversity: In information science there is excellence in both quantitative (e.g. Thelwall, Lewison) and qualitative (e.g. Borgan, Tenopir). By contest, in my view sociology primarily has excellence in qualitative. This slant towards qualitative is reflected by its education emphasis, for instance, my M.A. examination favoured qualitative to quantitative in the ratio of 13 to 3 (Goldsmiths College, London, 2002-03).

(2) Less methodological training: As far back as 2002, SSRC funded Ph.D. students in sociology either did an M.A. degree in social research methodology (four year combined M.A./Ph.D.) or satisfied about half of the requirements of the M.A. degree in social research methodology (three year Ph.D.). At nether of the departments at which I have been studying information science (City, 2003-04, and UCL 2004 onwards), has the department run more than a single course on methodology.

**Fredrik's opinion :**

Thanks Hamid, for bringing up a very interesting topic for discussion!

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You have a good point in LIS being relatively weak in research methodology, to some extent in terms of use, but certainly - with a few exceptions - in terms of development when it comes to the use aspect, Jonathan have a good point about the lack of thorough methodological training. In Sweden for instance, the LIS program is generally on the masters level, requiring at least two years of previous academic studies, with an assumption that the students will get their basic methodological training during that time.

However, most of the students have their academic background in the humanities, where the methodological training (with a few exceptions, e.g.

linguistics) is quite weak or at least very limited to the individual fields. The result being students with low awareness of research methodologies in general and quantitative methods in particular. So, strengthening the method training in undergraduate and graduate studies is important: we're trying to do it now, in our program here in Umeå. (A short note on Jonathans reflections on sociology: saying that qualitative methods are dominating sociology is something that can be debated... For at least 40 years, the nature of sociology has been debated; and the qualitative vs quantitative nature of the discipline has been one of the main issues. There are strong research traditions on both sides, and the focus depends both on where you are, as well as what area of sociology you're looking at. At our sociology department, with an emphasis on welfare

state and labour market issues, quantitative research is very strong.). I'm not so sure whether us using a lot of methods from other fields is that much of a problem though... I think most researchers, regardless of discipline, are quite un-interested in the disciplinary origin of e.g. multi-variate analysis or discourse analysis. You use the methods you need to answer your research questions, right? And in a discipline where those questions can be about everything from French private libraries in the 18th century, via literacy issues in Nigeria, to best-match algorithms, you're bound to get a multitude of methods of historical, pedagogical, political and computer science nature and so on... To be able to make LIS more homogenous, and with a defined set of research methodologies; I guess the easiest strategy would be to focus on the research areas where methodological awareness has been strongest and where research methods of a distinct LIS nature has been developed, i.e. IR and bibliometrics.

Interesting enough, these are also the areas where LIS research has received most interest outside LIS. Especially bibliometrics is a field with methodologies to a large extent has been developed within LIS, and is also very visible outside the LIS community. I'd say, much more so than any other area within LIS.

The low degree of method development might be a problem in terms of disciplinary independence, but when it comes to visibility in the academic community: I think theory development is a much larger (although somewhat related) problem. Again with the exception of bibliometrics and - to some extent - IR, few models and theories reaches researchers outside the discipline. That complex of problems is nothing I'll venture into

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right now, but it has been discussed in a couple of articles by Lynne McKechnie and Karen Pettigrew (e.g. *JASIS&T*, 52(1), 2001, 62-73).

When it comes to the systems-user questions, brought up by Kora, I'd say it's two research traditions where the user perspective originated out of systems oriented IR, first as user oriented IR and later developed into a more general interest in information behavior. The system orientation has continued existing in IR and knowledge organization, and what I think we're starting to see now, is a merging of the user and systems orientation, to a great deal brought on by technologies making it possible to develop systems with greater opportunity to adapt systems to different users. This integration is visible when looking at the the research literature over the last 10 years or so, and is further emphasized in e.g. Ingwersen & Järvelin's new book ('The Turn', 2005). I think a more interesting distinction in the case of basic assumptions in LIS research is between those arguing that the main objective of LIS is to make the access to relevant information as easy as possible and those arguing the "raison d'être" of LIS is to study information related issues in general.

Finally, the domain analysis issue... Knowledge about the domains, or contextualizing information processes, is very important both for knowing more about information related phenomena in general and for systems development; and Hjørland has some interesting ideas on how to reach this knowledge as well. However, there has been arguments that you can only go so far with the domain perspective, especially if you take a stand for LIS as means to improve information access. Domains do not use systems and information, users do; so to be able to improve the access, we'll at some point have to go down on the level of the individual user (whose behavior of course is heavily influenced - if not governed - by its environment). I have a hard time taking a strong stand for either position, I always had with those actor-structure issues...

Hamid gave two very good lists of web-based material for Research Methods in LIS, very useful for postgraduate students and those who teach this kind of course:

1. School of Library, Archive and Information Studies at University of British Columbia has developed a list of web-based material for different kinds of research methods in LIS (use the menu on the left of the page)

[http://www.slais.ubc.ca/resources/research\\_methods/index.htm](http://www.slais.ubc.ca/resources/research_methods/index.htm)

2. Tom Wilson at the University of Sheffield has also done a similar thing. This is his list.

<http://www.informationr.net/rm/>

## **2. Fourth discussion topic by Jonathan**

My discussion topic concerns the validity of information science. I describe briefly the background to my interest in the topic and then ask three questions.

When I studied social research methodology, my dissertation supervisor told me that one of his concerns is that much of what is published in sociology will be regarded

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by subsequent generations to be erroneous. The justified his concern by adding that much of the work in sociology in the early part of the last century has subsequently been discarded.

In order to start the discussion, I ask three questions:

- 1) To what extent do you think findings in information science reflect the time and place in which the studies were conducted? For instance, are findings on information use in China in 2056 likely to be very different radically from those on information use in Europe in 2006?
  - 2) What would be the ramifications if much of information science were to reflect the time and place in which the studies were conducted?
  - 3) What can be done to increase the validity of information science research?
- However the discussion does not need to confine itself to these questions.

Here is the discussion between Kora (KG) and Jonathan (JL) :

*1) To what extent do you think findings in information science reflect the time and place in which the studies were conducted?*

**JL:** My view is that extent of this variation is likely to vary within information science.

**KG:** This sounds like a really challenging issue, and as such is very important. I agree with your view that this will vary depending on the area in LIS. In my PhD, I work with the issue of evaluating automated classification.

Suspicious about the validity of precision and recall as evaluation measures have been brought up before, but are still being used because other measures are, perhaps, harder to use. Then, these evaluation measures are based on judgements on topicality of documents, which also vary among different users, and even the same person can change her mind through a period of time. So, concerning this issue in particular, I suppose things will change in the future...

**JL:** The problem of different researchers forming different judgements is closely related to the concepts of inter-rater reliability and internal reliability, described in C. F. Seale's book 'The quality of qualitative research'. Seale (p.140) divides reliability into the categories of internal reliability and external reliability. The former concept seems similar to inter-rater reliability and the latter seems synonymous to replicability. Replicability seems to be the extent to which the results of a project would be the same if the project were to be carried out by another researcher.

*2) What would be the ramifications if much of information science were to reflect the time and place in which the studies were conducted?*

**JL:** To me, one problem with this variation is the way people treat findings in information science. For instance, if the findings are likely to be dependant on the place and time it is important that those who use the findings take into account its likely dependence on the place and time

**KG:** I agree with you.

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**JL:** It concerns me that users of information science might not take on board the possibility that findings in information science research vary radically with time and place. For instance, they might use findings on current information needs as a rigid straight-jacket for digital libraries, without taking into account that information needs could vary according to place and that future information needs could be very different from current needs.

**KG:** Again, in my PhD the aboutness of a document can be judged from many different aspects, and methodologies for doing this have not been so well established. Thus, when judging the quality of the results, one should definitely take into consideration the methodology involved. Also, different users will provide different judgments at different points of time -- but reasons for these need further investigation.

**JL:** According to page 141 of Seale's book LeCompte and Goetz argue, it is possible to take steps to improve both internal and external reliability. External reliability can be improved, they say, by addressing five issues. Firstly, a research report should identify the particular status position taken by the researcher in the field ... Secondly, researchers should say as much as possible about who offered data and, thirdly, the social situations in which this was done. In this way, any attempt at replication might follow up similar contacts. Fourthly, Le Compte and Goetz advocate that a full account is given of the theories and ideas that informed the research, including those which were involved in any coding schemes. The fifth point involves attention to methodological reporting, with a detailed account of all aspects of methods used.

*3) What can be done to increase the validity of information science research?*

**JL:** This might be a more fruitful topic for discussion than the other two questions. In particular, it would be interesting to receive feedback on the measures adopted in different universities to seek to increase the validity of research.

**KG:** Another difficult question. I think that going back to the theoretical foundations of different methodologies could help. And not taking things we have today for granted.

**JL:** Another interesting point. In addition I suggest we seek to learn from a wide range of perspectives both from inside and outside information science.

**KG:** I didn't say much, did I? I believe others have better ideas/experiences...

Of course, if there is any comments or opinion or information to give about these two topics, do not hesitate to be active and/or reactive on the list ! it is not too late !!!

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## Agenda of conferences on information sciences

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LIDA with ASIST-ESC organize PhD forum, for the first time at LIDA,

<http://www.ffos.hr/lida/phd/>

ASIST-ESC student-in-charge:

Isto Huvila

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