Theoretical Foundations for Information Literacy: A Plan for Action

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Abstract  
Information literacy is both a common and an important learning activity with higher education. That said, it is under-theorized as a process and as a path to a product. In order to meet the need for theory, the four panelists will offer four distinct possibilities for theoretical frameworks. While the four frameworks are able to stand alone, there is also the likelihood that they might be melded together in order to form an even richer and more robust underpinning for the work of information literacy and instruction. This panel fills a need that has heretofore been found wanting in the topic.

Keywords  
Information literacy; metacognition; situated practice, embodied learning;

INTRODUCTION  
Information literacy is defined in a set of Standards (now under revision) articulated by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2000, pp. 2-3). The definition includes actions that are complex in execution and, especially, in conception. An open question that exists is: The panelists will present a variety of possible theoretical underpinning and their rationales as a way to create a robust praxis of information literacy, guiding by reasoned conceptual grounding.

POSSIBILITY ONE  
Metacognition entails an individual entering into a subjective relationship with self, especially examining the processes and contents of thinking about a subject. For example, a student not only ponders the meaning of, say, a scientific concept, but simultaneously explores her own thinking about that concept.

The strategy of metacognition is well-suited to the processes of information literacy because it is essential that students engage in serious reflection of their own ways of thinking about questions and problems (first) and about the world of information that is open to responding to the questions and problems. Metacognition does appear in conjunction with information literacy, but the application tends to be accepted from other sources and is under-theorized.

Metacognitive knowledge consists of three interrelated components: self-knowledge (awareness of one’s own cognition, including knowledge of one’s strengths and weaknesses and the awareness of one’s motivational beliefs); task knowledge (knowledge about the cognitive demands of the task); and strategic knowledge (procedural knowledge of cognitive strategies to employ when unsuccessful) (Bowler, 2010). Within the information literacy context this idea can be theorized in terms of creating awareness in students of the act of cognizing, developing an understanding of how a student proceeds to think about, not merely the processes but the content of the material in question, and what the processes mean for interpretation and assimilation into existing knowledge.

POSSIBILITY TWO  
A practice perspective of information literacy allows draws a broader analytical brush stroke:
viewing the practice as a social site that is connected to other practices through webs of understanding. This approach focuses on the interaction between people, information and the knowledge practices within a particular setting; and, an insight into what connects practices and what enables and constrains the ongoing performance of practice. Of particular interest is the focus on how information activities and strategies are socially constituted, shaped, and negotiated in practices. Practice based approaches have been influential in workplace information literacy studies (Lloyd 2012; Mornig and Lloyd 2013).

Social life is inherent and reflected within practice (Schatzki, 2002). Situating practice ontologically, Schatzki suggests that life can be analysed through the social site as a place where coexistence transpires through a web of ongoing practice and arrangements (2000: 26). Engaging in the practice enables the sites members to understand how social life happens, through insights into what forms of knowledge and ways of knowing are legitimized and sanctioned.

A particular emphasis for practice-based analysis is to enquire into how things happen and how this happening emerges through sayings and doings that entwine the social site. Where sayings represent what is spoken or gestured about, and doings reflect the actual performances associated with the execution of a practice. The concept of prefigurement is central to this theory of practice, whereby the social site qualifies the path of an activity, i.e. it is enabled or constrained through discourse. Practices are prefigured through a process of social interaction, which over time creates complex layers of meaning (Lloyd 2010). Central to practice is the role of the body, a site of embodied knowledge that has been largely silenced or ignored in information literacy research or instructional practice. Also ignored is the role of local and nuanced knowledges which are central to learning about how to ‘go on’ in the performance of learning.

From a teaching perspective, educators need to be aware of how their own information practices and performances emerge, and why this emergence is influenced by the information architectures of the setting. This has implications for engaging students with learning about information literacy.

When information literacy is viewed as practice, the emphasis is placed on: the foundational work of information literacy instruction; engaging students in thinking about the construction of discourse and knowledge creation in the context of the cultural discursive, material-economic dimensions which influence paradigmatic construction and communicative action; understanding the modalities of information that are enabled or constrained within a particular setting; considering the role of praxis as a reflective strategy required for transition from higher education to work; understanding how information is enabled and/or constrained by knowledge architectures which shaped practice and information landscapes.

**POSSIBILITY THREE**

A sociocultural perspective on information literacy has been growing steadily since the early 2000s. A sociocultural perspective transmutes literacy from its psychological and cognitive origin into a social and cultural domain (Scribner & Cole 1981). As presented here the perspective takes cues from two theoretical strands, firstly New Literacy Studies and similar approaches, which frame literacy as a social practice and secondly from Science and Technology studies and here specifically socio-material angles, which emphasise the constructive role of technologies in shaping what there is to know and how it can be known.

Firstly, New Literacy Studies took literacy research from studies of individual cognitions to regarding literacies as embedded in local and situated practices. Brian Street (1984) described the first mentioned type of research as based in an autonomous model of literacy and the latter type as an ideological model of literacy. The autonomous model, according to Street, views reading and writing as neutral skills and treats literacy in the singular. The ideological (or sociocultural) model, on the other hand, understands literacies in the plural and involves the situating of particular literacies in their context and in relation to power. A sociocultural perspective is the name of a theoretical family rather than of a specific narrowly defined theory. At the same time, there are some of core assumptions that glue the perspectives’ family members together.
To begin with, literacy is understood and investigated as part of local and situated practices. What is regarded as a literacy in one practice might not be considered proper behavior in another. One example concerns frictions between schooling and popular culture in the use of social media (Lankshear & Knobel 2006). For the field of information literacy this teaches us how information literacy should be seen in its plural form. As practitioners, a sociocultural perspective could be used as a way to critically reflect on areas such as copyright, where there might be conflicting understandings amongst practices, for instance in schooling on the one hand and popular culture on the other. As a scholar, this tension between practices is an interesting research focus. Specific concepts, theories, norms and values co-exists with material tools such as journals, databases, scientific instruments and classification systems. As an information specialist or scholar, a reflexive awareness of how the tools differ in different social practices could be used in classes and in research.

Secondly, in a sociocultural perspective of information literacy, technologies are neither passive nor neutral. Instead, intellectual and material tools are regarded as built into each other and could in this sense be described as socio-material (c.f. Suchman 2007). This theoretical cue comes from Science and Technology studies. The absolute distinction between people and things is then dissolved in favour of an interest in how people and technology relate to and shape each other (Latour 2005). Thereby systems and technologies are given attention, not as dead things, but as actors that should be analysed on the same level as people. Such an understanding is productive since it helps us to understand more precisely how the contemporary giants of the Internet which dominate most of our information activities, e.g. Google, Facebook, or Wikipedia, actually shape our understanding of what constitutes important knowledge and thus learning (cf. Sundin & Haider 2013). With such an understanding, information literacy must also relate to notions of medium and materiality.

**POSSIBILITY FOUR**

In what Street calls “autonomous literacy” (Street, 1984), the knowledge of codes in practice that we think of as literate are “centered” in the individual. Literacy creates the autonomous citizen who can read, write, reason, and debate—all essential qualities for an enlightened citizen in society. Street posits “ideological literacy” as an alternative to this autonomous literacy. Ideological literacy emphasizes that literacy is created in sociocultural contexts and is related to power. The power to read and write (the most traditional forms of literacy) confers great privileges on those who hold it. The most obvious power results from literacy as a gateway to success in formal schooling. Autonomous definitions of literacy mask the sociocultural advantages that underlie much of what counts for success in schooling. As a consequence, literacy is seen an individual achievement, not a sociocultural advantage.

We have recently begun to see literacy as related various social performances. We speak of computer literacy, financial literacy, visual literacy, and media literacy. Literacy as a concept seems flexible enough to adapt to these contexts. What emerges from linking literacy to these emerging performances is a vision of literacy as a form of “pop-up” activity rather than an enduring essence of the self. Literacy is an ensemble of skills and concepts that allows us to activate literate responses appropriate to contexts. We deploy our media literacies in the context of media, our financial literacies in the context of finances, and our information literacy in the contexts of information. When we do this, we more appropriately think of our literacies arising in the borderlands between our selves and the world, as opposed to within our central essential selves.

We can therefore think of literacy as a way that we negotiate boundary relationships. When we meet new situations or new people, our first reaction is to understand the codes and practices that we need in these relationships. We tend to do this through language, not language as a neutral skill, but language as an ideological construct that helps us understand how we can or should relate to the otherness of people or situations. We tune our literacy skills to facilitate communication and understanding in these relationships.

Starr and Bowker propose a key concept for understanding these negotiations, the “boundary object.” Boundary objects are structures or objects that exist at the contact points where a variety of sociocultural communities come
together for interpretive purposes. Different communities interact in different ways with boundary objects. These objects function to facilitate translation and communication across boundaries and between individuals and communities. Examples of boundary objects exist all around us, mostly obviously in the way bilingual signs give direction to two communities, for example.

Thinking about information literacy as boundary activity means no longer assigning privilege to one tightly focused kind of information (library information, for example). Instead we recognize that information exists in every community and it functions by providing a form of coherence—what “everybody knows” in a given community. When we cross cultural boundaries, either metaphorically or literally, information changes form and meaning.

PANEL STYLE
The panel presentation will last 1.5 hours. Panelists will converse about the challenges of theory related to information literacy and will involve the audience in the discussion of possibilities.

REFERENCES


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