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An Essay in Support of Critical  
Information Literacy

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# No Shhing: Giving Voice to the Silenced: An Essay in Support of Critical Information Literacy

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## Introduction

Information is the fuel of the academy. It is what is created and used, what drives it forward in its teaching and research mission. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, information is also what drives the economies of many Western nations. Daniel Bell referred to the time in which we are now immersed as the post-industrial era, or the information age (Bell, 1973). Yet it is also an age that is still aggressively informed by an industrial mode of thinking, and that continues to reify, through the academy, a hegemonic, traditional way of looking at information. In *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco speaks to the gate-keeping role librarians play between information and the researcher (Eco, 1983). In a medieval monastery, it was easy enough to create an unusable catalog to prevent access. In an era of post-modern librarianship, where there is an emerging critical sense of the hold this gate-keeping function has on the profession, academic librarians seek to develop ways in which to devolve information power to researchers. However, it will be the argument of this essay that the perennialist paradigm of the pedagogy that is information literacy instruction opposes this manifest intent of information literacy. Further, it is suggested that information literacy itself is in need of revision to a more critical paradigm. Some practical applications of information literacy practice will be shared as examples.

## The Information Literacy Paradigm

Information literacy has been a major formal focus of the agendas of professional library organizations since the early 1990s. It has been a part of

the profession for much longer. In 2001 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) published the Standards of Information Competency for Higher Education (Association of College and Research Libraries Institute for Information Literacy, 2000), the results of many years of labor by instruction librarians—the ACRL category of teaching librarians. Other library organizations, including that for teachers, or school media specialists, followed suit. The Standards for higher education, however, are pretty similar to the others. They define information literacy in procedural terms as the ability to find, retrieve, evaluate, and use information appropriate to a research need. These Standards have since found a privileged place in the work of ACRL, and particularly in the advocacy of the organization.

The manifest intent of the Standards is to assist instruction librarians in developing practices that will allow students to learn and demonstrate information literacy skills. As can be seen in the above definition, these Standards are decontextualized from the actual research process and, as one reads further into them, it can be seen that they also make some basic assumptions about the nature of knowledge that should be of concern. For example, while it is suggested that information found will be evaluated, this information is evaluated in strong procedural terms, not on critical terms.

The Standards were also developed to inform formal library instruction sessions, and to a lesser extent informal activities such as instructional design and assignment design. The formal sessions are usually considered a traditional 50-75 minute library class, though the Standards do suggest these sessions may not be totally effective in developing information literacy. Indeed, in spite of the suggestion that these Standards could also apply to informal practices, their emphasis on outcomes belies this.

These standards, then, fall into the perennial empirical/analytic paradigm of curriculum inquiry presented by William Schubert (1986). This paradigm, or conceptual framework, owes much to the law-like propositions of Ralph W. Tyler's Rationale (1949), wherein curriculum development is presented as a series of questions of purpose, content or experience, organization, and evaluation. Were these questions framed from an information literacy lens, they would be:

- What is the purpose of the research?
- What information would be most appropriate to assist in that research?
- How would that information be accessed and used?
- What value is placed on that information, and does that suggest the need for more/different information?

As can be seen here information is reified, and more particularly, certain forms of information. This, too, fits quite closely with the perennial paradigm,

in that it strongly suggests that information is relatively neutral in political terms.

A practical example of how information literacy informs instructional support in higher education can be seen in the traditional freshman composition paper. Librarians tend to support faculty in their learning outcomes. In the composition paper there is usually an expectation that students will look at a variety of sources (though usually not media of sources) and develop a synthesis argument around a certain thesis that is informed by these sources. Such sources are usually limited to books and journal articles. The ACRL Standards are strongly influenced by this type of research assignment—for example, they speak to instruction in the skills necessary to search for books (beginning with using a library catalog, to understanding keywords and subject headings, and also developing skills with Boolean logic).

I will return to the topic of media later, but for the moment the focus on books can be deconstructed to expose some of the critical issues. Students are not asked to examine the range of books on a particular topic, to expose the potential varieties of viewpoints, or lack thereof, to examine who are the prolific authors and who are not represented, or to even look at how the book has been categorized on the library's shelves. The same could be said for a journal article. Most research assignments in higher education tend to focus on the peer reviewed article, and there are ACRL Standards designed to teach a student to demonstrate knowledge of what makes a journal peer reviewed and why it is important to use it. Yet, there is no critical examination of the peer review process, again asking what information is excluded versus what information has been included.

### Some Practical Concerns

Schubert, in discussing his paradigms of inquiry, draws on Joseph Schwab's concern for the Practical in curriculum. Schwab (1969) suggests that an overemphasis on theory has stagnated the curriculum field to the point where the practical is almost overwhelmed. He proposes a continuum of commonplaces, of the student, teacher, content, and milieu, for inquiry, all facilitated by the curriculum worker. The perennial paradigm has privileged content over the other commonplaces, and in Schwab's mind that has led to "bandwagon" education. As can be seen above, content in the form of process has also dominated information literacy instruction.

Information literacy, rather, should be focused on the learner, not on the content. It would therefore seem to fit into Schubert's Practical paradigm, but even if content were not the focus of information literacy, there would still be a strong pull in the direction of the teacher, or in this instance the faculty. Their learning outcomes directs the library instruction session. Take out the faculty, and milieu still pulls quite strongly, in that the mode of delivery of

information takes precedence. Unfortunately, this leaves the student at the rear. Schwab's emphasis on the continuum of commonplaces, where no one should dominate the other, should be a prime concern here through the curriculum worker, or in this instance the instruction librarian.

This can be seen in the work of some library instruction programs where there is a strong partnership between the faculty and the librarians in an effort to develop effective learning experiences for the student. However, as can even be seen by the rhetoric used here, there is more of a perennial focus than a practical. Indeed, the continuum of commonplaces is still not in balance.

### The Problematic of Literacy

It is important here to take a step aside and to examine the problem that the term literacy itself presents. Library theorists James Elmborg and Cushla Kapitzke have been especially critical of how little regard librarianship has shown for literacy theory in general. Indeed, work by James Gee (see, for example, Gee, 1997), Allan Luke (see, for example, Luke, 1988; Luke and Kapitzke, 1999), and others have held up a critical mirror to literacy, and revealed how it is a socially constructed term. For a person to be literate, they demonstrate their literacy in terms defined by their community. For example, a literate person in the United States is one who can read and write in American English—and this is having grave political outcomes in the current immigration debate. Usually this form of literacy is also hegemonic, in that it is a strong reflection of the language of the dominant culture. Indeed, neo-Classicist E.D. Hirsch refers to what he terms “cultural literacy” in strong Western, Anglo-centric terms.

Gee and Luke are members of the New London Group, an interdisciplinary group of scholars who problematized literacy and then presented multi-literacies as a solution (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). Here, multi-literacies recognize the values of all forms of literacy as coming from a variety of community definitions. Therefore, applied to the academy, demonstrated literacy can come from virtually any source. In higher education, however, information literacy is still limited to a conservative tradition of peer-reviewed, print-based resources.

As an example, recent library literature has attempted to apply the ACRL Standards to non-traditional materials. In one instance a librarian worked with faculty to design an assignment in which the students were asked to use Google. However, they were then asked to evaluate Google in print-based terms, where the latent assumption was that Google was worse than a journal article (Ghahery, 2003). The students were not asked to evaluate the content of the information they found, or even to evaluate that content from a critical perspective that would have, for example, asked them to consider the different voices Google has presented them with.

## Critical Information Literacy

Information literacy, therefore, is long overdue a reframing into Schubert's paradigm of critical praxis. Elmborg (2006) and Ward (2006) have made just such a call. Elmborg suggests that the theories of Paulo Freire should especially inform the development of a critical information literacy. He overlooks Freire's own basic assumptions about literacy, but he has effectively set an agenda for how the information literacy standards of various library organizations are inherently privileged and biased towards the dominant culture. Ward furthers this argument by also suggesting that the information literacy agenda ignores the fundamental contexts of information itself:

[A] revisioning of information literacy would give birth to the future academic library—a place thoroughly integrated into the flow of campus learning where librarians, possessing diverse knowledge and expertise, would assist patrons in a multiplicity of information-related processes. These would include finding quality information, exploring the personal significance of a topic, framing an aesthetic experience of music, and facilitating personal awareness. (p. 402)

For example, emerging technologies are calling into question the gatekeeping function of librarians. On the Internet there are now social bookmarking web sites (for example, del.icio.us) where users can “catalog” their own content. These “folksonomies” are being developed outside of any formal controls other than social controls. Users can surf the web and tag various resources under keywords that make the most sense to them. These keywords are shared with other users of the service, and are added to a list of keywords that may have already been associated with the same resource. No librarians are involved, except as participants. No *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* or volumes of Library of Congress Subject Headings, both of which privilege a Western, scientific view of knowledge. It is ironic that ten years ago librarians were agitated about how well the Internet could be catalogued in traditional terms. They lost the initiative, if ever there was one, and in 2006 Internet users are doing it in a way that makes most sense to them.

How would critical information literacy look in practice? For one, it would need to consider two sets of learners, both the faculty and the students. Critical information literacy needs to de-reify traditional media and open up to all forms of knowledge. Folksonomies is one clue as to where knowledge comes from. The freshman research assignment mentioned previously would be restructured to maintain but deemphasize the procedural components of information literacy. Freire speaks of a critical consciousness necessary to literacy. I would add that it is necessary to multi-literacy too. Therefore, another aspect of critical information literacy is its de-reifying of certain forms of literacy. Does every resource have to be peer-reviewed? How many

resources must be consulted before information literacy is assumed? The questions could go on.

The new research assignment may wish to draw on a critical pedagogy method of uncovering the assumptions of traditional paradigm. Therefore, the topic should have at least a political aspect to it. An example could be a research topic that looks at competing demands for land use, perhaps the tension between land development and sacred sites. In the United States, especially in the western states, this is a major issue that has been researched and documented in the "literature" as well as elsewhere. However, a critical examination of the literature will reveal a dominant, capitalist, Judeo-Christian perspective on the issue. Even a cursory review of the conversation will reveal an oppressive voice. Critical information literacy will uncover that voice and ask the student where she would find the Other voices. Thus, websites, oral histories, student interviews, personal stories, home made videos, ceremonial "texts" and other resources could enter the dialogue the student is now conducting between herself and society's assumptions. Would the resultant synthesis paper be any different, or would the thesis and/or conclusion be more informed? In part, critical pedagogy suggests that this is the student's decision, but certainly it will have had more voices contribute to it, voices that are usually silenced.

### Intended and Unintended Consequences

Giving voice to that which has been silenced is, perhaps, the most important intended role critical information literacy can play. None of the recent writers on critical information literacy take the final step suggested by Freire, that of action. Information generally is organized in a manner that silences certain groups. In 1995, for example, non-Western scientists were arguing in the pages of *Scientific American* that their research was not getting the exposure it needed, due simply to the fact that indexing services were indexing only English language research (Gibbs, 1995). Indeed, it is worth considering the influence of Paulo Freire had he never been translated from his native language, and how many other Freires in every discipline are writing solely in their native languages. Critical information literacy is a form of activism that asks students to step outside of their paradigms and look for other voices. But it also seeks to ask the same of faculty who, after all, have created and perpetuate the information paradigm. At the end of it all, librarians are still only the gatekeepers.

Yet, perhaps another intended consequence of critical information literacy would be to develop an emerging critical consciousness in librarians about their roles. Elmborg (2006) suggests that academic librarians especially need to reframe their roles as educators as opposed to service providers. The latter, indeed, raises the specter of the myth of neutrality, whereas educators, especially critical educators, allow for more engagement with a researcher and

her information needs. At the same time, by simply deconstructing information and how it is organized librarians could be educating information users, including the content creators themselves, on the post-modern construction of information that will define the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Also, the academy is not the clichéd liberal institution suggested by the mainstream media and the conservative blogosphere. Rather it is a very conservative, change resistant place, where the community defines literacy in very stringent terms and where there have consistently been marginalized groups trying to break into a Westernized, masculine, scientifically oriented world. One consequence of a shift to critical information literacy would be to directly challenge the foundations of this world, the peer review process, the book, and, ultimately, the basis for promotion and tenure.

An unintended consequence of critical information literacy may be a de-emphasis on the library as a resource. In saying this, however, a less functional definition of libraries in general may not be a bad thing, especially in the educational context. It may also result in the lack of use of certain library resources, especially those the library spends money to purchase. Yet that also has some positive sides as well, in that it may force the library to radically reconsider where to allocate its resources. And finally, a new picture of libraries may begin to emerge: content creators, rather than content hoarders. Jorge, the librarian in Eco's *The Name of the Rose* hid information from the fear of how it would challenge the social paradigm. The non-traditional forms of information many libraries hold or can collect calls out to the possibilities of education, and to the voices that can inform education.

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