

Chapter 6

Information Literacy Research: The Evolution of the Relational Approach

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ABSTRACT

Information literacy is an issue of growing global concern. Amidst changing technologies, our information worlds intersect with all aspects of our lives. This chapter introduces the relational approach to information literacy, its evolution, application in contemporary research, and emerging directions. It presents the approach, as introduced by Australian researchers, as an integration of experiential, contextual, and transformational perspectives. The chapter first reflects on the wider information literacy domain and then addresses the development of the relational approach, its fundamental elements and characteristics, as well as its adoption in key contexts. The chapter also explores significant studies that have contributed to its evolution and considers the impact of the development of the relational framework and related research. The chapter concludes with a focus on new directions emerging from the relational understanding of information literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Information researchers, educators and professionals have long debated the meaning and application of the term *information literacy*. Its history is complex, entwined with multiple other literacies,

and with library instruction and information skills. The term, coined in 1974 by Paul Zurkowski, was adopted by libraries and the wider information profession following its use in the 1989 Final Report by the American Library Association (ALA). Historically, the favoured means of explaining information literacy is grounded in the behavioural approach, which views individuals as needing to develop competence in specific skills

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5158-6.ch006

in order to become information literate. According to the ALA (1989) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2000, p. 2), “Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.” This remains the dominant approach for explaining, teaching and researching information literacy. This view of information literacy has developed within educational settings, with information literacy defined as a skill or set of skills that needs to be developed or attained.

The ongoing association of the term *information literacy* with a behavioural view, built on standards and goals and focused on developing information literate individuals, poses challenges for those seeking a more nuanced or holistic approach to information literacy. Just as the ways in which we use information have evolved, so too should our understanding of what it means to be information literate.

Since its widespread adoption by the library and information community, ‘information literacy’ as a term and construct has been seen as problematic. The use and meaning of the term has been contested ... and we have been urged to consider different ways of thinking about the concept (Lupton, 2008, p. 230).

With the rapid pace of technological change and the quantity of information increasing at unfathomable rates, the behavioural approach may no longer be sufficient. Certainly, it is no longer reasonable to suggest that individuals merely need to achieve competencies or skills. Alternative approaches are needed for understanding and interpreting information literacy that reflect our fast paced, constantly changing, intersecting and unique information worlds (Limberg, Sundin, & Talja, 2012). Three particular evolving approaches, known as relational, sociocultural, and discursive

understandings of information literacy are critiqued by Limberg, Sundin and Talja (2012).

This chapter highlights the way in which the relational approach has evolved in response to this information literacy research agenda. Rather than considering information literacy as a goal, researchers adopting the relational approach explore how information literacy is experienced. The relational approach challenges information researchers, educators, information professionals and wider society to look afresh at how individuals engage with information to learn in all aspects of their everyday lives. The relational approach makes it possible for all sectors of the information profession to consider anew how people experience information literacy in their environments.

This chapter considers the significant contributions of Australian and international researchers in this contemporary information literacy research domain. The adoption of the relational approach is explored in the contexts of education, workplace and community settings. Key studies are highlighted with an emphasis on new directions in thinking emerging in this space and potential implications.

BACKGROUND

The relational approach is interested in the relationship between people and information literacy or, in other words, how people experience information literacy. It has to do with researching experience as an object of study and adopting experience as a theoretical construct. This requires researchers to adopt a holistic perspective in understanding information literacy to explore what constitutes information literacy in people’s experiences in different contexts. In order to understand the relational approach to information literacy, it is necessary to retrace its evolution as an object of study and a means to researching information literacy.

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