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Rethinking the 2000 ACRL Standards: Some Things to Consider

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RETHINKING THE 2000 ACRL STANDARDS

Some things to consider

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ABSTRACT

I propose three "rethinks" to consider in recasting the ACRL Standards for information literacy for the coming decades. First, rethink the concept of information need. Second, rethink the notion that information literacy is composed of a set of abilities for "extracting information." Third, rethink the holistic process of learning from a variety of sources of information that is central to information literacy. The necessity for these "rethinks" are grounded in my extensive studies of students' experience in the information search process that reveal an evolving, dynamic, holistic process incorporating a series of feelings (affective), thoughts (cognitive) and actions (physical) as described in the six stage model of the ISP (Kuhlthau, 2004). The challenge is to begin with the premise that information literacy enables a person's deep thoughtful process of learning from a variety of sources that is essential in a dynamic information environment

Sometime after the 2000 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* were published, I gave a talk at an international conference where I defined *information literacy* according to the *Standard*s as "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." Following my talk, Bob Hayes, the noted library and information science scholar and eminent UCLA professor, suggested that I add *wisely* to this description of information literacy. He made me question whether a person's capacity for gaining wisdom through information literacy is captured in the *Standards*. Over the years I have wondered if the *Standards* (ACRL, 2000) fully capture the role of information literacy in a person's capacity, not only for wisdom, but also for deep thinking, reflecting, constructing, innovating, and learning that are the most important purposes of information seeking and use. I have been invited to write this short perspectives piece to share some ideas about rethinking the ACRL *Standards*. We might start with the premise that information literacy enables a person's deep thoughtful process of learning from a variety of sources that is at the very core of what it is to be educated in the global information environment. Here are three *rethinks* to consider in recasting the *Standards* for information literacy in action for the coming decades.

RETHINK THE INFORMATION NEED

Information need is a slippery concept. It doesn't stay put. A person's information need changes and evolves with each new piece of information she or he encounters and thinks about. In the 2000 *Standards*,

information need sounds like a concrete, fixed *thing*. Information need often begins with a vague notion that changes with the information found, as Taylor (1968) discovered in his studies at Lehigh so may years ago. In my studies of students' information search process, I found that information actually increases uncertainty rather than reducing it in the early stages of extensive information seeking such as that associated with conducting research paper or term assignment (Kuhlthau, 2004). What seems like a simple question is really a complex problem as one gets further into the information search. Information need changes as the person progresses through the stages of the information search process. Uncertainty is the beginning of learning and deep understanding. Without a healthy respect for one's own uncertainty, a person commonly has the sense that something is going wrong when sources seem incompatible and inconsistent with each other and with one's preconceived notions. If one doesn't expect uncertainty, curiosity and exploration are stifled. Tolerance of uncertainty leads to patience and persistence that allows for building interest in emerging ideas, and one ultimately can take on a sense of discovery that researcher wants to share. Uncertainty is an important information literacy concept for understanding evolving information need. The concept of an evolving information need within the process of learning from a variety of sources of information is important to rethink in the new *Standards*.

RETHINK EXTRACTING INFORMATION

The term *extracting* is used throughout the 2000 *Standards*. Extracting is essentially a cut-and-paste approach to information literacy that is not only too simplistic but also wrong in the age of the internet. The

2000 *Standards* state that "the information literate student summarizes the main ideas to be extracted from the information gathered." The premise is that there are specific ideas in a text that should be selected by anyone reading the text, implying that there is one right answer for all. The phrases "summarizing the main ideas," "extracted from the information gathered," "restates in own words" and "incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base" portray a simplistic, positivist, one-right-answer-for-all approach to information literacy. This is a mechanical way of looking at the creative, constructive process of learning from a variety of sources of information and building on what one already knows. That perspective is not in line with my findings in studies of students over the past 30 years (Kuhlthau, 2004). These studies show a confusing, uncertain, often frustrating process of constructing understanding from conflicting and incompatible sources of information in the early stages of the information search process (ISP). However, in the later stages, the process reaches a turning point of focus, and the student shifts to increased interest, confidence, understanding, and ownership of the researched material. The focus in the form of a clear research question or thesis statement comes midway in the process, not at the beginning as often supposed. The cut-and-paste tone of *extracting* information causes students to view academic information seeking as merely lifting and rewording something off the source page or the Internet. Information literacy needs to be connected to the dynamic interaction of knowledge, theories, principles of the disciplines, and the best innovative ideas of the everyday world. Learning from a variety of sources of information can result in a whole range of solutions that call for collaborative conversation in a community

of learners and is important to rethink for the new *Standards*.

RETHINK HOLISTIC PROCESS OF LEARNING

Studies of students' experiences in complex research projects revealed an evolving, dynamic, holistic process that incorporates a series of feelings (affective), thoughts (cognitive), and actions (physical) (Kuhlthau, 2004). These studies showed that students' thoughts are charged with emotions that influence the actions they take. Students experience a dip in confidence and an increase in uncertainty when they least expect it, after they have selected a topic and started collecting information, during the exploration stage of the ISP. They often expect to be able to simply collect information and complete the assignment. This simple view of the research process sets up stumbling blocks, especially in the exploration stage. When their expectations do not match what they are experiencing, they become confused, anxious, and frustrated. The early stages of the ISP reveal the struggle they experience in learning during an extensive research project. Feelings are important and indicate when they are having difficulty and when they are doing well.
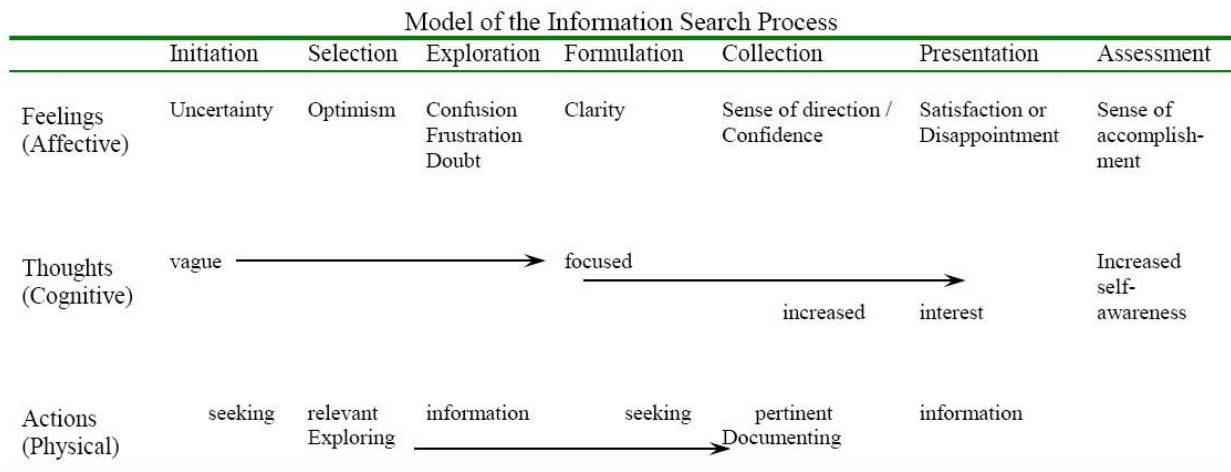
Advances in human brain science have verified that emotions are closely associated with thinking and acting. The model of the ISP describes feelings, thoughts, and actions of students in six stages of the research process: initiation, selection, exploration, formulation, collection, and presentation (see Figures 1 and 2). Longitudinal studies found that with more experience students described the research process in very personal ways, explaining that this is *my process* and *the way I learn*. Over the years, this research has changed the way many

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academic librarians help undergraduates with research assignments and graduate students with theses. It has opened a window into what students are experiencing when they are constructing new understandings and learning from multiple sources in a dynamic information environment. The ISP studies revealed that students need considerable guidance and intervention throughout the research process to construct a personal understanding. Without guidance, they tend to approach the research process as a simple collecting and presenting assignment that leads to copying and pasting with little real learning. With guidance, they are able to construct new knowledge in the stages of the ISP and gain personal understanding and information literacy for lifelong learning. Internalizing the holistic process of learning from multiple sources of information is learning how to learn in an information rich environment that is a central component of information literacy in action and is important while rethinking the *Standards*.
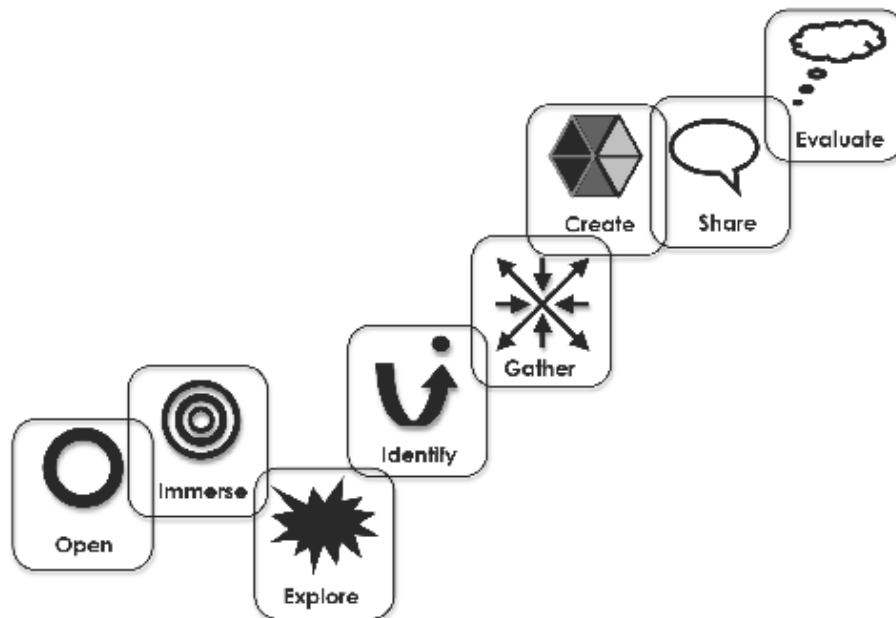
EMBEDDING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO INFORMATION LITERACY

Cahoy and Schroeder (2012) recommended embedding affective objectives into information literacy initiatives. The American Association of School Librarians (2007) published *Standards for the 21st Century Learner*, which takes a broad view of learning that incorporates inquiry and dispositions. I have been working with Leslie Maniotes and Ann Caspari (2007, 2012) to develop guided inquiry that embeds the ISP for assisting students in inquiry projects through the phases of open, immerse, explore, identify, gather, create, share, and evaluate. Guided inquiry opens the inquiry process at initiation, immerses students in background knowledge at selection, guides in exploring interesting ideas at exploration, enables identifying an inquiry question at formulation, supports gathering to address the question at

FIGURE 1 — MODEL OF THE INFORMATION SEARCH PROCESS (KUHLTHAU, MANIOTES, CASPARI, 2012)

Model of the Information Search Process						
	Initiation	Selection	Exploration	Formulation	Collection	Presentation	Assessment
Feelings (Affective)	Uncertainty	Optimism	Confusion Frustration Doubt	Clarity	Sense of direction / Confidence	Satisfaction or Disappointment	Sense of accomplish-ment
Thoughts (Cognitive)	vague ⟶			focused	increased	interest	Increased self-awareness
Actions (Physical)	seeking	relevant Exploring	information	seeking	pertinent Documenting	information	

FIGURE 2 — MODEL OF THE INFORMATION SEARCH PROCESS (KUHLTHAU, MANIOTES, CASPARI, 2012)

collection, intervenes for creating and sharing at presentation, assesses throughout the inquiry process, and evaluates at the close. While these books concentrate on PreK-12 students, the work can be readily adapted for undergraduates. By embedding a holistic approach within the inquiry process, information literacy develops as students' understanding of content deepens.

There are many innovative information literacy initiatives in university libraries that apply the holistic principles drawn from the ISP model. For example, at Arizona State University, Lisa Kammerlocher, an early adaptor of the ISP, has developed successful programs for students for many years. At Aalborg University Library in Denmark, a holistic process approach to information literacy has been embedded into an emphasis on project-based learning under the leadership of Niels Blaabjerg. Princeton University librarian, Mary George, has an excellent new book on guiding students' research that embeds a holistic approach in an imaginative, thoughtful, and practical way (2008). Mary worked with me as research associate on the ISP verification study of undergraduates many years ago and has been creatively embedding these concepts in her work with Princeton students. These are just a few examples of embedding a holistic approach to information literacy for consideration iwhen rethinking the *Standards*.

INFORMATION LITERACY FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

"Information literacy multiplies the opportunities for students' self-directed learning, as they become engaged in using a wide variety of information sources to

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expand their knowledge, ask informed questions, and sharpen their critical thinking for still further self-directed learning." This quote from the "Information Literacy and Pedagogy" (2000, p. 5) introductory section of the 2000 *Standards* is a good place to start. The challenge for the new standards is to take a holistic approach to information literacy that prepares students for the reflective thinking that leads to wise information seeking and use in the dynamic global information environment. The challenge is to provide standards that fully capture the role of information literacy in a person's capacity for deep thinking, reflecting, constructing, innovating, and learning, all of which are the most important purposes of information seeking and use. It is time to rethink the *Standards* to prepare students for information literacy for self-directed learning in a dynamic information environment.

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