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Information Literacy: What's the Question?

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ACRLLog

Blogging by and for academic and research librarians

Information Literacy: What's the Question?

ACRLLog welcomes a guest post from Mark Lenker, Teaching & Learning Librarian at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Do you have an arch-frenemy book or article from the literature of library science? Mine has to be Edward K. Owusu-Ansah's 2005 "Debating Definitions of Information Literacy: Enough is Enough!" Owusu-Ansah argues persuasively that we have already defined information literacy clearly enough to know that it involves making a positive difference in our students' experiences with learning. Rather than dither about with the fine distinctions that a perfect definition of information literacy would require, Owusu-Ansah implores us to get on with the good work of *teaching* information literacy.^[1]

But I can't help myself. Definitions of information literacy fascinate me because they open new possibilities for thinking about (and occasionally actually doing) my work. The [ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards](#) made it clear to me that information literacy was about more than just showing students how to use databases (which was a lesson I really needed to learn). The [ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#) stimulated my thinking about information as an ecosystem that we inhabit and influence. Even Owusu-Ansah's 2003 characterization of information literacy as "conversance with the universe of information" taught me that *conversance* with information is a more reasonable and pressing instructional goal than *expertise* in information.^[2]

All of these conceptions describe information literacy as an attribute of learners: competencies they exhibit, concepts they have mastered, a level of know-how they have attained. The focus on such characteristics makes sense; *literacy* itself is a quality possessed by people. But what if we took a step back from our focus on skills and competencies and instead thought about information literacy as a matter of learning something about the world? What if we framed information literacy in terms of a *big question*, one that accurately conveys the depths of the unknowns that information literacy touches upon? Getting the defining question right would help others understand the weight of the subject matter that we teach and research. It would also improve our own understanding of the deep-rooted mysteries that pervade our work.

It bears emphasis that information is an aspect of the world that is teeming with mystery. The range of questions includes current challenges, like how to learn about politics in the midst of our fractured public discourse, or how search algorithms can skew our searching and distort our learning. But the span also includes questions as old as information itself. How can I tell which information I should trust? What's the best way to obtain information that I can rely on? Or, deepest of all, how do text, images, and sound, all physical signals, get taken up as meaning that influences future thought or action? It's easy to forget that learning with information is an everyday miracle, and that libraries are in the miracle business.

When we acknowledge the vastness and the subtlety of information literacy as a subject matter, it makes a difference in the way we approach our teaching. I underestimate the subject matter and my students when I view teaching as a matter of giving the students what they need to know about research.

Better to think of the teacher as a guide leading the students to a vantage point over a yawning chasm of information possibilities so that they can explore it together.^[3] The canyon is sublime when considered in its wholeness—it is so much bigger than the teacher or the students—but it is also composed of billions of details worth considering on their own. The wind gnawing at the rock particle by particle. The intrepid trees somehow growing on the face of the blasted cliffs. The exquisitely adapted animals that find a way to thrive in this impossible place, where nature

slowly gouges away at itself. Each instance of information that we encounter, considered in its context, is a similar occasion for wonder, if we take the time to think about it.

To continue with the analogy, the teacher cannot give the students everything they need to know about the canyon. The canyon is too vast, and the backgrounds and questions of the students are too varied. The teacher can point out some interesting features and ask questions to bring the canyon into focus in a way that many students have not considered before. But no one will leave having *mastered* the canyon, and that is the way it should be. It is enough that the students have taken in one of the big, rich features of their world and come away more curious, inspired, or humble than they were before.

The canyon metaphor has important limitations. It is too visual, as though information is something that we look at from afar rather than participate in up close. In fact, none of us can ever really leave the information canyon. We are composed of information in much the same way that we are made up of water, carbon, and iron. Further, our choices, both big and small, influence the character of the information ecosystem that sustains us. We must be mindful to do no harm.

Instead of mastery, I would rather see my students come away from our time together more alert to the likelihood that there is more to information than initially meets the eye, more aware of the ways that information shapes their lives, and more mindful of the ways that their choices influence the future, both for information and for themselves. To awaken and encourage that sort of deliberate and probing curiosity, information literacy needs a really good question.

Can we meaningfully discern the human purpose (and, frequently, the human negligence) lying behind the information artifacts that occupy so much of our lives? How do our information choices make us more (or less) fully human?

That's my version of information literacy's big question. What's yours?

[1] Edward K. Owusu-Ansah, “Debating definitions of information literacy: enough is enough!” *Library Review* 54, no. 6 (2005): 366–374.

[2] Edward K. Owusu-Ansah, “Information literacy and the academic library: a critical look at a concept and the controversies surrounding it,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 29, no. 4 (2003): 219–230.

[3] I am not the first to use the image of a landscape to describe information literacy. For an influential example, see Annemaree Lloyd, “Information literacy landscapes: an emerging picture,” *Journal of documentation* 62, no. 5 (2006): 570–583. The [Scoull 7 Pillars of Information Literacy](#) also makes extensive use of the landscape metaphor.

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