

The Potential to Transform: Information Behavior Theory and Reference Service Professional Education

Amy VanScoy, Heidi Julien, and Alison Harding

University at Buffalo, United States of America

vanscoy@buffalo.edu, heidijul@buffalo.edu, ahall5@buffalo.edu

ABSTRACT

Information behavior is a critical research area for informing research and information services. The growth of information behavior research over the past few decades has resulted in theories, models, and concepts that can transform thinking about reference and information service. This study explores the extent to which these theories, models, and concepts have been integrated into reference professional education through a syllabus study and interviews with instructors. Preliminary results indicate that inclusion of information behavior theories, models, and concepts remains limited and suggests that a transformation in reference professional education is yet to come.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

education of information professionals; information services; information practices; information needs; information seeking; information use

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

professional education; information behavior theory; reference and information service

INTRODUCTION AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

Research and information services (RIS) education is an area that can be informed and enhanced by information behavior (IB) research. RIS practice needs to be based on an understanding of how users seek information to fill information needs, and what they do with that information once they have found it. That understanding is based on the complex mix of users' cognition, affect, and behaviors. Despite IB being an integral part of RIS, information behavior theories, models, and concepts (IB TMCs) are not well integrated into RIS practice and

education. In her study of library-related trade publications, Kingrey (2002) found that information seeking concepts were not present. In their study of professional associations' RIS-related competency standards, Hicks and VanScoy (2019) found that information behavior was generally not treated as an area of expertise.

The values and preferences of RIS professional educators may underlay the lack of attention to IB TMCs in RIS practice. O'Connor (2011) found that "information seeking behavior" was in the content of 43% of the RIS syllabi that she studied. This figure was a dramatic reduction from earlier studies that found the concept in 79% (Powell & Raber, 1994) and 77% (Broadway & Smith, 1986), suggesting that there is a widening practice-theory gap present in RIS education. This has consequences for RIS professionals who may enter service without a knowledge base that will inform their practice.

The growth of information behavior research over the past few decades has resulted in theories, models, and concepts that can transform thinking about reference and information service. This study investigates the extent to which IB TMCs are integrated, or merely represented in RIS professional education. The findings will suggest opportunities for IB TMCs to transform RIS professional education.

The research questions for the study are:

1. To what extent are information behavior theories, models and concepts integrated into syllabi and textbooks for basic reference courses in North America?
2. To what extent do reference instructors consider information behavior theories, models and concepts in preparing their basic reference courses? Are there common characteristics or perspectives of instructors who integrate them in their courses?

METHODS

This study is comprised of two phases. Phase One focused on the study's first research question. This phase consisted of identifying the basic RIS course in library and information science (LIS) programs in North America and conducting a content analysis of provided syllabi and textbooks. Phase Two is a series of interviews of select RIS instructors. Phase One is complete, so results will be reported in this proposal. Phase Two is scheduled and we expect preliminary results to be ready for the conference.

In Phase One of the study, the fundamental RIS courses at ALA-accredited programs in North America were identified. Although these courses had widely differing titles, the common aspect was that they were the first elective or the core course that focused, at least in part, on information services. Once the courses were identified, the ten publicly available syllabi were downloaded. Where syllabi were not available, an email was sent to the identified course instructor explaining the study and requesting a copy of the course syllabus and reading list. Emails were sent to 83 instructors, and 46 syllabi were sent for inclusion in the study. The total population included 56 syllabi.

Through content analysis, terms used to indicate that IB TMCs were included on the syllabi (i.e., information behavio(u)r/behavio(u)rs, information practices, human information interaction, user behavio(u)r/behavio(u)rs, information-seeking) were identified. Specific IB TMCs included in the syllabus, and the location of these terms and specific IB TMCs, were noted. Readings related to IB TMCs were recorded, and the location of these readings (i.e.,

whether they were concentrated in particular weeks or spread throughout the course) was documented.

Three researchers conducted the coding. They individually analyzed a small subset of syllabi and compared findings in order to come to consensus on analytic coding. An acceptable level of coder consensus, 85%, was reached (Connaway & Radford, 2016). The remainder of the syllabi were divided among the research team for coding. In addition, the required textbooks noted in all syllabi were split among the coders and analyzed for inclusion of IB TMCs. Finally, all of the readings listed on the syllabus, on the reading list, or at the end of textbook chapters were compiled. The IB TMC(s) for each reading were identified from the title or from the article itself. The number of times each IB TMC occurred in a unique syllabus/reading list or textbook was tallied.

In Phase Two of the study, using a theoretical sampling approach, RIS instructors who shared their syllabi were interviewed. Sampling was based on status (faculty, doctoral student, or adjunct faculty) and according to the extent to which IB TMCs were integrated into their courses. The selection of these instructors will allow for in-depth investigation of individual and contextual factors in the integration of IB TMCs into reference courses, such as knowledge of information behavior, autonomy in course design, and orientation toward RIS professional education.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The results presented in this section include only those for Phase 1. Results for Phase 2 will be included in the presentation.

The results of the analysis show that about two-thirds of basic RIS courses include some information behavior content. In 15% of the courses (n=8), IB TMCs were substantively integrated, meaning that IB concepts and readings appeared throughout the course or were the topic of a course week and a major assignment. In 25% (n=14) of the courses, IB TMC were included in the course through an early week on IB or a few readings. In 29% (n=16) IB TMCs were minimally treated, appearing in the course title or description, but not supported with course topics or readings. In 31% (n=17) of the courses, there was no reference to IB TMCs.

Eleven textbooks were identified in the syllabi. Most textbooks treated IB TMCs minimally, if at all. In textbooks that included IB TMCs, they tended to appear in early chapters on fundamental concepts or in chapters on RIS for children or diverse populations. Only one assigned textbook treated IB TMCs substantively (Hirsh, 2018).

Kuhlthau's information search process model (e.g., Kuhlthau, 2004) was the most-reference IB TMC. It appeared in 16 syllabi and their associated reading lists, and in three textbooks. Savolainen's everyday life information seeking (1995) appeared in nine syllabi and five textbooks, followed by Taylor's information needs (1968) in six syllabi and six textbooks.

DISCUSSION

The results of the first phase of the study suggest that the extensive IB research and model development in recent years has not yet been integrated into foundational RIS courses. Kuhlthau's information search process model is by far the most integrated model, yet it is only mentioned in fewer than half the courses.

These preliminary results are limited by the incomplete picture of the RIS courses that is provided by syllabi and reading lists. In Phase Two, instructors of courses will be interviewed to determine whether IB TMCs are presented in ways that syllabi and reading lists do not reveal and the reasons by IB TMCs are no, or are only minimally introduced.

The preliminary results suggest that a transformation in reference professional education is yet to come. The minimal integration of IB TMCs into RIS professional education may explain why information behavior does not play a greater role in professional scholarship or professional documents. For transformation in both professional education and professional practice, information behavior scholars and RIS instructors must work together to close the theory/practice gap.

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