Information Literacy from Australia to Allendale

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Information Literacy from Australia to Allendale

Exmaining two frameworks for information literacy—the skills-based and a more holistic teaching approach—could lead all faculty to approaching the teaching and learning processes differently, finding, evaluating, and using information more effectively.

Information literacy (IL), finding, evaluating, and using information effectively, is an international construct, but the relational theory of information literacy is uniquely Australian. The relational theory concentrates on the changing relationships between people and their experiences with information. It is based on phenomenography, a teaching and learning approach which analyzes the meaning that people ascribe to the world. Phenomenography emphasizes understanding the underlying meaning of concepts, synthesizing new ideas, and applying them in real-world situations. Information literacy understood in this way began in Australia, and I learned about it during my sabbatical there in 1999. It was postulated by Christine Bruce (see references)—and now has proponents and primary researchers not only in Australia and the U.S., but also in Sweden, South Africa, Singapore, the U.K., Canada, and New Zealand. What does the relational approach mean for GVSU? How is it relevant for non-library faculty? It has the potential to change how all faculty approach the teaching and learning process.

In the past, the library faculty have often been asked to focus on teaching the “finding” part of IL, which is the most behavioral aspect, and now we want to move into the relational. In the behavioral view, information literacy was a separate thing and librarians were almost solely responsible for teaching research skills. The relational approach integrates pedagogical theory and information literacy. (See Appendix 2.)

We want to work more closely with the classroom faculty because this has teaching implications for all faculty. As faculty, we hope to teach students to think critically to evaluate information; to synthesize and build on what they know with their previous knowledge to make their conclusions valid to their conclusions; to connect ideas from different research products, whether in academic or workplace settings. The holistic approach makes choosing the quickest and easiest search method a possibility. The library has often been seen as a support service and librarians were thought to be responsible for teaching information literacy. The article’s purpose is to redefine information literacy as an integrated activity of librarians as co-planners in the curriculum only and not as huge or scary as we may think. We can help decrease their first reactions, which can connect to ideas in a very unique way, and place our feelings out into the light. We can move on. Just as our emotions come from our human selves, let them come from the learner.
We worked on information literacy as a more holistic teaching approach to approaching the activities differently, finding, evaluating, and disseminating information. It is based on the relational theory of information literacy which focuses on relationships between people, which can be trained and modified. Relationalism is an international conference of information literacy that emphasizes understanding concepts, synthesizing ideas, and learning in real-world situations.

My sabbatical in Australia was a very joyful time—I felt incredibly alive! Yet at the same time, some deeply painful things happened both in my personal and professional life. I found I had to deal with my feelings about those events before my ideas for this workshop began to flow. Brain research has shown that people's feelings about events in their personal and academic lives can and often do create resistance to learning. For example, many of our students have a fear of research. We can help decrease their resistance by drawing out their initial feelings about the subject matter. Take a minute to consider what your first reaction is when you hear or see the phrase "information literacy." Would call your reaction positive? negative? neutral?

Where Are We Now: Behaviorism Segues into Relationalism
Definitions. This is not to simplify B.F. Skinner's theories, but he did leave us with the impression that humans are a collection of behaviors which can be trained and modified. Our emotions can also be trained and modified, according to Skinner's theories. Behaviorism translated into the education arena gave us skills-based learning theory. But the ability to perform a skill does not equal true understanding and an ability to apply knowledge to other situations. That is, one might have the skill to use the mirrors in a car to judge the relative distance accurately. We need to extrapolate to new situations is necessary for survival—thus, deep, true understanding is also vital. Our ability to distinguish good information from poor quality research, our ability to

Critical Activity
One of the ways to prepare ourselves for learning is to acknowledge our initial feelings about the subject matter. Take a minute to consider what your first reaction is when you hear or see the phrase "information literacy." Would your reaction be positive, negative, or neutral?

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use that knowledge to good end, the transformation of knowledge into wisdom, and the communication of that wisdom to others—that is relational information literacy.

A U.S. example of a master educator who also espouses these ideas is Parker Palmer (The Courage to Teach), devoted to equality, integrity, community, and responsibility. This field has immense teaching and learning implications.

**Teaching Implications**

Phenomenography in practice means that if we want students to know more, we have to teach less. We have to provide time for students to contemplate and discuss, make connections, and learn theoretical ideas in terms of common sense and give them ample opportunities to use their knowledge to solve or explain problems; we must test with open questions and problem solving rather than test with fixed answers. We can ask learners to explain rather than describe, and list similarities they perceive. We have to emphasize the meaning that can be drawn from activities. We can measure learning in terms of the quality of understanding, changes in how students interpret the subject content, changes in the level of understanding of key concepts.

Library/bibliographic instruction programs and the educational movement in the 1980s and 90s emphasized skills and their transferability. However, we're more than just stimuli and responses. Phenomenography's premise is that if learners synthesize and integrate discipline-embedded concepts, practicing with real-world applications, and thus have a deep understanding, then they will be able to extrapolate to other situations. But when we focus heavily or exclusively on behavioral outcomes, and assessment, there is too much leeway for misconceptions.

Performance indicators, behavioral outcomes, etc., are good, but not enough. There is something indefinable and unique about each of us as human individuals. So we can't just use behavioral means of assessment or behavioral teaching and learning processes.

**Toy Activity**

By sharing with each other, we not only help ourselves to understand more deeply on an individual basis, but we also create a relational group.

The Writing Center had toys, such as "Builders, Builders". In the workshop, each person picked the containers. I asked them, "What do the containers have to do with IL?" The first volunteer followed up by stating, "The parts and the different concepts of the piece/s represented for the discipline-specific, e.g., a biologist emphasized the different parts and the different concepts, and the first volunteer, each person described what his/her piece was physically connected it and previous parts. At the conclusion of the large, complex, colorful "whole IL process. The exercise is about how individual yet collaborative L process is and how we bring the information and ourselves in a different order, the strategies are very different. This toy exercise helped us to discipline to help students understand their topics, their writing of tools and sources.

**AS RELATIONAL: Why this is better for or society's understanding of changing. We are becoming situation. The post-modern age and processes information and any of us look for and read to look at graphical representations like not even read accompanying visual representations like non-linear web pages. [E.g., social]
Postmodern IL is relational information literacy. We can be responsible.

The need to change our teaching.

Behavioral outcomes. There is too much leeway. We have to teach less. We have ample opportunity to solve or explain problems and problem solving processes.

The ALA's view of IL is very behavioral. IL conceived of in this way would have to define and make rules. For all human behavior. The solution is left-brained and sequential, quantitative, mechanical, dualistic.

We are becoming more global; we have entered the post-modern age. Generation Y perceives and processes information differently.

The meaning that can be given to information is relational. We can measure learning in terms of skills, and focuses on the qualities of an individual apart from discipline to help students build a representation of their topics, their writing or projects, or information tools and sources.

IL AS RELATIONAL: Why this makes sense; why this is better for our students.

Society's understanding of humanity and community is changing. We are becoming more global; we have entered the post-modern age. Generation Y perceives and processes information differently. One example: many of us look for and read text first. Our students tend to look at graphical representations first, and may not even read accompanying text. They prefer non-linear visual representations like mind or concept mapping to linear web pages. [E.g., see WEBBRAIN at http://www.webbrain.com/ and search for information literacy.] This is why we need to change our teaching.

Phenomenography is qualitative, hypertextual, fluid, quantum, postmodern. IL conceived of in this way is very relational. Previous educational theory and practice approaches to IL were behavioral, standards- and skills-based. When approached this way, IL is left-brained and sequential, quantitative, mechanical, dualistic.

The U.N. published guidelines on incorporating information skills into curricula in 1986! IL really took off in the U.S. in 1989, with an American Library Association report, but ALA's view of IL is very behavioral. IL is seen as quantifiable (asks how much has been learned), is portrayed in terms of skills, and focuses on the qualities of an individual apart from the environment. The ALA's Association of College & Research Libraries' "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" exemplifies my saying that "competencies beget competencies." It has five standards, or goals, twenty-two performance indicators (objectives), and eighty-seven outcomes. If we talk about using information in a socially responsible way, for example, we have to define what this means—one might define it as not plagiarizing. In a behavioral objective, this means that students will quote, footnote, and create bibliographies. Here's the example: our toys, such as "Builders, Benders and More." During the workshop, each person picked at least one piece out of the containers. I asked the participants, "What do these have to do with IL?" There were several volunteers. I followed up by stating, "These are parts without context. But, if I give you a framework—and that framework is your research process, and then I tell you that the toy you've just taken represents one part of your research process, how would you describe it?" Participants took a few minutes to write. Then volunteers addressed the importance of the shape, size, color, type, and what the piece/s represented for them. The answers were quite discipline-specific, e.g., a faculty psychology member stated that the piece represented a conversation. A biologist emphasized the importance of the moving parts and the different configurations possible. After the first volunteer, each person following not only described what his/her piece represented, but also physically connected it and verbally related it to the previous parts. At the conclusion of the exercise, we had a large, complex, colorful "sculpture" representing the whole IL process. The exercise gave participants an idea about how individual yet collaborative and dynamic the IL process is and how we build a relationship between the information and ourselves. If they had volunteered in a different order, the structure would have looked very different. This toy exercise could be used in any discipline to help students build a representation of their topics, their writing or projects, or information tools and sources.

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all agree on this larger standard and then we don't have to micromanage behavior and have one hundred rules or skills defined to meet this goal.

The view of IL as being relational took off in Australia with Christine Bruce's book, based on phenomenography, which focuses on deep understanding and a holistic approach to teaching and learning. Phenomenography concentrates on the changing relationships between people and their experiences and conceptions of the world. Bruce sees IL as not quantifiable (she asks what has been learned, not how much has been learned) and focuses on qualities of the individual in relation to the environment. For example, Australians emphasize the equality of human beings. Each person is important, so kindness and courtesy are important in the social and business environments. Americans define individual behaviors that are forbidden and subject to litigation.

Phenomenography is about providing a framework for specifics to fit into, and constantly moving back and forth between the parts and the whole—the trees and forest. It incorporates paradox. What IL is depends on context. We're meant to learn with others who are carrying out the practical applications. Learning is a very individual process, yet rooted in the disciplines, and cannot be separated from the real world.

**How This Impacts Us As Teachers**

Much of teaching has been left-brained. Phenomenography is right-brained, and about the whole person. Just as current educational thought values student-directed learning and knowledge construction rather than the "pouring" of knowledge into students' heads, now in higher education we understand librarians as a vital part of the educational team, from curriculum development to assessment. That makes perfect sense when viewed from the phenomenographical standpoint. We can't separate the finding, evaluation, and incorporation of information from the learning and knowledge creation process. Finding is a creative, nonlinear process. Evaluation is equivalent to critical thinking. Incorporation equals the knowledge creation/learning process itself. Sharing means teaching and thus learning more fully. Using info wisely requires the deliberate placing of oneself in the context of community values. It is relational, inseparable from context.

Even though Bruce's Australian approach really motivated us, our librarians embraced the idea. Judy Peacock, IL Coordinator of Technology, says that all of them are leading the IL charge, perhaps because there are fewer insticts for litigation in Australia and all have also all embraced the idea and are working hard to implement it.

Unquestionably there are opponents of the IL approach, even in the U.S. Are there really any similarities in the current IL practices or IL programs in the U.S.? Not really. There is just lack of understanding about how to apply the theoretical base. We need to combine both the relational and the quantitative in order to provide the whole picture in education.

By providing a framework for thinking about and using information, relational understanding, and behavioral and relational approaches to learning, we can provide new ways of understanding and teaching the practical aspects of teaching.

**References**


and then we don’t have one hundred rules or a goal.

IL took off in Bruce’s book, based on phenomenography on deep understanding and teaching and learning. It relates on the changing role and their experiences and IL. Bruce sees IL as not being learned, not how quality of human beings. IL is kindness and courtesy in different business environments. IL is behaviors that are forbidden.

IL providing a framework constantly moving back and forth the whole—the trees and the forest. What IL is depends on what you learn with others who are publications. Learning is a process that is rooted in the disciplines, the real world.

Teachers are not brained. Phenomenography is about the whole person. Just values student-directed instruction rather than the students’ heads, now in and librarians as a vital part of curriculum development and the real perspective when viewed from a holistic standpoint. We can’t learn, and incorporation of knowledge creation is a nonlinear process. Evaluation thinking. Incorporation and learning process itself, thus learning more fully, the deliberate placing of community values. It is relational, inseparable from context and environment. IL is rooted in the individual, flowering in the context of community—humans creating and sharing in a living, changing world.

Even though Bruce resides in Australia, is the Australian approach really more relational in practice? Have their librarians embraced this idea? Some certainly have. Judy Peacock, IL Coordinator at Queensland University of Technology, says that although the U.S. has been leading the IL charge, perhaps the Australians, simply because there are fewer institutions of higher education, have been able to move more quickly and more productively towards their desired IL outcomes. However, they have also all embraced the behavioral “Standards of IL” and are working hard to implement them.

Unquestionably there are librarians and researchers who are proponents of the relational approach in the U.S. Are there really any significant differences between the current IL practices or beliefs in Australia and the U.S.? Not really. There is just the problem of figuring out how to apply the theory in practice, and how to combine both the relational and behavioral.

By providing a framework for finding, evaluating, and using information, relating the differences between behavioral and relational approaches, we can discover new ways of understanding IL, and relate these to the practical aspects of teaching.

References


### Appendix 1

**Behavioral Approach**
- measurable
- definable
- quantifiable (how much has been learned)
  - quantity of knowledge
- skills-based
- individual apart from environment
- left-brained
- dualistic, fragmented
- standardized across all disciplines
- education-related applications
- sequential
- quantitative, mechanical, assessment-based
- transferability of skills
- knowing what to do
- teacher-focused
- lecture/demonstrate/practice
- emphasize skills
- competencies
- individual knowledge
- librarians as "masters" of research skills
- objective
- legalistic
- learning as an event

**Phenomenography/Relational Approach**
- not measurable
- describable
- qualifiable (what has been learned)
  - quality of understanding
- conceptual, cognitive
- individual in relation to the environment
- right-brained
- holistic
- contextual, rooted in disciplines
- practical, real-world applications
- hypertextual/hyperlinked/interconnected
- fluid, quantum, post-modern
- deep understanding necessary to extrapolate
- understanding key concepts
- learner-focused, learner-directed
- contemplate/discuss/solve problems
- emphasize meaning of activity
- deep understanding
- community-based knowledge creation
- shared ownership for teaching
- subjective
- shared values
- learning as mysterious process
- learning transformation
- interpret & understand relationships
Appendix 2

Relational Approach

- Understanding
- Need/interconnected disciplines
- Modern
- Necessary to extrapolate concepts
- Self-directed
- Solve problems
- Life of activity
- Knowledge creation
- Teaching
- Learning process
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