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State of the art and future challenges for information literacy research

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1. Strategic Issues: The national research environment

State of the Art: National research environments facilitate or raise barriers to information literacy research in various ways. In Australia to date, the majority of information literacy research has been undertaken through doctoral students (self-funded or on scholarship), unfunded or 'internally' funded projects; i.e. projects that have not been funded through nationally competitive schemes. Publication opportunities have been secured in national and international journals from a wide-range of disciplines.

Challenges: This history positions Australian information literacy research teams poorly in terms of future competitive funding. Up until 2011, funding mechanisms have not supported the transfer of funds to support research collaborations outside of Australia, thus limiting the building of international teams. Further, new policies, for example at QUT, around examination of doctoral theses suggests that prospective examiners holding multiple research papers or grants with members of the supervisory team are likely to be disqualified due to conflict of interest. This poses additional barriers to the important task of building collaborations.

Specific issues that arise in the preparation of applications revolve around representing the field to a wide, potentially multi-disciplinary audience of assessors. For example:

- Representing the significant social and economic contribution IL research can make to other fields and sectors;
- Describing the domain of research to avoid confusion (e.g. IL is not digital literacy or tool literacy); and,
- How do we represent information literacy to stakeholders from a wide range of disciplines?

2. What are the important research questions?

State of the art: Typically in Australia the character of information literacy or the information literacy experience has been a focus of attention in a wide range of environments and contexts, including the academic, workplace and community. There is also strong interest in the pedagogical implications of IL research, again across a range of contexts. Two key, and interrelated directions have emerged over the years one focussed on investigating variation in experience, the other on researching practice from a socio-cultural perspective.

Challenges: The response to what are the important research questions varies according to, for example stakeholder perspectives. Practitioners in the information field would have responses that may differ from government bodies, or community organisations. This is often evident when supporting the work of doctoral candidates who plan to focus on questions of significance to themselves, their broader professional or civic communities. These issues may not coincide, and therefore represent tensions within the research community which need to be creatively resolved. Similarly, researchers themselves have important issues which raise themselves as needing attention.

The whole question of the politics of information literacy research deserves attention in terms of independent research questions:

- What are the challenges in progressing the research agenda?
- What are the barriers to progressing a fruitful agenda?
- How do we describe information literacy and its importance to society in general; to policy makers; funding agencies; practitioners?
- What theoretical perspectives are useful for framing these conceptualizations?
- What are the social, economic or theoretical benefits of researching information literacy as perceived beyond this research community? For the individual, for the community? In socio-cultural terms? In economic terms? In educational terms?
- How does the IL community see itself and the variation within it?

- How do people outside interpret what is being said?
- Who are we disseminating our research to? How do we connect with practitioners, business, governments, and educators? How do we create discourses that are accessible?
- How do we understand information literacy in relation to the collective discourses through which it manifests and is mediated?

3. Which urgent empirical areas do we need to investigate?

State of the Art: Research Directions established through Information Literacy Forums, texts, PhD theses, and Centres of Information Literacy with statements of research direction (e.g. Sheffield, South Africa, University of Malaya,)

Challenges: Undertaking research outside educational and library contexts in order to understand information literacy as it emerges in a range of non-educational contexts and to then develop effective pedagogy which reflects real-world IL.

- Workplace- at formal and informal levels-, understanding the experience of information of information literacy at work. How information literacy is constituted in different workplace environments? How is information literacy practice constituted in the collective activities of work environments? Understanding how information literacy practices are understood and then reconciled in the production and performance of work.
- How does information literacy travel between and within contexts? What aspects of information literacy are shared between school and work, between school and university, between worksites? What approaches to facilitating information literacy support the application of previous experiences or practices in new context?
- What does information literacy look like? How is the character of information literacy constituted, experienced in contemporary society?
- What does information literacy pedagogy look like? What are the different forms that information literacy pedagogy might/ do already take? What are the benefits/limitations of these different approaches? Who is responsible for training for education? What are different possible models for educating professionals in relevant fields around the importance of information literacy education?
- How do we ensure that information literacy is understood fundamental to educational practice? How do we connect with pre-service teachers to ensure that their developing pedagogical practices reflect a sound understanding of information literacy rather than just information skills?
- What is the relationship between information literacy and information skills, information use, information practice, and information seeking?

4. How can we develop the theoretical awareness of the field?

State of the art –To date theoretical awareness has been developed from drawing on external fields of study (education, psychology, sociology, management, health) and methods that typically derive from such fields. In consequence, information literacy research has become truly an interdisciplinary research endeavour

Challenges

- How theoretically mature is the IL research field?
- What forms of theory are being drawn from? What forms of theory from other fields should be considered?
- To what extent is information theory being drawn upon? Is this important?
- How can information literacy research contribute theory to other fields?
- How can information literacy research contribute theory to the field of information research?
- How is theory being framed methodologically? What methods/techniques are being used?

- How can we progress the development of information literacy theory? What forms of theory are useful/ appropriate to bring to the field? What forms of theory from other fields should be considered?
- How do we use our research to describe the relevance and impact of the research area?
- What elements/aspects of the construct are still contestable-?
- What can we learn from different approaches to IL research?

4.1 Which methodological challenges do we face?

- How might different methodological approaches complement each other or otherwise interact?
- What are the different contributions that are brought by different methods to development and understanding of the field?
- How do different research practices/traditions shape conceptions of information literacy?

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