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Bibliographic 'straws in the wind' and the status of documentation

Summary

Several recently published book and journal issues suggest a rising level of interest of theories and frameworks for the information disciplines. These may indicate a newly established academic status for these disciplines, particularly if they export theories and concepts to other subject areas.

The information disciplines have always enjoyed, if that is the right term, an uneasy position, balanced between theory and practice. To some cynics (including not a few in the library/information professions), they have been seen as a practice-based skill set, masquerading as an academic subject. To the more evangelically inclined, they are a fundamental meta-discipline, underlying many others. For those who would view them as a valid academic subject, there has always been - as a perennial reproach - their status as a net importer of ideas, concepts and methods from a wide range of other subjects, from the social sciences to computer technology.

It seems to me that we now be witnessing a kind of paradigm shift in this situation. It may not be too imaginative to suggest that the beginning of the twenty-first century may come to be seen as the point at which the sciences of documentation and human recorded information gained a new status in their own right. As yet, this is only hinted at by a few bibliographic straws in the wind, but these are still worthy of notice.

Two new books summarise research dealing with the wider contexts of the concerns of information scientist. One deals with increasingly recognised the overlap of, and interrelations between, information seeking and information retrieval (Ingwersen and J-rvelin 2005). The second book deals with the still wider topic of human information behaviour in the round (Spink and Cole 2005). This is also to be the subject of a forthcoming special issue of *Journal of Documentation*, to be edited by Amanda Spink and Charles Cole.

This amounts to explicit recognition that those topics traditionally seen as central to the information disciplines - information retrieval, and the organisation of information - are embedded in wider contexts of information seeking and information behaviour. Concepts and findings from the wider context can enlighten studies of the more focused topics, and *vice versa*. Pedagogically, this has been recognised in the work of a EUCLID (European Association for Library and Information Teaching and Research) project, which has aimed at outlining a post-Bologna European library/information curriculum (Bawden, Vilar, Bates, Cordeiro, Steinerov« and Vakkari 2005; see also <http://www.db.dk/lis-eu>). This may form a productive, and genuinely two-way, link between the information sciences, and the many other subjects which have some interest in human information behaviour.

Another indicator is the publication of a monograph describing more than 70 theories of, and conceptual frameworks for understanding, information behaviour (Fisher, Erdelez and McKechnie 2005). While the cynic might argue that the existence of so many theories shows only that none of them are adequate, it is better to see this as evidence that the past few years have seen a concentration on theory-building and the generation of new perspectives and 'ways of seeing' for information behaviour.

The recent publication of special issues of both *Journal of Documentation* and *Library Trends* devoted to the philosophical underpinnings of the information sciences is another indicator of strong interest in the theoretical bases of the discipline.

Bibliographic straws in the wind ? Or genuine evidence of an emerging discipline with a body of theory and concepts of its own ? Perhaps we will know in 10 years. In the meantime, the most valuable indicator would be evidence of an adoption by other disciplines of theories and frameworks originating in the research and scholarship of documentation and library/information science. I suspect that, if the information disciplines are to gain the status that their academic

adherents, and more reflective practitioners, would wish, this needs to happen sooner rather than later

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References

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