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Being fluent and keeping looking

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Abstract. The complexities of the many concepts and models around information literacy are considered, and some personal views given as to how they may best be clarified, both theoretically and practically. A slightly adapted idea of the concept of information fluency can serve as a main general purpose for the promotion of information literacy, expressed as a more specific meta-model for the prevailing technological environment, and as still more specific components for a particular context. The focus of this relatively stable general formulation is on understanding, rather than skills or competences. It can incorporate the need for education, advice and counseling, as well as information provision, and with domain-specific literacies, as well as supporting personal information literacy.

Keywords. Information literacy models. Digital literacy. Information fluency. Domains.

1 Introduction

This paper considers some conceptual issues in understanding the literacies of information, in a sense building on some of my earlier thoughts on these topics [1, 2]. It is a personal viewpoint, rather than an empirically supported case. The background, as I see it, is an increasing interest in, and recognition of the importance of, information literacy in its various guises, but at the same time a increasing uncertainty as to what information literacy *is*, how its aspects fit together, and how theory and practice can best interact; for recent examples, see [3, 4, 5]. Appropriately, I hope, for a keynote presentation, I will for the most part pose questions, rather than answering them.

2 To rule them all?

We are all aware of the proliferation of concepts in this area: information literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, transliteracy and all the rest. There have from time to time been attempts to produce over-arching models or frameworks to encompass these, usually of ever-increasing scope and range. J.R.R Tolkien in *Lord of the Rings* [6] tells us that on the One Ring was written, in the language of Mordor, “One ring to rule them all”. These have sometimes seemed to add to, rather than reduce, confusion in the area, and in a quizzical look at such frameworks, William Martin [7] asked if we really needed “one literacy to rule them all”.

One simple answer would be to declare that we have enough conceptual clarity, and to cease looking for new literacies, and multi-literacies. But that is not likely to happen. Nor should it, as this proliferation of concepts implies that there is a genuinely complex and changing set of issues and contexts to be mapped.

So, it would be preferable try to bring some clarity to a confused picture, accepting that this will involve trying to evolve a helpful framework rather than to propound any ‘right answer’. To do so, I suggest that we may think of the concepts of the area at different levels of specificity and abstraction. We might take as

an analogy the idea, familiar in the business studies context, that we have a general ‘purpose’ or ‘mission’, and somewhat more specific ‘vision’ of how the purpose is accomplished, and the quite specific ‘objectives’ which make the vision realizable. Those more familiar with resource description prefer to think of the various levels of FRBR [8]. The point is that the ideas become at each stage becoming less abstract and general, and more concrete and specific. They would also change, and require updating, at different rates: the most general remaining largely static, the intermediate changing slowly with a changing environment, and the most specific changing rapidly according to immediate and local circumstances.

In terms of information literacy, the specific ‘objectives’ would be the local and detailed components of particular models of information literacy: pillars, competences, lenses, threshold concepts and so on. These would be expected to change quite rapidly with changing contexts, and to be customizable to particular environments, regions, technologies, etc.

The intermediate ‘vision’ would be an encompassing model or framework: well-known examples are Gilster’s digital literacy [9], Annemarie Lloyd’s meta-competence [10], and Mackey and Jacobsen’s metaliteracy [4]. These can be clearly seen to be adapted for the prevailing information environment and context of the time: digital literacy for the internet, meta-competence for the knowledge economy, metaliteracy for interactive social media, etc. Necessarily, they change as the technological environment develops; perhaps the next requirement will be to deal with immersive information environments and documents [11], and the new forms of information behaviour which they will bring [12], by developing the idea of ‘immersive literacy’.

The most general ‘purpose’ is still rather debatable, and increasingly widely debated. I tentatively suggest that ‘information fluency’ would be a helpful concept here, though in a rather different sense to that in which the term is generally understood. It was initially taken to mean “a conceptual understanding of, and ability to adapt to, changing information technologies” [13]. I feel this is rather too narrowly technology-focused to be useful today, and would prefer, following Dame Lynne Brindley, the former director of the British Library, in relating it more to issue of the broader information world. Regarded as “a conceptual understanding of, and ability to adapt to, changing information environments/ecologies/contexts” (the last word being very much a matter of personal preference), this has the promise of remaining stable and sensible over time. It also has the benefit of emphasising understanding, rather than skills or competencies, which seems appropriate for this highest level.

This brings, at least to my mind, some stability to our idea of the literacies of information: the information fluency idea gives a (relatively) permanent account of the basic nature of the topic, to be expressed for a particular information environment by a meta-model such as metaliteracy or Gilster’s digital literacy, this in turn to be instantiated in a way useful for practice by the more context-specific components.

But three important issues remain unaddressed by this idea.

3 Is information enough?

The original propounders of information literacy believed that the provision of good quality information was sufficient in itself, and this is still an attractive idea, particularly in the library/information disciplines and professions. However, numerous studies have shown that this is not the case: information provision on its own is insufficient, and may actually cause confusion. In addition to information provision, therefore, there may be a need for education, advice, counseling, and so on. Recent examples of studies illustrating this point relate to information provision for chronically sick people [14], and information on good nutrition for the general public [15].

How are we to fit these considerations into our ideas of information literacy? If we accept the idea of information fluency as the highest level, with understanding at its core, then they fit well, since they are, in all cases, additional mechanisms for enhancing understanding. At the lower level, whether it is sensible to include them will depend on the context.

This does raise in a very clear way the question of who is responsible for taking the lead in promoting the area, reflecting the question of whether librarians should take such a leading role as in the past; for a recent discussion, see [16]. It is unlikely that there is a single satisfactory answer to this question for all contexts. It is likely that the information disciplines will be the natural leaders at the more specific levels, where definitively information matters are dealt with, but it is not obviously clear that this is so at the broadest, fluency, level.

4 Disciplines and domains

The debate as to whether there can be such a thing as a generic information literacy, or whether each discipline or domain must have its own variant, has been on-going ever since the information literacy concept was originated. It is argued that information literacy can take on a different personality in different domains, with different concepts and relationships; see, for example, [10, 17, 18]. It seems to me that the evidence is clear that domain-specific literacies (which are not necessarily aligned with traditional disciplinary or demographic boundaries) are needed, although the general fluency idea is certainly applicable universally, as, for the most part at least, are the intermediate meta-models. The specific components level gives the opportunity for expression of domain-specific issues. This again raises the issue of who should take the lead in promotion of subject-specific information literacy; to my mind this reinforces the necessity for subject knowledge among library and information specialists working in such contexts.

5 Individual and social

Any consideration of information literacy encounters a paradox implicit in all human information behaviour; the tension between the individual and the social group [19]. Theoretically, a persuasive case can be made that information literacy is a socially constructed concept [20, 21, 22], while in practice information literacy promotion and training is generally planned for, and delivered to, groups. Yet we know that individual personal differences are significant in all information behaviour [23], and fundamental to the increasingly important topic of personal information management [24], for which information literacy, or fluency, is of evident importance. This may remind us of Christine Bruce's early suggestion that one of the characteristics of an information literate person is that they have a personal information style [25].

There are no simple answers here, but it worth noting that some form of explicitly personal information literacy is likely to be increasing needed. This in turn feeds into the understanding of one's personal information world implied by information fluency, as understood here.

6 Conclusions

I suggest that the idea of fluency, understood as "a conceptual understanding of, and ability to adapt to, changing information environments".

grounded in a meta-model appropriate to the information environment, able to be encapsulated in specific and concrete components, gives a way of making sense of the complexities of the literacies of information. It foregrounds understanding: of the information environment, and of one's own personal information style. It recognises that information provision must meld into education and advice, that domains (social and disciplinary) have a great influence, but that individual factors cannot be ignored. I do not think it very much matters whether it is the library profession, or others, who take the lead, as long as someone does. I do, however, think that the conceptual advancement of the area is an important component of library and information science as a discipline.

I do not suggest this viewpoint as a panacea, but I think it might provide a way of moving forward effectively.

Let us leave the last word to another of Tolkien's creations. Thorin Oakenshield remarks that "There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after" [26]. If we wish to improve the theory and practice of information literacy, we must never stop looking.

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