

INFORMATION LITERACY: OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIBRARIANS IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: This paper will begin by defining learning communities. I will then describe opportunities for instruction librarians to frame the conversations about information literacy that occur within the learning communities in their sphere of influence. To do so I will present a typology of “modest” and “maximal” attempts to frame these conversations. I will argue for the maximal approach, while acknowledging its challenges. These challenges center around loss aversion regarding established conceptions of what it means to be a librarian. This challenge is worth surmounting because the opportunity is worth it. We have before us the potential to redefine our profession and reshape the nature of knowledge.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS

A learning community is a group of people who band together to learn from each other about topics of mutual interest [1]. These can be formal communities, like the residence halls at many universities which sponsor learning activities about topics such as political science or philosophy. These can be informal, such as groups organized via MeetUp.com. And they can be virtual and online. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are one type of a virtual learning community, as Daphne Koller of Coursera has described at TED [2].

Librarians are the natural leaders of learning communities that focus on critical thinking and rigorous evaluation. An argument or point of view is only as good as its substantiating sources, and we know more about sources than anyone else. This includes an awareness that what counts as a “source” is evolving. We should bring this awareness into the conversations we frame about information literacy.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF SOURCES AND KNOWLEDGE: RAINIE AND BANKS

There are many signs that the nature of a source, and ergo the nature of knowledge, is changing. Lee Rainie, head of the Pew Internet & American Life Project, has chronicled this shift. Now that it is easy for individuals to produce their own content and post it online, established gatekeepers such as librarians have a different function than in the print-only era. Our essential roles today are curation, vetting, and organizing the voluminous body of web-based content; we are evolving from collectors of a finite set of resources into curators of the infinite Web.

In a talk at the 2011 Internet Librarian conference, Rainie cites the work of Shana Ratner to describe how the nature of learning and knowledge is changing [3]:

- Learners are now creating knowledge, not just receiving it
- Learners are actively manage their own learning
- Knowledge is becoming flatter and interspersed between fields of inquiry, rather than being organized hierarchically and in isolation from other fields
- **Knowledge is now subjective and provisional, not objective and certain** [bold mine]

This final point, about the provisional nature of knowledge, segues nicely to a discussion of a paper I published last year in *Communications in Information Literacy* (CIL) [4]. This paper offers my perspective about the philosophical stance that the new ACRL information literacy standards, set for release later this year, should embody.

The quote below, from that CIL paper, will frame my remaining remarks in this paper:

“[I]t is simply not true that vetted resources are *prima facie* superior to unvetted resources located via a Google search or a Twitter feed. An increasing number of scientific journals have retracted articles they have published in recent years, even though those articles successfully passed through the checkpoint of peer review (Zimmer, 2012). Journal editors like Drummond Rennie (1986) and Richard Smith (2006) have long warned about the conservatism and mystique surrounding the institution of peer review, which is susceptible to failings like any other human institution.

“Just as the established sources have their flaws, so do new sources like Wikipedia entries, blogs, and tweets. Here are some examples. Following the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, traditional news sources offered more credible information than did social networks (Gleick, 2013). Wikipedia entries have been sabotaged (Seelye, 2005). Google search results have been gamed (Segal, 2011).

“Born-digital sources have many weaknesses, but we cannot let this blind us to the imperfections of older types of information. **Our goal should be to instill within students the ability to critically and objectively examine any piece of information they encounter, wherever they encounter it.**” [bold mine]

LEADING “MODEST” OR “MAXIMAL” DISCUSSIONS ABOUT INFORMATION LITERACY

My suspicion is that most people would agree with the bolded statement just above. It is hard to disagree with the idea that students should objectively critique all information they come across. However, the proof is in the pudding. If we explicitly steer students toward established resources such as databases or peer-reviewed journals, and away from resources in the more informal Web, this would reaffirm the hierarchy of knowledge.

On the other hand, this may be what your users want. If a powerful faculty member on your campus insists that their students cite only from an established source, it is difficult to go against this grain. In such a case, I suggest providing the source the faculty member requests while also opening up a conversation with them about the strengths and weaknesses of various sources. Provide the resource AND initiate a conversation.

Such an experience with a faculty member could stimulate a larger effort regarding information literacy on your campus. I perceive two ways to frame conversations about information literacy and the strengths and weaknesses of various source types:

- Modest: In this model the librarian organizes a conversation about these issues with a user group. The users then define their perspective and priorities and the librarian develops services and resources accordingly. After organizing the conversation the librarian recedes into a support role.
- Maximal: The librarian organizes the conversation, actively participates in it, and is unafraid to disagree with powerful players on campus. Even if services and resources are slow to evolve, this conversation persists indefinitely. Over time, new service models and priorities emerge. The librarian never gets ahead of the users, but also never walks behind.

My preference, probably unsurprisingly, is for the Maximal approach. I recognize that this is a challenge, though, which I wish to address in the final section of this paper.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE MAXIMAL APPROACH

To understand these challenges, we need to take a brief detour into cognitive psychology. The cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky pioneered our understanding of the concept of “loss aversion” [5]. In general, people fear losing something they know and understand more than they are excited by gaining something new. This is true even if the new thing is indisputably better.

In the Maximal approach I described above, two things are at risk of being lost: a clear conception of the role of the librarian; and a stable understanding of what we mean by an authoritative source. Librarians are user-centered people with a strong desire to support a larger enterprise, and the core of our education is about how to organize and guide people to quality sources. The Maximal approach still responds to these drives; our goals have not changed. But the Maximal means are fundamentally different than how we tend to operate, which can be a scary proposition.

I think it worth taking the risk, and would be happy to partner with anyone interested in discussing how to do so. One hundred years from now the Web will be old news and new dogmas about

what counts as knowledge and a source will have emerged. Now is the time to plant our stake in the ground and guide this conversation.

Scary? Yes. Exhilarating? Absolutely.

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