Information literacy as a social practice: A threshold concept for academic librarians

Logan Rath

Abstract

Introduction. *This poster presents research from a dissertation study that was the second phase of a two-phase study. The first phase of the study found that viewing information literacy as a social practice was a threshold concept for academic instruction librarians in the United States. This study builds on that finding by examining how the threshold concept describes the experiences of currently practicing academic instruction librarians. This poster will show the original threshold concept, the revised threshold concept and describe how academic librarians taught from a social practice perspective.*

Methods. *Focus groups and semi structured diary entries were used to collect data from nine academic instruction librarians in the United States and Canada. Focus groups were held in September and December, 2021. Diary entries were collected weekly between the two sets of focus groups.*

Analysis*. Qualitative content analysis was performed using Atlas.ti version 22 and Excel.*

Results. *The original model was adjusted with the addition of supports that can help academic instruction librarians confront and avoid tensions that push them towards teaching skills out of context.*

Conclusion. *The adjusted model was decided to be an accurate representation of participants' experiences.*

*****Keywords:*** *academic libraries, focus groups, information literacy*

Research aims

Information literacy has been theorized as a social practice for almost 30 years (Hjørland & Albrechtsen, 1995). The field of literacy discussed this turn even earlier (Street, 1984). A social practice approach to information literacy recognizes how an information landscape is uniquely constructed based on the valued ways of knowing in that context (Lloyd, 2010). While these changes have been discussed and valued in the scholarly literature (Cox, 2012; Todd, 2017; Tuominen et al., 2005), practitioners continue to describe information literacy as skills-based (Doyle et al., 2019). This is not surprising given the multiple competing discourses in the professional literature of information literacy (Hicks & Lloyd, 2021). Current studies have not investigated practitioners' understanding of this shift or how this understanding affects information literacy instruction.

The first phase of this study found that a threshold concept exists for academic instruction librarians in the United States that can be stated that information literacy is a social practice (Rath, 2020). A threshold concept is one where after having crossed the threshold, the learner is unable to view the world in the same way (Meyer et al., 2010). When librarians come to see that information literacy is a social practice, they integrated practices into their teaching instead of focusing on skills. In this study, participants who had crossed the threshold rejected the idea that students arrive at university with a deficit. Instead, librarians favoured a funds of knowledge view of students (González et al., 2005). Additionally, when presented with the work of Lloyd, participants discussed how the concept of information landscapes helped to acknowledge the dynamics of information practice. This dissertation project built on this phase of the study to refine the theory using additional methods and a new group of participants. This study asked the following research question

1. How, if at all, does the threshold concept describe how librarians' experience teaching information literacy as a social practice?

Significance

The refinement of this threshold concept may help researchers further understand why librarians discuss IL as a set of skills when scholars have long since theorized IL a set of social practices. Understanding this gap may partially answer Todd's (2017) call to move us forward in a more sustainable manner through shared understandings about IL from both practitioners and researchers. Insights from this study may also help future researchers investigate gaps that exist between theory and practice in other areas of librarianship. Lastly, understanding this gap can help us to begin closing it, resulting in a more theory-based approach to information literacy instruction.

Methods, results, and discussion

The first phase of this study used interviews to develop the grounded theory, so additional methods were desired to collect data in order to refine the theory. The second phase used focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015) and semi-structured diary entries (Bartlett & Milligan, 2020) to collect data from nine academic instruction librarians in the United States of America and Canada between September and December 2021. Focus groups were chosen for their ability to produce many ideas from a group, especially when examining behaviour or motivation. Additionally, focus groups can generate ideas that are greater than any one participant's contribution through discussion and debate. Diaries were chosen for their ability to approximate participant observation and to allow participants to reflect on their teaching using the model.

The study contained two sets of focus groups, one at the start of the semester and one at the end of the semester. The first set of focus groups introduced the grounded theory to participants, checked for consensus around the threshold concept (Figure 1) and prepared participants to complete diary prompts to provide evidence in support of or to refute the grounded theory. Participants submitted weekly semi-structured diary entries that described their instruction session, how they taught skills, how they taught practices, the factors that influenced those choices, and asked if the theory was useful,

and if the theory needed adjustment. In total 36 entries were submitted from seven participants. Two participants left the study after the first set of focus groups.

As a result of the diary entries, the original grounded theory was adjusted (Figure 2) and the second set of focus groups explained and discussed this adjustment. Generalized findings were also presented. This study also confirmed many of the findings of previous studies (Aharony et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2018; Julien et al., 2018). Each focus group arrived at consensus that adjustments to the model were appropriate and adequately described their experiences.

Recommendations

Faculty who prepare future instruction librarians should introduce and discuss the facets of this model in their courses.

Conclusion

This focus group and diary study effectively refined the threshold concept as well as provided useful data regarding how librarians teach from a social practice approach while confronting tensions that drive librarians towards a skills-based approach. The model was adjusted to add supports that can help librarians remain teaching from a social practice standpoint. Limitations in this study include the lack of diversity among participants (all where White and mid-career at either Master's or doctoral Universities), and the low number of total participants. Future research needs to examine this threshold concept among diverse individuals, internationally, and in a wider range of institutions.

Figures

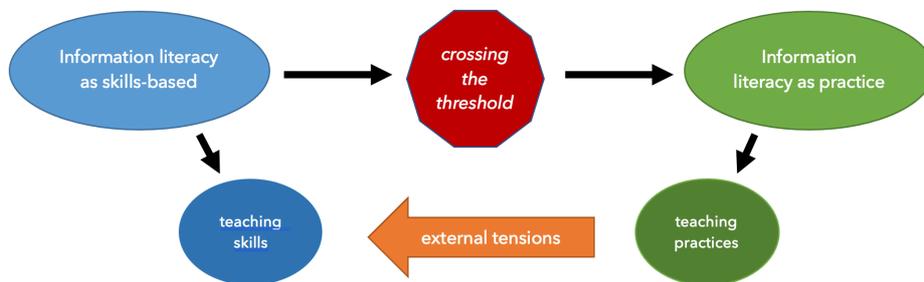## Threshold Concept: Information Literacy is a Social Practice

Figure 1: Original Model of the Threshold Concept

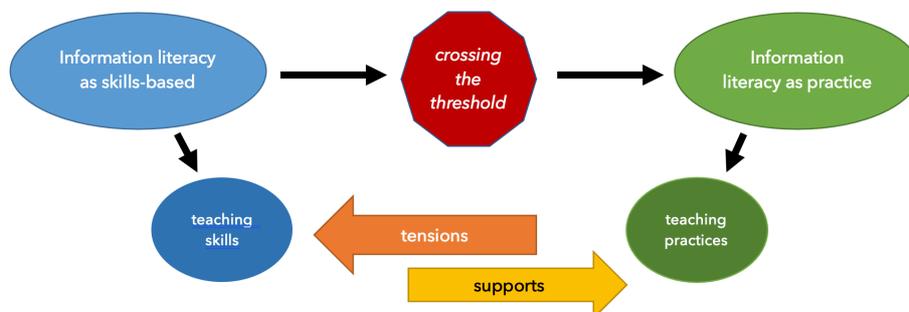## Threshold Concept: Information Literacy is a Social Practice

Figure 2: Final Model of the Threshold Concept

References

Aharony, N., Julien, H., & Nadel-Kritz, N. (2020). Survey of information literacy instructional practices in academic libraries. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, *52*(4), 964–971. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000619891762

Bartlett, R., & Milligan, C. (2020). *Diary method: Research methods*. Bloomsbury.

Cox, A. M. (2012). An exploration of the practice approach and its place in information science. *Journal of Information Science*, *38*(2), 176–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551511435881

Doyle, M., Foster, B., & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. (2019). Initial development of the perception of information literacy scale (PILS). *Communications in Information Literacy*, *13*(2). https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2019.13.2.5

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Routledge.

Gross, M., Latham, D., & Julien, H. (2018). What the framework means to me: Attitudes of academic librarians toward the ACRL framework for information literacy for higher education. *Library & Information Science Research*, *40*(3), 262–268. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2018.09.008

Hicks, A., & Lloyd, A. (2021). Deconstructing information literacy discourse: Peeling back the layers in higher education. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, *53*(4), 559–571. https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000620966027

Hjørland, B., & Albrechtsen, H. (1995). Toward a new horizon in information science: Domain-analysis. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, *46*(6), 400–425. https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4571(199507)46:6<400::AID-ASI2>3.0.CO;2-Y

Julien, H., Gross, M., & Latham, D. (2018). Survey of information literacy instructional practices in U.S. academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, *79*(2), 179–199. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.2.179

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Lloyd, A. (2010). *Information literacy landscapes: Information literacy in education, workplace and everyday contexts*. Chandos.

Meyer, J. H. F., Land, R., & Baillie, C. (Eds.). (2010). *Threshold concepts and transformational learning*. Sense.

Rath, L. (2020). Transforming understanding of information literacy: Sustainable futures through information landscapes. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *57*(1), e420.

Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Todd, R. J. (2017). Information literacy: Agendas for a sustainable future. *Journal of Information Literacy*, *11*(1), 120–136. https://doi.org/10.11645/11.1.2233

Tuominen, K., Savolainen, R., & Talja, S. (2005). Information literacy as a sociotechnical practice. *The Library Quarterly*, *75*(3), 329–345. https://doi.org/10.1086/497311