

Reading in information behaviour and information literacy frameworks

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the placement of the skill of reading in models devoted to information behaviour and information literacy process frameworks, with particular attention to children and young people.

Design/methodology/approach – The work is based on an analysis of pertinent literature that has been published over a period of some 80 years. The sources include monographs, essays in books, academic journal papers, conference proceedings and articles in professional periodicals.

Findings – Much thinking on information behaviour tends to assume that reading takes place either for leisure purposes or to support study, whilst information literacy (IL) frameworks typically either emphasise higher-order reading skills or present generic stages in which reading is subsumed within a category of more abstract action. Many IL models implicitly assume that the individual has already mastered the fundamentals of reading.

Research limitations/implications – Although extensive, the author’s literature review is by no means exhaustive. It does not refer to all models of either information behaviour or information literacy.

Practical implications – Information professionals need to acknowledge the true variety of motivations that prompt young people to read, and those responsible for information literacy instruction must determine how far they view their role as providing teaching in basic reading skills.

Originality/value – The paper is unusual in examining reading from two quite different perspectives - those of information behaviour and information literacy - and, despite its academic orientation, concludes with a range of suggestions intended to be of use to practising librarians.

Keywords Information literacy, Reading, Children, Young people, Information needs, Information behaviour

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, a paper written by [Dervin \(1976\)](#), who is today regarded as one of the great gurus in the fields of communications and information science, appeared in the *Journal of Broadcasting*. An impression of its impact can be gauged from the fact that in April 2017 a search of the Web undertaken via *Google Scholar* revealed that it had been cited over 120 times and, some 40 years after the article’s publication, [Case and Given \(2016\)](#) chose to conclude the fourth edition of their substantial monograph on information behaviour by drawing heavily on Dervin’s analysis. Essentially, her work discussed ten questionable assumptions which, she felt, had hindered understanding of people’s information needs. The purpose of this paper is to highlight two other widely maintained arguments pertaining to information and users that are of equally dubious value. Drawn from the closely related areas of information behaviour and information literacy (IL), they effectively misrepresent why and how many young people read non-fiction.

A widespread oversimplification

Over the past 25 years, especially, there has been a tendency to conceptualise dichotomously the motivations prompting youngsters to read – they do so, we are often told, either to support their studies or for leisure purposes. Scant attention is frequently given to other factors, such as the need to respond to spontaneous life problems or situations that naturally arise at certain stages in a young person’s life. As is the case in a study context, reading here plays what [Mann \(1971, p. 9\)](#) terms a “utilitarian” or “extrinsic” role – the process is undertaken to achieve a higher-level purpose. In Britain, some of the blame for the prevalence of the binary stance must be laid at the door of the Government and, in particular, the [Department of National Heritage \(1995, p. 5\)](#), henceforth referred to here as the DNH. Separating the scenarios that stimulate reading into those resulting in needs and those leading to wants, the DNH claims that the former is “largely dictated by the formal education system”, whereas the latter emerge from “self-interest, the desire for informal education and information, [and] the search for enjoyment”. [Mann’s \(1971, p. 9\)](#) “sociological model” of reading is basically similar, in that it, too, separates very specifically reading stemming from obligations with that which is pleasure-oriented, although here it is “work” and “leisure” that Mann presents as opposite poles of a continuum. Still, even before the post-War age, there were in existence schools of thought that contrast sharply with the clear lines of demarcation

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proposed by the DNH. Waples *et al.* (1940, p. 18) for example, draw attention to the *overlapping* attributes of education and recreation. They write, “Any genuine education is charged with recreational elements, and vice versa”. The blurring of the distinction has been underlined in more recent decades by the development of the concept “serious leisure”, whose nature, Hartel (2006, p. 313) explains, “is highly informational and involves knowledge acquisition”.

Admittedly, the importance of reading providing a tool for dealing with real-life problems is not especially significant in relation to young children, since, as Farrell (1974, p. 143) recognises, they are “almost totally dependent on adults for the satisfaction of their needs”. Their limited skills and levels of understanding certainly render them poorly equipped to exploit material that is designed to be read. Older youngsters, who exercise a greater degree of independence and have better developed abilities, may be expected to read more extensively and for a wider range of purposes. Yet, even some of the research into adults gives little consideration to the problem-solving motivation behind reading. In identifying shortcomings in the existing knowledge base and thereby introducing her own project scrutinising the reading habits of undergraduates attending one of Britain’s leading universities, Keller (2012, p. 1) defines “reading purposes” merely as “study” and “leisure”. She later analyses the data she herself has collected, again according to a “study-related reading”/ “leisure reading” breakdown (p. 8). At both points, the possibility that reading may be undertaken for reasons outside these categories appears to go entirely neglected.

From reading motivations to information needs

Moving beyond the territory of reading specifically, a similar dichotomous perspective has now gained a foothold in other areas of academic thought, notably the wider realm of information behaviour. Taking a stance which echoes very strongly that of the DNH, Large *et al.* (2008) conclude, after reviewing the pertinent literature, that children’s information needs “can broadly be divided into two categories: those relating to education and those relating to their individual leisure interests” (p. 124). While essentially true of the situation from the youngster’s perspective, from a more objective standpoint the contention would seem to ignore a key dimension addressed by Kuhlthau (1988). She draws on developmental psychology to show how certain needs for information arise at particular stages within the lives of children and young people. Fourie and Kruger (1995), too, attach considerable importance to how the information needs of school pupils are developmentally rooted.

In addition, since various researchers have, over a period of more than 40 years, presented typologies of information needs that emphasise the diversity of situations prompting young people to seek information, the perpetuation of simple, binary divisions is surprising. As long ago as the mid-1970s, Minudri (1974, p. 158) defined five categories of young people’s needs. Those associated with “school and curriculum” and “recreation” correspond closely to the DNH’s divisions of needs and wants, respectively. Although Minudri herself maintains that they are separate, a case can be made that her “accomplishment skills and information needs” lie within “recreation” but the positions of “personal development

needs” and “vocational and career information needs” are rather harder to frame in the DNH’s terms (p. 159). More recently, the information need typologies of Walter (1994), Latrobe and Havener (1997), Shenton and Dixon (2003) and Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2006) also include categories that defy neat pigeon-holing into “school-related” or “recreational” groupings. The same is true of many of the young adult information needs reported by Silvio (2006), especially those that pertain to health, educational opportunities and careers and political matters.

Reading as an information-seeking strategy

It would be grossly inaccurate, of course, to argue that reading constitutes the sole method of acquiring knowledge used even by adults skilled in literacy. Gorman (1998) posits that learning takes place in three ways, namely, by experiencing life, via teaching from others and through interactions with recorded knowledge, and Eisenberg *et al.* (2004, p. 161) remind us that engagement with information may involve “viewing” and “listening”, as well as reading. Elsewhere, Eisenberg and Berkowitz (2003, p. 35) add “touching” to this list of ways of engaging with information. The research of Poston-Anderson and Edwards (1993) would suggest that many adolescents are not inclined to consult the collections available to them in libraries when looking to address their “life concerns”. It is thus entirely possible that at least some of the needs for information that Minudri (1974) and later writers have highlighted are satisfied by means in which the reading of libraries’ traditional paper materials does not feature at all, particularly as approaches to other people, especially, offer considerable benefits. Not only is the convenience that is afforded attractive; the strategy also enables the inquirer to clarify the nature of their need through a question-and-answer dialogue in the manner described by Allen (1996), thereby allowing a genuine interactivity that is missing when paper sources are read.

Emphasis on higher-order reading skills

While the first problem explored in this paper was that much work on information behaviour effectively oversimplifies the purposes attributed to reading by labelling people’s motivations in this regard as either “recreational” or “study-related”, the second problem subjected to investigation is that many IL models adopt a stance which, in real-world situations, is often too optimistic and, at best, aspirational.

The role of reading as a means of accessing information is a recurrent theme in many of the major models of IL. For the most part, though, their orientation tends to imply that IL teaching should concentrate on fostering specifically information-oriented reading skills. In this context, the PLUS (Purpose–Location–Use–Self-evaluation) model of Herring (1996, p. 18) points to the value of skimming and scanning “information resources to find relevant information or ideas”. In a seminal work, which laid the foundations of principles that would underpin information skills teaching programmes for the next two decades in the UK, Marland (1981, p. 33) highlights the same territory – “scanning for facts [and] skimming for information and meaning”. It is not difficult to identify the origin of such preoccupations with higher-order reading skills. In the early days of IL, when work in this area was largely

restricted to “bibliographic instruction” or “library user education”, there was often a clear overlap in the foremost concerns of school librarians and the territory of “study skills” textbooks. Such duplication predominated in an era when IL had not developed sufficiently to enjoy the kind of identity that is bestowed upon it today. In considering “the science of library and book skills”, Coles *et al.* (1982) also refer to scanning and skimming when reading, and both they and Marland (1981) highlight the importance of the surveying, questioning, recalling and reviewing skills characteristic of the SQ3R approach presented by Freeman (1982) in his study skills course. Chapter 3 of Freeman’s instructional guide is, in fact, entirely devoted to reading.

Although, as Herring (1996) recognises, an emphasis on reading is a feature of the EXIT (Extending Interactions with Texts) model of Wray and Lewis (1995), few IL frameworks devote any real attention to the basics of reading. Yet, teachers who are experienced in working with low ability pupils will have frequently encountered situations, even when interacting with teenagers, where a learner’s real needs are much more rudimentary – a certain child may be still to acquire competent abilities in such elementary areas as decoding words and understanding their meaning. The teaching of higher-order reading skills at this point would seem akin to training someone to run before they can walk. Tibbitts (1992, p. 14) writes of the importance of the links between “reading strategies” and particular “reading purposes” on the part of the individual, and goes on to indicate how someone who is armed with the necessary skills will select the strategy that is most appropriate in any given circumstances. This situation is comparable to that outlined by Marland (1981), in relation to the IL stage in which the person presents the findings of their investigative efforts. Marland stresses that learners must appreciate the circumstances when different types of writing should be used, and make a suitable choice when called upon to present their work. Specifically, he mentions descriptions, illustrations/applications, discussions, debates, analyses/interpretations, arguments and comparisons/contrasts. For children who lack a sound basis in the essentials of literacy, such perspectives are hardly realistic. If school librarians accept the argument that reading is pre-eminent as the foremost information skill (Shenton, 2011), they may well reason that even within their IL remit their first priority lies in simply helping the child to read more effectively. Gorman (1998, p. 147) notes with some irony that, despite the modern emphasis on the development of user-friendly electronic interfaces that involve “the minimum of words and typing”, the works to which the searcher is often ultimately directed are texts, which themselves make considerable demands on the individual’s reading ability. The mismatch between the characteristics of the system interface and the actual information sources is, of course, most evident in relation to library catalogues and the books with which they are concerned.

The librarian as a wider literacy instructor?

The question of how far the librarian should go in teaching the mechanics of reading and, in particular, using the collection for this purpose, is a difficult one and no doubt many information specialists will hold differing views on the matter. Some will see

their role extending beyond IL’s traditional territories and into that of being an all-round educator. This kind of attitude underpins the stance put forward by López and Ballan (2016), who write that “IL has the potential to become an umbrella term that could encompass spelling and grammar, [and] reading academic literature effectively” (p. 45). Others, meanwhile, may be reluctant to venture too far into the realms of the traditional literacies of reading and writing if they are working in a school environment and these areas are deemed the preserve of specialist teachers. One way around this barrier is for the librarian to devise an approach in which the skills are taught from a different angle or perspective.

It is perhaps appropriate to equate the positioning of reading within IL to the placement of skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving. Various IL models indicate the importance of these strands. Indeed, in an influential IL report written in the USA some 25 years ago, Doyle (1992, p. 13) recognised the need for teachers to develop in their pupils critical thinking and problem-solving skills within “a resource-based learning approach in their classrooms”. Time management forms another key transferable skill that is integral to IL. In each case, critical thinking, problem-solving and time management are, like reading, taught not for their own sake but in a certain context and for a higher purpose. In short, they may be viewed as mere components – admittedly vital ones – in an overall process which forms the real focus of the IL specialist’s interest. Problem-solving skills are necessary if intended information-seeking action has to be modified in the face of obstacles; critical thinking must be demonstrated when evaluating sources for their accuracy, suitability and authority and when distinguishing between different – yet related – arguments; effective time management is required if the investigation is to proceed on time and the final deadline is to be met. Few would argue, however, that problem-solving, critical thinking or time management constitutes the essential territory of IL. Reading may be viewed in a similar way. IL is not “about” reading *per se*; reading is, though, fundamental to the wider processes involved and to the outcomes that IL helps to deliver.

“Hidden” reading

Reading is not mentioned specifically – or even alluded to – in some IL models and its role may be no more than assumed or implied in the individual stages, which are conceptualised in a more generic or abstract manner. The Primary Information Literacy Process Model (2018), for example, consists of four elements, namely, get ready, dig, discover and share. We may infer that reading is most associated with digging and discovering, but the model itself gives no direct indications and any reading that takes place simply facilitates a higher-level purpose.

Elsewhere, whilst the labels applied to the individual stages may not make reference to reading by name, the verbal explanation offered by the creator may be more explicit. The pathways to knowledge model for example, consists of six steps – appreciation, presearch, search, interpretation, communication and evaluation – and the authors note that “clarity” is brought to the first and the final phases “only through a reading of the extended text” (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2002). Similarly, in elucidating her BAT

(Beginning–Acting–Telling) model, [Nesset \(2015\)](#) isolates reading and construction as the two main concepts associated with the first stage. In other models, although reading is not mentioned specifically in any of the descriptions of the individual elements, it is clear from the author’s words that the skill is involved. In addressing the “learning skills” of planning, locating/gathering, selecting/appraising, organising/recording, communicating/realising and evaluating, the UK’s [Library Association \(1991, p. 4\)](#) affirms the importance of understanding alphabetical order and the “use” of indices, reference sources and information technologies. Yet, it is only when the document draws directly from the National Curriculum to assemble a “sequential programme of learning skills” that reading is mentioned by name (in Appendices 1–6 of the publication). The creators’ explanations of the phases within models such as ILPO (or Information Literacy Planning Overview) would seem to take for granted that the individual has already acquired a basic level of reading competency ([Ryan and Capra, 2001](#)).

Conclusions and implications

If we are to understand the true motivations of young people when they read and if we are to appreciate the real worth of the skill, it is necessary to take a broader perspective on the purposes that drive young people to take this action than much of the writing on information behaviour has hitherto acknowledged. When teachers and information professionals like librarians understand reading solely in terms of its function in educational and leisure contexts, there is the danger that this outlook is transferred to the youngsters with whom they work and they, too, fail to see the other applications of reading as part of a bigger picture. Few educators would dispute the need to highlight the usefulness of IL in as great a range of respects as possible when trying to “sell” it to students. [Jackson \(2005\)](#) recommends impressing on learners IL’s pivotal role in achieving academic success, and practitioners may be even more persuasive if they widen their demonstrations of its relevance. With a Canadian colleague, the present author has written previously of the appeal of associating IL with the pursuit of information in support of personal interests ([Shenton and Fitzgibbons, 2010](#)). A similar multi-faceted strategy can be advanced when promoting reading. The more bases librarians and teachers are able to cover in their arguments, the more likely are students to recognise the value of reading to them personally. Beyond the day-to-day interactions between educators and learners, there is a risk that scholars who think of the motivations to read exclusively in terms of those that are either academic or recreation-driven adopt a restricted research agenda when conceiving studies devoted to reading.

Yet, the priority that IL teachers will give to developing in practical ways the basic skills associated with reading will be determined by various factors, notably what exactly they believe IL involves and perhaps even which particular IL model they follow. At the heart of the matter is the question, if young people struggle with reading, does the librarian feel that this constitutes an IL problem? There are, nevertheless, other equally important factors pertaining to the individual; if they are working in a school environment, they must be clear as to what they perceive their role in the institution to be and how

they understand the way that their IL remit dovetails with their other responsibilities. The attitudes that the librarian forms on these matters will, no doubt, be shaped by a multiplicity of issues including their personal inclinations and the circumstances in which they operate.

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