An Inquiry Perspective on Information Literacy

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Abstract

How might ideas from pragmatism lead us to reconsider information literacy? Following an introduction to pragmatism, community inquiry, and modes of reading, this presentation considers three examples: (1) a study of digital literacy in Irish primary schools, (2) an activity in which youth investigate community information spaces, and (3) problems with the standard model of information access.
Pragmatism
Pragmatism maxim

“Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then the whole of our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” --Charles Sanders Peirce
Doubt => inquiry

“Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state. ... The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle Inquiry.” --Peirce
Inquiry

“is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.” --Dewey
"The principle of continuity is the idea of fallibilism objectified. For fallibilism is the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy. Now the doctrine of continuity is that all things so swim in continua." --Peirce
Spiral path of inquiry

• asking questions

• investigating solutions

• creating meaning

• discussing discoveries and experiences, and

• reflecting on new-found knowledge in order to ask new questions
Inquiry cycle

1. Ask
2. Investigate
3. Discuss
4. Create
5. Reflect
The Four P’s of Pragmatism

• Practical dimensions of all inquiry

• Pluralistic nature of the phenomena studied and the tools that are used to study those phenomena

• Participatory role of many individuals with different perspectives in the necessarily interpersonal process of inquiry

• Provisional and flexible character of explanation
“what do we mean by the real? It is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves...The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge.” --Charles Sanders Peirce
Community of inquiry

“knowledge is a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned. Faculties of effectual observation, reflection and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent powers.” --John Dewey
Consciousness is not something that happens within us. It is something we do or make. Better: it is something we achieve. Consciousness is more like dancing than it is like digestion. -- *Out of Our Heads*, Alva Noë, 2009

“The human skin: Philosophy’s last line of defense,”
Arthur Bentley, 1954
Action & inquiry

- Hans Joas: creativity of action
- Manuel Zacklad: communities of action
- Richard Sennett: making is thinking
Community inquiry

- Derives from the connection of learning and life

- *Community* emphasizes support for collaborative activity and for creating knowledge that is connected to people’s values, history, and lived experiences

- *Inquiry* points to support for open-ended participatory engagement

- *Community inquiry* is thus a learning process that brings theory and action together in an experimental and critical manner
Def: Community inquiry

= inquiry conducted of, for, and by communities as social organisms. The inquiry is of the community because it is embedded in community situations, resources, and needs; it is for the community because it seeks to solve community problems (indeterminate situations); it is by the community, because it is enacted by community members with strong ties.
Consequences: Education

• of => learning connected to life; inquiry in relation to lived experience

• by => participatory nature of all inquiry; expanding ties & community

• for => understanding the relationship between knowledge and the ends to which it is applied; finding answers to real questions in the world around us; social and moral responsibility
Consequences: Information science

- framework for understanding distributed knowledge work
- Peirce’s theory of consequences; uncertainty is based on use
- consider usefulness, not truth --Wolfgang Lenski, Michael Richter
- emphasis on changing nature of knowledge and knowers (cf: Knowing and the Known, Dewey & Bentley, 1949)
Expanding ties & community
Democracy

...is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. --John Dewey, 1927, The Public and Its Problems
Modes of reading

• exegetical: the text is definitive and the reader need only study it thoroughly to divine its true value

• dogmatic: assume the superiority of print media, and look for confirming evidence in the web or its typical uses

• agnostic: technical stance toward web quality

--Walter Kaufmann (1977), "The Art of Reading"
Dialectical reading

- Socratic, "harks back to Socrates' dissatisfaction with the unexamined life"

- dialogical, a "deliberate exposure to alternatives"

- historical-philosophical, attempting to understand the work in its larger contexts
How might ideas from pragmatism lead us to reconsider information literacy?
Information literacy in the Inquiry Cycle
Ask

• answers may be "out there," but if we search inappropriately we get useless data back

• a challenging problem may make it difficult to formulate a precise request (e.g., Whitman at U Texas)
Investigate

- information can be understood only as part of a process of inquiry, but the process is not specified in the search request

- information is often in the world, in practices, objects, physical spaces, bodies,...
Create

- the inquirer is making knowledge, not simply receiving it

- “Not just occasionally but always the meaning of a text goes beyond its author” -- *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1991, p. 296
Discuss

- The inquirer is not alone

- “knowledge...depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned” -- *The public and Its Problems*, John Dewey, 1927, p. 158
Reflect

• information needs to be “read” in a dialectical mode

• the true value of information lies in the way it can open up our questions

• the completeness and correctness of the answer is less important than its usefulness (consequences) for the inquiry process
Information needs, seeking, and use
Reference services

- The librarians can help you make effective use of the Library's resources by advising you on the use of the catalogue and website and suggesting appropriate databases for your subject area. (Murdoch Library, Australia)

- The Slavic Reference Service handles bibliographic and reference questions in the humanities and social sciences from individuals and libraries. Over 65% of the titles requested have been found to be already in our library. (U. of Illinois)

- Ask Scotland is an online information service provided by Scotland’s public libraries that lets you get real answers from real people.
Information retrieval (IR)

the science of searching for documents, for information within documents, and for metadata about documents, as well as that of searching relational databases and the World Wide Web
What is a pond?

a body of water...

- either natural or man-made, that is usually smaller than a lake
- up to 8 hectares in surface area
- which is between 1 m² and 20,000 m² in area, which holds water for four months of the year or more
- shallow enough for sunlight to reach the bottom, permitting the growth of rooted plants at its deepest point
- smaller than one would require a boat to cross
- which a human can walk across without being submerged
A pond is

- a small lake, a big pool, a water body in a wetland

- a lake where the deep aphotic zone is missing

- a body of water with a maximum depth of no more than 8 m, offering water plants the potential to colonise almost the entire area of the pond

- different from a lake
In origin, “pond” is a variant form of the word “pound”, meaning a confining enclosure (Svenska: “damm”)

In the US, a pond is usually a natural body of water, not human-made

A pond in New England is a lake in Southern U.S.
Purposes

- Environmental sustainability
- Fishing
- Vacation stay
- Ecological study
- Orienteering
- Canoeing
Standard v inquiry models

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Discussion

• Other examples of information seeking not addressing the actual inquiry?

• Approaches to contextualize information needs, seeking, and use?

• Other ways that the inquiry cycle perspective should cause us to think of information literacy and learning differently?
Sources


- Casey, Leo; Bruce, Bertram C.; Martin, Allan; Reynolds, Abigail; Shiel, Gerry; Coffey, Laura; Brown, Clifford; & Hallissy, Michael (2009, March). Digital literacy: New approaches to participation and inquiry learning to foster literacy skills among primary school children. Dublin, Ireland: Centre for Research and Innovation in Learning and Teaching, National College of Ireland. http://hdl.handle.net/2142/9765


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