Bringing Librarianship Back Home: Information Literacy as a Return to Method

Kimberly A. Jones
University at Buffalo, kjones5@buffalo.edu

Communications in
INFORMATION LITERACY

Bringing Librarianship Home: Information Literacy as a Return to Method [Invited Student Editorial]

Kimberly A. Jones
University at Buffalo

The operation, Freud suggests, is not the cure; it is only the prelude to the cure.
Adam Phillips,
On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored

A specter is haunting the world of librarianship—the concept of information. What is it? What do we do with it? This concept has generated pages of literature that have left us no closer to secure answers, wondering, "Where do we find ourselves?" Ralph Emerson asks this same haunting question in the opening lines of his essay "Experience." His first response is that we find ourselves on a stairwell, not sure if we are moving up or down or even how we got there. We are in a moment where we don't know what comes next, only that the grounds upon which we have built our empires have shifted and left us floundering.

We are preoccupied with information,

professionally and philosophically. Librarians' desire to work with information, to be fluent in it, has turned something that was once a verb—to inform—into an object. This obsession tends toward the *finding and possessing the object*. In focusing on the object, librarianship has lost its methodology, its senses of self, its approach. We are forced to ask repeatedly: "where do we find ourselves?"

This question is not one of location (you will not ask the gas station attendant for directions) but of movement, of a mindset. This question seeks a moment where we do not have an epiphany so much as a brief recognition of something lacking, something not outside ourselves but in ourselves, between our selves. According to literary theory, this nauseous feeling of lack and vagueness is a part of our postmodern condition. It is called "the crisis of identity" and names the philosophical move

14

from a singular identity to a multiple one, comprised of many different elements. Defining one's self in relation to the world becomes a paramount concern in order to assert agency. Historically, librarianship's agency has been its ability to preserve materials. But librarianship too has moved into a postmodern era—the era of information—and has lost its course. How can librarians and librarianship re-define themselves? And what do we do with this thing called information?

But library and information science (LIS) has also attempted to recover what is lost through a movement called information literacy. Information literacy (IL) is a *philosophy* entirely focused on method, not on objects. It is not an epistemological method, which seeks in knowing the world, but in creating the conditions in which a user (defined here as anyone using a library to access its repositories of knowledges) and texts can interact. It is not a cure to the problem of reification of information, but an attempt to re-focus and re-write LIS's priorities. IL is an approach interested in something like phenomenology, where information literacy teaches instructors to participate in a "process of letting things manifest themselves", how to read that process and their selves in relationship to it.

Philosopher Ronald Day has written about the curious position of LIS in the modern era of information. In his paper "LIS, Method and Postmodern Science" he discusses the problem of LIS creating an object and attempting to use that object to define its methodology. Part of the problem is, he reasons, that we are relying on classical notions of method. Method, for the ancient Greeks, is a "specification of steps . . . [and] a journey [that] is chosen according to an end seen in advance of the method. Such foreknowledge requires that the object that we are journeying toward be in some way clear and distinct, or to put it another way, 'objective'" (Day, 1996, p. 319). Method here relies on a clear vision of outcomes and must not be subjective—the outcomes must be impartial and lack agency, much like an object. In order to have this method, we must first have

an object in mind for us to seek out.

Method characterizes modern science, according to theorist Jean-François Lyotard. The technological revolution has impacted our global economies and production of knowledge (Lyotard, 2002, p.185). How we will respond and use produced knowledges will determine what type of scientific discourse in which we participate. Day uses Lyotard's argument to claim that librarianship wishes to become involved in the scientific discourse as a whole and not align itself with any one particular discursive identity and practices (Day, 1996, p. 320-321). This argument becomes a catch-22: to have a method means being a science and being a science requires a method. Before LIS can even begin to claim it is a part of this discourse, it must have an object to focus on, to evacuate.

But information does not lend itself well to becoming an object. It is too fluid and can exist in too many contexts. Nonetheless, LIS has worked hard at reifying and commodifying information. The discourse around the term information has expanded within the last century as communicating facts has become a central part of service and knowledge based economies: "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production" (Lyotard, 2002, p. 187). Information, facts and knowledge became interchangeable terms, all pointing to something, an object, that can be bought and sold, like a purse or a book.[1] As libraries seek to move into a more virtual, non-physical realm, it has institutionalized the thing which it sought to preserve. Information becomes the library and the librarian. With the rise of technology, libraries have began to serve as a conduit between the user and the text, much in the same fashion that a retailer serves as a meeting point between the consumer and the consumed.

Day claims in *The Modern Invention of Information* that in reifying information, LIS has moved to a more mathematical reading of itself. Information in this version becomes "a unit . . . a probabilistic calculation between what

can be sent and what is sent" (Day, 2001, p.42). In short, not only has information become something we desire to possess—a signified—it has also become the signifier. That is, not only is "information" a term itself but it is also what it is pointing to. We have affixed and frozen the term "information" so it cannot move like a free floating term but instead must describe the thing and be the thing itself. Think of our use of "information" like money—it points to an idea of wealth and it is the wealth itself.

In reifying information, what LIS has done is transform "information" from a word with multiple meanings to one with a singular definition. It has taken a word that was a derivative of a verb and made it more than an adjective or an adverb. It points to something and is the thing that it points to. Consequently, information can only be used in certain, specialized contexts and only to mean certain things.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argues in his *Philosophical Investigations* that meaning is found in use, not in ostensive definition, not in labels. If information is affixed to something particular, then it cannot be fluid. It must carry around a meaning the way that I carry a purse. Under IL auspices', information falls under Wittgenstein's formulation. Information isn't tied to any one thing because the *form* of the information, the nature of the information, can change; it can be found in many different disciplines as a vaunted item which each user seeks and will find in different sections of the library. Its definition is changed by each speaker's use. Information, in LIS's new world, means, and can only mean, fact, a guarantor of knowledge and truth. It is denied flexibility and is completely objectified.

The problem with reifying information is that it in turn freezes LIS into a structured form without fluidity. In turning its method into an object, LIS is no longer capable of reading itself and its relationship to the world. It has lost the ability to read. It has, as Wittgenstein argues, taken the form: "'I don't know my way about'" (Wittgenstein, 1958, §123). LIS, once a

theory, has removed itself from any philosophical or theoretical knowledge or bases. It has tried to mold itself into a science seeking an object. It has situated itself as technology and began to argue for itself as a science; after all, it does have an object to purse, doesn't it? As a result, in its argument for legitimacy, LIS has turned to the conduit theory and has begun to read itself as a conduit between user and "information." Like a tunnel through which a traveler must pass to get through mountains. LIS has infected itself philosophically. Is there a cure available for this field? How to bring together user and text without further compromising librarianship?

Information literacy has arisen as a response to the problems created by disabling LIS's motivating methodology. IL has stepped in to reclaim the method inherent in library science and as a result is the therapeutic for the reification of information. IL works to free information from its ostensive definition—to call the word home—and to create conditions where the user becomes the subject, rather than an end point as figured in the conduit theory. It is difficult to define the user's contexts, so in order to make these conditions viable and adaptable, IL works to recreate the conditions in which information can be found by turning to the user's thought processes.

IL has taken it upon itself to return to librarianship's roots as a method—a method which can move across disciplines. Something more interested in approach than in the thing it is approaching. In its work, IL has become not only the way to redeem LIS, but has placed it back into a postmodern discourse and has begun to formulate itself as a theory of reading.

However, IL is not a cure. Rather it is a therapeutic-like solution. It is not the cure itself but creates the conditions for a cure to take place. It does this work by freeing the term "information" from its bonds and reincorporating method into librarianship's self-knowledge.

Adam Phillips, a psychoanalyst, claims that

16

Sigmund Freud's definition of psychoanalysis was not a cure but a prelude: "By removing the pathological material the surgeon creates the conditions in which the cure can take place. The cure can begin only after the treatment has ended. The psychotherapist simply clears the way to establish the conditions requisite for recovery" (Phillips, 1993, pgs.1-2). Phillips (1993) argues that psychoanalysis "can only engage [people] in interesting and useful conversations" (p.6) to get them to tell the story about themselves. He writes: "Psychoanalysis is a conversation that helps people gets back on track" (1993, p.6). As a helping profession, psychoanalysis becomes useful when people's stories don't work anymore—when they jump the track or overwhelm the tellers (Phillips, 1993, p.7) Or, when the words they have no longer do the work they expect them to.

As a result, IL must first look to our words. Words exist in contexts and it is in these contexts, in use, that give them their lives; allow us to use them to tell stories. Words themselves are not objects and are not in the business of pointing to things. If we rely on ostensive definitions, then every potential user must agree to that word's definition. "Information" cannot be both the signifier and the signified unless what it is signifying is a subject, not an object. To turn an object into a subject, IL needs to create conditions in which information can be more fluid—it needs to remake information. It must re-direct our interest from information itself to the contexts in which information lives. Focusing on contexts motivates IL instructors to teach not on mechanics, but concepts: "If we are truly providing ILI, we need to concentrate on general, transferable strategies and concepts" (Grassian and Kaplowitz, 2001, p. 9). By looking at words, I do not mean ILI sessions which teach subject specific vocabularies. I mean a system by which ILI instructors take pressure away from information as the thing itself that needs to be taught and places emphasis on *how users get there.* In doing so, information becomes no longer the focal point and method rightfully takes its place as the overriding concern.[2]

Emerson writes that "An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with" (2000, p.309). This sea is what prevents us from grasping our objects; in this reading, it prevents LIS from grabbing and holding information. So why attempt to cross this sea at all? If it is innavigable, then perhaps the focus should not be on the object on the other shore but other ways in which an object can become a subject. Emerson says this sea exists between subject and object; what if the relationship was changed to subject and subject? A subject has agency and cannot be grasped in the same way an object can. This is the method that IL advocates and teaches.

IL remakes the object into a subject by treating it as if it is already found and the problem lies within the approach (we aren't seeking anything, that is; we are merely observing). Each situation demands a uniquely crafted approach but by giving attention, by acknowledging approach, IL removes information from its central place. IL instruction sessions then become the practice in which this theory is taught. By teaching lifelong methodologies, IL shows users *how to think* about how they think and how their thinking leads them to solution sets rather than a singularly determined answer. IL's response to the quantitative world of information is the creation of a discipline that favors critical engagement, qualitative analysis and skepticism. The result is a focus on thinking. Thinking is a process and not a static one. It often requires assessing what one believes, how one thinks about things and what counts as a thing. It is a paratactical process, often encircling itself. But thinking also adjusts itself and responds to changes in predicted courses.

IL is an attempt to get users to think about thinking. Within sessions, instructors often focus on how to evaluate texts and how to craft search queries. What is a good question as opposed to a poorly framed one? How does a student think about relevance when examining returned results? IL sessions focus on evaluating and preparing the user for her work by asking

17

her how she will approach it. Information-as-object is absent, or should be absent, from IL sessions. IL creates a framework where LIS can begin to engage critically with information rather than accepting it in is current place, in its current discourses.

So how is this switch to thinking about rather than finding information a prelude to the cure rather than the cure itself? A cure must come from within. It should be a surprise, according to Freud, and not necessarily a pleasant one (his patients were always taken aback when they realized they wanted to kiss their mothers). Freud's psychoanalysts create a space in which a patient can tell and respond to stories about themselves; a psychoanalyst functioned to point out the inconsistencies in the stories. IL acts in a similar fashion by calling attention to what libraries do, what users do and how to make them work together. It is attempting to bring LIS back to itself, back home, to a more critical and fluid more fluid methodologies.

What IL then becomes, however, is a theory of reading. Reading here does not mean running one's eyes over the page—the physical act of reading—but a condition of the world in which we live. Reading is an active engagement with our chosen communities. But more than engagement, it is a creation of it. If we treat reading as a method, rather than a physical act, it becomes the way in which we construct our world and understand our relationships to it. We examine ourselves, our texts and others in our lives, and place them into contexts, categories for further use.

IL works in this manner by rejecting the object, accepting the terms of a non-Cartesian subject and making every moment count. We cannot choose when to read; by refusing to read, we are not engaging with the world, we abandon our agency, and we become objects upon which others act. IL refutes this movement by returning agency to the user, by remaking the user a subject and teaching the user that the desired outcomes are subject to the user's thinking—the user's readability not only of whatever she is engaging with, but also of

herself.

When Edward Duffy reads Stanley Cavell reading Emerson in his article "Stanley Cavell's Redemptive Reading: A Philosophical Labor in Progress," Duffy uses Cavell's writings to show how Cavell is interested in what a redemptive reading is. To Duffy, this redemptive reading involves the reader as much as the text. A reader does work to a text, a subject, by reading it and paying attention to it, but in return, the text moves the reader and makes him readable too: "The hoped-for success or 'progress' of a Cavellian reading is for the reader to become the one read, the one called out" (Duffy, 2003, p.45). As a reader becomes invested in a text, the reader also becomes readable.

Both subjects become engaged and responsive. A user learning to read herself can think about how she does things, which methods she can employ. As she reads information, it reads her too. Information no longer becomes this sought after, hard to find thing but a subject, a process, with which a user can engage.

Reading—IL—creates a way in which LIS can shake off these chains tying it to commodified and uninteresting definitions of information. If LIS returns to reading, if it begins a critical and cultural assessment of information, it can begin to read itself again as a collection of methods and not a hard, reified science.

IL is the proactive response to the hardening of LIS. LIS's commitment to information has meant that it is no longer interested in non information related methodologies, in critical engagement of and by the reader. IL creates grounds in which librarians can actively work to repair this situation by re-introducing thinking into the curriculum, into LIS's philosophies. In response to Emerson's, to our often puzzled, "where do we find ourselves," we could now begin to respond "on our way home."

NOTES

1. It is not a coincidence that with this rise of knowledge production and the eliding of

18

information, fact and knowledge books have come to be seen as something like a repository for ideas. Reclaiming the text as something with which one can have a conversation is not only a task for literary theorists but for librarians as well.

2. K.L. Evans' graceful readings of Wittgenstein and language were invaluable in this section. See *Whale!*

REFERENCES

Day, Ronald E. (1996). LIS, Method and Postmodern Science. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science,* 37, 317-324.

Day, Ronald E. (2001). *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History and Power.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Duffy, Edward. (2003). Stanley Cavell's Redemptive Reading: A Philosophical Labor in Progress. In K. Dauber and W. Jost (Eds.), *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein.* (pp. 31-53). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. (2000). "Experience." *Emerson's Collected Essays. (*pp. 307-326). New York: Modern Library.

Evans, K.L. (2003). *Whale!* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Grassian, Esther S., and Kaplowitz, J.R. (2001). *Information Literacy Instruction: Theory and Practice (Information Literacy Sourcebooks).* Neal-Shuman Publishers: New York.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. (2002). The Postmodern Condition. In A.Easthope and K. McGowan (Eds.), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader.* (pp. 184-195). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Phillips, Adam. (1993). *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1958). *Philosophical Investigations.* (G.E.M. Anscombe, Trans). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. (Original work published 1953).