Chapter 4: Reframing librarian approaches to international student information literacy through the lens of New Literacy Studies

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1. Introduction

International students play a vibrant role within today's globally focused systems of higher education. Enriching both the academic and the cultural climate, international student numbers are growing, with over 850,000 studying in the United States alone in 2013/4 (Institute of International Education, n.d.). These figures have led to a sharp increase in librarian engagement in the field, with tours, workshops and instruction sessions positioned as some of the most important ways to support the growing presence of international students on campus (Bordonaro, 2013; Witt et al, 2015). Yet, while these developments have created renewed interest in the field, a failure to engage with research that positions information literacy as a complex, social practice has led to the widespread belief that international student difference represents a learning difficulty that needs to be corrected. In turn, this problem-deficit stance has created what have been termed essentialist stereotypes of international students and fossilized models of instruction (Conteh-Morgan, 2003) that fail to account for the diversity of today's multicultural societies.

This chapter aims to address the shortcomings of these instructional approaches and models by exploring information literacy through the lens of New Literacy Studies. Characterized as a group of theories that emphasizes the 'social and cultural contexts in which literacy is practised' (Perry, 2012, 51), New Literacy Studies has not been widely explored within information literacy despite the important role that it has played in the development of more culturally inclusive approaches to literacy studies more generally. Accordingly, this chapter will start by providing an overview of New

Literacy Studies. It will then explore common observations related to international student information literacy through the lens of New Literacy Studies before offering a number of recommendations for future research and practice. In doing so, this research challenges librarians to reconsider the way that they conceptualize and teach international student information literacy.

2. New Literacy Studies

Traditionally, literacy has been understood as the acquisition of functional reading and writing skills. Measured through the assessment of tasks and characterized as a series of technical competencies that students had to master in the right order (Barton, 2007, 11), these ideas draw from cognitive and psychological perspectives of learning to position literacy as an individual skill that can be applied in any situation (Perry, 2012, 53). Starting in the 1980s, however, literacy researchers used a series of anthropological studies to question these ideas, demonstrating that literacy was situated within social contexts (Brice Heath, 1983); was used for a number of purposes (Street, 1984), and that different literacies were practised in different domains (Scribner and Cole, 1981). Together, these early studies forced researchers to refine their understandings of literacy, moving from a 'dominant cognitive model with its emphasis on reading, to a broader understanding of literacy practices in their social and cultural contexts' (Street, 2005, 417).

Hailed as representing a new paradigm in literacy studies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003, 2), these ideas led researchers to reconceptualize literacy as 'almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that invoke talk, interaction, values, and beliefs' (Gee, 2014, 60). In other words, rather than being conceived as an individual or a decontextualized, cognitive skill, literacy should be seen as situated, emerging within a specific context through the 'delicate interplay of social, cultural, economic, political, and even geographic forces' (Brandt and Clinton, 2002, 340) and social, or shaped by the 'values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships' of a particular community (Perry, 2012, 54). This also meant that literacy could not be seen as a neutral activity. If literacy is formed by 'different social groups with social rules about who can produce and use particular literacies for particular social purposes' (Larson, 2005, 19), then researchers argue that it must also be patterned by the power relationships and structures of society (Barton and Hamilton, 2000, 8). From this perspective, literacy becomes inseparably linked with, and reflective of, inequalities in society (Barton, 2007, 213) in terms of whose literacies are being marginalized as well as in terms of the structural issues and conditions that originally lead to an individual's exclusion (Street, 2003, 77).

These ideas form the nucleus of what has come to be known as New Literacy Studies, as well as serving to underpin other sociocultural theories of literacy (Perry, 2012, 53). Now forming an established approach in many classrooms, as well as a guiding framework for scholarly studies, these ideas have only recently started to be explored within the field of information literacy. Often conflated with multiliteracies, which examines literacy practices within changing technological environments (Coiro et al., 2008), New Literacy Studies has most commonly been invoked in passing to argue for a more critical understanding of information literacy (Detmering, 2010; Elmborg, 2006; 2012; Hall, 2010; Kapitzke, 2003; Patterson, 2009) with Nicholson (2014) and Buschman (2009) providing considerably more detail than most. Yet, while there has been little direct engagement with New Literacy Studies research, the focus on socially and contextually situated practices forms an intriguing way to reframe our understandings of information literacy. Most importantly, these ideas force us to consider both our traditional conceptions of information literacy as well as and the implications of these understandings on the way that we think about the literacy practices of specific groups and communities. The idea that information literacy is a situated activity that derives meaning and legitimacy from its broader social context, rather than a set of neutral, cognitive skills that transfer unproblematically to other contexts and settings, for example, raises the possibility of multiple information literacies. It also forces us to explore a number of ideological questions, for example, ideas about what counts as literacy, or whose literacies are dominant or privileged in our society. A New Literacy Studies lens can thereby help us to reflect more concretely on our approach to international student information literacy.

3. International student information literacy

Research into international student information literacy has grown substantially over the last twenty years (Bordonaro, 2013). Centred, for the most part, on the experiences of international students studying in English-speaking countries, these observations (and their implications) will now be examined through the lens of New Literacy Studies.

3.1 Common observations about international student information literacy

Most literature that explores international student information literacy is structured through the use of information literacy standards, for example, the ACRL's (2000) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. Focusing on an examination of both the content and the structure of international student educational initiatives, information literacy is positioned as a goal for educational activity (Pilerot and Lindberg, 2011, 341). Studies use a series of assessment techniques to measure changes in international student information literacy, as compared to bibliographic or

professional markers of expertise (Addison and Meyers, 2013), and to provide practical advice for other librarians.

The structure of these studies, as well as the results of research, tends to centre on several key observations. One common theme relates to the idea that international students demonstrate low levels of information literacy, a problem that tends to be linked to difference, or to these students' ethnic, national, racial or cultural traits. Thus, international students are seen to show 'special difficulties' (Lewis, 1969, 271) or an 'obvious lack of self-sufficiency' (Bilal, 1989, 129). They may possess inappropriate skill sets (Chen and van Ullen, 2011, 210), undeveloped critical thinking skills (DiMartino and Zoe, 2000), or their abilities may 'lag behind those of US students' (Martin et al., 2009, 1). Their nationality or ethnicity may further be seen as an impediment to learning with cultural difference likely to 'adversely affect international students' ability to develop information literacy skills' (Morrissey and Given, 2006, 223). These ideas can be seen to parallel a number of studies from the field of education, which argue that the prior educational experiences of international students often leave them unprepared to study in Western contexts (Chalmers and Volet, 1997).

Another common theme relates to learning difficulties, or the idea that international students face a number of additional barriers to learning as compared to domestic students. Low levels of information literacy are thereby linked to the perceived common problems that international students face in the classroom, including language and communication difficulties (e.g. Bilal, 1989), general cultural adjustment problems (e.g. Baron and Strout Dapaz, 2001) and differences in learning styles (e.g. DiMartino and Zoe, 2000) or educational traditions (e.g. Lewis, 1969). The widespread acceptance of these ideas has lead Conteh-Morgan (2003, para. 5) to characterize international student experience to be marked by struggles as they 'continually labor […] under the weight of linguistic, cultural and technological disadvantages'.

Conclusions such as these are fairly common within information literacy literature. Yet, while recognizing that librarians may be forced to teach to professionally approved standards, these ideas present a number of problematic assumptions. A New Literacy Studies lens will help us to explore these ideas in more depth.

3.2 Decoupling the people from the problems

The focus on measurement or assessment that is inherent within standards based education means that many librarians often look to explain why international students demonstrate such low levels of

information literacy or why they are so unprepared for the challenges of academic study. An easy solution is to link these problems to international student difference, or the idea that students from a certain country lack critical thinking skills or are rote learners who adopt a superficial approach to learning. However, in drawing our attention to the power differentials that are inherent within information literacy education, New Literacy Studies helps us to explore these suppositions in more depth.

The first issue that New Literacy Studies helps to problematize is whether low levels of information literacy can be linked to individual ethnocentric characteristics, a question that is linked to our framing of information literacy through performance standards. Most simply, when we position information literacy standards as universal, or as 'common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education' (ACRL, 2000), we create the assumption that truths should be immediately apparent if only individuals would 'draw on their ability to evaluate information around them critically' (O'Connor, 2006, 205). In other words, if information literacy is a universal skill then individuals only have themselves (or, by implication, their cultural, racial, or ethnic characteristics) to blame for a low score on their information literacy test. However, in demonstrating that literacy is both socially and ideologically situated, the lens of New Literacy Studies shows us that information literacy standards cannot be characterized as neutral. Instead, the standards to which we hold students accountable have emerged through culturally and ideologically specific conceptions of information competence; the ACRL Standards, for example, can be characterized as a 'eurocentric, socially and culturally constructed set of skills' (Morrison, 2009, 19) that have arisen from Western positivist and economic-rationalist ideas of literacy or ways of knowing (Lloyd, 2005, 83). This means that when we assess international students against information literacy standards, not only are we judging them against a culturally specific model of information literacy, but we are also marginalizing other forms of literate knowledge (Street, 1984) as well as the cultural and social practices that students bring to a classroom. These ideas demonstrate that low levels of information literacy may be linked to the mechanisms we use to measure information literacy, rather than to international student abilities.

The second issue to which a New Literacy Studies lens helps to draw our attention is the assumption that information literacy skill performance is linked to national or cultural trait. In opening up our thinking to the concept of multiple literacies, it is easy to imagine that literacy can be lined up with culture, or that 'there is a single literacy associated with a single culture' (Street, 2000, 18). However, a New Literacy Lens demonstrates that this supposition is problematic because it risks perpetuating

the idea that information literacy exists autonomously rather than as emerging from contested and situated sociocultural practices. At the same time, these ideas also draw attention to the belief that an individual's information actions are due to a cultural 'style' that is derived from their membership in a cultural group. While recognizing that a focus on the behaviours of cultural groups is often used to increase representation and to decentre the assumption that the dominant group's cultural practices form a norm, these ideas are problematic because they position individuals as 'carriers' of cultural traits and their behaviour as derived 'from the essence of an individual or a group' (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003, 20). Cultural difference is not located *within* an individual as an "inventory of characteristics" (Street, 2000, 19). Instead, it should be understood as a proclivity of 'people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities' (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003, p.19); just like in literacy, cultural variation is constituted and reproduced through an individual's participation in the dynamic social practices of a community. Cultural labels can be problematic for other reasons, too. International students may be grouped with people who do not share the same language, history or cultural identity (Ramirez, 2009) with a Latin American label, for instance, covering Portuguese speaking Brazilians, Spanish speaking Peruvians, and the Anglophone, Francophone or Dutch speaking Caribbean. Similarly, membership in a cultural community should be seen as neither homogenous nor exclusive. Most worryingly, these ideas categorize international students on the basis that they must share the exact same set of experiences, beliefs and values as other members of a national or an ethnic group. This obscures a broader consideration of the international student as an individual, even though a student's motivations and goals for studying abroad or the fact that they are also a first generation college student may have a profound effect on their learning. In effect, these ideas demonstrate that student performance cannot be categorically attributed to membership within a specific cultural group. Coupled with the understanding that our conception of information literacy obscures a number of unacknowledged power differentials, it is clear that international student information literacy may be more complex than has been previously imagined.

3.3 Difference is an asset

The idea that international students face a number of linguistic and cultural barriers to learning may seem uncontentious, with anxiety about communication, for example, seen to form one of the primary reasons why international students may avoid using the library (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 2001). However, as Conteh Morgan (2003, para. 5) points out, it is surprising that 'in the past three decades or so, there has been hardly any noticeable change in the profile of students who come to study in the United States'. New Literacy Studies enables us to explore these ideas in more detail including whether these barriers exist, or if they are as problematic as they appear.

One of the first questions that New Literacy Studies helps us to ask is whether these barriers are, in fact, barriers at all, a question that relates to how we understand the nature of information literacy. In effect, when we see information literacy as a generic set of skills that students are lacking, it is clear that linguistic issues may prevent students from internalizing these competencies quickly and efficiently. However, when we see information literacy as a deep engagement in the social practices of a community, it is clear that every time we engage in the literacy practices of the different communities of which we form part, we are developing our identity as well as the discursive resources that we have at our disposal. In other words, when international students study within a new intercultural context, their multilingualism is not a problem. Instead, it should be seen as an asset because it expands the range of interpretive resources that these learners have at their disposal, thereby helping to expose the values and beliefs that drive literacy practices and to drive the development of dynamic 'dispositions towards inquiry, analysis, design and action' (Comber, 2012, xi). Most simply, and as Orellana and Gutiérrez (2006, 119) point out, 'Who, from a linguistic and social perspective, is more limited: those who are monolingual English speakers, or speakers of other languages who are also English learners?'. In this light, linguistic and cultural variables are seen to bring complexity and depth rather than forming a barrier to international student information literacy experiences (Hughes, 2004, 2). These ideas will only become more important as societies become increasingly international.

The idea that international students face a number of insurmountable barriers may further reflect a lack of engagement with the current state of international education. Most pragmatically, when we treat international students as a homogenous group, we ignore the considerable variation that exists between individuals. Many international students will face minimal linguistic barriers: Canada, for example, provided the fifth largest contingent of international students to the USA in 2013/4 (Institute of International Education, n.d.), while many countries in Africa, as well as in South and South East Asia also speak English as an official language. In addition, the growth of English as a global *lingua franca*, the wide availability of English language media, or the significant emphasis that many countries place on language learning from an early age (Pew Research Center, 2015) signifies that students are likely to be far more prepared for studying in an English context than ever before. Advances in communication technologies means that the technological readiness of international students is seen to be less problematic than was previously assumed (Conteh Morgan, 2003, para. 24), while the growth in numbers of students worldwide who are engaged in international educational programs, for example, the International Baccalaureate (International Baccalaureate,

n.d.), means that a significant proportion of students may already be familiar with Western norms and practices. These ideas demonstrate the importance of examining supposed barriers in detail, and within the changing higher education landscape.

Another idea that New Literacy Studies helps us to interrogate is whether these barriers are unique to international students. In fact, this is a far harder question to answer than it may seem because most studies to date have centred uniquely on international students, rather than comparing them with their domestic counterparts. In addition, few studies take a longitudinal approach, focusing, instead, on one-time measures of student behaviours. These issues mean that studies run the risk of exacerbating perceived problems by failing to see international student adaptation to new settings within the context of *all* new students' adjustment to higher education, as well as part of longer term change processes (Volet and Jones, 2012, 252). These methodological limitations become even more problematic when studies that *do* compare international and domestic student information literacy rarely find evidence of difference (Martin et al., 2009; Varga-Atkins and Ashcroft, 2004).

What is certain, though, is that in moving the focus of international student information literacy research from measurement to description, a New Literacy Studies lens decentres and destabilizes the very idea of barriers. In other words, when we associate information literacy with the idea of what people do with information within a specific context, rather than as a checklist of competencies, research is re-focused on student actions and strategies within new settings. This allows for a far deeper exploration of the concept of a 'barrier' and its effect on student activities. While it does not explicitly take a New Literacy Studies focus, these ideas can be seen the most clearly within Hilary Hughes' work (2009) on international students in Australia. In exploring how these students use online information resources to learn, Hughes (2009) demonstrates that firstly, barriers to international student information literacy are far more nuanced than previously believed, and secondly, that students are rarely passive in the face of problems and challenges. Linguistic differences, for example, were perceived as strengths rather than barriers, because they helped students to develop creative strategies to work around challenges, for example using a search engine to find synonyms (Hughes, 2009) or to establish an author's gender (Han, 2012). Alongside the finding that common information literacy issues, such as being able to deal with lengthy lists of results, are not unique to international students, Hughes and Bruce (2006, 38) thereby argue that international student difference should be positioned as being related to 'the degree of difficulty [rather than to] the nature of the difficulty itself'. These ideas provide considerable evidence that

barriers to information literacy should neither be considered unique to international students, nor as paralyzing as they are often presented.

4. Recommendations

In moving the focus from the individual to the social, New Literacy Studies invites us to explore the nature of international student information literacy in a number of new ways and future research should build upon these beginnings to examine the potential of this approach more fully. In the meantime a series of practical recommendations will be helpful for librarians who are working to take a more holistic approach towards international student information literacy.

Firstly, it is important for us to examine and to be aware of our own biases. It is easy to accept stereotypes blindly, or because they match with our personal experiences, but research demonstrates that many of our assumptions related to cultural difference are not corroborated through research (e.g. Daniel et al., 2011). Unfamiliar methods of learning, for example, are not inferior to more familiar Western models, and asking international students to abandon the prior educational experiences and learning habits that have served them well in the past is, at best, counterproductive (Conteh-Morgan, 2003). Similarly, international students do not just enrol in Western universities in order to get a better education. Individuals are motivated to study abroad for a number of reasons, including for professional advancement or to learn a language (Conteh-Morgan, 2003). Our swiftness to categorize students as 'international' may also prevent us from seeing the individual through the label. Just like domestic students, international students may be undergoing various transitions at once, such as living away from home, moving from childhood to adulthood and adjusting to a new academic culture. These changes, as well as the sociocultural dynamics of a situation, may affect their learning and goals.

Secondly, consider your choice of research methods carefully. Avoid relying on personal anecdotes and one-off survey data to make judgements about international students. Measurement over time acknowledges that international students are in a state of transition and studies that look at domestic and international students together will enable more meaningful comparisons. Alternatively, consider using qualitative methods (such as interviews or ethnographic observation) to explore the dynamic processes and contexts of student adaptation. Ask students about their experiences, too! The student voice is invariably missing from most research into information literacy and an understanding of their issues will help us make judgements based on their experiences rather than on the perceptions of others.

Lastly, think carefully about how you present your research results. Write about your research in the past tense and use a definite article in order to avoid making over-generalized statements about international students. Using the phrase 'The international students did this' instead of 'International students do this' recognizes the contextual nature of research, while also moving away from seeing students as homogenous (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003). The way you refer to international students is important too. Use labels as narrative descriptions rather than as categories (e.g. working class, first generation college student, trilingual). This moves beyond the tendency to essentialize students or to see causal relationships between information literacy and cultural group membership (Gutiérrez and Rogoff, 2003).

5. Conclusion

This chapter set out to challenge librarians to reconsider popular conceptualizations of international student information literacy. International students form a growing and vibrant population on campus, yet within information literacy literature these students are invariably positioned as both deficient and unprepared. However, in using a New Literacy Studies lens, we move the focus of information literacy from skill measurement to social practices, or broader considerations about how information literacy emerges and is perpetuated within a specific community. In the case of international students, this centres our understanding of information literacy on what people do, rather than 'what they do not do when compared to a dominant group' (Larson, 2005, 101). It also positions questions of language and culture, as well as the power relations between linguistic groups, at the heart of literacy, rather than seeing them as problematic add-ons.

The strength of New Literacy Studies, however, may be linked to what it exposes as missing, or what we obscure or fail to see when we focus on understanding information literacy as an individual, generic practice. In the case of international students, it is clear that the emphasis on deficit keeps us from identifying the structural inequities, or the institutional practices and social processes that create and maintain vulnerability (Orellana and Gutiérrez, 2006, 118). This demonstrates that we can only start to address the real issues within international student information literacy when we understand students in relation to the practices of which they are a part rather than as a unit of analysis (Orellana and Gutiérrez, 2006, 119). More problematically, the focus on student problems can also be seen as ensuring that we, as educators and as librarians, can avoid examining our own attitudes and practices (Chalmers and Volet, 1997, 96). Our first step in this process, then, may be to start to question our own perceptions, actions and values as we work to rethink our approach to international student information literacy.

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