

Professional Event Summary

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INFO 231: Issues in Special Libraries and Information Centers

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My attempt to find and take part in a networking event and make a new contact in the special librarian field unfortunately faltered when, because of a scheduling conflict, I missed out on half of the InfoTrends “interactive virtual event” hosted by the SLA on June 30th. The closest thing to a networking event or webinar / webcast with opportunities to meet and converse with librarians was a three-session webcast presented by the ALA’s ACRL on “Hidden Architectures in Information Literacy.” We haven’t talked much about information literacy (IL) and instruction in the special library context, but my research into the topic revealed that these practices are becoming more widely adopted in corporate and other special libraries. In fact, I was able to find a handful of peer reviewed articles which addressed literacy instruction in special libraries, and one which explored the use of the ACRL framework on information literacy in a special library setting. Because the ACRL webcast was entirely created by and focused on librarians in university settings, this essay will only offer speculative links between the content of the webcast and the practices of IL in academic and special libraries.

IL is defined by The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (American Library Association, [2015](#)). Koltay, in an article on IL in public, academic and special libraries, expands on this definition to include “critical thinking, meta-cognitive and procedural knowledge used to locate information in specific domains, fields and contexts” (2011). These descriptions, which in a very general way align with others I have encountered during my MLIS studies, speaks more to cultivating a mindset and cluster of principals to guide and improve one’s research and analysis skills. At a basic level IL is about enhancing one’s “relationship” to information (discovering it, evaluating it, transforming it, etc.), than it does to becoming fluent with a collection of tools and set of concrete applications of knowledge. The breadth and generality of IL is illustrated by the way that the critical thinking aspect is applied to IL itself. Yet IL even in these wide-ranging senses could still produce tangible value to organizations and individuals served by special librarians, especially to those involved in R&D and other knowledge-intensive activities. Nevertheless, it is

probably too broad to win widespread buy-in from managers across the special library landscape.

Koltay provides another category of instruction which he argues has succeeded IL: “digital literacy” (DL). Quoting Martin (2006), Koltay offers this definition of DL:

“[...] the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyze and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process [...]”

As I studied in INFO 200 (“Information Communities”), there are a range of digital era information behaviors which begin with awareness of a need and an ensuing search for and consumption of information. As literacy in resources and tools are gained – particularly those with a social component – people become fluent in creating, sharing and publishing information in various visual, audio and written digital formats. An awareness of the social dimensions of information online and in library contexts, including fluency in social media platforms and tools, is critical to an IL which is complex and broad enough to be up-to-date for our time. The evolution of these social features, which extend beyond mere platforms and tools to include organizational strategies like knowledge management, is profound enough in Koltay’s estimation as to warrant the replacement of IL with DL.

Interestingly, Koltay notes that “literacy is embedded in cultural situations. This requires that we take communities that produce, read, interpret texts and reach consensus about interpretation into consideration” (2011). This made me think about the cultural aspect of IL in other kinds of organizations which host special libraries, whether corporate, a “memory institution” or some other type. As for the fitness of IL or DL to these different sorts of organizations, I think a lot comes down to how amenable they are to cultivate literacy which “reflects new social relationships and socio-technical configurations of information use” (2011).

Platforms and tools – in some cases of the Web 2.0 type – can be configured and taught to employees via IL programs which ultimately aim to facilitate social relationships, workflows, knowledge creation and sharing, and other activities in pursuit of various desired outcomes. In this I see the makings of a case, however rudimentary, for IL / DL in special libraries including in corporate settings. In the end, Koltay collapses IL into DL, but the consequences of this re-categorization are mostly superficial. More importantly, he aims to define an “IL 2.0” and a “Library 2.0,” and to reconcile these to Web 2.0. I won’t go into details except to note that he claims that Library 2.0 “supplements predominantly system-oriented approaches with more user-centered ones,” which recalls the previous discussion of both information and knowledge creation and sharing as well as the social dimensions of IL.

Liz Fite & Esther Marie Jackson, in their 2019 article “ACRL Framework: Integrations for Special Libraries,” provide a literature review, case studies and reflection on information literacy in the special library context. While they repeatedly underscore the scarcity of published literature, research, and practical guidance, as well as instructional resources available for special librarians, the picture that emerges nonetheless is that information literacy in the workplace is a vital if nascent trend in special libraries and their parent organizations. They discuss the various ways in which academic librarians, who have decades of experience running IL / DL programs, are viewed by special librarians as allies and sources of practitioner knowledge. While there are significant gaps and differences in the contexts of special and academic libraries, it is a robust enough phenomenon that Tara Murray wrote an article in 2017 titled “An Unlikely Collaboration: How Academic and Special Libraries Can Help Each Other Survive.” As their article suggests, Fite and Jackson note the relevance of the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for special librarians, which they argue “creates a structure for events that might otherwise seem scattered or unjustifiable to administration” (2019). They add that “it is also helpful for librarians who enjoy instruction but have not been formally trained as instructors, as a pedagogical tool for instruction creation” (2019). These assertions led me to an unexpected insight: that the presentation of IL or DL materials to “clients” in special (and other) libraries might simultaneously utilize and demonstrate the methods of IL itself. Workshops,

webinars and other events can both convey content and demonstrate in their form some critical tools and concepts of IL / DL.

The ACRL webcast on “Hidden Architectures in Information Literacy” featured four panelists from four different universities and colleges discussing how information literacy instruction is managed and practiced in their schools. The webcast’s overarching “learning outcomes” (i.e.- the value created for meeting attendees, which included a number of MLIS students) that each speaker addressed included identifying LI leadership and management strategies, examining how boundaries and best practices can be determined through dialog with institutional stakeholders, and exploring how power is distributed and managed in the service of “equitable instruction program development.” There was a good deal of diversity across the four institutions: at California State University San Marcos, for example, all 17 librarians are subject specialists, all do collection development, and all provide IL instruction for freshmen. Yvonne Meulemans, Head of Teaching and Learning CSUSM, describes her role as “Modified servant leadership and critical reflection.” At Delaware County Community College, the 5 full time librarians (aided by 3-5 adjunct librarians) located in a “learning commons” building manage to produce 300 course-integrated information literacy classes and 140 individual workshops in synchronous online format each academic year. Mike LaMagna at DCCC explained that his job is based on leadership rather than management, and he talked about how one of his most important responsibilities is to prevent interference by school administrators in the daily activities of his librarians. I thought that was quite amusing, though his longer explanation made a lot of sense. The structure of the webcast entailed each librarian describing their workplace and roles within it in terms of some key ideas: leadership and management, navigating power dynamics, setting boundaries and expectations, and reimagining and refocusing instruction programs, etc.

Rather than delving any further into the (very interesting) content of the webcast, I’ll briefly describe the format and narrative. The application used for the interactive presentation was Adobe Connect, which I was unfamiliar with until this event. Like Zoom it offers chat and

live video, but it adds a PowerPoint type slide feature as well. The hosts encouraged attendees to use the chat feature, initially to introduce themselves and briefly describe their professional or academic status and goals for the webcast, and later to ask questions of the presenters. While the response was good for the first of these, it lagged for the second. In other words, there was not much chatting after the first few minutes of the webcast. I had audio and other difficulties that caused me to miss half of the presentation. I should have seized the opportunity to reach out to one of the librarians. I decided I would introduce myself to Michael LaMagna, but I had missed half of his presentation, so I decided to wait until I could listen to the webcast in full and then contact him. I had to wait until the end of the day on July 30 to get access to the recorded webcast. I took extensive notes while viewing it and wrote Michael an email requesting a brief email chat and LinkedIn connection. I am unsure whether or when I'll hear from him, but I will follow up with an email coda to you shortly, regardless of whether I make contact with him.

REFERENCES

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