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Understanding the Language of Information Literacy

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A B S T R A C T

Understanding the language of information literacy is necessary for the effective use of library resources. The results of a recent study indicate that undergraduate students lack such an understanding, and the authors recommend that librarians, working with faculty, reassess information literacy terms. This article examines what is involved in reassessing these terms by drawing on several ideas from the philosophy of language, which provides a foundation for grasping the semantic challenges librarians face in educating users. Any reassessment of information literacy terms should recognize their ordinary and specialized use and aim for the holistic expression of core concepts, however complex they may be.

Introduction

Semantic or meaning holism is a theory of knowledge. There are many varieties of the theory, but the basic idea is that we do not know things in isolation. It is also a very old idea, having first appeared in Plato's *Theaetetus*. In that dialogue, Socrates asks a series of questions about how we understand the world around us. He has us consider a wagon, or something concrete, and he has us consider words, which are abstract. In both examples it seems clear that, while wagons are comprised of timbers as words are of letters, we neither know a wagon or words by their constituent parts. Rather, we know them as wholes – wholes that interact in complex ways with the parts of which they are composed.

According to Schaub, Cadena, Bravender, and Kierkus (2017), something very much like sematic or meaning holism is essential to the effective use of library resources among undergraduate students. However, the acquisition of the meaning of terms that are associated with information literacy, such as *source*, *database*, and *peer review*, remains difficult to determine, as the study shows that library instruction would seem to have little to no influence at all. This is an important finding; chiefly because the authors report that by the time students reach their senior year, their proficiency with these terms would suggest some formal influence on the part of librarians and yet, as this study demonstrates, "library instruction does not significantly enhance student understanding" (p. 291). It is also important because both library instruction and library use have been positively correlated with academic achievement (ACRL, 2016a; Haddow & Joseph, 2010; Massengale, Piotrowski, & Savage, 2016; Soria & Nackerud, 2013). These findings, taken together, suggest that students seem capable, on the one hand, of grasping a particular set of ideas that form the requisite concepts of research on their own while, on the other, suggest that library instruction and use are value-added components to student success. This makes for some confusion. Even less clear is whether the information literacy terms the students seem to understand are known in isolation or as conceptually integrated, part of the complex whole of academic libraries.

The goals of this paper are continuous with the Schaub et al. study, mainly in that it is critical to assess whether the language of a discipline is understood and, if it is, to what extent it is possible to draw conclusions about that understanding. The authors suggest that the difficulties associated with comprehending information literacy terms be addressed (i) by informing teaching faculty of the issue, (ii) by reassessing the language librarian's use in consultations and in the classroom, and (iii) by creating a glossary of information literacy terms for inclusion with course materials. These are good suggestions, but the main focus of this paper will be in examining the implications that come with (ii) or reassessing the language of information literacy. What is involved in such a reassessment, and to what extent can the philosophy of language help in that endeavor? With the Schaub et al. results as a basis, this paper will outline several difficulties that emerge when a reassessment of library language aims to accommodate an understanding of information literacy in more general terms, as doing so is a threat to holism. Rather, the differentiations language allows are essential to the kind of success we strive for in *any* teaching where conceptual integration remains the overarching ideal. The motivations for embracing the complexity of the language of our discipline quite likely form the basis for the reassessment Schaub et al. proscribe, given their commitment to holism. The paper concludes with two reasons for adopting this kind of complexity, both of which ought to be considered uncontroversial.

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An overview of Schaub et al.

Threshold concepts in information literacy rely on a set of terms used by librarians and teaching faculty (ACRL, 2016b). The degree to which students understand these terms is essential to their becoming information-literate. If a student is information-literate, then her conceptual grasp of libraries has, in effect, crossed a threshold and is never quite the same again.

The idea for the study began while the authors were writing and editing lesson plans related to teaching information literacy threshold concepts. The language of information literacy is also, to some degree, the language that teaching faculty regularly use in course syllabi. By measuring how well students grasp these terms, the authors sought to develop more effective integration practices both in the library and across campus. Drawing on 14 commonly used information literacy terms, the authors distributed a survey to a random sampling of 400 undergraduate classes at Grand Valley State University, a comprehensive state-supported school with an undergraduate enrollment of 21,235 students. Apart from demographic questions, the students were asked if they had previous library instruction and to select the correct definition of common library terms. 773 responses were collected with Freshman and Senior respondents leading across class levels, 207 and 209 respectively.

The authors found that previous exposure to library instruction ranged from 59.09% (Sophomore), to 62.79% (Junior), to 70.73% (Freshman), and to 71.155% (Senior). Regarding the 14 information literacy terms, comprehension ranged from a high of 87.1% for the term *citation* to a low of 22.3% for the term *stacks*. No statistically significant association emerged, according to the authors, between a student's understanding of a term and whether or not they had received library instruction. An analysis of each term (citation, bibliography, keyword, full text, abstract, database, peer review, journal, catalog, open access, subject heading, scholarly, source, stacks) revealed that, while library instruction had no discernible impact, as students advanced toward graduation they more frequently identified the correct meaning of a given term, although this finding was not consistent for all terms. In particular, the terms *peer review*, *journal*, and *scholarly* appeared resistant to both library instruction and class level.

The authors suggest that the substantive grasp and use of information literacy terms in a manner consistent with the threshold concepts with which they are associated can only occur when all participants understand the meanings of those terms, which implies a holistic stance. The results of the survey suggest that both library instruction and the language we use in describing the practice of information literacy require careful reflection, mainly in their perceived impact. The authors conclude that many librarians quite likely assume too much when attributing understanding of information literacy terms to college students and sketch three strategies, enumerated in the introduction above, for addressing the problem.

Literature review

Schaub et al. rightly note that much of the library literature devoted to language meaning and use is concerned with website usability as it relates to the information seeking behavior of students. However, the barriers that jargon or technical language impart certainly predate website usability studies and are not limited to librarianship. Naismith and Stein (1989) focused on the language that librarians use in reference interviews and in library handouts, two practices that remain with the profession. They found that students misunderstand roughly 50% of library terms. Mount (1966) observed that the degree to which a reference transaction is successful depends largely on whether or not the library terms are understood. Similarly, Nicholson (1958) found that librarianship relied heavily on abbreviations and acronymic language and that this reliance shifted in magnitude depending on the context. The contextual nature of jargon, according to Fenske (1986), is not only widespread among librarians, but it should also be taught in library schools in order to enhance the future working conditions of librarians and the users they are likely to assist, in this case health professionals.

More recently, Taylor (2008) described an effort by business librarians and teaching faculty in creating a business vocabulary workshop with the goal of fostering greater critical awareness of both the discipline and the tools necessary for accomplishing specific objectives. Several studies place similar emphasis on the importance of the integration of meaning. Coffey and Lawson (2002) chose to localize the issue to library administrators and found that when making decisions that bear on the understanding of technology terms, it is essential to avoid assumptions that suggest a common ground when such terms are being used and to instead pursue a spirited line of questioning until both meaning *and* use of technology terms are fully understood. Adedibu and Ajala (2011) surveyed over 2000 undergraduates at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology in Nigeria. They found that students desired greater clarity of library language, whether by definition in class or in handouts. In addition, the students indicated that library language could be more accessible or user-friendly, thus reducing the need for explaining the meaning of a resource or service. After noticing hundreds of unclaimed printouts of article abstracts, Imler and Eichelberger (2014) narrowed their study to the meaning of *abstract*, a decidedly library term, and *full-text*, which is, arguably, a more accessible, user-friendly term. The authors found that 75% of the undergraduates surveyed could correctly identify the meaning of *full-text* (50% for the term *abstract*), but only 25% of the study participants could correctly retrieve the full-text of an article across several different databases, which suggested less of an issue with language and more so with database design. Candido (1999) argued that library language, far from obscuring meaning, remains both legitimate and necessary, precisely because it has the capacity to communicate exact meanings while simultaneously inculcating newcomers to a discipline. Hutcherson (2004) limited his observations to newcomers – freshman and sophomores who had completed a seven-week library skills course – and found that students had greater difficulty in recognizing library language (Boolean logic, bibliography, controlled vocabulary, truncation, descriptors, abstract, article, and citation) than other, more commonly used terms (plagiarism, copyright, table of contents, editor, call number, and journal) that are associated with library work.

The existing research does not cohere into ready perspective, mainly because the approaches seem only tangentially concerned with semantic holism. This is likely due to the ineluctable tie of the meaning of a term, on the one hand, and the use it inspires, on the other. A recent study by Calvert (2015) considered the relative worth of some information resources, in this case a discovery service, against their perceived use. Concerns about usability, distinguishing among material types in a results lists, and general information overload in a typical search are all factors that can drive down discovery service use. Meadow and Meadow (2012) analyzed discovery service transaction logs and found that most users continue to rely on less sophisticated search techniques while conflating a discovery service with more specific requests, such as library hours. What do users expect of a discovery layer whose manner of description is *find it* or *search everything*? The answer to this question is largely speculative, but the surfeit of usability testing in the library literature suggests that a focus on the meaning of such phrases as *find it* or *search everything* is necessary. A primary driver of search success involves the language that governs the resources offered by libraries. Such language requires a proper fit between the user and the resource. In the next section, some consideration will be given to several core ideas in the philosophy of language concerning meaning and use.

Some relevant ideas from the philosophy of language

When we attend to the language we use it is often in an attempt to