



Web designers and developers experiences of information literacy: A phenomenographic study



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ABSTRACT

The qualitative research reported here identifies how web designers and developers experience information literacy. Using a phenomenographic approach, this cohort's experience is presented through a map of variation, which includes four different ways of experiencing information literacy. Analysis of 23 in-depth interviews with web workers from different stages of the web design and development process suggested the four ways web workers experience information literacy: staying informed, building a successful website, solving a problem or participating in a community of practice. The study advances the existing understanding of the concept of information literacy, especially in a professional context and from a relational perspective. Additionally, using the web professionals' world as the context of the study, the research contributes to the field of website design and development by shedding light on less-researched information experiences of people involved in the web industry.

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1. Introduction

In an era where information is power (Drucker, 1999), information literacy, described as effective use of information (Bruce, 1997), is a key consideration. Information literacy has for some time been constructed both as a research domain (Bruce, 2000) and as an object of research in different contexts, such as educational environments, various workplaces, or everyday life settings. It has been investigated from different theoretical perspectives including the behavioural, socio-cultural (Lloyd, 2005) and relational (Bruce, 1997). The qualitative study reported in this paper was designed to address the experienced meanings of information literacy among a specific professional group: web designers and developers (referred to here as web professionals). In this study, web professionals were considered to be those involved at different levels and stages of the process of website design and development, ranging from decision making to programming and coding. This study identified how web professionals experienced information literacy in their day-to-day professional practice. By adopting a phenomenographic approach, the study presents their experiences through a map of variation, which includes four different ways of experiencing the information literacy phenomenon.

2. Problem statement

Effective use of information is considered to be the secret of success for organisations (Goad, 2002). This has been clearly stated by both workplace information literacy researchers and members of the corporate world (Cheuk, 2008; Travis, 2011). Despite the relevance of information literacy in the workplace, as revealed in the literature review, a clear theoretical image of this concept in many workplaces is not yet available. Furthermore, research suggests that general understandings of information literacy in educational settings (e.g., *Framework for information literacy for higher education*, 2015; *Information literacy competency standards for higher education*, 2000) may not be readily transferable to workplace contexts. Additionally, researchers critique those standards for not being grounded in the users' experiences of information literacy, but rather in the expectations of information professionals.

This study produces a detailed picture of information literacy among a specific group of professionals, web industry practitioners, grounded in their own experience. The basic research question was "What is the critical variation in web professionals' experience of information literacy?" The findings contribute to existing understandings of the character of information literacy in different contexts, as well as specifically revealing web industry practitioners' experiences. The insights from this study may be of value to the professional education of future practitioners in the areas of both information literacy and web design and development.

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3. Literature review

3.1. Workplace information literacy

Information literacy researchers have always been interested in exploring information literacy in different contexts. Nevertheless, research has traditionally been associated with and continues to focus predominantly on the education sector (Bruce, 2000; Hughes, Middleton, Edwards, Bruce, & McAllister, 2005). Thus, despite the work of early researchers on workplace information literacy such as Cheuk (1998) and Mutch (1999), existing knowledge of information literacy in the occupational setting less than ten years ago was considered as “emerging” and in its “infancy” (Lloyd & Williamson, 2008, pp. 5, 7).

Workplace information literacy received major attention for the first time during the “exploratory” phase of information literacy research (Bruce, 2000). Since then the relevance and importance of the concept in the workplace has been highlighted (O’Sullivan, 2002), the strategic issue of providing employees with “access to the right information at the right time” has been raised (Cheuk, 2008, p. 137), and the specific support required for workplace information literacy has been recognised (Kirton, Barham, & Brady, 2008). Lloyd (2011) introduced the workplace as a critical site of information literacy practice beyond educational settings. The impact of information literacy on successful workplace performance has also been acknowledged both within libraries (Somerville, 2015) and by the corporate world (Conley & Gil, 2011; Travis, 2011). As a result, interest in information literacy research within workplaces has expanded.

Bruce’s (1997) phenomenographic investigation into the information literacy of academic staff, Cheuk’s (1998) constructivist approach to auditors’ information literacy, Mutch’s (1999) critical realist approach to managers’ information literacy, and Lloyd’s (2005, 2007) sociocultural exploration of information literacy of fire fighters and ambulance officers are worthy of note, not only as early works exploring information literacy in settings other than the academic, but also for nurturing different theoretical perspectives. In particular, Bruce (1997) and Lloyd (2005, 2007), respectively, developed the relational and socio-cultural lenses for viewing the concept of information literacy. While the socio-cultural perspective considers information literacy as a complex collective practice shared between people working in a specific context (Lloyd, 2012), the relational approach looks at variants in effective use of information. This study uses the lens of the relational approach.

While there are important stimuli for researching information literacy in the work environment, there are also perceived problems in transferring the idea of information literacy across contexts. In response to the original domain of information literacy (i.e., education), many have questioned whether such understandings of information literacy were usable in the workplace environment (Cheuk, 2008; D’Angelo, 2012; Lloyd, 2005; Mutch, 2008). They question whether the standards- and skills-based understandings of information literacy prevalent in the library and education sectors would enable individuals to successfully engage with information practices in their workplaces. Most of them found the answer to this question to be in the negative. Mutch (2008) and Hepworth and Smith (2008) therefore stressed the importance of modifying research and practice approaches to studies of workplace information literacy. Head, Van Hoeck, Eschler, and Fullerton (2013) noted the gaps in graduates’ skills in applying the identified information work strategies valued by employers. The application of these strategies was understood as a tool that assisted in transitioning from one context to another. Inskip (2014) also confirmed the gap between skills and competencies obtained in an education setting and those required by employers.

The need to explore information literacy experiences in different workplaces as a solution to the unsuitability of applying education-based information literacy in the workplace setting has already been established by Lloyd and Williamson (2008), who suggest that studying

many workplace environments may shed light on the preparation of new employees to effectively use available information in their new workplaces. However, the differing natures and characteristics of workplaces mean that the findings from one workplace may not be readily transferable. This is demonstrated by O’Farrill’s (2010) recommendation for developing situation-specific information literacy guidelines rather than a single encompassing framework, as each workplace may have unique features and different information literacy demands. Notably, applying an understanding of information literacy from one context into another is unsuitable as the level of interaction between people and information at work differs depending upon environment. This may happen at a broad level in a profession or at a more specific level in a physically bounded workspace (Sayyad Abdi & Bruce, 2015). The study reported here, which is designed to uncover the concept of information literacy practiced within the specific work world of web professionals, contributes to this research trajectory examining understanding of information literacy in varying environments.

3.2. Relational information literacy

This research adopts a relational perspective towards information literacy. The relational perspective was first developed by Bruce (1997) as she studied the internal relation between information and people and variation in their experience of information literacy. Viewed through a relational lens, an information literate person is able to experience effective information use in different ways. Bruce (1997) concluded that being aware of the different ways in which people effectively use information could influence learning design in a positive way.

Inspired by this approach, other researchers began to explore information literacy and its components relationally in different environments and settings (Gunton, Bruce, & Davis, 2014). McMahon and Bruce (2002) explored variation in the information literacy needs of local staff in cross-cultural development projects, while O’Farrill (2010) investigated how information literacy was experienced differently by the staff of a tele-health organisation. Within an educational workplace setting, variation in experiences of information literacy among secondary teachers was uncovered (Williams & Wavell, 2007). Also within an educational setting, Maybee (2006) explored undergraduates’ experiences of information literacy and Lupton (2008) investigated the relationship between information literacy and learning. Kirk (2004) identified different ways in which senior managers experienced information use, one of the key components of information literacy. In community settings, research has provided insight into experience of health information literacy (Yates et al., 2012) and religious information literacy (Gunton, Bruce, & Stoodely, 2012).

One of the advantages of the relational approach is its potential to connect theory and practice. The findings from this approach refer to lived experiences of information users rather than theoretical understandings of experts. For instance, Boon, Johnston, and Webber (2007), and Williams and Wavell (2007) compared the findings of their relational studies on users’ information literacy experiences on the one hand and existing librarian-and-expert-centred standards and frameworks on the other. Their findings suggested significant differences between the two groups. Similarly, Kirk’s (2004) research also showed a weak correspondence between information literacy programs delivered by information professionals and the experienced phenomenon among senior managers in cultural industries.

4. Methods

The present study used phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997), a qualitative and interpretive approach. Phenomenography describes variation in awareness and researchers who use it are interested in uncovering “the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, ..., various aspects of, and phenomenon in, the world around

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