



# Information encountering and management in information literacy instruction of undergraduate, students



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## ABSTRACT

The nature of the information-rich environment of the 21st century has affected the ways in which students' access information. Students no longer have to seek information; they acquire it passively through their everyday use of the Internet. This paper presents findings of a study involving the information encountering experiences of undergraduate students and the potential role of personal information collection, management, and retrieval in information literacy instruction. Undergraduate students enrolled in an information literacy course were surveyed regarding their experiences online with information encountering and personal information management. Survey questions were adopted from the information encountering scale developed by Wise & Erdelez (2012) and consisted of twelve questions focused on the noticing, stopping, examining, and capturing steps of the Information encountering model (Erdelez, 2004). The study indicates that the vast majority of the undergraduate students responding to the survey were frequently encountering unexpected information while online, but were not capturing this information for future use using built-in, web-based tools. While information literacy courses teach students to identify, seek, analyze, and use needed information, they do not prepare them to manage and retrieve unexpected information encountered while using the Internet.

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## 1. Introduction

Information comes to students in many forms and through many channels without actively seeking or requesting it. In a society overwhelmed by the sheer mass of information available, it is just as easy for individuals to ignore information that they have not actively sought or requested. Information literacy seeks to solve problems associated with information overload through the provision of a skills set to assist individuals in recognizing “when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ACRL, 2000; ALA, 1989).

Emerging technologies have changed the way that we, as a society, interact with information as well as the extent to which we use technology to communicate. Information literacy in the 21st century needs to address information users as both passive and active receivers of information so that they are able to seek needed information as well as accept, gather, store, and retrieve information from a variety of sources. This includes the ability of a user to store and organize information in *anticipation* of a future need (Bruce, 1998). Friedel (2001) noted that “insight is every bit as important

as the accident” (p. 38), so although it is very possible that needed information may be stumbled upon accidentally, if the individual is unable to make the link between the information that they have encountered, and a need that they have the information will not be made use of.

Information encountered by students requires that they have practical skills that will assist them in managing unexpected information. Information literacy standards do not reflect the changing nature of information use and distribution because they have not been revised in over a decade; in this time, the methods of information distribution, and storage have changed greatly.

This paper describes a case study focused on the behavior which students exhibit when they encounter unexpected information and is placed in the context of a one-credit information literacy course based on ACRL's Competency Standards for Higher Education. In particular, this research investigates how the current ACRL Competency Standards address personal information management, along with which students would benefit from the integration of personal information management into an information literacy course.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Personal information management

“Information is not always there when we need it or where we need it” (Jones, 2004, para. 2). Needed information may exist in

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a variety of formats (digital or print) and scattered across different desktops, flash drives, and e-mail accounts (Jones, 2004). This problem is amplified by the variety of methods in which information is distributed. Information no longer needs to be sought; it comes freely to students in many different forms outside of the classroom, such as television shows and documentaries, tweets, Facebook messages, cell-phone apps, game consoles, GPS systems, and including materials with text, visual, video, voice, music, and digital elements (Anson, 2011, ix). Users frequently encounter information that may be used for a future task, but the question is: where do they put this information in the meantime?

Personal information management (PIM) is a term describing the responsibility of an individual in the collection, storage, organization, and retrieval of personal items in digital form (e.g. files, website addresses) (Boardman & Sasse, 2004) and is frequently cited in terms of an individual's ability to manage information in fulfillment of their various life roles such as parent, employee, student, etc. (Fourie, 2011a,b).

While the idea of PIM is by no means new, the problem of Keeping Found Things Found (KFTF) has become increasingly more complicated as the sheer mass of information on the Internet has increased (Jones et al., 2001). Methods to collect and manage information have also increased with the accumulation of technologies that students rely on for everyday information needs and have thus assisted in the creation of information overload (Marshall et al., 2005). The increase in the quantity and accessibility of information creates the need for skills to assess the relevancy, reliability, and credibility of information as well as the ability to manage this information efficiently.

In the Keeping Things Found Studies (KTFS), Jones et al. (2001; 2002; 2003) found that their participants were frustrated with the different technologies needed to organize their information across multiple organizational schemes. Participants collected and stored information sources in a variety of ways including self-addressed e-mails and document files. These studies were focused on the problems that users encounter while managing information in their workplace environment, but it is not only the working professional who has the task of managing information coming from multiple sources. Information is encountered on a daily basis by users in a variety of contexts. While some information is sought out, other information comes in the form of a URL shared by a friend, colleague or media source (Marshall et al., 2005).

## 2.2. Rethinking information literacy competency standards

For close to three decades, information literacy models have provided pedagogical tools and learning strategies for teaching students how to search for, evaluate, and use resources for research purposes. These skills are important, not only in a student's academic life but also in other facets in which they are required to make educated decisions. Models typically include a description of specific steps that students are expected to complete while conducting information research and provide useful scaffolding for novice information seekers as they gain more search experience and learn how to address more complex and time consuming research activities.

The prescriptive simplicity of information literacy models is especially evident in teaching students to conduct research. For example, the traditional methods and standards of teaching research have no elements of surprise that are the common characteristics of most satisfying and worthwhile discoveries (Erdelez et al., 2011). Some authors such as O'Sullivan (2002) and Wilder (2005) also questioned the applicability and transferability of skills learned through information literacy instruction in schools to lifelong learning, because everyday information behavior does not follow flow-charts provided by information literacy models; it

is messy, iterative, and often unpredictable. This may be partly attributed to the shift in how information is being presented and accessed within our networked society.

ACRL's information literacy competency standards include the ability of information literate students to:

1. Determine the nature and extent of the information needed.
2. Access needed information effectively and efficiently.
3. Evaluate information and its sources critically and incorporate selected information into their knowledge base and value system.
4. Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
5. Understand many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally (ACRL, 2000).

While all of the above standards are important in the assessment of information resources, these standards are framed in the context of an information seeker, one who has already identified an information need and is actively engaged in satisfying that information need. Information technology skills are intertwined with information literacy (ACRL, 2000), and information technology has changed drastically in the last decade. Since 2000, social technologies have exploded giving us Twitter, Facebook, Enterprise 2.0, and social gaming. Current information literacy models do not address the active and passive roles of information users, which include the acceptance of, gathering, organization, storage, and retrieval of information from a variety of sources.

## 2.3. Opportunistic discovery of information

Humans have sought out many ways to seek, organize, and use information as they learn and develop patterns of human information behavior (HIB) for resolving problems associated with their survival, work and everyday life (Case, 2012). Wilson (2000) defined information behavior as the "totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use" (Wilson, 2000, p.50). Although Wilson recognized both active and passive actions, most of the information behavior models, as well as research studies, have traditionally focused on how people actively seek information. However, over the last two decades, many information behavior researchers have recognized the importance of serendipity and various forms of opportunistic discovery of information (ODI) in human information behavior (e.g., Erdelez, 1997, 2000, 2004; Foster & Ford, 2002; Foster, 2003; Björneborn, 2008; McBirnie, 2008).

This type of information acquisition has been recognized as a common behavior in modern environment saturated with information and pervasive technologies for its processing. Several definitions have been provided to describe this phenomenon. In her earlier studies, Erdelez (1997: 412) defined information encountering as 'memorable experiences of accidental discovery of useful and interesting information'. Williamson (1998: 24) defined 'incidental information acquisition' as 'finding information unexpectedly while engaged in other activities', while Heinström (2006) defined it as 'acquiring (useful or interesting) information while not consciously looking for it'.

## 2.4. Information encountering (IE) model

Erdelez (2004) has developed the IE model, which assumes that information users switch from the foreground task of finding specific information to the background interest or problem-related task during the information encountering process. Erdelez (2004) argued that a person typically attends to only one problem at a time

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