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**Building intercultural teachers: Designing information literacy instruction opportunities for increasingly international populations.**

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# Introduction

Even before the current boom in international student enrollment within higher education (American Council on Education 2012), librarians have a long history of reaching out to and supporting individuals from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g. Peters 2010). However, while the wish to help newcomers settle in or to graduate from college is, as Powell (2013) points out with reference to retention narratives, hard to argue against, it is clear that an uncritical acceptance of the ways in which librarians attempt to assist individuals may complicate rather than facilitate the mediation of new information environments. This is particularly the case within the area of information literacy, where universal approaches to instruction position newcomers as toiling under the burden of their difference (Hicks and Lloyd 2016) and the transition to a new setting as a site of struggle (Fenwick 2013) that can only be managed through librarian intervention. In further neglecting to account for the sociocultural influences that impact how an individual is able to engage with the learning affordances (Gibson 1977) of a new setting, information literacy instruction that is designed for intercultural contexts can be reproached for silencing diverse perspectives as well as limiting the employment of centring and inclusive pedagogies (Hicks 2016). This paper will address these critiques by drawing upon a recent doctoral study that explored the information literacy practices of language-learners over time as they worked, studied or volunteered overseas to present a series of recommendations for the design of accessible, diverse and inclusive information literacy instruction initiatives.

**Theoretical framework**

Situated within an interpretivist framework, this research employed symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) to provide the study’s ontological framing and constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966) to provide its epistemological structure. In conjunction with the study’s constructivist grounded theory methodological approach (Charmaz 2014), transitions theory (Meleis, Sawyer, Messias, Im & Schumacher 2000) and practice theory (Schatzki 2002) formed the two major sensitising theories through which the findings of this study were analysed.

**Research questions**

Designed to broaden understanding of language-student information literacy practices during residence abroad, this study’s research aim is addressed through two major research questions:

* How do language-students enact information literacy practices during residence abroad?
* How do language-students make sense of, transition into and come to know their new information landscapes?

**Methodology**

This study employed constructivist grounded theory as its methodology (Charmaz 2014). Facilitating the construction of theoretical understanding about language-learner information literacy practices that is grounded in data, constructivist grounded theory further foregrounds the role of the researcher within the development of meaning. The study additionally employed semi-structured interview methods, which were designed to allow the participant to reflect on and present their explanatory narrative of their time overseas, as well as photo-elicitation visual research methods, which helped to elicit tacit and contextual data that is hard to verbalise. The study’s sample comprised 26 language-learners, who were interviewed twice for a total of 52 interviews and who took 160 photos for an average of seven per participant. Selected through a maximum variation purposive sampling strategy, the study’s participants were English-speakers from Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom who were learning one of eight languages in 14 different American, Asian and European countries for a period of between four and 12 months overseas.

Exploring how language learners mediate a variety of challenges and opportunities during their time overseas, including finding accommodation, mastering transportation systems and establishing new shopping and leisure activities, the study’s research design moved the focus of information literacy, which is defined as a “way of knowing the many environments that constitute an individual's being in the world,” (Lloyd 2007, 182) from the measurement of skills to student representations of their information activities. In further recognising that the majority of information literacy research to date has emphasised the activities of non-native English speakers within majority English contexts (Hicks and Lloyd 2016), this study also purposefully focused upon the activities of English-speakers abroad to provide a comparative perspective to existing studies as well as to extend understandings of intercultural information activities (cf. Bruce, Somerville, Stoodley and Partridge 2013, 225). In turn, the emphasis on everyday information literacy practices mirrors the growing engagement with high-impact practices and experiential learning in higher education (Kuh 2008).

**Findings and discussion**

This paper draws from the findings of this study to outline a number of recommendations for the design of educational interventions that respect diverse cultural contexts and combat the inequities that currently exist within intercultural information literacy instruction initiatives.

*Reframe newcomer engagement within a new information environment in terms of transition*

Most importantly, findings from this study highlight the importance of reframing intercultural information literacy instruction in terms of transition, which refers to how learners develop a “sustainable fit” (Hviid and Zittoun 2008, 123) within a new context, rather than to the physical move that newcomers make between two settings. In recognising that international newcomers are participating in temporally-mediated and situated processes of adjustment to a new information environment, findings from this study highlight how information literacy instruction should focus on supporting the various ways in which individuals negotiate the complexity and the emotional intensity of their engagement within a new intercultural context rather than on the acquisition of remedial skills. In further highlighting how transition forms what Kilminster, Zukas, Quinton and Roberts (2010, 556) refer to as a “critically intensive learning period,” findings from this study also illustrate how information literacy instruction must acknowledge how this period of time is marked by a shift in identity and agency rather than by cultural deficiencies. In this sense, librarians and educators should take a nuanced approach to supporting international transition rather than automatically framing discontinuity as linear and anxiety-inducing.

*Recognise that information literacy centres on negotiation rather than on assimilation*  
In turn, this study’s recognition that newcomers mediate change through participation in the activities of their new setting (Rogoff 2003) highlights how information literacy instruction should acknowledge how learning within a new intercultural context is both constrained and enabled through the ways in which individuals are received within a new society. In demonstrating how social and community conditions such as the presence of discrimination and the existence of support structures (Meleis et al. 2000) impact on an individual’s ability to adjust to and engage within a new intercultural information environment, findings from this study highlight the need for information literacy instruction that moves beyond individual processes and idealistic goals. In further illustrating how newcomer information literacy must be understood as both dynamic and negotiated rather than centring on passive assimilation into a new setting, findings from this study also point to the need for information literacy instruction that engages with and is sensitive to sociocultural pressures rather than ignoring questions of individual agency.

*Design for sociality, connections and interaction*

Findings from this study also point to the need to design learning experiences for sociality; while the recent ACRL Framework (2015) has acknowledged the importance of communities of learning, information literacy still tends to be positioned as a solitary academic practice rather than as a complex (re)mediation of socially-constructed ways of knowing (Tuominen, Talja and Savolainen 2005). Yet, in recognising the importance of social connections to the ways in which a newcomer apprehends and builds knowing within a new intercultural context, findings from this study highlight the need to design information literacy learning opportunities that draw from and engage learners within broader collective practices. In further illustrating how another important challenge of intercultural transition is to rebuild social connections (Johnston, 2016), particularly when individuals feel marginalised within their setting, findings from this study also highlight the need to think more broadly about the shape that information literacy instruction could take. The recognition that library events such as speed-friending (Bridges 2014) or conversation cafes (Johnston 2016) break down barriers and build networks between domestic and international students illustrates the importance of engaging with questions of information literacy within everyday spaces (Lloyd and Wilkinson 2016) as well as in the classroom.

**Conclusion**

Recognising that the ability to engage with linguistic and cultural difference is key on educational, social and industry levels, it is vital that information literacy instruction is designed for increasingly global societies. At the same time, it is clear that internationalisation cannot merely be linked to the development of individual intercultural competence. Instead, librarians and educators must also critique and deconstruct dominant pedagogical values and frameworks to engage more than superficially with the complex challenges of creating inclusive and centring educational spaces for marginalised and underserved groups. In exploring the information literacy practices of language-learners through a sociocultural lens, this paper extends research and practice by questioning whose conception of information and information literacy is valued within studies of intercultural contexts. In further demonstrating how intercultural information literacy is more complex than has previously been assumed, this paper also sets the scene for the development of instructional opportunities that are both more meaningful and more culturally appropriate within today’s increasingly international societies.

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