Culturally Relevant Information Literacy

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Abstract: *This paper is a qualitative case study of the role of culture in the information-seeking process. This study revealed that culture does affect how we locate, evaluate and value information and thus specific kinds of knowledge. Librarians and educators must engage in discussions on "Critical Information Literacy" where information is tied to knowledge creation that does not limit learners to a specific cultural worldview. Information and information-seeking processes cannot be separated from knowledge production.*

Introduction
"Complex social practices cannot be captured in simple checklists"
--Tuominem, Savolainen, & Talja, 2005

Information Literacy is a term that has been defined as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association, 2000, p.2) The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) formalized Information Literacy into a set of competencies to provide higher education students with requisite problem-solving skills to succeed academically and as lifelong learners in the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ACRL Standards)*.

ACRL is a division of the American Library Association, and serves as the major professional association for academic librarians in the United States. The *ACRL Standards* have been adapted by library associations in Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. The definition of Information Literacy used in this study is the one articulated in the *ACRL Standards*.

The *ACRL Standards* have been promoted as a universal process that "is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education" (American Library Association, 2000, p.2). The purpose of this study was to explore Information Literacy as defined in the *ACRL Standards* from the cultural perspectives and lived experiences of self-identified Hispanic students at an institution of higher education. My goals were to: identify culturally-relevant information-seeking behavior, inform librarians on how they can provide relevant instruction for students in different cultures, and to critically examine a cultural alternative to the *ACRL Standards*.

The questions guiding this study directly address the articulation of Information Literacy skills in the *ACRL Standards*. They were:
1. How do Hispanic students construct knowledge?
2. How do these students locate, evaluate, use, create, and incorporate information?
3. How does these students' culturally-relevant knowledge affect how they learned information literacy skills?

I questioned the *ACRL Standards* as a positivist, universal process, applicable for every learner and in every learning environment, regardless of their culture. The Western worldview of universal applicability can be dangerous because it "conveys a message of superiority over all

those who do not hold this view of the world" (Harris, 2003, p.43). Knowledge originates in the social and cultural practices and experiences of human beings, as does information. Our educational standards and practices must incorporate a variety of cultural knowledge bases and worldviews to avoid a single, fixed way of knowing and learning.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study drew from concepts in Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory. Critical Theory is a social theory for critiquing and changing society. Critical theorists believe that certain truths and beliefs are privileged by dominant groups (and cultures); how we view the world is the result of a layered set of ideologies manifested in fixed practices (i.e. professional standards). Critical Race Theory applies a critical lens to the enduring nature of racism and shares with Critical Theory the goal to uncover structures in society that support inequalities and oppression.

Specific concepts utilized in this study from Critical Theory were: the ideology of economic and technical coercion, and hegemony where the belief in an education, technology, and skills are willingly accepted. These concepts were developed by Frankfurt School theorists Herbert Marcuse (1941, 1968, Kellner, 2001), Max Horkheimer (1972, 1982), and Theodore Adorno (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). The concept of hegemony as defined by Antonio Gramsci (Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971; Forgacs, 2000) was used to illuminate ideologies operating in education.

These concepts were appropriate lenses to study the definition of Information Literacy as detailed in the *ACRL Standards* as culturally biased and privileging a specific set of technical skills. Technology is a key instrument for locating and accessing information today and the dominant culture exercises economic and technical control (oppression) through the power of ideology. The embedded belief in the power of technology is one means to exercise economic control in society.

Additional concepts included Cultural Capital and Culture. The concept of Cultural Capital was drawn from Critical Race Theory (Yosso, 2005), where specific knowledge, skills, and abilities are privileged (acquiring information literacy skills). The definition of Culture from Talmadge Guy (1999) is the shared beliefs, language, and learning of a group of people. Information Literacy is a form of Cultural Capital for accessing, using, and evaluating privileged academic knowledge through a culturally-specific process.

Methodology

This was a single case qualitative research study bounded by institution and cultural group (Hispanic). My investigation employed particular questions that relied on personal stories and experiences in order to understand the cultural factors affecting information-seeking behavior. I wanted to identify issues and problems in my professional practice and to challenge theoretical assumptions concerning the *ACRL Standards*.

I interviewed three female students who lived in the Chicago area who initially self-identified as Hispanic, were bilingual, and attended courses at the same urban university campus. I used the term Hispanic broadly to include students or their parents born in the United States or in a Spanish-speaking country. I collected data through interviews, observations, and field notes,

and then analyzed utilizing a layered analysis comprising triangulation, member checking, and then organized data into themes.

Findings

This study revealed that students located and evaluated information from trusted sources as directed by college professors, family/community members, and librarians. I also found that academic knowledge is imposed, taught, directed, and very much controlled the information-seeking behavior of participants that was not always grounded in or valued by their culture. Students' cultural knowledge originated in family stories aided their process of locating, evaluating, and using information. English language proficiency and technical skills were barriers to learning and comprised an essential form of Cultural Capital.

Participants were Mexican-American; they were born in the United States and their parents were born in Mexico. Participants shared a common language and a belief in the value of education.

Each shared a common language, had ties to the same country, and self-identified differently. One participant used the term Hispanic as a generic descriptor and Chicana as a culturally-grounded identifier. The other two participants used the terms Latina and Hispanic interchangeably to self-identify. Hispanic was described as the "regular standard" used in American society to identify all Spanish speaking people, in businesses, professional organizations, and on official forms like the census. Hispanic was an imposed identity as reflected in the words of one participant who noted that the dominant culture "tends to point us out as Hispanics."

How Students Constructed Knowledge

Participants constructed knowledge from internal, culturally-trusted sources and from external sources (academia knowledge). Community and family members comprised cultural sources. Family stories provided a powerful cultural source through lessons of hardship that motivated participants to obtain a college degree. "Family means everything to us" one participant remarked when speaking about Hispanic (Mexican-American) families and this theme was echoed by each participant. The participants' parents strongly valued education and motivated their children to obtain a college education as a means to improve their lives, through their stories of hardship and sacrifice. Another source of cultural knowledge was the public library: participants reported using their materials, librarians, and their school teachers as trusted sources of information.

How Students Located, Evaluated, Used, and Incorporated Information

Participants located, evaluated, and incorporated information through *trusted sources* that d*irected* their *learning*. These sources originated internally (culture & community) and externally (academic knowledge). Participants *trusted* members in their community: librarians, teachers, and professors were credible sources that *directed* them to reliable information. Participants frequently used the same terminology in their accounts of locating and evaluating information. They described scholarly materials as "accurate," and experts were academic scholars that provided information to them. Information was located by following "guidelines" set by their trusted teachers.   My observations of participants searching for a prior class assignment provided supporting evidence where they showed how they would identify trusted (reliable and accurate) information, pointing to academic sources that instructors or friends

directed them to use. I believe this process revealed the intersection of cultural values and external ideologies (the value of education).

Culturally-Relevant Knowledge

Participants' culturally-relevant knowledge aided their learning Information Literacy skills through valuing education and associated skills. Their local public library and schools were trusted by them and this carried over into college. English language proficiency and discrimination were impediments to acquiring the Cultural Capital necessary to learn Information Literacy skills and to obtain a college degree. Another factor was cultural assimilation that was apparent through participants' experience and comfort level with the American education system that included schools and libraries.

The participants acknowledged struggling with English and cited learning academic terminology as particularly difficult. Using "higher" words impeded their search for information. English language proficiency placed these students in a powerless and difficult position in the information seeking process. As Jeria noted, language is a "cultural commodity" (1999, p. 54). Language was also tied to discrimination through a fear of being misunderstood by the dominant English-speaking culture.

Ideology & Hegemony

Economic and technical coercion were powerful factors embedded within technology. Participants discussed that they had little computer training before college. Computers and technical proficiencies were essential to succeed in college and in the information-seeking process. One participant noted that Hispanic families do not earn enough to own computers which set them back in terms of economic and Cultural Capital needed to succeed in education. Technical skills and college degrees were described as essential skills participants struggled with but knew they had to acquire in order to "survive."

One participant when describing the process of finding and evaluating information, used the terms "true" and "accurate" and remarked that certain sources "feel right." These feelings could be a combination of culture, ideology, and hegemony. Since they had trusted certain individuals (librarians, teachers) to direct them to "good" information, starting with public libraries and schools, this could reflect an internalization of the ideology of academic sources and an example of how hegemony operates in education. As one participant remarked, "do it the way it's supposed to be."

Implications for Adult Education

Culture does impact how we locate, evaluate, value and privilege information (and thus specific kinds of knowledge) but is not reflected in the *ACRL Standards*. Culturally-relevant knowledge originates in the lives and social practices of individuals in particular groups and societies. The failure of the *ACRL Standards* to address the social construction of knowledge (Weissinger, 2005; Simmons, 2005) is the crux of the problem. These standards do not address the authority and politics of knowledge and the local and cultural knowledge construction that Critical Theory endeavors to illuminate (Kaptizke, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Luke & Kaptizke, 1999).

This study revealed that adult educators, including librarians, must pay attention to cultural ways of knowing and using information. Since culture is a factor in the information-seeking process, more research is critical in understanding the complexities of different cultures; how individuals view, create, and use information. Technology continues to impact how we as human beings create and share knowledge, as information is now increasingly produced,

accessed, and disseminated digitally. Academic standards may not provide sufficient tools to address information and literacy skills, when factoring in increasingly complex technologies and human cultures.

One way to bridge the gap between knowledge and information is through "Critical Information Literacy" where knowledge production is integrated with information seeking skills. Critical Information Literacy marries concepts and theories from adult education with the *ACRL Standards*. Critical Theory and Critical Social Theory offer lenses to examine how knowledge and information can contribute to critical thinking skills that students can use to explore the assumptions, beliefs, ideologies, and cultural/social factors that underlie knowledge construction.

Critical Information Literacy could also be a means to effectively transform practice using critical theories to understand knowledge construction and to engage with privileged information in higher education. Librarians and educators must engage in discussions on literacy and how information is tied to knowledge that does not limit learners to the Western worldview.

Framing information as good or bad information can reinforce a dichotomized reality and excludes the richness and diversity of human cultures. Information and information-seeking processes cannot be separated from knowledge production.

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