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Rethinking the teleological essence of information literacy: Academic abstraction or real-life action literacy?

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Abstract

This think-piece critically examines (critical) information literacy ((C)IL) and its teleological essence. Despite substantial scholarly inquiry and progress, IL remains invisible and undervalued beyond academia. IL silos and CIL's embeddedness within critical pedagogy and its focus on epistemological issues hinder its theoretical development, reduce it to an academic abstraction and undermine its salience and emancipatory goals. A multidisciplinary/multidomain approach is needed, leveraging insights from critical (social) theories and engaging with the ontological, to facilitate a novel understanding of IL and transform it into real-life action literacy for positive social change. The paper concludes by interrogating assumptions about (C)IL's benefits, highlighting potential inadvertent disempowering effects, and issues a call to consider it a dynamic concept that evolves by accounting for sociopolitical realities.

Keywords

action literacy; critical information literacy; information literacy

The golden jubilee of information literacy (IL) is a major milestone, one that deserves an appreciation and celebration of its past and present. As a firm believer in IL's importance, and its committed advocate, I am convinced that such a milestone also calls for critical reflection—rather than complacency—so as to inspire and pave a way to the future. Therefore, the critical perspective offered here is combined with the underlying question “What is the teleological essence of information literacy for the future that lies ahead (of IL)?”.

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While, admittedly, research had traced the outlines of what was effectively IL before Zurkowski, it was he who coined the term and defined it as the ability to use a variety of information tools and sources to solve problems at work (Zurkowski, 1974). He viewed IL as a response to information overabundance and to the perceived inadequacy of workers' skills in relation to economic advancements and market demands, setting the (democratic, albeit strongly neoliberal) agenda for the future to train the whole population to deal with this and to become "information literates".

Although Zurkowski's vision of universal IL education has not come to life, IL has come a long way since his rallying call. Or has it?

Studies indicate that IL has become well-established, more scholarly and one of the most explored concepts within library and information science. During the course of its relatively short history, multiple "windows" on IL have been used, from the generic and situated to the transformative (Lupton & Bruce, 2010). In the process, IL conceptualisations have moved away from the originally predominant functional, skills-based perspectives towards the recent, more sophisticated, social practice approach and the first—and currently the only—theory of IL, Lloyd's (2017) *Theory of Information Literacy*. Moreover, an inflation of literacies associated with IL has occurred, with more than 50 identified (Onyancha, 2020). Indeed, it seems that a new literacy pops up every day, together with a new definition of and conceptual scope for IL. Instead of bringing greater clarity and a more nuanced understanding of IL, this proliferation of terms indicates that IL has been used to denote *anything*—and, thus, in effect, *nothing*. Namely, such terminological, conceptual and semantic ambiguity poses threats to IL's (disciplinary? sic!) identity and runs the risk of making it a floating signifier, a concept devoid of meaning, thereby deprived of its analytical (and transformative) potency and potential (Šobota, 2023, p. 149; cf. Haider & Sundin, 2023, p. 161).

At the same time, IL remains largely invisible as well as poorly understood and undervalued outside the confines of librarianship and (higher) education (Bruce, 2015; Goldstein, 2020; Inskip, 2015; Secker, 2023; Webber & Johnston, 2017), while its research outcomes have failed to be translated into other disciplines (Hicks et al., 2022; cf. Onyancha, 2020). This pertains also to the workplace setting, despite its status as IL's historical origin and, as such, the place where IL should come to life; the setting where it is considered most relevant (Bruce, 1997, p. 183).

While not denying the importance of studying IL in these contexts—indeed, IL has always been entwined with education and learning—I contend that this narrow focus and locus of IL research contributes to its ghettoization. Furthermore, it promotes the risky, and arguably untrue, notion that IL is the sole responsibility and competence of librarians and educators, thus serving solely as their professional legitimisation. These IL silos, both within and outside the IL community (Webber & Johnston, 2017), are hindering the development of IL which, despite some progress, is still undertheorised (Hicks et al., 2023; Sproles et al. 2013; Webber & Johnston, 2017; cf. Onyancha, 2020).

Even more so, IL silos run the risk of reducing IL to an academic abstraction, as well as hindering its uptake and real-life relevance as "a key facet of human development in society, political economy and active citizenship" (Webber & Johnston, 2017, p. 175). If IL remains a primary concern solely for us in the IL community, for librarians and educators; if we fail to mainstream and essentialise it (Pawley, 2003) with scholars from other disciplines but also with grassroots activists, workers, citizens, policy-makers and others; and if IL is not seen and valued

as something that impacts the lives of people and has the potential to transform and advance society, then the real question that needs to be debated and answered for the future of IL is a question of its, fundamentally, teleological essence: “*What is information literacy for and who is it for?*”.

This exact question was posed already some time ago by Pawley (2003, p. 445, emphasis added), and was echoed—and answered—by someone who may seem an “*unusual suspect*”—Zurkowski himself. He cried out: “Well, what good is being information literate if the information or wisdom is not *used for good?*” (Zurkowski in Kelly, 2013, p. 166, emphasis added). In 2014—another important IL anniversary, surprisingly passing mainly under the radar of the IL community—Zurkowski reiterated this question by issuing a call to action to reinvigorate IL and transform it from an academic concept into a “real-life, take action” “Action Literacy” (Kelly & Zurkowski, 2015; Kelly, 2023; Zurkowski & Kelly, 2014, p. 52). He regarded action literacy—“the ability to transform good reliable information into moral/ethical activism/actions” (Zurkowski in Kelly, 2023, p. 414)—as an all-encompassing literacy of critical importance to addressing issues like education reform or job security in the context of growing public mistrust, disinformation, injustice and inequity. The past ten years have certainly not lessened the urgency of this agenda.

While the goals of the betterment and empowerment of individuals and society have always been at the heart of IL, it was its sub-discipline—*critical information literacy* (CIL)—that brought a “teleological turn” in its essence (Bezerra & Schneider, 2023, p. 57) to achieve these emancipatory goals, as well as to advance human rights and social justice more broadly, in other words to use IL “for good”. However, I contend that the transformative agenda and potential of CIL is hindered by its failure to move beyond an academic and pedagogical abstraction, which is paradoxical given its definition as a “theoretically informed *praxis*” (Elmborg, 2006, emphasis added). Moreover, and again paradoxically, it is by remaining within the realm of academic/librarian/educational¹ contexts and issues that CIL also hinders the further progress of IL. Let me elaborate this in a bit more detail, space allowing.

CIL was forged in the North American academic library context in the 2000s, primarily in opposition to “traditional conceptions” of IL (Tewell, 2015, p. 25)², and has continued ever since to engage in a kind of navel-gazing, i.e. to centre and frame the object of its research and theorising around IL itself. In this regard, a specific research and theorising interest are the IL notions which constrain its instruction. Namely, since CIL emerges from and is embedded within, predominantly, critical pedagogy, especially in the Freirean tradition, its praxis and political stance are mainly directed at understanding and challenging how we teach and learn IL, almost entirely without engaging in empirical research and crossing the boundaries of the classroom. In effect, CIL is both the *result* and the *object* of (the study of) critical pedagogy. While I am not denying the salience of approaches focusing on *in-formation* and

¹ Here “educational” is conceived of in its narrow meaning and context, limited to formal institutions; this is important to emphasise since the educational component, understood broadly, is ingrained in hegemonic relations and is a fundamental facet of conceptions of power and the transformational pursuits exemplified in the work of Gramsci (Mayo, 2014), and should therefore be a crucial aspect of CIL.

² Although, *nota bene*, CIL’s “proto-definition” (Šobota, 2023, p. 141) came very early in the IL development, framed by a communication scholar, Hamelink. He regarded it as essential for “liberation from oppressive effects of the institutionalized public media” (Hamelink, 1976, p. 120). However, his work was, astonishingly, “under-utilised” in the (C)IL theoretical development.

epistemological, pedagogical issues, I posit that CIL has not done enough to establish its own salience and distinctive character vis-à-vis IL, including positioning itself in relation to IL research, especially outside the U.S. Thus, it has created another IL silo and undermined its own democratic character (see, e.g., Webber & Johnston, 2017, pp. 166–168). Also, and consequently, it has not done enough to contribute to a substantially different, novel understanding of IL.

One reason for this, in my view, is that CIL has not drawn sufficiently or appropriately from critical theories and thinkers like Marx, Gramsci, Horkheimer and other Marxian, Marxist (for a distinction see, e.g., Chauvel, 2001) and Frankfurtian thinkers (see also Bezerra & Schneider, 2023). The reasons for this may be understandable and justified from a pragmatic standpoint—for example the complexity and richness of critical legacy and thought, and/or the political sensitivity and dangerousness (“Marx is radioactive”), and hence existential/career precariousness (Elmborg, 2022, pp. 237–239). Nevertheless, these choices and omissions undermine CIL’s theoretical foundations and its strength as well as its internal consistency and authenticity.

An example of such an omission, i.e. marginalisation, which is particularly contradictory to the teleology, and origin, of critical theory and pedagogy, and by extension of CIL, is the concept of class (including class consciousness and solidarity, class struggle and class antagonisms) and the related concepts and theories of decent or meaningful work. I regard class as a fertile analytical concept, especially in the workplace context, which could also help overcome IL silos, for instance by bridging CIL and workplace IL research (see Šobota & Špiranec, 2022; Šobota, 2023), as well as by allowing for the necessary multidomain, multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches and the application of complementary (social) theories. These include equity-mindedness, plural agonistics, positioning theory, social capital theory and sociomateriality (for a discussion on the possible application and relevance of these theories to IL, see the relevant contributions in the recent Facet book *Information Literacy Through Theory*: Eckerdal, 2023; Folk, 2023; Haider & Sundin, 2023; Hicks, 2023; Johansson, 2023). CIL research could take a sophisticated stance on exploring a range of issues pertinent to the diverse workplace of today. Among them, how class determines the “moral economy” (Thompson, 1971, 1991) of the workplace environment; how CIL practices can be developed through an understanding of the role of class and exploitation within the workplace; how and if CIL can help build workers’ agentic capacity to act on and take control of their own life trajectories; the role of “information capital”, in a Bourdieusian sense, in workers’ class interests; and how AI is used in the class struggle—both by capitalists/employers to control workers and by workers to take back control of their work, for example through data activism and “AI socialism” (Acemoglu, 2023).

Furthermore, the use of critical theories would help centre marginalised voices (both in society and within IL), such as non-western, non-white, disabled people, those from migrant backgrounds, precarious and informal sector workers and the otherwise disenfranchised and disadvantaged.

These research foci and approaches—via for example critical ethnography/autoethnography, community-based participatory action, scholar-activist research and novel, inventive research methods (e.g. rhizomatic mapping and multimodal discourse analysis) incorporating intersectional analysis—would help build a robust and coherent argument on how (but also *whether*) CIL is needed and how/whether it can be effective in attaining objectives such as

social justice and decent work. In effect, it would contribute to a greater theoretical awareness when connecting IL to the concepts of power, empowerment and democracy. Ultimately, this would allow CIL to engage more with the ontological issues (e.g. an ontological understanding of capital), which are missing in CIL research, thus facilitating a more critical understanding of IL.

Just as importantly, and in line with CIL's teleology, the concept of class and other concepts from critical (social) theories could (or rather—should?) be used by CIL authors as a foundation for progressive politics and a transformative and theoretically informed agenda in opposition to inequalities, injustice, oppression and the neoliberal contempt for working-class people. The contemporary challenges and intersecting crises—of a largely information-illiterate environment governed by technofeudalist interests (Varoufakis, 2021, 2023), the increased consequences of information imperfections (asymmetries) (Stiglitz, 2017) and neoliberal-induced inequalities—mean that there has never been a greater need for CIL. In consequence, CIL needs to have a bold, ambitious, even utopian³ agenda and to stand as a “way of being and taking critical action”, that is to act as a real-life, action literacy which offers a clear standpoint and whose teleological essence is to effect positive social change. This calls for stepping outside our own silo and narrow interests; instead, we need to build alliances ready to advocate IL and to put marginalised, even deliberately suppressed issues of social justice high on the agenda as an academic, ideological and political priority. Ultimately, we need to form a Coalition for Social Justice, the coalition which Zurkowski (2013) labelled the “Direct Democracy Coalition”.

Let me conclude this think-piece with one final critical, even provocative, reflection. While I am obviously convinced of the critical relevance of (C)IL, I am also convinced that we cannot afford to be naïve in thinking that it alone can solve all the inherent problems of the information and sociopolitical environment. On the contrary, we must also interrogate the underlying and unchallenged assumptions of the benefits of (C)IL and maybe even whether the current conceptualisations are not only part of the solution, but also part of the problem. To paraphrase Bourdieu (1986, p. 19), it is risky to reduce social exchanges to the phenomena of information and communication and to ignore “the brutal fact of universal reducibility to economics”. In other words, sociopolitical structures usually configure prohibitive experiences which constrain our CIL practices and our capacities to act meaningfully upon them. In addition, what we imply and teach, especially through CIL, may be counterproductive and discouraging—in effect, inadvertently disempowering—as it can impose high, unrealistic standards and expectations on learners, who are expected to possess—it sometimes feels—“superhuman” powers and capacities. As Loukissas (2019, p. 19) argues in the context of critical data studies, “critical reflection has its own limits; it can be detached rather than responsible, analytic rather than affective or conceptual rather than hands on”.

For (C)IL to be transformed into a real-life, action literacy capable of transforming our realities and being used for good, we need to consider it as a dynamic concept which needs to evolve by accounting for our sociopolitical realities. The agenda proposed herein, to be pursued collaboratively, leveraging insights from critical (social) theories, is a way forward to achieving that as well as to helping overcome IL silos and developing a concept relevant beyond academia. This think-piece serves as a prolegomenon and a call to action for interested thinkers

³ Here, utopian is understood in Bloch's terms as an “educated hope” and as “anticipatory consciousness” which constructs utopia not as a “fantastic creation” but as a possibility for which one should advocate and act (see Kalanj, 2018, p. 21 as cited in Špiranec & Kalebić, 2022, p. 599).

within and outside our IL community to engage with this agenda and drive forward the IL evolution.

Declarations

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