# Towards a constructive unbalancing: the reflexive turn in information literacy

A roar of indignation shook the room. Before the commotion had settled down another teacher had stuck his head in the door to see what the trouble was.

“It’s all right,” Phaedrus said. “We just accidentally stumbled over a genuine question, and the shock is hard to recover from.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The last two decades have seen a shift in the most fundamental issues of our concern. This transformation can be traced in the thought patterns, concepts and metaphors through which we see our practice as teaching or instruction librarians, and which in turn structure it. Above all, it manifests in a relinquishment, however reluctant, of a monolithic or absolutist vision of information literacy as a singular, constant and stably definable state, in favour of a relational[[2]](#endnote-2) and embodied[[3]](#endnote-3) phenomenon in which the individual’s unique context and connections are of paramount importance. This white paper highlights both the multiplicity of those contexts and the global interconnections between our divergent experiences.

The monolithic vision of IL is grounded in a belief that there are comprehensive and universally applicable standards both for information behaviour and information competency: ‘right ways’ of using information[[4]](#endnote-4), and measurable levels of attainment in doing so. This idea of a *universal* form of IL that could be not only identified, but also taught and assessed, seemed to take root early on in IL’s 40-year history. Corporate definitions and models anatomised the encounter with information into a linear process with a defined end-point, and mandated an order and a method in which that process should be carried out. The trajectory carried the learner from need identification through searching and locating, through evaluating to citing, and thus to the end of the transaction - as though IL were a convergent force designed to uncover a singular, final answer.

Despite the unyielding solidity of the models, many IL practitioners found the reality of their teaching to be far more fluid, uncovering multiple legitimate approaches to research problems, contradictory yet valid interpretations of evidence, and instances like the one above where, together with our learners, we stumbled over questions to which we could not immediately - or perhaps ever - find stable solutions. We learned that knowledge itself is less about acquiring definitive answers and ways of doing, and more about participating in a dynamic, socially constructed and endlessly developing work.

Our certainties have been called into question; our equilibrium has been disturbed, perhaps beyond recovery - and we are, I believe, the better for it.

In our own understanding and practice, our roles as information literacy librarians are no longer about guiding students to the ‘right’ resource, and we can no longer position ourselves as mediators, connectors, gatekeepers or kindly sages[[5]](#endnote-5). Our use is not in pointing out the right route to academic information, but in exploring and enacting as part of a learning community the various ways in which knowledge in any domain may be framed, analysed, interpreted, questioned, communicated and lived. This evolution is captured in the terminological shift from ‘user education’ - something done *to* learners *by* librarians - to the language used by the authors in this paper to position their work: curriculum integration, academic development, situated practice.

This growing awareness of the contextual and co-constructed nature of information, reflected in the ACRL’s movement from ‘standards’ to a negotiated ‘framework’[[6]](#endnote-6), allows us to recognise the connections between IL and learning. Once we begin to understand learning as “a qualitative change in a person’s way of seeing … rather than a change in the amount of knowledge which someone possesses”[[7]](#endnote-7) we perceive that, as a constituent part of the process of learning, IL is not merely additive but transformative. Admitting the validity of information that challenges or contradicts our beliefs, and revising our stance accordingly, is a crucial element of transformative learning and personal development. Thus, engaging in critical encounters with information changes more than the learner’s understanding: it also changes the learner, perhaps profoundly.

As a result, this shift towards a more questioning, relational view of IL inescapably brings with it a destabilising of the ‘ownership’ of IL. Within the absolutist vision of IL as a set of universally defined competencies, it is librarians who articulate what information literacy looks like, assess whether learners have met the required standard, and graciously confer the status of ‘information literate’. But once we recognise the transformational nature of the encounter between the individual and information, the agency passes from the librarian to the learner. Once we understand that the value of information varies according to the context within which it is used, we also recognise that it is the individual who is best placed to decide whether and how to deploy that information to make it serve their needs within that context. Rather than a skill conferred by professionals, we begin to see IL as a state of mind, like Bruner’s description of academic disciplines as “less repositories of knowledge than … methods for the use of mind”.[[8]](#endnote-8) (1960, p.20) From this perspective, information literacy is a critical lens through which we interact with the world and make meaning of it; a way of seeing, and therefore a way of *being*.

To relinquish the reassuring conception of IL as a “prescriptive enumeration of skills”[[9]](#endnote-9) that is the occupation and the proper preserve of the library may seem a loss to mourn. Yet if we let go of this idea of our practice as a skillset uniquely propounded by librarians and start to see it instead as a “cluster of interconnected … concepts”[[10]](#endnote-10), part of a larger enterprise whose purpose is both to educate and to discover, we gain something greater: partnership in a community engaged in the construction of knowledge.

Good teachers don’t just *do*; they *are*. They model ways of being, approaches and mindsets, that can help learners to decide who and how they want to be. Our role as information literacy practitioners is not to describe a critical relationship with information, but to enact it: to model what an approach based on critical appraisal and discernment, on asking questions, on weighing evidence, on probing arguments, statistics and claims looks like, not only in the academic arena but in everyday life.

Adopting this role brings with it one other disconcerting responsibility: to apply as far as we can the same critical gaze to the underpinning values of our own practice. This movement, which is broadly labelled critical information literacy, represents a reflexive turn in IL thinking which argues that as educators we are inescapably involved in an unequal power structure whose greatest achievement may be the pretence of being innate. Our choice is either to accept or to question that structure: we cannot remove ourselves from it, to criticise it from a position of objectivity. “Neutrality is not an option”[[11]](#endnote-11).

This reflexive position disconcerts once again our achieved beliefs and erodes even the provisional securities of our reflective practice. But, again, that loss of certainty and comfort is compensated for by the possibility of a greater integrity, a deeper insight, and a new awareness of our place as learners and inquirers within a wider community of practice, one which consists of an intersecting set of communities such as that modelled in this work.

The work does not end with the abjuring of our neutrality. Rather, it is from that unstable point that it begins. Radical commitment to a vision of IL that embraces uncertainty, multiple viewpoints and unfixed knowledge may still be reappropriated by a more determinate position, petrified by institutional pressures, brought to a standstill by economic imperatives surrounding the university (such as ever-increasing calls to demonstrate value through quantitative measures). To maintain our commitment to openness, contingency, pushing beyond ‘right answers’, we need the support and provocation of our peers. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community of practice to maintain a reflective information literacy practitioner: a librarian capable of embracing uncertainty and of turning an unfearing questioning gaze on their own identity and entitlement.

1. Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (London: Bodley Head, 1974), 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Christine Bruce, Sylvia Edwards, and Mandy Lupton, "Six Frames For Information Literacy Education: A Conceptual Framework For Interpreting The Relationships Between Theory And Practice," *Innovation In Teaching And Learning In Information And Computer Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2006): 1-18, accessed January 10, 2017, doi:10.11120/ital.2006.05010002. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Annemaree Lloyd, “Information Literacy Landscapes: An Emerging Picture,” *Journal of Documentation* 62, no. 5 (2006): 570-583, accessed January 12, 2017, doi:[10.1108/00220410610688723](http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00220410610688723). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Whitworth, “Communicative Competence in the Information Age: Towards a Critical Theory of Information Literacy Education,” *Italics* 5, no. 1 (2006), accessed January 12, 2017, doi:10.11120/ital.2006.05010007. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Andrew Walsh and Emma Coonan, eds., *Only Connect* *… : Discovery Pathways, Library Explorations and the Information Adventure* (Huddersfield: Innovative Libraries, 2013), 8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ACRL. “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education”. Accessed January 10, 2017. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ference Marton and Paul Ramsden, “What does it take to improve learning?” in *Improving Learning: New Perspectives*, ed. Paul Ramsden (London: Kogan Page, 1988), 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jerome Bruner, *The Process Of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), quoted in Noel Entwistle, *Teaching for Understanding At University: Deep Approaches and Distinctive Ways of Thinking* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. ACRL. “Framework”. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. James Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 192-199, accessed January 12, 2017, doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)