Statement of Competency J

J. Describe the fundamental concepts of information-seeking behaviors

In order for librarians to be able to assist users in locating information within library collections, they must first have an understanding of how users conceive of information, as the lay library user does not think about information in the same way as a professional. One could say that we are living in an era of information over-abundance due to the presence of the Internet that allows users to find information at any time of day or night from practically any location through the use of web searches on computers and mobile devices. For the lay information-seeker, using the Google search engine to find information has become so commonplace that the word “Google”, meaning to look up information using Google, has its own entry in the Oxford English Dictionary. Indeed, using Google has become the default means of finding information on the web. Another source of information for the information-seeker is Wikipedia. Wikipedia has information on a wide variety of subjects that are not found in traditional encyclopedias that are often only accessible through library databases. As Wikipedia is freely accessible by any user with a web browser, it too has become a default source of information.

Beyond the common use of Google and Wikipedia, Adam Mathes has described what he calls “folksonomies”. Folksonomies are a way that users of content-sharing websites such as Delicious and Flickr that allow users to use tags to describe the items that they are sharing. The tags are then used as a means of categorizing items that have similar themes or subjects. Tags are also used on wiki entries and blog posts. The tags make items easy to find by other users. The tags used in folksonomies are completely informal and do not have any pre-determined vocabulary, as is the case with library catalogs that use controlled vocabulary such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings.
What does this have to do with the way people use libraries to find information, and why do librarians need to be aware of this? For one thing, librarians need to be aware of the popular conceptions of information seeking so that they can guide users in the use of library resources. Not only do librarians need to be aware of the general conception among the public of how to seek out information, librarians must be aware of each individual’s personal information infrastructure. Gary Marchionini described the personal information infrastructure as each person’s set of mental models, cognitive skills and general knowledge that guides that person’s practices of accessing and integrating information. Carol Kuhlthau describes what she calls zones of intervention, in which a librarian assesses a person’s needs when seeking information. By being able to successfully assess the level of intervention needed by each particular user, the librarian is able to provide the right amount of information. Being able to do so is important as providing too much detailed intervention to an inexperienced user can be overwhelming to that person, which can intimidate him or her in either conducting a search or asking for help again should the need arise. Likewise, providing too little information to such a user is of no help whatsoever, as the user will not gain any new skills in searching for information, and thus will not be able to expand their own personal information infrastructure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Level of Intervention by Librarian</th>
<th>Librarian's Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Z1</td>
<td>User conduct’s his or her own search independently</td>
<td>Organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z2</td>
<td>Provides a single reference</td>
<td>Locator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z3</td>
<td>Provides a group of references</td>
<td>Identifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z4</td>
<td>Provides guidance to searching within a group of references</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z5</td>
<td>Provides guidance through the search process as a whole</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
</tr>
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How does this translate into practice? As many users have the conception that they can find anything on the Internet just by using Google or Wikipedia, both the reference interview and library instruction sessions (that generally take place in the educational sphere) affords the librarian and opportunity not only to instruct users in both the presence of and best practices for use of library resources such as online public access catalogs (OPACs) and databases, but also to teach users such information literacy skills as evaluating resources so they can know which ones are valid and will provide them with the best information, and which for which the validity of the information is difficult to verify. In this way, the reference interview also aids learning, as it is often a collaborative process in which the librarian and user work together to explore the library’s resources allowing the user to learn skills for doing so in the future, and allowing the librarian to gain new insight on the users’ understanding of information, how it works and how to find it.

Another way in which librarians can enhance users’ information seeking skills is by designing user interfaces that are intuitive and easy to use as they correspond to users’ expectations of how a web site should work. Pages should be structured in such a way that links for different types informational resources (such as links to research guides and databases) is easy to find, and the catalog search box is placed in a prominent or easy-to-find location on the page. Many libraries also encourage reference questions through use of chat, instant messaging (IM), email or appointments with librarians.

Evidence and Criteria for Selection

1. LIBR 202 – Information Retrieval – Final: The Information Professional as Counselor and An Analysis of Amazon.com Via Norman’s Theories of Design

In this paper, I examined Carol Kuhlthau’s theory of zones of intervention, by which the librarian can assess a users’ level of knowledge about library resources, as well as the users’ skill when it
comes to using these resources and conducting searches, both via OPACs and online databases. In particular, I studied the idea of the librarian as a counselor who works with the user to build the user’s information-seeking skills. However, this is a two-way street, as the librarian, through interaction with the user, also gains an understanding of the users’ own personal perspective when it comes to finding information. Therefore, the perspective of both participants in the interaction are changed and expanded: the user has no skills by which to expand his or her personal information infrastructure, and the librarian has new insight into how the lay user sees the world of information, allowing the librarian to tailor the reference interview accordingly. In addition, I used Donald Norman’s theories of affordances and constraints to analyze Amazon.com from the perspective of the user, to see what elements guide users in performing the actions they want (affordances), and what features prevent users from taking certain actions such as navigating away from the site (constraints).

I feel that this evidence demonstrates my ability to understand the interplay between users’ understanding of the world of information, and the librarian’s ability to guide the user in more effective information-seeking skills. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the user’s interface with the world of the library plays an important role in allowing librarians to meet the needs of library users at their own level of understanding.

2. LIBR 202 – Information Retrieval – Folksonomies Article Summary

Among my assignments while taking LIBR 202 Information Retrieval was to write weekly summaries of articles that were provided to us by the professor. The article here summarized describes the idea of “folksonomies”, as described by Adam Mathes, and was written while Mr. Mathes was a student in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University
of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. According to Mr. Mathes, folksonomies are ways of categorizing information that are done by lay people (i.e., non-information professionals), and that are usually done on social media websites wherein users apply labels or tags that describe the items that they are sharing with others. By attaching tags to these items, users are, in effect, creating their own sets of subject headings that are searchable by others. Mr. Mathes uses Delicious and Flickr as examples, though tagging is often used on blog posts as well. Users either create new tags or use tags that have been created by others. An example how tags work can be seen in a blog posted on the website of the New York Times on October 8, 2010, about the son of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. At the bottom of the blog posting, a section appears with two tags for “kim jong-un” and “north korea”:

Each tag contains a hyperlink. Clicking on the tag labeled “north korea” brings the user to a page with all the blog posts that have been marked with that tag, thus allowing the user access to different articles on the same subject if he or she so desires. Indeed, many library OPACs are now incorporating this feature on search results to allow users to expand their search results and find works similar to the subject of the original search query. This is useful if the original query does not return the results that the user was seeking.

This evidence demonstrates my understanding of some of the methods of categorizing
information that have emerged outside the world of the library, and the importance for librarians to
understand how people respond to the need to organize information, so that they can take these
responses into consideration when designing searchable systems that can be easily used by library
users who have no formal training in information science.

3. LIBR250 – Design and Implementation of Instructional Strategies for Information Professionals –
Module 1: Synthesis

In this assignment, I synthesized and summarized information I had read and studied about
educational theory, curriculum and assessment, collaboration in the learning environment, and 21st
Century Skills, which are means by which students use modern technology to enhance their own
learning. Among the key theories I examine in this assignment is the theory of constructivist
learning, in which learners incorporate new ideas, concepts and knowledge into their own personal
information infrastructures through the experience of examining a problem to find a solution. In
addition, constructivist-learning theorists also have determined that the best learning is done
collaboratively, as each person’s ideas add to the whole. The reference interview is a collaborative
process in that the librarian and the student (or non-student library user) are both working together,
each contributing their own understanding and perspective to the reference interview experience.
In addition, as the user provides feedback to the librarian, the librarian is able to adjust his or her
interactions with the user accordingly. The librarian is also able to use such interactions as a means
of educating the student in good information literacy skills, such as looking for sources of
information that can be verified. In addition, the use of Web 2.0 technology in the reference
interview (chat, IM, email) allows the user to consider the library as a place that is “always open”,
which thus encourages the user to seek out libraries for their information needs.
I feel that this evidence demonstrates my understanding of the ways in which both theories of education and technology can be used to enhance a user’s information-seeking skills, by understanding how the reference interview can help build learning in a collaborative fashion, and how technology can enhance this process.

**Conclusion**

Assisting library users in expanding their informational repertoire requires more than just the ability to teach the user the technical skills for using OPACs or databases. It requires an understanding of how people see information, how they think about it, and how they go about acquiring it on a day-to-day basis beyond the library walls. As libraries exist to serve users and meet their information needs, it is important that librarians understand the information-seeking skills that users already possess when the walk through the library’s doors. Knowing that people use Google and Wikipedia to meet their information needs provides librarians with a starting point from which they can introduce users not only to OPACs and databases, but also teach them skills to use them most effectively. By understanding how people already conceptualize information, librarians can work together with users to introduce them to new skills that will hopefully stay with them for a long time to come.