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ENCOURAGING CONVERGENCE OF INFORMATION BEHAVIOUR THEORY AND INFORMATION SERVICES EDUCATION (PAPER)

Abstract:

Information behaviour theory, models, and concepts (IB TMCs) are foundational for effective reference and information services (RIS) and yet they are not widely addressed in basic RIS courses. This presentation reports preliminary findings from a broader study exploring which IB TMCs are introduced in RIS courses and how they are treated. Course syllabi and assigned textbooks of RIS courses were analyzed for integration of IB TMCs. This analysis will be followed by a survey of instructors of these courses to determine key factors in integration of IB TMCs. Preliminary results indicate that treatment of IB TMCs remain limited and suggest that IB scholars may have an impact on the integration of their work.

1. Introduction

Information behaviour (IB) is a critical research area for informing research and information services (RIS). RIS practice must be predicated on what is understood about how users think about their information needs, how they search for information to meet those needs, and what they do with that information once found. That understanding includes a complex mix of users' cognition, affect, and behaviours. Information behaviour theories, models, and concepts (IB TMCSs) are not, however, well-integrated into RIS practice. In her study of library-related trade publications, Kingrey (2002) found that information seeking concepts were not present. In their study of professional associations' RIS-related competency standards, Hicks and VanScoy (2019) found that information behaviour was generally not treated as an area of expertise.

The lack of attention to IB TMCs in RIS practice may originate with the values and preferences of RIS professional education. O'Connor (2011) found that "information seeking behavior" was in the content of 43% of the RIS syllabi that she studied. This figure was a dramatic reduction from earlier studies that found the concept in 79% (Powell & Raber, 1994) and 77% (Broadway & Smith, 1986). The finding that more than half of the fundamental courses for RIS professional education do not include IB is troubling. Beyond the broad concern about the disconnect

between theory and practice, it indicates that RIS professionals may enter the workforce lacking a critical knowledge base that should inform their practice.

This study builds on O'Connor's findings by probing the extent to which IB TMCs are integrated, or merely represented in RIS professional education. It also explores the IB TMCs that are integrated to determine why these have been more successful. The findings will encourage better integration of IB TMCs into RIS courses and will ultimately contribute to better RIS practice.

2. Research Questions

This presentation reports findings from the first phase of a larger study on the integration IB TMCs into RIS education. The research questions addressed by the study include:

1. To what extent are IB TMCs integrated into syllabi for basic RIS courses in North America?
2. To what extent are IB TMCs integrated into the major RIS textbooks in North America?
3. To what extent do RIS instructors consider IB TMCs in preparing their basic RIS courses? Are there common characteristics or perspectives of instructors who integrate them in their courses?
4. What are characteristics of IB TMCs that are well-integrated into RIS professional education?

The preliminary findings reported here address the first two research questions.

3. Methods

The study is being conducted in two phases. Phase 1 is a content analysis of RIS syllabi and textbooks (RQs 1 and 2). Phase 2 is a survey and interviews of RIS instructors (RQs 3). RQ4 will be addressed by the findings of both phases.

In Phase 1, websites for ALA-accredited programs in North America were examined to identify the fundamental RIS course for each program. Publicly available syllabi for these RIS courses taught in 2019 were downloaded. Ten were made available in this way. Where syllabi were not available, course instructors were identified and an email sent to explain the study purpose and request a copy of the course syllabus and reading list. Emails were sent to 83 instructors, and 45 syllabi were forwarded for inclusion in the analysis, for a total corpus of 55 syllabi. Content analysis was used to identify terms used to indicate that IB TMCs were included on the syllabi (i.e., information behavio(u)r*, information practice*, human information interaction, user behavio(u)r*, information-seeking). Specific IB TMCs included in the syllabus, and the location of these terms and specific IB TMCs, were noted. Readings related to IB TMCs were recorded, and the location of these readings (i.e., whether they were concentrated in particular weeks or spread throughout the course) was documented. Coding was conducted by three coders, who analyzed a small subset of syllabi and compared findings in order to come to consensus on analytic coding. That consensus was achieved to 85% (Connaway & Radford, 2016), so the remainder of the syllabi were divided into three, and each coder analyzed that set. In addition, the required textbooks noted in all syllabi were analyzed for inclusion of IB TMCs.

Phase 2 of the study, an online census survey of instructors of RIS courses in all ALA-accredited programs is scheduled for early 2020. Survey questions will examine the decision-making around integration of IB TMCs in the design of RIS courses, as well as individual and contextual factors that affect these decisions.

4.   Results and Discussion

Two-thirds of the syllabi make some reference to IB TMCs. The terms used to indicate IB as a topic were largely found in weekly topic labels (40%, n=22), course descriptions (31%, n=17) and course objectives (31%, n=17). Only 15% (n=8) of syllabi treated IB TMCs substantively (as integrated and fundamental to the course, or the focus of a week's content and one major assignment). Another 25% (n=14) included some treatment of IB TMCs (e.g., assigning one or two early readings, or assigning a brief assignment, or brief topical treatment in a single week of the course, possibly to establish a "lens" for students). Sixteen (29%) syllabi included minimal treatment of IB TMCs (the course title, description, or student learning outcomes set expectations but these were not followed by any content or readings; or, a few related readings were assigned, with nothing else). The remaining 17 syllabi (31%) made no reference to IB TMCs. In eight of these cases, this limited attention to IB TMCs could have been due to a required or prerequisite course in IB.

The most-referenced IB TMC was Kuhlthau's information search process model (e.g., Kuhlthau, 2004), in 12 syllabi (22%), undoubtedly because of Kuhlthau's dedication to providing practitioners with clear advice about how to incorporate the information search process model (ISP) into RIS. The most commonly assigned reading in those syllabi that referenced IB TMCs to any extent was an excerpt from *Looking for Information* (Case & Given, 2016), required in 7 syllabi (13%). IB-related readings were typically found grouped together in the week or weeks devoted to IB TMCs. The expectation set by course titles and objectives mentioning IB was frequently not reflected by course content, as measured by readings, assignments, and course topics.

The syllabi identified 11 unique textbooks for student reading; that set included one which was an updated edition of another in the list. The coverage of IB TMCs within those texts varied, but was mostly minimal. Only one assigned textbook treated IB TMCs substantively (Hirsh, 2018). In textbooks that included IB TMCs, they tended to appear in early chapters on fundamental concepts or in chapters on RIS for children or diverse populations.

The picture painted by these results make clear that there remains significant opportunity to enhance treatment of IB TMCs to ensure that pre-service librarians have at least a basic understanding of IB, as an important theoretical foundation to RIS.

5.   Importance and Implications of the Study

A limitation to the results presented here is that syllabi and textbooks reveal an incomplete picture of what is taught in a course. Instructors may refer to IB TMCs during lectures, introducing them as new content or using them to frame RIS concepts. For this reason, the third

research question that probes how instructors consider IB in preparing their course is a critical component of this study.

The study's finding that IB TMCs are not well-integrated into RIS professional education should encourage instructors to reflect about the power of IB research for understanding why certain RIS practices are recommended and the power of IB knowledge to help students respond to future contexts that today's instructors cannot foresee. The authors acknowledge the fact that the breadth of content required of an RIS course is a challenge (Agosto et al., 2010). The demand for future RIS professionals to acquire skills and knowledge in management, marketing, and instruction, for example, may be eliminating course time that would have been devoted to some fundamental skills and knowledge from RIS courses.

This study's finding that Kuhlthau's ISP is the most commonly integrated model sheds light on the role of the IB scholar in the use of IB TMCs in RIS courses. Efforts by IB scholars to apply their research to practice may pay off in adoption by practitioners. McKechnie et al. (2008) found that IB scholars do a poor job of writing up their research for practitioner access. IB scholars can facilitate integration of their findings into RIS professional education by deliberately making connections to practice, by collaborating with practitioners and instructors to communicate their relevance, and by disseminating their work through practitioner-oriented channels.

As Nguyen & Hider (2018) state, the responsibility for ameliorating the theory practice gap lies on both sides. A more synergistic relationship between RIS instructors and IB scholars may help to enrich RIS courses with theories, models, and concepts that will improve RIS practice. In turn, such a relationship would increase the impact of IB scholarship.

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