Theory of Action and Information Literacy: Critical Assessment towards Effective Practice

Paulette A Kerr, PhD
Department of Library and Information Studies
University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica
Research Background
Competing Conceptions

- Behavioral Conception
  [Doyle, 1992]

- Constructivist/Knowledge Construction View
  [Gordon, 2000; Todd, 1999]

- Process Approach
  [Kuhlthau, 2004; Cheuk, 2000; Lloyd, 2007]

- Relational Conception
  [Bruce, 1997; Catts, 2005; Maybee, 2006, 2007]

Multiple Definitions

- The ability to access, evaluate and use information towards a specific purpose. [American Library Association, 1989]

- Enabling student learning via theory based strategies and interventions which enable students to construct new knowledge [Todd, 2001]

- A process of constructing meaning [Kuhlthau, 2004]

- A way of thinking and reasoning about aspects of subject matter [Bruce, 2000]

Information Literacy as Complex
Critical reflection on institutional values may address challenges and dilemmas in professional practice.

Public *reflection* on practice is done in the interest of *learning* towards bringing theories-in-use in line with espoused theories for *greater effectiveness in practice*

*Argyris and Schö¨n, 1974*
**Conceptual Framework**

**Theory of Action** *(Argyris and Schön, 1974)*

A detailed framework for explaining relationships between what can be observed in people’s actions and their beliefs about these actions.

- employed to examine organizations and communities of practice

*Theories of action are beliefs, rules, concepts, practices that underlie actions*

**Contrasting theories of action:**

- **Espoused theory**
  - Beliefs, assumptions, rules
- **Theory-in-use**
  - Theory of action implied by behavior

*Effective practice: congruence between espoused theories and theories-in-use*
Evaluating Theories of Action

Argyris and Schön, 1974
Investigation of espoused theories of learning in policy statements and theory that actually informs assessment used by academics. Willis, 1993.

Meta analysis of studies exploring teaching beliefs and practices of university academics. Kane, Sandretto and Heath, 2002.

Rhetoric and reality of teachers’ feedback to students. Orrell, 2006

Assessing a community of practice via an in-depth investigation of relationships between conceptions and practice in light of varying and competing understandings of information literacy.
Research Design and Procedures

- **Multi-case sample**
  - 11 US academic libraries recognized in two best practice databases for exemplary instruction resources

- **Multiple data sources**
  - 60 Policy documents (mission statements, instruction policies, goals, definitions of IL)
  - 150 Online tutorials
  - 12 Semi structured in-depth interviews

- **Multi-method approach**
  - Questioning, thematic, comparative analysis at 2 levels
    1. Case-by case, institutional : Statements of claims
    2. Meta claims of espoused theories and theories-in-use
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta Claims from Policy Docs</th>
<th>Meta Claims from Tutorials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Libraries as environments of learning become agents for fulfilling missions of universities.</td>
<td>- Online tutorials address multiple information literacy competencies with a focus on developing strategies for accessing and using information sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The espoused discourse of academic libraries indicates intellectual support for universities by advancing knowledge, critical thinking and learning.</td>
<td>- A few tutorials give attention to critical thinking and other knowledge outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Information literacy is conceptualized primarily as intentional engagement with information for specific purposes</td>
<td>- Critical thinking is addressed primarily via the evaluation of information sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Libraries espouse a “culture of collaboration and integration” as essential to achieving information literacy</td>
<td>- Information literacy is practiced primarily as locating, using and evaluating information sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Information literacy agendas address multiple learning outcomes to enable holistic development of students, including academic success, social responsibility and lifelong learning.</td>
<td>- Ethical dimensions in missions of universities and libraries are addressed via tutorials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Some tutorials are designed to be used by faculty for integration of student learning outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Espoused Theories: Conceptions of IL

Information literacy is understood as

- Knowledge outcomes and processes including critical thinking, knowledge creation, scholarship and intellectual habits.
- Intentional **use of information** for specific purposes
- Enabling **academic success, social responsibility** and **lifelong learning**.
- Knowledge and skills in **accessing and using information sources**
- Enabling **ethical and human values**
- Effective in collaborative endeavors
Theories-in-Use:
Practice of IL via Online Tutorials

- Multiple goals and outcomes
- Varied roles
- Source approach: focus on strategies for accessing information sources: “Find it” theme
- Emphasis on plagiarism and ethical use of information
- Nuanced approaches to evaluation of information sources
- Interactivity
- Point-of-need learning tools
Espoused Theories and Theories-in-Use

- **Congruence**
  - Knowledge focused missions and definitions
  - Encouraging of ethical values
  - Disciplinary approaches in subject tutorials
  - Critical thinking addressed via evaluation of sources
  - Strategies for accessing and using sources
  - Strategies for creating knowledge
Espoused Theories and Theories-in-Use

**Incongruence**

- Source approach rather than a knowledge approach in tutorials
- Greater emphasis on procedural techniques than on conceptual understandings
- Focus on a few aspects of the continuum from access to use of information
- Information use operationalized as ethical use
- Little attention to communicating, constructing meaning, solving problems
- Tutorials focus on strategies for consuming information without parallel process of creating information
- Minimal attention to developing lifelong learning competencies
Model of Effective Information Literacy Programme

- Best practice elements from sample of libraries
  - Explicit and implicit attempts at aligning practice with mission
  - Assessment models beyond self assessment and quizzing: outcomes-based
  - Culture of collaboration
  - Enabling values and social responsibility via tutorials
  - Curriculum integration modules; curriculum mapping; embedding outcomes
  - Team approach to developing instruction tools.
Dimensions of Congruence & Incongruence

Espoused Theories
- Missions
- Instruction Goals
- Standards, Definitions

Theories-in-use
- Teaching Initiatives
- Strategies
- Learning Objects
- Outcomes

Concepts, Themes

Reflecting

Questioning

Knowledge claims

Compare/Contrast

Dimensions of Congruence between Espoused Theories and Theories-in-use
= Effective Practice

Information Literacy: Evaluation and Reflection Tool
(Kerr, 2010)
Thank You!
Questions?