



IFLA
2005
OSLO

World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme:

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

June 07, 2005

Code Number:

053-E

Meeting:

108 Education and Training with Library Theory and Research

Division VII Education and Research

On librarians' occupational identities: ICT and the shaping of information seeking expertise

Jenny Hedman

The Swedish School of Library and Information Science
Göteborg University & The University College of Borås
SE-501 90 BORÅS, Sweden

Abstract

Changes in the Scandinavian LIS (Library and information science) curriculum during the last decade, interacting with librarianship as well as with society at large, call for a deepened understanding of the social dynamics of librarians' occupational identities. At least two central themes emerge studying the recent development of librarianship, namely the process of academisation and the implementation of contemporary ICT (information and communication technology) tools. This paper discusses Scandinavian academic librarians' expertise, identified as the roles of information seeking experts and as information literacy mediators; both coming to expression within the professional practice of user education. This is done through a theoretical discussion with points of departure taken in current theory of professions and in Patrick Wilson's writing on librarians' unique competence. The discussion is empirically illustrated primarily by examples from a study on 31 Scandinavian academic libraries' web-based tutorials for information literacy. Finally, some suggestions are made for the development of user education as well as for future research.

Introduction

The greater the appetite for learning and the wider the catholicity of the appetite, the greater the potential problems of choice, of recognition of cognitive authority. The greater those problems, the more important the utility of trustworthy assistance and the possible service that the librarian might render.

(Wilson 1983, p. 179)

The introduction of ICT tools for information seeking, combined with profound modifications of the Scandinavian LIS curricula during the last decade, has brought great changes to librarianship in practice. From a starting point where librarians exclusively had access to and controlled the information retrieval tools in libraries, the rapid development has taken a new direction where end-users themselves master the computerised tools as such. Accordingly, librarians' daily work, to a large extent, involve directing users' attention to problems implied in, for instance, the seemingly simple task of information seeking on the Web. This challenge is often addressed within the framework for pedagogical activities performed in both public and academic libraries.

There is also a massive societal discourse concerning information literacy as providing core skills and capabilities for people's active citizenship and lifelong learning. Librarians' mediation of information literacy thereby is understood as a true mission to librarianship. In Sweden this mission is evident, partly by the fact that many libraries go in for web-based tutorials to support their traditional user education. It is also expressed in the LIS curricula. The University College of Borås offers both a course on *Information seeking and learning* and a distance course called *Educating the user* mainly intended as a further education for working librarians. Furthermore, Växjö University in Sweden, with its relatively fresh LIS programme have applied to a unique pedagogical profile.

Taken together these aspects constitute crucial prerequisites for the evolving professional practices of librarians. But how does the historically fundamental information seeking expertise of librarians hold good in times when end users, especially in academic libraries, tend to seek information for themselves? With what authority may an academic librarian choose and recommend information sources to subject expert users?

Sadly, there are some quite discouraging empirical results at hand on this matter, for example Lars Seldén's (1999) study on the information seeking of social science researchers. A senior researcher comments on the help librarians might possibly provide during the research process:

[T]he big problem in this case is that the librarians have very poor imagination, that somewhere, when no references are found on a topic, they say there are no references and that's all mumbo jumbo./.../ There's not a single research area today with less than two hundred relevant references and one should let those bloody librarians choke on it, if you excuse the expression. /.../ Personally, I think the librarians are a hinder because they make it legitimate for the doctoral students to give up searching.

(quotation from: Seldén, 1999, p. 169)

From the point of view of theory of professions, it is not likely that a client will consult a professional of any kind, without a collective agreement on her trustworthiness, ascribed to her by other people. This also goes for librarians.

Information seeking and occupational identity

The significance of professionals' information behaviour has attracted increased attention during the last few decades in LIS. Great effort has been put into exploring information needs, seeking and use of various occupational groups (Leckie, Pettigrew & Sylvain, 1996). Lately, this research has been complemented by influences from theory of professions (Touminen, 1997; Hjärlund, 2000; Sundin, 2003; Sundin & Hedman, in print); in its turn a tradition rooted in the social sciences. The importance of keeping up to date as a professional should be understood in the context of an increasing specialisation in working life, combined with an acceleration of institutionalised expertise in society.

One way of exploring the outlined questions on librarians professional information seeking and status is to employ the theoretical concept of occupational identity. On the other hand occupational identities are characteristically collective and social, shared with other members of a specific occupational community. This means that they are formed in interaction within social practices and communities; beginning in education and carried forth in the library or other workplaces (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Using this concept one should be aware that it merely encompasses a limited part of each individual's complex identity. Every single person may hold several identities, such as a family identity - in the role of a parent or a child - or a gender identity, typically in the role of a man or a woman. Occupational identities must therefore not be seen as stable essences within individuals, but rather as arenas for a diversity of, sometimes conflicting, approaches to different phenomena (McCarthy in: Sundin & Hedman, in print). In this way the concept holds a potential for analysing and understanding social and collective aspects of various occupational practices.

For example, Olof Sundin (2005) interprets the practice of web-based user education as a forum for negotiations on what should be put forward as the professional expertise of academic librarians today. Concerning librarians' professional information seeking and use, the shaping of occupational identity touches on both practical and intellectual knowledge as well as a whole set of norms, values and expectations concerning personal discourse and conduct. Different approaches to one's own professional expertise, as well as to other peoples' information behaviour, may therefore be seen as expressions of librarians' occupational identities. (Sundin & Hedman, in print)

Academisation and ICT

Since the 1990's, many programmes within higher education have moved towards a more academic and theoretical content; the Swedish LIS programme being but one example of this development (Selden & Sjölin, 2003). Such academisation is crucial to the professional aspirations of many occupational groups, as mentioned above. Part of what makes the process of academisation significant to LIS, is that its effects are intertwined with, and strengthened by the last decades' expansion of ICT, leading to increased physical access to information. It would seem that ICT and academisation interact and benefit from each other.

In Scandinavia it is often argued today, that access to ICT and being information literate, are actually prerequisites for an active citizenship and for taking part in the intellectual and democratic processes of the so-called information society. The importance of ICT and peoples' ability to make "proper" use of it in their education, in their occupational practice and life-long learning, is often emphasized in current debate and policy-making. Accordingly, in many educational institutions, considerable resources are invested to improve the library's user

education, both in face modes and virtually on the web, to support users' development of information literacy.

For example, investments have been made in the production of web-based tutorials for information literacy, often through external funding by organisations such as Bibsam in Sweden, Danmarks Elektroniske Forskningsbibliotek in Denmark and ABM utvikling in Norway. The expansion of academic libraries' user education thus shall be seen in relation to an overall development, where mediating knowledge of information seeking, evaluation and use has become a very important practice to education on all levels. In his study on tutorials, Sundin examines the web based user education from a sociocultural perspective that underlines the importance of studying how people make use of technical tools, or artefacts, that have been shaped in specific historical contexts and human interaction. Such tools should not be considered "neutral" or granted; they are always carriers of meaning and history, and thereby mediate certain perspectives of the world (Säljö, 1999). Consequently, the tutorials for information literacy are analysed as tools for learning, where different professional knowledge claims are built in and made visible (Sundin, 2005).

Sundin describes how users are being educated to search for information in a rational and somewhat "librarian-like" way. In contrast, not many tutorials mention alternative, informal and more common ways of computer-based information seeking, such as browsing or surfing. If they do, it is often in terms of warnings against the unreliability and arbitrariness of the web (Ibid., p 143). This shows that giving advice on "unqualified", social information seeking methods are no part of librarians' knowledge claims, as it simply does not serve their professional interests. Still, this of course says nothing about the usefulness or frequency of that particular kind of information encountering.

Expertise in flux

In Sundin's (2005) study on web-based tutorials, four different approaches to user education are identified; one *source approach*, one *behaviour approach*, one *process approach*, and one *communication approach* (see figure 1) – the first three exhibiting similarities to Carol Kuhlthau's well-known classification of the librarian's roles in the information seeking process (Kuhlthau, 1993). These approaches also reflect a development of librarians' expertise over time, if still in a schematic and simplified manner.

Until the 1960's and 70's librarians were indeed the source and search experts of formal information, with exclusive techniques in their hands for document retrieval. Behaviouristic research in the sixties stimulated an interest in the pedagogical aspects of librarianship; that is, to teach users "correct" information seeking behaviour and conduct. Within the practice of user education this influence may, for example, be traced in the ambition to teach students what search strategies should be practiced to be successful in the library. During the eighties LIS research tended to draw more upon cognitivist and constructivist traditions. Based on pedagogical ideas a partly new area of expertise was formed together with the process approach, where great effort was put into enlightening individual users of their inner construction of meaning, in its turn, connected to information seeking and use. Problem-based learning and joint ideas of meta-reflexivity seems to have strengthened this development. In this context librarians' expertise was expressed as the counselor role, where both pedagogical and psychological aspects are emphasised along with more technical search skills (Kuhlthau, 1993).

What revolutionized the pre-requisites of librarians' pedagogical role in the 1990's was, of course, the broad implementation of new computer-based tools for information seeking, not least the Web. Quite rapidly search engines, web catalogues and various databases became accessible to the general public in the developed world. The concept of information literacy was promoted and embraced, not least by librarians, although often narrowly defined as the mastery of a set of technical skills in a checklist style (Limberg et al., 2002). So far, social or sociocultural perspectives on learning and information seeking have not yet made the same impact as the cognitivistic and constructivistic have. In recent years, the sociocultural perspective has been increasingly influential though, primarily within pedagogical research (Säljö, 1999), but also in organizational research (Orlikowski, 2002) and in LIS (Sundin & Johannisson, 2005). The most significant trait of the sociocultural perspective on learning and information seeking is probably the view that learning and knowing are explicitly understood as closely related to the culture and context of which they are part.

The approaches mentioned above all co-exist in the practice of user education today, in spite of theoretical incompatibilities. The communication approach, though, may be seen as a newcomer in the context of user education, holding characteristics that are not present in the other three. The communicative approach does also show a kinship with the sociocultural perspective taken by Sundin as his own theoretical starting-point. With a communicative approach, the librarian's expertise accordingly includes an understanding of the sociocultural conditions for the production, mediation and consumption of information. This kind of knowledge and expertise problemises the view of information seeking as a systematic, rational and context-less activity (Sundin, 2005).

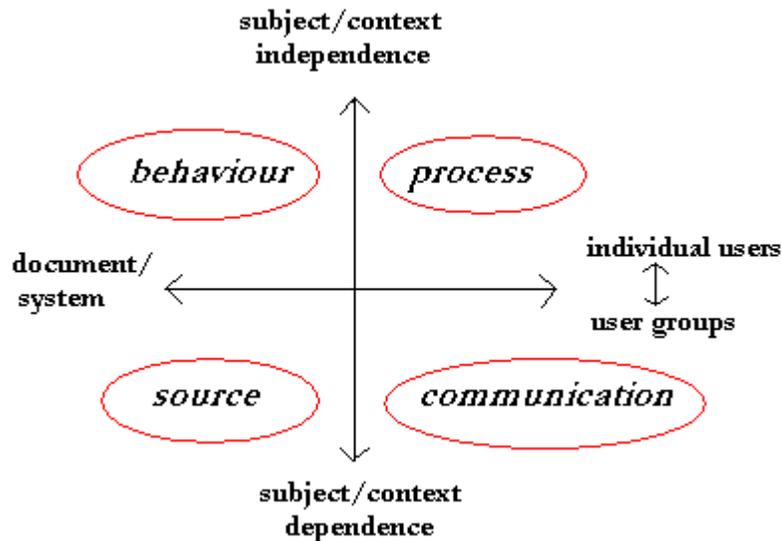


Figure 1. Four approaches to web-based education for information literacy (Sundin, 2005, p 47 [published in Swedish; elaborated by me])

An expert to whom?

Patrick Wilson argues that everybody can be an expert on something, but it takes more than specialised knowledge to become an authority (Wilson, 1983, pp. 26-30). Professional claims of jurisdiction within a certain knowledge domain and the priority of interpretation coming with it are associated with a status that must be earned and only can be ascribed by others – especially

other experts in the same field. This kind of authority is thus particularly concerned with the cognitive or intellectual aspects of power. Wilson puts it as follows: “What one needs to know also depends in part on what others expect one to know” (Ibid., p 150).

As the tools for computer based information seeking have become more accessible and usable for end-users, handling search engines, databases and other computerised tools, is not exclusively a librarian asset anymore. In the face of loosing authority, a new kind of expertise has been put forward by librarians, with a focus on information literacy and the pedagogical practices associated with it. This becomes quite evident in Sundin’s study in illustrations given of librarians that are implicitly described as persons with the potential to select the “right” information (Sundin 2005, p 123). In comparison, I find it noteworthy that if librarians tend to work hard to provide end-users with qualitative information, they tend to work even harder to provide them with information on the virtues of the library and the continuous necessity of consulting librarians.

A profession is often defined in relation to other professions (cf. Abbott 1988; Larson 1977) – horizontally – but vertical positioning also takes place in relation to clients. The question of librarians’ competence as information seeking experts and information literacy mediators may be addressed from the aspect of librarian-user interaction. This could well be extra fruitful in the context of higher education. Raising the classical question of librarians’ ability to evaluate and recommend information sources to “expert” users, the concept of cognitive authority may be put to work. Is it even possible for a “generalist” to choose and recommend information sources to subject experts? Or, put in Wilson’s terms, may the librarian actually be an authority on authorities (1983, pp 179-183)? Many of the tutorials in Sundin’s study implicitly argue for this kind of librarian expertise, but the previously cited quotation from Seldén serves as a striking contrast of a frustrated user view.

Kimmo Tuominen (1997) describes the librarian-user interaction as a relation of power, where librarians’ professional interests are exercised. He also points out that, in the well-established individualistic approach to the information seeking process, possible dysfunctions are often explained as the user’s lack of insight. This kind of categorical “diagnosis” is grounded in the mentioned psychological perspective that focuses on users’ mental activities, rather than attributing them an ability to act and influence their own situation. Applying such an “inside-the-head-strategy”, Tuominen means that librarians establish themselves powerful and irreplaceable in relation to the user (Tuominen, 1997, pp. 364-365). I would say that the underlying ideas of the web-based tutorials in Sundin’s study seem to confirm this observation.

Presenting the prerequisites of information seeking in an unbalanced and too simplified way, one risks missing the point in Wilson’s reasoning and also the challenge implied in the quotation from Seldén. Still the question about librarians possibly being authorities on authorities in a highly specialised context is a very relevant one, also deserving to be addressed within occupational practice.

Suggestions on user education and further research

As previously mentioned the communicative approach to user education, librarians’ expertise includes an understanding of the sociocultural conditions of the production, mediation and consumption of information. This kind of knowledge and expertise problemizes the view of information seeking as a systematical, rational and context-less activity. For example, user education on relevance assessment and subject dependence stands out as an important task for

librarians (Sundin, 2005). If that kind of knowledge was evolved and discussed within user education as a dialogue between academic librarians and users, hopefully a shift in the subject positions of the librarian and the user could be achieved as well. The roles of librarians as professional information seekers and information literacy mediators could ideally remain and develop, and the subject expertise of users could actively be taken into account, respectively.

Following the professional debates one can tell that there is an intense, on-going discussion about the nature of the competences and the status of library professionals of today and tomorrow. For instance, recently on the Jesse-list, an article titled "The entry level gap" (Holt & Strock, 2005) was circulated and followed by a discussion on the hardships of newly graduated Masters of LIS. The state of the profession is clearly scrutinized, and intra-professional changes could also be put in a broader societal perspective through scientific examination. Ironically, against the background of the plethora of user studies in LIS, librarians' own professional information seeking is still partially unexplored.

For my dissertation I plan on studying ways in which librarians' information seeking expertise, and their use of ICT artefacts, are learnt, conceived and mediated. In this work LIS students and newly employed academic librarians will be interviewed. My main research interest is directed at the potentially critical transition phase between educational and occupational practices. Hopefully, enhanced knowledge and understanding of the interaction between librarians' higher education, their information seeking and use and their occupational identity may serve favourably the co-operational development and overall relations between educational and professional institutions. I would also find it highly gratifying if the results could serve as intellectual tools for a reflexive occupational practice in libraries.

References

Abbott, A. (1988). *The system of professions: an essay on the division of expert labor*. Chicago: The university of Chicago Press.

Hjørland, B. (2000). Library and information science; practice, theory, and philosophical basis. *Information Processing and Management*, 36(3), 501-31.

Holt, R. & Strock. A.L. (2005). The entry level gap. *Library Journal*, 5/1/2005.

Kuhlthau, Carol C. (1993). *Seeking meaning: a process approach to library and information services*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.

Larson, M.S. (1977). *The rise of professionalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leckie, G.J., Pettigrew, K.E., & Sylvain, C. (1996). Modeling the information seeking of professionals: a general model derived from research on engineers, health care professionals, and lawyers. *Library Quarterly*, 66(2), 161-193.

Limberg, Louise, Hultgren, Frances & Jarneving, Bo (2002). *Informationssökning och lärande – en forskningsöversikt*. Stockholm: Liber, Skolverket.

- Marcum, J.M. (2002). Rethinking information literacy. *Library Quarterly*, 72(1), 1-26.
- Orlikowski, W. (2002). Knowing in practice: enacting a collective capability in distributed organizing. *Organization science*. 13(2), 249-273.
- Seldén, L. (1999). *Kapital och karriär: informationssökning i forskningens vardagspraktik*. Borås: Valfrid. Diss.
- Seldén, L. & Sjölin, M. (2003). Kunskap, kompetens och utbildning: ett bibliotekariedilemma under 100 år. *Svensk biblioteksforskning*, 14(4), 19-67.
- Sundin, O. (2003). Nurses' information seeking and use as participation in occupational communities. *The New Review of Information Behaviour Research: Studies of information Seeking in Context*, 3, 187-202.
- Sundin, O. (2005) Webbaserad användarundervisning: ett forum för förhandlingar om bibliotekariers professionella expertis. Sundin, *HumanIT*, 7(3), 109-168.O.
- Sundin, O. & Hedman, J. (in print). Theory of professions and occupational identity. In Erdelez, S., Fisher, K. & McKechnie, L. (ed.). *Theories of information behavior: a researcher's guide*.
- Sundin, O. & Johannisson, J. (2005). Pragmatism, neo-pragmatism and sociocultural theory: communicative participation as a perspective in LIS. *Journal of Documentation*, 61(1), 23-43.
- Säljö, R. (1999). Learning as the use of tools: a sociocultural perspective on the human-technology link. In K. Littleton & P. Light (Ed.). *Learning with computers: analysing productive intervention*. London: Routledge. P. 385-161.
- Tuominen, K (1997). User-centered discourse: an analysis of the subject positions of the user and the librarian. *Library Quarterly*, 67/4), 350-371.
- Wilson, P. (1983). *Second-hand knowledge: an inquiry into cognitive authority*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.