

Exploring Intentional Information Evaluation: Students' Assessment of Complex Issues

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There has been a plethora of research on information seeking and use; much of which is of very high quality and utility. Only some of the modeling and inquiry has been applied practically in library environments, though. In some instances, the disconnect may be due to an abstract assumption (real or perceived) of information seeking research. The goal of the proposed project is to test one particular approach to instruction that has the potential of linking the possible abstractness of information to the concreteness of students' academic programs. If the approach is successful it may be transferable to all information mediation services, including reference services.

One of the key elements of instruction (semester-long information literacy courses or single instructional sessions) is a purposefulness that may all too often be implicit rather than explicit. Many philosophers (Daniel Dennett, John Searle, Collin McGinn, and David Woodruff Smith, for example) speak of the intentionality that connects our consciousness to the world in which we live. Smith (2004) expresses intentionality's importance in a way that is most pertinent to librarianship. Intentionality is contextual; it is directly connected to a subject's specific experiences. He articulates a schematic to make his point:

context | — subject — act — content → object (p. 2)

The linking will be tested during the spring 2010 semester in a course offered at the University of Missouri entitled "Information Use and Student Success"). Approximately 150 students will be included in the project. The first (roughly) half of the course situates information content into the resources that the University Libraries offer access to (services within the library, databases, etc.) The second half focuses more on evaluation of information resources and content (in keeping with the ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education (see <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf>). Early in the second half of the course the students will be required to complete a particular assignment designed to create a context within which students can operate. The students will be required to locate six commentaries on the January 21, 2010 United States Supreme Court ruling on political campaign

financing. Three of the commentaries will have to support the ruling and three will have to be in opposition to it. The students' analyses will include looking for any consistencies and uniqueness in the statements on the two sides of the issue. The analyses will also include a one-page statement on how the ruling may change politics in the United States in the future, and which side of the debate they find convincing (and why).

The students' responses will be discussed in class; one of the investigators will be present in each class meeting in which the discussion takes place. The investigator will note the tenor of the conversation, the ways students express the reasoning that underlies their written analyses, and their ideas about the potential changes to future elections. The last matter has a philosophical grounding. There are some who argue that there are possible worlds that may exist in addition to the concrete world in which we live. David Lewis (1973) states his belief in possible worlds bluntly: "I believe there are possible worlds other than the one we happen to inhabit. . . . It is uncontroversially true that things might have been otherwise than they are" (p. 84). Robert Stalnaker (2003) adopts a somewhat more moderate position, contending that the possible worlds are real insofar as they are conceivable (not that they necessarily exist) (pp. 38-39). Esoteric philosophical discussion aside, each time some decision is made that affects a great many people, the alternatives to that decision can be examined as though the world could be different. Since some decisions can be reversed or overridden in some ways, the examination of possible alternatives is a genuine exercise in discourse on the efficacy of *any* decision. The exercise is one in intentionality. The analysis of the students' statements introduces the notion of possible worlds in a more oblique way, in that they are asked to examine implications of the Court ruling and the discussion can incorporate the possibility of an opposite ruling.

The purpose of the assignment, as is mentioned above, is to provide a context for examination—based on examination of the one-page analyses written by the students and the students' comments in class—rather than an artificial assessment of information content. As such, the assignment is an authentic examination of the world we live in (following Smith (2004)). The assignment, in particular the students' examination of the content of the commentaries as they look for consistency and uniqueness, includes a kind of categorization. The categorization is at a more macro level, focusing primarily on Fact (a concrete or real entity, such as the Court ruling); Essence (an ideal entity, such as the reasoning behind the opinions of Court members), and Sense (or meaning entity, such as the impact of the ruling on actual elections in the future) (Smith 2004, p. 264). These categories will emerge from the in-class discussions and will be identified by the investigators who are observing the class discussions.

The results of this project will be several important outcomes of instruction that is structured in the contextual consciousness manner:

- Students' performance on a contextual assignment
- Students' understanding of disputative argument
- Emergent discussions of the content of the contextual issue
- Categorization of both information content and the perception of the content within the context of the world in which we live

These results will be reported by the investigators at the seminar, and the implications of the results for practice will be explored.

References

- Lewis, David. 1973. *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smith, David Woodruff. 2004. *Mind World: Essays in Phenomenology and Ontology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stalnaker, Robert C. 2003. *Ways a World Might Be: Metaphysical and Anti-Metaphysical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.