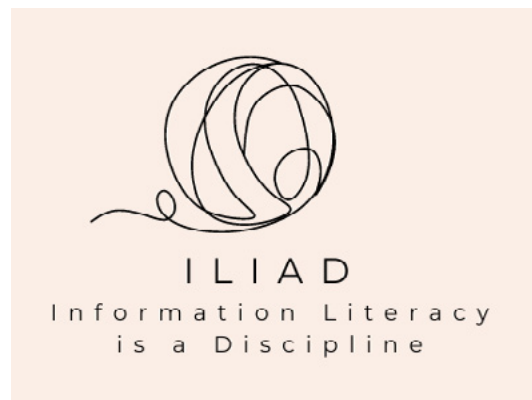


Recognizing information literacy as a discipline

Reflections on an ACRL 2023 panel discussion

There has long been debate, even controversy, around the nature of information literacy. Is it comprised of a set of skills as laid out in the now-rescinded Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,¹ inter-related concepts as laid out in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,² or perhaps can it be conceptualized in yet another way? What if information literacy were an academic discipline, such as education, nursing, or social work? In October 2021, an international group of information literacy educators and researchers came together to explore the idea that information literacy is a discipline and speculate about what that could mean for education and research. We read articles arguing that information literacy is a discipline by Sheila Webber and Bill Johnston,^{3,4} who later joined the group. Examining its decades-long history, Webber and Johnston have suggested that information literacy should be recognized as a “maturing” discipline.⁵ We reviewed the literature to determine the characteristics of a discipline identified by scholars, which include (1) a community of scholars, (2) communications networks, (3) a code of ethics, (4) traditions and history, (5) modes of inquiry, and (6) shared ideas about what constitutes knowledge.^{6,7} Information literacy meets these criteria.

Our group, which became known as Information Literacy is a Discipline, or ILIAD, decided to bring this conversation to the information literacy community for a larger discussion. To that end, members of the group have been presenting at conferences and meetings, including the four authors offering a panel presentation at the ACRL 2023 Conference in Pittsburgh. Our goal for the panel was to learn how attendees (more than 120 in-person and 200 virtual) view the idea and implications of recognizing information



literacy as a discipline to their work in academic libraries. Select topics covered in the panel included (1) possible changes to library and information science curriculum, (2) the ethics of the information literacy discipline, and (3) implications for information literacy content taught in higher education. For each topic, we used a polling software called Slido to gather thoughts from the audience. In this article, we will outline the topics covered by the panelists at ACRL 2023 and share reflections of what we learned from our interaction with attendees.

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“Casting a New Conversation: Recognizing Information Literacy as a Discipline” panel presentation at ACRL 2023.

Implications for the MLIS curriculum

If information literacy were recognized as a discipline, an essential area for consideration would be the master of library and information science (MLIS) curriculum. In the ACRL panel session, this area was positioned initially as a wide-ranging question: What would be the impact on the MLIS curriculum if information literacy was an academic discipline? To gain traction on this big question, three smaller questions were posed:

- How would current MLIS students learn to think differently about information literacy?
- What kinds of different abilities would MLIS graduates have, what different career paths or work environments would they be prepared for?
- What new kinds of contributions would MLIS students and graduates be likely to make?

With these questions as background, findings were presented on how information literacy is currently being taught in MLIS courses using course syllabi from three programs (Drexel University, Simmons University, and San José State University). The syllabi showed that information literacy is taught with the emphasis on five major conceptual and practical areas:

- *applications* in different environments: public libraries, academic libraries, corporate workspaces
- *issues* related to information literacy: accuracy, privacy, authenticity
- *pedagogy* basics: learning outcomes, assessment, formats/platforms
- designing instruction for *diverse learners*
- alignment with ACRL *definitions*, such as the Standards or Framework

In a similar way, an exploration of the literature showed consistent themes at a high conceptual level:

- an expanded understanding of information literacy “emphasizes dynamism, flexibility, individual growth, and community learning”⁸
- “information literacy has its own epistemology and ontological reality”⁹
- “information literacy is the adoption of information behavior . . . leading to wise and ethical use of information in society”¹⁰

The discussion then returned to the opening questions so that participants could contribute their ideas using the Slido tool. Both the attendees in the room and those participating online were able to contribute. The question posed was “What would you see as shifts within the MLIS curriculum in having information literacy as an academic discipline?”

Responses were immediate and continued for several minutes, for a total of 195 posts, 15 of which received a total of 29 up-votes. In addition, because attendees could see everyone’s responses on the room screen and their own devices, they also began to interact with each other’s ideas, generating a further level of engagement. For example, an early post was for “more theory,” and others jumped in with “less theory” and “time wasted with theory,” but also “grounding in theory!” To encourage further interactions, the presenter called out some of the posts about new topical areas and contrasting ideas as the discussion proceeded. The 195 posts and up-votes were organized thematically, resulting in six prominent themes representing likely implications for the MLIS curriculum:

- information literacy would be a required course.
- improvements to pedagogy in information literacy.
- more theoretical grounding for information literacy.
- more focus on and rigor in research methodologies.
- information literacy faculty would deepen self-image as experts.
- stronger advocacy for and positioning on campus.

Ethical guidelines

The consideration of information literacy as a discipline necessitates developing a set of ethical guidelines that can inform its *practice*. These guidelines must be in keeping with one of the commonplaces identified by Howard Gardner and Lee Shulman, who state (about professions, but the same applies to disciplines),

The hallmark of all professions, even beyond the prototypical practices of each, is the ubiquitous condition of uncertainty, novelty, and unpredictability that characterizes professional work. . . . This means that professional practice is frequently pursued at or beyond the margins of previously learned experiences.¹¹

Their words inform the development of ethical statements that can be employed by practitioners and in MLIS education.

In preparation for the ACRL panel session, the authors determined that there are at least five such statements that can be formulated, which include the following:

1. Treat students with respect and dignity and as individual learners and information seekers.
2. Acknowledge the role of *teacher* for instructors, critically engaging students and information seekers in becoming informed.

3. Instill in students and information seekers a commitment to intellectual integrity.
4. Admit to the tension between speech by people with knowledge and speech by those who espouse ideologies.
5. Recognize the complexities underlying the infosphere and the learning environment.

During the panel session, attendees (in-person and virtual) were asked to suggest additional areas of ethical concern. Responding in Slido, more than ninety suggestions were made, and they tended to cluster around three themes. This resulted in an additional three statements being added to the original five:

1. Make certain that students are fully cognizant that artificial intelligence and algorithms are human products and, so, can lead to errors of fact and of omission.
2. Ensure that students understand that the production of all information (popular and scholarly) is controlled by relatively few actors.
3. Be aware that scholarly information can tend to amplify established voices and approaches to knowledge growth and can limit access to underrepresented groups and perspectives.

Making the totality of the statements more exhaustive and efficacious, the three added statements enhance the guidelines materially, and address some essential ethical concerns.

Academic librarians teaching information literacy: Impact of a disciplinary lens

Teaching and learning information literacy in higher education is essential for an information literate, educated, and informed civil society. If information literacy is recognized as a discipline, it may have a major impact on academic librarian teaching practice.

In the ACRL 2023 panel presentation, we suggested that learning is an interconnected experience that focuses on understanding and applying disciplinary content, including information literacy disciplinary content. Information literacy may be considered “transdisciplinary,” meaning that although it is its own discipline, it can also be realized in other disciplines, such as history, nursing, business, and so forth. The idea that information literacy is closely related to disciplinary learning continues to emerge in contextual learning environments as stakeholders in higher education recognize that information literacy is required for academic success. One recent example of the growing recognition for the need for information literacy in curricula is reflected in the recent legislation enacted by the state of New Jersey making it the first state to require K-12 students to learn information literacy.¹²

Badke suggests the discipline of information literacy could be conceptualized as three elements: philosophy of information, methods, and applications.¹³ Badke argues that information literacy education currently focuses primarily on applications, while learners should first be exposed to philosophy of information and information literacy research methods, which would provide them with the necessary context for learning information applications. Learning these essential foundational elements would enable students to recognize information literacy as a viable, core academic discipline.

In our presentation at ACRL 2023, we asked participants to respond to the Slido question “If information literacy is a discipline, how does recognizing information literacy as a discipline change or impact your practice?” The audience responses centered around a few primary themes:

- faculty status and teaching authority recognized within the academy
- collaborative work support and opportunities with scholars across the institutional landscape
- disciplinary curriculum development and teaching opportunities
- disciplinaryity lends credibility to information literacy as a way of thinking—not segmented to skills or support

Another change that may result from the recognition of information literacy as a discipline is the expansion of information literacy research beyond the study of educational methods and pedagogy. This has already begun as the study of information literacy continues to develop and the research community's interests have expanded to include various personal and work-life contexts. Researchers conducting these investigations adopt several methods, theories, and epistemological frameworks to study information literacy outside of educational settings. The recognition of information literacy as a discipline opens a new lens that may nurture new research and educational efforts that explore and address the use of information in any context, including academic, civic, personal, or work life.

One particular outcome of recognizing it as a discipline would be the way the information literacy community frames the teaching of information literacy. Adopting a new lens in which it is characterized as a discipline would result in different conversations related to information literacy with faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders. Members of the ILIAD group believe this shift is needed to advance the teaching and development of information literacy curricula at all educational levels as well as to inform the development of learning experiences occurring outside of formal educational settings.

Conclusion

The ILIAD group continues to seek out ways to discuss the idea that information literacy is a discipline with the broader information literacy community. The group is working on a handbook scheduled to be released in 2025 intended to show the breadth of evidence that information literacy meets the criteria of being an academic discipline. In the meanwhile, members of the information ILIAD group continue to present at conferences. As we continue this work, we hope to hear your thoughts as well—what concerns do you have? what opportunities do you see?—about the implications of recognizing information literacy as a discipline. ❧

Notes

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2. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015), <https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/infolit/framework1.pdf>.

3. Bill Johnston and Sheila Webber, "Information Literacy as an Academic Discipline: An Action Research Approach to Developing a Credit Bearing Class for Business Undergraduates," in *New Fields for Research in the 21st Century: Proceedings of the 3rd British Nordic Conference on Library and Information Studies*, edited by Maj Klasson, Brendan Loughridge,

and Staffan Loof (Borås: The Swedish School of Library and Information Studies, University College of Borås, 1999).

4. Bill Johnston and Sheila Webber, "As We May Think: Information Literacy as a Discipline for the Information Age," *Research Strategies* 20, no. 3 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resstr.2006.06.005>.

5. Sheila Webber and Bill Johnston, "Information Literacy: Conceptions, Context and the Formation of a Discipline," *Journal of Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.11645/11.1.2205>.

6. Tony Becher and Paul R. Trowler, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines*, 2nd ed. (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2001).

7. W. M. White and F. J. Hitt, "Expanding Leadership as a Discipline," in *Academic Administration: A Quest for Better Management and Leadership in Higher Education*, edited by Sheying Chen (New York: Nova Science, 2009).

8. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy*, 8.

9. Johnston and Webber, "As We May Think," 102.

10. Bill Johnston and Sheila Webber, "Information Literacy in Higher Education: A Review and Case Study," *Studies in Higher Education* 28, no. 3 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070309295>.

11. Howard Gardner and Lee S. Shulman, "The Professions in America Today: Crucial but Fragile," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 134, no. 3 (2005): 15.

12. Carly Sitrin, "New Jersey Becomes First State to Mandate K-12 Students Learn Information Literacy," *Yahoo News*, January 5, 2023, <https://news.yahoo.com/jersey-becomes-first-state-mandate-162152967.html>.

13. William Badke, "A Rationale for Information Literacy as a Credit-bearing Discipline," *Journal of Information Literacy* 2, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.11645/2.1.42>.