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Information Literacy as an Emancipatory Process Directed to Social Inclusion in a Knowledge Society

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Abstract

Information literacy as an individual and a social emancipatory process is explored in this paper. It also examines the awakening awareness of the Latin American librarians towards information literacy. Specially in developing countries, information literacy is a key issue because there is a close connection with social inclusion. The incorporation and mobilization of attitudes, knowledge and skills directed to citizenship exercise is the core of social inclusion. It also includes the acceptance of the differences, valorization of diversity, the right to belong and the search for constant improvement of society. Information literacy, at a higher level, more than a sum of skills and attributes, is a continuous process of the adequate mobilization of interrelated contents. The learning path that begins with literacy, functional literacy, digital inclusion, informational inclusion, culminates in social inclusion. According to this, librarians and educators are conceived as mediators and social transformation agents.

Introduction

Nowadays, specially in developing countries, there seems to be a social subjacent movement around the social cohesion as a step beyond social inclusion. However, it is known that globalization has a perverse effect upon local communities and the common citizen. The world trend is the prominence of the corporative interests upon public interests, concerning the development of the local societies. The surge of globalization tears at local relations as a knife.

However, as globalization advances and a technocratic approach of society becomes stronger, its opposite is evidenced. In other words, local identities and networking have been valorized by government, not-for-profit organizations and communities.

Facing the complexity of the challenge of social transformation and the multiplicity of intervening factors, there is no miraculous solution. The process of construction of a democratic society, despite the technological advances, is long and difficult, and there is inherent resistance. The bases of cultural identities need to be preserved, as the only way to guarantee the social cohesion. At this point, information, knowledge, ethics and values become essential.

Thus, empowering people to actively control their lives and participate as citizens in a democratic society became an imperative for many educators and social agents, even among common people. It means to consider the existence of emancipated individuals with critical awareness about themselves and the society they build.

In that scenario, information literacy is conceived as a prerequisite for effectively participating in the Knowledge Society, and it is concerned with empowering people regardless of modes of information access and delivery.

Despite the existence of different concepts of information literacy, all of them converge to a common denominator that it is the attempt to build emancipated human beings, incorporating three levels of complexity: information emphasis (that can be defined as digital and computer literacy), knowledge emphasis (that can be defined as cognitive literacy), and learning emphasis (that can be defined as critical literacy).

Most of all, it is important to reflect on the challenges that lie ahead: the need for constructing an inclusive society, that prioritizes the democratic access to information, supported by an education that leads to emancipated individual formation. In order to reach social inclusion it is necessary to prepare people to be information literate.

In recent years, information literacy studies have been more popular in Latin America. Now, Latin American librarians are awakening to the information literacy movement, observing the need of disseminating and communicating their studies. Programs, projects and articles on the topic have gradually become more popular in the internet. Only from 2000 to 2006, in Altavista search engine, there were, in May 2006, 244 site references about information literacy in Brazilian (.br) domain, 153 in Argentina, 137 in Mexico, 78 in Chile, 57 in Colombia, 49 in Jamaica, 38 in Venezuela, 37 in Cuba, among others.

This paper aims to investigate Latin American information literacy movement. The premise is that, specially in developing countries, information literacy is a key issue because there is a close connection with social inclusion and cohesion. The incorporation and mobilization of attitudes, knowledge and abilities directed to citizenship exercise is the core of social inclusion. It also includes the acceptance of the differences, valorization of diversity, the right to belong and the search for constant improvement of society.

Information Literacy Concept: different levels of complexity

Generally described as an integrated set of abilities related to the information universe domain, Information Literacy has assumed different forms and, so far, no consensus has been reached about its meaning. As a metaphor, well provided of connotations, information literacy still has a long way to go through as a consolidated theoretical issue.

Undeniably, information literacy appeared in the scope of Librarianship, linked to inquiry process, critical thinking and independent learning. It permeates any process of creation, resolution of problems and/or decision making.

Observing the literature, there are different levels of complexity of the information literacy concept.

At a basic level, information literacy can be conceived according to a set of abilities and attributes built upon user training in computer and digital issues, as an information technology capability. In this way, it is defined upon skills in the use of tools and technological supports, prioritizing the recovery of information, adjusting itself perfectly to the Information Society paradigm.

According to this concept, library is seems in a traditional way: a support to education, that provides the physical access to organized information to its users. The focus is on information technology system. The librarian assumes the role of information intermediary (*infomediary*), responsible for to making information reach to the user, teaching the latter how to use the library system and technology to access and recover information. Therefore, the librarian is a product of the library, with low interaction with the community.

At a second level of complexity, information literacy can be conceived as a cognitive process, incorporating skills development and knowledge building by reflexive activity. The Information Literacy with emphasis on knowledge prioritizes the cognitive aspects of learning, the construction of meanings from individual reflective processes facing the information. Here, the core concept is the individual needs. The emphasis is in the process of searching and using information for knowledge construction. It involves use, interpretation, establishment of relations between collected and understood information. The process notion is central, as well as the principle of the uncertainty, that decreases along time, when new knowledge is incorporated to the preexisting cognitive structure.

The information systems are examined as they are perceived by the individual. The researchers who assume this approach to Information Literacy seek to understand how human beings search the direction of its questionings and how they solve their

informational needs (making sense). Such needs are defined according to information gaps that stimulate individuals to seek information and knowledge. Therefore, it is considered that the information literate is an individual that knows how knowledge is organized, how to find the information and use it for accomplishing tasks and/or solving problems. The library is conceived as a space for learning and the information systems must adjust to the individuals needs. The librarian can be defined as a knowledge manager or as a mediator of the search process. This approach is advocates by different authors and it is aligned with the Knowledge Society paradigm.

At a third level of complexity, information literacy can be conceived as a continuous learning process that encompasses abilities and knowledge, plus the notion of values, with emphasis on the individual social responsibility. The systemic approach of learning leads to other concepts: context and interdependence. In this way, it evolves the mobilization of intelligence and builds the information competence of the person and of the community. In the absence of network, intelligence is static. To be dynamic, intelligence has to be consolidated from relationships as a social construction process.

At this point, Information Literacy incorporates the previously described levels and it is a continuous process of internalization of concepts, attitudes and abilities for the understanding and permanent interaction with the information universe and its dynamics, in order to provide a lifelong learning and social transformation. Library is a learning library and a space for expression. The librarian is a citizen and social transformation agent. This approach is aligned with the Learning Society paradigm.

A comparative overview of different conceptions of information literacy is presented below (Table 1).

Table 1 Comparative overview of the different conceptions of Information Literacy

<i>Information Emphasis</i>	<i>Knowledge Emphasis</i>	<i>Learning Emphasis</i>
Information Society	Knowledge Society	Learning Society
Access	Access and processes	Access, processes and relations
What	What and how	What, how and why
Knowledge accumulation	Knowledge construction	Learning phenomenon
Information System Technology	Users/individuals	Learners/citizens
Abilities	abilities and knowledge	abilities, knowledge and values
Technocratic vision	Cognitive vision	Systemic vision
Traditional school	School in process	Learning school
Traditional library (as repository)	Library as learning space	Learning library and space of expression
Librarian as intermediary	Librarian as knowledge manager and mediator	Librarian as transformational agent and citizen

Source: the author

It is necessary to incorporate and mobilize new skills, knowledge and attitudes, directed to full exercise of citizenship and acceptance of diversity. People can have different practices and attitudes, and still coexist and share common objectives and values. An inclusive society accepts and values diversity.

Facing the current scenario, it is necessary to initiate a social transformation capable of incorporating an emancipating attitude with a positive and collective action. The agents of social transformation, librarians and professors, among others, must have the courage

to consider experimental actions and innovative initiatives. It is necessary to extend popular participation to all. The awareness of the citizens can be constructed by information literacy.

So that this can occur, it is necessary to treat the human being and the relations between people. Digital inclusion is fundamental. Information inclusion and knowledge share are essential. But social inclusion with quality of life is the final target. Librarians must make their humanitarian character flourish, treating each other as learning partners. Meaning, reciprocity, transcendence and dialogue are the base of interaction between people; they are form and support for social transformation.

Latin American Scenario

Latin American history registers the existence of dictatorial regimes, military problems, individual freedom restrictions, and a lot of episodes of absence of the full citizenship exercise. Instead of weakening the social links, that adverse situation led to the strengthening of relations. Nevertheless, globalization and neoliberal ideas have accentuated the gap between rich and poor people.

As in other regions, in Latin American reality different concepts of information literacy coexist. Despite this, it seems that Latin American librarians developed a proper agreement of the concept, in function of their history and cultural traditions, a specific way to understand the world, based on the importance of the communities and the sense of belonging.

Historically, governments and institutions focused their initiatives on the provision of the necessary infrastructure of information technology and telecommunications. Since the 1990s, several countries have built this infrastructure. Also, governments made investments in networks, computers and digital contents, base for initiatives of digital and information inclusion. In the Information Society, initiatives must advance in information access and, in this scenario, “digital literacy” is a key element. There is some truth in that view.

Because of that, many information literacy programs emphasize computer and digital literacy. The world has become much more complex, and the ability to operate computers is now as important as the ability to know how to navigate the Internet. Many telecenters and infocenters have been created as a support to the access and dissemination of information, through broad access to microcomputers and internet. Telecenters are contact spaces of the poor populations with microcomputers and the necessary information for its use. The differential of the Telecenters with other projects of digital inclusion is its strong emphasis on the use of computers for social inclusion.

Recently, the sixtieth Telecenter of Sao Paulo, Brazil, was inaugurated, as a part of a project of the Social Assistance Secretariat of the Sao Paulo Municipality, called Boraceia Workshop. The telecenter is located in an ample space, destined to shelter the city homeless people, where the attendance is individual, in contrast with what happens in most of the shelters, that have, for example, collective bathrooms. For the first time a telecenter will deal with socially excluded groups. All employees training will be centered in the place, and will provide contact with the homeless.

"In some of the cases, people have lost their confidence; this is going to be an innovative experience for the Telecenters ".

The situation of social exclusion that a considerable share of the Latin American people live in, and the positive results of projects such as telecenters, show the importance of the socialization of knowledge to minimize the social problems in developing countries.

Accessibility is the focus. It is true that there are many admirable initiatives that have promoted the access to technology facilities to a wide number of young and adult people in big cities. Conversely, there are many regions that not even count on electricity.

Thus, few internet contents exist that valorize the local culture. The governments have promised to present different services and governmental information, developing the concept of electronic government (e-government), that has facilitated the life of many people. In schools in urban regions, students display their intellectual production in the internet, they use tutorials, check notes, have access to digital contents, organize *blogs*, *chats* and discussion groups.

For the low income population, there is a possibility of using computers, although its importance for accessing information and entering the job market is still restricted to few. Digital exclusion seems to be the biggest challenge, deepening the gap between populations of the rich countries and the poor countries, hindering the development of less favored countries.

Public information policies in Latin America have been incipient, fragile, insufficient and disarticulated. Thus, some challenges are posed:

Challenge 1: the creation of an integrated telecommunication infrastructure.

Challenge 2: integrated approach of information and communication policies, with valorization of the local culture.

Challenge 3: integration of different media: digital television, radio, telephony, Internet, in order to promote extensive access to information and knowledge.

Challenge 4: change education in order to incorporate information literacy as an activity that promotes autonomy, emancipation and citizenship.

Despite many initiatives, the lack of resources destined to the educational system and libraries (mainly the public and school libraries) shows that many things have to be made in formal education, and that information technologies cannot be used as a panacea that will be a solution to all problems.

Many school buildings are still precarious, they are in low number, distant from the population, mainly in rural areas. Teachers are not valorized and their salaries are low. According to official data, about 11% of the Brazilian population is illiterate. However, the number of functional illiterates may be greater.

School and public libraries have faced similar problems: buildings have poor maintenance, there is a lack of professionals, lack of basic materials. There is not a

general representation of Latin American countries, or a sociology of information and knowledge theory in its totality. Data are rare, particularly statistical data of all Latin American countries. There is a tendency to concentrate in immediate results without reflexive foresight thinking. Besides, there is not a broad discussion about educational issues by society. However, illiteracy eradication seems to be the major aspiration. Therefore, most of the governments' initiative are directed to rapid and collective solutions, privileging a linear causality, with simple solutions based on information technologies.

Nevertheless, there are many creative solutions and impressive social programs that intent to improve social conditions, in order to promote the eradication of hunger, lessening violence through social inclusion actions and well being. The main concerns with respect to education in Latin America are on its quality. Besides formal education, nations have undertaken to develop programs of open education, distance education, and non-formal education. Popular education programs in Latin America represent important social movements.

There is a clear linkage between education and work, people have instruction to be productive. Education tends to be instrumental and functional. Libraries are not specially important in this scenario. Nowadays, the increment of investments in education, libraries and reading activities is imperative.

Despite these problems, initiatives around information literacy in Latin America countries have been growing in recent years because of librarians' initiatives. Several librarians began information literacy programs, mainly in universities and schools. Papers about the theme are spread in internet government, educational and commercial sites. The social impact of information literacy seems to be the major issue in Latin American research on the theme. The librarians' social responsibility has been an emergent topic.

There are many articles and papers about information literacy. Despite that, the difficulty in to gathering papers and articles of Latin American librarians persists. A recent and important initiative conducted by Mr. Lau, that is undertaken by the Information Literacy Section of IFLA with generous funding by UNESCO, has been a meeting point for librarians around the world.¹

Special mention has to be made to Mr. Menou for the set of his studies and actuation in Latin American countries. Menou made a critical analysis about the relevance of ICTs in education, and the importance of telecenters, but he alerts us to pay attention to the fact that education for information literacy cannot be dispensed by machines only. Another assumption defended by Menou is that education is not a response without development. It is necessary to have a holistic approach towards information literacy.

Another mention has to be made to Mrs. Rader that made a compilation of the major initiatives on the theme in different countries around the world, including some Latin American countries, in the paper titled "*Information Literacy – an emerging global priority*" published in 2002. Another study was presented in the 2004 IFLA Conference by Ferreira & Dudziak, about different levels of appropriation of information literacy in some Latin American experiences.

¹ International Information Literacy Resources Directory, available at: www.uv.mx/usbi_ver/unesco

Using Altavista tools it was possible to measure the number of sites about information literacy published in each of the Latin American countries (Table 2).

Table 2 Comparative overview of number of sites about Information Literacy in Latin America countries

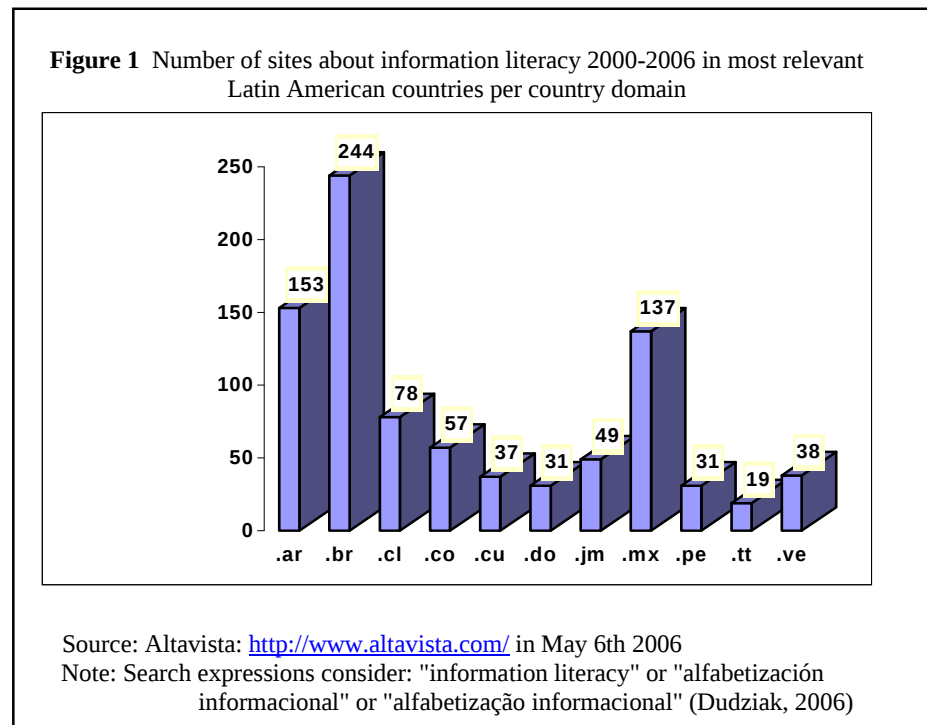
Country	Country Domain	Total per Country
Argentina	.ar	153
Bahamas	.bs	8
Barbados	.bb	2
Bolivia	.bo	2
Brazil	.br	244
Chile	.cl	78
Colombia	.co	57
Costa Rica	.cr	9
Cuba	.cu	37
Dominican Republic	.do	31
Ecuador	.ec	4
El Salvador	.sv	1
Equatorial Guinea	.gq	0
French Guiana	.fg	0
Guatemala	.gt	7
Guinea-Bissau	.gw	0
Guyana	.gy	1
Haiti	.ht	0
Honduras	.hn	1
Jamaica	.jm	49
Mexico	.mx	137
Nicaragua	.ni	4
Panama	.pa	0
Paraguay	.py	1
Peru	.pe	31
Trinidad and Tobago	.tt	19
Uruguay	.uy	5
Venezuela	.ve	38

Source: Altavista; <http://www.altavista.com/> in May 6th 2006

Note: Search expressions consider: "information literacy" or "alfabetización informacional" or "alfabetização informacional"

As we can see, there are many sites about information literacy in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru,

Trinidad & Tobago and Venezuela, among others. In Fig. 1 below, the most relevant occurrences per country are presented.



Librarians' mobilization in Latin America around information literacy has been stronger among academic librarians, linked to user education. There are many initiatives around information literacy with emphasis on appropriation of technology as an instrument of education, according to the teaching-learning paradigm. Infocenters and public libraries as centers of community development are emergent initiatives.

Some papers about different initiatives, specially applied to the university public, was presented in national conferences, where panels are organized too. In some courses, information literacy has been incorporated to the librarians' formation syllabus. There is a genuine concern about pedagogical aspects of information literacy courses: significant learning, librarian as educator, different pedagogical models, ethical behavior. However, collaboration among librarians and faculty is recent and sparse. A pioneer experience was reported at 2001 IFLA Conference, held in Boston, USA.²

In Latin America, more than in other regions, information literacy seems to have been conceived as an emancipation process promoted by learning, based on Freirean vision of

² Dudziak, E.A., Gabriel, M.A. and Villela, M.A. (2001) Information Literacy Education: the case study of Escola Politecnica da Universidade de Sao Paulo – Brazil, Poster presented at 67th Council and Conference IFLA, Boston, MA.

critical literacy. As a social and cultural movement, the information literacy movement is a real and promising trend.

Autonomy and Critical Literacy

Critical literacy has been built upon the idea of enhancing individual autonomy, according to an emancipatory process. First of all, it is necessary be aware of reality. In doing so, the next step is to develop critical awareness of reality. This implies in going beyond the spontaneous sphere of reality apprehension to a critical position.

In Professor Paulo Freire's life work, pedagogy was a fundamental cornerstone, starting with the *Pedagogy of Oppressed* (1972) among other works. His last masterpiece - *A Pedagogia da Autonomia* (1997) - has not yet been published in English. In his work "Pedagogy of Autonomy", the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) emphasizes the need to respect the knowledge that the pupil brings to the school, as a social and historical citizen, and to understand that "to form is much more than purely training the education in the performance of dexterities" (p.15).

He defines this position as ethical and advocates the idea that the educator must seek this ethics, called "universal ethics of the human being" (p. 16), essential for the teaching work. He states that "there is no education without research or research without education" (p. 32). Furthermore, for Freire each and every educational action is a political act to help people become more aware of their position in the world, in order to actively participate in the history and in the transformation of reality.

Therefore, learning is a constructivist process owned by the learner. This process can be facilitated by the teacher or educator in interaction with the apprentice. For Freire, educators can learn together with their students. The interaction is based on dialog and includes some principles: to respect his or her view of the world, to consider learning as never ending process, to foster curiosity, common sense, tolerance and advocate the rights of the learners, to be in touch with reality, and to have the conviction that changing is possible. Paulo Freire chose a political pedagogy centered in freedom and in the individual's autonomy (Almeida and Jardimino, 2003).

At this point, Freire's theory is close to Feuerstein's thinking about mediation. He developed his theory stating that the learning experience is effective when it produces a change in the learner and this can only be accomplished through a humanitarian interchange. As a process of joint creation of meanings, mediation applied to pedagogy is built upon intentionally, reciprocity, and aims at the transformation and valorization of the individual.

Essentially, the mediated learning experience aims at to unchain in the apprentice the perception on him/herself and the mediator, developing a joint situation lived and constructing meanings for both. The core objective is to make the apprentice an emancipated, independent citizen. Intentional change aiming at the entire development of the people involved, through joint transformation.

The process of autonomy is initialized with praxis. Nevertheless, there is an underpinning and increasing sense of reality awareness; to be in the world, as product and producer of reality.

Information Literacy as an emancipatory process

According to that point of view, information literacy can be conceived as a constructionist process of meaning creation through information and knowledge. Different dimensions of the learner must be considered: skills dimension (abilities constructed by training), cognitive dimension (knowledge construction), and values and attitudes dimension (man's construction of political and ethical aspects).

The locus of information literacy activities has tended to shift from functionalist technology-focused approaches towards the acknowledgement of broader concerns that encompass the entire individual (holistic approach), including societal and political aspects.

First of all, it is considered the dialectic phenomenological approach of information literacy activities and research. The formation of information literate individual should be the dialectic learning model because it is based on a recursive dialog between men and reality, action and reflection. It means to consider the praxis and the theory at the same time, e.g., knowledge and action intertwine: the road leads not only from scientific knowledge to action (orienting approach), but also from action to knowledge (experimental and experiential approach). As a phenomenological process, information literacy can only occur in a particular context of learning, at a specific moment, centered in an individual and his/her needs, hopes, beliefs, and so on.

In that way, librarians and educators are conceived as mediators and social transformation agents. In order to provide Information Literacy, educational institutions need to incorporate the culture of information, working in cooperation with libraries and librarians in the implementation of Information Literacy Education, providing a propitious environment to the development of educational activities toward information, from its educational, curricular policies and of education. Integrated curriculum and the resource based learning provide and foster Information Literacy. Libraries, while cultural and educational institutions, are the basic mediators in the learning processes that aim at information literacy. However, a change in both the library paradigm and in the librarian paradigm is absolutely necessary. The library must change into a space of expression and as a learning organization. The librarian must be transformed into an social and transformational agent with solid educational knowledge. Such changes aim at the integration and the real commitment of the library and the librarians with information literacy and the community, from:

- a pro-active vision
- valorization of the dialog with the community;
- valorization of the local identities;
- democratization of access, both physically and intellectually, to information;

- cooperation among librarians, professors, teachers, administrators, employees and students in the development of education toward Information Literacy.

Final comments

Information literacy, at a higher level, more than a sum of attributes, is a process that conducts to social inclusion through the adequate mobilization of interrelated contents, which are knowledge, abilities and attitudes directed to citizen actuation. The learning path begins with literacy, digital inclusion, informational inclusion, and culminates in social inclusion, by information competence.

The emphasis on progressive knowledge reconstruction process, development of abilities and research attitudes, autonomous study, as well as permanent learning forms emancipated people, capable of transforming their reality. Education that has information literacy as a priority promotes the enrichment of learning and is the way that leads to social inclusion and cohesion.

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