

Title: Exploring Kenyan women university students' everyday interaction with information

Abstract: A social constructionist methodology was used to explore how Kenyan women university students interact with information in everyday life. Focus was on how participants interpret experiences within the historical, cultural, and material spaces they inhabit. Methods used were linguistics pragmatics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. Conceptual implications for information literacy are discussed.

Résumé: Une méthodologie sociale constructionniste est utilisée pour explorer comment les étudiantes universitaires kényanes interagissent avec l'information au quotidien. Nous avons insisté sur les façons dont les participantes interprètent leurs expériences dans les espaces historiques, culturels et matériels où elles habitent. Les méthodologies utilisées comprennent la pragmatique linguistique, la phénoménologie et l'herméneutique. Nous discutons finalement de leurs implications sur la maîtrise de l'information.

1. Introduction

International and regional leaders have declared information literacy (IL) a basic human right that “empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupation and educational goals” (Garner, 2006, p. 3). Accordingly, nations have begun to formulate and implement policies that address IL. In many cases, IL has been tied to initiatives aimed at advancing development, implementation, and institutionalization of various information and communication technologies initiatives (Tilvawala, Myers, and Andrade, 2009; Ministry of Information and Communications, 2006). Adopting this limited view of IL in Kenya might actually hinder Kenyans' ideal participation in an information society (Tilvawala, Myers, & Andrade, 2009). What seems to be lacking is a theoretical and practical definition of IL that outlines different walks of life, various ways of seeking, evaluating, using and creating information, and what personal, social, occupational, and educational goals people are pursuing.

Redefining IL in a way that addresses why people seek information would create opportunities to explore how people actually identify, evaluate and use information. Any definition of IL, however, would have to consider what is, and is not, information. Current conceptions of IL are inextricably linked to notions of the Information Society, as a guiding ideology. Social constructionism provides an epistemological framework in which ideas about information can be critically explored. In addition, social constructionist viewpoint allows implementation of a variety of context-oriented methods that extend beyond the individual.

2. Background and significance

Exploring Kenyan university women's everyday information practices must consider the discursive context in which information-seeking practices occur. Social constructionism has been identified as an appropriate epistemological framework to explore this question. Social constructionist approaches, in information science, "assume that information, information systems, and information needs all are entities that are produced within existing discourses, i.e. linguistic and conversational constructs" (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005, p. 90). The unit of analysis is the discourse, or discourses, that legitimate social or information practices. It is important to note that social constructionist epistemology differs significantly from social constructivist epistemology, in which individual cognitive processes rather than discourse is the object of study.

Information practice, which is the set of institutionalized or recurrent information seeking, searching, use, evaluation, and production activities of a particular group or community, is a conceptual alternative to information behavior, which focuses on individual cognitive processes (Savolainen, 2007). Understanding an information practice requires an in-depth look at the discourse that guides a practice. Traditionally, a discourse is a body of knowledge informed by a particular epistemological viewpoint or way of knowing that has been institutionalized through language and implies an idea of 'how things are'. To uncover discourse, research can look at the discursive activity, or language activity, that situates knowledge as true, as valid, as legitimate (Foucault, 1972).

McKenzie (2003) has observed that most information practice research focuses on academic or professional settings. Furthermore, Savolainen (2007) has questioned whether information practices outside a working environment are institutionalized. The current research assumes that practices outside academic or professional setting can be institutionalized and can be uncovered by looking at the discursive activities in which people engage to make meaning about everyday life objects and experiences. Another advantage of adopting a social constructionist epistemological stance is that, in addition to positivities of knowledge, the discontinuities, tensions, and ambiguities become legitimate research objects. This becomes particularly important when observing people in everyday situations that is unaccompanied by explicit reasoning.

The methodology used to analyze the discursive activities uses multiple methods. Each method focuses on the structural elements of participants' experiences and interpretations of objects they identify as relevant to their everyday lives. Social constructions that influence Kenyan women university students' interaction with information will be explored using two specific historical-interpretivist methods, phenomenology and hermeneutics. Content analysis and pragmatic linguistics will also aid in identifying various themes. How these methods and overarching methodology are applied and adapted to explore social knowledge constructions and essential structural elements will be explained and demonstrated.

Reported discoveries will include: themes of experience associated with various information contexts; explicit and implicit sources of information, including also tangible and intangible sources of information; identity roles assumed in various contexts; artifacts of knowledge and how these artifacts are instantiated through discourse; how places are tied to knowledge reconstruction; and, ultimately, the dominant discourses in which participants' experiences come together.

3. Methodology

Epistemological foundation: This qualitative study is grounded in social epistemology. The unit of analysis is the discursive context in which Kenyan women make meaning of their everyday experiences. This exploratory research is not guided by a specific theory or hypothesis and is designed to uncover the social and information practices of a particular group of people.

Data collection: Twenty Kenyan women students at United States International University (USIU), a private university in Nairobi, Kenya, participated. Data was collected over the course of 7 weeks. During weeks 1 and 2, participants were instructed to photograph 2-3 events, places, or objects per week they identified as relevant to their daily lives at that time. Photos served as structural anchors. During weeks 3 and 4, participants were instructed to choose any topic or concept, to take 2-3 photographs that represented how they get information about that concept, and explain why that concept is relevant. During week 5, participants identified 3 concepts about which they would all take 2-3 photographs that represented how they get information about those concepts. Participants met as a group each week to discuss their photos. Prior to discussion, they wrote a 2-3 sentence description of each photograph stating what they intended to capture and the relevance and listed keywords. Open-ended interviews were held to gain insight and receive feedback about preliminary findings. Finally, participants uploaded images, keywords, and descriptions to an online photography forum. Discussions and interviews were transcribed and were the primary texts for analysis.

Data analysis: Four types of analytical methods were used to explore the discursive context of how participants interacted with information and how knowledge was reconstructed and experienced. First, content analysis was used to explore frequencies and code explicit concepts. Second, a phenomenological method of analysis outlined by Hycner (1985) was used to explore how each participant expressed the relevance of their photographs to their daily lives, uncover the essence of their communicated experience, explore intentionality, and formulate experiential themes. A third method employed the principles of pragmatics (semiotics) to aid in deciphering signs, speaker intention, presuppositions, attitudes and further develop themes. A fourth method was hermeneutical analysis, which allowed interpretation of texts by considering the geo-historical and social context in which participants interacted with information and provided a way to explore the tensions, ambiguities, and absences in the texts.

4. Conclusion

Understanding information-related activities and practices requires understanding of the discourses tied to various information practices in a particular time and place. By exploring the discourses and information practices that dominate knowledge production will help develop our concept and measures of IL. More importantly, as citizens become aware of dominate information practices, they are self-empowered to be more effective participants in an alleged information and knowledge society, to act more effectively as members of a democracy or other levels of their governance, and, essentially, to intentionally transform their lives and positions of power against a dominant way of knowing.

References

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