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Fiction as Information: A Look at Reading as Information Source

Mary Ann Harlan
maryann.harlan@gmail.com
San Jose State University School of Information

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Abstract
Information literacy, the ability to effectively seek, evaluate, and use information, is a concern of library science and instruction as evidenced by a variety of evolving standards from professional organizations (American Association of School Librarians (AASL), 2018; Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), 2015; IFLA, 2015). A close look at these standards reveals an assumption that information is fact based, and information literacy is an academic skill. However, researchers have consistently challenged this assumption by broadening our understanding of information in areas of information behavior (Wilson, 2000; Agosto &Hughes-Hassel, 2006), information practices (Lloyd, 2006; Savolainen, 2008), and information literacy (Bruce, 2000; Lupton, 2008). In particular Christine Bruce consider information literacy as a learning process, introducing informed learning (Bruce, 2008). This is consistent with the ALA definition of an information literate person as someone who "has learned how to learn". Information itself has a broad conceptualization. Bruce (2008) states that information is anything that is informing. This suggests that what we see, experience, the emotions we feel as well as what we read or are told can be informing, and therefore information. This information can change our knowledge schema. Everyday life information seeking and information behavior research extends the notion of information sources to include the people around us, the media we encounter, and all manner of less academic sources. Suggesting these source can impact how we know and understand out world (Savolainen, 2008). If what we encounter in our world is informing then the art we encounter and engage with is a source of information, a way we can understand and know about our world. Which brings me to the statement that fiction as a form of art is a way to engage our emotions, to explore our world, a way to learn.

Statement of Research Problem
Teachers and librarians have made claims that reading is "a window to the world" (AASL, 2009) and that reading fiction can inform us about ourselves and the world around us. We should examine this statement, problematize the process, and hear from readers so that we can best use fiction as an information source. Literacy theories provide some insight into the reader experience as related to learning and fiction as a potential information source (Keen,2007; Rosenblatt, 1982; Zunshine, 2006). Perhaps the most well-known in K12 education circles, and potentially misunderstood, is Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory. Rosenblatt suggested that reading is a transaction between reader and text, and that there is both efferent reading and aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1982). Efferent reading is described as a reader's stance of what information they can 'take away' from the text, and aesthetic reading is 'living through' a text (Wilhelm, 2016). In both efferent and aesthetic stances towards reading one could claim that a reader is interacting with information. Therefore, fiction should be considered an information

source. However, the notion that fiction is an information source is not particularly considered in much of the information literacy scholarly research. Therefore, this research examines how adolescents engage with fiction as a source of information, even when involved in an aesthetic reading experience rather than an efferent one.

Literature Review

Reading

Often we assume that if we provide diverse materials, emphasizing different views that readers will engage the stories in a way that both allows for identity exploration but also reading the world around them. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) provided the analogy when she wrote about Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors. Writing that "literature transforms the human experience and reflects it back to us" (p.1) and opining that it "could help us understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards difference" (p.2). Bishop sees fiction as an information source that allows readers to both see themselves and learn about their world. The short hand metaphor Bishop provides found new footing in 2014 when two popular articles in the New York Times shone a spotlight on research on representation in children's books (Meyers (a), 2014; Meyers (b) 2014). The data the Meyers' referenced that highlights the lack of representation of people of color in youth literature has been collected since 1985 by the Cooperative Children's Book Center and is ongoing; it is also quite dismal. The articles launched broader conversations and reminded us of Bishop's suggested metaphor. Emerging from this were movements #weneeddiversebooks (WNDB) and #ownvoices which has encouraged publication of books that "reflects and honors the lives of all young people" (https://diversebooks.org/), whereas #ownvoices expanded this idea to support authors of color and other identities (e.g. LGBTQIA+) writing about their own experience. This allows "all children to see themselves in the pages of a book" accurately represented by an author representing their community. In Bishop's terms WNDB provides mirrors for readers to learn about themselves. Bishop also suggests a potential for others "to understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans" (Bishop, 1990, p.2), or a window. A window potentially provides the possibility of using fiction to read themselves or the world fiction becomes an information source and a site of learning.
The idea of reading as an opportunity to read one's self and the world requires interaction with a text to build meaning. When Rosenblatt (1982) introduced reader response theory she emphasized the transaction between reader and text. She proposed two different stances in reading: efferent reading and aesthetic reading. A simple interpretation is to propose that efferent readers are reading for information, whereas aesthetic readers are reading for the experience although that is not entirely what Rosenblatt intended (Rosenblatt, 1995). This simplified understanding ignores the way engaging with art can provide information rather than recognizing the possibility of a continuum between efferent and aesthetic reading that Rosenblatt actually envisioned and therefore the possibility that an aesthetic reading experience can be considered an information experience.

Rosenblatt is not the only literacy and reading theorist who focuses on the reader experience. For instance, Keen (2007) explored the concept of empathy in reading. The simple idea is that engaging in other's stories will encourage empathy, an aesthetic information experience. However, she finds that most readers are drawn towards characters they relate to therefore empathy is rooted in self-interest which suggests that reading about others might not encourage empathy unless that is the goal of the reader. Much like Rosenblatt, Zunshine (2006) also suggests reading fiction allows us to try on "different states of mind" for enjoyment (p. 17) which is similar to Rosenblatt's conceptualization of aesthetic reading. Ultimately Zunshine argues that we are a "long way off from grasping fully the complexity that this engagement entails" (p. 164), and that the nuances of how fiction engages our emotions and perceptions is

not yet well understood. Similarly, Blackford (2004) found that girls perceived literature as "a difference between self and life" (p. 12) taking a reading stance the reading was not "real life" (p.12), that it was escapism and not something that impacted how they saw the world or changed their knowledge base. On the other hand, May'an (2012) and Wilhelm (2016) suggest that critical literacy stances encourage readers to engage with fiction as aesthetic experiences that allow readers to explore identity, explore their world and communities. The nuance of a readers' necessary stance is not well investigated and the popular literature and professional stances takes a more surface level approach assuming that the act of reading is enough to look in a mirror or peer through a window Embedded in this is the assumption that in reading books the reader learns something new. But do the reader's perceive learning, do they see themselves as interacting with information? Or is there a stance that a reader must take and a way to guide readers to this stance? How can fiction be an information source?

Information Literacy

Information is the province of information science, understanding how people engage with information is at the core of information behavior, information practice, and information literacy research. As we engage with concepts of information and the process of seeking, evaluating, using and creating information and new knowledge we have come to acknowledge the complexity of the experience. An understanding of information as "anything that is informing" (Bruce, 2008, p.6) provides impetus for studying the information experiences in which people engage with a wide variety of everyday information sought and created for a wide variety of reasons (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2006; Bruce, 2008; Lloyd, 2006; Lupton, 2008; Savolainen, 2008). In contemplating this in regard to fiction as a way to learn about self and others I return to the definition that an information literate person is one who has learned how to learn (American Library Association, 1998) and consider the idea of reading fiction as an information literacy practice.

Over the years the definition of information literacy evolved recognizing the changing nature of information formats and contexts, this included ideas of information literacy as a set of skills to be master, critical information literacy, information experiences, and information literacy frameworks that attempted to categorize different ways of seeing information literacy (Bruce, 2000; Eisenberg, 2001; Lupton, 2008; Marcum, 2002; Pawley, 2003; American Association of School Librarians, 2009). These evolutions are evident in the latest standards from ACRL (2015) and AASL (2018).

In considering the information literacy of reading fiction Lupton's GeSTE framework was particularly helpful. In proposing conceptual approaches to Information Literacy Lupton (Bruce et al., 2017) discusses the GeSTE framework in which E represents the expressive window. In the GeST framework Lupton (2008) introduced four windows into information literacy: Generic, Situated, and Transformative. Each window proposed a way of seeing information, and a conceptualization of information literacy. Lupton (Bruce, 2017) later introduced the E, the expressive window, into GeSTE. The expressive window of information literacy is about building identity, to express and understand oneself Lupton states that the response to information "involves an aesthetic and emotional response" (Bruce et al., 2017, p. 7). This is similar to Rosenblatt's suggestion that the aesthetic stance is focused on "experiential qualities of what is being evoked in the text" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 350). In other words, if one considers information literacy through the Expressive frame Rosenblatt's view of aesthetic reading can also be reading for information, only the information is deeply personal.

When readers submerse themselves into a text what is information they engage with, and how do the conceptualize it as an information source? What are the practices that make readers information literate when reading fiction?

Methodology

In order to address the research question: do teens consider fiction an information source and what practices do they engage in when considering the information of a story a class of 16 and 17 year-olds were observed, surveyed, and interviewed over the course of one school year. The school is located in a rural area in Northern California, and is primarily White. The community is also primarily lower to lower middle economic class, despite the presence of a University. The class demographics reflected the community demographics, primarily White, lower – lower middle class, with limited experience beyond the boundaries of the community. While it was not immediately obvious that demographics might matter as the year progressed it became apparent it would matter.

In the beginning of the school year students were encouraged to fill out a questionnaire that required them to select a pseudonym and then asked about their perceptions of reading, when and where they read and for what reasons. Over the course of the year students were required to read independently as a class assignment. As they finished individual titles they completed a second questionnaire based on the specific title using their pseudonym. Questions on the specific title included (not limited to):

- What stands out to you about your book?
- What was your opinion about the characters? Did you like them or did you relate to them? Explain.
- Did you learn something about yourself or the world around you? Explain.
- What would you share if you were asked to share what was most important or that you enjoyed the most? Why this?

The questions were designed to be broad enough to obscure the specific interest: did students perceive fiction as a possible information source, and gather information from their reading. This why the question is phrased "learn" which is based in the assumption that engaging information is a learning experience. Based on early responses and class observations from the classroom teacher it became clear additional data would need to be gathered.

After two survey rounds interviews were conducted with students who identified themselves as readers. Interview questions were more specific to the research question, including asking students to define information, and if they considered reading fiction as a source of information. The interviews evolved into conversations as specific answers were delved into more deeply. Additionally student discussions during book club circles of group selected titles were observed and reading journals were provided for additional insight into students' reading experiences.

Findings

Students as Readers

This paper specifically uses students as an identifier of the population. This is because the context of school impacted the experience of researching the population. Participants adopted the identity of student in their stance in answering questions on the questionnaire, using language familiar to their teacher. Furthermore, a majority of them saw reading as a school activity, stating that they "only read for school" or citing school as the only place they read. Additionally, the context of which the data was collected was a classroom, and while it was not a specific assignment the questionnaire and interviews were encouraged

by the classroom teacher. I mention this due to the fact that it has some significance to understanding both researcher and participant stance and identities in the exchange of information (Harlan, 2016).

In the first survey students were asked where they read and over half of the students indicated that school was the only place they read. For the purposes of this paper those students are considered non-readers. Students who read in a variety of contexts (home, school, travel destinations, etc.) were classified as readers. In exploring why students read a majority of the students claimed they only read for school, even a few who were classified as readers. These students read their independent reading books as well as assigned reading at home, or other locations. One third of the students only read for school at school. The students who only read for school (only in school or in a variety of contexts) claimed to read "for a good grade" or "mandatory" reading as the reason for reading. Two students claimed to read for information, but further answers indicated they were reading only informational (non-fiction) texts. A select few (3) suggested they did not read at all, even required reading. On the other hand, a few students were articulate about reading to "fill my imagination", "immerse myself in the story", and "get lost in a story". Students classified as readers, and who read for reasons such as these more often saw fiction as an information source as they more readily identified their learning, although they were more likely to articulate reading as entertainment, a way of "running through someone else's mind". Students who classified as non-readers were more likely to see reading "like pulling teeth" (one of the students who also said they never read, even in school).

Reading Fiction to Learn

Perhaps unsurprisingly based on the answers to "why I read" students primarily did not suggest that they learned anything while reading their books. Over half of the students consistently answered the question "Did you learn something about yourself or the world around you?" with the answer "no" or less emphatically "Not really", although one of those students once answered "Not really, well l learned that things change so fast and sometimes you cannot control it," changing the answer, midstream. One of the emergent conflicts in understanding the ways students constructed fiction as an information source was that answers to the questions "what stands out in this book" and whether or not students related to the characters displayed some information gathering that impacted their own knowledge. For instance, one student who stated they didn't learn anything, also stated feeling empathy for a character and stating "no one deserves not have a choice", a thematic element of the book they read and something that might be considered as information or learning. Another student who suggested they had "not really" learned anything also pointed to how the author embedded scientific facts in the story as something that stood out, although perhaps they knew the facts already and therefore didn't learn anything, hence the verbal shrug.

One particular note regarding the question what stands out to you about the book is that it seemed that students primarily read for plot, interested in how a story progressed. However when cross-tabulating their answers students who only read assigned school reading were the students most likely to identify a plot element rather than a character, thematic, or aesthetic element of a text as notable. Four students who said they read for entertainment were also primarily reading the plot, but when asked about other elements could and would respond. Students who read frequently, in multiple environments identified writing style, tone and emotion, and character development as notable without prompting. In interviews with the teacher it became apparent that students who attempted to avoid reading class novels through use of online sources such as SparkNotes and had non-critical approach to class texts could be identified as the students who primarily read for the plot when reading independently. In other words, they may not have the skills to engage a text critically to gather information to learn about the world, or even reflect on themselves as dialog with the text.

Reading as Identity Management

Students who self-identified as liking to read demonstrated an awareness of characters, and reading as a way to explore their self. They saw reading as a "mirror" in the ways in which they related to characters, but also as a "window" in that they judged characters actions against their own or the choices that they might have made. They made commentary on characters that reminded them of people in their own lives, "I had empathy for his strung out, unmotivated mother because she reminded me of my own", further expressing being proud of the main character for learning to cope with his family. Or this "I hated the mom, she reminds me of my mom. I feel for the children, they do not deserve what they are forced to endure", recognizing their own personal relationships and making a judgement that indicated either confirming what they knew, or shifting knowledge schema. In answering what they learned the student who had empathy for the mother, discussed that "it took time to build relationships", or that people experience things they do not deserve (two students had similar reactions to different texts). Students related to characters based primarily on the actions of characters, ignoring demographics in a way that assumed a similarity of experience. For instance, one girl discussed Starr from The Hate U Give attending a primarily White school, and the ways Starr adjusted her personality. The student was White and her own "mask wearing" was between peer groups that were also White. The window she peered through reflected back a vision of herself rather than a critical understanding of a community much different than her own. She used The Hate U Give as a mirror to learn about herself, however distorted, rather than a window into learning about the world. In considering characters the majority of students imagined the character as themselves, rather than critically considering how context and demographics might make the characters' experience different than their own. Furthermore in regards to identity and characters it was observed that students dismissed a title when it became apparent that the character they might most relate to was the antagonist, or if they finished the novel they expressed empathy for the antagonist.

Considering how students who did state they related to the characters or demonstrated engagement with characters' choices as a way to understand their own experiences or to develop their own choices it was worth exploring this concept in more depth during the interviews. One student discussed reading as a way to understand "dealing with your experiences and what to do afterwards" and therefore agreed there was information is embedded in that reading experience that allowed her to "grow". Another explicitly expressed that "if the story lines up with something that relates to me in some way then I know I am know I am going to learn from it", and she dismissed demographics as significant to relating to a character (although she also primarily read White characters). In reading characters beyond what was easily identifiable as self, in other words reading about others, one student did state that when she reads about characters she doesn't relate too she related those characters to "others around her", looking for "patterns of personalities" and then relating them to her reading. In that sense she was using fiction to make sense of her own community and space, but not necessarily as a way to learn about the world beyond her own context. Ultimately students looked to fiction as a mirror, learning about self through reading but rarely used it as a window.

Discussion

Conceptualizing Information

On the surface students did not conceptualize fiction as an information source, although the questionnaires did demonstrate that if asked they might identify something they learned. Being able to identify learning suggests that they were encountering, evaluating, and then incorporating that information into their construct of themselves and/or the world. But it was not something they were

metacognitively aware of despite this being the main activity involving literature in their class when engaging in whole class reading. This suggests yet another way many students do not merge school and out of school contexts, activities, and skills (cite). The interviews provided more contexualization to the disconnect between understanding fiction as an information source and acknowledging that they might have learned something while reading. Students invariably identified information as academic, factual, and discrete. Only when asked what their information sources were or if experiences and emotions were information did they broaden their concept of information and conceive of fiction as an information source. Rosenblatt laments that in school students read efferently, even in reading fiction, with questions focused on right answers (cite). This points to a pedagogical approach to literature emphasizing facts as information even in exploring literature (e.g. what color was the dress Curly's wife was wearing instead of why might Curly's wife behaved the way she did?). We are not engaging students in aesthetic experiences as information, and broadening out definitions of information that values emotional engagement as a way to learn self and world. Students see reading as gathering facts, and fiction is not "fact". We need to explicitly engage in a broadening of concepts of information so that story can be perceived as information, so an aesthetic experience invoking information can be considered informing.

Critical Reading

Based on the above it is clear that engaging in aesthetic reading that is informative is not just about access, it is not simply providing the books. It is clear that critical reading needs support. If we frame literacy beyond decoding, and truly expect nuance in comprehension then students/readers can use fiction as an information source, as a way to read themselves and the world. It seems that fundamentally if reading is to act as a window into other's lives that we need critical approaches to reading (Ma'ayn, 2012, Thomas, 2019; Wilhelm, 2016)To engage in a critical literacy readers need context, they need to be questioned, and they need to engage in dialogue. As evidenced in how students read for identity management to engage in the complexity of a story students may need additional context, a way for reading fiction to learn about others rather than self, particularly for non-readers. During a book group discussion of White Oleander a debate about characters' motivation within societal context extended reader's understandings and shifted reader's notions about their world. Relying on personal experience of two of the readers, the impact of the foster care system significantly changed how the other two readers understood both their peers and the broader concepts of family. This indicated a specific need for dialogue in activating fiction as an information source when it was information about people's experiences beyond one's own. What would have happened if a conversation about Starr from The Hate U Give occurred between two students rather than one reading it independently? Would a student willing to engage critically with the subject matter and themes increase learning about the world for other students?

Limitations of Context and the Fun House Mirror

I was unprepared for the implications of demographics and the resistance to reading others, while still being prepared for the implicit messages of engaging independent reading research in a school context. Above I highlighted that students responded to questions and observations as students – using language expected in an English Language Arts classrooms, and distancing themselves from the story through dispassionate discussion and answers. Interviews broke down these walls but it proved a limitation to truly understanding if youth can conceive of fiction as an information source, and if they would seek it out as an information source. The answer seemingly is- it depends, readers suggested they might and/or were more likely to be critical in the possibility of learning from fiction, non-readers were less likely to make that leap to fiction as information.

Furthermore, students might have used reading as an identity management tool but only in the sense that they related to personality traits, or plot points. They rarely and only with prompting examined social constructs that impacted characters and plot. This was particularly obvious in relation to class. Many students identified as middle class, despite being at or below an established poverty line and qualifying for free/reduced lunch. The teacher reported students being surprised that home insecurity, food insecurity, and inability of parents to pay bills at the end of the month might mean that they and others could consider themselves poor. In whole class readings they adamantly did not identify with poor characters, dismissing that those characters had anything in common with their lives. Only through discussion well into a school year in which personal safety regarding disclosure was established were students likely to use personal experience in relation to class to make an argument as was seen in the White Oleander book group. However even then the idea that systemic class structures impacted the foster care system and who found themselves in foster care were not examined. As a result the information encountered in story was only engaged within the context of that story and personal experiences rather than what the story suggested about the larger world around them. The mirrors often reflected a different vision of themselves than perhaps was accurate, identifying with characters of different community contexts, and dismissing characters perhaps too close for comfort.

Limitations of Research

Like most qualitative research this research has limitations in regard to size of case study and context of the study. This was a small study of 34 students. They live in a remote rural area of California and many have not left the county. Their experiences are limited to their geographical region. It was not demographically diverse, either in terms of race or class. And this combined with the geographical isolation may have impact on how they read about contexts unlike their own. Finally, in regard to readers/non-readers it was also a class with a high percentage of students needing academic assistance for learning disabilities and/or attendance concerns. This may impact reading critically as the opportunity in the school system in this study often pulls these students into intervention classes that focus on efferent reading skills and strategies. For many of the students this would have been the first time someone asked about aesthetic or encouraged aesthetic reading.

Conclusion

With discussion and dialog students saw fiction as an information source, although it was not an immediate belief. They understood story as a possible way to learning about self and others if they were readers but even in this situation they needed to be critically questioned about the text, and their reading experience. It was not self-evident to them. Given the high percentage of non-readers, and the fact that readers needed to conceptualize information more broadly, be given permission to consider emotion and aesthetic response as informing, teachers and teacher librarians have a role in making explicit how to read the world through fiction, provide strategies towards critical reading, and developing context (particularly sociohistorical). Reading needs to be considered an aesthetic experience, and information literacy instruction needs to value the aesthetic experience in order to fully achieve and embody the possibility that reading is a mirror, window, and sliding glass door.

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Biographical Information

Mary Ann Harlan is an Assistant Professor at the San Jose State University School of Information. She received her PhD from the San Jose State/Queensland University of Technology Gateway Program in 2012. She worked in K12 libraries for 12 years. She is currently the program coordinator of the Teacher Librarian program at San Jose State University.