Forester or Bushman? Experience as an Information Source in an Ontario Logging and Tourist Community

Abstract: LIS research tends to favour documentary information sources. Using ethnographic methodologies (including photovoice), I explore how experience constitutes an information source in a small Northern Ontario community built on the logging and tourism industries. Preliminary results suggest that experiential information crosses boundaries between work, leisure and everyday life information domains.


Context and purpose

In 1961, a coincidence of events created an information problem for a seasoned businessman in the little northern town of Whitney, Ontario. Shortly after the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests gave John Stanley Lothian McRae notice that he was required to submit an operating plan as a “pre-requisite for granting authority to McRae Lumber Mills to harvest timber [in Algonquin Park] for the next three year period,” (Connelly 2005) the man Mr. McRae had set in charge of the task died.

Although JSL McRae was “an intelligent, shrewd, self-made lumberman as tough as a two-dollar steak,” (Connelly 2005) he was also now in a real bind. Failing to produce this plan meant that he and the 100 men he employed were out of work. The stubborn and feisty McRae needed to submit this document, but really didn’t want to hire an “[expletive] forester” to write it because he had “a camp full of good bushmen [already on the payroll] at Rock Lake who [knew] all there is to know about cutting timber” (Connelly 2005). But as McRae put it, the government had him “by the throat” (Connelly 2005).
And so it was that Brent Connolly, forester fresh out of university, came to work at the McRae Lumber Mill in Whitney, right alongside Mr. McRae’s valued bushmen. At the end of his self-described 29 year “dream come true career” he wrote the book in which this tale is recounted, Holy Old Whistlin: Yarns about Algonquin Park Loggers. It is one of many blue-collar and everyday life tales at the root of how I came to be interested in the differences between experience and education as an information source.

Theoretical Framework

Much work has been done in LIS research to describe formal education, professional work environments and tangible, documentary sources of information. This doctoral project turns from the formal to the informal. It inherits its focus from Elfreda Chatman’s studies into the everyday life information worlds of marginalized peoples (Chatman 1991, 281-300; Chatman 1992; Chatman 1996, 193-206; Chatman 1999, 207-217) and Reijo Savolainen’s studies of everyday life information seeking contexts (Savolainen 1995, 259-294; Savolainen 2005, 152; Savolainen 2006, 110-127; Savolainen 2006, 3-3; Savolainen 2006, 1116-1125; Savolainen 2008, 37-75; Savolainen 2009, 38-45). Using the work of these theorists as my lense, I look at the information world of a rural, geographically isolated population from the less tangible side. I seek to explore whether there is substance to the perceived difference in value between information acquired through formal sources, and information acquired through experience. Experiential information can be broadly considered to be sensation, emotion, fact, skill, knowledge, or understanding acquired or otherwise derived (with or without intent) during interactive participation in a physical, intellectual or imaginary context, or occurring at some point thereafter as a result of contemplation and reflection. This definition draws on Dewey’s idea of experiential learning (Dewey, 1997), and Savolainen’s idea of information as social practice (Savolainen, 2008).

Focusing on the question, “What does experiential information look like in the rural town of Whitney, Ontario?” I examine whether these two types of information sources are as binary as the McRae story suggests, and whether it is possible to describe or measure the qualities of blue-collar, everyday life, experience-based information sources in some meaningful way. Of particular interest are the occasions when experiential information used in this rural environment for work-related purposes or everyday living crosses over into the world of hobbies for other populations. The idea that information can serve to satisfy multiple purposes has not yet been explored in any great detail in LIS.

Methodology and research methods

I explore the topic of experiential information from the perspective of the people in this community using qualitative, ethnographic methods of inquiry including semi-structured interviews and photovoice. Photovoice is a technique whereby people “identify, represent, and enhance their community” through photographs (Wang and Burris 1997, 369).

Using snowball, theoretical and maximum variation sampling techniques, I recruit fifteen to twenty-five adult residents from the town of Whitney for interviews. I focus on participants who
are current residents of this community, and who have also lived here during their formative childhood years, as this is the population expected to exhibit the greatest number of experience-based information behaviours and memories and to produce the “richest possible data” (Lofland 2005). Although I collect information on the education level of participants in order to make comparisons between my sample group and census data possible, participation is not limited by minimum or maximum education level requirements. I ask participants to share with me and talk about at least one photograph from their personal collection of a person, place or thing that represents a source of something they learned through experience. These photographs can be existing photos taken from their collections, or they can be new photographs taken by the participant specifically to share with the researcher. We also discuss photographs taken in Whitney by tourists and posted to public Flickr accounts to elicit discussion around the topic of how they view their own experience as compared to how their experience is viewed by outside visitors. The use of photovoice and photo-elicitation in these ways is designed to improve the comfort level of the participants by giving them something familiar to speak about; to improve the quality of data obtained through more vivid and highly personal descriptions; and to give the researcher something concrete to take away from what is otherwise a very ephemeral interaction.

Data are analyzed according to grounded theory using the constant comparative method, whereby “incidents that are found to be conceptually similar” are given “the same conceptual label” until each emerging theme is fully elaborated (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Emerging results

Preliminary results suggest that the experience-based information skills found in this rural population are undervalued, particularly in terms of their ability to cross the boundaries between work, play and everyday life. For example, working and living in a rural community surrounded by forests often requires both the ability to manage the presence of wildlife, and a well-honed set of wilderness survival skills. Research conducted by Dr. Robert Stebbins suggests that the evolving urban leisure economy also values this type of information for playful purposes in what he calls ‘serious leisure’ contexts such as, in this case, extended interior camping excursions into Algonquin Park.

Contribution to the field

This research project supports the advancement of information theory by further challenging the boundaries between formal and informal information systems (and the value we attribute to each) and by conceptualizing information in terms of intangible, undocumented experiences. It also seeks to extend our understanding of information in leisure contexts by associating information with leisure, examining pleasurable information exchanges, and using leisure information activities to encourage lifelong learning and increased social inclusion (Fulton and Vondracek 2009, 613). Finally, documenting experiential information behaviours present in this community shines a light on a rural population that has not previously been examined in LIS.

References


Information Science and Technology, 152. Medford, N.J.: Published for the American Society for Information Science and Technology by Information Today.
