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Rethinking the concept of “information literacy”: a German perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the original and diverse approaches to the concept of information literacy in the German academic world. Unlike the American notion of information literacy, whose pedagogy, methodology and conceptualisation follow guidelines set forth by powerful professional organisations such as ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) and ALA (American Library Association), the German notion of information literacy is still negotiated on an interdisciplinary market of ideas ranging from communication science to didactics and from cultural anthropology to epistemology. An awareness of this international perspective on information literacy is timely, given the recent debates about the legitimacy of the radically new approach to information literacy put forth in the ACRL Framework.

Keywords

information literacy, Germany, higher education, *Informationskompetenz*, information literacy pedagogy, metaliteracy.

1. Introduction

With the arrival of the new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy, a redefinition of the concept of information literacy was also put forth (Association of College and Research Libraries 2016). This new concept emphasises metacognitive and conceptual understandings of information use and information creation, while the earlier emphasis on the acquisition of skills (such as finding and evaluating information) is being assigned a subordinate role. As a result, some information specialists have expressed confusion and uneasiness over the sunset of the old outcome-based definition of information literacy standards (for example, An Open Letter Regarding the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, sent in December 2014, addressed to the task force charged with drafting the Framework and signed by over 300 librarians). Some argued that favouring concepts over abilities will bring with it an incapacity to instruct and measure student learning outcomes effectively, altering, in turn, the nature of what constitutes information literacy (Wilkinson 2014). A metacognitive approach is too vague, too speculative, it was argued, it leaves too many doors open to the unknown, it relies too much on evidence that still needs to be defined. We need a solid grounding in types of evidence drawn from a common understanding of information literacy practice: “I don’t want to justify the value of information literacy in terms of some mysterious threshold that students must face down” (Wilkinson 2014).

Such an objection proves the methodological inertia that dominates the theory of information literacy in many, not all, academic and professional circles in the United States. It assumes that any approach that is not rooted in an outcome-based pedagogy is somehow illegitimate or pseudo-scientific. This conception demonstrates little awareness of the constructed, contextual and constantly changing nature of our understanding of information literacy. In reality, our use of the concept of “information literacy” in the United States has its own history, one that has been profoundly influenced by the pervasiveness of a particular pedagogical model popular among American teachers and scholars during the last three decades, but we should expect it to change together with the changes in our own understanding of the ideas of information ecosystem, information use and information creation. Because much of the American information literacy scholarship is almost exclusively self-referential, that is, focused on developments from within the American academic and professional world, there is little awareness about the ways in which other countries conceptualise the notion of information literacy.

The present article offers a review and brief analysis of some of the main alternative conceptualisations of information literacy in the German-speaking world. Exploring these methodological practices will bring more awareness about the constructed nature of the concept of “information literacy” as it is used in North America and parts of the English-speaking world and will, hopefully, open up new ways of understanding and interpretation that will enrich our scholarship. It is not my intention to argue that there are no new, groundbreaking and fertile approaches to the theory and pedagogy of information literacy within the American scholarly world. In fact, interesting approaches are produced constantly, and some of them even come close to some of the ideas analysed in this paper. I can mention, without doing justice to all of them, James Elmborg’s (2012) theory of critical literacy, based on Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, a theory that combines the “competence” of educated explanation with the “performance” of ethical action, or William Badke’s (2011) interpretative “multicultural infolit”, an argument in favour of a pedagogy of information literacy that takes into consideration the meta-cognitive aspects of any culturally-informed understanding. But such theories are having a hard time breaking the methodological monopoly that dominates the discipline. The prevalence of an institutionalised information literacy model grounded in a particular pedagogical practice has left very little room for a dialogue based in interdisciplinary inquiry. The reticence with which the recent ACRL Framework has been met bears testimony to this situation.

2. What hides behind a word

The words we use to describe the world do not just describe the world, they also describe how we think about the world, what is important to us and what is not. In his famous 1952 short story “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges makes reference to an imaginary Chinese encyclopedia which categorizes animals by criteria that might seem absolutely arbitrary to a Western reader: animals that belong to the emperor, embalmed, tame, sucking pigs, sirens, etc. Borges argues that such categorisations are not any more imprecise than Western taxonomies or bibliographic classification systems for the simple reason that they all try to classify the universe, but we do not know what the universe is in essence. In other words, we lack a common point of reference. Thus, words do not categorise external, unchanging realities, but internal, relative realities that reflect our own shifting understanding of the universe. In thinking about the vocabulary

employed in information science around the world we might conclude that terminological differences do not simply reflect semantic incompatibilities, but that they tell us a lot about the wider conceptual categories used to comprehend the discipline in general, a discipline that does not exist independently of our own projections on it. These terminological differences function as windows into the methodological and cognitive processes that shape the science at a particular time and place. Hence, analysing the terminology employed in the German information science as alternatives to the English concept of “information literacy” will tell us a lot about the specific pedagogical and interpretative approaches favoured in Germany.

By and large, many information literacy programs in Germany walk in the steps of the tone-setter, the American library world, with its many umbrella associations and initiatives. However, it is interesting to note that, while in the United States the concept of “information literacy” has been accepted as a norm and as a national strategic goal, at least since the 1989 Final Report of the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, no single concept has been able to take on this role in Germany, where multiple concepts are competing for primacy (Rauchmann 2009, p.75). As of now, the concept of “Vermittlung von Medien- und Informationskompetenz” (Instruction of Media and Information Competency, or IK, in abbreviated form) - sometimes “Vermittlung und Förderung von IK” (Instruction and Advancement of Information Competency) (Sühl-Strohmenger 2012, p.205)—a concept first developed in 1991, (Treude 2011, p.49) is widely accepted, being used by about half of the German institutions of higher learning (Rauchmann 2009, pp.484-485). However, although the term “Vermittlung von Medien- und Informationskompetenz” is largely considered equivalent to the English “Information Literacy”, there is a considerable difference between them: in the German expression, media is understood as a concept different from information (according to Treude, *Medienkompetenz* was introduced later as a concept, p.75). A possible definition of the concept of *Medienkompetenz* was given in 1999 by Dieter Baacke, who sees the media separately from information, as the channels through which this information is disseminated. As a result, a critical awareness of these media, of the “wirtschaftlichen, technischen, sozialen, kulturellen, ethischen und ästhetischen Probleme” (“economical, technical, social, cultural, ethical and aesthetical problems”) related to the functioning of the information media is necessary (para. 7). At the same time, in the case of the concept of “Vermittlung von Medien- und Informationskompetenz”, the emphasis is on the pedagogical facilitation of the learning of these concepts, not the acquisition of a state (literacy). This difference is significant insofar as it signals a more explicit preoccupation with the pedagogy of information literacy, one that is not necessarily there in the English concept. This might explain why many of the German-language conceptualisations of information literacy foreground questions of pedagogy, teaching methods, and didactics.

It should be pointed out that the German notion of *Kompetenz* (competency), which expresses the educational goal of information literacy instruction, applies equally to other learning domains, as the Conference of Ministers of Education from the German federal states (*Kultusministerkonferenz*) recommended in its 1997 “Konstanzer Beschluss”. The emphasis on “core competencies” that began in 1997, some researchers argue, is responsible to a considerable degree for the proliferation of the notion of *Kompetenz* in the field of education in Germany, including information literacy education (Müller and Felder 2009, p.247). This shift in the categories applied to measuring learning is indicative

of an ongoing preoccupation with standardisation, evidence-based assessment, and authentic learning, preoccupations that also carried over into the field of information literacy. This does not mean that, before the notion of “Medien- und Informationskompetenz” gained popularity, there existed no awareness of the need for an informed, educated and efficient populace of information users. As early as 1974, Dieter Mertens expressed in his seminal report “Schlüsselqualifikationen: Thesen zur Schulung für eine moderne Gesellschaft” (Key-Qualifications: Theses on Instruction for a Modern Society) that “Informiertheit über Informationen” or “being informed about information” is a *Schlüsselqualifikation* (key-qualification) for the labour environment of the new Informational Age (1974, p.41). The language of qualifications, which emphasised the acquisition of knowledge in the realm of information use (for instance, knowledge of information retrieval, organisation, and processing), was replaced with the language of competencies in order to emphasise the ability to use and create information.

If Müller and Felder associate the rise of the concept *Kompetenz* in the 1970s with the increased popularity of Noam Chomsky’s linguistic theory of competence in language use (2009, p.247), Treude engages in an exploration of the connection between the concept of competency and that of literacy (2011). Treude is interested in pointing out the similarities rather than the differences between the two concepts. She analyses “literacy” in conjunction with “competency” (*Kompetenz*) in order to highlight that, although semantically different, there exists, in both cases, an emphasis on the idea of communication (2011, p.43). With “information literacy” the emphasis is on the language of information and on the ability to successfully use this information by mastering its specific modes of deployment. With *Medien- und Informationskompetenz*, the emphasis is on competence, but if one is to interpret competence in the sense given by Noam Chomsky in his book *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1969), then it becomes apparent that linguistic competence is tantamount to the ability to be fluent in a set of linguistic, that is, grammatical and semantic, rules. The overlap between the two concepts is obvious in that they can be both interpreted in the form of linguistic abilities. Treude concedes, however, that the overlap is probably best conveyed by the English concept of “Information fluency”, which is preferred by some American scholars over information literacy. Regardless of the differences and possible similarities between the notions of *Informationskompetenz* and information literacy, there are, nonetheless, some other concepts in the German pedagogy of information literacy that attempt to define both the teaching role of the library and the methodology of information and research education in different ways. I shall try to define the nature of these other concepts in order to shed light on the multitude of ways of defining the sphere of information literacy and hopefully provide a cross-cultural comparison that will offer the instructional librarians in the American tradition a different manner of conceptualising their own trade.

3. The role of the library as place

The idea of the library as a location and resource for learning has been habitually associated in the US with the pedagogy of “information literacy”, a term first mentioned in 1974 in Paul G. Zurkowski’s report to the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science but which, according to Treude, only started gaining traction after 1990 (Treude 2011, p.45). When considering the physical

library as a place that enhances learning, as in the case of the “information commons”, the view that “it may be helpful to conceive of information literacy as the curriculum information professionals teach within the information commons framework” is fairly common (Bailey and Tierney 2008, p.6). This does not mean, however, that the complexity of the library as a place of learning does not preoccupy scholars in the United States. Some support alternative learning theories and methods that can better address the diverse forms of learning taking place in the library, such as “integrative learning” (Beagle 2012), cooperative, and game-based learning (Weiner et al. 2010, pp.205-206), but there is no distinctive pedagogy of the library as a place. Even in the case of consciously designed library places, such the learning commons, the library supports “the spectrum of information literacy competencies: define information questions, find information to answer those questions, critically evaluate the information, and ethically use and communicate the information” (Weiner et al. 2010, p.202).

As a result, in the United States, when activities such as exhibits, reading events, and cultural happenings use the library as a resource and a location, the learning practices involved are usually subsumed to the pedagogy of information literacy instruction. Knowing that the library offers access to these resources and knowing how to use them is commonly perceived as an attribute of being “information literate” in the US, whereas in Germany a different concept, *Bibliothekspädagogik* or “the pedagogy of the library” explicitly addresses these competencies. As Holger Schultka argues, there needs to exist a set of distinct educational methods and concepts that capture the library’s ability to provide support in areas of visual, traditional or cultural literacies, a set that informs the librarians’ approach to instruction, reference and collection development (2011). The traditional concept of information literacy employed in the American library world, with its emphasis on the end-user’s acquisition of skills and aptitudes in information retrieval, evaluation, and use, does not sufficiently address the complex set of cognitive processes associated with trans-literate learning. When multiple forms of communication and information transfer occur within a library, including visual, cultural, social, or financial, just to name a few, the question arises: what kinds of teaching methods should be developed to address learning modes that transgress the traditional types of learning associated with academic communication and research practices?

In his 2002 article “Bibliothekspädagogik versus Benutzerschulung: Möglichkeiten der edukativen Arbeit in Bibliotheken” (The pedagogy of the library vs. user instruction: possibilities for educational work in libraries), Schultka, one of the main proponents of the concept *Bibliothekspädagogik*, suggests a fundamental distinction between *Bibliothekspädagogik* and another concept used in the German information literacy pedagogy, *Benutzerschulung* (“user instruction”, a concept which will be addressed later in this paper). In his article, Schultka sketches out a theory of *Bibliothekspädagogik* by showing how, in contrast to the notion of user instruction, which addresses the methods best suited for the training of library users in the various library resources, a pedagogy of the library explores the differentiated set of pedagogical approaches that suit the entirety of learning forms going on in the library. In a 2013 address at the first forum for *Bibliothekspädagogik* in Mannheim, Germany, persuasively entitled “Bibliothekspädagogik. Realität oder Utopie?” (Pedagogy of the library. Reality or Utopia?), Schultka offers the following definition of the concept: “Bibliothekspädagogik ist ein interdisziplinäres Theorie und Praxisfeld, die Schnittstelle zwischen Pädagogik und Bibliothek–Bibliothek und Pädagogik. „Pädagogik“ wird dabei als weiter Begriff genutzt. Es geht um Lehr-

/Lerninszenierungen für Menschen in, mit und durch Bibliotheken.“ (“The pedagogy of the library is an interdisciplinary theoretical and practical field, the interface between pedagogy and library - library and pedagogy. ‘Pedagogy’ is used here as a wider concept. It refers to teaching and learning situations in, with and throughout libraries”) (2013, p.10). Just as in the case of museums, which developed their own pedagogy in order to address the various learning and teaching situations taking place inside them and thus better structure collections, curation, promotion and programming, libraries should develop an intentional pedagogical strategy for users, Schultka argues, a strategy that integrates standard information literacy instruction with programming, marketing, networking, civic engagement, etc.

Jana Haase builds on the idea of the pedagogically driven library in order to show that the involvement of educators in the library organisation, physical arrangement and programming can stimulate learning at the source, that is, in the schools, at home and in society: “Die Entwicklung von Kompetenzen beginnt in den Nahbereichen des Erlebens – zu Hause, in der Schule” (“The development of competencies begins in the vicinity of lived experiences – at home, in the school”) (2010, p.63). This conception of learning, beyond the classroom and the academic world in general, opens up our understanding of what it means to be information literate in the modern world, of the way in which learning practices that accompany us from childhood, and from many lived experiences at home or in society, are relevant to the way in which we structure our own understanding of communication and information. Questions pertaining to psychological readiness, ethical disposition and linguistic ability thus become relevant for the education specialist, who looks at the global environment in which learning takes place in order to better shape the library so that it is able to meet the needs and challenges of its users but also to educate them for the informational environment of the new century.

A concept related to *Bibliothekspädagogik* is that of *Bibliotheksdidaktik* (the didactics of the library), originally formulated by Gunter Bock in 1972 and then further developed through the concept of *Informationsdidaktik* (Schulz 1993, cited in Rauchmann 2009, p.73). *Bibliotheksdidaktik* is a concept that emphasises the teaching of library skills as a didactic process, including elements of psychology and sociology of learning. Although Sabine Rauchmann considers that neither of these concepts (*Bibliotheksdidaktik* and *Informationsdidaktik*) has managed to gain a solid footing in the German academic world, the concept of *Bibliotheksdidaktik* continues to remain relevant, as the 2013 study *Bibliotheksdidaktik: Grundlagen zur Förderung von Informationskompetenz* by Ulrike Hanke and Wilfried Sühl-Strohmer suggests. Hanke and Sühl-Strohmer emphasise the importance of sound didactic planning for instructors involved in the teaching of information literacy skills. Building on Schultka’s *Bibliothekspädagogik*, they argue that the entire gamut of learning practices that take place in the library necessitates concrete teaching ideas and strategies that are adapted to the wider learning goals of the academic institutions. In this sense, the concept *Bibliotheksdidaktik* is a complement of *Bibliothekspädagogik* and it focuses on the didactical structure of planned instruction, which represents only a particular case of the pedagogy of the library (Hanke and Sühl-Strohmer 2013, p.8). The same idea is echoed in Tobias Pohlmann’s belief in the importance of having librarians who are “didactically qualified” (“didaktisch qualifiziertes Bibliothekspersonal”) (2012, p.9). This emphasis on the importance of sound pedagogy in the praxis of information literacy teaching

accounts for the frequent presence of education specialists in library-driven initiatives targeted at the preparation and assessment of information literacy teaching at many German universities.

Informationsdidaktik (the didactics of information) is a concept derived from the theory of information and communication and it deals with the cognitive aspects of interaction with information, offering a conceptual model for the instruction of information literacy. With every interaction with information and every knowledge transfer, issues of social, political, economic, ethical and cultural significance play an important role, and the goal of *Informationsdidaktik* is to address these issues in a systematic way. The fact that knowledge transfer takes place in an institutional, individual or social context also plays a role in understanding how learning practices are formed. Hence, the role of *Informationsdidaktik* is to function as a research concept ("*Forschungskonzept*") aimed both at the description and optimisation of the process of knowledge transfer: "Das Konzept zielt auf die Beschreibung, Gestaltung, Kontrolle und Optimierung von Wissenstransferprozessen auf Seiten der Produktion, der Rezeption und der verwendeten Medien (Online, Offline) und Kanäle (Sprache, Bild, Film etc.)" ("The concept aims at the description, creation, control and optimisation of knowledge transfer processes present in information production and reception, as well as in the media of dissemination (online, offline) and communication (language, image, film)") (*Informationsdidaktik*, para. 2).

Informationsdidaktik is focused on the shift from information to knowledge and on the cognitive processes that make this change possible and optimal. In an age of information overload, the structuring of information transfer is key to obtaining an efficient model of knowledge production that improves the social, professional and personal lives of the individuals. Another key aspect of *Informationsdidaktik* is the articulation of optimal practices for the creation and maintenance of a sustainable informational environment, in which information is not wasted, but finds its ideal reception and leads to a coherent cycle of information production and use. *Informationsdidaktik* is conceptually related to *Bibliotheksdidaktik* but it looks at the latter as only one aspect of the wider notion of didactics of information. At the same time, through its emphasis on education in information retrieval, use, and creation, it stands in close proximity to the notion of information literacy, but, as Matthias Ballod points out, the conceptual connection exists only insofar as information literacy or *Informationskompetenz* is understood beyond the confines of the library, as a comprehensive science of information research and organisation, analysis, and communication (2009).

An interesting story is that of the concept "teaching library" ("lehrende Bibliothek"), which, according to Dannenberg (cited in Treude 2011, p.78), was adopted into German from English. Originally, the term came from a concrete designation of a portion of UC Berkeley libraries, but in German the concept of "lehrende Bibliothek" (together with that of "learning library", adopted in its original English form) became a way of designating the library as a location that promotes teaching and learning and no longer as a repository of data. There exists a pedagogy of teaching and learning connected with the German concept "teaching library" but also a more general one that aims at marketing library services and enhancing institutional networking (Treude 2011, p.79). The idea of "Learning Commons", popular in the American world, offers an approximation of the German notion of "lehrende Bibliothek", but only to a certain extent. While the concept of Learning Commons promotes a view of the library as the one-stop shop for many research, teaching and learning needs across the campus, the "lehrende

Bibliothek” redefines the library as a department in its own right. Rather than viewing the library as a source of content, a medium for the other departments through which to exercise their teaching and learning, the “lehrende Bibliothek” assigns the library a role and function similar to those of the other departments. Of course, this understanding has institutional implications and even possible complications, but what is peculiar about it is its ability to define the library as a locus of education and by that token to assign it the same pedagogical importance that is assigned to the other university departments.

According to Pohlmann, who is referencing Krauß-Leichert’s seminal 2007 *Teaching Library—eine Kernaufgabe für Bibliotheken* (Teaching Library - a Core Undertaking for Libraries) the “teaching library” is a comprehensive concept that covers not only user training and orientation, but also all the teaching provided via instruction, face-to-face or blended, group meetings, tutorials, etc. (Pohlmann 2012, p.8). The idea of the complex, multi-faceted interaction with information that takes place in a library is thus captured into a concept that is large enough to accommodate both the traditional understanding of the library as the gateway to learning and a newer, more involved understanding that considers the library as a platform intimately involved with the higher-end, long-term processes of learning and research education: “Es sollen grundlegende, dauerhafte, individualistische und kontextgebundene Kompetenzen bezüglich des Umgangs mit wissenschaftlicher Information vermittelt werden, wofür ein Gesamtkonzept vorliegen soll” (“It is important to develop a comprehensive concept that captures the necessity of instructing the acquisition of foundational, long-term, individual and contextual competencies relevant for the interaction with scientific information”) (Pohlmann 2012, p.8). According to Rauchmann, the fact that the concept of “lehrende Bibliothek” stresses the importance of developing a pedagogy of research education that is appropriate for the modern library brings this concept in close proximity to other concepts that emphasise the library’s teaching role, such as *Informationsdidaktik* or *Bibliothekspädagogik* (2009, p.75).

In another important study on the teaching libraries, *Teaching Library: Förderung von Informationskompetenz durch Hochschulbibliotheken* (Teaching Library: Promotion of Information Literacy through University Libraries), Wilfried Sühl-Strohmenger defines the teaching library as a nodal point, both physically and pedagogically, that unites the various parts of the university (2012). One of the key ideas that Sühl-Strohmenger puts forth is that the library as a whole unit should work toward teaching and learning, and not only the library’s “instructional division”. His understanding of learning is wider and it includes the discrete, individual and even indirect learning that takes place in a library setting. Developing a pedagogical awareness of this comprehensive notion of learning constitutes one of the main tasks of the teaching library. For Sühl-Strohmenger, the manner in which the library connects researchers, students, information providers and other constituencies (such as assessment, marketing, and – importantly – a pedagogical division in charge of didactic methods) into a functional and multi-faceted unit is of utmost importance. His philosophy of the teaching library resembles, in this respect, the more common idea of the library as a Learning Commons, as he himself points out (2012, p.102).

It is relevant to indicate that Sühl-Strohmenger does not consider the concept “teaching library” as an alternative to information literacy, but as a complement, as the institutional space in which the goals of

Informationskompetenz can be best pursued, although he concedes that information literacy is a concept that exceeds the confines of a particular place or institution and relates to life-long learning abilities. Sühl-Strohmer is interested, however, in formulating an integrating theory of the library as place, one that takes into consideration the entirety of learning practices and information transfers that take place in the physical or virtual space of the library. His notion of teaching library pays, therefore, particular attention to the relevance of pedagogical and didactical questions, but also to questions of informational and learning psychology in the organisation of a library, one that is intentional and conscious about all the types of learning that take place inside it: "Dabei sind grundlegende Erkenntnisse der Pädagogik und Didaktik, der Wissens- und der Lernpsychologie von Interesse, die von der Hochschulbibliothek als Lernort oder als lernförderliche Infrastruktur im Zusammenhang mit der dort stattfindenden Informations- und Wissensverarbeitung zu berücksichtigen sind" ("The foundational insights brought by pedagogy and didactics, by the psychology of knowledge and that of learning are of interest insofar as they inform the practices of information and knowledge processing that take place within the academic library, which is to be understood as a place of learning or as educational infrastructure," Sühl-Strohmer 2012, pp.5-6).

4. Information literacy at the interface with cultural anthropology and epistemology

Another concept that competes with the notion of Information Literacy or *Informationskompetenz* in the German-speaking world is Thomas Hapke's "Informationskultur", or "culture of information". The concept of "Informationskultur" is derived by Hapke (2012, p.10) from the French "culture de l'information", a term coined by Olivier Le Deuff. Hapke is interested in capturing those subtle competencies that inform the cultural background against which information appears or is understood. His approach draws on ethnographic and cultural-anthropological ideas of culture, difference and understanding. Hapke is particularly interested in defining the framework of modern understanding of information, a kind of cultural metaliteracy, of which information literacy becomes a particular case. For this purpose, he also draws on philosopher Hans-Jörg Sandkühler's concept of "Wissenskulturen" or "cultures of knowledge" – a concept that emphasises the contextual nature of all knowledge creation and transfer (p.6). The concept of *Kultur* is, of course, problematic for an accurate translation into English, insofar as the German notion of *Kultur* is more restrictive than the English "culture", which signifies a totality of human practices, habits, and mentalities. In German, on the other hand, "Kultur" habitually refers to artistic practices and creative processes and has been historically associated with "intellectual, artistic, and religious facts" (Elias 1978, p.4). However, Hapke uses the notion of culture in a more Anglo-Saxon sense, as a sum of knowledge practices, and not necessarily in the sense of refined artistic production.

Hapke's method is original and proposes an alternative approach to the idea of information reception, use, and creation to the one promoted by the idea of information literacy. It suggests that our approach to information and communication is informed by cultural assumptions about information creation and ownership, by dissemination systems that reflect technological and intellectual practices rooted in individual histories and in distinct worldviews. Acquiring a level of meta-cultural awareness, of self-understanding, and critical knowledge of one's own epistemic traditions and connections with

the past becomes crucial in becoming a competent information user in one's own culture. Being able to become conversant, so to speak, or competent in the cultural code that informs the vast processes of information creation and use is the foundational competency for any form of information literacy. While this approach echoes aspects of metaliteracy embedded in the new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy, the methodological approach differs in that, while the conventional information literacy approach to questions of information use and creation is rooted in communication theory and cognitive science, the cultural-critical approach favored by Hapke proceeds by asking interpretative questions rooted in cultural anthropology and intellectual history.

This conceptual, interpretative approach to information literacy is not uncommon in the German-speaking world, where other approaches rooted in philosophy and cultural studies also exist. In her 2011 dissertation *Information als Gegenstand von Informationskompetenz* (Information as Object of Information Competency), Marianne Ingold proposes the concept of "Wissenskompetenz" ("knowledge competency") as a possible substitute for "Informationskompetenz" (2011, p.60). Her purpose is to move away from a conception of information as content and develop, instead, a philosophy of information as understanding, one that harkens back to ideas and concepts developed in German epistemology since the 19th century, at least since Wilhelm Dilthey, who famously developed his epistemology of human sciences around the distinction between causal explanation (*erklären*) and a deeper, ethical and psychological understanding of human phenomena (*verstehen*) (Dilthey 1981). The concept of "Wissenskompetenz" focuses on interpretation, rather than description, of knowledge and knowledge practices. Instead of limiting itself to describing information patterns and dissemination practices (through publication, for instance), an approach rooted in the science of knowledge is able to provide an interpretation of why certain information patterns exist in the way they do and what their limits are.

By problematising the competencies involved in the acquisition and transfer of knowledge, Ingold suggests that knowledge is not a static concept, a mere repository of information that needs to be acquired in a linear fashion, but a complex construct in which the producer, the medium and the receiver are equally involved: "Im Unterschied zur Vorstellung, dass Information als Gegenstand unabhängig von einer tatsächlichen Nutzung existiert, ist Information in dieser Sichtweise etwas, das erst in der kognitiven Rezeption durch einen Empfänger entsteht" ("In contrast to the belief that information exists as an object independently of its actual use, our approach sees information as something that appears only through its cognitive reception through a user,") (Ingold 2011, p.45). By resorting to arguments drawn from hermeneutics, Ingold suggests that the actualisation of knowledge is not to be understood as a process separate from the creation of knowledge and that the actual form of the knowledge transfer depends on pre-cognitive assumptions that, in turn, affect the transmission of knowledge (p.61).

Ingold's shift from traditional information literacy to knowledge and cognitive competence is an approach that is very familiar to promoters of "metaliteracy" as it is expressed, for instance, in the recent Framework for Information Literacy proposed by ACRL. Moving away from models of knowledge acquisition based in description and explanation (the "what" and "how" questions) toward models based in interpretation (the "why" questions) facilitates a deeper understanding of the

conditions under which information and communication processes in general are possible. This approach not only offers an understanding of the social nature of information creation and use but also reveals the ethical issues involved in this process. Thus, questions of media and information justice become directly relevant to the information literate user. Going beyond explanation into issues of interpretation opens up a whole new dimension of information literacy, in which users provide recommendations for best practices in information dissemination and use by taking into consideration the entirety of issues involved in these processes, from cognitive to ethical questions.

5. Other concepts

The concept of *Benutzerschulung* (or user instruction) is also popular in the German-speaking world, although, according to Treude, its use is as limited in the pedagogy of information literacy as the English concepts “bibliographic instruction”, “library instruction”, “orientation” or “user education” are in the American world (2011, p.72). As Rauchmann points out, the concept *Benutzerschulung* came under attack mostly due to its overemphasis on the acquisition of skills and specific abilities, instead of larger processes that would allow one to solve complex problems pertaining to the production, dissemination, evaluation and integration of information in general (2009, p.47). Schultka’s criticism of the term refers to the fact that it implies a restrictive view of information literacy instruction, limiting it to library users and to the instructional practices going on in the library (cited in Rauchmann 2009, p.74). The idea of user instruction is also somewhat restrictive if understood as a form of orientation in the library’s specific collections, catalogues, and databases with the single purpose of facilitating information discovery and retrieval. In such a case, the user can be trained to use the existing resources with some proficiency and even understand the library as a set of technical procedures and methods, but will never grasp the wider, conceptual questions pertaining to publication and dissemination practices or to information use in and outside academia. However, as Rauchmann admits, the concept continues to be used a lot in the praxis of information literacy at many German institutions of higher education (2009, p.74).

Treude also makes reference to other concepts used as alternatives to *Informationskompetenz*, such as “Einführung in die Bibliotheksbenutzung” (or introduction to library use), or “Informationsrecherche” (information research). These concepts, however, Treude argues, are as limited in their applicability as the concept of *Benutzerschulung*, because they focus on skill acquisition or instruction in a particular set of competencies instead of taking into consideration questions of knowledge acquisition in general (2011, p.72). In her detailed, evidence-based study of pedagogical and terminological practices at German institutions of higher learning, Sabine Rauchmann notices that the concept *Informationskompetenz* is used consistently by about half of the German colleges and universities, while about one third do not use it at all (2009, pp.484-485). She contends that some institutions still see the concept of *Informationskompetenz* as too vague and prefer, instead, more applied concepts that convey the acquisition of a practical skill or ability: “*Informationskompetenz* wird häufig mit den Wörtern *Schulung*, *Einführung*, *Kompetenz* und *Literatur* kombiniert oder durch diese ersetzt” (“‘Information literacy’ is often combined or replaced by ‘instruction’, ‘introduction’, ‘competency’ and ‘bibliography’” Rauchmann 2009, pp.484-485). Rauchmann notices that the frequency with which these alternative notions are used is often an indication of the type of information literacy instruction going on at the different institutions. Thus, the use of “Introduction” designates a preponderance of

general survey and introductory presentations of library resources, “instruction” or “bibliography” (rendered in German as *Literatur* or *Literaturrecherche*) an emphasis on discovery of information, *Informationskompetenz* an emphasis on evaluation and selection of sources, while “information” is generally associated with an emphasis on the integration of sources (p.486).

In Rauchmann’s opinion, the presence of multiple competing information literacy concepts at German universities leads to confusion about the purpose, goals and pedagogy of information literacy instruction (2009, p.562). She argues that the American model of conceptual and pedagogical congruence in the treatment of information literacy, a congruence ensured through the existence of national organisations that support and promote common guidelines (such as ACRL), constitutes a practice that should be emulated in Europe as well. However, I would argue that the multiplicity of concepts that the German academic landscape offers allows the teachers and students alike to understand the complex and contextual nature of the idea of information literacy in general. By entertaining a variety of alternative concepts and terms for “information literacy”, the German academic world acknowledges that we are using a concept with variable geometry, one that is relative to our own changing understanding of what it means to be a competent information user and creator. The recent redefinition by ACRL of what information literacy is and the newly introduced Framework for Information Literacy are evidence that even in a highly regulated academic library environment, like the one in North America, there exist divergences over and reconsiderations of the content, goals, and pedagogy of the concept of information literacy.

6. Conclusion

The existence in the German-speaking academic world of a diversity of conceptual approaches to what we, in the English-speaking world, routinely call “information literacy” brings evidence to the fact that information specialists can relate to the complex processes of knowledge acquisition and creation in a variety of ways. Whether they are favoring a pedagogical, cultural, or cognitive perspective, these approaches run an entire gamut of research methods, ranging from low-end skill training to deep learning and conceptual understanding. According to Rauchmann (2009, p.75), some emphasise the structure of informational competence while others the pedagogical methods employed in the acquisition of informational competencies. However, as the present article demonstrates, each concept takes a different approach to what it means to be and to become information literate. Each one casts a new light on a different element in the complex picture of our conceptual definition of information literacy. Hopefully, by becoming more aware of these different understandings, information specialists in the United States and other parts of the English-speaking world will be better equipped to respond to the shifting nature of our discipline’s own self-understanding.

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Appendix: Table of Terms

German Term	Translation	English Equivalent
Informationskompetenz (IK)	Information Competency	Information Literacy/ Information Fluency
Medienkompetenz	Media Competency	Media Literacy
Vermittlung von Medien- und Informationskompetenz (IK)	Instruction of Media and Information Competency	
Vermittlung und Förderung von IK	Instruction and Advancement of Information Competency	
Schlüsselqualifikation	Key Qualification	
Bibliothekspädagogik	Library pedagogy	
Benutzerschulung	User Instruction	User Education
Bibliotheksdidaktik	Library Didactics	
Informationsdidaktik	Information Didactics	
lehrende Bibliothek	Teaching Library	Learning Commons
“learning library”		Learning Commons
Informationskultur	Culture of Information	
Wissenskulturen	Cultures of Knowledge	
Wissenskompetenz	Knowledge Competency	
Einführung in die Bibliotheksbenutzung	Introduction to Library Use	
Informationsrecherche	Information Research	Research/Library Instruction
Literatur/Literaturrecherche	Bibliographic Research	Bibliographic Instruction