

Librarians' Understanding of Information Literacy in Academic Libraries in Bulgaria: A Case Study

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Abstract. This study aims at illuminating a culturally situated understanding of Information literacy (IL) contextualized by a particular landscape in terms of a specific geographic region with related socio-cultural characteristics. The understanding of IL defines the frameworks for teaching IL in academic settings and impacts pedagogy. The study embraces the *constructivist* worldview through the lens of a socio-cultural theoretical framework and employs *instrumental* (with *exploratory* and *ethnographic* elements) case study approach. The research design includes: field observations and analysis, unobtrusive data set(s) collection and examination, artifact analysis such as websites, and in-depth interviews with Bulgarian academic librarians. This study addresses the need to apply culturally grounded approaches to IL to better serve specific groups. It will add to the international pool of knowledge in the field and will benefit Bulgarian academic librarians by providing a view of their understanding of IL and possibly facilitate further inquiry into suitable framework and practices.

Keywords: Information literacy · Academic library · Bulgaria

1 Introduction

Information literacy (IL) has signified a practical and strategic concept to information professionals since its emergence in the 1970s. IL encompasses the ways we discover, value and use information. The understanding of IL defines the frameworks for teaching IL in academic settings and impacts pedagogy. From a (social) constructivist point of view understanding is an activity of the individual mind and these interpretations of reality are culturally derived and historically situated. The body of literature suggests that IL understanding may vary in different parts of the world depending on factors such as historical perspective and socio-cultural characteristics [1–3, etc.].

South-East Europe (SEE) has been identified as one of the geographic regions in the world which is lagging behind global IL developments. Many countries there have been experiencing challenges since “IL is a highly contextual phenomenon, circumscribed by different socio-technical, political or historical factors” [2]. Hence, existing frameworks and best practice models from abroad cannot be copied or nested into IL policies.

Bulgaria is an old country in SEE with rich history and long-standing cultural traditions. The Bulgarian state was founded in 681 CE and thus dates from the time of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium). Bulgarians have their own language, Bulgarian, and have given the Cyrillic alphabet to the world [4, 5]. Bulgaria became a part of the European Union in 2007, which triggered significant legislative transformations after 45 years (1944–1989) of communist regime and consecutive economical hardship. Bulgarian librarianship has been going through significant changes since 1989, concurrently with the democratic reforms in that country after the end of the communist era, by transforming the librarian's role as a curator and gatekeeper to a new user-oriented paradigm of librarianship. The ongoing makeover of Bulgarian libraries has been amplified not only by the changing political and social milieu, but also by the cycles of economic turmoil and recovery in Bulgaria, as well as by the increasing implementation of new technologies.

The concept of 'information literacy', also called in Europe 'information competence' [6], is relatively new to the Bulgarian library field and practices. IL scholars in the Central - and East-European regions have started to address the significance of specific socio-cultural contexts [2, 7]. This study aims at illuminating a culturally grounded understanding of IL contextualized by a particular landscape in terms of a specific geographic location, Bulgaria, with related socio-cultural characteristics.

2 Literature Review

The literature review focuses on overviews of IL as a concept, IL in academic libraries including in particular Southeastern European countries, and the emerging need for culturally grounded approaches to IL.

2.1 Information Literacy as a Concept

IL has signified a practical and strategic concept to information professionals since its emergence in the 1970s [8, 9]. The first definition of the term "information literacy" was linked to work-related skills, namely, as stated by Zurkowski [10], "people trained in the application of information resources to their work can be called information literates." Most definitions of IL include the following elements: critical thinking, resource-based learning, and life-long learning [8].

Table 1 below represents the two main groups of approaches to IL identified for the purpose of this study: **generic-skills approach** and **contextualizing approaches**. Many of the contextualizing approaches have derived from studies on IL in **different 'cultures'**

With all of these taken into account, 'the context' represents a much more complicated milieu, which would explain why homogenous approaches to IL tend to create contradictions across contexts. For example, suggestions about exploring IL experiences of higher educators in other cultures in terms of other parts of the world [1] or at the workplace in different countries [22] support the notion that a focus on not-yet-studied various contexts results in a need for new agenda in IL research [24]. In the same way that there are different faces of information literacy [1, 13], there are

Table 1. Approaches to IL

Generic-skills approach	Beyond the generic-skills approach	IL in different ‘cultures’
ALA [11] Delphi study, Doyle [12] ACRL IL Standards Due to ALA’s definition this was the primary approach to IL in North America but not necessarily in other countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational approach [1, 13–15] • Social context approach [14, 16, 17] • Sociotechnical practice [18] • Information landscapes [19, 20] • Radical information literacy [3] 	Educational arena, workplace, etc. [1, 16, 21–24] Suggestions to study ‘cultures’ in terms of other parts of the world (education, Bruce [1]; the workplace in different countries, Jinadu and Kaur [22], etc.)

many ways of understanding, experiencing and conceptualizing the phenomenon [1, 16, 20, 21, 23]. It is important to consider the contradictions across contexts and the importance of the context to understanding the complexity of IL [24]. Taking the view that an information literate person engages with information in a particular *landscape* [19, 20] and acknowledging the inequality in access to information [3] based on political, socio-cultural and other differences in specific landscapes, both advance further the notion that IL understanding should be investigated in particular settings in different parts of the world instead of just imposing outside understandings and frameworks.

As a researcher, my intention is to use a socio-cultural approach to investigate IL understanding among Bulgarian academic librarians. This will account for the significant roles that social relations, culture and community play in learning and specifically in higher education [25].

2.2 IL and Academic Libraries

Literature reviews have revealed that IL as practiced in higher education and academic libraries outlines a landscape that has a particular user population and is influenced by perceptions and trends in relation to learning and teaching in academic settings. The activities of academic librarians in the higher education settings [20] encompassed: *information sharing and two-dimensional advocacy for IL*. One dimension focused on improving information practice in the interest of students. The second focused on the librarian’s status in relation to roles outside of the academic library; *identifying ways to measure and prove the worth of IL education* to the academic community and then sharing these accomplishments with the IL instruction community; *librarians’ reflection on their own pedagogical knowledge* and ways to develop it further; and *reflexivity about teaching skills* as well as ways to improve their own experiences and the learning experiences of students [20].

Table 2 below represents the two identified approaches in academic libraries. It also shows IL publications about Southeast-European Countries where Bulgaria is located.

Table 2. IL in academic libraries

Generic-skills approach in academic libraries	Beyond the generic-skills approach	Southeastern Euro-countries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boff and Johnson [26]; Cunningham and Lanning [27]; Doyle [12]; Hollister [28]; Johnson and Webber [29]; Korobili et al. [30]; Sharkey [31]; O'Hanlon [32]; Stanger [33]; etc. • Standards and frameworks based on decontextualized understanding of IL regarded as <i>generic skills</i>. 	<p>Complex phenomenon, which serves as a catalyst for learning [1, 13, 14, 16, 34, 35]</p> <p>Education <i>landscape</i> [19, 20]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Korobili et al. [30] • Špiranec and Pejova [2] • Yankova [36] • Todorova and Stoikova [37]

Overall, in the higher education landscape the practice of IL was “situated, shaped, interpreted and constituted through a Western educational discourse that emphasizes and values individual achievement” [20, p. 64]. There are two major views of IL in this landscape. The first one regards information as objective and external in relation to the user and focuses on the development and application of skills, thus defining IL as a measurable set of abilities. The other view highlights the subjective and transformational aspects of the information experience [1, 14, 34], and the emphasis is not on developing skills but on empowering students to recognize “the variations in experiencing information in a reflective and critical way” [20, p. 64].

Southeastern European Countries. Scholars have conducted studies on investigating attitudes, perceptions and practices of IL among academic librarians in relation to specific countries and Southeastern Europe is represented by Greece [30].

The term ‘information literacy’ was mentioned in a few professional Library and Information Science publications in Bulgaria in relation to the ALA’s (1989) definition [36, 37]. An overview of IL in Southeastern Europe [2] outlined the variables that influence the IL paradigm in many countries of the region as follows: *traditions in education; traditions in librarianship; demands of the labor market; and the wider political & socio-technical context*.

Summary. Overall, the body of literature suggests that IL understanding may vary in different parts of the world depending on factors such as historical perspective and socio-cultural characteristics [1–3, 7]. These factors provide different contexts for the IL phenomenon. Hence, existing frameworks and best practice models from abroad cannot be copied, imported and nested into IL policies. This leads to the conclusion that there is an existing need of applying culturally grounded approaches to IL to better serve specific groups. Bulgaria is only just now adopting a user paradigm. Going from generic-skills approach to beyond generic-skills approach seems to be a critical shift that might need to happen. The potential beyond generic-skills approach needs to be well contextualized in terms of the Bulgarian context. The understanding of IL in Bulgarian academic libraries has not been researched so far. This study will address the existing gap by investigating how Bulgarian academic librarians understand IL and possibly facilitate further inquiry into suitable framework and practices.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Question

The central qualitative question is *How do Bulgarian academic librarians understand IL?*

3.2 Qualitative Case Study

This study embraces the *interpretivism (social constructivism)* worldview through the lens of a socio-cultural theoretical framework. It follows Vygotsky's notion that *understanding* is social in origin and the development of knowledge structures and knowledge formation in general take place within socio-cultural contexts. Qualitative case study research empowers the researcher to explore a real-life, contemporary bounded system, namely, a case, through in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports, which provide a case description and case themes [38]. The intent is to explore and generate insights into Bulgarian librarians' understanding of IL by employing *instrumental* (with *exploratory* and *ethnographic* elements) case study [39].

Defining and Bounding the Case. Defining the case for this study led to selecting the setting of Bulgaria taking into account that Bulgarian academic libraries are spaces in which the country's culture and traditions in education are reflected. The older libraries could be considered keepers of culture and they might have strong influences on other libraries. In terms of bounding the case, the artifacts to be analyzed and the academic librarians to be interviewed will be selected from different academic libraries representing the types identified below.

The participant profile in this study defines 'Bulgarian academic librarian' as follows: Bulgarian professional librarian employed in Bulgarian academic library. Three types of universities and respectively their libraries has been identified for the purpose of this study as follows:

Type 1: Library Studies related, that is Bulgarian University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Sofia;

Type 2: General, broad scope universities in terms of disciplines, older and newer, for example, the libraries of Sofia University (SU) and New Bulgarian University (NBU).

Type 3: Specialized Universities, for example, the libraries of Sofia Medical University, University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy at Sofia.

The identification of the different types was essential in relation to the need to assure fair representation of different Bulgarian academic libraries.

The Research Design includes: field observations and analysis, unobtrusive data set(s) & artifacts collection and examination and at the end in-depth interviews with approximately 15 Bulgarian academic librarians.

Field Observations. The researcher plans to observe the environment and activities in three different academic libraries (each representing one of the three types), and to take

field notes in regards to analyze and identify any relations to IL understanding and application. The daily activities of the academic librarians as well as their behavior while interacting with library patrons might be a rich source of information to draw on in terms of exploring their understanding of IL. The same could be said about the library environment, including signage, dedication and use of library space, available resources and services. The field observations and field notes might, also, help with identifying possible locations and options for unobtrusive data set(s) collection & artifacts to examine and analyze.

The Unobtrusive data set(s), documents & artifacts to be collected and examined in relation to any possible mentioning of or affiliation with the explored phenomenon, namely, information literacy, are: (1) publications, presentations, and posters by academic librarians in Bulgarian; (2) handouts, flyers, and such; (3) publications from professional organizations such as newsletters, conferences (if any), organization's mission, vision, policy documents and materials, and such; (4) grants & corresponding findings or developments. Some other unobtrusive data set(s) might be identified, collected and examined as well. All other available information related to the cultural differences in how Bulgarian librarians understand IL will be explored. These could include any relevant historical and political interpretations, university- and institutional-wide policies, evidence supporting culturally specific views of academia on a national scale, etc. A possible challenge could be gaining access past possible gatekeepers of the information, but this will be investigated.

Identified artifacts will be examined and analyzed, such as websites and tutorials. For example, the researcher plans to examine Bulgarian academic libraries' websites in relation to IL understanding and activities.

Interviews. The researcher plans to conduct qualitative, in-depth interviews (digital and/or face-to-face) with approximately 15 academic librarians from different academic libraries in Bulgaria representing the three types of academic libraries. The goal is one interview per participant and having 1–2 participants from different academic libraries representing the three types of universities. The interview script is semi-structured and contains open-ended indicative questions. The interviews will be conducted, recorded by voice recorder and transcribed in the Bulgarian language. Specific parts will be translated into English as necessary.

In this study the intention is to align with interviewing for “conceptual analysis of the person's understanding of a topic” [40], namely, *understanding of IL*. Investigating perceptions through open-ended questions will allow exploring information through the views of Bulgarian academic librarians. The context of their work places, social interactions and cultural views shaped by historical predispositions of the particular geographic region, the Balkans, are expected to shape their understanding of IL.

The goal will be to achieve thick description of the case and its context, then use categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns [41]. The researcher will create and organize files for data, read through texts, make notes and formulate some initial codes. The next step will be to identify common themes through cross-data analysis. The researcher will follow a specific coding manual [42]. The method of analysis will be a process that involves constant comparison in regards to data collection to allow the exploration of unexpected information.

3.3 Challenges and Strategies for Validating Findings

Since an *instrumental* (Bulgaria) with *exploratory-ethnographic* elements *case study* has been selected, as an approach of inquiry the validation of findings will be done by *triangulation*, which includes field observations, unobtrusive data set(s) & artifacts analysis and qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data collection plans, procedures and analysis have been refined through pilot testing [39, 41]. Also, the quality of the design of the case study will be examined in relation to four tests commonly used in the social sciences: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability [41].

4 Pilot Study

The pilot study could be helpful not only with refining the data collection and analysis plans but also with clarifying the conceptual framework of the study [39, 41, 43].

Following the research design the researcher conducted **observations in two academic libraries** and completed initial analyses of **one unobtrusive data set**. Then the researcher conducted **three interviews** with librarians representing library types two and three.

4.1 Results

Observations. The researcher took detailed notes about space use, collections and access, offered services, and visible activities and interactions at the libraries. The analysis of the notes revealed many similarities in terms of services and at the same time significant differences in terms of access between the two libraries.

Unobtrusive data set. The only major publication in Bulgarian related directly to IL identified so far is the conference proceedings of a symposium with international attendance, *Information Literacy – Training Models and Best Practices*, held in Varna, Bulgaria in 2012. This was the first and only event so far held in the country, which directly addresses IL.

The initial review of these conference proceedings revealed that:

- The terms used interchangeably as an equivalent or closely related to the term IL were three: (1) *Информационна Грамотност* – Information Literacy; (2) *Информационна компетентност* – Information Competency; and (3) *Информационна Култура* – Information Culture.
- A lot of the publications referred directly to the ALA (1989) definition of IL and the generic-skills approach. These publications were using the term (1) *Информационна Грамотност* – Information Literacy. Other definitions mentioned were a definition declared at a 2012 International Conference on *Media- and Information Literacy* in Moscow and an IFLA definition from 2006. No other approaches to IL were mentioned.
- Most of the authors in the collection are professors at the Bulgarian University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Sofia.

- It seems that sometimes the meaning of information literacy has been considered equivalent to subject content knowledge in terms of subject expertise and subject publications expertise.

Further examination and analyses of the texts are expected to reveal more details and particularities.

Interviews. Initially identified cross themes from the interviews:

- Pressure to catch up with developments and best practices in the outside IL paradigm;
- Some familiarity with ALA's (1989) definition of IL and imported examples of best practices affiliated with the generic-skills approach;
- Expressed emphasis on subscription to online databases with content in English and on how to search in them.
- At the same time, acknowledgment that students do not use these databases because of two reasons: (1) Students do not need to use them since all they need is a textbook in relation to most of the courses' curricula. Apparently lecturing is still the highly predominant pedagogy. Professors require attending lectures and studying from lecture notes and/or the content of the required textbook. (2) The content of the databases is in English or Russian and most of the students are not well versed in any of these languages.
- Faculty members and doctoral students use the databases but not directly. A typical practice is to request from a librarian to find and deliver the full text of specific articles or to prepare a bibliography on a specific topic. Then the faculty member reviews the bibliography and requests the full text of all or some articles to be retrieved and delivered by the librarian.
- Pressure to develop IL education practice, for example, IL courses and workshops. Library orientation, introduction to library collections and library services, when available, are considered IL instruction.
- Bulgarians in general do not like to seek help.

4.2 Initial Findings

As expected, the pilot study has informed the research design. Linear design was not optimal. The data of each one of the methods informed the other two.



An early finding that has significance is that IL is being related to subject area competency. This finding has been underpinned by the data from each one of the methods (observations, unobtrusive data set analysis, and interviews).

Also, the preliminary findings on the context suggested how Bulgarian academic librarians were setting the boundaries of IL, for example, instruction seemed to be limited to how to use the library. The substantial difference in access between the two visited libraries is expected to have significant impact on it.

All of the three interviewed librarians mentioned pressure to catch up with developments and best practices in the outside IL paradigm mostly in relation to grants coming from the European Union. One of them was expected to design and develop a pilot IL program/course and seemed to feel quite unsure how exactly to approach this. This suggests that the findings of this study could be helpful in facilitating further inquiry into suitable framework and practices.

5 Discussion

The intrinsic quality of the IL agenda is embodied in understanding and utilizing “the power of effective information use in all social and cultural contexts” (Bruce, as cited in Whitworth, 2014, p.b.c.). The full study of information literacy understanding among Bulgarian academic librarians will add to the international pool of knowledge in the field and address the need to apply culturally grounded approaches to IL to better serve specific groups. Also, the study will benefit Bulgarian academic librarians by providing a view of their understanding of IL and possibly facilitate further inquiry into suitable framework and practices.

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