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Book Review

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Chan, L. et al 2002. *Budapest Open Access Initiative*. New York: Open Society Institute. Available at: <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/read.shtml> [Retrieved 22 January 2007].

Whitworth, A. 2014. Radical information literacy: reclaiming the political heart of the IL movement. Oxford: Chandos. 233 pp. ISBN: 9781843347484. £47.50. Pbk.

Charles Inskip, Lecturer, Department of Information Studies, University College London. Email: c.inskip@ucl.ac.uk

The continual gathering of momentum of the library and information professions' wholesale adoption of information literacy (IL) is, in many ways, a good thing. It provides us with an additional *raison d'être*, a new unique selling point, and reinforces the idea of a user-centred focus. It means that increasing numbers of patrons / customers / users, call them what you will, are benefiting from the outcomes of many very detailed conversations and research projects. They are more likely to engage creatively with the information that may otherwise overload them. They have access to rich and varied insights which have been encouraged through IL interventions administered by an experienced information professional. All good, right?

In this book, Whitworth identifies a trick which he believes has been missed in the race towards the IL summit. He argues that taking an institutional approach to the enhancement of learning creates a restrictive tension. In other words, if we are to enable the realisation of potential through IL then we need to take a more democratic approach. It is through understanding Lloyd's (2010) information landscapes –or the user context – that this democratic approach may be realised. Unfortunately, in Whitworth's view of its history, IL, although potentially political at birth, has lost that thread because the authority of which it is a part (the education system) is 'centralised, exclusionary and unitary' (p.2). This restricts opportunities for communities of interest by limiting any power they may have in exploring and developing their information landscapes. Only a radical approach to IL can de-institutionalise it, and this radical approach should be informed by theory drawn from an integration of practice and educational research.

This integration is explored in some detail in the book, focusing heavily on the ideas of Jurgen Habermas and Mikhail Bakhtin. Until now, the discussion of Bakhtin's work on dialogism in the IL literature has been minimal. Whitworth redresses the imbalance through a well-informed and densely argued discussion of Bakhtin's ideas around power, discourse and authority, which all lead to an important, central point. Just as language creates reality, so authority informs landscapes. A closer examination of, and influence over, authority is what is needed if communities are to successfully develop context-specific information landscapes. These are what are really needed if we are to realise the potential of IL in terms of releasing the knowledge genie from the information lamp.

As library and information professionals and their wider stakeholders develop their understanding of IL, and as resources continue to be allocated to its development and delivery, Whitworth's arguments here around widening the view of education from the institution to the community are key. Many of those involved in the process of IL are not formally-qualified teachers. They are frequently, however, librarians. This, challenges Whitworth, is a fundamental problem. The library's ownership of IL is symptomatic of its institutionalisation, which is isolating and exclusionary. Perhaps we need to continue to develop and revise our ideas of the purpose of IL. Is it to provide librarians with a new *raison d'être*? Is it to maximise the creative potential of information? Or is it really to shift power and authority to the information user in pursuit of the fulfilment of Bateson's definition of information as 'any difference which makes a difference' (1972: 276)? This suggestion that IL as an approach, rather than an outcome, needs to be placed in the hands of the users is indeed radical, as it potentially undermines the authority of the library and the institutions and the establishment of which it is a part.

This is a challenging book. It challenges the nature of authority in the ownership of information and in the adoption of IL by the library profession. It challenges the idea that education is best delivered by, and within, the institution. It challenges the reader to make an effort in thinking about these complex issues. Although its impact may eventually be on practice, the most likely path this impact is likely to take will be from the dissemination of these ideas through researching the information landscapes outside the library. This important book adds an authoritative voice from the education academy to the increasing number of calls for a shift in focus from the library to the workplace, the community, and lifelong learning and is likely to support and inform a continuing growth in research in these areas.

References

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