

Review of Thesis

Thórsteinsdóttir, Gudrun (2005). *The information seeking behavior of distance students – A study of twenty Swedish Library and Information Science students*, Göteborg, Valfrid

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Saturday October 1st, 2005, Gudrún Thórsteinsdóttir defended her thesis *The information seeking behavior of distance students – A study of twenty Swedish Library and Information Science students* in Gothenburg. I had the honor to be the opponent at the event and the pleasure of getting well acquainted with Thórsteinsdóttir's work. I now take the opportunity to introduce this interesting thesis to a wider public.

The thesis explores the information behavior of distance students, an education mode that has become increasingly common as a result of the rapid development in information technology. What was once mainly advocacy and politically correct language is now a reality in educational institutions: life-long learning. Students who study at a distance make this term come alive and prove its validity beyond mere rhetoric.

Independent information seeking and information literacy are important survival skills in – to use another jargon – our information society, and particularly essential for distance students. In order to design services to best match their needs, we need a profound understanding of their information needs and behavior. It is also helpful if we as information specialists reflect on our own information seeking to be able to truly help others. Also here Thórsteinsdóttir's work will make an important contribution as the respondents were LIS students.

This work contributes particularly to a user-centered approach to the design of information services, information literacy and learning as knowledge construction through information. I will in the following reflect on these aspects.

Thórsteinsdóttir has studied the information seeking behavior of distance students through in-depth analysis of 20 library and information science students' information seeking. The respondents were highly motivated mature women. Many with work experience in libraries and all aiming at a future career as professional information seekers. It is not far-fetched to assume that these students would take information seeking seriously, do their outermost to reach high-quality sources, practice search skills and use of multiple databases. Yet, the principle of least effort prevailed even in this motivated sample. This is a familiar finding in information science research. In most human behavior, as in information seeking, we often settle for the "good enough" result and invest just as much time and effort that is necessary to accomplish a level of satisfaction. To always strive for the optimal would in itself be destructive and unproductive. But yet we tend to expect this from ourselves as information seekers, and perhaps more importantly in our profession, we tend to expect too much of our users. The user can learn to adapt to search systems, but more importantly search systems should be adapted to the users' natural ways of seeking information. Even though information services work perfectly fine for on campus students, they may not work for distance students and vice versa. Unlike the traditional on campus student who may initially find the library building and its resources with little guidance or direction, the library resources available for distance students may be harder to locate, unless there is active promotion and communication related to these resources. Having access to high-quality distance library services provides little benefit to the student who is unaware of it.

In today's information age the role of libraries are more important than ever. Yes, Google and the like are great, but they cannot ever compete with and even less replace a professional library service. Effective libraries in the information age provides students with up-to-date resource collections in a variety of information formats. Much librarian work, often invisible for the user, is to be found behind these services. Traditional library work such as classification and indexing have not lost their importance in the new information environment. As Thórsteinsdóttir states; poor indexing in various databases and the variety of database formats can be information barriers for students. This shows indirect effects of information services. Relevance of different information sources and channels is furthermore often judged based on familiarity. Monica states on page 143 that "using the library had become a habit and she would not know what to replace it with". If we want to design information services for our users, we must somehow account for these natural ways and meet the users in their natural context, instead of imposing services. People generally do not change habits, if not forced or concretely experience the benefits of a new method.

If distance students cannot access an information source electronically, their situation is equivalent to the library being closed. Distance students who are dependent on information technology pay a particularly high price in case of technological problems. Thórsteinsdóttir's statement on page 195 touches right at the core as she says "if students are not properly taught how to use these new technologies...the obstacle that the new technologies was supposed to remove, is still there". The respondents also tended to have unrealistic expectation of their skills, and in addition the host university assumed that students knew more about information searching than they actually did. This is unfortunate and a serious concern for equal opportunities in education.

It has been said that the wisest are those who are aware of their lack of knowledge. Strong evidence of life long learning at its best can be found on page 214 where Thórsteinsdóttir describes how the students developed a conception of information seeking as an ongoing process which is impossible to fully master. The respondents in Thórsteinsdóttir's thesis reflect some of the most central elements of educational theories of learning as a process of construction. Previous understanding of library related terms facilitated the students' learning, while the lack of previous experience was experienced as a barrier. The core of Dewey's concept of knowledge construction, a combination of theory and application, is reflected by the respondents who worked at a library applying the skills they learnt through their LIS education.

When designing a system or a service, we must always start by analysing the needs for this particular group. We cannot only assume that we know what our users want. We may, for example, speculate that distance students would have different information needs than on campus students. We can guess that they would have a higher need for electronic material, require more inter-library loans etc. But do we really know what they want and what possible problems they face if we don't simply ask them to tell us in their own words? That is why work such as Thórsteinsdóttir's is so important. With in-depth studies of a particular group we always learn something new. Thórsteinsdóttir, for example, describes some unexpected connections between access to library services and use of quality sources. Respondents residing in a rural area were so accustomed to effort in information seeking, that they in fact ended up with more high quality sources than students living in university cities. Those in the university cities were content with the second best alternative, simply since it was easily available. Distance can in this way actually produce a better outcome through the extra effort. We cannot assume, we have to know in order to adapt services to user needs. In the same spirit, we can not either theoretically assume that another group of distance students would in fact have the same problems that Thórsteinsdóttir's sample did, because again, this is a new group of users. But research studies like Thórsteinsdóttir's shows us the general tendencies for what we should look for and be attentive to.