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An Exploratory Study of Research Contexts for Information Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

In a previous study, the author argued that information literacy instruction which takes into account the contextual nature of research is more meaningful to students and has more potential for long term impact than instruction that focuses narrowly on academic research skills. As part of that argument, the author identified six types of research that represented the contextual nature of research—academic, creative, personal, professional, scholarly, and scientific. This list of research types has since proven useful in the classroom. However, it is still an open question whether this framework is a useful way of thinking about research. The author set out to answer these questions by examining studies of information behavior published in core library and information science journals. The results were generally positive and provided further insight into the more specific types of research that may fit into these broader categories.

Introduction

The present study is intended to build on the author's past work on the contextual nature of research, written from the perspective of an information literacy scholar and practitioner interested in finding ways to create instruction that expands beyond the traditionally narrow focus on academic and scholarly research practices (Hosier, 2019).

This instructional approach is supported by the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2016), which names six frames intended to represent foundational concepts for information literacy teaching and learning. The contextual nature of research is not a frame unto itself but ideas about how context influences the research process are present throughout the document. Seeing this, the author decided to incorporate this aspect of the Framework into her own thinking and teaching about information literacy. The goal was to address a common misconception, anecdotally observed, that students and outside stakeholders often have about information literacy and research, which is that both are basic skills which have little value beyond the academic environment. Information literacy instruction that included ideas about the contextual nature of research, the author felt, would have the potential for more lasting impact.

The author drew on these ideas to create a list of six broad types of research which students might be familiar with or which they might encounter throughout their lives, including academic research, creative research, personal research, professional research, scholarly research, and scientific research.

This list, though very broad in nature, proved useful for the way that it offered students in the author's information literacy course a vocabulary for describing the

different types of research which seemed to resonate with their experience (Hosier, 2022a). Anecdotally, then, the author felt that the categories of research she had named were a useful way of presenting information about the contextual nature of research to students but that more work needed to be done to validate them. The goal of the present study was to attempt to do just this as well as gain more specific insight into what types of research might fall into the broad categories the author had originally named.

It is likely that the bulk of what our profession knows about the contextual nature of research comes from studies of information behavior. For this reason, the author chose to test the efficacy of her framework by examining studies of information behavior published in core journals in the LIS field, first from 2010-2019 and then from 2020-2022. Though the nature of this work was both preliminary and exploratory, the results were generally positive and the insight gained could benefit information literacy instruction which seeks to teach students about the contextual nature of research.

Background and framework

The basis for this study is an understanding of research and context that was established by the author in her previous work. That work began with an argument that research is not only an activity but also a subject of study and that an important part of what makes it a subject of study for library and information science (LIS) scholars is the ways in which context can affect the research process (Hosier, 2019). This argument was made primarily from an information literacy perspective.

Information literacy instruction has traditionally had a narrow focus on academic and scholarly research. This focus was historically reflected in the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000). The skills described by the Standards—determining the extent of information needed, accessing needed information efficiently and effectively, evaluating information and its sources critically, incorporating information into one's knowledge base, using information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose, and understanding the ethical use of information—were general in nature but the learning outcomes associated with those skills were unquestionably academic. For example, learning outcomes for the first standard (determining the extent of information needed) included conferring with instructors and peers to identify an appropriate research topic, developing a thesis statement, and recognizing disciplinary differences in how different formats of information are valued.

This focus on academic research skills in the Standards made sense because, after all, the organization responsible for this document was the Association of College & Research Libraries. The academic environment was where the Standards were meant to be utilized and teaching students these skills helped them meet their most immediate information needs, which were academic in nature.

The *Framework* reflects a broader understanding of research but is still a document associated with an academic organization, intended for utilization in an academic environment and so is still primarily concerned with academic and scholarly research. This is most clearly seen in the "Scholarship as Conversation" frame which presents research as an activity intended to contribute to a scholarly conversation. However, the chief innovation of the Framework, as first pointed out by Nancy M. Foasberg (2015), is

that though academic research is its primary focus, it still manages to acknowledge the importance of context to the research process. Throughout its six frames, the Framework makes clear in various ways that an information literate researcher is one who makes decisions about how to meet an information need based on their awareness of the conventions and practices of the context in which their research is being undertaken.

This is most clearly seen in the "Authority is Constructed and Contextual" frame, which states that information resources should be "evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used." Examples from other frames include "Information Creation as Process" where an information literate learner is described as someone who can "assess the fit between an information product's creation process and a particular information need" and the "Research as Inquiry" frame which highlights the ability to "use various research methods, based on need, circumstance and type of inquiry" as a knowledge practice. These are just a few selected examples of how context shows up in the Framework.

The author used this feature of the Framework to argue that true information literacy is about learning the importance of context to the research process and becoming adept at navigating and adapting to new research situations and contexts as they arise (Hosier, 2022a). To illustrate this point, the author identified six categories of research, which she defined broadly as any formal or information process undertaken in order to fill a gap in knowledge, build on existing knowledge, or create new knowledge. Those six categories of research are defined as follows:

- Academic research: Research completed as a requirement by a student at any level of study as part of an academic program
- Creative research: Research undertaken to enhance a creative work
- Personal research: Research undertaken to satisfy personal curiosity or to meet a personal information need
- Professional research: Research undertaken to enhance professional knowledge or enhance a professional work
- Scholarly research: Research undertaken in order to fill a gap in a field of scholarly knowledge
- Scientific research: Research undertaken to test a hypothesis related to natural phenomena using the scientific method

These six categories proved to be a useful teaching tool for the author, especially in her credit-bearing information literacy course where individual units were devoted to learning about each context. In this way, students learned about the interrelatedness of the information activities they would participate in throughout their lives as they developed their information literate learning. (The exact nature of this work is described in more detail in Hosier, 2022a.)

Despite their usefulness in the classroom, the author had never tested the categories themselves against anything other than her own knowledge and experience. Whether the categories named reflected real life research activities—and, most importantly, whether anything might be missing—was an open question in need of further exploration.

Context is an important area of concern for information behavior research, which made this area of study an ideal setting for that exploration. In his book *Exploring Context in Information Behavior: Seeker, Situation, Surroundings, and Shared Identities*, Naresh Kumar Agarwal (2018) provides a thorough overview of the different ways that context has been studied by information behavior researchers. From this summary, it is clear that though there is general agreement on why studying context is important for information behavior scholars for the way that it influences information-seeking activities, there is no consensus on what, exactly, context is or how it should be studied. Indeed, Agarwal names 15 facets and types of context that have been studied by information behavior scholars, including context as environment or container, context as setting, context as role, context as the actor's mind, and many more. There are also studies which consider how different types of context interact with one another and how context may sometimes be nested within other contexts.

The present author's approach to context has some elements in common with several of the facets Agarwal names, including "context as environment or container," which he describes as being concerned with "aspects of a person's life or work role that would influence why a person is looking for information" (p. 9) and "context as discourse," which is concerned with how social interaction and discourse can shape a person's information behavior. However, in formulating her ideas about context, the author found more resonance in research on genre theory. Genre theory has been used by many LIS scholars as a lens through which to think about different aspects of information behavior. Andersen (2008a), Burkholder (2010), and Brannon et al. (2022), for example, use genre theory specifically to think about formats of information and how they are produced and

used. Similarly, Gorichanaz (2017) sought to understand the different ways information professionals use the terms genre, format, and medium in various contexts. Huvila (2019) drew on the work of Andersen (2008b) to consider the interaction between information genre and situational appropriation in the use of information.

As it turns out, the exact definition of context is just as elusive for scholars of genre theory as it is for scholars of information behavior. “If the context of a situation is not simply a physical fact of the surrounding environment, as it clearly is not,” Amy J. Devitt asks in her book *Writing Genres* (2004), “where does it come from?” (p. 19). The answer she suggests, based on a synthesis of relevant genre theory texts, is that context is constructed by both writers and readers and that the relationship between the two is reciprocal and dynamic. Devitt quotes David R. Russell (1997), who said that “context is an ongoing accomplishment, not a container for actions or texts” (p. 518).

With this in mind, Devitt builds off of work by Carolyn R. Miller (1984) to define genre as a “reciprocal dynamic within which individuals’ actions construct and are constructed by [the] recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genres” (p. 31). This is different from the understanding of genre typically held by information professionals, who generally understand genre as a means of categorizing items either by subject matter or format (Gorichanaz, 2017). As explored in her previous work (Hosier, 2022a), the types of research suggested by the author could fit with Devitt’s thinking for the way each considers how the research process is shaped not only by the goals of the researcher but also by a discourse community’s shared knowledge about how research is practiced in a given situation and how those practices have been shaped over time. The researcher’s own individual knowledge about and experience with

research more generally are also important components in this way of thinking about genre and research. As Andersen (2008b) puts it, “Typified human activities reveal what kinds of paths and access to knowledge are considered legitimate or appropriate in particular contexts; this also reveals what kinds of information-seeking strategies are employed and why they are employed the way they are” (p. 342).

It should be noted that, unlike information behavior scholars, the author chose “research,” defined broadly, as her preferred term for this study rather than “information seeking.” Information seeking is defined by Case and Given (2016) as “a conscious effort to acquire information in response to a gap in knowledge” (p. 6) and further characterized by Bates (2002) as a process that can be either active or passive. In this way of thinking, research would be considered a type of information-seeking activity but not all information activities would qualify as research. This distinction is useful for LIS scholars. However, it is less so in the undergraduate, non-LIS classroom setting where the author intended to use these ideas when she first suggested them. Because “research” was the term used in the author’s past work, it will also be used here in order to remain consistent with that work.

Methodology

This study used the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database to search for articles on information-seeking behavior published in LIS journals between 2010-2019. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English. This search returned 1,245 items. This list was reduced to 1,162 items after excluding book reviews.

The abstracts for each of the remaining 1,162 articles was examined by the author. In cases where an abstract was unavailable, the introduction of the article was used instead.

To be included in the study, the abstracts needed to indicate a user-centered focus. This was determined by whether the study in question sought to understand something about the information-seeking behaviors of a specific population through direct study of those behaviors. Literature reviews, conceptual or theoretical papers, papers focused on introducing and/or testing a model or framework, and papers which focused on the use or effectiveness of a system or service were excluded.

The reason for excluding papers that were not user-centered was that user-centered studies are more likely to have a clear context in which a behavior is being studied. As an example, many researchers during the time period under study were concerned with understanding how users think about or use ebooks. Studies which examined how much ebooks in a library collection were being used and by whom would have been excluded because the goal of such studies is to understand the use of a resource rather than a behavior in context. Meanwhile, a study of how undergraduate students use ebooks as part of their academic research would have been included because context does clearly play a role and can be easily identified.

The remaining pool consisted of 280 articles. For each article, the author used the abstract to determine the context of the research under study: academic, creative, personal, professional, scholarly, or scientific. This determination was made based on the definitions shared in the previous section. Anything that did not fit these definitions was

categorized as “other.” Space was also made to account for articles which might include more than one context and those in which the context was unclear.

Because the initial review was a learning experience, the author re-reviewed the included articles a second time to confirm or change the initial determination as needed. Some articles which were originally included ended up being excluded after all. Others were re-categorized. The final pool consisted of 263 articles.

After the initial sorting was done, the articles in each category were inductively coded to determine themes within each category. This was done in order to gain further insight into the more specific types of research that might be represented in the broader categories. Articles were classified as “miscellaneous” if they were the only ones that pertained to a particular theme during the relevant publishing period.

2020-2022

This research began in 2020. At the time, it made sense to end the period under study at 2019 in order to reflect a full decade of research. However, as with any research project, the timeline for completion stretched on. As 2022 drew to a close, the author worried that the results of the original study might be seen as stale or outdated. With this in mind, she decided to apply the same methodology described above to articles published in three additional years: 2020, 2021, and 2022. The goal was to determine whether the trends being observed in the older articles were being upheld in more recent years.

Results and discussion

2010-2019

Table 1 shows the distribution of results for articles published between 2010-2019. It shows that almost all of the articles from this time period could be classified according to the types of research identified by the author. The most common type of research studied during this period was professional research (35%) while personal research (34%), academic research (18%) and scholarly research (10%) were the next most common. Creative research accounts for only 2% of articles published in this period and scientific research accounted for less than 1%.

There was one article where the context could not be determined based on the abstract. A copy of the full article could not be obtained. There were no articles which fell into the "Other" category.

Table 1 Research contexts represented in articles published 2010-2019

Type of research	**Number of articles**	**Percentage**
Academic	47	18%
Creative	5	2%
Personal	90	35%
Professional	93	36%
Scholarly	26	10%
Scientific	1	0.004%
Other	0	0%
Unclear	1	0.004%
Total	263	

2020-2022

Results from 2020-2022 (Table 2) reflect a similar distribution from the earlier period under study, with all but one article falling into the named categories. The main difference is that though personal and professional research are still the most commonly studied types of research, a much greater percentage of articles published during this period focus on personal research rather than professional research. Studies of creative and scientific research are still rare.

One study was categorized as "other." The subject for this study was the information behaviors of a fictional character, which did not seem to fit with any of the named categories as defined.

This seems to suggest that in terms of percentages, trends from 2010-2019 are so far being largely upheld in the more recent period. Time will tell if this continues to be the case.

Table 2 Research contexts represented in articles published 2020-2022

Type of research	**Number of articles**	**Percentage**
Academic	17	13%
Creative	2	2%
Personal	62	50%
Professional	37	30%
Scholarly	8	6%
Scientific	1	1%
Other	1	1%
Unclear	0	0%
Total	128	

A discussion of the themes found for each category follows.

Academic research

Table 3 Academic research by theme 2010-2022

Academic research	**2010-2019**	**2020-2022**
High school	3	2
Undergraduate	12	5
Graduate	20	6
Undergraduate and graduate	4	1
Unclear	8	3
Total	47	17

When establishing themes related to the academic research category (Table 3), it made the most sense to sort articles by the level of education that they were most concerned with: high school, undergraduate, or graduate. In both periods under study, research on the information-seeking behavior of undergraduate and graduate students far outstripped research on the information-seeking behavior of high school students. (No research on the academic research behavior of students younger than high school age were found.) Though the number of studies of undergraduate and graduate research behavior for 2020-2022 was found to be nearly even, studies of graduate research behavior represented a significantly larger percentage of studies of academic research in the earlier publishing period.

There were 11 articles for which the exact nature of the population under study could not be determined. In some cases, only the abstract was available and the full text of the article could not be accessed. In others, this information was not given either in the abstract or the article. However, in all 11 cases the setting of the study was a university.

Common subthemes in this category included studies of distance students and studies of the effects of technology on the information-seeking behaviors of student researchers.

Articles from the later publication period also examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, on students' information-seeking activities.

Creative research

Only 5 of the articles published between 2010-2019 fell into the creative research category. No broader themes could be discerned from this small number of articles, due in part to the variety of populations under study, including artists and designers, design students, musicians, filmmakers, and architecture students. Of these, two of the articles stated an interest in understanding how the identified creative population seeks information from a library or archive while three appeared to be motivated by a broader interest in the relationship between creativity and information-seeking behavior.

Two articles published between 2020-2022 fell into this category. One was a study of the research behavior of two specific artists. The other was the present author's own previous study on fiction writers' self-reports (Hosier, 2022b).

Personal research

Theme	**Number of articles, 2010-2019**
Health information	43
Personal information needs of populations in specific regions	12
Hobbies	10
Personal information needs of students	7
Immigrants and refugees	7
Children/young people	3
People with disabilities	2
Misc	6
Total	**90**

Table 4 Personal research by theme 2010-2019

Theme	Number of articles, 2020-2022
Health information	34
Immigrants and refugees	6
Elderly people	5
Personal information needs of students	3
Parents	3
Children/young people	2
Misc	9
Total	**62**

Table 5 Personal research by theme 2020-2022

A comparison of articles published between 2010-2019 (Table 4) and 2020-2022 (Table 5) finds similar themes and similar distributions among studies of personal research in both periods. Studies of health-related information-seeking made up the greatest number of articles, with a particular focus on the effects of COVID-19 on health-related information-seeking behaviors of various populations in the more recent period.

Both periods also included studies of the information-seeking behaviors of immigrants and refugees and children/young people as well as studies of the personal information behavior (as opposed to the academic information behavior) of college students.

One noticeable difference is that the earlier period included 10 studies of the information-seeking behaviors of various types of hobbyists, including record collectors, fans and fan communities, and amateur historians, among others. Only one article from the 2020-2022 period was found to fall into this theme and so was classified as "miscellaneous." That study was concerned with understanding the information-seeking behaviors of "leisure participants."

Another noticeable difference is a greater interest in the information-seeking behaviors of elderly populations in the more recent period under consideration. While

there was some representation of this in the earlier publishing period, these studies related more strongly to the health information theme and were classified accordingly. In the 2020-2022 period, the information-seeking behaviors of elderly populations tended to focus more on their use of technology.

Articles classified as miscellaneous included single studies of voting behavior, news consumption, responses to natural disasters, a study of prison inmates, and a study of the information-seeking behaviors of loved ones of the forcefully disappeared in Colombia.

Professional research

Table 6 Professional research by theme 2010-2019

Themes	**Number of articles, 2010-2019**
Medical	31
Teachers/educators	14
Law/politics/government	12
Engineers/scientists	7
Agricultural workers	7
Clergy	5
Misc	17
Total	**93**

Table 7: Professional research by theme 2020-2022

Themes	**Number of articles, 2020-2022**
Medical	10
Law/politics/government	6
Teachers/educators	4
Librarians/information professionals	3
Media/journalists	3
Engineers/scientists	2
Agricultural workers	2
Misc	7
Total	**37**

The themes identified for professional research in both publishing periods were quite similar, as shown in Table 6 and Table 7. In both, the information-seeking behaviors of professionals in the medical field was the most highly represented while studies of professionals working in the law, politics, and government were also high on the list. Other common themes included studies of teachers and educators, studies of engineers and scientists, and studies of agricultural workers.

One noticeable difference is that the 2010-2019 publishing period included five studies of the information-seeking habits of clergy while the 2020-2022 publishing period did not include any (even among the miscellaneous articles). The 2020-2022 publishing period also included a higher number of studies of librarians and information professionals and studies of journalists and members of the media than the earlier period, where these studies fell into the miscellaneous category.

Other professions under study in the miscellaneous category include human resource professionals, customer service professionals, marketing professionals, consultants, domestic workers, small business owners, and textile traders, among many others.

Scholarly research

Table 8 Scholarly research by theme 2010-2019

Themes	**Number of articles, 2010-2019**
STEM scholars	13
Humanities, arts, and social sciences scholars	3
Both	10
Total	26

Table 9 Scholarly research by theme 2020-2022

Themes	**Number of articles, 2020-2022**
STEM scholars	4
Humanities, arts, and social sciences scholars	3
Both	1
Total	8

The themes for scholarly research were the same for both 2010-2019 and 2020-2022. In each case, articles were sorted according to whether they focused on the research behaviors of scholars in the science, technology, engineering and math disciplines (STEM), scholars in the humanities, arts, and social sciences disciplines, or both.

In both periods under study, studies of STEM scholars represented the largest number of articles, though the difference was not as pronounced in the more recent publication period as it was in the earlier one, where studies of STEM scholars made up half of the articles in this category and studies of non-STEM scholars made up only 11%. There were a relatively large number of studies which encompassed both STEM and non-STEM scholars published in 2010-2019 but only one published in 2020-2022.

Scientific research

In the 2010-2019 publication period, only one article was identified as belonging in the scientific research study category, a study of the research and information activities of laboratory scientists throughout the research lifecycle.

The 2020-2022 publication period also included only one article classified as scientific research, a study of scientists' data needs.

Implications

Though this research was exploratory in nature, it does provide a preliminary indication that the six contexts identified by the author are useful as a vocabulary for naming different types of research. This supports the use of this framework as a tool for teaching the contextual nature of research.

This is easier said than done, especially considering the limitations of the most common models for teaching information literacy. The author herself reorganized her information literacy course around these research contexts and found that it was an effective way to teach students about the interrelatedness of the many information-seeking activities they will engage in throughout their lives (as described in more detail in Hosier, 2022b). Not everyone has this option. However, teaching the contextual nature of research does not have to mean overhauling entire courses or even entire lessons. Acknowledging context can be as simple as remembering not to treat the academic skills and conventions that information literacy instructors most often teach as universally correct or to overstate their transferability. Research is conducted in many different settings, in many different ways, for many different purposes. The suggested research contexts named here give instructors as well as students a vocabulary to work with as part of learning this fact.

Limitations

A few limitations of this research have already been identified but several more are worth noting. First, this is a single author, exploratory study which relied on the judgment of one researcher with no opportunity for interrater reliability. Another researcher

studying the same set of articles from the same time period might categorize the results differently or come to different conclusions. Such a researcher may find the categories identified less useful.

The study also confirmed that while these labels are useful, the boundaries between them can be quite fluid. The distinction between professional research as it pertained to educators working in institutions of higher education and scholarly research was at times difficult to tease out. It was similarly tricky to determine whether a study of research in a creative context might be better classified as personal, professional, or scholarly research, depending on the nature of study. Deciding which category an article belonged in was often a matter of personal judgement.

It was not a goal of this study to identify potential gaps in the scholarly literature on information behavior. While it does appear that studies of creative research and scientific research are rare, this finding may result from any number of factors which make it impossible to definitively say whether this is a true gap. It could be that more articles fell into the personal and professional research categories because these types of research are more broadly defined while creative research and scientific research are much more narrow. It is also possible that studies of creative or scientific research are more highly represented in conceptual or theoretical articles, which were excluded from the present study. More work would need to be done to determine whether that is the case.

This research was also limited to articles with abstracts and/or introductions available in English. It did not take into account research which may have been published in other languages with no English translations available.

Conclusion

The ACRL *Framework,* with its acknowledgement of the importance of context to the research process, opens the door to teaching students about the contextual nature of research. To do this, it is necessary to create a vocabulary of research contexts that students will recognize and understand. The author created such a vocabulary in her past work and found it useful as a tool for teaching students about the interrelatedness of the information-seeking activities they engage in throughout their lives. This vocabulary was based not on an existing framework but on personal knowledge and expertise. This exploratory study confirms that the suggested research contexts can be a useful lens through which to view different types of research, supporting its use in the classroom for anyone interested in teaching about the contextual nature of research.

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