Andrea Dömsödy
Hungary

The New Educational Review

Children's Conceptions about Libraries and Learning

Abstract

Current library instructions, textbooks do not adequately address children, because they do not consider children's (pre)conceptions about information literacy. Using qualitative methods this research tries to describe conceptual frameworks, distinctions to support a more efficient and constructivist library instruction. In our opinion research does not result in adaptive information about conceptions, if the research subject does not investigate relationships from the point of view of information and information literacy generally and in terms of some preferred resources. This study emphasizes a relationship between libraries and learning in children's conceptions. Four types of conceptions were revealed in this specific sub-field, which influence preparing for autonomous learning and lifelong learning.

Keywords: *Preconceptions, Information Literacy, Libraries, Learning, Children, Qualitative Research*

In Hungary, library pedagogy as a self-reliant interdisciplinary field occured in specialist literature in the early 1970s and soon it was realised in the 1978 curriculum. This gave a stimulus to school children's library instruction and permanent education, in other words lifelong learning instruction. A practice-based concensus was estabilished related to the contents of library instruction at every level of education, and to a traditional method group. These are applied by teacher librarians and are reflected in schoolbooks on library instruction.

The contents of library instruction – which could rather be called information literacy instruction because of technical development and conceptional changes – received more emphasis in the National Core Curriculum in 1995. Our present National Core Curriculum, which was introduced in 2003, is competence-centred and competences related to learning or information use are emphasized (e.g. handling complex information, critical thinking, problem solving, communication,

focusing on essence, rule abidance, decision-making, narration, effective learning, reading proficiency, writing skills) and information literacy is dealt with in a separate paragraph in the cross-curricular field under the title of information and communication culture (Hungarian…, 2006). The new curricula gave a boost to the practice of teaching and to the theory of library pedagogy. There is a possibility to formulate other, alternative approaches and to develop the subject-matter of library instruction and methodology according to new pedagogical paradigms. One of the first indications of this process is that library pedagogy focuses not merely on the literal library instruction, but it also concentrates on the information literacy resulting from the development of libraries and society. It does not only attempt to teach how to use library equipment, but it also aims at assisting the progress of knowledgeable, conscious and flexible information literacy which integrates adequate conceptions and abilities.

Information literacy and – within this – libraries are connected with learning in two aspects, they are part of pedagogy in two different ways. In one of them information literacy is the aim as information literacy instruction is a school task as well. The other aspect is built upon the previous concept in which information literacy is a means of learning. If we consider that constructivist pedagogy does not support the transmission of objective, prestructured contents, information resources and the oldest information institutions, libraries play a prominent role in this paradigm.

The causes of this are:

- the information accessible through libraries is almost infinite,
- the available sources contain many various concepts and alternatives,
- the facts and knowledge appear in the sources in an integrated and interdisciplinary way,
- the manifold retrieval possibilities make manifold approaches possible,

in this way it supports the problem-centred learning process, which takes students' previous knowledge and interest into consideration.

Definitions of Information Literacy

Secondary literature provides us with various definitions of information literacy (Grassian – Kaplowitz, 2001; Bawden, 2001). Some of these are specific, others are more general, however, most of them speak highly of information literacy and define it as high level knowledge and do not define information literacy in general. The definitions mainly consist of lists of activities and/or features.

However, in our opinion information literacy is not a list or pile of skills but a knowledge system, of which facts and skills are parts but concepts, attitudes, values and aims are also defining factors. So it does not only include measurable, easy-to-reach elements, as opposed to information knowledge, which concentrates only on encyclopaedic facts and accomplished activities. In this manner, during the inquiry of information literacy the question is two-fold: on the one hand we must consider the difficulty of an information problem and the level of its solution. On the other hand, the attributed significance and the aim of knowledge, the directing concepts of the person's activities and the principles predicting future events are also important.

Considering the concepts above, we may give the following definition:

Information literacy is the part of our knowledge which helps us to find our way among the information connected with all fields of life, which helps us to recognize information needs, to locate and access information resources necessary and to gain, process, employ and transmit information.

Certainly, information literacy has more levels, according to the solution methods of information problems of different difficulty and considering the aims and preconcepts a person uses to apply the knowledge.

The Role and Place of Information Literacy in Pedagogy and Education

Information literacy comes to the front because of two correlative processes: evolution of information society and lifelong learning becoming more and more indispensable.

Analysing it in more detail there are a lot of social, economic, library and information science phenomena and changes thanks to which information literate persons get on in life more successfully and society needs citizens presenting higher level information literacy. More and more declarations, manifestos are published in professional and political forums of international, national and regional levels in order to press solutions to problems relating to learning information literacy and in order to put this topic on the agenda.

These changes and requirements have an effect on and make demands on education and training in many respects.

Now let us look over only those which are closely connected with our exact subject, correlations of information literacy and learning. Recent effects of the

social, economic, communication and library and information scientific changes, development on pedagogy and education:

- Purpose of education transformation: school should prepare for lifelong learning and autonomous learning. This leading method is an effectual information literacy instruction. So among other things this is the social and education political expectation for school.
- Education levels, forms and institutions are more and more varied. Compulsory school attendance and years spent at school are getting longer. Adult education is getting higher rates compared to earlier years and in this type of education teachers build upon autonomous learning. Compulsory education must prepare for a variety of learning. Teaching needs facilitate learning and support learners continuously to help learners to develop their information literacy at a required level in order to learn successfully.
- Dimensions change also among formal – in the school system – non-formal – out of the school system – and informal – spontaneous, non-conscious – education. The concept of learning is expanded in everyday thinking and in teaching practice. It resigns from the previous, narrow interpretation in which learning was a result of direct school teaching.
- In view of the above, non-school and non-schoolbook learning resources and information sources gained increasing significance in intentional and unintentional school learning and teaching.
- Out-of-classroom and sometimes out-of school learning spaces, information institutes, e.g. school libraries, public libraries, museums, computer rooms, become of more significance. New information and communication devices and sources appear in school, teachnig and learning.
- Whereas the new infomation and communication technology, ICT, is the most spectacular, and enormous economic interest, so its pedagogical influence and role often are overemphasized instad of subordinating ICT to educational purposes and subjects and instead of applying other teaching aids. This current tendency leads to deformation of the concept of information literacy in many instances. This phenomenon has been observed not only in political and everyday thinking but in some places in secondary literature we can find definitions in which information literacy is only connected with new technology and not with information generally. Teaching according to this type of one-sided preconceptions/conceptions, constructing this type of preconceptions/conceptions necessarily hinders development of high level information literacy.

The topic and problems of educational connection of information literacy are part of not merely 'informatics' cultural domains – in Hungary within this is the

'library instruction subject – but in a wider sense it is also part of pedagogical processes. After all, students' learned and constructed information literacy may increase efficiency of knowledge acquisition in every other subject, if teachers rely on it during the teaching process. On the other hand, school is capable of 'only' preparing not completely realizing the purpose of development of information literacy because of its skill nature. The entire environment should try their hand at practising, deepening and changing habits during the learning and teaching process.

The Method of the Research – Raising Questions

As a result of the tendencies mentioned in the previous part, a child's conceptions of information literacy became more important especially with relation to connections among different information resources, habits of obtaining information and learning and how children interpret those. In preparation for lifelong learning and information literacy instruction it is importnant to know how learners accept processes of information and information society, how they construct their own system of concepts and knowledge.

It was mentioned that in our explanation of developing/changing conceptual frameworks part of information literacy instruction is essential and this part plays a central role in constructivist pedagogy. So, uncovering and describing conceptions and the functions and developing diagnostic methods, measuring devices – which are applicable in teaching practice – is an indispensable step to lay the foundation of constructivist library pedagogy.

However, everybody has conceptions about almost everything, also about information literacy and within that about libraries, too. Also those who have never been to a library and have never studied. Consequently, learners', people's consciousness is not tabula rasa when they study how to use a library, go to a library for the first time or take a book in their hand for the first time in their life. This is also testified by the Hungarian library sociological research from the 1970s and 1980s. In this representative research series respondents had to finish the following sentence: "Library is such a place where …" – which is connected with our research area. In our opinion a remarkable result was that fifty percent of the respondents had never been library users, nevertheless eight – twelve percent of them could not finish the sentence, that is to say the vast majority could not express an opinion about libraries. It implies that we know the sociological nature of library using and user's needs more and more, but there is yet another question: What kind of constituent parts have concepts of Hungarian society about library? Among other

things it was a conclusion of research because it recognised that little attention has been paid to this problem, but it influences/determines the attitude toward libraries. (Gereben, 1998) In this research library science and librarian approaches have been made for this problem, too. Nowadays this is also placed in the context of library pedagogy and pedagogy which needs a more complex interpretation framework. So the questions are: what are the concepts/preconcepts like? How and in what direction do they influence further acqusition of knowledge, learning, using library and information resources.

We would like to contribute to mapping of the the library's public image. We do not prefer to analyze the concept about library only in the strict sense. In our opinion research does not result in adaptive, applicable information about conceptions, if the research subject does not investigate relationships from the point of view of information and information literacy generally and in terms of some preferred resources, e.g. books, computers and the Internet. After all obviously that is the way we can provide complex pictures of the system of concepts about library.

On the other hand, previous research, addressing concepts about information literacy, used the technique of asking respondents about opinion of information and their own information user preferences. As we have explained above we are of the opinion that information literacy is more comprehensive than adopting the process of information use. Accordingly, in our mapping the concepts about information literacy, examining the concept about information and information use have completed more detailed investigation of thinking of books, libraries, computers, the Internet and their relationship to each other. After that we go on to construct a possible type of concepts about information literacy from the analysing of responses to general and special questions.

The assumption is that one can get more comprehensive, complex pictures about information literacy as well as libraries and the Internet. In this respect this will be more adequate for practice and will help to understand learners and library users.

In the first phase of the research, in 2005, the following open-ended questions were asked, among other things, to 112 twelve-year-old students in three schools:

- What is the use of library?
- In your opinion what would happen, if libraries did not exist?
- Library is like …
- What kind of people go to a library?

The purpose of the questions was to draw up lists of motives and categories to develop more detailed measurement equipment whereby we can access contents

of concepts more precisely. For this purpose all the responses were divided into groups of questions in a stepwise way, then recognizable conceptual frameworks and points of view were constructed from final categories of all the questions.

From them, in what follows, we would like to present only those which are related to the concept, activities, and equipment of learning.

Information Literacy and Learning

Christine Bruce identified seven types, seven 'faces' of conceptions about information use held by undergraduate students. Three of these are in relation to knowledge, therefore also learning: the fifth face: knowledge construction, critical use of information in favour of knowledge, the sixth face: knowledge extension, centred creative use of information, the seventh face: wisdom, comprehended conscious, value-centred and comprehensive interpretation. (Bruce, 1997)

Clarence Maybee also made a scientific investigation into conceptions of undergraduate students about information use but identified only three groups od conceptions. One of these three interprets information use as learning. "Information use is seen as building a personal knowledge base for various purposes." While the other two categories concentrate on only resources and not on purposes. (Maybe, 2006)

Another approach to this theme is to study the appearance of information, information resources and information literacy or parts of it in concepts about learning. Information processing is definitely presented among described learning concepts. In this conceptual framework information processing, information use is seen as increasing knowledge in the reproductive sense. (Säljö, 1979)

Our research indicated four types of functions of information in thinking of twelve-year-old children: the first category: we always need it, the second category: we have to know something, to be more clever, the third category: to do school exercises to learn something, the fourth category: to communicate. (The questions were: In your opinion what is the use of information? When do we need information?) The second category was the most frequently appearing and the other three are included in only one fourth of the responses.

In these conceptions information is often a result of conscious activity, and it is often identified with the recent news. We also asked: 'How can we receive information?' Their responses also reinforced the previous assumption. Sources of the news (newspapers, tv, radio) are represented strongly, and searching or asking are also characteristic motives. Libray was mentioned only sixteen times and school, teachers or learning only eight times. It may be concluded that although many children

think that we can get knowledge from information they connect it with learning very rarely because they equalize learning with direct school learning. This type of conceptions necessarily increases the weight of the development of conscious and planed lifelong learning because they do not recognise or accept library resources as learning resources.

Libraries and Learning in Children's Concepts

In the Hungarian representative library sociological research from the 1970s and 1980s, mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed positive views on libraries. Part of these responses were full of pathos or were general and confused. It may be often guessed that the respondents declared positive opinions because they thought that negative opinions are not unseemly. In other terms they did not cunstruct a concept that library is a 'good place' but said that in clever, researchers' opinion library is a 'good place' but 'I do not know what to do there'. This assumption is supported by negative motives that came from library users in the research. (Gereben, 1998) While in our qualitative and not representative research, the proportion of negative responses is remarkably higher. Especially remarkable that in 2005 negative responses were generalizations, not necessarily real objections like earlier. For example, in some children's conceptions libraries are boring, annoying or out-dated places. In other words in the 1970-80s negative aspects came from bad experiences, but in 2005 they came from open-minded, not hidden concepts.

The first mentioned research in 1978, indicated a library's nine public images. One of the nine ones was related to learning. In these described conceptions a library is a place physically, also because of the question, so in this learning-related conception library is a study hall. Fifteen percent of the respondents thought so.

Our research shows that libraries are interpreted as a stock of information, books without services and activities. In addition the approaches related to learning, knowledge, school definitely presented in the conceptions in various ways. And considering this rate of entertainment is very low in children's conceptions about a library. Not expected result that the social function of a library often appears in the conceptions about a library. They often mention, for example, that books and information are free in a library, and poor people can read there.

Analysing responses to the questions related to the functions of libraries we identified four categories which show a relationship between libraries and learning:

First category: Library supports learning generally. – very general responses

Second category: Library helps to increase knowledge. – increase is quantitative or general: we become cleverer,
Third category: Library is a place for studying – like a study hall
Fourth category: Library helps to solve particular school excercises. – e.g. essays, gathering information about historic personalities

Conclusion

From these different conceptions we can see that conceptional frameworks can be varied. So library instruction and also information literacy instruction focused on only information skills and knowledege about libraries and computers cannot be too efficient, because new knowledge is built in particular contexts of thought in case of every student. In other words, teachers, librarians, teacher librarians and learners, users speak other languages in this topic.

A conception-based approach should be employed to develop information literacy and prepare for autonomous learning and lifelong learning. Knowing some possible ways that learners conceptualize information literacy, library and so on will allow creating of learner-centred, constructivist subjects, methods, pedagogy. For example, conceptions should be diagnosed, compared and confronted in conversations, debates, role-plays and analyses of situations and so on.

Bibliography

Bawden, D. (2001): Information and digital literacies: a review of concepts. *Journal of Documentation*. Vol. 57, no. 2. 218–259.

Bruce, Ch. (1997): *Seven Faces of Information Literacy in Higher Education*, Queensland University of Technology, URL: http://sky.fit.qut.edu.au/~bruce/inflit/faces/faces1.php Last visit: 2006.07.05.

Gereben F. (1998): *Könyv, könyvtár, közönség*, A magyar társadalom olvasáskultúrája olvasás- és könyvtárszociológiai adatok tükrében, Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, p228; URL: http://mek.oszk.hu/01700/01742/ Last visit: 2006.07.07.

Grassian, E.S., & Kaplowitz, J.R. (2001): *Information literacy instruction. Theory and practice*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers.

Hungarian National Core Curriculum, abridged version (Last update: 2006.03) Ministry of Education, URL: http://www.om.hu/main.php?folderID=137&articleID=6994&ctag=articlelist&iid=1 Last visit: 2006.07.07.

Maybee, C. (2006): Undergraduate Perceptions of Information Use: The Basis for Creating User-Centered Student Information Literacy Instruction. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*. Vol. 32, no. 1. 79–85.

Nahalka, I. (2002): *Hogyan alakul ki a tudás a gyerekekben? Konstruktivizmus és pedagógia*. Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó.

Säljö, R. (1979): *Learning in the Learner's Perspective I. Some Common Sense Conceptions. Reports from the Department of Education*. Göteborg: University Göteborg.