

The Quarterly Interview: Alison Hicks

University College, London

-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and what are your main responsibilities? How long have you been in this position?*

Hicks: I am an Assistant Professor and the Programme Director of Library and Information Studies (LIS) at University College, London (UCL), the UK's oldest school of librarianship. In this role I maintain an IL research agenda, lead our MA programme in LIS, teach our IL module, and supervise MA and PhD research. I have held this position for almost 5 years now; prior to this, I worked as a librarian at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

After getting your undergraduate degree in Scotland, why did you decide to get your MSIS at the University of Texas?

My undergraduate degree was in French and Spanish, so my initial career goal was to become a Spanish/Latin American academic librarian. Texas, with its rich Latin American/Latinx collections and heritage, seemed like an obvious place to do this. It also felt like there was more of a focus on the digital in US LIS programmes which was attractive to me in the early 2000s. Little did I know that my career would focus on the social questions of LIS rather than the design and organisation ones!

How does information literacy instruction differ in the UK as compared to your experiences in the US?

One difference that I have noticed is that IL instruction in the UK may be housed with other departments on campus, such as academic skills or careers. This has the benefit of connecting IL with educational support programming but may perhaps stretch people more thinly. There also seems to be a significant drive to attain additional teaching qualifications; obviously, there is a similar focus on professional development in the US, but I have been struck by the take up in the UK. In school (equivalent of K-12) libraries, one key difference is that unlike in many states in the US, school librarians do not have to have a teaching qualification, which has implications for the scope of their role.

How has teaching about information literacy to library and information science graduate students changed the way that you view instruction and information literacy?

It's been a fascinating process to strip back the field to its essentials and think about how to scaffold the complexity of IL to new and emerging librarians—it's still something I wrestle with as my own IL research agenda evolves. For example, I want students to be able to talk confidently about IL models and frameworks if they come up in a job

interview, but my own research has been quite critical of these structures, so I'm still figuring out how to present all these ideas in a way that students can grasp in a ten-week course. It's also made me think a lot more about how to meet the needs of students who want to become public or corporate librarians as much of what is accepted as the IL 'canon' just doesn't work in these contexts.

In several of your past publications, you have raised the idea of transition as a way to reframe information literacy instruction rather than a focus on skill development. Can you explain more about what transition means and why that reframing would be helpful?

Yes, absolutely. The idea of transition came up in my PhD research, which looked at the role that IL plays when undergraduates transition (usually in their second/third year) from learning a language in the classroom to learning a language overseas as part of a study abroad experience. Transition is not a new concept and is playing a more prominent role within student success literature, particularly in studies that examine the shift from secondary or high school education to university. However, this literature tends to focus on the baseline skills that librarians think the learner will need for the new context rather than on the dynamics of the transitional process itself—including the impact of change on the learner. And that's where I think the concept of transition has so much potential for IL—because if you think about it, the shift to higher education or the workplace isn't just about a simple physical move. Instead, it involves a massive shift in identity, whether this is a transition from being a high school student to becoming an undergraduate or from being a master's student to becoming a professional. And, if we understand that we develop an identity through participating in the activities of a social community (Wenger, 1998), IL can be seen to support this transformation through connecting us to the forms and sites of knowledge that allow us to access these shared endeavours. So, that is where things get exciting! When we think about transition in terms of an identity shift, we start to focus on the processes and dynamics involved in learning to become something, including the challenges people face and the information activities that they employ to navigate these issues. The recognition that people inhabit many identities and may consequently be going through many transitions at once, further draws attention to how even the best 'prepared' student may struggle at this time. In effect, a focus on transition helps us to extend disciplinary understandings of IL by emphasising the complex processes that are involved in learning to think like a professional rather than just zeroing in on the more fixed habits of expert practitioners. It also enables

(Interview...Continued on page 11)

(Interview...Continued from page 12)

us to situate IL at the heart of human development, an idea that opens up a number of intriguing further directions.

I'm also curious to know more about a topic addressed in your 2020 article, "Deconstructing information literacy discourse: Peeling back the layers in higher education." You wrote how information literacy instruction tends to focus on a deficit model of learners rather than focusing on how material and social conditions affect behavior. Could you expand more on this idea?

Of course. When my colleague, Annemaree Lloyd, and I started the project from which this paper emerged, we had no idea that the deficit model of learning would play such a prominent role in our work. Our original goal was to explore the outward and inward narratives of IL, or the ways in which we present our work to ourselves as well as to people outside our field. We did this through examining IL models and textbooks that have been written on these topics. And what we found was that references to students within these documents were often very negative—there were frequent allusions to passivity, plagiarism and a lack of criticality. On one level, I understand why this happens—if we can prove how much value we add to educational experiences, the more we shore up our own work. However, this approach is also really problematic because it lays all the blame for these failings at the foot of the learner instead of recognising that a seeming inability to fulfil certain academic expectations may be linked to structural issues. Amelia Gibson and colleagues (2021) for example, write powerfully about how young Black girls' information seeking is shaped by how safe they perceive a setting to be— from this understanding, activity that may be perceived as passive by librarians may be a reaction to feeling threatened within a certain environment. Similarly, Jessie Loyer's (2018) portrayal of how indigenous students are often forced to confront their own trauma within poorly conceived research assignments provides another example of how what may be seen as a lack of criticality may actually be a moment of self-care. So, this paper was really an attempt to point out the subtle messages that are being embedded in our professional documents and to demonstrate why we found these approaches problematic.

You recently co-wrote the 2021 article, "Participation and Presence: Interrogating Active Learning." We tend to have a non-questioning acceptance of active learning as part of our teaching, but this article raises some concerns that information literacy librarians may want to purposefully deliberate. Can you mention some of those concerns here and ideas for addressing them?

Yes, this was a paper that my good friend and collaborator, Caroline Sinkinson, and I wrote as part of a project looking at open educational practices, or the use of open and digital tools for teaching purposes. As we read around this topic, we became quite struck with how teaching activities designed in the best faith, for example, to go be-

yond "disposable assignments" (Wiley, 2013), might have unintended consequences, including exposing learners to tracking, surveillance and advertising. From there it was a short leap to thinking about active learning more generally—which we had both previously not even thought twice about questioning— and pinpointing ways in which participatory learning opportunities might not always bring the benefits we hope for. One area that we highlighted in the article was how active learning positions learning as a public event that is both verbal and observable, an idea that delegitimises private learning strategies and less vocal students. We also noted how the belief that participation provides inclusive learning opportunities papers over the structural inequalities that cause learner marginalisation in the first place. Carrying out this analysis consequently enabled us to think about the assumptions that lie behind active learning, including disturbing parallels with neoliberal ideas of presenteeism and productivity. Before we all revert to lecture style instruction, we do suggest a few ways forward in the paper, including inviting students to interrogate what the cost of participating in open educational practices is. Ultimately, we hope that this paper will encourage a renewed engagement with concepts we hold dear in IL.

What books or articles have influenced you?

I feel a bit geeky saying this as she is now my colleague and collaborator, but Annemaree Lloyd's 2005 paper was one of the earliest influences upon my understanding of IL. Reading this article was the first time that I had ever considered that IL could be understood beyond an academic skills trajectory, and it blew my mind. Nowadays I get more out of her 2017 theory of IL, but this paper opened a lot of doors for me.

An article that influenced me during my PhD was a 1998 article by Mary Lea and Brian Street, which critically interrogated three different ways in which writing has been taught within university settings— skills-based, socialisation and academic literacies models. This comparison was very useful as I made connections between the educational theory I was reading about and what I was seeing in IL literature. A close runner up was Brian Street's (2006) work on autonomous and ideological models of literacy, which gave me the vocabulary to express my discomfort with simplistic understandings of IL impact.

A paper that inspired early work exploring IL within intercultural settings was Miriam Conteh Morgan's 2003 ACRL paper, which was one of the first pieces of work to draw attention to the many inferences that are made about international students within IL literature. This paper's emphasis on language and culture is an early precursor for much of the recent focus on deficit models of learning

(H5P...Continued from page 6)

Examples of H5P Content

Currently, H5P does not provide a central repository where users can share and search for content examples or reusable elements. The H5P Core team is working on an Open Educational Resources Hub to meet that need and allow interested users to share their content under a Creative Commons License. According to their site (<https://h5p.org/oer-hub-coming>), the Hub is “98% done” but there doesn’t seem to be a scheduled launch date yet.

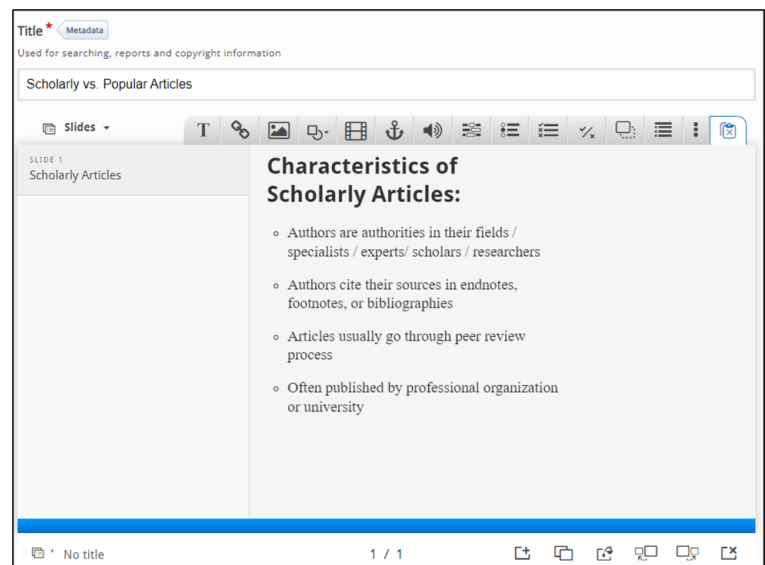
While we wait for the official Hub to materialize, a good alternative option for viewing examples of H5P learning object is the eCampusOntario H5P Studio’s Catalogue of H5P Content (<https://h5pstudio.ecampusontario.ca/>). The eCampusOntario H5P Studio provides hosting for anyone working at an Ontario, Canada university or college, and many of its users make their content viewable and/or available to others to reuse and repurpose under a variety of Creative Commons licensing terms. The catalogue has thousands of entries and is searchable by keyword and subject (amongst other options); it can be a great source of ideas and inspiration for developing your own instructional assets.

Conclusion

When thoughtfully integrated into online or in-person teaching, interactive content can increase student engagement, stimulate attention, and facilitate active learning.

Using H5P, instructors can easily develop interactive learning objects that can be used as standalone instructional modules or embedded into online courses. With its free plug-in, H5P provides a cost-effective option for libraries to host, develop and share information literacy teaching resources. Overall, H5P is a useful tool for instructors seeking to enhance their online learning objects with interactive elements. Give it a try, and I think you’ll agree.

Figure 4: Authoring Tool Interface for Building Course Presentation Slides



(Interview...Continued from page 11)

and the author’s razor-sharp analysis inspired and provoked me in equal measure.

Reference List of Sources Mentioned in Interview

- Conteh-Morgan, M. (2003). Journey with new maps: Adjusting mental models and rethinking instruction to language minority students. *ACRL Eleventh National Conference*. Retrieved from <https://alair.ala.org/bitstream/handle/11213/17607/conteh-morgan.PDF?sequence=1>
- Gibson, A. N., Hughes-Hassell, S., & Bowen, K. (2021). Navigating ‘danger zones’: social geographies of risk and safety in teens and tweens of color information seeking. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-18.
- Lea, M. R., & Street, B. V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157-172.
- Lloyd, A. (2005). Information literacy: different contexts, different concepts, different truths?. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 37(2), 82-88.
- Lloyd, A. (2017). Information literacy and literacies of information: A mid-range theory and model. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 11 (1), 91-105.
- Loyer, J. (2018). *Indigenous information literacy: nēhiyaw kinship enabling self-care in research*. In: Nicholson, K.P. & Seale, M. *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*. Library Juice Press.
- Street, B. (2006). Autonomous and ideological models of literacy: Approaches from New Literacy Studies. *Media Anthropology Network*, 17, 1-15.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wiley, D. (2013). What is open pedagogy? Retrieved from <http://opencontent.org/blog/archives/2975>