

## Chapter 6

# Hidden Greenlands: Learning, Libraries, and Literacy in the Information Age

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter considers the role of libraries and educational publishers in the information age. Studies show that, for most college and university students, the trigger for research remains the classroom assignment. Tasks associated with specific learning objectives—writing a paper, preparing an interpretive reading, engaging in historical or statistical analysis—still motivate students to engage in research. What has changed is the fact that students no longer rely on librarians, libraries, or traditional publishers for information resources. They go directly to search engines. Today’s learners are, however, quickly overwhelmed and, despite being “digital natives,” struggle to evaluate information and organize it to build ideas. The ability of publishers, librarians, and libraries to address this issue will determine their relevancy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, perhaps, the success of students themselves in the information age. This chapter reviews a wide variety of literature and experiential data on information literacy, findability, metadata, and use of library resources and proposes how all players can re-think their roles.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently, during what is usually one of the duller stretches of a transatlantic flight—when passengers obliterate the hours with sleep, read, or escape tedium watching movies on postcard-sized screens—the captain addressed the cabin and alerted us we were in for something unusual: Greenland, typically hidden under a misty shell of clouds, was fully visible.

Maybe it is axiomatic in post-September 11<sup>th</sup> times that warning of anything out of the ordinary, particularly from a pilot mid-flight, grabs our attention. In any case, within moments, passengers clustered around the tiny, oval windows, straining to take in the event.

And an event it was: soaring mountain peaks and precipitous slopes. Between them, giant, grooved fjords stretched down to scraps of land: brown, with a little green at the fringes.

I remembered an article describing the expansion of Greenland's arable land, a consequence of shorter winters, higher temperatures, and other effects of global warming (Trautfetter, 2006). And now, here it was as part of a scene of colliding histories: ice dating back to prehistory, next to 21<sup>st</sup> century agriculture, itself a result of industrialization begun in the 1800s.

The incident revealed something paradoxical.

I realized how little I knew about the place, and, how little *reliable* knowledge I had about climate change. I should, I decided, start keeping tabs on Greenland.

More than a year of search engine alerts and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds later, my inquiry seemed well-timed: Greenland had risen from obscurity to topicality in much the way it appeared out of the mist on that transatlantic flight.

On November 13, 2010, for example, *The New York Times* reported that Greenland had become no less than a locus of major global warming study. Scientists take the temperature of the surrounding ocean to gauge the rate of melting in glaciers. Their

conclusions are stunning in their implications as well in their *inconclusiveness*:

*...researchers have recently been startled to see big changes unfold in both Greenland and Antarctica.*

*As a result of recent calculations that take the changes into account, many scientists now say that sea level is likely to rise perhaps three feet by 2100 — an increase that, should it come to pass, would pose a threat to coastal regions the world over.*

*And the calculations suggest that the rise could conceivably exceed six feet, which would put thousands of square miles of the American coastline under water and would probably displace tens of millions of people in Asia (Gillis, 2010).*

One degree of temperature change or several? Three feet of water level increase, or six? The implications of the numerical differences, in a human context, are tiny: whether to take a sweater or not; wading in up to the knees or swimming. In a global context, over time, the impact is enormous.

The indeterminacy of the data, the range of their potential consequences, should make us ask: which other unknown uncertainties are out there influencing our future? How many hidden Greenlands do we pass over unthinkingly until to notice them is to be shocked by our own ignorance of their impact? How do we interpret information in shifting contexts? And how do we convey the urgency of these issues to learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## I. TRUTH 2.0

As consumers and producers of educational publications, such questions ought to preoccupy us. The answers go straight to how human beings will learn and flourish in the information age.

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