

Chapter 1

Understanding Information Seeking Behavior of Faculty and Students: A Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews significant information seeking literature, focusing on general models that can provide a framework for those not familiar with the research in that area. It then explores models and characteristics that are unique to academic users, specifically undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members, highlighting similarities and differences among these groups of users. Changes to information seeking that have resulted from technological advances are also examined. The chapter concludes with a look at resource discovery tools in light of what is known about the information seeking behaviors of academic users, and recommendations are provided for those considering adoption of resource discovery tools.

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INTRODUCTION

The design of systems and interfaces is a complicated matter that must take myriad details into consideration. One of those details is how users interact with the system or interface, and there is an entire field of study, that of human computer interactions, that deals with just this issue. The interaction between user and system impacts both sides of the equation, as it influences how the system or interface is designed, but also has significant influence on the success of those using the system. Use studies comprise one of the most significant bodies of research in librarianship (Krikelas, 1983), but one that has focused on the user's experience of the system (as opposed to focusing on the system itself) only since the 1970s (Case, 2008).

From the users' perspective, both Ellis (1989) and Kuhlthau (2004) agree that if the system with which a user interacts operates in a way that runs contrary to that user's process of seeking information, that user will encounter difficulty in finding the information needed to satisfy his or her information need. Borgman (1986, 1996) acknowledges the complexity of satisfying user needs by stating that "[o]n any given system, people will search in different ways, with different levels of success and satisfaction" (p. 393). She nevertheless suggests that it is not possible to design a system that functions well unless we first understand how people search, and that this has historically been the most significant flaw of library catalogs.

Web-based resource discovery tools represent the latest attempt to overlay the traditional approach to library resources with a user-friendly, streamlined, aggregated access point that would allow users to discover resources they might not have identified using traditional tools. How well these tools serve users depends, however, upon how well they integrate with the ways in which these users already search for information.

Information seeking has been studied from the perspectives of psychology, education, marketing, information science, library science, medicine, and others. Due to its immense size, it is not possible to address all the literature on information seeking in a single chapter, even when focusing on those publications specific to libraries and library-related interfaces (Case, 2008; Dervin & Nilan, 1986; Krikelas, 1983; Wilson, 1981, 1997). This chapter will instead strive to present a brief review of significant empirical and theoretical literature on this topic. The chapter will begin with a general introduction and some basic models, and then proceed to examine more specific behaviors exhibited by academic users, specifically undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members, by examining literature unique to those populations. It will explore and compare some proposed models of the information seeking process, and will look at possible changes to information seeking that have come about as a result of the Internet, Web 2.0 and social networking tools, and other technological advances. This chapter will conclude with a look at the implications of these information seeking behaviors on the adoption of resource discovery tools.

ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT FOR INFORMATION SEEKING

Information seeking behaviors are a subset of the broader category of information behaviors comprising "complex combination[s] of different biologically primary abilities such as language, information processing, decision-making, etc. that are found in all humans" (Spink, 2010, p. 46). Information seeking behaviors specifically are those steps and processes that lead an individual to information. Typically, information seeking begins when an individual recognizes a need or gap that needs to be satisfied (Kuhlthau, 2004; Wilson, 1981). Krikelas (1983) refers to this need as an unacceptable level of uncertainty in

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