Information Literacies: Concepts, Contexts and Cultural Tools
Introduction to the Special Issue of *Human IT*

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This special issue of *Human IT* introduces Nordic information literacies research to an international audience. With a basis in the notion of information literacies, the contributions present analyses of how people in different contexts learn to participate in information activities, what they learn from this participation, and by which means learning takes place. Furthermore, the articles concern questions relevant to the study of information literacies.

The background of the special issue is an edited book published in Swedish in 2009 called, in translation, *Information Literacies: Learning in Information Practices and Information Seeking in Learning Practices* (Hedman & Lundh 2009). This book was the result of a four year research project, *Libraries, ICT, and Learning*, funded by the Swedish Knowledge Foundation and its research programme *LearnIT*, and led by Professor Louise Limberg from the Swedish School of Library and Information Science.

The theme uniting the studies conducted within *Libraries, ICT, and Learning*, and hence the edited book, was the relationship between information activities, such as information seeking and information use, and learning. This theme is inherently multidisciplinary, and both the edited book and this issue include contributions resulting from collaborations between researchers in Library and Information Science and Educational Science.

The crossing of disciplinary boundaries has led to both empirical insights and theory development. Research on information activities and learning are of interest for several professional groups, such as teachers and educators throughout the educational system, as well as public, academic and school librarians. As there has been a scarcity of literature in the Nordic languages in this area it was deemed important to publish *Information Literacies* in Swedish, which is understood not only in Sweden, but also in other Nordic countries. This turned out to be a successful strategy; the book was, and still is, used as a textbook in teacher and librarian education in several Nordic countries and it was reprinted in 2010.

Publishing in Swedish has, however, its limitations in terms of outreach. In order to make *Information Literacies* accessible for an international audience, the authors of the book were invited to translate and revise their contributions for inclusion in this special issue of *Human IT*. Four of the five contributions are published in the open section of the journal. It should be noted, though, that in their Swedish versions, all of them were part of a review process where the invited authors reviewed each other's contributions, in addition to the review of the editors.

We are proud to present the five articles, which all in some way concern the concept of information literacy, the different contexts where information literacies are enacted, and the cultural tools that are employed in this enactment.

The Concept of Information Literacy

Is there such a thing as a Nordic perspective on information literacies? Nordic research on information literacy has developed strongly during

the last decade, producing an increasing number of PhD theses on information seeking and learning (e.g. Gärdén 2010; Hultgren 2009; Lundh 2011; Moring 2009; Rivano Eckerdal 2012; Thórsteinsdóttir 2005) and attracting funding to several research projects and programmes. It was also a Nordic initiative that led to the establishment of the International Information Literacies Research Network, iilresearch.[2]

In their contribution to this issue, Louise Limberg, Olof Sundin, and Sanna Talja present three theoretical perspectives that have been influential in Nordic information literacy research, namely phenomenography, sociocultural theory, and Foucauldian discourse analysis. In the international information literacy research these three perspectives all offer alternatives to the cognitivist viewpoints that are prevalent in this field. Despite their differences in terms of philosophical foundations and methodological consequences, they all open dimensions which have implications for the conceptualisation of information literacy.

In fact, the three perspectives open up for a questioning of the concept as such. Working with any of these perspectives means that the concept is not taken for granted, but is given its meaning or meanings through careful theorising and analysis. Information literacy is, from these perspectives, understood through a theoretical lens, and through its use. This means that the three perspectives lead away from the focus on the individual that characterises many definitions of the concept of information literacy. Various understandings and definitions of information literacy emerge from the ways in which the concept is perceived, enacted, and negotiated in collective, social, and linguistic practices. Thus, in each of these three perspectives, the objective of measuring individuals' levels of information literacy is replaced by an interest in understanding what information literacy might be for different people, or within a specific context, and why this might be so.

In the contributions to this special issue, the sociocultural perspective is put forward as particularly useful for understanding information literacies as it highlights the role of contexts and cultural tools.

Information Literacies in Different Contexts

The three articles by Camilla Moring, Mikael Alexandersson and Louise Limberg, and Anna Lundh, Birgitta Davidsson and Louise Limberg illustrate how learning of and from information seeking and use takes place in different contexts, from the early school years to workplaces. The empirical studies exemplify the sociocultural notion of situated learning, and by extension, the situated character of information literacy. Ways of seeking and using information that are valued as effective and appropriate in one setting might not be useful or valued in another. Standardised definitions are therefore, in this view, not sufficient for describing the various constituents of information literacy. Instead of trying to define information literacy once and for all, this view invites us to explore and try to understand what information literacy might be in different contexts. This leads to the preference of using information literacy in its quite unusual plural form, information literacies (Hedman & Lundh 2009; Limberg 2010).

The understanding of information literacies as context-bound raises questions concerning the transfer of information literacies between contexts. What does it mean if we cannot describe individuals as information literate per se, but always in relation to specific social practices? This question is relevant for anyone who is teaching aspects of information literacy. Are there any dimensions of information literacy that individuals can transfer from one setting to another? The contributions of this special issue do not provide a definite answer to this question. However, in her contribution Moring illustrates how individuals can always negotiate the meaning of effective and appropriate information activities, even when they are new to a setting.

The emphasis on context-dependence implies that information literacies are constantly evolving both in the transition between different social practices, as well as over time. In their article, Alexandersson and Limberg describe how the requirements on pupils' abilities to seek, use, and evaluate information changed in Swedish primary and secondary

school in the early 2000s. This era was characterised by the computerisation of Swedish schools, alongside with the rise in popularity of student-centred learning methods. However, even though these processes placed new demands on pupils' ability to seek and use information, some issues, related to the history of school as an institution, seem to be continuous. In some respects, the introduction of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) changed the ways in which information was sought and used, but at the same time, Alexandersson's and Limberg's research shows that technologies will not in themselves change school practices.

The Roles of Cultural Tools

In sociocultural thinking, the concept of *cultural tools* (e.g. Säljö 2005) is pivotal for the understanding and explanation of learning processes. This concept highlights that people learn through acting in the world, by participating in social practices, and through appropriating the physical and linguistic tools used in these practices. This theoretical notion has proved useful, not least in the area of information seeking and use research, during the past decades when digital tools for various information activities have been introduced, developed, and adopted by large groups of people.

For information literacy research, the notion of cultural tools draws attention to the material aspects of information activities. Our objects of study do not solely consist of inner information processing, but of what people do and how they interact with each other as well as with different tools in a material and social world. Cultural tools shape the practices where they are used, but concurrently, the social practices shape the tools and their use. They may be regarded as promises of a new bright future, or described as threatening and dangerous, as illustrated by Lundh, Davidsson and Limberg. However, it is through their use that their meaning is negotiated and formed. Cultural tools should not be seen as neutral vehicles for information transfer. In his contribution to this special issue, Jan Nolin analyses the ideology built into so called "learning technologies"

and he concludes that the ideas of standardisation and reusability actually hinder the development and usefulness of these technologies in educational settings.

Limberg, Sundin, and Talja argue that sociocultural perspectives help us to focus on the roles of cultural tools in people's learning and development and are therefore fruitful in the area of information literacies research, especially in times when tools for information activities are developing rapidly. This is particularly evident in this issue which presents some of the findings of socioculturally based Nordic information literacies research from the past decade. Together, the contributions illustrate how information literacy can be conceptualised, and how it can be understood in relation to different practices and cultural tools. However, this special issue is not merely a summary of what has been, it also reveals a research field that is maturing and which now has a solid base from which new questions of the relationship between information activities and learning can – and will – emerge.

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Notes

1. Formerly Jenny Hedman.
2. http://iilresearch.wordpress.com/

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