Introducing The Information Experience in Context

Jenna Hartel

The past winter semester of 2009, 24 students participated in a new course at the Faculty of Information, *INF2305: The Information Experience in Context*. Our goal was to discover what information scientist Marcia Bates calls, "the *red thread* of information in the social texture of people's lives" (1999, p. 1048). Put another way, we sought to look at a variety of situations from an iSchool perspective to determine "What's going on with information here?" Answering the question required a fusion of information theory and ethnographic method that was then applied by each student to an independent research project. This special issue of *Faculty of Information Quarterly* shares the story of our adventure and showcases a sample of final papers.

The class began with an introduction to *metatheories*—idea systems that function as lenses and bring a particular aspect of information into view. Different metatheories orient attention to information as cognition, language, sociality, power, documents, or technology among myriad

forms. We also surveyed and discussed exemplar *models* that describe the human information experience. Altogether, these conceptual devices provided a framework , vocabulary, and stance to conduct information research.

Next, we adopted ethnography as a methodology and began an intensive, hands-on, 3-week *methods workshop*. Ethnography entails firsthand involvement in and observation of phenomena in their natural environments, a setting known as "the field." Participants learned the necessary ethnical protocols from the University of Toronto's Office of Research Ethics. Then, we studied ethnographic field methods and tools such as observation, field notes, interviews, and photography. The workshop involved practice exercises, and in one session classmates interviewed each other to discover the red thread of information within a knapsack, book bag, or pocketbook.

The 2305*ers* (as they became known) were then ready to go into the field to gather data for their own original, exploratory, research projects. For these case studies no corner of Toronto (or the virtual world) was off limits. Some students investigated information institutions where they hoped to launch a career (generating memorable anecdotes and expertise to share at a job interview). A few sought the red thread within public spaces while others became analysts of their favorite hobbies, making the hard work unusually fun. Online communities served as the field setting for several investigations, and one person explored the information universe within a popular science fiction television series. Everyone

became a pioneer and *the* leading expert on the topic they opted to study, since most of the world has not been examined from an iSchool point of view.

This issue features a sample of the short papers that report findings and served as the final assignment. In the ethnographic tradition, the work is unencumbered by elaborate theoretical frameworks, nor hemmed in by an existing literature. Instead, the writing is centered on original field data and is rich with verbatim statements from interviewees, colorful digital photographs, and original models—in an effort to capture the phenomenon and evoke its essence to readers.

For instance, in "In Search of HOVBY: Informational Markers and Materials at Ikea" Jennifer Andraea describes how a shopper uses information to navigate Ikea in Etobicoke. "It will all come out in the wash: Information behaviour in the laundromat and the shared communal experience of 'place'" by Kate MacDonald documents information use at her local laundromat, a case study that may apply to other situations that involve waiting. In "Kvetch: Information Sharing in an Online Wedding Forum" Monica Retig examines the information behaviors common to a discussion forum of an online wedding website. Leslie Thomson's "The Information Experience of a Printing Company Employee in a Home Office" is the first study of information organization and use in the home office of a printing professional (who happened to be her father), and has since evolved into a master's thesis. Rebecca Sheffield, author of "'Smelly

Knowledge': An Information Audit of the Sunnydale High Library in Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (and whose fieldwork consisted of watching television intently), profiles the informational roles of its lead characters and their information resources. Doctoral student Peter Coppin applied ethnography to explore the information workspace of an information professional with dyslexia and ADHD in "Intentional Distractions and Organizational Clutter." Finally, Suzanne LeBlanc examined the use of information in her world of work in "Information Overload: Stock Picking at a Small Wealth Management Company".

INF2305 ended with a mock-awards ceremony, and students won commendations for excellence in a variety of serious and not-so-serious categories. Of note, Angelina Pizzirusso received the inaugural *Llewellyn C. Puppybreath III Award*[1] for channeling one of information science's great spirits. Comments on the course evaluation include, "It truly changes how you look at the world of information!" and, "The course was the first opportunity to put theory into practice and get out into the world and act like an information scientist. It was a great capstone to the Masters."

In Fall semester of 2009 a second cohort of *INF2305* had their own "information experiences" and continued the search for the

---

[1] Dr. Puppybreath is a legendary information scientist; see Bates, 1999 (p. 1049) or attend the annual SIG-CON event at the *Annual Meeting of the American Society of Information Science and Technology*.

red thread. This time, students pursued information in fantasy football, Woodbine Racetrack, Facebook, avatar formation, a public library's DVD collection, and an urban garden, among other realms. Their discoveries will be featured in upcoming issues of this journal. The course will be offered again in summer 2010 (please contact Professor Jenna Hartel for details); and is especially suited as a warm-up or pilot for a thesis or dissertation. We thank the *Faculty of Information Quarterly* for the opportunity to share the information experience with the iSchool community and beyond.

References

Bates, M.J. (1999). The Invisible substrate of information science. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science 50* (12), 1043-1050.

Jenna Hartel's website with more information on the course: www.jennahartel.com

Figure 1. Suzanne LeBlanc describes information use by an expert in the financial services industry.

Figure 2. Brian Stearns receives an award (a packet of glow-in-the-dark straws) from Professor Jenna Hartel, for conducting ground-breaking research into information behavior in an online forum.