THE THEORY/PRACTICE ~~GAP~~ LINK: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT THEORY IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

45TH GABRIEL A. BERNARDO MEMORIAL LECTURE

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UP SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES · 1961 ·

1. How we talk about theory in LIS
2. Two studies that changed how I viewed the theory/practice gap
3. How theory can be a unifying concept for our field

1. How we talk about theory in LIS

“Gulf existing between faculty concepts of useful research and practitioner views”

- Bill Crowley

“Experienced practitioners view the LIS literature as an occasional adjunct to their interpersonal communications networks.”

-Bill Crowley

“The gap between theory and practice reflects deep cultural differences and appreciation for different kinds of knowledge.”

-Bill Crowley

“I hear complaints from some students that the MLS has ‘too much theory’.”

- Kathleen Kern

“Why are we learning this sort of thing? . . . it’s models, it’s theories. I don’t like that.”

- an instructor reporting what students think (VanScoy et al., 2022)

“They hate it.
They don’t understand the point of it .”

- an instructor reporting what students think
(VanScoy et al., 2022)

“It’s like putting broccoli in a quiche.”

- an instructor (VanScoy et al., 2022)

“Metaphors do not just point out similarities that are objectively true;

they create the similarities.”

-Lakoff and Johnson (2008)

2. Two studies that changed how I viewed the theory/practice gap

Whether and how information behavior theory is integrated into the basic reference course in North American LIS programs.

Syllabus study

Interview study

Survey study

Instructors think students...

48% are unsure about learning theories and models at first but come to appreciate their value

40% appreciate learning theories and models and can connect them to their current or future practice

13% do not see the point of learning theories and models

“We’re setting a knowledge base. We’re not just doing skills. This is graduate work. So it’s about knowledge building, not just kind of basic skills . These are things that they're going to be able to apply much more broadly than just reference.”

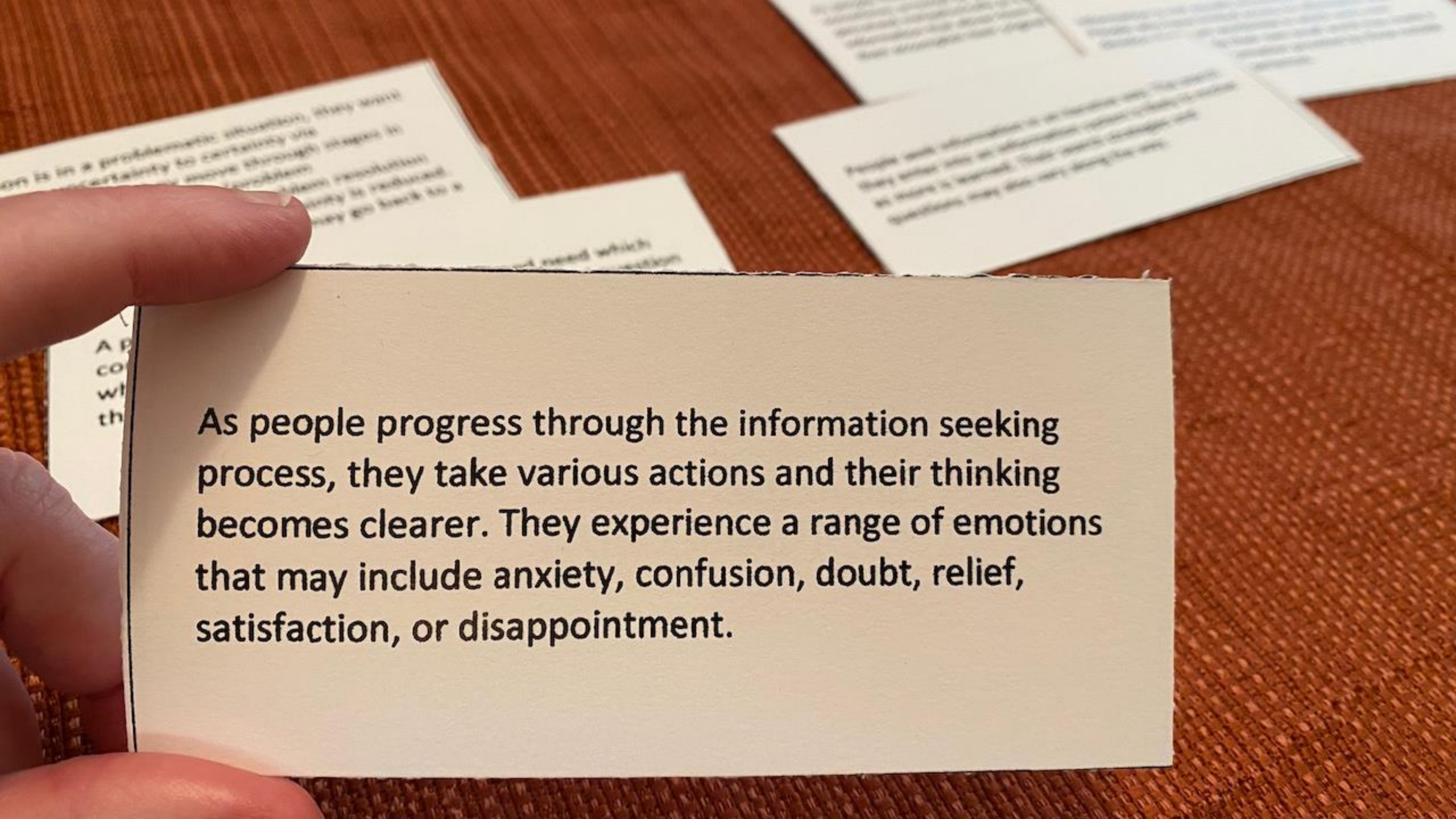
- Reference instructors value theory and believe students can learn to appreciate it.

- A negative narrative about theory remains.

Which information behavior theories are relevant and useful to librarians in their reference practice?

Interview and card sort

Survey


As people progress through the information seeking process, they take various actions and their thinking becomes clearer. They experience a range of emotions that may include anxiety, confusion, doubt, relief, satisfaction, or disappointment.

A person has an actual, but unexpressed need which comes to the conscious mind as an ill-defined question which the person forms into a formal question which is then formulated to enter into an information system.

When a person is in a problematic situation, they want to advance from uncertainty to certainty via information-seeking. As they move through stages in the information seeking process (problem identification, problem definition, problem resolution and, potentially, solution), their uncertainty is reduced. If their uncertainty isn't reduced, they may go back to a previous stage of the process.

As people move through life, their forward progress is sometimes arrested by a lack of knowledge, which is perceived metaphorically

As people progress through the information seeking process, they take various actions and their thinking becomes clearer. They experience a range of emotions that may include anxiety, confusion, doubt, relief, satisfaction, or disappointment.

People seek information in an iterative way. The search they enter into an information system is likely to evolve as more is learned. Their search strategies and questions may also vary along the way.

A person recognizes a gap in their state of knowledge which they search for information to rectify. The person evaluates the information found to determine if it resolves this gap. If it is resolved, the information seeking may end, otherwise the process is repeated. (D)

As people move through life, their forward progress is sometimes arrested by a lack of knowledge, which is perceived metaphorically as a gap. They seek information that allows them to overcome the gap and then accomplish their original aims. (K)

As people progress through the information seeking process, they take various actions and their thinking becomes clearer and more focused. They experience a motions that may

People seek information in an iterative way. The search they enter into an information system is likely to evolve as more is learned. Their search strategies and questions may also vary along the way. (I)

A person has an actual, but nexpressed need which comes to their conscious mind as an ill-efined question which the person orms into a formal question which hey then share with a librarian or enter into an information system. (J)

The process of looking for information includes searching, following references, browsing, filtering and selecting sources based on judgement of quality and relevance. It also involves checking accuracy and checking that all material was covered. (C)

etimes a person asks a arian for help with an nation need that is someone else's inform need. This can cause co or misinterpretation beca librarian is not communi with the person who ha need. (H)

Due to time or other constraints, people make selections that are good enough, rather than optimal. (B)

Due to pressing economic and psychological problems, some people seek immediate gratification by using information that is readily accessible and easy to use in the moment of need. (A)

n is in a y want t from uncertainty to c information-seeking. A through stages in the seeking process their is reduced. If their unc reduced, they may g previous stage of the process. (E)

Sometimes people encounter a problem or a project that disrupts their orderly way of life. Depending on their own psychology and their sociocultural situation, they use various means to seek information and return their everyday life to an orderly state. (F)

People who have limited access to information may develop distrust in the information provided by those they perceive as outsiders. (G)

“Another place we see it come up is when we have, you know, an immigrant family. Sometimes one or more members will not speak English or not have very good English, and then somebody whose English is better is trying to translate the need for that person.”

- example provided by a librarian

“We have a very large Guatemalan population. And when ICE comes through, they disappear. They don't know who to trust. And even getting them in the door for story times, it's a matter of who can you trust. I mean, we are in a constant process of teaching them that we can be trusted.”

- example provided by a librarian

“I would say it's probably more implicit. But I also think that I'm probably influenced by learning about it... My brain isn't like ‘What is their unconscious need?’ But I might be like ‘What do they actually need?’”

“The only one I do is berrypicking. Just because I have shared that term with other staff.”

- Librarians see the relevance of theory in their work.
- Some librarians use theory explicitly in their work.

3. How theory can be a unifying concept for our field

THE THEORY/PRACTICE ~~GAP~~ LINK:

- Make theory approachable
- Show its relevance to practice
- Relate it to students’ own life experience

- Look for ways to use theory as a framework for practice
- Read up on the current theory
- Collaborate with researchers

- Collaborate with librarians to create theory
- Research practice theories and tacit knowledge
- Communicate relevance to practice

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Interested in participating in a research study?

- Employed as a librarian
- Reference service is an important part of your job
- At least 2 years of experience providing reference

Contact Amy at vanscoy@buffalo.edu

Please pass this information along to public, school, or special librarians!