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**Information literacy - empowerment or reproduction in practice? A discourse analysis approach**

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Review

# Information literacy – empowerment or reproduction in practice? A discourse analysis approach

## Abstract

**Introduction.** This paper presents a qualitative investigation into whether online textual postings, produced by undergraduate students as part of an undergraduate module, can demonstrate their information literacy (IL) capabilities as a discursive competence and socially-enacted practice. It also asks whether these online postings embody power relations between students, tutors and librarians.

**Methods.** Foucault's notion of discursive competence and the separate but complementary concept of practice architectures (specifically focussing on 'sayings') devised by Lloyd were used as thematic lenses to categorise online discussion board postings from a formative online peer assessment exercise created for first-year UK undergraduate students.

**Analysis.** Online postings were the *node* of analysis used to identify patterns of language across online conversation. These postings were inductively analysed through manual content analysis. Subject's responses were initially categorised using open coding.

**Results.** Postings appeared to embody student's discursive competence and information practice in IL, especially their level of information discernment and what constituted a quality 'reference' for an assignment. However, they also demonstrated that the notion of 'references' (information artefacts such as a journal article) perform a certain function in reproducing the discursive practices of an academic discipline as an agreed construct between tutor, student and librarian.

**Conclusions.** Students were engaged in the process of becoming good scholars by using appropriate online postings to create valid arguments through assessing other's work, but what they did not do was question received meanings regarding the quality of information they used as evidence. Far from exhibiting the desired outcome of critical thinking (a cornerstone of IL) students who appeared most articulate in discussion tended to emulate the 'strong discourse' put forward by their tutors and librarians.

## Keywords

Information behaviour, information literacy, discourse analysis, e-learning, information practice, practice architectures

## Introduction

The broad question asked by this research is, in what ways is information literacy truly empowering, as many claim, or is it merely a tool for the reproduction of existing structures and power-relations? The discussion furnished here examines both information literacy as a set of capacities and Information Literacy as part of wider academic discourse. These are mutually

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5 interdependent, with the former primarily focussing on learners' skills and the  
6 latter centred on IL as a theoretical construct. There are many claims made for  
7 IL's potential in terms of its benefit to the individual (Secker & Coonan, 2013)  
8 and society generally (Obama, 2009), that it is empowering and essential for  
9 engaged citizenship (Hepworth & Walton, 2009), necessary for study  
10 (Andretta, 2005) and the workplace (Crawford & Irving, 2012). A large body  
11 of scholarship and research exists on the topic (Leaning, 2009), yet it remains a  
12 highly contested area with its origins in economic pragmatism rather than  
13 engaged democratic citizenship (Whitworth, 2014). Furthermore, critics of IL  
14 note that this instrumental nature found in the text of some of the older IL  
15 'grand theories' (for example, Association of College & Research Libraries,  
16 2000) are incompatible with the constructivist and critical approach they  
17 promote (Markless & Streatfield, 2007). Robust theoretical works (Fisher et al.,  
18 2005) and empirical studies (Hepworth, 2004) supported by extensive  
19 information behaviour research (such as, Walton & Hepworth, 2011; Bruce et  
20 al, 2013) on the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social processes which  
21 underpin IL indicate that IL is less of an individualised activity and more social  
22 in nature. Lloyd (2012), in particular, has shown that IL is more akin to a  
23 socio-cultural or socially-enacted practice. The concept of socially-enacted  
24 practice embodies the notion of the negotiation of meaning which is a concept  
25 central to discourse analysis, the methodological lens employed in this study.

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29 Olsson (2010) argues that meaning is continually negotiated and renegotiated  
30 within a particular context which is shared, provisional and contested. In this  
31 sense truth is not an objective reality to be known for all time, nor entirely  
32 subjective, but something which can only be revealed through meanings which  
33 are agreed and shared – if only for a moment (Foucault, 1972). From this it can  
34 be extrapolated that there is no truth, no facts, nor knowledge, not even  
35 information, only data to be analysed, interpreted and their meaning negotiated.  
36 Higher Education, in its undergraduate courses, offers many opportunities for  
37 conversation, discourse, argument, debate and ultimately the negotiation of  
38 meaning.

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41 One way in which students, tutors and librarians engage in debate is by  
42 discussing factors which might be used to determine levels of information  
43 quality. This is especially so for information which could be used in an  
44 assignment. One example of where this debate takes place (and the focus of  
45 interest in this study) is the online peer assessment exercise in Blackboard's  
46 Discussion Board in the first year undergraduate module Research &  
47 Professional Development taught at a UK university.

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49 In week 5 of the module students were given the opportunity to hand in an 800-  
50 word draft of their final assignment to be formatively peer-assessed.

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52 During weeks 6-8, the students participated in online peer assessment within  
53 their tutor groups. The structure of this three-week programme was focussed on  
54 the essay introduction (week 6) moving to the essay main body (week 7) and  
55 the main focus of this study. Finally, students focussed on the essay conclusion  
56 and referencing style (week 8).  
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Students were also directed to the university's online study skills tool the Assignment Survival Kit<sup>1</sup> (ASK), specifically the advice it gives on essay construction. In brief ASK is an online time-management and information literacy tool developed by Staffordshire University. It is designed as a 10 stage, step-by-step guide through the essay writing process primarily for first-year undergraduates. Each step is accompanied by advice on how to address each stage of writing an essay from planning to submission. Each student provided a weekly qualitative online analysis of each section of their peer's formative submission. The task was scaffolded (Mayes & de Freitas, 2007) where a set of comprehensive instructions for students is provided for the first workshop and more autonomy given by the third workshop. Although no grade was given during this exercise, the students were made aware of the grading criteria adopted and how a piece of work was assessed. The advantage of this according to Biggs (2003) is that students need to learn assessment criteria and apply them to their own work enabling them to become 'students as scholars' (Hodge et al, 2008, p. 5-6).

### Literature review

Most new models of IL (notably Secker & Coonan, 2013) ally themselves with constructivist views of teaching and learning which argue that learning is an experiential and empowering process involving the continuous building, amending and eventually the transforming of previous knowledge structures. An example of a constructivist approach is inquiry-based learning which is regarded as student centred and a means of fostering critical thinking where learners construct knowledge for themselves as they attempt to make sense of their experiences (Squires 1994; Fry et al, 1999; Race, 2001, Driscoll, 2005). Bruce, Edwards & Lupton (2007, p53) support this view and argue that their 'relational frame' allows learners to move from using surface notions of evaluating web pages to more critical notions where they examine, 'ideas opinions and perspectives apparent in the source and the quality, style and tone of the writing'. The notion of examining tone as a deeper approach to information discernment (Walton & Hepworth, 2013) is also highlighted by Shenton & Pickard (2014). Walton (2013, pp376-378), in addition, observed that first year undergraduate students exhibit IL five discrete levels of information discernment (described below with typical examples):

- Level 1 (lowest): The person operating at this level tends to express the need to evaluate information in terms of quantity e.g., "*You have only used some references*" (critical) "*You use lots of references*" (uncritical)
- Level 2: Those operating at this level tends to express their view in terms of a range e.g., "*Nice and varied amount of references*"
- Level 3: At this level the person is aware of the need to evaluate information but sees it in terms of types of reference where the quality is implied, "*You have used websites as references, try to use more books and journals*". This implies the notion of authority in information discernment which is also highlighted by Lankes (2007).

- Level 4: Here the use of specific evaluation criteria is mentioned e.g., *References are relevant and support the information presented* (NB: relevance was the most common evaluation criterion mentioned by participants in this study)
- Level 5 (highest): typically expressed as the linking of references to specific content or concepts to support an argument e.g., *“You have looked at both sides by including refernces (sic) that oppose each other such as the reference that stated there was no change and then another reference that stated there was a change”*.

Most of these theories and approaches tend to envisage IL as an individualised activity. Lloyd (2012), however, argues that IL is a complex collective practice that is negotiated between people in a particular information landscape and ‘implies learning to communicate within a specific context’ (Limberg, Sundin & Talja, 2012, p104). The landscape is ‘prefigured’ where the path of any activity is enabled or constrained by the social site proffering an explanatory concept which enables the understanding of why IL manifests itself in different ways in different contexts; for example, rational, objective knowledge is valued in the scientific context and experiential embodied knowledge is valued in the workplace. In this sense landscapes are themselves the product of social and material settings and reflect the modalities of information (the agreed upon sources) that people draw upon in the performance of their practices in working or everyday life, and therefore constitute the inter-subjective agreement that informs their situated reality. Lloyd (2012), draws upon sociocultural theories which emphasise the situatedness of activities, mediation and dynamics of interaction. Here inter-subjectivity produces shared agreement of what information and knowledge is for that setting. In this sense information does not reside in either the individual, artefacts or tools but instead becomes shaped through dialogues in practices; this implies that the information tools we use are themselves not neutral but suffused with perspectives, norm and values which mediate understandings of the world (Limberg et al, 2012). People participating collectively in a social setting bring practices such as IL into being and shape it via negotiation. In effect people engage with a discourse which governs agreements about what is accepted or validated (Foucault, 1972) as information and knowledge and what activities are acceptable in the performance of becoming information literate. In a sense the norms are created locally. In theoretical terms this may be open to accusations of relativism because of the potential lack of an inter-subjective dimension regarded by Whitworth (2011) as a counterweight to subjective meanings. He argues that, “the poisoner seeking information on how to manufacture deadly gas, and doing so in accordance with good technical IL practice” would otherwise have been seen as legitimate” if it not for the inter-subjective values of morality and legality (Whitworth, 2011, p202). Nevertheless, it remains a useful way of framing information practice. Lloyd (2012) and others (for example, Walton & Hepworth, 2011; 2013) regard IL as a collective practice which not only connects people to rational and instrumental aspects of their performance but also to the embodied and affective aspects that shape identity and situate

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5 people within a social context. One example is the centrally organised shared  
6 practice of students having to find, evaluate and use information in an  
7 acceptable format in an essay to gain a good grade which legitimises their role  
8 and continuance at university. Clearly this is a move away from individualised  
9 approaches regarding IL towards conceiving how it is constituted through  
10 negotiated practice. To gain a finer grained understanding of negotiated  
11 practice it is necessary to briefly explore its components through the lens of  
12 'practice architecture' which are constituted from 'sayings', 'doings' and  
13 'relatings' within a group (Lloyd, 2012, p774).  
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16 In practice architectures (Lloyd, 2012) 'sayings' are the words and phrases  
17 members of a practice group use in their day-to-day situated interactions for  
18 example, the content of a set of instructions communicated verbally to  
19 individuals regarding laboratory safety. It is argued here that this definition  
20 could be extended to include online textual postings generated by learners  
21 because: these communications are a demonstration of their comprehension as  
22 defined in Bloom's taxonomy (Walton & Hepworth, 2011); they are carried out  
23 in an environment (Virtual Learning Environment) which provides a cognitive  
24 space (Garrison et al, 2003); they embody more considered utterances about a  
25 topic than face-to-face conversation (McConnell) and finally, they can form the  
26 basis for shared meaning within a community of practice (Collis & Moon,  
27 2005). Additionally, 'doings' might, for example, refer to using a specific piece  
28 of equipment or software. Lastly, 'relatings' refers to the ways in which  
29 colleagues interact with each other in a specific context. Practice architectures  
30 structure and organise the information landscapes through which people access  
31 information via: semantic space (these could be rules and regulations), the  
32 social-political space which is akin to Foucault's notion of the  
33 power/knowledge dialectic and the corporeal modality of economics for  
34 example where a lecturer is paid to construct, run and interact in lectures and  
35 seminars. In summary people learn how to take on a professional or  
36 occupational identity and learn to identify with others in their field. Through  
37 these occupational practices people learn to become members of the  
38 community. In this sense IL can be envisaged as inter-connected webs (similar  
39 to Foucault's notion of nodes) of activity (Lloyd, 2012) for instance, when  
40 students share information about a new online tool, or seek information about it  
41 at a training event or discuss an issue related to it in a seminar.  
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45 Therefore, IL does not evolve in isolation to its setting – it emerges in  
46 practitioners and the way they operate as a reflection of the knowledge domain  
47 bounds a particular setting such as , in the HE domain students are guided into  
48 the recognised academic practice of using peer reviewed research and text  
49 books rather than web pages. IL is enacted by a community of actors who are  
50 co-located and co-participating in the performances of the site according to  
51 social, material economic and historical conditions that shape the texture of the  
52 site.  
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55 What Lloyd omits is the notion of power and how it operates through discourse  
56 to produce either control or resistance (critical thinking) through localised  
57 relationships e.g., between academic librarian and student or between academic  
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5 and student. For this reason it is necessary to consider Foucault's notion of  
6 discourse analysis as an additional and complementary lens through which to  
7 analyse information practice.  
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### 9 **Discourse analysis and its relevance to IL**

10 It is suggested that discourse analysis appears to be a useful methodology for  
11 this, yet it does not feature heavily in relation to IL research and practice with  
12 the notable exception of some recent work (see Limberg et al, 2012). However,  
13 it has been used to a greater extent within information behaviour research  
14 (Tuominen et al., 2005; Given, 2005; Case, 2012), as well as library and  
15 information contexts (Olsson, 2010) and in related areas especially the  
16 prevention of plagiarism (Gourley & Deane, 2012). Bates (2005) has noted that  
17 discourse analysis is one of the thirteen meta-theories which have influenced  
18 contemporary information behaviour research.  
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21 The central argument of discourse analysis is that language is central to social  
22 life and so its study provides a key to social functioning. In this approach it is  
23 not only what is said or written which is important, but also the styles and  
24 strategies employed by the language user (Robson, 2002).  
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26 In a sense, Higher Education is a network of discourses in many subjects such  
27 as humanities and social sciences through which meaning is shared and  
28 negotiated. Students, in this context, are not only receivers of subject  
29 knowledge but active negotiators, shapers, re-shapers and producers of new  
30 knowledge (Andretta, 2007). In this sector IL (a way of enabling students to  
31 find, make judgements about and use information and so navigate these  
32 discourses) can also be viewed as a negotiated, or even contested, discourse  
33 between tutors, students and librarians. It can be argued that this discourse is  
34 part of a wider socio-cultural practice that students learn as they progress  
35 through their educational journey in Higher Education.  
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37 However, few exponents of IL couch it in terms of critical information literacy  
38 which seeks to enable learners to question the very roots of academic discourse  
39 (Holschuh Simmons, 2005). Many IL approaches, for example, tend to avoid  
40 concerns about the production, communication and exchange of knowledge  
41 particularly, 'the social construction and cultural authority of knowledge, the  
42 political economies of knowledge and control, and the development of local  
43 communities and cultures capacities to critique and construct knowledge'  
44 (Holschuh Simmons, 2005, p300). Rather knowledge is often regarded by  
45 information professionals as something completely external and impervious to  
46 mediation or interpretation. Yet it is through asking more searching questions  
47 about information that enables students to navigate their subject and begin to  
48 understand the conventions of the academic discourse in which they are  
49 immersed including the contesting of received wisdom. It can be argued that  
50 academic librarians are uniquely placed to introduce this question by mediating  
51 between the non-academic and the specialized discourse of the discipline.  
52 Discourse analysis is heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault  
53 (Bryman, 2012) and has been extended and used by many researchers (for  
54 example, Fairclough, 2003). Discourse is regarded by Foucault as more than  
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5 simply talking or writing, it is seen as a complex network of relationships  
6 between individuals, texts, ideas and institutions (van Leeuwen, 2005).  
7 Foucault (1972, p30) describes discourse as constituted by groups of  
8 statements and that,  
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10 ‘We must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence;  
11 determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its  
12 correlation with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what  
13 other forms of statement it excludes.’  
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15 It is from this complex network of statements that sharing of meaning arises at  
16 specific points in space and time (a *node*) within a socio-historical context  
17 (Olsson, 2010). For Foucault, the socio-historical context is defined as the  
18 society, shaped by its history, in which the participants are living (Paltridge,  
19 2006). Within this framework knowledge is regarded as inherently inter-  
20 subjective, produced through shared meaning operating through a discourse  
21 inter-twined with a person’s sense-making processes (Bryman, 2012). For  
22 Foucault, the central issue is how discourse analysis can be used to uncover the  
23 way in which social reality is produced (Jansen, 2008). Within Higher  
24 Education, for example, both academics and librarians have come to share the  
25 agreed meaning that plagiarism undermines the academic process (Gourley &  
26 Deane, 2012). It is argued, however, that the notion of plagiarism is, in itself, a  
27 discourse and arguably a contested one which is produced by the socially-  
28 constructed Western tradition of academic writing and therefore, not an  
29 absolute (Gourley & Deane, 2012).  
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31 The discourse regarding the relative merit of the *academic text book* and  
32 *Wikipedia entry*, for example, also demonstrates the power/knowledge duality  
33 that exists within discourse. These power/knowledge relations are dynamic and  
34 constantly re-inventing and re-affirming themselves through the application of  
35 discursive rules to examine and re-examine texts. The shifting standing of  
36 Wikipedia demonstrates this (Rector, 2008). It has been shown that Wikipedia,  
37 in certain circumstances, is more accurate than established and more  
38 *authoritative* texts and is a useful starting point for research (West &  
39 Williamson, 2009). In this way, the battle for *truth* is on-going and agreements  
40 on whom the *authoritative speakers*’ are within a specific discourse can change  
41 (Olsson, 2010). Individual (information) behaviour cannot be seen in isolation.  
42 It is this discursive element which shapes the person-in-context (Wilson, 1999).  
43 In this sense, the construction of meaning is not individual or egalitarian but  
44 linked to the existing power/knowledge discursive networks (Olsson, 2010) for  
45 example, the Higher Education sector and its rules regarding academic form  
46 and content.  
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50 By using the theoretical lens of discourse analysis primarily put forward by  
51 Olsson (2010), Fairclough (2003), van Leeuwen (2005) and Paltridge (2006),  
52 plus the complementary notion of information practice and practice  
53 architectures described by Lloyd (2012), this study seeks to discover to what  
54 extent online textual postings, produced by students as they peer assess each-  
55 others draft assignments, reveals their IL capabilities and to what extent it  
56 constitutes the ‘sayings’ of socially-enacted practice - albeit through the proxy  
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5 artefacts of online postings, rather than face-to-face conversation. In this  
6 context, students' IL capabilities might be revealed via their information  
7 practice of presenting an essay which contains a critical review of the scholarly  
8 research literature that furnishes a balanced argument and is properly  
9 evidenced and referenced.  
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## 11 12 13 **Methodology**

14 In essence this research is qualitative investigation into whether online  
15 conversation, produced via postings to a discussion board by undergraduate  
16 students, can demonstrate their information literacy (IL) capabilities as a  
17 socially-enacted practice. It also asks whether this online activity embodies  
18 power relations between students, tutors and librarians. To address these  
19 overall aims the following four research questions are presented:  
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21 Research Question (RQ) 1: To what extent does online text-based conversation  
22 reveal students' information practice?

23 Research Question (RQ) 2: In what ways could this online text-based  
24 conversation be used as a basis for summative assessment of their work?

25 Research Question (RQ) 3: in what ways does online peer assessment embody  
26 complex and asymmetrical power relations between tutors, students and  
27 librarians?  
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29 Research Question (RQ) 4: how is academic discourse rehearsed, negotiated,  
30 reproduced and its meaning shared through online text-based conversation?  
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## 33 **Discourse analysis**

34 The node for analysis in this study is the online peer assessment activity  
35 constituted by online postings made by students and tutors during the module.  
36 The socio-historical context of this study is a UK Higher Education institution  
37 from 2007-2012. The participants who took part in this are first year  
38 undergraduates enrolled onto the course (approximately 120 per year divided  
39 into seminar groups of between 15 and 20 students each), seminar tutors (a  
40 teaching team of 6-8 staff depending on student numbers) and the subject  
41 librarian (working with support from up to 5 other subject librarians depending  
42 on student numbers and other commitments). A purposive sample of tutor  
43 groups led by 3 tutors who were consistently present on the module from  
44 2008/9 – 2011/12 was identified. This ensured continuity across the 4 years of  
45 the study. The module leader and subject librarian remained constant  
46 throughout the period.  
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49 The specific framework adopted for this study is taken from Paltridge (2006,  
50 p1), which seeks to identify 'patterns of language across texts as well as the  
51 social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur.' In this sense texts are  
52 socially constructed, in that they, and the knowledge they embody, are  
53 developed in specific social contexts (van Leeuwen, 2005). This social  
54 constructionist approach focusses on the socially-orientated view which  
55 considers what the text is doing in the social and cultural setting in which it  
56 occurs. It examines the patterns of language across texts and the ways in which  
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5 language presents different views of the world. It examines how the use of  
6 language is influenced by relationships between participants and the effect it  
7 has on social identities and relations. Finally, it seeks to reveal how views of  
8 the world, identities and ways of being are constructed through the use of  
9 discourse (Fairclough, 2003). Hence, it is an examination of language beyond  
10 the level of the sentence to linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. In  
11 particular, the focus will be on the notion of *discursive competence* (Foucault,  
12 1972) within a practice architecture as a means of revealing to what extent  
13 individuals gain the ability to produce contextually appropriate texts within the  
14 online peer assessment construct. This was inductively analysed through a  
15 manual form of content analysis each subject's response was qualitatively  
16 coded and categorised. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984, p.9), the  
17 data was themed into categories to identify 'patterns and processes,  
18 commonalities and differences' across the student cohort.  
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## 21 Results

22 During weeks 7 and 8 of the online peer assessment, students spent a great deal  
23 of time commenting in some detail on the quality of their fellow students work  
24 (far more so than week 6). This analysis focuses on week 7 only as more online  
25 postings were generated for this week in particular. In this online social  
26 situation students could be both authors and commentators. It emerged that in  
27 postings sent to the Discussion Board students used the term 'references' on  
28 multiple occasions (in 231 postings). This tended to denote artefacts of  
29 information such as books, journal articles, websites or newspaper articles used  
30 by student author's in their draft assignments. The discourse tended to embody  
31 the traditional view of these artefacts as neutral, uncontested and static rather  
32 than as part of a 'dialogic, political and contested process' (Holschuh  
33 Simmons, 2005, p300).  
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36 All postings that contained the term 'reference' and its variants were identified  
37 as a focus for this analysis. These are particularly useful because they provide a  
38 strong indication of the ways in which this discourse community write,  
39 research and in so doing make assumptions about their disciplinary discourse  
40 (Holschuh Simmons, 2005). Here are typical pieces of online conversation  
41 posted by students (commentators) commenting on fellow student's draft  
42 essays (authors – not shown here) in Blackboard (one is taken from each  
43 tutor's week 7 session in 2011):  
44

45 SS11 (first character indicates this is student posting, second character denotes  
46 the tutor group to which the student belonged and the calendar year): 'It is  
47 effective how you focus on one particular idea and you use good examples to  
48 back your arguments up. The way in which you structured your paragraphs  
49 allowed a clear transition from each one and your grammar made it clear and  
50 easy to read. One area of improvement could be to use 'do not' and could not'  
51 as opposed to 'don't' and 'couldn't'. Overall referncing (sic) was done well,  
52 however make sure every key point made is backed up with a reference. Also  
53 try to use academic references instead of autobiographies [ie, texts by famous  
54 sports people].'  
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5 SB11: 'Well set out essay, you have included a number of points to why sport  
6 affects society instead of focusing on one area and used references well, the  
7 first paragraph has over 5 references that all support your point of how sport  
8 has an economical affect (sic) on society which proves there is a lot of  
9 evidence for your argument. If you referred back to the question more in the  
10 main body it could improve the essay.'

11 SF11: 'A very well laid out main body. Goes in to a lot of detail and focuses on  
12 one major area where sport has an effect on society. A very good use of  
13 references as well to help back up the points you are making about certain  
14 health issues. Maybe to improve this even further you could go in to detail  
15 about what kind of exercise would help to reduce the chances of getting the  
16 certain diseases you have described.'

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19 The extracts above appear to embody the student commentator's discursive  
20 competence in IL and also embody a proxy indicator of their information  
21 practice, especially in terms of their level of information discernment  
22 (addressing RQ1). Particularly, for example, what constitutes a quality  
23 reference ('academic' as opposed to 'autobiographies'), that there should be a  
24 number of references ('5 reference' - sic) and that these should be used in a  
25 specific way to 'make sure every key point is backed up by a reference'. This  
26 places the online postings at Level 5 within Walton's (2013) information  
27 discernment hierarchy. This does appear to constitute potential output for  
28 assessment purposes (partially addressing RQ2). These notions of quality  
29 usefully contribute to information practices that could be transferred beyond  
30 this context and into the world of work. However, what they also exemplify is  
31 the notion of information as monolithic and static rather than being constantly  
32 reproduced by the discourse community.  
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35 However, there is a deeper analysis to be gained beyond the standard  
36 considerations of IL. The discourse presented above (an embodiment of the  
37 practice architecture 'sayings' as described by Lloyd, 2012) appears to indicate  
38 a shared understanding of certain elements within the discourse such as  
39 'references', 'argument' (or points), 'paragraphs' (or 'well laid out') and 'main  
40 body' (further addressing RQ1). Commentator SS11 shows a sense of how to  
41 write a Western style, scholarly essay, stating that it needs structured  
42 paragraphs, it should not contain informal language, an example of a  
43 contraction such as 'don't' is used to demonstrate this. SB11 also shows this  
44 understanding of structure in, 'well set out essay' and 'paragraph': SF11 is  
45 clearly in agreement but uses different terms 'well laid out main body' in her  
46 discourse. It is highly likely that the term 'main body' denoting the main part  
47 of the assignment is prompted by the online peer assessment session title and  
48 the supporting resource within the Assignment Survival Kit (ASK).  
49 Interestingly, SF11 shares the idea of structure but in a less detailed way than  
50 SB11 and SF11. In fact, SF11 concentrates on the subject and how the  
51 arguments should be presented and supported, 'very good use of references as  
52 well to help back up the points you are making about certain health issues'.  
53 Where all three unequivocally agree is on the subject of the references  
54 themselves and what function they should perform in the author's assignment.  
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5 Firstly, that they should be present in the text of an essay and secondly that  
6 they should be used well to support or 'back up' each 'key point' or 'argument'  
7 put forward. Hence, references perform a certain function within the discourse,  
8 in that they are there, not just to support an argument, but as an agreed  
9 construct or set of 'sayings' between tutor, student and librarian (and therefore  
10 within Western scholarship generally). Also, what they all do is provide a piece  
11 of advice at the end or 'constructive' comment to confirm and reproduce the  
12 social reality of academic writing itself. In a sense this demonstrates that  
13 students have conformed to established patterns of the academic discourse but  
14 are not participants in the disciplinary conversation where knowledge and  
15 convention can be contested. An issue highlighted by Holschuh Simmons  
16 (2005) that needs to be addressed if students are to become acculturated into a  
17 disciplinary discourse.  
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20 From these few comments it could be said that a power relation has begun to  
21 emerge between the author of the text being commented on and the  
22 commentator. The commentators have identified that the author does not seem  
23 to have followed certain prescribed rules, that of Western academic writing,  
24 whereas the commentators themselves demonstrate a clear idea of what they  
25 should be. However, the commentators are not exercising their power in a  
26 coercive way but in an 'inductive' way. This means that that the commentator  
27 becomes an 'authoritative speaker' where the text he has posted, for instance,  
28 'try and use academic references' is accepted as a 'truth statement' by his/her  
29 community (the student participants). This is not to say that what the  
30 commentator is saying is the truth, it is only deemed to be true by the  
31 discursive network, i.e., students at university who agree that it is necessary to  
32 write an essay that will get a good grade and so addresses RQ4.  
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35 Where the power relation becomes asymmetrical is regarding two comments  
36 made by SS11,

37 'make sure every key point is backed up by a reference'

38 'use academic references instead of autobiographies.'

39  
40 There are a number of socially constructed 'truths' here. Firstly the socio-  
41 historical context of being a student at university and within a community of  
42 scholars, where any argument or 'key point' must have its own supporting  
43 piece of evidence. Possibly hidden within this is the notion of plagiarism  
44 which is itself is a source of great anxiety between both academic staff and  
45 their students (Gourley & Deane, 2012). Secondly, the reference must be  
46 'academic' and thirdly they must not be 'autobiographies'. This signposts the  
47 notion that within this discourse there is an agreement that 'academic texts'  
48 (which imply text books or peer reviewed journal articles but we cannot be  
49 certain of this) are superior in some agreed fashion (the notion of validation) to  
50 'autobiographies' (texts written by famous sports people) which are repudiated  
51 by SS11. What the commentator appears to be rehearsing is the concerns,  
52 beliefs and the social context of their community and that these statements  
53 whilst not true in an absolute sense are nevertheless a set of 'truths' for this  
54 community. It is, therefore, argued that the information behaviour that this  
55 discourse embodies, can be regarded as social and negotiated rather than  
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5 individualised behaviour. Why? The 'truths' that the commentator has learned  
6 can be seen to emerge from the context in which she finds herself and not by  
7 individual cognition alone. This has the function of reproducing the discourse  
8 of the subject context or the academic tutor – especially the notion of what  
9 constitutes valid scholarly work. Again this constitutes evidence of conformity  
10 to, but not participation in, the academic discourse. This becomes more evident  
11 when we compare tutor discourse to students' and note the similarities as  
12 shown here:

13  
14 SF11T (last character denotes posting by tutor): 'In the first paragraph, your  
15 grammar and writing are good. The main thing to improve on is your  
16 referencing. You have to add a reference every time you make a statement that  
17 is a little bit opinionated, or is a sweeping statement or contains data. It is  
18 better to paraphrase what someone else has written and reference, rather than to  
19 use a quote. Your grammar deteriorated a little bit towards the end, although  
20 your paragraph structure was much better in the last two paragraphs, which  
21 each of these paragraphs making a separate point.'

22  
23 The discourse shares similarities in technical words such as 'paragraph',  
24 'grammar', 'point', the a 'reference' should be used in support of a statement  
25 and that 'constructive' advice is given at the end. Where they differ is in the  
26 notion of 'paraphrasing' which is not found in the student discourse either in  
27 the examples here or in the online postings as a whole. It is perhaps implied  
28 rather than embodied in the students' online postings and this may have some  
29 repercussions for the discourse of plagiarism.

30  
31 It is argued here that in Foucault's terms the examples can be regarded as a  
32 'strong discourse' because it reflects the academic discourses put forward by  
33 the tutors and so is more likely to be recognised as such and conformed to.

34  
35 This discourse hints that the postings to be listened to, the 'strong discourse',  
36 would be those that gave constructive criticism, affirming that postings such as  
37 SS11, SB11 and SF11 may have this status (by imitating their tutor's  
38 approach). Indeed, this indicates that the 'students as commentators' discourse  
39 can very clearly demonstrate their knowledge of a subject, in this case their  
40 ability to be information literate by showing that they can recognise good  
41 quality information, know how to use it in a given context to support their  
42 arguments and then reference it correctly in a well formed academic essay. It  
43 also shows that student commentators have been able to recognise good criteria  
44 for assessing work by selecting appropriate evidence and making a judgement  
45 regarding the extent to which criteria have been met (Biggs, 2003). Finally,  
46 they have also learnt how to give 'constructive' feedback which was 'straight  
47 to the point; and emulates tutor discourse which is contextually appropriate and  
48 embodies their discursive competence (Fairclough, 2003). This places those  
49 students that emulate the 'strong discourse' in a powerful position in the  
50 classroom. This leads to the scholarly community affirming their social identity  
51 (van Leeuwen, 2005) as person-in-context (Wilson, 1999) or 'student as  
52 scholar' (Hodge et al, 2008) which, ultimately, leads to students' gaining a  
53 good mark in their assignment. In turn this gives a firm indication that online  
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5 text-based conversation is a proxy for revealing students' IL as a socially  
6 enacted practice – and so addressing RQ3.  
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## 9 **Conclusion**

10 From the results discussed it is asserted that the methodology furnished here  
11 provides a prism through which information literacy outputs, in this case online  
12 postings, can be critically analysed and set within the broader context of the  
13 environment in which they occur. Discourse analysis provides a means for  
14 examining information literacy practice by revealing the constraints imposed  
15 by specific discursive contexts and in so doing furnishes a more nuanced  
16 approach to information literacy research. It also provides the potential for re-  
17 envisaging IL (both at the learner and theoretical level) as a means for  
18 critiquing academic discourse enabling students to become participants in its  
19 discursive practice rather than merely conforming to it. More specifically the  
20 text-based discussion found within online peer assessment appears to be a  
21 useful way for evidencing IL capabilities as part of a socially enacted practice  
22 and so addresses RQ 1. The online contributions made by students as  
23 commentators are contextually appropriate by embodying attributes of IL  
24 capability (in particular high levels of information discernment as defined by  
25 Walton , 2013), demonstrating discursive competence which has the potential  
26 to be used in summative assessment, which partially addresses RQ 2. However,  
27 though these students are engaged in this laudable (or is it 'blinkered') process  
28 towards becoming good scholars by using appropriate texts to create valid  
29 evidenced arguments through assessing other's work, what they are not doing  
30 is questioning received meanings regarding the quality of information they are  
31 using as evidence as recommended by Holschuh Simmons (2005). In other  
32 words, they are operating within a well-structured discourse which reproduce  
33 structures that already exist and their questioning is bounded and finite –  
34 addressing RQ3. In Foucault's words, 'a statement is linked to the situations  
35 that provoke it' (1972, p33). Hence, the evidence indicates that within the  
36 particular instance of Higher Education analyses here, IL appears to reproduce  
37 existing social power relations rather than empowering the individual because,  
38 by its very nature and *raison d'etre*, it fits neatly into the existing Western  
39 academic discourse – addressing RQ4. IL also appears to legitimise and  
40 reproduce the 'strong' discourse that peer reviewed journals and their  
41 publishers are the primary source of legitimate knowledge. Other sources of  
42 potentially legitimate knowledge are relegated to second class sources because  
43 of the highly instrumental rather than critical nature of engagement that IL  
44 facilitates, i.e., IL contributes towards the process of getting good grades which  
45 will eventually lead to decent, well paid job but not towards a critique of the  
46 production of information. In other words, the outcome of IL is already decided  
47 for the student and s/he merely has to follow the rules of the game, by  
48 emulating their tutors, and is subservient to more powerful discourses. Critical  
49 thinking is only engaged in a very narrow range.  
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55 Given these assertions, the notion that IL enables students to engage in the  
56 academic debate through the community of practice is somewhat disingenuous  
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5 because the discourse, in its instrumentality is, unsurprisingly, wedded to other  
6 stronger existing discourses. Where IL can be most empowering, perhaps, is  
7 beyond the academic sphere where it can stand in juxtaposition to existing  
8 discourses regarding, citizenship, information (and freedom of information)  
9 and knowledge. It is recommended that module leaders and academic librarians  
10 re-assess the teaching of IL and move away from existing well established  
11 instrumental views to the newer more critical and radical discourses which  
12 offer clearer paths towards enabling empowered citizenship.  
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<sup>i</sup> The Assignment Survival Kit study skills and time management tool can be found at  
<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/ask>

# Information literacy – empowerment or reproduction in practice? A discourse analysis approach

[Article title]

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**Structured Abstract:**

**Introduction.** This paper presents a qualitative investigation into whether online textual postings, produced by undergraduate students as part of an undergraduate module, can demonstrate their information literacy (IL) capabilities as a discursive competence and socially-enacted practice. It also asks whether these online postings embody power relations between students, tutors and librarians.

**Methods.** Foucault's notion of discursive competence and the separate but complementary concept of practice architectures (specifically focussing on 'sayings') devised by Lloyd were used as thematic lenses to categorise online discussion board



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postings from a formative online peer assessment exercise created for first-year UK undergraduate students.

**Analysis.** Online postings were the *node* of analysis used to identify patterns of language across online conversation. These postings were inductively analysed through manual content analysis. Subject's responses were initially categorised using open coding.

**Results.** Postings appeared to embody student's discursive competence and information practice in IL, especially their level of information discernment and what constituted a quality 'reference' for an assignment. However, they also demonstrated that the notion of 'references' (information artefacts such as a journal article) perform a certain function in reproducing the discursive practices of an academic discipline as an agreed construct between tutor, student and librarian.

**Conclusions.** Students were engaged in the process of becoming good scholars by using appropriate online postings to create valid arguments through assessing other's work, but what they did not do was question received meanings regarding the quality of information they used as evidence. Far from exhibiting the desired outcome of critical thinking (a cornerstone of IL) students who appeared most articulate in discussion tended to emulate the 'strong discourse' put forward by their tutors and librarians.

**Keywords:**

Information behaviour, IL, discourse analysis, e-learning, information practice, practice architectures

**Article Classification:**

Research

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**Running Heads:**

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