# How Philosophical Theory Informs Information Literacy Practice

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**Abstract:**

*To advance information literacy (IL) practice in higher education – academic librarians can investigate the philosophical foundations and commitments we all necessarily make about what the world is and what is most meaningful. This paper will describe and contrast two such commitments, Critical Theory and phenomenography, that ground popular IL theories and practices, and how such foundational commitments can influence IL practice in higher education. Particular attention will be given to informed learning and critical IL. Accordingly, this paper argues for a simple syllogism: 1. Philosophical commitments about what the world is informs (intentionally or not) IL theory. 2. IL theory informs IL practice. 3. Therefore, philosophical commitments about the world inform IL practice. Investigating IL practice in this way has a number of benefits. Understanding the philosophical foundations of IL theory allows practitioners to apply IL more broadly and holistically across an institution. The better one can articulate what IL is and why they take a certain approach, the more convincing they can be in aligning IL with campus-wide initiatives. Additionally, a philosophical lens allows academic librarians a new way to recognize the limitations of IL practice, and could also provide new avenues for different theoretical approaches of IL to engage in better dialogue. One way to enrich IL practice is to examine the philosophical foundations of IL theory.*

**Keywords:** information literacy, philosophy, phenomenology, critical theory

**Introduction**

Philosophy does not have to be abstract or pedantic. Aristotle conceived of philosophy as a practical way to bring about *eudaimonia,* or human flourishing (Ross & Brown, 2009). The study of ethics for instance, while grounded in theory, ultimately demands humans *act* in specific ways. It is in this spirit that this paper treats the study of philosophy – as a lens through which to reflect on and better human action. In this paper, our specific task is to apply philosophical theory to information literacy (IL) practice.[1]

Philosophical theory supports and informs IL theory. This should be an uncontroversial claim. Popular IL theories like Informed Learning and Critical IL overtly use philosophical schools of thought, namely, phenomenology (which has a clear relationship with phenomenography) and Critical Theory.[2] IL theory in turns supports IL practice. Theory is the reason why informed learning proponents focus on students' varied experiences with information and on using information to learn disciplinary content. For theoretical reasons critical IL focuses on different aspects of information. The crux of this paper is the following syllogism:

1. Philosophical commitments about what the world is informs (intentionally or not) IL theory.
2. IL theory informs IL practice.
3. Therefore, philosophical commitments about the world inform IL practice.

Put differently, one way to enrich IL practice is to examine the philosophical foundations of IL theory. We will first discuss premise one from informed learning and critical IL perspectives, and then conclude with the benefits of philosophy informing IL practice.

**Informed Learning, Phenomenography, and Phenomenology**

Informed learning claims that using information can be considered part of the "process" of learning subject content (Lupton, 2008). The theory views IL as relational. Informed Learning is based on variation theory, a theory of learning, and phenomenography, a research methodology. While learning theory can play a useful role in examining IL theory (Flierl, 2018), let us focus on phenomenography – which aims to make sense of the variety of experiences of a phenomenon. The experiences phenomenography investigates "are generalized and categorized in the form of a number of 'Categories of Description' and arranged in a logically inclusive structure giving a picture of the collective experience of the phenomenon within the group under analysis" (Forster, 2016, p. 353). The experiences of a group are collected, usually in the form of interviews using open-ended questions (Marton, 1986, p. 42), and phenomenographic analysis ideally yields a structured output making sense of the range of experiences, as well as the relationships between those experiences.

Phenomenography as applied by academic librarians has been used for practical purposes, as a means to understand the variety of ways students experience using information in a classroom context to learn disciplinary content. For example, Maybee examined students' experiences of an assignment for a language and gender writing course and concluded that

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[1] IL practice here is defined broadly as any action that contributes to a stated IL goal.
[2] The extent to which phenomenography is based in phenomenology is unclear from extant literature. What is clear is that phenomenology has a richer intellectual tradition, having influenced not only philosophy but numerous other fields for over a century.

the ways the students are asked to engage with information sources influences what they are able to learn about the topic they are investigating (Maybee, et al., 2017, p. 2385).

Both phenomenography and phenomenology are concerned with human experience and take the metaphysical position that reality does not lie in subject versus object, person versus the world, but in the *relationship* between subject and object. Phenomenology rejects the dualism of subject and object. Just as air continually enters and exists the human body, the phenomenological perspective claims that we are in the world as much as the world is in us. We are intertwined with the world, not separated from it. Both theories also take an epistemological stance – we come to know things by examining relationships, not by determining how well something describes the world.

It should be unsurprising then that informed learning, based in phenomenography, views IL as contextual, situated, and *relational.* Individuals will have varying experiences of information in the disciplinary classroom. If we can understand the variety of those experiences, and categorize them in some kind of logical way, academic librarians can help students to use information while also learning to use information to understand disciplinary content. IL instruction should not be separated or opposed to disciplinary instruction in the same way that subject should not be separated (in terms of metaphysics) from object. Ideally – IL instruction is interwoven with disciplinary instruction while leveraging students' varied experiences of information.

**Critical Information Literacy, Critical Theory, and critical theories**

Critical IL instruction often cites Freire – and his work is useful to understand critical pedagogy (1970). It can also be useful to go one step further and consider Critical Theory more foundationally which draws from philosophers like Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Jürgen Habermas. It is important to note here that Critical Theory (as a proper noun) refers to a specific philosophical movement.[3] Critical Theory was founded as a Marxist or neo-Marxist philosophical approach – seeking to supplement or correct orthodox Marxist thought. While the Marxist underpinnings of critical theories are not as emphasized as they were in the past – the core concept of human emancipation from oppression, whether Marxist or not, remains (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Without the capitalization, a critical theory denotes any theory, whether philosophical or otherwise in nature, that shares this goal.

Horkheimer provides three criteria for a critical theory, "it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation" (Bohman, 2016). Critical Theory both as a historical school of thought and more broadly viewed as a loose set of theories concerned with the same ideas, aims to create practical ways to emancipate humans from various forms of oppression, for example sexism and racism. Critical theory, for our purposes, is concerned with ethics. It is normative and prescribes certain actions, beliefs, and viewpoints as beneficial to individuals, but more importantly, society.

One way a critical theory is discussed in academic librarianship is in the student-instructor dynamic. To what extent should an instructor exercise authority and power over students? Moreover, what kinds of IL instruction could help students recognize "how information

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[3] Additionally, the phrase should not be conflated with the more generic concept of critical thinking.

systems reflect and often privilege certain conversations and voices" or explore information in "social, political, historical, and structural contexts" (Baer, 2016)? And to what degree *ought* an academic librarian teaching a one-shot, or a few embedded instructional sessions, to integrate a critical perspective while also helping students to navigate their complex information environment? Attempting to answer these questions – whether from a critical theory perspective or not, is to engage in philosophy, in ethics. This is a normative exercise – these questions are not hypothetical or abstract questions for critical theory – they have ethical weight. A critical theory approach to IL and to IL pedagogy pushes academic librarians to question their role as educators in academia (Jacobs, 2013) and examine power structures and dynamics that create an unjust and inequitable society. IL practice can be a force for good – fighting against systemic oppression and social justice.

**Benefits to examining IL practice from a philosophical lens**

In using an informed learning or critical theory approach to IL is to make philosophical commitments to what the world is, how we know things, and what people ought to do. These are metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical concerns. Recognizing and evaluating the philosophical foundations of IL theory and practice may provide some benefits to IL practice.

One is the ability to apply IL more broadly and holistically across higher education institutions. If IL is more than a set of discrete skills but grounded in rich intellectual traditions and thought – this can broaden IL's appeal to educators and provides justification for involving IL in more conspicuous ways in campus initiatives. For example, by using phenomenographic research methods to justify a strong relationship between information use and student learning – informed learning justifies academic librarian involvement in the Instruction Matters: Purdue Academic Course Transformation (IMPACT) program at Purdue University (Maybee, 2018). In this program, librarians are part of teams with educational developers and teachers and strive to integrate IL into courses as part of creating student-centered learning environments. Viewing IL in the light of student learning and students' classroom experiences makes it a valuable perspective in campus-wide teaching and learning conversations that aim to be theory-driven and evidence-based.

A philosophical lens also provides a new ability to recognize the limitations of IL practice and in doing so improve it. Existing criticisms of critical theories, for instance, could also be applied to critical IL practice. Baer does an excellent job of this, citing Philosophy, Media Studies, and English professors critiquing various aspects of critical thought – including a perceived bias against questioning the value of idealistic goals like societal emancipation or the use of certain concepts like "empowerment" (Baer, 2016). Using such a term, for instance, could serve to reinforce a power dynamic that critical thought desires to undermine in practice. One might want to 'empower' students to think about information in the 'right' way. It is just this kind of tendency to enforce a single narrative, a single concept of Truth (with a capital 'T') that critical theories argue against. Academic librarians do not need to become engaged in disparate fields in order to inform their own practice. But drawing from philosophical discussions and engaging in critique of one's own philosophical foundations may allow academic librarians to become more sophisticated IL educators in practice. An academic librarian could allow students to investigate feminist, critical race theory, and other perspectives on information in the classroom without exercising excessive authority.

Lastly, while informed learning or critical theory practitioners ostensibly tend to approach IL and IL pedagogy differently, evaluating the philosophy behind these IL theories could provide justification for putting these theories and their accompanying practices, into better dialogue with one another. Both Critical Theory and phenomenology were founded in the interwar period on Continental Europe, both are closer to a family resemblance of theories than a single unified theory, and both are anti-positivist – prioritizing human context and lived experiences epistemologically. One could argue that the two theories share so much historically and theoretically that academic librarianship could be biased towards 20th century European thought. Gaining greater insight into the philosophy grounding IL theory could address barriers to IL practice arising from using similar philosophical foundations.

**Conclusion**

Just as a knowledge of Latin can provide a richer understanding of English or other languages, so can a knowledge of philosophy provide insight into IL practice. While such an understanding is not necessary for IL practice – there are clear benefits to the value of IL institutionally, and as a means for better self-critique. Furthermore, both informed learning and critical IL practitioners could better their practice by engaging in dialogue with the other theory. Critical IL educators could use phenomenographic research methods to explore the lived experiences of students' facing systemic oppression for example. Informed learning approaches could be applied towards topics like systemic oppression and social justice. Studying the philosophical foundations of IL theory can be useful for furthering IL practice.

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