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Information Literacy Handbook: Charting the Discipline

Review of Kaufmann, K.F., & Maybee, C. (2026). *The information literacy handbook: Charting the discipline*. Facet Publishing, UK. 592pp. ISBN: 9781783306343

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It has taken me a while to decide whether I am the right person to write this review; I have long been sceptical about an information literacy discipline (Hicks, Lloyd & Pilerot, 2023) and, spoiler alert, 550 pages into the newly published *Information Literacy Handbook: Charting the Discipline*, I remain unchanged in my beliefs. However, the recent labelling of this book as a “foundational text” by ALA’s Library History Round Table, as well as various other incidents, convinced me of the importance of representing dissenting views alongside more generous assessments of the book’s value. The *Handbook*’s focus on influencing the direction of information literacy research and practice (p.3)– a topic in which I have an obvious professional stake– provides a further motivation for my review of this title.

I’ll start with what I like about the *Handbook*. To begin with, the sheer size of the volume is impressive. Registering at over 500 pages and including the work of over 70 individual authors, the handbook forms an ambitious attempt to record certain aspects of the evolution of information literacy research and practice to date. Each of the seven thematic sections presents a breadth of topics and it is encouraging to see specific elements of information literacy laid out in detail; the overview of professional (section two) and communication networks (section seven), for example, speaks to the huge amount of infrastructural work that has gone into establishing information literacy as both a viable and a thriving area of study over the last fifty years. Conceptually, information literacy has received considerable push-back since 1974, with commentators variously pronouncing on and questioning its purpose, scope, relevance and value. In laying out how the term has been taken up by key stakeholders, the *Handbook* illustrates that information literacy has, at last, arrived.

The *Handbook* also provides insight into some of the thinking that information literacy has inspired. While I have issues with the topics represented in the text (as well as notable absences, see below), the presentation of “home-grown” concepts, including information landscapes (6.8) and critical information literacy (3.3 and 6.2), mean that it would now be hard to argue that information literacy merely provides the institutional context for information behaviour (Limberg & Sundin, 2006). The *Handbook* also attempts to move beyond the more typical focus on information literacy teaching; the inclusion in section four of sociologically oriented research methods, which include grounded theory (4.4) and nexus analysis (4.5), speaks to a growing interest in information literacy as an object of learning, too. Finally, it is helpful to see entries on historically important information literacy entities; before I consulted this volume, I wasn’t particularly aware of, for example, the National Forum on Information Literacy (3.6), and the elaboration of these landmarks will support the work of library historians.

Unfortunately, providing insight into information literacy's rich trajectory is neither the purpose nor the premise of this title. Instead, as the editors make very clear, the goal of the *Handbook* is to "extend the scholarly conversation by making the argument that information literacy (IL) is a maturing discipline" (p.xli). In attempting to fulfil these two ambitions, I consider the *Handbook* to be far less successful.

Take the first stated goal of the *Handbook*, which is to explain the "disciplinary substance" of information literacy. One of the reasons why I struggle with the concept of disciplinarity is that I have yet to see a robust argument for its existence; like Hammarfelt (2018), I believe that organisational characteristics, such as the presence of journals, are far too "inclusive" to form the basis for disciplinary claims. Given that the *Handbook* provides both space and opportunity, I find it surprising that the introductory chapters (1.1 and 1.2) do not advance more meaningful arguments for these assertions, whether intellectual (what is the epistemological and ontological basis?) or practical (what would we lose through secession?). In fact, reasoning appears to become even more convoluted; attempts to downplay the early influence of Becher and Trowler's (2001) disciplinary indicators in chapter 1.2 contradict their use as the overarching structure of the book while the positioning of information literacy as an "umbrella", "open access", "transdisciplinary" and "post-disciplinary" discipline within the space of a few pages adds to the confusion. A lack of justification for the disciplinary framing alongside the snowballing list of qualifiers means that it becomes increasingly unclear why a label of 'field', which several chapter authors employ, does not suffice. Issues are not improved by the failure to acknowledge attempts to accord disciplinary status to information literacy's direct precursor, bibliographic instruction (e.g. Rader, 1982), a curious imprecision given the emphasis that disciplinary scholarship places on tradition.

Unexplained inconsistencies also challenge the handbook's second goal, which is to progress scholarly conversations. The list of featured topics forms a particular case in point: while editors are swift to point out that the *Handbook* is not exhaustive, it is hard to square the claim that this volume represents a "diversity of... research" (p.xxxix) when niche topics that I suspect will have little traction outside of the confines of this volume, such as medieval information literacy (3.5) and a rallying call for a return to behaviourism (4.1), are promoted over more well-known (and empirical) work. Astute readers, for example, will notice the absence of almost all sociocultural theorising from the table of contents, including related to embodiment (Lloyd, 2005), practice (Lloyd, 2010), sociomateriality (Pilerot, 2016; Haider & Sundin, 2021), cognitive authority (Hirvonen & Palmgren Neuvonen, 2019) and transition (Hicks, 2020), while just one chapter (6.4) focuses in any detail on information literacy outside academic contexts. The section on alleged ethics is equally erratic, being limited to the presentation of three (unproblematised) ideals while overlooking recent work exploring alternative epistemologies (e.g., Burnett & Lloyd, 2020). A lack of clarity about how entries have either been commissioned or selected means that it is also unclear why critical information literacy is accorded two chapters (3.3 and 6.2) while information literacy models receive no fewer than seven turns in the spotlight (3.4, 6.1, 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, 6.10 and 6.11).

The *Handbook* shares the aim of so many researchers and practitioners, which is to develop information literacy research and practice. Unfortunately, the editors' commitment to disciplinarity comes at the expense of conceptual reach while further presenting a vision of information literacy in which it is academic priorities and outdated cognitive ideals that hold sway. It is a vision that seems out of focus to me.

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