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Rivano Eckerdal, Johanna

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Variations of information literacy and different views on democracy and citizenship

INTRODUCTION

Many activities in libraries and schools aim at strengthening the students’ information literacy, portraying it as tremendously important not only for school work and a future lifelong learning, but also for enhancing their opportunities to participate in the civic society. Research focussing on the relation between information literacy and democracy and citizenship is still scarce. This poster contributes to a critical strand of information literacy research suggesting how a more fine grained analysis of information literacy may be obtained by scrutinising the view on democracy that are drawn upon in the analysis. I draw on findings from my study (1) on young women’s information literacy practices on the arena of sexual and reproductive health.

THE INFORMATION PRACTICES OF CHOOSING A CONTRACEPTIVE

Information literacy is often portrayed as a key for enhancing each person’s opportunities to engage as citizens. However, few empirical studies have looked into information literacy related to democracy (e.g. 2; 3; 4; 1; 5; 6). When a young woman attends a counselling meeting about contraceptives with a midwife at a Swedish youth centre the negotiation between them relates to her identities both as a sexually active person and as a citizen exercising her right to have information about and perhaps prescription of a contraceptive. Thus when engaged in an information practice of choosing contraceptives the sexual and civic identities evolve (7). In this setting outside the educational arena it becomes apparent that information literacy is a judgement of the

situation at hand. This judgement will differ depending on which view on democracy that is drawn upon and who is making the judgement (1).

	Understanding of democracy and citizenship	Understanding of information literacy
Liberal	Freedom Individual rights and obligations	Appropriate behaviour Preparedness for informed choices Obeying laws and regulations
Radical	Democracy as process, Radical negativity (Mouffe) Heterogenous communities Struggle for resources Identities in constant change and flux	Dialogue Conflicts unavoidable Private/ public Information practices as shaping identities

DEMOCRACY AND INFORMATION LITERACY

The significance of information literacy and its democratic dimension vary depending on the understanding of democracy (8). Over time the meaning of democracy has evolved, two understandings being *the liberal* and *the radical* ones (9; 10). In a liberal model of democracy and citizenship the freedom of citizens is central, the state exists to ensure that they can live freely without harming each other. The citizens have a set of universal formal rights and obligations. Being a citizen means to fulfil one’s duties to the state by e.g. paying taxes and voting. Citizens are thus consumers of the services provided by the state to ensure their good life. In return citizens make wise, rational choices ensuring that the state is reproduced. When the democratic dimension of information literacy is perceived from a liberal point of view being an information literate citizen is an undertaking that the individual engages in to fulfil his or her civic duties and to enjoy his or her civic rights. The state ensures its citizens’ active participation in the civic activities such as voting and obeying the law by providing education and training in correct and lawful procedures related to information seeking and use. A liberal view on democracy seems to correspond to a behaviouristic view on information literacy as expressed in check-lists of correct, lawful, information literate behaviour such as the wide spread definition of an information literate student (11). By emphasizing the citizens’ responsibility to make wise and informed choices concerning their health (12), every meeting with a sexually active young woman that do not use a contraceptive could be related to a liberal view of information literacy (1). The young woman’s behaviour could then be judged as lacking in information literacy.

The radical model of democracy and citizenship emphasizes the multitude and diversity of social life. Access to resources is not equally distributed. As identities are in continuous change and flux people belong to several groups with perhaps conflicting interests (9:64). Democracy is never accomplished as an endpoint, but it is an on-going process of dealing with arising conflicts (13). Civic agency is important and engagement in public life is for the common good. As conflicts may be rooted in issues related to citizens’ identities a link between public and everyday life is established (10:93). Theoretically, proponents of critical information literacy (14; 8; 15; 16) have argued for an understanding of information literacy that could be paired with a radical understanding of democracy.

Here it is proposed that information literacy related to a radical view on democracy would entail practices related to information seeking and use in which citizens engage in dialogue, participate and interact in order to deal with the conflicts that arise, with possible connection to their identities, in a community characterised by multitude and diversity. When midwives meet young women for counselling about contraceptives and invite them into a conversation about their need for contraception without passing judgement on their previous choices, the situation at least to some extent fits with a radical view on democracy and citizenship (1). Such conversations could be described as practices in which information literacy related to a radical view of democracy are enacted and have the potential to be situations where the sexual and civic identities coevolve.

IMPLICATIONS

If information literacy practices in schools should prepare young people for civic engagement according to a radical understanding of democracy, change is required. The results suggest that it would be of importance to invite the use of a broad range of information sources, online and offline, with varying producers and aims, engaging the students in discussions about how to evaluate them.

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