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OPEN-MINDEDNESS AND INFORMATION LITERACY: A NEW APPROACH

Abstract

With growing interest in the relationship between information literacy and intellectual virtue, the time is ripe for a closer look at open-mindedness. A traditional approach to the trait offers a limited perspective and does not fit well with a socio-cultural approach to information literacy. This presentation explores intra-active open-mindedness as an alternative account that lifts the trait out of the individual and places it in conversation with a socio-cultural approach.

Introduction

In everyday terms, open-mindedness means being willing to take in new ideas and change your mind. The *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2016) references this disposition twice, stating that learners should “develop and maintain an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives” (p. 13). McMenemy (2018) finds “synergy with open-mindedness” in the UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional’s overall definition of information literacy (p. 3). Referring to the metaliteracy model, Mackey (2016) notes that in “today’s post-truth world, we also need an expanded and conscious emphasis on open-mindedness” (p. 20). This concept is intuitively important to information literacy practices that involve making judgements about sources, engaging in inquiry, and participating in scholarly conversation. It is frequently cited but rarely defined.

With growing interest in the relationship between information literacy and intellectual virtue, defined as “personal characteristics required for competent and motivated learning” (Baehr, 2021, p. 4), the time is ripe for a closer look at the open-mindedness. References to the trait in information literacy usually refer to Hare’s (2011) narrow definition that focuses on “a willingness to form or revise our ideas in the light of a critical review of evidence” (p. 9). This traditional approach to open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue is individualistic. It has no place in a socio-cultural perspective on information literacy as described by Hicks (2018). Is there a version of open-mindedness that can fit this perspective?

Literature Review

There has been little theoretical engagement with open-mindedness in information literacy research. Lenker (2020) identifies open-mindedness as a central concept in information literacy. He describes the trait as an achievement that “requires careful attention to the best available

evidence” and constrains the focus to information seeking contexts (p. 10). Wayne Bivens-Tatum (2021, 2022) offers a perspective on information literacy that weaves open-mindedness into the picture but focuses on defining an over-arching concept called Virtue Information Literacy.

Discussions that pivot around intellectual virtue as an overarching concept investigate the possibilities for integrating it into information literacy education to address affective dimensions of learning (Brooks, 2017); issues such as misinformation (McMenemy and Buchanan, 2018); and the goal of living a flourishing life (Bivens-Tatum, 2021, 2022). So far, discussions that pivot around specific individual virtues focus on intellectual empathy (Baer, 2019) and intellectual humility (Gorichanez, 2022). Clarke (2022) observes that there is great potential for integrating distinctly anti-prejudicial epistemic virtues such as testimonial justice into information literacy. These individual virtues could be described as other-regarding because they are, at least in part, uniquely concerned with cultivating knowledge in others or cultivating understanding about others in community.

Methodology/Design/Approach

Hare’s (2011) traditional approach to open-mindedness as an intellectual virtue is atomistic. It clashes with a socio-cultural perspective on information literacy that emphasizes situatedness. Unlike the virtues mentioned above, a narrowly conceived “being prepared to follow the argument where it leads” (Hare, 2011, p. 9) definition of open-mindedness has limited value because it does not adequately account for social practice in complex information realities. This presentation explores intra-active open-mindedness as an alternative account that lifts the trait out of the individual and places it in conversation with a socio-cultural approach.

Findings/Conclusion

A sociocultural approach focuses on how information literacy emerges in different contexts. It “centers upon communities and how information literacy ‘shows itself’ in the different collective practices” (Hicks, 2018, p. 71). Instead of imposing a particular model, this approach works from the ground up by observing dynamic aspects of practice. While a traditional approach to open-mindedness like Hare’s (2011) pushes the perspective back to decontextualized individuals aiming for objectivity, intra-active open-mindedness offers a much broader perspective.

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Barad characterizes intra-action as “enactment, not something that someone or something has” (p. 178). An intra-active approach conceives of open-mindedness as something that people do rather than something they possess (i.e. a trait).

Interaction describes a process that occurs between people and the world around them, but *intra-action* describes a process that transpires within an encounter. Intra-active open-mindedness is a deeply relational and creative act or expression.

This is an approach that decenters open-mindedness and shifts it “from individual experience to experience in concert with others” (Hicks, 2018, p. 78). There is no ideal of open-mindedness to reach, or to impart to learners. Epistemic injustice, which Fricker (2007) defines as an injustice wherein “someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower” (p. 20), is addressed by

this account because intra-active open-mindedness attends to social context and subject position in relation to the ways that people with different identities encounter and share information. In particular, the act of unfairly downgrading or upgrading testimony based on a speaker's identity – a vice that Fricker (2007) refers to as testimonial injustice – requires a form of careful attention to epistemic agency that Hare's approach to open-mindedness overlooks with its single-minded focus on seeking out more and better information.

Intra-active open-mindedness acknowledges the social nature of knowing. Being *in concert with others* means cultivating awareness of differences in how agency manifests within communities. Open-mindedness is not on the shoulders of one individual. It is part of a “larger material arrangement of which ‘we’ are a ‘part’” (Barad, 2007, p. 178). The responsibility for expressing intra-active open-mindedness is shared. In fact, it is shared beyond people because for Barad (2007) agency is an intra-active phenomenon rather than a pre-existing attribute. The material world, including our bodies and information technologies, are “key to the development of knowing within a setting” (Hicks, 2018, 78). It is implicated in intra-active open-mindedness. Ultimately, instead of approaching open-mindedness as a disposition that information literate individuals maintain or achieve, intra-active open-mindedness offers a way to explore dimensions of open-mindedness in information literacy entanglements.

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