Chapter 6

Hidden Greenlands: Learning, Libraries, and Literacy in the Information Age

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the role of libraries and educational publishers in the information age. Studies show that, for most college and university students, the trigger for research remains the classroom assignment. Tasks associated with specific learning objectives—writing a paper, preparing an interpretive reading, engaging in historical or statistical analysis—still motivate students to engage in research. What has changed is the fact that students no longer rely on librarians, libraries, or traditional publishers for information resources. They go directly to search engines. Today’s learners are, however, quickly overwhelmed and, despite being “digital natives,” struggle to evaluate information and organize it to build ideas. The ability of publishers, librarians, and libraries to address this issue will determine their relevancy in the 21st century and, perhaps, the success of students themselves in the information age. This chapter reviews a wide variety of literature and experiential data on information literacy, findability, metadata, and use of library resources and proposes how all players can re-think their roles.
INTRODUCTION

Recently, during what is usually one of the
duller stretches of a transatlantic flight—when
passengers obliterate the hours with sleep, read,
or escape tedium watching movies on postcard-
sized screens—the captain addressed the cabin
and alerted us we were in for something unusual:
Greenland, typically hidden under a misty shell
of clouds, was fully visible.

Maybe it is axiomatic in post-September 11th
times that warning of anything out of the ordinary,
particularly from a pilot mid-flight, grabs our at-
tention. In any case, within moments, passengers
clustered around the tiny, oval windows, straining
to take in the event.

And an event it was: soaring mountain peaks
and precipitous slopes. Between them, giant,
grooved fjords stretched down to scraps of land:
brown, with a little green at the fringes.

I remembered an article describing the expan-
sion of Greenland’s arable land, a consequence
of shorter winters, higher temperatures, and other
effects of global warming (Trautfetter, 2006). And
now, here it was as part of a scene of colliding
histories: ice dating back to prehistory, next to 21st
century agriculture, itself a result of industrializa-
tion begun in the 1800s.

The incident revealed something paradoxical.
I realized how little I knew about the place,
and, how little reliable knowledge I had about
climate change. I should, I decided, start keeping
tabs on Greenland.

More than a year of search engine alerts and
Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds later, my
inquiry seemed well-timed: Greenland had risen
from obscurity to topicality in much the way it
appeared out of the mist on that transatlantic flight.

On November 13, 2010, for example, The New
York Times reported that Greenland had become no
less than a locus of major global warming study.
Scientists take the temperature of the surrounding
ocean to gauge the rate of melting in glaciers. Their
conclusions are stunning in their implications as
well in their inconclusiveness:

...researchers have recently been startled to see big
changes unfold in both Greenland and Antarctica.

As a result of recent calculations that take the
changes into account, many scientists now say
that sea level is likely to rise perhaps three feet
by 2100 — an increase that, should it come to
pass, would pose a threat to coastal regions the
world over.

And the calculations suggest that the rise could
conceivably exceed six feet, which would put thou-
ousands of square miles of the American coastline
under water and would probably displace tens of
millions of people in Asia (Gillis, 2010).

One degree of temperature change or several?
Three feet of water level increase, or six? The
implications of the numerical differences, in a hu-
man context, are tiny: whether to take a sweater or
not; wading in up to the knees or swimming. In a
global context, over time, the impact is enormous.

The indeterminacy of the data, the range of
their potential consequences, should make us
ask: which other unknown uncertainties are out
there influencing our future? How many hid-
den Greenlands do we pass over unthinkingly
until to notice them is to be shocked by our own
ignorance of their impact? How do we interpret
information in shifting contexts? And how do we
convey the urgency of these issues to learners in
the 21st century?

I. TRUTH 2.0

As consumers and producers of educational pub-
ications, such questions ought to preoccupy us.
The answers go straight to how human beings will
learn and flourish in the information age.
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