PhD-course: Information Seeking Behaviour

Introduction

For thousands of years people have been seeking, making sense of, and using information in order to manage their work, solve their problems, or simply survive. The rapid growth of information made available to man during the last decades has further emphasised our dependence on information. Information behaviour can be defined as “the totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and use” (Wilson 2000, p.4). A subset of this is information seeking behaviour, which here is understood as the intentional seeking of information for a specific purpose or to fulfil a particular need. This course will give the PhD students both the theoretical models and the methods to be able to understand others’ or carry out their own research in this increasingly important field.

Part of the course will be to make the students aware of the importance of the context in which information seeking is happening; information has historically been seen as something required for work but yet separate from work itself and this view must be challenged (Reddy & Dourish 2002). As Lamb & Kling (2003) point out; users seldom see themselves as users but as professionals working to complete a task or solve a problem. In this course we shall focus on context and its role in understanding and shaping information seeking behaviour as an integrated aspect of everyday work.

The course will, in addition, give the students an opportunity to specialise in a particular aspect of information seeking of their own choice. Such a specialisation will be useful for students whose thesis topic will be very closely related to information seeking or information behaviour, and will render extra credit.

Course instructor

Dr. Dick Stenmark, Associate Professor in Informatics, the IT University of Göteborg

Course objective

The goal of this course is to give the PhD student a common background for understanding and discussing information behaviour in general and information seeking behaviour in particular. Students will learn through reading and discussion. After the completion of this course, the PhD student is expected to:

- Be able to recognise and analyse the context’s specific characteristics and the information seeker as an actor interacting with both information and context as part of work
- Understand how information behaviour studies are done, using a range of different methodologies;
- Appreciate the basic philosophical and conceptual approaches to the study of information, information needs, information seeking, and information behaviour;
- Be familiar with the current literature addressing information seeking behaviours in general, and – optionally – having specialised in some specific aspect(s) of information seeking.

Credits and examination

The class can be organised either as a collective effort of several students and course instructors who in collaboration explore and discuss the literature, or as an individual reading
exercise where a student in solitude digests the literature and only report back to the instructor. In the former case, each student is expected to participate in and to lead a number of discussions. In leading a discussion, the student should present his or her personal summary and understanding of the selected literature and have prepared 2-3 questions or proposals that will be the basis of the class discussion. In the latter case, the student shall orally report back to the course instructor after each completed sub-section.

At the end of the course each student should write an opinion paper (based on the course literature) on the relevance/importance of understanding information seeking behaviour in today’s society. A specific emphasis should be on the context and the information seeker. Successful completion of these tasks will render 6 Swedish point or 9 ECTS points.

In addition, the student who wishes to specialise in some aspect of information seeking shall select one of the proposed topics (or approach the course instructor for additional topics), read the relevant literature, and write a second opinion paper on the selected topic. This will render an additional 2 Swedish or 3 ECTS points.

**Course Description**

The course consists of seven mandatory sub-sections followed by the optional individual specialisations.

**Part 1: Introduction to information seeking and information behaviour**

- ~85 pages

**Part 2: Theoretical concepts**

- ~100 pages
Part 3: Theories and models of information seeking & behaviour

- ~100 pages

Part 4: Theories and models of information seeking & behaviour II

- Fisher, K.E., Erdelez, S. and McKechnie, L. (eds.) (2005). *Theories of Information Behavior*, Information Today, Inc. Skim through all the remaining pages (39-400) and read carefully the 5-8 theories that best fit your current and/or future research approach. (~36 pages)
- ~50 pages (+300 pages)

Part 5: Methodologies for studying information seeking & behaviour

- ~100 pages

Part 6: Methodologies for studying information seeking & behaviour II

- Case (2005). Chapter 9: Methods: Examples by Type. (39 pages)
• ~100 pages

**Part 7: Search engines, information retrieval, and the Web**

• ~112 pages

**Individual tracks**

*Option A: Search/research by occupational group*

• Case (2005). Chapter 11: Research by Occupation (26 pages)
• Additional material
Option B: Search/research by demographic groups

- Case (2005). Chapter 12: Research by Social Role and Demographic Group
- Additional material

Option C: Classification and its relation to search

- Additional material

Option D: Metadata and structures

- Additional material

Option E: Searching and the Semantic web

- Additional material
**Option F: Differences between experienced and inexperienced users**

- Additional material

**Option G: Interfaces and Human Computer Interaction**


**Option H: Multilingual searching**


**Additional resources on the web:**

http://www.u.arizona.edu/~asc/isbibib.html
http://witloof.sjsu.edu/courses/202/welcome202.html