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Introducing transliteracy: What does it mean to academic libraries?

Transliteracy is recent terminology gaining currency in the library world. It is a broad term encompassing and transcending many existing concepts. Because transliteracy is not a library-centric concept, many in the profession are unsure what the term means and how it relates to libraries' instructional mission and to other existing ideas about various literacies. Transliteracy is such a new concept that its working definition is still evolving and many of its tenets can easily be misinterpreted. Although this term is in flux, academic librarians should watch developments in this new field to continually assess and understand what impact it may have on the ways they assist and interact with their patrons and each other.

Transliteracy originated with the cross-disciplinary Transliterations Project group, headed by Alan Liu from the Department of English at the University of California-Santa Barbara. The main focus of that group is the study of online reading. Sue Thomas, professor of new media at De Montfort University, attended the Transliterations conference held by this group in 2005 and has since built upon their research to develop the key concepts and working definition of transliteracy. The term has its basis in the word *transliterate*, which means "to write or print a letter or word using the closest corresponding letters of a different alphabet or language."

The essential idea here is that transliteracy is concerned with mapping meaning across different media and not with developing particular literacies about various media. It is not about learning text literacy and visual literacy and digital literacy in isolation from one another but about the interaction among all these literacies.

The working definition of transliteracy, as put forth by Thomas, states that it is "the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and films, to digital social networks."

Basically, transliteracy is concerned with what it means to be literate in the 21st century. It analyzes the relationship between people and technology, most specifically social networking, but is fluid enough to not be tied to any particular technology. It focuses more on the social uses of technology, whatever that technology may be. This terminology is new and the study of transliteracy is in the early stages, so this definition is likely to evolve.

Transliteracy is new enough to be unknown to many in the library profession. In 2009, Susie Andretta, senior lecturer at London Metropolitan University, interviewed four librarians about transliteracy, three of whom were not familiar with the term. She discovered, however, this does not mean librarians are not familiar with the underlying concepts.

One librarian, initially unfamiliar with the term, notes that this working definition is "an accurate description of this phenomenon," emphasizing the fact that the issues are out in the library world being addressed already but not necessarily under the umbrella of transliteracy. Andretta says that "the lack of familiarity with the terminology does not mean that transliteracy is not integrated in the practice of these information professionals."

Because of its broad scope and recent genesis, transliteracy can be misinterpreted easily. Not much work exists in the scholarly record, especially within library scholarship, although there has been lively debate and discussion via informal channels as interested parties begin to hash out what this term means to libraries. Oversimplifying the concept is tempting but that risks turning transliteracy into just another buzzword. An important issue that needs to be addressed is whether transliteracy concepts manifest as skills and to what degree these skills are teachable.

On one level, transliteracy is a descriptive concept, being a "new analytical perspective." In its original iteration, transliteracy is more about understanding the ways various means of communication interact and understanding, not necessarily teaching, the skills necessary to move effortlessly from one medium to another. It is about the convergence of these media and acknowledges the multi-modal experience of engaging with the modern world. As Thomas notes, transliteracy is a move toward "a unifying ecology of not just media, but of all literacies relevant to reading, writing, interaction and culture."

That's not to say that teachable and transferable skills have not become a key concern of transliteracy, only that transliteracy in its initial form lacked a pedagogical imperative. Because of the newness and holistic nature of transliteracy, defining what specific skills are necessary is a bit of a challenge. No group has yet proffered any suggestion as to what a definitive list of transliteracy skills would look like. Some librarians have stepped up to promote transliteracy concepts, but more work needs to be done to formalize what relationship libraries will have with transliteracy.

Information literacy standards are in place, but are these enough to support the growing research with how people currently communicate across various media, how they produce information in myriad forms and formats, and how the establish rapidly expanding social networks? The answer could very well be yes, but, if not, should these standards be expanded to encompass these issues, or should transliteracy proponents adopt clear standards and define specific skills to supplement information literacy?

Transliteracy is very concerned with the social meaning of literacy. It explores the participatory nature of new means of communicating, which breaks down barriers between academia and the wider community and calls into question standard notions of what constitutes authority by emphasizing the benefits of knowledge sharing via social networks. Thomas points to "an increasing need for organizations and individuals to develop wider, more open networks, partnerships and trusted communities to share ideas and to innovate."

In 2007, the Institute of the Future, California, issued a report, "The Future of Learning Agents," which states that "transliterating social and creative life implies new social and political understandings as new relations of creative production emerge. Collective authorship and collective intelligence are modes of active learning and discovery that present new dynamics between individuals and groups with respect to knowledge."

In the transliterate world, creating a social network of experts is held in high regard. What is important is not just transferring information but creating an information narrative that evolves over time and adds value. Libraries can help add value for patrons by allowing patrons to contribute to the construction of knowledge bases. This social construction of knowledge can take many forms from allowing tagging in catalogs to commenting on special collection photographs. The assumption that authority only comes from an established expert changes in a transliterate world. Personal experience can add value to rare photographs, for example, by supplementing academic research.

Not only does transliteracy question previous assumptions of authority, it also calls into question the often assumed privilege of printed text. Transliteracy works against the "entrenched bias towards the written medium." ALA Committee on Literacy's definition of literacy demonstrates this bias. It defines literacy as the ability to use "printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

Transliteracy is not unique in questioning this bias—media literacy efforts have certainly tried to raise the profile of nonprint materials. But transliteracy is unique in combining democratizing communication formats, expressing no preference of one over the other, with emphasizing the social construction of meaning via diverse media.

Because of the ways in which transliteracy questions authority and devalues hierarchical structures for disseminating information, proponents tend to advocate for issues that help level the information playing field, such as ensuring neutrality and bridging the digital divide.

Despite the fact that transliteracy originated outside the library realm, librarians should follow the development of this concept because so much of transliteracy overlaps concerns much at the heart of librarianship. As more research is created in the field, librarians can incorporate these new ideas into the ways they assist patrons with accessing, understanding, and producing information. The social aspects of transliteracy can enhance the workplace by creating robust systems of knowledge sharing and can enhance user experience by granting them a role in the construction of information.

