

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF STUDENTS' JUDGEMENTS OF THE RELEVANCE AND RELIABILITY OF INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative investigation is situated in the field of information seeking and use, and, more broadly, in decision making. In a naturalistic setting and across a range of curriculum areas, it investigated the behaviour of secondary school students undertaking information search tasks. Research questions focused on students' criteria for deciding on the relevance and reliability of information.

Participants were thirty-seven students between 14 and 17 years of age from a school in south-eastern Australia. The study collected data from students' journals; structured and semi-structured interviews; video-stimulated recall interviews; think-aloud reports; video screen captures; and questionnaires. Analysis of data was influenced by a grounded theory approach with an emphasis on thematic categorisation.

Participants made pre-access judgements on the basis of results returned by the search engine, while post-access judgements were based on an examination of the full source. Judgements of relevance and reliability were bound by students' socio-academic context and were influenced by students' adoption of the most convenient and pragmatic approach to task completion. Participants were motivated to find a prime source, and to find information that linked to the prime source. Other knowledge building behaviour was also evident in sub-processes of filtering, matching and adding information.

Initial judgements of an item's relevance were based on: comprehensibility; completeness of source; whether the item needed to be purchased; whether video sources were suitable; and whether factual or opinionative material met students' needs. Participants preferred information that provided topic overviews, information that linked to prior knowledge, and sources that treated topics in acceptable depth, and that were structured to facilitate accessibility.

Students derived clues about reliability from URLs, and considered the reputation of sources. The ability of the item to corroborate prior knowledge, its graphic design, its style of writing, and perceived authority of its creators influenced participants' decisions about reliability.

The study supplements the limited number of Australian studies of students' ISP (information search process) and addresses the lack of studies worldwide that focus on information seeking and use behaviour from the perspective of decision making. The investigation has implications for information literacy education, particularly critical thinking skill development.

ABBREVIATIONS

ATAR	Australian tertiary admission rank
ELIS	Everyday life information seeking
ELM	Elaboration likelihood model
EUT	Expected utility theory
INSU	Information needs, seeking, and use
IR	Information retrieval
ISP	Information search process
JDM	Judgement and decision making
LIS	Library and information science
NDM	Naturalistic decision making
RPD	Recognition-primed decision making
UAI	University admission index
UNE	University of New England

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