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[Gunton, Lyndelle](#)

(2011)

Religious information literacy : using information to learn in church community.

Australian Library Journal, 60(2), pp. 155-164.

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/41943/>

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.2011.10722587>

Religious information literacy: Using information to learn in church community

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March 2011

Abstract

What informs members of the church community as they learn? Do the ways people engage with information differ according to the circumstances in which they learn? Informed learning, or the ways in which people use information in the learning experience and the degree to which they are aware of that, has become a focus of contemporary information literacy research. This essay explores the nature of informed learning in the context of the church as a learning community. It is anticipated that insights resulting from this exploration may help church organisations, church leaders and lay people to consider how information can be used to grow faith, develop relationships, manage the church and respond to religious knowledge, which support the pursuit of spiritual wellness and the cultivation of lifelong learning. Information professionals within the church community and the broader information profession are encouraged to foster their awareness of the impact that engagement with information has in the learning experience and in the prioritising of lifelong learning in community contexts.

Introduction

This paper presents an emerging picture of what informs members of the church community and how that impacts on their learning within the community. The ways in which people use information as they go about learning in the church are described.

In seeking to describe the different ways people in the church community use information to learn, that is, how they experience informed learning, the paper adopts a relational perspective of information literacy. According to Bruce (1997, 16), this is a way of describing information literacy “in terms of varying conceptions or experiences which are defined in terms of relations between people and aspects of the world.”

By developing an understanding of how the church community uses information when learning, information professionals in that environment can engage in dialogue about, and promote, informed learning, both in individual learning events and in the longer term pursuit of lifelong learning. Furthermore, this enables the wider information profession to draw parallels between learning experiences in different contexts, thereby expanding the horizon of contemporary information literacy research. This may also foster a heightened awareness of the place of spiritual

wellness in wider society and the role that information plays in how people learn about what spiritual wellness means to them and how they achieve it.

Information literacy: research perspectives

A new perspective for contemporary information literacy research heralds the expansion of research from primarily formal education settings into workplaces and communities. Lloyd (2008, 9) suggests, “a major task for researchers, who study IL, is to understand more about the nature of the phenomenon and the way its processes and practices manifest and operate in different contexts.” Bruce’s (2008) theory of informed learning develops the research of the different ways individuals use information when learning and gives life to a new definition of information literacy, that is, a way of using information to learn. The argument for a research agenda that seeks to “investigate people’s experience and engagement with information within the context of the everyday life” is demonstrated in the work by McMahon & Bruce (2002), Partridge (2007), Yates (2009) and Tilley (2010) (Partridge, Bruce, & Tilley, 2008, 112).

Contemporary information literacy research and the church community

There is little literature available demonstrating the connection between informed learning and the church community. Research studies focusing on the information-seeking behaviours of theological students and academics are readily available, including Gorman (1990) and Brunton (2005). Further emphasis on the role of information literacy in theological education is contributed by Teske (2002), Phillips (2005), Delamarter (2005) and Phillips (2007). As far back as the 1950s, researchers showed interest in how ministers handled information (Blizzard, 1956), preceding other studies by Porcella (1973), Allen (1987), Tanner (1993), Wicks (1999) and Lambert (2010). Fisher et al. (2005) addresses the topic of information use in the less researched context of informal church community learning experiences.

Learning and the church community

People are drawn to, and participate in, community for a variety of reasons. The religious educator, Maria Harris (1989, 76), describes people’s motives as “the impetus towards belonging; toward associating with those sharing a common heritage, belief, and way of life; and toward the human need to share.” Collaboration in community has long been valued as a learning tool. Seymour (1997, 13) makes the association between informal learning and the contexts of families and communities, questioning why, when “much of our learning takes place as we participate in families and communities,” are formal learning environments given responsibility for developing the skills required for that participation?

As a learning community, the Christian church makes an interesting case for consideration. The use of the term ‘community’ is inherent in the theology of the church. Harris (1989, 77) argues that “one Christian is no Christian; we go to God together or we do not go at all.” The relationship between community and the church is explained further by Harris (1989, 76) in the belief that the “ideal embodied in community is the movement toward unity and union with others: *community* and *communion*.”

What makes a church a learning community? The Uniting Church in Australia as an example

Formed in 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) was created through the union of three Christian denominations: the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia. Today, it is Australia's third biggest Christian denomination with around 2500 congregations across Australia (Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly, 2010).

The Uniting Church in Australia is populated by 5.72% of Australians, according to the 2006 Census, with 55% of the church community being women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007a). The Uniting Church's population is an ageing one with only 8% of Uniting Church constituents within the age bracket of 15-29 years (National Church Life Surveys Research, 2001). Despite growth in the Australian population, membership in the Uniting Church is in decline (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007b).

The founding document of the UCA, the Basis of Union, speaks about the integral role of the community in its beliefs, suggesting that "in faith we can... participate in the worshipping, caring and serving community of Christians" (UCA, 2010). It defines the congregations of the UCA as "communities in which people seek to follow Jesus, learn about God, share their faith, care for each other, serve the local community and seek to live faithfully and with real joy" (UCA, 2010). While the theoretical association is made between learning and participating in the UCA community, the question must be asked about the practical aspects of learning in the church community, specifically how members of that community use information to learn.

Making the connection between information and learning in the church community

Using the research methodology of phenomenography, the study explored how informed learning is experienced by members of the church community. Four members of the Uniting Church in Australia were interviewed, including men and women, lay people and ordained ministers. Participants' descriptions of their experiences were used to develop an understanding of how the collective community engages with information as they go about learning.

Despite the preliminary nature of the exploration, considerable insight was obtained into the complex and remarkable experiences that contribute to the collective experiences of religious information literacy and the potential role it may play in spiritual wellness. Informed learning in the church community is experienced as using information in four different ways:

1. Growing faith
2. Developing relationships
3. Managing the church
4. Responding to religious knowledge

Informed learning in the church community is experienced as using information for growing faith

The church community considers the growth of faith to be a significant outcome of the way the community uses information to learn. The growth of faith through informed learning can be described in terms of how members of the church community use information to develop their spirituality and move forward in their faith journey. When experiencing informed learning this way, members of the church community are motivated by a desire to understand and grow in their relationship with God, their spiritual understanding of God's Word and how that impacts upon everyday life. Therefore, the primary focus is to learn about God and confirm their faith.

People use a various types of information in their experiences of growing faith, including text, audio, visual and digital forms. The information that is used in order to grow faith is found to be a combination of new material and a reiteration of previously learned material. Both internal and external sources are used to access information, supporting the argument that learning experiences relying solely on information sourced internally are not adequate.

The research data reveals that the church community often begins to explore faith using textual information, such as biblical commentary, academic research, theological treatise, personal reflections and narratives. This is complemented by other forms. Engagement with artistic expression, such as art, music and drama, is a popular means of growing faith. Collective experiences suggest that using information in the form of artistic expression increases interest and improves recollection, thereby complementing other forms of information and supporting alternative learning styles to that of traditional approaches. The community indicates a preference for engaging with narrative as an auditory form of information:

Int.2 (p.4) "When they present it in a new and fresh way with a story that could almost be relevant to you, that's when I will retain that information."

In particular, this type of information, combined with artistic expression in the forms of craft, music and drama, cooking and technology, is effective in learning experiences involving children.

The collective experience of using information to develop spirituality uses a number of different approaches in the learning experience. These include personal reflection and study, small group discussion, informal conversation, formal education in the form of workshops, seminars, and lectures, and kinaesthetic learning, or learning by doing. Participants indicate a preference for exploring and developing skills and knowledge in discussions or conversation with others, via peer learning. Participation in worship services is recognised as a fundamental means of obtaining and using information for growing faith. Contributing to the worship service is seen as a way of using information to learn and a means of helping others to learn. The benefit of structuring learning experiences to incorporate more than one approach is

acknowledged. However, intentional exploration of spiritual issues using a variety of styles is not predominant.

The extent to which the church community is aware of the role of information in learning about faith impacts heavily on the ability to actively engage in learning experiences. Members of the church community vary in their awareness about the way they use information to grow faith. Those with previous experience as educators tend to be more aware of the need to intentionally engage learners using a mixture of learning approaches and forms of information. Religious information literacy relies on the learner being conscious of how they are using information to learn in the church community.

In using information to grow faith, there is acknowledgement for the need to intentionally commit to a process of lifelong learning. This may originate from an understanding of personal learning needs, regardless of the context, when people recognise the need to participate in learning. Lifelong learning can also be associated with the specific context of the church and an individual's faith journey. There is also an awareness of the value of learning about faith through experiences outside the church community.

Informed learning in the church community is experienced as using information for developing relationships

Members of the church community engage with information as a means of developing relationships, particularly social and pastoral associations. The creation and upholding of a community is fundamentally linked to the quality of relationships within the community. As such, the wellbeing of the church community depends on the ability of members to initiate and foster relationships with one another. The information generated through the interactions contributing to those social and pastoral relationships is valuable to the life of the church community and is an important aspect of religious information literacy.

In developing relationships, the church community relies on information that is typically auditory and visual in nature. The experience of using information to develop relationships in the church community is rarely an individual experience. Instead, it usually involves interactions of two or more members of the community in face-to-face contexts. Examples of such information include sharing of stories and personal beliefs and experiences, and artistic expression such as music, song and drama.

The application of kinaesthetic learning, or learning by doing, is experienced in the development of relationships in the church community. Such experiences can include participation in community pastoral activities, engagement of ministry colleagues in informal and social interactions outside the workplace, and sharing in worship services. Outside the planned community building activities, members build relationships by supporting one another to cope with life experiences. The building of trust and relationships evolves from the sharing of personal information and experiences.

It should be noted that during learning experiences where relationships are initiated or strengthened, learners are not always aware of the learning taking place. This learning process often occurs in tandem with other learning experiences. The benefits of these learning experiences are largely subconscious and occur when focusing on other aspects of church life. Consequently, they are not commonly recognised for the learning opportunities that they offer. For example, in learning experiences that occur in small group interactions, such as Bible studies, the primary intention is to learn about God. However, the underlying benefit of new and strengthened relationships is realised through the sharing of common values and core understandings of what it means to be a Christian.

Developing relationships by engaging with information makes a valuable contribution to religious information literacy in the church community. Quality pastoral and social interactions foster the wellbeing of individual members as well as the church community as a whole.

Informed learning in the church community is experienced as using information for managing the church

The experience of using information for the purpose of managing or administering the church is a significant aspect of religious information literacy. Management of the church includes those strategic, administrative, legal and financial functions that allow the church to operate on a day-to-day basis.

Members of the church community are motivated to learn about how the church is managed by the desire to contribute to decision making processes. Members of the church community who contribute to these functions of the church are expected to maintain awareness about a broad range of documentation, commonly shared in print, digital, or auditory formats. The information can be sourced internally, such as committee reports or the informal information shared by one minister with another, or externally, such as documentation detailing local council property requirements.

Members of the church community seek to help others learn to manage the church by creating opportunities to engage with information in group contexts, such as committee or congregational meetings, as well as learning experiences that rely on individual reflection and reading. When experiencing informed learning this way, members of the church community are using information to effectively communicate the mission and vision of the church as actioned by the strategic plans developed. Learning experiences from which both educators and learners benefit are recognised as important. When experiencing informed learning this way, the church community uses consultation as part of visioning and planning processes:

Int.3 (p.3) “I’m clearly interested in communicating what is in that strategic map so that people, one, understand it and two, get behind it and the church moves ahead in an aligned fashion.”

Interestingly, this learning strategy is informed by a factor that is unique to learning experiences in the church community, that of the will of God. Regardless of the degree to which a decision makes good business sense, decisions about church

functions are made with the mission and values of the church community, that is, God's purpose for the church, in mind.

Informed learning in the church community is experienced as using information to respond to religious knowledge

When experiencing informed learning this way, members of the church community are using information to do more than accumulate religious knowledge. The community engages with information in ways that allow for analysis and reflection, thereby prompting the communication of useful information and the discarding of that which is irrelevant. Participation in these learning experiences acknowledges the fact that using information to learn in the church community can confirm knowledge, can identify errors or inconsistencies in one's knowledge, and can correct and update it. This is a key factor in religious information literacy.

The stimulus to participate in these learning experiences is born out of a need to control information in the ways other than simply retaining religious knowledge. It is a desire to manage how information is sourced, how it is analysed to determine its value and how it is retained or disposed. In these learning experiences, the church community is focused on controlling information to create knowledge and make effective use of it.

Rather than seeking to learn a set of static religious facts, members of the church community acknowledge that by engaging with information sourced from within and outside the church community, knowledge can develop, adapt, and mature. That is not to say that the learning and memorising of fundamental religious information, such as Bible verses and liturgy, is without value. However, on its own, it cannot enable the learner to fully engage with the learning experience and continue to grow.

Learners in the church community engage with a variety of information to respond to religious knowledge. Artistic expression of information, using narrative, music and song, drama and imagery, is a useful means of engaging participants in a learning experience. It serves to personalise the learning experience, giving members of the church community the opportunity to identify how the information relates to them. This makes the learning experience more interesting and improves recollection. Learning can also be more meaningful when kinaesthetic learning is enabled:

Int.4 (p.3) "It's by doing that I learn best...really cemented that learning and helped me to really consider what it was that I believed as part of that so it wasn't just that I've heard in a lecture, but here I am, leading the sacraments and doing communion and, you know, I need to know why I am doing what I'm doing."

Religious information literacy is also experienced as using information to communicate knowledge. It is suggested that an individual's learning experience may be inspired by the desire to help others learn (Bruce, 1997). This can be derived from the desire to learn to be able to preach a sermon, or to be able to assist others

in church administrative decision making processes. The sharing of the wealth of intangible religious knowledge available in the church community is an important aspect of developing religious information literacy. This perspective encourages the wider church community to take responsibility for creating, sharing and retaining knowledge, rather than relying on those in ministry to know all:

Int.1 (p.3) "The long held belief that the minister is the repository of all that's good should be well past."

While members of the church community recognise the value of using other types of information, there is a desire to engage with information through conversation. This may be due to a belief that people achieve greater confidence in their understanding of that information, and therefore, their creation of knowledge by this means.

There is acknowledgement that formal study is not everyone's preferred way of engaging with information to learn, particularly those activities that do not cater to a variety of learning styles. This makes it difficult for some participants to process information adequately and store it for future use.

When experiencing informed learning this way, members of the church community consciously use information to implement their commitment to lifelong learning. To become an informed learner in the church community, as in other learning contexts, people acknowledge the need to continue to actively engage with information and participate in learning experiences. By planning learning experiences in the community that allow participants to explore information and share their knowledge, educators encourage that commitment to lifelong learning.

How do collective experiences of informed learning vary in the church community?

Between the different experiences of informed learning in the church, there are significant variations in the types of information used and the way people engage with that information. Identifying variations in how people experience informed learning is vital because it enables the proactive planning of experiences that cater to different ways of learning, thereby adhering to the principles of the variation theory of learning (Marton & Booth, 1997).

There are numerous forms of information that members of the church community engage with to grow faith. While the data indicates a preference for collaborative learning in groups, a mixture of types of information are considered valuable, including in text, auditory and visual forms. A combination of several types of information is believed to enhance the learning experiences that contribute to spiritual development.

This is contrasted with the experiences of using information to develop relationships. While there may be a link between the two categories, the use of narrative and auditory information is supported by few other types of information. Face-to-face interactions are preferred as the situation in which people obtain and use that information. Again, the lack of mention about social media prompts curiosity, due to its growing profile in other contexts.

The experience of using information to manage the church is different again. More formal and textual forms of information are used regularly to attend to the administrative needs of the church. While the church community does use collaborative learning in these types of learning experiences, there is a significant textual component incorporated, often in documenting decisions and policies.

Finally, information use in responding to religious knowledge concentrates on the ways the church community uses information to create and update knowledge. It is the thought processes and systems that members of the church community use to analyse information and then retain or discard it. Engagement of information for more than storing knowledge relies on the sharing of that sometimes intangible wealth of knowledge that exists in collaborative learning experiences.

Implications for the church community and information professionals

The insights that have evolved from this research indicate the need for a new way of referring to information literacy in the church: 'religious information literacy'. This can be used to refer to the experiences of using information to learn within the context of the church community. The term incorporates more than the religious content that is contained in the more commonly known term of 'religious literacy'. It seeks to incorporate the learner's understanding of learning about and from religious information to enable participation in the church community as well as to contribute to the individual's ability to be a lifelong learner in that context. It is an awareness that learners engage with information using skills and practices that are used in other contexts, but adapted for application in the context of the church community.

The research indicates that religious information can incorporate a variety of information: spiritual, theological, organisational, corporate, academic, educational, philosophical, community, and personal. The experiences in which members use these types of information to learn may influence the church community in a number of ways. An awareness of how the church community uses information to grow faith may allow individuals to be more intentional about using a variety of types of information to inform different learning styles. For example, the data suggests that learners recall and apply more information acquired during sermons that use visual imagery and narrative than those relying on the spoken word. Therefore, worship leaders could prepare material using a higher proportion of visual and narrative information.

The experience of using information to develop relationships may impact upon the community in particular ways. Actively using information for this purpose could strengthen the commitment of members of the community to each other and the community as a whole. It may also enable the development of groups within the community to support special interests, such as refugee outreach or youth groups.

The community might be affected by the experience of using information to manage the church. Intentional use of information to manage the church may raise

awareness about community news and events, and also invigorate debate about the mission and vision of the church and its future.

The experience of using information to respond to religious knowledge may assist members to feel prepared and willing to make contributions to church decision making processes. Active engagement with information could give individuals opportunity to use their gifts and talents for God, and create an atmosphere in which mentoring relationships are developed to help raise confidence. It can also support those who are new to ministry by giving opportunities to share knowledge and practice skills. This is not just about storing religious knowledge, but using that knowledge to grow through learning experiences, using religious information to build and grow church community.

Little is revealed about the church community's experiences with regards to digital information and about the potential for creating new learning opportunities provided by the advent of new technologies such as social media. This could be due to the participants' lack of awareness about the way they use digital media in connecting with others in the church community. It could also be because they do not engage with information via this means at all. It is hoped that further research may shed light on this.

Hughs and Emmett (2000, in Emmett, 2002, 38) claim that an overwhelming 97% of surveyed ministers "perceived preaching as their most significant opportunity for educational ministry." Even they admit that it is difficult to see how an interaction of less than half an hour per week can be considered such an important learning opportunity. It is interesting to compare this with these initial insights, which suggest that, contrary to the perceptions of ministers, information obtained through preaching is not considered to be the primary means of learning. Rather, it is one of numerous activities with information that the church community uses in order to learn or to develop religious information literacy.

Analysis of the data indicates there is a notable link between two of the categories of descriptions. Using information to grow faith is connected to using information to develop relationships. Part of growing faith in a community relies on trust and the ability to share with others. Clearly, the development of strong relationships within a community contributes to the capacity for spiritual development because it creates a safe space for exploring faith.

Conclusion

A comparison of these explorations with the review of existing research indicates there is further work to be done, both in exploring the way people learn in the church community and in the raising of awareness of the impact that such insights could provide. It is suggested that this research can be placed within the newly emerging awareness of community information literacy.

Ongoing exploration of this topic may reveal a significant contribution to this field of research, which, thus far, has not pursued religious information literacy. However, the growing interest in the relationship between information and religion is demonstrated in the increasing availability of opportunities for academics,

theologians, clergy and lay people to share their understandings. The upcoming First Annual Conference on Information and Religion in 2011, hosted by the Center for the Study of Religion in the School of Library and Information Science at Kent State University in the United States, is an example.

It is clear that these results offer a new way to consider learning in the church community. Informed learning in the church looks beyond the focus of existing research on the information-seeking behaviour of theological students and clergy to explore how lay people use information to learn. It also looks beyond the studies of the church as a learning community to examine how information is used in those learning experiences.

It should be noted that, given the small sample from which data was retrieved, these observations demonstrate the potential relevance and value that a more in-depth study could provide, rather than offering definitive results and models for immediate strategic implementation. The study lays the groundwork to justify more in-depth exploration of religious information literacy in the church community.

While the research indicates that religious information literacy is a significant part of lifelong learning for members of the church community, there is a need to intentionally incorporate the principles of informed learning in the planning and design of the wide range of formal and informal learning opportunities that form part of church community activities and operations. This could prove useful for those in leadership roles in the church community, members of the church community who take responsibility for Christian education and those in the process of training to enter the ministry.

With this strategic thinking, it is hoped that members will become more active participants in using information to learn, both within the church community and outside it. Furthermore, this growth in understanding about the relationship between information and learning will enable members to develop a heightened awareness of how they can use information to make the most of their personal gifts and abilities. Religious information literacy, developed according to the principles of informed learning, can make a valid contribution to the growth and wellbeing of the church community, and wider society.

Acknowledgement

This essay is based on preliminary research completed as part of a QUT student project conducted in 2010 and supervised by Professor Christine Bruce and Dr Ian Stoodley. Further research will be presented at the forthcoming RAILS7 conference.

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