iWords: Exploring the interdisciplinary vocabularies of information research

Organizers: Andrea Hoff, Michelle Kaczmarek, Robyn Schafer, Saguna Shankar, Bonnie Tulloch

iStories Research Lab,
The University of British Columbia,
School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, The iSchool @ UBC

Contact: iStoriesLab@gmail.com

Abstract

How do our respective vocabularies affect our conceptualizations of information and the diffuse field of information studies? In this half-day workshop we examine the role that language plays in envisioning the interdisciplinary identities of iSchools. Through an interactive arts-based activity, panel presentation, and small group discussion, we seek to: 1) Identify contentious keywords within the information studies field; 2) Explore how these keywords function as a technology through which we epistemologically and ontologically organize our understanding of the field; and 3) Discuss the critical and creative value of keyword conversations to our individual research projects, collaborative investigations, and teaching. This workshop is designed to facilitate discussion among students, faculty, and practitioners about ways in which language structures and limits our understanding of our own and our peers' work within the iSchool community. These discussions will contribute to ongoing efforts to span the boundaries of disciplines and form crosswalks across disciplinary vocabularies.

Keywords: iSchools; information research; interdisciplinarity; communication; knowledge translation; metaphor; methods; keywords

Purpose and Intended Audience

This workshop is designed to engage emerging and experienced scholars in conversations on the role of language in the field of information research. By extending Raymond Williams's (1976) concept of keywords to the field of information studies, we seek to facilitate discussion among iSchool graduate students, faculty, and practitioners about the ways in which language shapes our understanding of the relationships between people, information, and technology. In a discipline grounded by concepts of information access, classification, description, documentation, search, retrieval and policy, we argue the iSchools community can draw upon our differences to learn how to better articulate and communicate what our research is about and, by extension, what information studies is capable of contributing to society.

What is at stake in the emerging boundaries and convergences that we construct using key terms in the iSchools community? Furthermore, what are some of the assumptions and effects of keywords in information studies, many of which are continually being

re-conceptualized (Chua & Yang, 2008)? We seek to identify and explore contentious terms within the field of information studies, noting how they can act as communicative barriers when engaging in collaborative research. At the same time, we also strive to highlight the ways that communicative barriers can inspire communicative breakthroughs, leading researchers to pursue new avenues of investigation and make unexpected connections. The overarching goal of this workshop is to reflect on the transformative role language plays in information studies as a meta-discipline (Bates, 1999), and how it might be more effectively employed and understood to meet the objectives of interdisciplinary research set by the field (Dillon, 2012; Feinberg, 2012).

Format

This half-day workshop is comprised of three parts: 1) A keyword connection activity to engage participants in discussions with one another to explore the ways in which they describe their research. 2) An international panel discussion comprised of four established scholars from different iSchools, who are leading researchers in the area of keywords, language technologies, and the identity of iSchools. Currently, we have confirmed three panelists and are in conversation with a fourth. 3) A creative exercise in which groups of participants will be given a set of blank, large cubes on which to write six keywords that have emerged throughout the workshop. These "word dice" will then be used to initiate discussion regarding the connections between various terminologies and disciplines.

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Call for participation posted on workshop organizers' and schools' websites, social media, and listservs.

As participants register, they will be asked to fill out a researcher profile card, which will include their name, a photo, and several keywords that will describe their research interests and expertise.

March 2018

Half-day workshop will be organized as follows (final schedule will align with other workshops):

9:00 Welcome, overview, and introduction activity

9:10 Keyword iConnect activity

9:50 Break

10:00 Facilitated iTalk panel discussion

11:00 Break

11:15 iStories small group activity ("word dice")

11:45 Reporting on group discussions

12:00 Closing remarks and future directions (edited journal issue proposal)

12:15 Evaluation forms and appreciation gifts

12:30 Official closing

Goals
1. To highlight the importance, the benefits, and the difficulties of using keywords in the field of information studies as a meta-discipline.
2. To uncover the "invisible substrate" (Bates 1999) of knowledge (i.e., epistemological and ontological assumptions) underlying our use of different vocabularies, recognizing how they organize and shape our approaches to understanding the relationships between information, people, and technology.
3. To identify and discuss contentious keywords within the field of information studies.
4. To explore the communicative barriers associated with collaborative, interdisciplinary research in the area of information studies.
5. To reflect on the potential for communicative breakthroughs in collaborative, interdisciplinary research in the area of information studies.
6. To employ creative methods of inquiry in order to stimulate dialogue regarding the language of the iSchool community and the key concepts and controversies its members negotiate.

Outcomes
Short term outcomes

     The short-term outcomes, including an outline of this workshop and reflections from the organizers, will be published on the iStories website <iStories.info>. The organizers' plan is to make the iCubes ("word dice") accessible for future use and adaptation using Creative Commons attribution. Conversations regarding the keywords discussed will also be followed up on the iStories Research Lab media accounts by our Media Coordinator. Reflections and preliminary findings from the workshop will be published in an open access journal article.

Long term outcomes

     The long-term outcomes of this workshop include the creation of an interactive, open, and evolving game design for use and adaptation in the iSchool community in order to further explore keywords in information research. The intention is to hold a follow-up workshop at the 2019 iConference to test the prototype and gather feedback. The objective of the game design is to create an educational tool for iSchool instructors and a resource for researchers who are engaging in interdisciplinary research.

Relevance to the iConference
     This workshop builds on the theme of global collaboration addressed at the 2017 iConference in its exploration of the 2018 theme of transforming digital worlds. It will expand on recent scholarship (Hartel & Savolainen, 2016) in the iSchool community that focuses on creatively exploring and identifying the conceptual biases that shape the way we approach our

research of information. By examining the role language plays in our interdisciplinary collaborations, it asks participants to consider the transformative nature of the vocabularies we employ in our research as scholars of information. Benjamin Peters (2016, p. xiv) notes that "keywords are the lexical operators of the current information age" and that many of the information technologies today might be described as "*terminological technologies*" (p. xv). As a meta-discipline that is concerned with the processes and domains that structure people's interactions with information (Bates, 1999), it is important to understand the role words play in the field of information research. Understanding the transformations taking place in digital worlds requires that we unlock the complexities of the terminologies we adopt in our research.

Attendance

We will welcome 30–35 participants from all backgrounds. We are hoping to bring together a diverse range of researchers to exchange unique experiences, interests, and research paradigms.

Special Requirements

The room will need a projector and screen, tables arranged so that participants can collaborate in groups of 5-6 people, and table surface for participants to hang easel-sized sheets of Post-it paper (also, if possible, easels, easel-sized Post-it pads, and felt markers – enough for 6 groups). Once we learn what will be available onsite, we will supply any other materials required for activities during the workshop, e.g., cardboard cubes.

In addition, we request access to designated wall space—approximately 5 feet by 15 feet—in a general conference area, on which we will place a durable poster paper that will function as a graffiti wall on which all conference attendees can contribute their own keywords/comments to the workshop discussion. An explanation of the wall's function will be posted beside it, along with a set of felt markers of different colours and thicknesses, Post-it pads, and an invitation for conference attendees to post their own word/comment. The invitation to add to the graffiti wall will read: "Sticky keywords: What iWords do you get stuck on?" Following the closing of the iConference, we will photograph and digitally distribute the graffiti wall, sending the image of the graffiti wall to workshop participants, and will make the graffiti wall image available through our website for ongoing access. We hope that inviting conference attendees to document their thoughts in this way will extend the theme of keywords and the language of information research beyond the workshop to the wider iSchool community.

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