Awards Luncheon
Tuesday, November 5, 2013

2013 ASIS&T Award of Merit to Carol Kuhlthau

Carol C. Kuhlthau, professor emerita in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, is the 2013 recipient of the ASIS&T Award of Merit, the highest honor presented by ASIS&T. The award goes to an individual who has made a noteworthy contribution to the field of information science, including the expression of new ideas, the creation of new devices, the development of better techniques and outstanding service to the profession.

Professor Kuhlthau is internationally recognized for her contributions to the study of information behavior. Her best-known work is her book Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services. In her rigorous research she observed student information seeking, developed a model of the information search process, then tested the model in several ways over several studies to validate and refine the model. This model has motivated widespread current research interest in the affective components of the information search process. In addition information professionals’ practice has been significantly influenced by her publications. Her life and work are models in several senses. Personally highly intelligent, judicious, and modest, she has earned the highest respect from scholars and students in the field of information behavior as well as practitioners. Through example, Carol Kuhlthau has taught many in the field how to do rigorous research, how to mentor, and how to teach.
Award of Merit Acceptance Speech

By Carol Collier Kuhlthau

I am delighted and honored to receive the ASIST Award of Merit. It is especially gratifying to be recognized for my work on the Information Search Process that has grown over the years and continues to be important. Back in the late 80’s when I was starting out, bringing emotion into the conversation seemed more than a little strange to many in information science. But early on ASIST was open to giving me a hearing by accepting my papers for conferences and publication.

ASIST has been a wonderful affiliation for me. This association provides a collaboration and dialog of research and researchers that has been immensely important for me. I’ve benefited from being able to share ideas with researchers in the field and hear their work year after year. It has been an annual conversation of sharing and learning over the years. I have received good feedback on my ideas and some very practical advice. I remember after my first ASIST presentation, one I approached with considerable trepidation, Evelyn Daniel kindly took me aside to let me know that my slides were terrible - way too cluttered and not readable from the back of the room. You can be sure that I didn’t make that mistake again. ASIST enabled me to see how my research fit into the whole spectrum of information science research. Our recent name change reflects the international nature of the field and many of my most interesting collaborations have been with international colleagues.

2013 is the anniversary of thirty years of my work on the ISP starting with my doctoral dissertation in 1983. I began by wanting to understand more about how students learn from multiple sources and why it seemed so hard for them to engage in their own inquiry. My research into their perspective of information seeking opened up the “big problem” that got me started on my scholarly journey and that still intrigues me today.

When I studied for my MLS at Rutgers in the early 70’s it was called “Library School.” But it was very much a library and information science program. So from the beginning I took an information science perspective of librarianship.

I have been interested in theories on the boundaries of library and information science. My undergraduate work was firmly grounded in Deweyan philosophy of education along with other learning theorists, particularly the constructivists as opposed to the behaviorists. In light of this, while studying for my Masters degree I realized that I was most interested in libraries for learning. So in the early 80’s when working on my doctorate I concentrated on information behavior that resulted in learning and Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory from psychology clearly influenced my Information Search Process model.

When I joined the Rutgers faculty, library and information science had recently merged with communication and journalism bringing in a wide range of converging perspectives. Tefko Saracevic and Nick Belkin joined the LIS faculty as senior professors. The Ph.D. was a joint program across the school prompting lots of discussion on theories and application. Communication brought social construction into the conversation and that
was particularly pertinent to my work. It was an especially fruitful environment for exploring ideas and fascinating to be a part of it all.

Of course the 1990’s were a time of tremendous advances in information technology. I started researching information behavior in a contained-collection library world and everything changed in amazing ways within a short time. It was a fantastic time to be doing research in library and information science and still is.

Three important changes in information science occurred during that time.

First, use became an important area of interest. Questions of purpose became important. Why do people seek information? What’s their purpose? How do they use it after they find it? That was right up my alley. Today it may seem strange to think of purpose not being important but only as information became available “where you are all the time” did serious questions of use come to the fore. SigUse is now one of the most active special interest groups in ASIST.

The second change was the users’ experience in information seeking became an area of interest. When I came into this field emotions were thought to be outside the paradigm of information science. But once the “black box” of users’ experience was opened there was no denying the importance of emotions in information behavior.

Third, the concepts underlying information behavior became an increasingly important area of interest. Researchers looked into their findings for concepts to build the theoretical framework of information science.

It may sound like the really interesting work is behind us. I don’t think so. The broad range of information science research offers important insights into the most pressing problems of the complex information environment of the 21st century. But information science research is something of an insiders’ game. We are interested in each other’s research findings and build on each other’s work. But for the most part there has been only minimal transport outside the field in this time when it would seem our work would be most valued. We each need to ask what is the value-added that my work brings to society as a whole?

My own area of information seeking for learning is an example in point. Educators are struggling to transform schools to prepare students for living in the information society. My research offers some important insight into the process of learning from multiple sources of information that is central to this task. We have developed a design framework based on the ISP model, called Guided Inquiry, that makes these concepts and
insights accessible for school administrators, teachers and librarians to put into action in schools.

Information science is a relatively young discipline, but it is right at the center of every aspect of people’s lives. We are just at the beginning of the age of information that holds tremendous potential for the future of information science. The big question is how will information retrieval and information behavior research influence the way systems and services enable people to be smarter, wiser, more creative, productive and perhaps even happier? In my view this is the challenge before every researcher in information science today. What are the implications of your work? You know, that section at the end of the research report that is usually an after thought. I urge you to consider seriously the implications of your research. How does your research contribute to the good of society? How can you make your findings accessible outside the field? This is a wonderful time to be in this field. There is much work ahead. Let’s get going.