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Promoting Transformative Encounters in Libraries and Archives

Carli V. Lowe
San José State University, carli.lowe@sjsu.edu

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Promoting Transformative Encounters in Libraries and Archives

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PROMOTING TRANSFORMATIVE ENCOUNTERS IN
LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

ABSTRACT

Purpose: In several existing studies of Information Encountering (IE), a recurring sub-phenomenon of serendipity arises that indicates the potential for certain unexpected encounters with information to be transformative. I will label this sub-phenomenon Transformative Information Encountering (TIE), deriving its definition from an application of Transformative Education theory to existing understandings of IE. I will discuss the potential for librarians and archivists to promote TIE through everyday practices.

Design/methodology/approach: After defining and identifying TIE in existing studies of IE, this article will put models of IE in conversation with theories of Transformative Education and propose ways in which TIE may arise in the everyday work of librarians and archivists.

Findings: In Transformative Education theory, there are three phases of the process of critical premise reflection that may be especially relevant to the work of libraries and archives. These are A disorienting dilemma (phase 1); recognition that the process of transformation is shared (phase 4); and acquiring knowledge and skills (phase 7). Each of these align with aspects of IE models.

Originality: While several IE studies have suggested the existence of TIE as a sub phenomenon, none thus far have attempted to define it or apply an understanding of it to LIS work.

Practical implications: Understanding how TIE might inform everyday LIS work may increase the positive impact cultural institutions have on the communities they serve.

Keywords: Information encountering, serendipity, education, transformative theory

INTRODUCTION

When I first read about Sanda Erdelez's model of Information Encountering (IE) while in library school, it felt like the beginning of an answer to a question I had long been contemplating. Throughout my life I have happened upon sources of information I was not actively seeking but that have had a profound impact on the way I see myself and the world at large. I had recently begun to wonder about other's experiences with similarly unsought information. I soon discovered that IE models speak more to the mechanisms of the encountering than they do to the impact of those encounters. In response, I began actively seeking the work of psychologists, neuroscientists, and educators who study how the human mind becomes open to learning something new. Jon Wergin is one such educator. His discussion of Jack Mezirow's Transformative Education (TE) theory in his book *Deep Learning in a Disorienting World* (2020) included a list of Mezirow's Phases of Critical Premise Reflection. I immediately recognized parallels between Mezirow's phases and models of IE, and began to explore how IE and TE might inform one another.

Studies of serendipity in Library and Information Science (LIS) settings have resulted in a growing body of models informing the work of librarians, archivists, and others who work with information resources. These models and the studies in which they are rooted are well-summarized in several existing articles, most recently in Sanda Erdelez and Stephann Makri's "Information Encountering Re-Encountered"(2020). In this article, Erdelez and Makri also propose an updated definition of the term Information Encountering (IE) to encompass the multitude of forms serendipity can take in the context of information acquisition:

“. . . finding interesting, useful or potentially useful information when looking for different . . . information, not looking for any information in particular or not looking for

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3 information at all . . . [T]he information that is encountered can be physical or digital, in
4 various forms (e.g. textual, visual) and, in addition to traditional media, can also include
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6 objects and places” (2020, p. 736).
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10 Erdelez and Makri acknowledge the evolution of research related to Information Encountering
11 over the past twenty years and propose this unifying definition as a way to bring the full universe
12 of studies under a cohesive theoretical umbrella.
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17 In several existing IE studies, a recurring sub-phenomenon of serendipity arises that
18 indicates the potential for certain unexpected encounters with information to have transformative
19 impacts on the encounterer. In this article, I will label this sub-phenomenon *Transformative*
20 *Information Encountering* (TIE), deriving its definition from an application of Transformative
21 Education theory to existing understandings of IE. I will discuss the potential for librarians and
22 archivists to promote TIE through everyday practices.
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33 **TRANSFORMATIVE INFORMATION ENCOUNTERING**

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35 Transformative Information Encountering arises when an unexpected encounter with
36 information is more than intriguing, even more than useful. TIE is encountering information that
37 leads to a change of strongly held beliefs, values, or world views, whether in the moment or after
38 a process of reflection and learning.
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44 There are existing studies of IE that indicate the existence of TIE without terming it as
45 such. In 2003, Allen Foster and Nigel Ford identified a range of responses a scholar may have to
46 encountering unexpected information. They classified these responses into two types:
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51 “(1) reinforcing or strengthening the researcher’s existing problem conception or
52 solution; or
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3 (2) taking the researcher in a new direction, in which the problem conception or solution
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5 is reconfigured in some way” (2003, p. 330).
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8 When an unexpected encounter with information takes the encounterer in a new direction or
9
10 prompts them to reconsider a problem, they may be experiencing a transformative encounter
11
12 with information.
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15 Similarly, in McCay-Peet and Toms’s 2015 study of work-related serendipity among
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17 professionals and academics, they assert that the outcome of serendipitous experiences can be
18
19 valuable at three levels: “personal, organizational or community, and global” (2015, p. 1473).
20

21 They note that these outcomes range “from minor to life-changing” (2015, p. 1470).
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23
24 Transformative Information Encountering lies at the life-changing end of this spectrum. The
25
26 value may originally manifest at the personal level, but then impacts relationships between the
27
28 individual and society at large.
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31 TIE may follow a natural progression similar to the systematic unfolding of IE
32
33 occurrences as identified by Erdelez in her 2000 study of IE in online environments. Erdelez
34
35 proposes that IE consists of functional elements: noticing, stopping, examining, storing, using,
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37 and returning (2000, p. 368). This systematic unfolding will inform an understanding of TIE,
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39 which seems to begin with a moment of encountering and continue through a process of
40
41 transformation that may involve additional information encountering along the way. A trigger is
42
43 usually at the heart of these actions, prompting the encounterer to notice and stop (Erdelez, 2004,
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45 p. 1017). However, the differences between IE in general and TIE in particular will be partially
46
47 rooted in the particular qualities of certain triggers that prompt transformative experiences.
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52 Erdelez’s 2004 study of researchers’ experiences with IE presents the idea that its
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54 occurrence “is facilitated by parallel presence of various situations in people’s everyday lives
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3 that can be defined very broadly as ‘problems’” (2004, p. 1015). While some parallel problems
4 may be mundane, (e.g. finding the best brand of tomato sauce), others may be related to deeply
5 held concerns about the world or a person’s identity. A transformative encounter with
6 information occurs when a person encounters information that speaks to concerns rooted in
7 deeply held values, beliefs, and world views.
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14 15 16 17 **TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION THEORY**

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19 The existence of transformative encounters with information indicate a connection
20 between IE models and Transformative Education theory. First introduced by Jack Mezirow in
21 1978 as perspective transformation, Transformative Education theory (TE) proposes a systematic
22 process by which an individual moves from learning something new to changing the way they
23 see and operate in the world. Mezirow defines perspective transformation as follows:
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30 “... the emancipatory process of *becoming critically aware of how and why the structure*
31 *of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our*
32 *relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating*
33 *integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. It is the learning*
34 *process by which adults come to recognize their culturally induced dependency roles and*
35 *relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them” (1981, pp. 6–*
36 *7).*
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47 The process includes not just becoming aware, but taking action in response. Mezirow outlines
48 an eleven-phase process of critical premise reflection as follows:
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51 “1. A disorienting dilemma
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- 3 2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, sometimes turning to religion for
- 4 support
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- 8 3. A critical assessment of assumptions
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- 10 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and
- 11 others have negotiated a similar change
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- 14 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
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- 17 6. Planning a course of action
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- 19 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
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- 21
- 22 8. Provisionally trying out new roles
- 23
- 24 9. Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships
- 25
- 26 10. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- 27
- 28 11. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new
- 29 perspective" (1994, p. 224).
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33 This process of “becoming critically aware” and taking action is not isolated to
34 classrooms. In IE research, Erdelez identifies a “trigger” as the common starting place for an
35 unexpected encounter with information (2004, p. 1017). This trigger may catch a person’s
36 attention because it relates to any number of parallel problems present in the person’s conscious
37 or subconscious mind (2004, p. 1015). Though not every trigger results in an encounterer
38 “becoming critically aware”, when a trigger does prompt this critical awareness, the result can be
39 transformative.
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49 A transformative trigger aligns with the concept of a “disorienting dilemma,” which
50 Mezirow situates as the first phase in the process of “critical premise reflection”:
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3 “Premise reflection can transform meaning perspectives, a less common and more
4 significant learning experience. Perspective transformation may be the result of a major
5 event in one’s life or the accumulative result of related transformations in meaning
6 schemes” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 224).
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12 In order for perspective transformation to occur, a person must first experience a disorienting
13 dilemma. While discussing Mezirow, Jon Wergin describes a disorienting dilemma as a moment
14 when you “experience something that catches you off guard, off balance, something you can't
15 quite make sense of, something you can't easily make meaning of. And it is too disturbing to
16 ignore” (2020, p. 28). As reflected in IE models, when this occurs a person can have several
17 different responses to it.
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26 IE researchers often describe serendipity as a joyful experience, however in the case of
27 disorienting dilemmas, the encounter can be less than comfortable at first. In discussing the work
28 of Dan Kahan on scientific literacy, psychologists Fernbach and Sloman acknowledge that “[t]o
29 discard a belief often means discarding a whole host of other beliefs, forsaking our communities,
30 going against those we trust and love, and in short, challenging our identities” (2017, p. 160).
31
32 Tingting Jiang, Fang Liu, and Yu Chi’s study of IE online highlights the importance of
33 understanding not just how the encountering occurs, but also what an individual does with
34 encountered information (2015, p. 1148). They propose a model that, when read with TIE in
35 mind, implies that consideration of “Mid-activities”—noticing, examining, and acquiring
36 information—as well as the encounterer’s intentionality, curiosity, emotions, and attitudes (2015,
37 p. 1147), are critical to whether an encounter with information will lead to perspective
38 transformation. An encounter with a disorienting dilemma is not in and of itself enough to
39 catalyze a transformation.
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3 The emotional repercussions of a disorienting dilemma, or transformative trigger, relate
4 to Heinström's assertion of the psychological factors involved in IE (2006). Reporting on her
5 research with three different populations of students, she ultimately concludes that a positive
6 emotional state, in addition to certain personality traits and a high level of motivation, are highly
7 correlative to experiencing what she terms Incidental Information Acquisition. Heinström claims
8 that "... in emotionally stressed moods thought processes may be blocked against divergent
9 thinking" (2006, p. 580), limiting the encounter's ability to recognize the potential in unsought
10 information. An environment conducive to TIE must account for these affective factors that will
11 impact whether a person engages with or rejects a transformative encounter with information.
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24 Wergin highlights the precarity of this moment following the initial disorientation:

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26 "A disorienting dilemma should make us curious, but not so curious that we put ourselves
27 in a place that feels isolated and unsafe. We want to make meaning of and interact with
28 the dilemma, but only within socially sanctioned limits. We need to feel that changing
29 our belief system will make us more competent in dealing with our environment, as long
30 as doing so will not threaten our important social networks (and our cherished self-
31 images)" (2020, p. 35).
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40 If a person feels threatened by the new information, they are likely to retreat. As Sloman and
41 Fernbach put it, "The first step to correcting false beliefs is opening people's minds to the idea
42 that they and their community might have the science wrong. No one wants to be wrong" (2017,
43 p. 170). Heinström identifies a correlation between a positive emotional state and receptivity to
44 unexpected information (2006, p. 580), however Transformative Education theory suggests that
45 it is possible to move from an uncomfortably disorienting IE through a process of perspective
46 transformation, as long as the discomfort remains at a tolerable level.
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3 Much of the work of an individual's critical premise reflection may take place beyond the
4 reach of libraries and archives, however it is worth examining the roles that information
5 professionals can play in both prompting disorienting dilemmas and facilitating the phases
6 leading to perspective transformation. In what follows, I propose ways in which libraries and
7 archives might engage with this process, especially in the following phases:
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14 Phase One: The disorienting dilemma

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17 Phase Four: Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are
18 shared and others have negotiated a similar change
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21 Phase Seven: Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
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24 By incorporating an understanding of Transformative Education theory into our work with
25 information resources, librarians and archivists may be able to increase the frequency with which
26 our communities experience Transformative Information Encountering.
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PROMOTING TRANSFORMATIVE INFORMATION ENCOUNTERING

Phase One: Disorienting Dilemmas

As the first phase of critical premise reflection, a disorienting dilemma prompts a series of subsequent phases, some of which may include information seeking activities. Given the nature of libraries and archives, librarians and archivists may more often encounter people seeking information as a result of a disorienting dilemma, rather than having the opportunity to initiate such a dilemma. However, disorienting dilemmas can arise even in the midst of other information seeking activities (Foster and Ford, 2003, p. 330). In order to promote Transformative Information Encountering (TIE), librarians and archivists can choose to design spaces, curate exhibits, and plan events informed by an understanding of the situations in which a disorienting dilemma is most likely to occur.

Diversity is a key component in prompting disorienting dilemmas. The word diversity is being used so often at the time of this writing that it can begin to take on more “buzz” than meaning in everyday consciousness. But the frequency with which diversity is discussed is due to its ongoing and critical importance to human activity and interaction. It is, therefore, worth revisiting the definition. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines diversity as follows:

1: the condition of having or being composed of differing elements : VARIETY especially : the inclusion of people of different races . . . cultures, etc. in a group or organization . . .

2: an instance of being composed of differing elements or qualities : an instance of being diverse . . .” (Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Diversity. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved February 10, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity>)

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3 To expand on this definition in the context of libraries and archives, a diverse space or collection
4 is one in which multiple identities, ideas, norms, etc. are represented.
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8 The more diversity represented in a space or collection, the more likely it is that people
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10 interacting with the resources will experience a disorienting dilemma. Paraphrasing Terenzini
11 (2014) on the qualities of “[e]xperiences that promote student learning,” Wergin asserts that
12 these “[a]lmost uniformly involve encounters with difference, both with people different from
13 themselves and with ideas different from those currently held. Because they challenge existing
14 beliefs these encounters create cognitive dissonance” (2020, p. 32). IE research supports this
15 claim. Jiang et al. found that the number of resources available to information seekers is related
16 to the probability of having an encounter (2015, p. 1150).
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26 This establishes yet another in a long list of important reasons for libraries and archives
27 to engage in practices that promote multiple forms of diversity. When cultural institutions have
28 diverse collections, with materials that represent a multiplicity of identities, experiences, ideas,
29 norms, etc., and especially with materials that represent identities, experiences, ideas, norms,
30 etc., that are rarely encountered in our users’ everyday lives, they create opportunities for the
31 constructive cognitive dissonance that can instigate the process of learning and critical premise
32 reflection. When cultural institutions prioritize exhibits and events that center marginalized
33 communities’ voices, ideas, histories, and experiences, they are creating the “encounters with
34 difference” that promote deep learning. When spaces are welcoming and inclusive, it is more
35 likely that people with different identities, experiences, ideas, and values will be able to interact
36 with one another. Even if libraries and archives already engage in practices that promote
37 diversity, engaging with TIE in mind may shift plans and priorities, or even how we assess the
38 gaps in a collection or the success of an event.
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3 For example, as University Archivist at ~~[removed for blind review]~~San José State, I had
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5 become aware of several well-known stories that are often at the forefront of people's minds
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7 when they think about university history. While preparing a digital exhibit that included a
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9 display of items related to the university's response to World War II, several of these familiar
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11 stories presented themselves: The football players who were in Honolulu to play a game when
12
13 Pearl Harbor was attacked, the numerous students who left their studies to enlist as soldiers, and
14
15 the use of the men's gymnasium as a processing center for Japanese Americans on their way to
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17 government incarceration camps. The documentation on these stories was numerous due to
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19 widespread and ongoing interest in them. It would have been easy to include only these in the
20
21 exhibit and nothing more. Less well-documented were the names and stories of the individual
22
23 students who found themselves in the ~~[removed for blind review]~~San José State Japanese Club
24
25 one semester and forced into incarceration camps the next, via the processing center on their own
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27 college campus no less. The final exhibit included both the well-known and lesser-known stories,
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29 but with an emphasis on the lesser-known stories. Doing so entailed taking the time to quantify
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31 how much of the exhibit was being dedicated to each story in the hopes of providing new
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33 perspectives and perhaps prompting some in our community to question what they thought they
34
35 knew about university history.
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42 It may not always be possible for librarians and archivists to know when an attempt to
43
44 prompt a disorienting dilemma has been successful, but emphasizing the perspectives and needs
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46 of marginalized communities as well as multiple manifestations of diversity, may increase the
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48 frequency with which user communities find themselves in this first phase of transformation
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50 while interacting with these institutions and their resources.
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Phase Four—Recognition That the Process of Transformation is Shared

Community and community spaces are critical to transformative experiences, providing a way for people to feel connected with others who are investigating similar questions. In *The Knowledge Illusion*, Sloman and Fernbach discuss the importance of community to our sense of what we think we know (Sloman and Fernbach, 2017, p. 12). Evolutionarily, humans have relied on one another for survival. A single human does not need to be an expert on hunting and gardening and raising children and building boats and treating illness as long as they are part of a community of humans who among them share all of this knowledge. This has led our brains to perceive safety in having shared knowledge and beliefs with a community. As a result, our brains also perceive information that challenges a shared belief as a threat, because it may separate us from our community (2017, pp. 112, 160). As reflected in Mezirow's phase four, being in community with others within the process of a transformation can mitigate the sense of vulnerability, guilt, and shame experienced, and inform the critical reflection that follows a disorienting dilemma.

IE researchers also recognize the role community plays in the discovery of information. Pálsdóttir, in her 2011 study of opportunistic discovery of information among elderly people living in Iceland, found that organizations such as associations and sewing clubs became crucial information grounds. Study participants shared that a sense of solidarity and an understanding of one another's needs inspired them to disseminate encountered information to others (Pálsdóttir, 2011).

Constructing literal and metaphorical spaces for dialogue and connection—whether a tangible meeting room or event, or a less tangible silence that can be filled by new voices or a reputation for being a safe and affirming environment—may increase the probability that users will find the community they need to be able to continue along a transformative path. These

1
2
3 necessary connections may include the ability to make internal connections while exploring an
4
5 idea—i.e. an understanding of how the idea connects to the individual—as well as external
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7 connections allowing the individual to discover that they are not the only one asking questions.
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9
10 McCay-Peet and Toms discuss the “social aspect of serendipity” and “the notion that serendipity
11
12 springs from interaction with other people or *relationships*” (McCay-Peet and Toms, 2015, p.
13
14 1468). Though this discussion centers around triggers, which align more closely with Phase One
15
16 of critical premise reflection, their findings amplify the important role of community in how
17
18 people discover and respond to unexpected information. Many libraries and archives already
19
20 provide spaces for communities to connect. We host events to bring communities into our
21
22 buildings. Communities reserve our spaces for meetings. In some reading rooms, there is no
23
24 demand for silence and discussion among researchers and staff flows freely. As with disorienting
25
26 dilemmas, perhaps looking at this work through the lens of TIE will shift how we plan and
27
28 prioritize.
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33 In February 2020, the California Historical Society held an intimate gathering titled
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35 *Hidden Histories of African Americans in the Bay Area* (“Black History Month,” 2020). Curator
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37 Susan Anderson had worked with reference archivist Frances Kaplan to identify documents and
38
39 photographs throughout the collection that provided a picture of the influence of Black
40
41 Americans in the earliest days of California history. These were items discovered scattered
42
43 throughout various collections that told a commonly overlooked aspect of history. The items
44
45 were laid out across two tables, and attendees were invited to move with the curator as she talked
46
47 about each item and the story it told. This format meant attendees were in close proximity to one
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49 another and to the curator throughout the evening. This proximity promoted a more natural
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51 dialogue than may have occurred in a traditional presentation with a speaker on a stage and a
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3 question and answer period following the talk. Attendees asked questions of the curator, but also
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5 of one another. They called each other's attention to details they noticed in the materials. As a
6
7 participant in this event, I experienced a sense of community around shared enthusiasm for and
8
9 interest in the history of Black Californians. Similar events have taken place at the San Francisco
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11 Public Library, which they call "Hands On History" ("Presentation: Hands on History | San
12
13 Francisco Public Library," n.d.). This approach brings people with a shared curiosity together
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15 with one another and with the collections. It is an opportunity to make connections internally as a
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17 person explores an idea, as well as externally as a person discovers they are not the only one with
18
19 a particular question. In the midst of the phases of critical premise reflection, an event such as
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21 this may allow a person to discover others who are negotiating a similar transformation in their
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23 knowledge and beliefs. This sense of camaraderie or even solidarity can mitigate feelings of fear
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25 or discomfort, and facilitate continued transformation.
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33 *Phase Seven—Acquiring Knowledge and Skills*

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35 It is possible that the majority of people who enter a cultural institution are neither
36
37 primed for a disorienting dilemma, nor hoping to connect with community, but are rather seeking
38
39 new knowledge and skills, engaging in the activities LIS researchers are usually addressing when
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41 they discuss information seeking behavior. This information seeking can be rooted in everyday
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43 questions or profound needs, and depending on the need, finding the sought for information can
44
45 have a range of impacts on the seeker. Librarians and archivists often interact with information
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47 seekers in some type of reference exchange, whether this occurs at a reference desk, over email,
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49 through a live chat, or on a video conferencing platform. Critical to the reference interview is
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51 asking the right questions to understand what is at the heart of a person's information need.
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3 As a liaison librarian and archivist in an academic library, the majority of the reference
4 questions I receive from students involve their course assignments. They need ten scholarly
5 sources on U.S. immigration policy in the 1990s, or a primary source on the history of women's
6 sports programs, not necessarily to answer a question that is close to their hearts, but to satisfy
7 the professor's requirements for their assignment. Despite best efforts to teach students database
8 search strategies rather than simply delivering the articles they require, these types of reference
9 interactions tend to be largely transactional. These are legitimate information needs, but they
10 produce a particular type of interaction compared to a reference interaction with someone in the
11 midst of critical premise reflection.
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24 Brook, et al, in the article "In Pursuit of Antiracist Social Justice: Denaturalizing
25 Whiteness in the Academic Library," discuss the idea that the dialogue that takes place in the
26 context of a reference interaction has the potential to be liberatory. This potential is enhanced
27 with the recognition that the individuals on both sides of the desk (whether physical or virtual)
28 have knowledge to share. They advocate for training "... reference staff to employ problem-
29 posing methods of critical pedagogy in reference interactions in order to draw out patrons'
30 struggles against oppression and to help build strong and lasting solidarities with patrons"
31 (Brook et al., 2015, p. 276). This could be the foundation for a transformative reference
32 interaction: a reference interaction that fulfills the needs of the knowledge and skill seeking
33 phase of critical premise reflection, and makes it possible to take the next steps.
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47 A person who finds themselves in the knowledge seeking phase of critical premise
48 reflection may have already had an encounter that has created cognitive dissonance, spent time in
49 self-reflection, and survived feelings of guilt or shame. They may have reconsidered the
50 assumptions on which their old beliefs were based, and sought community with others who have
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3 similar questions. They may have explored new ideas and created a plan of action, so that by the
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5 time they are sitting on the other side of the reference desk they are likely to have a lot to say
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7 about the topic they are researching. There is an opportunity for the librarian or archivist to learn
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9 through careful listening and thoughtful questions, not just what the person's information need
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11 is, but how to be an ally (or a co-conspirator) in that moment, becoming invested, even in the
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13 short term, in this next step of the person's journey towards transformation. This reframing of the
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15 reference interaction may change the dynamic of the entire exchange, and those on both sides of
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17 the desk may walk away not quite the same people they were when the exchange began. As
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19 Brook, et al, put it, "In a reciprocal, dialogic process, librarians and patrons would share and be
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21 affected by each other's knowledge, care, and actions" (Brook et al., 2015, p. 275).
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26 A student who had been born in a country in Africa began to question the stories she had
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28 been taught about the impact (or lack thereof) of the Transatlantic Slave Trade on the history of
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30 her country. Finding herself in a program at the university to support students in pursuing
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32 graduate level research, she turned her curiosity into a research project, reaching out to me, as
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34 the liaison librarian, for assistance in finding resources. The energy and enthusiasm that this
35
36 student brought to the research consultation resulted in an entirely different interaction than the
37
38 typical student looking for sources for a class paper. More than a question of research expertise
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40 or experience, the difference was the student's sense of urgency in working not to meet a list of
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42 requirements, but to discover the answer to questions that were close to her heart and impacted
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44 the way she saw the world and her role in it.
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49 Aspects of *transactional* and *transformative* reference interactions may look the same on
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51 the surface. A student has a question or information need. The person on the other side of the
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53 reference desk (or the web conferencing platform or chat program), asks questions to understand
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3 what is at the heart of the information need, asks what resources the student has already found,
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5 and seeks to establish the context of the request, proceeding to guide the student in navigating
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7 relevant resources, using databases and research guides, and applying Boolean strategies and
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9 facets to narrow and expand searches. The mechanics of both types of interactions are quite
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11 similar. However, the underlying dynamics and the intentionality of how each actor engages in
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13 this conversation may shift if the information professional approaches it with an understanding
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15 of the potential for Transformative Information Encountering.
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21 CONCLUSION

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23 Understanding when the qualities of information itself, as well as the context within
24
25 which it is accessed, promote transformation, will enhance the impact cultural institutions such
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27 as libraries and archives can have on individuals and communities. Within this is an opportunity
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29 for libraries and archives to become or continue to be generative spaces where new ideas take
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31 root and grow beyond their walls. That is not to say that everything libraries and archives do *can*
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33 or *should* promote transformations, nor that transformations will not occur without intentional
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35 design.
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40 The idea of Transformative Information Encountering hovers perilously close to the
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42 realm of vocational awe. As Ettarh cautions:
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45 “Because the sacred duties of freedom, information, and service are so momentous, the
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47 library worker is easily paralyzed. In the face of grand missions of literacy and freedom,
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49 advocating for your full lunch break feels petty. And tasked with the responsibility of
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51 sustaining democracy and intellectual freedom, taking a mental health day feels
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53 shameful. Awe is easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a
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3 vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or
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5 passionate enough to serve without complaint” (Ettarh, 2018).
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8 Promoting Transformative Information Encountering will look different in different contexts,
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10 and may not be the right choice for every institution or professional. I offer TIE as another way
11
12 for librarians and archivists to understand the potential impact of the everyday work we do, and
13
14 choose to, as Meredith Farkas recently said in an interview, do “the most meaningful work rather
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16 than focusing on doing the most work” (Thomas and Farkas, 2021).
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19 It is worth investigating whether intentional design can provide more opportunities for
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21 Transformative Information Encountering in libraries and archives. McCay-Peet and Toms, in
22
23 discussing Björneborn, highlight “*serendipity dimensions* of the physical environment of the
24
25 library” which appear related to the phases of critical premise reflection, including: “*diversity,*
26
27 *pointers, imperfections, cross contacts, and explorability*” (McCay-Peet and Toms, 2015, p.
28
29 1466). They also identify “[f]actors that may facilitate the process of serendipity,” including
30
31 creating a trigger-rich environment and enabling connections (2015, p. 1471). De Rond likewise
32
33 promotes the importance of being in an environment where dissent and risk-taking are
34
35 encouraged, and heterogeneity is avoided, if serendipity is to occur (de Rond, 2014). If it is
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37 possible to facilitate more Information Encountering through design, it may be possible to work
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39 towards an environment in which more of those encounters have the potential to be
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41 transformative. Studying personal accounts of well-known as well as everyday people who have
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43 experienced such perspective transformations, with the intention of understanding the role IE
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45 played in their development of new world views, may enable the development of models that
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47 could then be put to the test in libraries and archives.
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3 It is possible that TIE is too elusive to fully understand and codify. If understanding the
4 factors that make TIE possible relies solely on deriving evidence from people's personal
5 experiences, any models that result will be unreliable. Studies in neuroscience have revealed that
6 people are consistently untrustworthy when it comes to reporting on why they say, think, or act
7 in a particular way (Mlodinow, 2012, pp. 176–218). Human memory is also unreliable (2012, pp.
8 52–78), while at the same time, identifying an experience as serendipitous is often only possible
9 in hindsight (McCay-Peet and Toms, 2015, p. 1464 discussing Makri & Blandford). Therefore,
10 interviewing individuals about their transformative encounters with information may provide
11 limited insight, however it is a place to start, and grounded in a long tradition of IE research.
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