The Role of Information in the Settlement Experiences of Refugee Students

School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
saguna.shankar@gmail.com; h.obrien@ubc.ca; elissahow@gmail.com; millicent.mabi@alumni.ubc.ca; luyilei0239@gmail.com; ceciliarose74@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
We conducted a pilot study to explore refugee students’ access to and use of information during the settlement process. Using arts-based elicitation and semi-structured interview techniques, we probed the information world of a refugee student studying in Canada. Our findings begin to identify the scope and variety of information sources that students consult at various stages of settlement and their utility. Our continued work in this area seeks to assist the Student Refugee Program (SRP) on our campus to advocate for and meet the information needs of refugee students by understanding what information is needed, when it is needed, and how to provide optimal access to it.

Keywords
Information needs, information practices, immigration and settlement, refugees, university students

INTRODUCTION
Migrational individuals are a population of much political, scholarly, and societal discourse and debate. The World Bank estimates that there are 60 million “forcibly displaced persons—which includes internally displaced people, refugees, and asylum seekers…the highest since World War II” (2016, p. 40). Forced mass displacement caused by political instability, economic collapse, or environmental disasters, has a direct impact on migrants, as well as regulatory government bodies, citizens, and service agencies. Migration is a two-way process in which the individual and the communities and institutions with which they interact evolve in response to exposure to one another (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010). Emigration, the leaving of ones home country for another, is precipitated by a number of “push” (e.g., poverty, war, crime) and “pull” (promise of higher standards of living, climate, political stability) factors (International Organization for Migration, 2015).

Refugees, displaced persons, and asylum seekers are distinguished from other immigrants due to the conditions that lead to migration and the lack of choice these present. While there has been much research over the last decade in information science (IS) on immigration and settlement (Caidi, et al., 2010; Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004; Quirke, 2015; Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007), there has been less emphasis on the information practices of refugees, with exceptions. Lloyd and colleagues considered collaborative information processing strategies used by refugees, i.e., the pooling of fragmented information to make health information decisions (Lloyd, 2014). She introduced the term information resilience to explain an individual’s capacity to access, understand, and use information during times of adversity or transition “when knowledge bases become disrupted” (Lloyd, 2015, p. 1030).

We appreciate this acknowledgement of refugees’ resilience, as it pushes against what Tuck (2011) and others call a “damage-centered” research approach that sees communities as “defeated and broken” (p. 412) and focuses on “what a particular student, family or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure” (p. 413). This project, which is concerned with the settlement experiences of refugee students in Canada, is just beginning. Yet, we have already observed the tenacity of the students, and the dedication of university and non-university personnel who work with them to help them succeed. We have, however, noted that the settlement process could be improved through a better understanding of refugee students’ information worlds, the sources of information available to them, and the ways in which information needs and strategies may be incongruent with what information is available, and when and how it is delivered. In this paper, we further contextualize this project, report on the findings of a small pilot study, and share future directions for this work.

PRIOR RESEARCH AND CONTEXT FOR RESEARCH
Information science models of settlement describe how newcomers access and engage with information before, during, and after arrival. Caidi et al. (2010) proposed a four stage-based model of settlement that could be applied across ethno-cultural groups. Individuals gather information from many sources online and offline during pre-migration. This is followed by an immediate stage where basic language training, shelter and orientation needs are
addressed. Next, newcomers enter an intermediate stage where they utilize local government and institutional resources for long-term basic needs. The final integrative stage sees newcomers comfortably making their own way. Kennan, Lloyd, Qayyum, and Thompson (2011) presented a three-phase approach to settlement: transitioning, settling in, and being settled. Models of settlement use comparable indicators of movement along a timeline from pre-arrival to permanent settlement, and often include accessing services provided by community organizations, volunteering or becoming otherwise civically engaged, and bridging and bonding with others. Settlement models can aid service providers in streamlining support so that specific types of information or resources are provided as and when needed. This streamlining may in turn combat information overload.

We examined the settlement process through information sources provided to refugees when applying to a Canadian university and upon acceptance and arrival. These sources, listed in Table 1, are derived from World University Services of Canada (WUSC) and Student Refugee Program (SRP) documents and staff. Each in-person, electronic, and print-based source has a specific academic (e.g., advising) or everyday life (e.g. health care) purpose. We elaborate on these sources below, positioning them within the settlement process (Caidi et al., 2010; Kennan et al. 2011).

Pre-migration stage or transitioning phase

Canadian universities, in cooperation with WUSC, recruit refugee students and resettle them in Canada. The recruitment and settlement processes involve negotiations between international and local academic bodies. Prospective students must meet high academic and English proficiency standards for admission. WUSC compiles dossiers of qualified students from refugee camps in Kenya, Malawi, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, and sends them to Canadian universities. At the local level, dossiers are reviewed to ensure students meet admission requirements, and university partners consider how many students they may offer admission. Following a notice of admission, university representatives await confirmation from WUSC and applicants, resulting in a memorandum of understanding amongst all parties.

Once students accept an offer of admission, the university receives the names and arrival dates of all prospective students. In the intermediate period between confirmation of admission and the start of the school year, prospective students may encounter barriers that prevent their travel to Canada. For example, immigration documents may not be approved by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. If things go according to plan, students receive a welcome document and University Recruitment Yearbook from the WUSC Local (LC) committee to introduce them to the university.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dossiers</td>
<td>Hard copy</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorandum of understanding</td>
<td>Digital copy</td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome document</td>
<td>Hard copy</td>
<td>Mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University recruitment yearbook</td>
<td>Hard copy</td>
<td>Mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting at the airport</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>In Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University WUSC orientation</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic advisors</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial health plan</td>
<td>Digital or hard copy</td>
<td>Email or in Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WUSC SRP handbook</td>
<td>Digital or hard copy</td>
<td>Email or in Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University WUSC LC website</td>
<td>Website resource</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WUSC LC guidelines</td>
<td>Digital or hard copy</td>
<td>Email or in Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events (e.g., social gatherings)</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>In person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Format and delivery mode of information

Immediate stage or settling in phase

When students arrive in Canada, a WUSC LC representative meets them at the airport, helps them settle into campus housing, and provides an informal orientation; a more formal WUSC orientation is also organized. Subsequently, students meet with an admissions advisor for assistance with course selection and registration. The application and migration process is intensive: students arrive within a few days of the start of classes. Arrival and the beginning of term are hectic, high-contact periods for Student Refugee Program (SRP) students and staff. During this time, students are oriented to university policies, programs, and support services, and make early connections with academic advisors, support staff, and peers. WUSC LC provides information to students about the provincial health plan, and orients them to WUSC program guidelines with a WUSC SRP handbook and guidelines. They are also referred to the WUSC website for current events and news.

Intermediate and integrative stages or settled phase

The last item in Table 1 are organized events, such as social gatherings, which present opportunities to check in with the students. However, beyond this we know little about the information sources utilized by refugee students after their
information relationships, participants, and to use visual methods to articulate information practices of young parents.

**Information Worlds** (Greyson, 2013). This visual method aims to enable creative communication about a participant’s information world. This pilot study is the beginning of a project to address these questions, with the goal of evaluating, designing and reconfiguring essential information practices that aid the settlement process. We used a novel arts-based elicitation technique, Information World Mapping (IWM), and semi-structured interview to appreciate a refugee student’s information world and the role of information within it.

**METHODS**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit and interview a single participant, who provided informed consent and was debriefed at the end of the study. We do not report identifying information about the participant (e.g., age, year of study, program of study) to maintain their privacy. Direct quotations are presented verbatim as supporting evidence, and altered only in instances where words or phrases may compromise the person’s identity.

This pilot study used IWM (Greyson, 2013) and semi-structured interviewing to draw upon the lived experiences of the refugee student’s information world and strategies used to navigate through it. We conducted a 15-minute IWM activity and a 45-minute semi-structured interview. In conjunction, these methods deepened and localized our understanding of refugee students’ information practices and specific strategies used to meet information needs during settlement. Arts-based elicitation and interviewing methods have been combined in previous work with young people (Greyson, 2013) and newcomers (Lingel, 2011) and were appropriate for exploratory purposes.

**Information World Mapping**

IWM is a projective drawing and mapping technique that aims to enable creative communication about a participant’s information world. This visual method is used to highlight and articulate information-related relationships, places, and processes (Greyson, 2013). Greyson drew upon information worlds (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010) and information horizons (Sonnenwald, 2005) to develop IWM to study the health information practices of young parents. IWM was designed to help reduce barriers between researchers and participants, and to use visual methods to articulate information relationships (Greyson, 2013). The mapping exercise allows participants to determine the format, scope, and practices for discussion in the interview, so that they may describe experiences based on their own interpretation, instead of foregrounding the researcher’s interpretations.

The IWM activity was completed at the beginning of the study session to put the participant at ease and provide time for reflection prior to the interview. We provided a blank poster board and markers, and encouraged the participant to draw their information world in any conceptual or spatial form. Our instructions were to “draw your information world,” and the concept *information world* was defined for the participant as the people, places, and things in their life that help them search for, discover, or use information. Then, four prompts were offered following an initial five-minute drawing period:

- What kinds of information did you need before or after you came to the university?
- What tasks have you needed information for during your time as a university student?
- What places do you turn to in order to look for or discover information? (i.e., real-world and online).
- What people, places, and things help you understand or use information?

IWM helped the participant locate themselves within their personal information landscape (Kennan, et al., 2013).

**Semi-structured Interview**

The interview consisted of ten questions related to information needs, practices, and privacy, technology use, and demographics. Questions were posed chronologically and thematically to document the participant’s current and pre-arrival information practices. We also asked for input about the university’s role in information service provision for refugee students. In particular, the interview focused on: Types of information needed prior to arrival; digital or physical places, on or off campus, to locate information or resources; challenges encountered in searching for information; and cases where needed information was not found. The interview was transcribed and a qualitative content analysis approach was used to inductively derive themes about information needs, practices, and the settlement process (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

**FINDINGS**

We combined data derived from the IWM activity and interview to understand our participant’s information world. This provides context for discussing information needs and sources, and the settlement process.

**Our Participant’s Information World**

Our participant drew a tree-like diagram in the IWM exercise, with information sources and channels represented as branches of the tree. The map did not express directionality of information flow (e.g., no arrows), or
prioritize information sources or depicted relationships. Rather, people and places were enumerated. The participant noted regular attendance at a faith center, which was discussed as a source of information and ongoing social connection. We learned more about our participant’s information world as we moved into the interview. We have organized our data to reflect settlement stages/phases.

**Pre-migration stage or transitioning phase**

There was an indication that our participant was not equipped with accessible information about the city, university, and academic program policies prior to arrival. They consulted with friends who were studying at various Canadian universities, but since experiences of living in Canada depend on local factors (e.g., community, geography, university policies), the student may have built an inaccurate picture of life in Canada before arriving.

**Immediate stage or settling in phase**

The participant described a range of everyday life information needs, or what they called “the convenient things you need for your daily life,” namely finding work or calculating the cost of groceries, but did not always have a clear sense of how to obtain information:

> For example, let’s say I want a job. Where can I get it, where? I don’t know, like, I need information for that. So, it’s a, it’s a, recurring daily repetition things. Repeatedly, that you need it every time.

This challenge of “getting started” on an information quest led the participant to question what the best source of information would be for a particular information need, and that sometimes ideas of where to look were exhausted.

> The hardest challenge is knowing what you, is knowing a little bit about the information [...] you want a job and you don’t even know what department offers that job. Or I want to go repair my iPhone, the screen, and I don’t even know where to start to do that. Do I have to go to Apple or do they have another...so sometimes you go to Google and sometimes Google don’t have what you want, and seeing here is a busy life you have to run out of people.

Francis and Yan (2016) noted that newcomer youth from African countries living in Canada expressed the need for social connections with service providers. Refugee youth may not feel comfortable requesting personal everyday life information in institutional settings, such as student services offices, without an ongoing social connection to establish trust. The participant in the present study discussed unevenness in approaches to advising across academic units:

> It need to be very intensive to sit down with someone. And, there are some other departments that are alright like that are good that can give a very good direction but some departments are not like that they just say take these courses, take these courses, okay yeah.

This preference for face-to-face interactions when seeking information was a common thread in the literature: newcomers often want to engage socially with peers and professionals to obtain information (Francis & Yan, 2016; Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016). In this way, contextualizing or processing information can occur at the site of information exchange to integrate it collaboratively with peers and service professionals into one’s knowledge base.

Social media and web search was also mentioned to meet ongoing everyday life information needs. However, technology use was not consistent across everyday life and academic spheres. The participant indicated needing to use a computer for academic work, but not being comfortable with required software (“It was really too hard for me”) and needing “basic knowledge” because “I have never used computers before”. The participant gave the example:

> Like let’s say I want to prepare a slides, I want to prepare a presentation, I need to go look for a friend to help me because I don’t even know how to prepare that.

There is limited access to technology in refugee camps, and very little time to learn to use it upon arrival. Courses may require the use of software for basic (e.g., giving presentations, writing and submitting assignments), or subject-specific tasks (e.g., data analysis and modeling). Making sense of the technological landscape needed to meet the demands of ongoing academic work is challenging if computer literacy skills and computational ways of thinking are limited or minimal. Overall, our sense of the participant’s information world was that it was “overloaded.” When we look at the information sources in Tables 1, most are delivered pre- or upon immediate arrival at university. In addition to receiving orientation information, refugee students are also immersed in their course work right away, adding to their information load.

**Intermediate and integrative stages or settled phase**

University is a costly endeavor, and many refugees, including our participant, attempt to financially support family in their home country (World Bank Group, 2016). The participant related financial struggles, as refugee students have tuition support for the duration of their studies, but housing support is only provided in the first year. As a result, the interviewee took on employment to make ends meet:

> People come with so much expectation, they think they are coming to paradise, they think there is no problem anymore. The true story is people are struggling...I am here talking to you and then after I finish here I’m going to my tutor, then after finishing I’m going to work, until tomorrow.
morning. I’ll come tomorrow morning at seven and I’ll be at the university at eight then have a nap and I have a class at 12 and I have to wake up at 11 that means three hours of sleep and I have to go to class and I have to come back and go to work in the night.

Juggling work and academic studies caused physical stress (e.g., lack of sleep) and mental anguish; our participant explained that money was a major concern that affected the capacity to study. The student’s schedule left little time for coursework, affected the ability to seek support from university services, participate in extracurricular activities, or form and maintain a social network. Establishing a group of trusted friends, peers, and mentors has been associated with positive social capital (Caidi et al., 2010), and the inability to engage socially or civically has implications for later stages of settlement. The question of whether refugee students truly became settled was raised by the participant, who shared the sense that peers in the SRP “don’t really graduate well. They fail to get a lot of opportunity outside,” and that “most of the students from [refugee camps] do not end up making their dreams. They don’t end up studying what they really want, even if they have potential, because it is so competitive.” The participant perceived that Canadian-born students were fortunate in their educational opportunities:

And other students that are raised in a better conducive environment are not the same like those that are raised in the circumstances at which they are so scared, they have nothing to eat.

However, it should be mentioned that our participant expressed a great deal of self-reliance and resilience, and had already overcome many information and non-information related barriers to travel to Canada to study.

In summary, we have begun to explore the stages/phases of settlement in a cursory way, based on our limited data. An emerging theme for this particular individual is the importance of social connectivity in the settlement process. During pre-migration/transitioning, the student connected with peers already studying in Canada, but did not mention the formal materials provided by WUSC/universities. Upon arrival, the student cited challenges around connecting with an academic advisor and using technology for coursework; the solution for the latter was to “find a friend” to help. Lastly, comments from the participant suggested that they were not completely “settled in” and their need to attend school and hold down employment affected them physically and emotionally. This has consequences for their academic success, but we also noted that it left little time for socializing and engaging in extracurricular activities within the university or broader communities. This results in lost opportunities to gain social capital, which may be crucial to becoming fully integrated in their new home.

Limitations and Future Work
This pilot study focused on the information world and settlement process of one student and cannot be generalized to all refugee students. A larger sample would allow us to compare refugee students from various countries across disciplinary programs in different years of study to identify common information practices and experiences in the settlement process. Further, there is much LIS literature on international students, which has explored studying abroad, e.g., issues of language, different education systems. Due to space limitations, we did not review it here, but acknowledge its contributions to our ongoing work.

We are experimenting with IWM, an arts-based elicitation method. It was challenging to use the map as a data source since we had one artifact, but IWM did allow us to initiate and ease into our interview with the participant, and established a space for reflection at the beginning of the session (Greyson, 2013). We also learned more about our participant’s sense of self during this portion of the study. Moving forward, we believe IWM will be a useful facilitation tool and means of assessing refugee students’ familiarity with, and knowledge about, information services and support on campus. We may consider other arts-based elicitation methods, such as participatory mapping (Lingel, 2015) or Photo Voice (Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016) to retain students’ agency in the research process and outcomes.

Previous work that has constructed models of settlement (Caidi et al., 2010; Kennan et al., 2011) provides a foundation upon which to think about the settlement process and the role of information within it. However, we recognize that models of settlement may be limited in that they are two-dimensional and do not consider how information is situated (e.g., digital or physical media, social spheres, geographic location in the city). The situatedness of information has been a longstanding interest in research on the information practices of newcomers (Fisher, et al., 2004; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016), but in two-dimensional models, the physical, social, and textual context is missing. Approaches that situate practices in context include those such as Lingel’s (2015), who found that transnational newcomers generated knowledge about urban space through wandering, and information seeking and processing habits developed in response to lostness. Combining participatory mapping of neighborhoods, participatory wandering, and interviews, Lingel found that information practices and relationships to technology shifted as individuals spatially adjusted to New York City. Lingel’s methods may help inform the development of a three dimensional model that considers information practices, space, and time, and how these factors effect information interactions throughout the settlement process. Our future work will involve deeper examinations of existing settlement models, with the intention of infusing them with the unique contextual elements of the SRP.

In addition to extending the pilot study to include more participants and working with settlement models at a
conceptual level, we will continue to evaluate existing information sources, and how these might be re-conceptualized in terms of format and mode of delivery; we also believe that the timing at which students receive these resources could be adjusted to minimize information overload and better meet “just in time” information needs. We are exploring opportunities between IS and SRP stakeholders to enhance refugee students’ information and technological literacy, and promoting social connectivity.

CONCLUSION
The pilot study sheds light on the lived experiences of an undergraduate refugee student, and lays the foundation for further work with refugees in Canadian higher education institutions and community settings. The findings begin to identify the scope and variety of information sources that students consult at various stages/phases of settlement and their utility. Theoretically, this study contributes to the small body of IS literature about refugees, particularly refugee youth. Pragmatically, our continued work in this area seeks to assist the SRP and similar service agencies to advocate for and meet the information needs of refugee students by understanding what information is needed, when it is needed, and how to provide optimal access to it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Our gratitude to Peter Wanyenya, Student Development and Services, UBC and our student participant for sharing their time and stories with us and supporting this work.

REFERENCES


