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# A Guide to the Transdiscipline Informing Science for the Perplexed and Multiplexed

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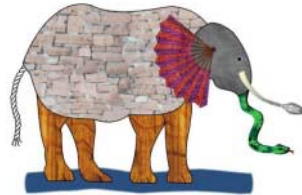
# A guide to the transdiscipline Informing Science for the perplexed and multiplexed

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It was three men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant

Is very like a wall!"  
The Second, feeling of the tusk  
Cried, "Ho! what have we here,  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant



Is very like a  
spear!"

The Third no  
sooner had  
begun

About the beast to grope,  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope.  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

Adapted from John Godfrey Saxe's version of the Indian legend *The Blind Men and the Elephant*

Source: [http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind\\_men\\_elephant.html](http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind_men_elephant.html)

When colleagues who work in Information Systems first see the term "Informing Science", they think "I know what that is. It's another name for information systems. After all, is not IS = IS?" Actually, it is not.

Informing Science is best described as a **transdiscipline**. This is the term Stafford Beer coined to describe it and some other emerging areas of inquiry. Transdisciplines are broad fields of study that are not disciplines unto themselves and not disciplines that merely cross the lines of two or three fields. A transdiscipline affects and is impacted by many fields and many disciplines. It provides a platform for fields to share knowledge and research across the traditional disciplinary divide of research methods and epistemologies.

Informing Science is the transdiscipline that studies issues related to informing clients. The actual client varies by field. In the field Information System, the client is the end user, manager, or customer. In library science, the client is the patron; in education, the student (among others); in journalism, the reader, and so on. The underlying issues of information technology and the underlying psychological and sociological issues are the same or quite similar for all these fields.

I define Informing Science as the transdiscipline whose goal is to provide a client with information in a form, format, and schedule that maximizes its effectiveness (Cohen, 1998). This definition is a direct adaptation of the definition of Information Systems proposed by Mason

and Mitroff (1973) "Information Systems is the field of inquiry that attempts to provide the business client with information in a form, format, and schedule that maximizes its effectiveness."

The idea behind Informing Science comes from the recognition that various fields across campus were developing new interests that often coincided. We in Information Systems recognized this phenomenon when other fields began teaching course content that we considered our core areas of expertise. We as a profession also recognize that Information Systems researchers work in three distinct areas (Robey, 1996). To this extent, there is no single field of information systems. We work in a multiplexed field.

Figure 1 shows the Informing Science framework. A full explanation of the framework is beyond the scope of this paper. The framework serves as a platform for current and future research. For a more complete explanation of information science, see <http://inform.nu/WhatsIS.htm>.

## Pedagogy Issues

It is both a blessing and a curse for information systems professors that Informing Science includes education among its constituent fields. It is a blessing because research that we information systems professors conduct can be relevant to this transdiscipline. Indeed, the quality research on teaching and education conducted everywhere on campus provide a wealth of resources that benefits our understanding of information systems. It is a curse because some of our more shortsighted colleagues in the university view education as unworthy of respect.

## Journals

The principal journal of the field is *Informing Science* <http://inform.nu>. It has a readership of over 2000 colleagues around the globe. The journal is in its third year of publication.

## Current Research

From my perspective as editor of *Informing Science*, I believe most current research published in the area is not truly transdisciplinary. It is rather more of a cross-pollinating nature in which researchers in one field share their research and perspectives with researchers in other fields. As such, *Informing Science* is more like the magazine *Scientific American* than the journal *Nature*. This is not necessarily bad. But I would like to change that by promoting focused research.

I hope to direct research in the near future. One area toward which I hope to direct research is misinformation, or failure of systems to inform. I encourage those interested in pursuing research in this area to contact me.

## Web

A second web site is associated with *Informing Science*. Besides the journal site mentioned above, the Teach IS web site <http://gise.org> deals with *Informing Science* Education (for both students and teachers). The site supports the study of Education and Training for the *Informing Sciences* globally (around the world and throughout organizations). It provides on-line resources for those interested in advancing the interests of IS education. It is free to you, supported in part through grants and advertising income. The site receives an average of 250-300 unique visitors every day.

## Email List

The Teach IS web site is updated monthly. An email service notifies viewers of new resources that will be posted to the site, even before the resources are added. About 2,500 people receive this email every week. (One way readers sign up is by sending a blank email to [TeachIS-subscribe@onelist.com](mailto:TeachIS-subscribe@onelist.com).)

## Conferences

The next *Informing Science* conference will be held in Krakow, Poland June 20-22, 2001. Since that is still over a year away, the conference website has not yet been launched. The main website will be in Krakow with a mirror in the US. (A link to that site will be posted on the <http://inform.nu> site.) The conference is scheduled so that colleagues can attend it and the e-commerce conference in Bled, Slovenia during the same trip. Those interested in a leadership role in that conference should contact me at [Eli\\_Cohen@acm.org](mailto:Eli_Cohen@acm.org).

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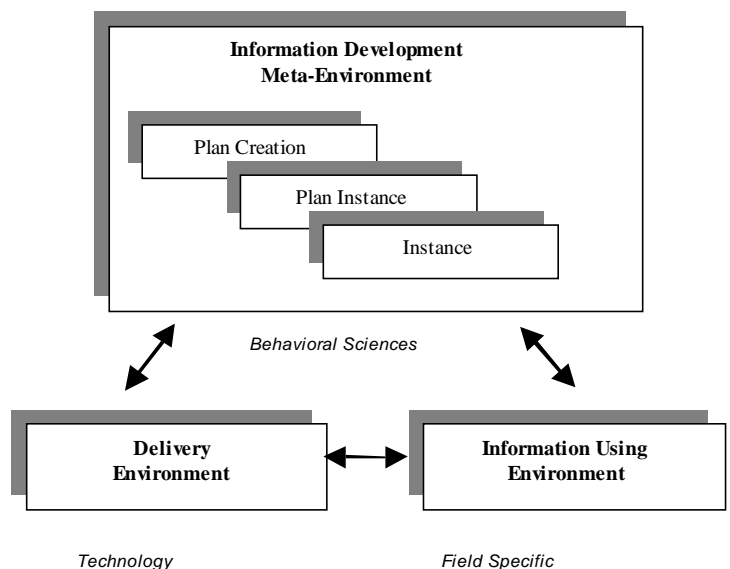


Figure 1. The Informing Science Model. Source: Cohen, 1999.