

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Threshold Concepts and the New Framework for Information Literacy

by Barbara Fister

After much discussion and debate, the new Framework for Information Literacy was formally approved by the Association of College and Research Libraries Board at the 2016 Midwinter meeting. What does this mean for academic libraries? Will they need to completely overhaul their instruction programs to meet a new set of standards?

In a word: no. The new Framework is described as “one of a constellation of documents” that librarians can use to guide their thinking about their library’s instructional role. As was the case with the familiar Standards for Information Literacy Competency in Higher Education, adopted in 2000, the authors of the Framework encourage libraries to adapt the document to their local community’s needs and interests.

These are not marching orders. They aren’t even “standards” in the sense of being nationally accepted goals against which libraries should measure their progress. There is plenty of room for librarians to use the parts of the Framework that inspire them and apply them in whatever way is locally effective. In the meanwhile, the familiar Standards have not yet been officially retired and some librarians have chosen to continue using them in ways they found effective for curriculum planning and assessment.

What the Framework offers is a strikingly new way to think about information literacy that is focused on concepts about information rather than on demonstrable learning outcomes. For librarians looking for an opportunity to overhaul their programs or simply to reinvigorate a successful information literacy effort, the Framework provides an opportunity to think deeply about what we want our students to learn.

The drafting of the Framework was an open

process that has generated numerous conversations about what information literacy programs should strive to accomplish and, in many cases, have reinforced instruction librarians’ long-standing belief that successful instruction programs are built on collaboration with faculty in the disciplines, a process that takes constant work as allies retire, new faculty join the institution, and departments revise their majors. Discussions about the new Framework have also firmed up librarians’ intentions to make their interactions with students more engaging and less reliant on demonstration and database training.

Interestingly, these resolutions are nothing new. Librarians resolved to improve collaboration with faculty in the disciplines and focus more on concepts than tool-based training back in 2000 when the Standards were adopted. It seems good intentions never grow old.

What Exactly is the Framework?

The Framework introduces six overlapping core concepts or “frames” that undergird a complex understanding of information. Rather than a sequential list of skills related to finding and using information, these core concepts invite students to think more deeply about where information comes from, how information is generated within social and economic systems that shape it, and how students can create it themselves.

The decision to call this approach a framework rather than a standard emphasizes the notion that

Coming Soon —

Wikipedia: From Pariah to Partner?

this document is not an exhaustive checklist of what students should master, but rather is subject to change and is open to different interpretations. This fluidity can be seen as a strength, acknowledging that the evolving social context that influences our understanding of information will influence the way instruction librarians think about their programs over time. Standardizing and universalizing a statement about information would contradict the way the Framework conceptualizes information as an organic social ecosystem.

That said, the official nature of the document and its prominent place in discourse about information literacy means many librarians will turn to it for guidance, giving it almost regulatory authority to shape their activities. Some librarians have expressed concern that well-meaning early adopters will rush to implement a complex conceptual document in a superficial manner, developing over-simplified checklist approaches to ideas that can't be reduced to a 50-minute lesson. Others lament the fact that the Framework isn't a standard, that it refuses to provide librarians with a uniform set of aspirations against which the success of their programs can be measured.

The framers of the Framework insist that the document will, inevitably, be subject to change. According to the Framework's website, "the collaboration of librarians, faculty, students and other stakeholders will drive the growth and development of the Framework as a dynamic, living guide for transforming teaching and learning as we share our experiences." Currently the site tracks research on the Framework in a "spotlight on scholarship" feature and will soon add a repository of teaching materials.

From Standards to a Framework

The Standards that became so thoroughly embedded in library instruction programming were originally passed in 2000 and were widely adopted by higher education organizations and across many campuses.

The Standards stated five concepts and related skills that were intended to be broadly applicable. They were

The Six Frames

These concepts, believed to be central to becoming information literate, are not sequential, but rather are overlapping "portals" to deeper understanding.

- **Authority Is Constructed and Contextual:** the relative authority of an information source depends on the context within which it is created and used.
- **Information Creation as a Process:** the way information is created reflects its purpose.
- **Information Has Value:** legal and economic interests influence how information is produced and shared.
- **Research as Inquiry:** it depends on an iterative process of asking increasingly complex questions.
- **Scholarship as Conversation:** scholars create information within the context of an ongoing conversation, sharing and debating new developments.
- **Searching as Strategic Exploration:** the nonlinear process of searching for information requires flexibility as new understanding develops.

Developing New Definitions

Throughout the development of the new Framework, the definition of information literacy was reworked. The final version encapsulates the difference between the Standards and the Framework.

2000: Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. (This definition was quoted from a 1989 document.)

2016: Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.

articulated in a sequence that closely mirrors how librarians expect students to use information in the college setting. The first standard states that an information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed. That is followed by standards for searching for information effectively, evaluating which information will suit a particular task, and using information in a project or performance without violating ethical norms. Whether intentional or not, this sequence seems very much like deciding how to approach an assignment, finding and selecting sources, using those sources, and avoiding plagiarism. Many instruction programs relied on teaching those research paper steps while claiming (in the words of the Standards) "information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning."

Yet those steps don't provide a model of information-seeking that is universally practiced. A scientist doesn't usually start an experiment by determining an information need. She likely starts

with a question, one informed by her prior knowledge and through continual involvement in the conversation among scientists in her field. A performing artist will use information in creating a dramatic work, but won't sit down first to analyze information needs, followed by finding and evaluating sources. He's more likely to integrate search and discovery into a creative process. Information created and used in the work world will be shaped by the values and practices of a particular professional context and its use won't necessarily begin with an information need and end with a product.

A fundamental difference between the Standards and the Framework is that the older document positions information as something one finds and uses for a purpose. The Framework describes information as a web of cultural materials created by people working within social systems. There is no step-by-step process or set of sequential skills spelled out by the Framework. The core

concepts – sometimes called “frames” and sometimes “threshold concepts” – are instead fundamental ideas about information that overlap and can be combined into a sophisticated grasp of how information works regardless of context.

What are Threshold Concepts?

The task force that developed the Framework sought a theoretical basis for their work and found inspiration in the idea of threshold concepts, first developed by Jan Meyer and Ray Land in the United Kingdom. In order to improve undergraduate education, Meyer and Land sought an effective way to replace a knowledge-transfer curriculum that emphasizes acquisition of large amounts of content knowledge, most of it quickly forgotten, with a focus on key concepts that change the way students understand a discipline. Grasping one of these concepts is like crossing a threshold into a new way of thinking. They are complex ideas that take time to grasp.

Threshold concepts, according to Meyer and Land’s theory, typically share certain characteristics.

- They are *transformative*, because they induce a significant ontological shift in the way students think.
- They are usually *irreversible* because, once grasped, they fundamentally change the way a student understands the world.
- They are also *troublesome*. Because they require such a profound shift in understanding, students have to wrestle with them. These novel ways of thinking about the world are not only cognitively challenging, they threaten the student’s sense of equilibrium. The experience of being in an in-between (or “liminal”) state while working through that difficult conceptual shift is where deep learning can happen, but it takes time and effort.
- They are *integrative*. They apply to many situations and allow students to make connections.
- They tend to be *bounded*; that is, they are ideas fundamental to a particular disciplinary way of knowing. Threshold concepts in history will not be the same as threshold concepts in chemistry.

This characteristic is controversial in an information literacy context.

From an instructor’s perspective, identifying those fundamental ideas as a first step, followed by designing curricula around them is similar to “backward design,” an instructional principle espoused by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins in their influential book, *Understanding By Design*. They argue that instructional design should begin with deciding on the understanding that the teacher hopes student will end up with – those key and enduring ideas that will stick long after specific content knowledge fades from memory. Only after those enduring ideas are identified will an instructor build a scaffold of assessments and activities that will bring students to that understanding. This is a reversal of the more traditional approach, which starts with deciding what content to teach, followed by designing means of teaching it and a method of testing it.

Threshold Concepts in the Library

The idea of threshold concepts was introduced to instruction librarians in an influential article by Lori Townsend, Korey Brunetti, and Amy R. Hoffer reporting on a Delphi study they were conducting. Having embraced the idea of designing learning around key concepts, they set out to identify threshold concepts for information literacy by asking LIS professionals and scholars what ideas are central to understanding information.

Townsend, Brunetti, and Hofer argue that student learning can be strengthened if we explore the areas where students struggle the most. Those “stuck places” are likely to involve a lack of conceptual understanding that we fail to recognize as a barrier. From our more expert position, these concepts seem obvious and self-explanatory. The authors argue that library instruction could be more effective if we used these concepts to design effective learning opportunities. Essentially, the authors believe that students’ information literacy would benefit from developing a deeper understanding of core concepts in information science on which the practice of librarianship is built.

This idea – that when we design a program to help students become information literate, we are helping students understand the core ideas of our discipline – has been a particularly controversial aspect of using threshold concepts in the Framework. Most instruction librarians resist the idea that we are instructing students in librarianship. Most typically believe we are helping them use information in other disciplinary contexts – for a history course, for an advanced biology lab, for graduate study – or we are introducing them to general skills for information seeking that are intended to help them succeed in college and which may have lifelong practical use for life after graduation. We don’t generally imagine that we’re introducing them to the discipline of information science.

Yet Townsend, Brunetti, and Hofer argue that foundational disciplinary concepts so deeply influence how we think about information that it does students an injustice to leave them unexplored, even if our students are more interested in how information is used in history, biology, or whatever discipline they are studying.

This question of boundedness of information literacy concepts came up last April at LILAC, an annual conference on information literacy held in the U.K., at which Ray Land gave the 2015 opening keynote address. He questioned whether information literacy instructors could make good use of threshold concepts given that librarians typically teach in a support role. In spite of much criticism of the “one-shot” model, most programs still depend on course-related instruction, with librarians typically having no more than a single session with students in a course taught by an instructor in another discipline. That seemed to him an inauspicious setting for learning difficult concepts. However, in follow-up conversation Land acknowledged that information literacy instruction, like writing instruction, is intended to function across the curriculum and responds to disciplinary needs. Both learning to write and learning how information works can benefit from learning key ideas about how we communicate ideas, even though those concepts will be put

to work in a variety of disciplinary contexts.

Metaliteracy

A second theoretical position that influenced the development of the Framework is metaliteracy. Though the word has never been widely adopted by librarians, it broadens the definition of information literacy from finding and using information effectively to producing and sharing content in the participatory and fluid environment of the digital age. Metaliteracy emphasizes critical thinking and collaboration in a variety of settings, not just academic ones. Though this theory has a lower profile in the Framework than threshold concepts, it influenced the way information is presented as a dynamic and social system. According to Trudi Jacobson and Thomas Mackey,

Metaliteracy promotes critical thinking and collaboration in a digital age, providing a comprehensive framework to effectively participate in social media and online communities. It is a unified construct that supports the acquisition, production, and sharing of knowledge in collaborative online communities. Metaliteracy challenges traditional skills-based approaches to information literacy by recognizing related literacy types and incorporating emerging technologies. Standard definitions of information literacy are insufficient for the revolutionary social technologies currently prevalent online. (From metaliteracy.org)

Bones of Contention

While the new Framework was being debated, both the Standards and the Framework were criticized widely. Supporters of the Framework

wrote about why they thought the Standards were lacking. Still others who saw significant problems with the Standards felt the Framework wasn't theoretically sound or didn't go far enough to challenge traditional practices. In general, these criticisms were frequently aired.

The Standards are . . .

- too prescriptive
- too focused on skills
- too focused on information consumerism
- too little focused on a wider understanding of the social systems influencing information
- too old to accommodate the current information landscape

The Framework is . . .

- too abstract
- too full of jargon
- too dependent on theories that haven't been empirically proven
- too difficult to sell to faculty
- impossible to assess
- a setback, given the wide adoption of the Standards achieved through years of work

And yet . . .

Librarians who weathered the adoption of the Standards in 2000 are likely feeling a bit of déjà vu. Both documents open with claims about the need for change based on developments in higher education and publishing. The Standards argued that "rapid technological change and proliferating information resources" required greater attention to preparing students to be able to make informed choices in a world of information abundance. The Framework refers to "the dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem in which all of us work and live" as an argument for adopting a "big ideas" approach.

Both documents are explicit about the complexity of the task. While librarians may feel uniquely positioned to argue for the importance of information literacy, both the Standards and the Framework acknowledge that this kind of extended learning requires thoughtful collaboration with other campus partners, particularly with faculty in the disciplines. Both documents make clear that becoming information literate is a long-term project, something that requires lots of practice to achieve.

So while adopting the new Framework for Information Literacy may seem like a big change, in reality the challenges librarians face—developing engaging learning opportunities in collaboration with faculty across the curriculum in order to prepare students for a world that will be different in ways we can't anticipate—are really nothing new. — *fister@gustavus.edu*

Resources

Framework Website
<http://acrl.ala.org/framework/>
Standards for Information Literacy Competency in Higher Education.
<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency>

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