

Collaborating With Faculty to Help Students Cross Thresholds

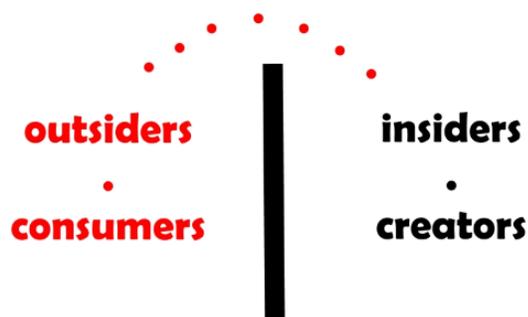
This has been an interesting year for information literacy. The new [Framework](#) is a significant departure from the familiar [Standards](#) that have been in place for fifteen years. What I'm hoping to do in this session is think about how threshold concepts can inform our instructional work, think about concrete ways to collaborate with faculty on higher-order learning that fosters information literacy, and consider how our instruction programs might adapt to emphasize collaboration. My argument this morning is that we need to spend much more time and energy working with faculty, even if that means less time spent directly with students. There will be time for you to do some work together envisioning ways to foster collaboration at your institutions. As a way to start your thinking, I want you to spend a couple of minutes reflecting on these questions:

- What have been your best experiences working with faculty on information literacy?
- What made those experiences work so well?

Give that a bit of thought and jot down notes if that helps you reflect – or tell Twitter.

I want to begin our conversation by thinking historically. When the Standards were adopted back in 2000, I was excited about them because it seemed to make it very clear that we were moving beyond a library-based bibliographic instruction model, where our job was to help students master the mechanics of using the library, to a more ambitious set of skills and practices that were so complex that it was obvious that we'd have to work more closely with faculty, that this was by its very nature a joint venture. In the intervening years, however, it seemed as if librarians were taking all of the standards upon themselves, that the collaboration required was mainly to get our feet in the door, to get contact time with students so that we could teach them these things. Once again, looking at the new Framework, I'm thinking "this is not something librarians can teach. There's no way students can learn these complex concepts in our course-related sessions or even in entire information literacy courses. These are concepts that students must experience through years of practice and through a growing sense of confidence and agency as they handle information in increasingly sophisticated ways. In the

course of this learning, they will change the way they think about themselves in relationship to information, moving from outsiders and consumers to knowers and creators. To support this kind of



long-term experiential learning, to make these transformations possible, librarians have a special obligation to provide leadership but also to share responsibility for this kind of learning with faculty across the entire curriculum.

The new Framework, as I'm sure you know, developed around a couple of contested ideas. The first is [threshold concepts](#), those moments when students make a significant breakthrough in their understanding, an irreversible "aha!" moment that changes the relationship they have with knowledge. These moments have the quality of threshold concepts – they are transformative, integrative, irreversible, troublesome, and bounded, meaning defined in some way by a discipline—that last quality being the most questionable in the context of information literacy, which is learned in the context of disciplines but isn't itself learned as a discipline.

The second underlying idea is [metaliteracy](#), which broadens the definition of information literacy to include finding, producing, and sharing content in the participatory and fluid environment of the digital age. It emphasizes critical thinking and collaboration in a variety of settings, not just academic ones – basically, expanding what mean by information literacy, reminding us it's not just for school. If we compare the definitions of information literacy from the Standards to the Framework, you can see the shift from manipulating information to something more socially situated and complex. We're not just describing what we do with information, we're looking at entire information systems and how we interact with them. We're also moving from a fairly linear concept of information literacy as a sequence of steps to one that is a collection of overlapping and fairly abstract ideas. For that reason, the new frames won't slide neatly into our existing programs. I would argue that this is a good moment to focus more intentionally on working with faculty on these higher order skills.

I work at a small teaching-focused institution, which makes this kind of collaboration relatively easy. We've been very involved in our faculty development program and in developing our own faculty workshops. Our most recent [project](#) was to explore threshold concepts with faculty from across the curriculum. It's kind of funny how this happened. Two years ago, I had seen a presentation at LOEX about the Delphi project Lori Townsend and others were conducting, asking library practitioners and scholars what they thought were thresholds for students in developing their information literacy. We wondered if it wouldn't more sense to ask faculty this question, because they are the ones who really see these skills and dispositions emerge. What we didn't know as we got started was that threshold concepts would be used by the task force developing the new Framework, so our own on-campus conversation evolved in parallel to the various drafts of the Framework.

From our previous experience with faculty, we knew that they feel a strong sense of ownership of this kind of learning. They care deeply about helping students gain the capacity to ask good questions and think critically about potential answers, and they see this as their job. They're happy to have us help, but they don't see it as a library task – it's one of the primary outcomes of undergraduate education. This sense of ownership was confirmed in a [study](#) by Jonathan Cope and Jesús Sanabria published last fall in *portal* looked at how faculty in a variety of disciplines conceptualize information literacy and found that they do, on the whole, own a responsibility for this kind of deep learning that is conducted in a disciplinary context but is intended to be more widely applicable. The authors point out:

many faculty members saw the goal of undergraduate education and information literacy as being “learning how to learn.” However, that process of learning can only occur when students engage in—and to some degree internalize—an understanding of a specific academic discourse. It is not so much that students have learned how to master a specific disciplinary discourse; it is that they have learned how to engage in a disciplinary discourse.

Being in that process of figuring out how a discourse community works is what threshold concept theorists call the “liminal state.” What's important about this state is that it's where students learn something that is hopefully transferrable: learning how to cope with ambiguity and find ways to enter new discourses. The content a student masters is secondary to learning how to master unfamiliar things. As Ray Land, one of the people who came up with threshold concepts, has said, “troublesomeness is less a barrier than an opportunity for learning.”

When we asked faculty what thresholds they think students cross as they become confident and self-directed learners, they gave examples from their disciplines, but were able to translate them to more fundamental kinds of learning that transcend disciplinary boundaries. Here are some of the things they thought were thresholds. I tried to map their ideas to the frames identified in final draft of the Framework.

FACULTY SAID . . .	ACRL FRAMES
Knowledge is made by people.	Authority is constructed and contextual
Every exchange of information requires judgment (critical thinking and evaluation)	
You will encounter things that challenge your view of the world and question something you believed to be true, which can be uncomfortable	
Audience matters when creating or using information.	
Information needs to be organized, and how it is organized makes a difference	
Knowledge evolves, so context and chronology matter	
Everyone's view is partial. Sometimes those limits are invisible to us.	
Research is a recursive process. What you learn will lead you to ask new	Searching is strategic

<p>questions, some of which you may not be able to answer conclusively.</p> <p>Vulnerability is required. It takes courage to go “where the buses don’t run” and take risks.</p> <p>There is a physical and emotional aspect to threshold-crossing. “Aha moments” can be exhilarating and even addictive.</p> <p>Appreciating those moments and the feelings they inspire may help you discover your vocational passion.</p>	<p>exploration; Information creation as a process</p>
<p>The purpose of research is to pursue understanding while recognizing that absolute understanding is inevitably elusive.</p> <p>The economic value of information is not necessarily related to its actual value.</p> <p>(Many faculty were dismayed by the idea that monetary value of information would be considered important, though they understood how important barriers are. Acknowledging sources was not tied to the value of information in their minds)</p>	<p>Information has value</p>
<p>Research involves posing a question and proposing an original response.</p> <p>Researchers must approach questions with an open mind .</p> <p>Good researcher represent others’ ideas accurately and fairly and acknowledge where those ideas came from.</p>	<p>Research as Inquiry</p>
<p>Research is guided by ethical principles. These principles vary depending on the context of the research and disciplinary practices</p> <p>Knowledge is social and collaborative. It’s made by people working together (or side by side) over time and is influenced by economic and social contexts.</p> <p>I have something to say. I can do research on things I care about.</p>	<p>Scholarship as Conversation</p>

There were a lot of similarities – which is good; it validates our new concepts. But there were also differences. “Information has value” created some real consternation among faculty. They didn’t want to put a price tag on information. They also didn’t separate searching from creation. To them, they were part of the same creative process – which makes me think we would do well to talk about search as a sense-making process.

Finally a difference that jumped out at me when I laid them side by side had to do with focus: the Framework seems mostly about how information systems work and helping students understand their place in them. Our faculty were focused on student subjectivity, seeing these threshold moments from the perspective of how students changed as they grew more confident and capable of interacting with information, as they go from seeing knowledge as something external to them, something they get from the web or the library, something that exists through a completely mysterious process, to seeing themselves as authorities, as people who can engage in creating new knowledge. One other thing to

mention about our conversations with faculty: they really enjoyed them. They loved getting together in a workshop to rework their assignments. They want to do more of this, which makes me think librarians have a real opportunity to host these conversations about where we want our students to be by the time they graduate.

This kind of learning is complicated stuff, and it takes years to develop. How can we work more closely with faculty? Can we rethink our instructional efforts to focus on faculty as much as (or perhaps even more than) on students?

As we think about collaboration, it may help to think about culture. First, what is your institutional culture like? What are the relationships like between librarians and faculty in the disciplines? Are librarians perceived as teachers? Are faculty perceived as teachers – or as researchers who teach? What are the material conditions for teaching on your campus? To what extent are the faculty you work with on contingent contracts? Do you work with graduate teaching assistants? Do faculty have much practice collaborating on curricular decisions, or do they mostly work independently? Do you have opportunities to work with faculty outside the library in ways that help you get to know one another? Serving on committees or task forces outside the library can give you useful observation posts for understanding what matters to your faculty.

Another thing to consider is that librarians and faculty in the disciplines may be equally committed to helping students learn how to learn, but we have some striking differences in our perspectives.



Taking all of those cultural conditions into account, we need to think about what partnerships we can forge. Is there a teaching and learning center on your campus or some other office for faculty development? Are there programs where this kind of learning is developed—writing across the curriculum, a first year experience course, a service learning program, a program for first-generation

students or English language learners? An undergraduate research program? Courses that pop up in many departments such as methods courses or capstones? Has anyone gotten a grant recently to launch or refine a curricular program? Where are curricular conversations happening that librarians might join? Find informants among the faculty who can brainstorm opportunities. Look for the places where you can make a mark.

If funding is available, incentives work wonders – which reminds me, getting to know whoever works with grants and foundations on your campus is another worthwhile connection. Busy faculty might find time for a discussion if lunch is provided. If you're planning something intensive, like a three-day workshop, stipends not only reward faculty for their involvement, but it makes them feel more committed to carrying through. You can ask faculty to apply in a competitive process so that you can strategically choose how to spread your resources around and you can require reports on what they did as a result. Generally, it heightens their investment.

Here are some other factors that in my experience seem to be features of successful faculty development events.

- Faculty love to talk to one another. Make sure there's a lot of opportunity for conversation.
- Faculty seem to enjoy opportunities to meet faculty outside their disciplines.
- Faculty respect expertise. Be prepared to share findings from studies such as [Project Information Literacy](#).
- Be mindful of the academic calendar – pick a sweet spot where the course is off and running but grading isn't too burdensome. If summer workshops are an option, and if you want STEM faculty involved, ask them what works. We learned the hard way to avoid the first week of June because that's when they're getting students involved in lab work.
- Promise that people will leave with something accomplished: a teaching idea, a revised syllabus, a revamped assignment—something. Even if in practice they have trouble finishing their work, it's helpful to at least start applying ideas to concrete outcomes and it feels like a good use of time.

Now, I want to try putting these suggestions to work right now—by giving you time to talk together and work on something.

First, take an inventory of your local situation. What opportunities for collaboration are there on your campus? What are the barriers? In small groups, compare notes and see whether you can give one another ideas for finding sites of collaboration or strategies for overcoming barriers.

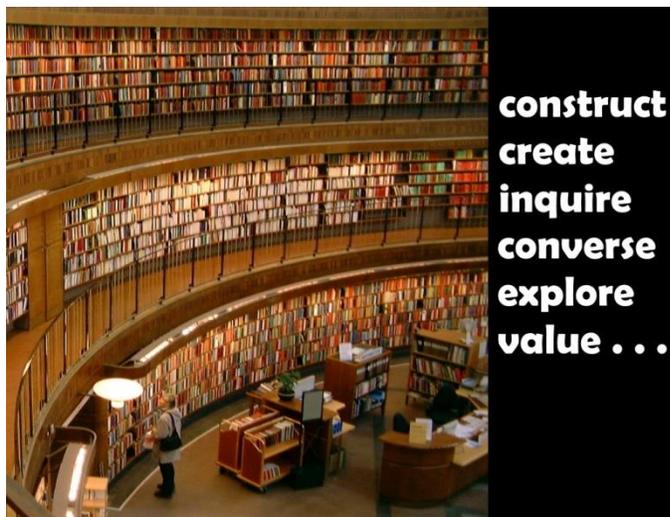
Now that you've thought about opportunities, try to design a program that will involve faculty in discussions about teaching



and learning with information literacy as a focus. What kinds of activities would you involve faculty in? What could they work on? In your groups, brainstorm and see if each of you can come away with a plan. You might want to use one or more of the threshold concepts as discussion points. But you certainly don't have to.

What I hope you've heard this morning are a lot of ideas for working with faculty on the kinds of teaching most of them love to do – teaching that prepares students for whatever the future might hold, learning opportunities that provide students with the confidence, skills, and disposition to become involved in the world they are graduating into, equipped with a respect for reasoning from evidence and approaching open questions with an open mind. This kind of learning is a journey, and we can think of threshold concepts as places on that journey that give students a new perspective, a way of understanding things they've never experienced before. It's hard to get to those places. You can't cross a threshold by hearing about it and then taking a test. These are places where learners get stuck, places that are really difficult and troublesome, but once you've cross that threshold of understanding, once you've grasp that concept, it's learning that is irreversible. Your perspective has changed. It's not something you'll forget because it has fundamentally changed the way you think. It's experiential learning that takes time, and our faculty will play an essential role in setting up those experiences, guiding them through the rough spots, and encouraging students when they're nervous about the messy open-endedness of it all.

But let's not forget that we librarians have a unique role to play in this, and it's not just in guiding students to use databases or retrieve sources. We can help both faculty and students see the big picture as it is morphing in unexpected ways.



Libraries are places in their institutions where connections can be made because we are the intellectual common ground for the campus. Librarians are particularly well positioned to host these conversations because we keep an eye on evolving information systems and we value what happens in the liminal space in between classrooms and between disciplines where students begin to connect ideas and to find their own identities as participants in this vast, multivocal, ongoing conversation that is knowledge. We can help our faculty peer

beyond their disciplines and think about “so what?” and “what next?” As a profession, we have core values that are immensely important right now – intellectual freedom, respect for diversity, access to information because democracy depends on it, support for lifelong learning, and a belief in social responsibility and the importance of the public good. These values are under assault these days, but they are the equipment our students need to go out into the world empowered to make it better. Working with faculty we can do more than help our students succeed as students. We can work together to guide them across thresholds and prepare them for an active role in shaping their world.