The New ACRL Framework for Information Literacy: Implications for Library Instruction & Educational Reform

ANDREA BAER
Undergraduate Education Librarian
Teaching & Learning, Wells Library
Indiana University Bloomington

Over the past two years, many instruction librarians have closely followed and engaged in (often heated) conversations about the new [Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](). The Framework was adopted at this year's ACRL Midwinter Meeting and now is a guiding document for library instructional services, programs, and educational outreach. The ACRL Task Force appointed to develop the Framework shared and solicited input on three drafts of the document prior to this recent adoption, so many librarians have already been thinking a great deal about the Framework and its significance to our profession.

Currently the Framework co-exists alongside the [ACRL Information Literacy Standards](), which have significantly shaped library instruction programs since ACRL endorsed them in 2000. While the Standards consist primarily of defined learning outcomes that reflect the document's definition of information literacy (IL) as the ability to identify an information need and "to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information," the Framework presents a more theoretical view of information literacy. Information literacy, as described in the Framework, involves "conceptual understandings that organize many other concepts and ideas about information, research, and scholarship into a coherent whole." The Framework's further definition of information literacy as "a cluster of interconnected core concepts" suggests that information literacy education may take a wide range of approaches. Indeed, the Framework emphasizes that IL instruction can be approached in numerous ways, rather than being based "on a set of standards, learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills."

The Framework was developed largely as a response to growing concerns within the academic library community that the ACRL Standards do not fully reflect the complexity of information literacy. Critiques of the Standards include the idea that they reduce information literacy to a set of discrete skills that are dissociated from social and rhetorical context, that they imply research and information use to be a linear rather than an iterative process, and that they favor text-based and scholarly sources over the much wider range of information types and formats that make up today's information environments. Advocates for a new way of representing information literacy have, furthermore, argued that a greater emphasis on conceptual knowledge and ways of thinking would help to illustrate that information literacy is essential to critical thinking and that IL should be an integral part of curricula within and across the disciplines.

The Framework's focus on conceptual understandings is reflected in its overall structure, which consists primarily of six "frames" (also called "threshold concepts"). Threshold concepts are ideas that often present stumbling blocks to learning; they are essential to understanding and engaging in a discipline and are not intuitive. While initially difficult to grasp, threshold concepts – once understood – are said to open the potential for actively participating in a given discipline or community of practice. (The term "threshold concept" originates from the work of Meyer and Land (2003).)

The six threshold concepts that make up the Framework are as follows. (Also included below are the Framework's brief descriptions of each of these concepts. The Framework itself provides a more detailed explanation of each threshold concept.)

- **Authority Is Constructed and Contextual**
  "Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required."

- **Information Creation as a Process**
  "Information in any format is produced to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method. The iterative processes of researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information vary, and the resulting product reflects these differences."

- **Information Has Value**
  "Information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world. Legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination."

- **Research as Inquiry**
  "Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field."

- **Scholarship as Conversation**
  "Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations."

- **Searching as Strategic Exploration**
  "Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops."

Of course, these frames intersect with one another; it would be artificial to say that one of the threshold concepts can be fully grasped without an individual developing an understanding of several others. For example, when a person recognizes "Scholarship as Conversation" and develops an argument that connects with or challenges ideas that others have shared, that individual is simultaneously engaged in "Research as Inquiry" (i.e. exploring ideas and developing new questions). When one revises a search strategy or a research question based on their search process (as suggested in "Searching as Strategic Exploration"), that person may simultaneously be seeking sources that will be considered authoritative and relevant for her particular research task (as implied in "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual").

These six threshold concepts are further outlined in the Framework by their associated "knowledge practices" and "dispositions." The knowledge practices are "demonstrations of ways in which

learners can increase their understanding of these information literacy concepts," while "dispositions" reflect ways of thinking and approaching information and "address the affective, attitudinal, or valuing dimension of learning." (For example, the frame "Research As Inquiry" includes the knowledge practice "Formulate questions for research based on information gaps or on reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information" and the disposition "Consider research as open-ended exploration and engagement with information.") As evident in these examples, many of the knowledge practices and dispositions look much like learning outcomes, though they are generally more conceptually-based and more complex than the outcomes in the ACRL Standards. They frequently foreground metacognitive thinking, which involves reflecting on one's own cognitive and learning processes and exercising awareness of how one's own experiences, biases, and background, influences one's ways of thinking.

As illustrated in the examples above, the Framework mirrors a paradigmatic shift in how our profession thinks about our roles as educators. The complex understandings and abilities described in the Framework are obviously not things that can be mastered in a single library session or even in a single academic year. Rather, the Framework indicates that developing information literacy is an ongoing and lifelong process. In keeping with this perspective, the text is explicit about the need for IL education to be integrated within and across the curriculum, an idea that suggests the limitation of traditional "one-shot" library instruction. As stated in the Framework's opening, the document "grows out of a belief that information literacy as an educational reform movement will realize its potential only through a richer, more complex set of core ideas."

This, of course, has significant implications for librarians' roles as educators and as campus partners. It suggests that a key to supporting IL education is developing fuller partnerships with course instructors and other campus partners and sharing our knowledge of and expertise in areas including student research behaviors, research assignment design, scholarly communications, information architecture, and curricular development.

Since most library instruction still occurs within the context of individual class sessions, there has, understandably, been much debate about the significance and implications of the Framework to librarians' work, and those conversations will undoubtedly continue for some time. Many instruction librarians are excited about the potential of the Framework, many share reservations, and most are grappling with how to translate the ideas from a highly conceptual document into concrete action.

The implications of the Framework may be at times unclear or even overwhelming, but they are also rich and exciting. Much is being done now to support librarians in thinking more concretely and critically about the Framework and its potential applications. For example, ACRL is currently developing a "sandbox" that will include sample assignments, lesson plans, and other instructional resources. Librarians across institutions will be invited to share relevant materials there. A [listserv](#) about the Framework was also created this March. A large number of online discussions and publications invite us to appreciate aspects of the Framework that resonate with us, while questioning those that raise concerns. And many conferences and professional development events are also giving significant attention to the Framework (including the [Indiana University Information Literacy Colloquium](#) this coming August).

The Framework has been described as a "living" document that will continue to evolve as we explore its relevance and practical applications. We have a significant role to play in not only determining the Framework's current significance to us, but also in continuing to shape the Framework and its related

resources in meaningful ways. The Framework, like scholarship and research, can be an ongoing conversation.

References

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2015 Feb.) Framework for information literacy for higher education: The information literacy competency standards for higher education. (Final version). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2000). Standards for information literacy for higher education. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency

Meyer, J. & Land, R. (2003). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to Ways of thinking and practicing within the disciplines. University of Edinburgh UK. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving Student Learning – Ten Years On*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD). Retrieved from https://www.dkit.ie/ga/system/files/Threshold_Concepts__and_Troublesome_Knowledge_by_Professor_Ray_Land.pdf