

6-25-2015

## Teaching Matters: The Interplay of Information Literacy Instruction and Professional Statements

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### Recommended Citation

Ragains, P. P. (2015). Teaching Matters: The Interplay of Information Literacy Instruction and Professional Statements. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 9 (1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2015.9.1.173>

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# THE INTERPLAY OF INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION AND PROFESSIONAL STATEMENTS

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This column examines the Association of College & Research Libraries' new *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* and *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* in the context of professional practice.

Communications in  
INFORMATION LITERACY

TEACHING MATTERS, EDITED BY PATRICK RAGAINS AND JANELLE ZAUHA

For nearly 30 years, information literacy has provided a stimulating framework for me as a reference and instruction librarian. In view of professional and personal developments it seems appropriate now to discuss some strengths and weaknesses of information literacy instruction (ILI) as conceived and practiced in higher education in the United States. Librarians have made notable contributions to pedagogy and student success, but more remains to be done.

My own involvement in information literacy emerged out of a strong interest in teaching critical thinking. We know that skilled searching, selection, and analysis of information play central roles in good analytical thinking, since these activities help one frame better questions and generalizations. This conceptualization emphasizes at least four of Christine Bruce's well-known "Seven Faces of Information Literacy," i.e., technology, sources, process, and knowledge construction (1997, p.154). I view analytical skills, and therefore information literacy, as specific to particular academic disciplines, but I also recognize students' need to develop more general acuity in their thinking in order to understand and live well in a world where one encounters science, economics, psychology, law, the arts, and more, simply as a matter of living.

Librarians in higher education perform service functions for faculty, students, and researchers. For instance, librarians provide library and information literacy instruction for students, but they usually do not write programmatic or course-specific learning outcomes. The exception to this is when librarians write learning outcomes for credit-bearing courses they teach. Our service role

emphasizes learning the language of the disciplines we serve and avoiding isolating ourselves with our own jargon. For instance, words like "metaliteracy" are less easily understood than are terms such as "source evaluation," "contextualization," or "semiotics." This brings me to the heart of my discussion.

In my own work setting, in the academic libraries I visit, at the instruction-oriented library meetings I attend, and in the related literature, I'm constantly inspired. I learn about ILI strategies that address students' learning needs in exemplary ways. I see much valuable work being done in these venues, and I continue to learn from my colleagues. Librarians meeting with freshman composition courses teach in support of course assignments, but, at the same time, teach search and evaluation behaviors as valuable long-term competencies. When meeting with more advanced students, librarians teach about search and discovery using a wider range of sources, whether market research, company data, manuscripts and archives, or images. Again, they teach in support of course and programmatic objectives.

Librarians' own professional culture helps them grow as teachers. I see the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Competency Standards) as one of the key elements in promoting the acceptance of information literacy in curricula (ACRL, 2000). The Competency Standards still have value. I do not think practicing librarians will set them aside as willingly as the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Board of Directors envisions, despite the Board's decision to "sunset" them in favor of the

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new *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Hereinafter Framework, ACRL, 2015).

The Framework's threshold concepts are:

1. Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
2. Information Creation as a Process
3. Information Has Value
4. Research as Inquiry
5. Scholarship as Conversation
6. Searching as Strategic Exploration

The Framework's threshold concepts are worded more broadly than are the Competency Standards, which may promote collaboration between course instructors and librarians. "Research as Inquiry" and "Scholarship as Conversation" come to mind as good springboards for instructors and librarians to develop lessons and engage students. Several of the concepts speak clearly to the knowledge base of librarians, such as "Information Creation as a Process" and "Searching as Strategic Exploration." However, I doubt that the Framework can effectively replace the Competency Standards.

The language of the Competency Standards is quite specific, which has been one of their strengths. For convenience, they appear below:

1. The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.

2. The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
3. The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
4. The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
5. The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

Many librarians refer to the Competency Standards when planning lessons. For example, a librarian preparing to teach freshman composition students may concentrate on teaching concepts and skills related to the first two standards, understanding that these provide the foundation for the course instructor to guide students as they work to understand and enter a topical conversation by writing about it. Here the course instructor's work directly relates to the third and fourth standards. I believe this example shows that the Competency Standards are more precisely articulated and guide our teaching better than does a very general idea like "scholarship is a conversation," a threshold concept from the Framework. At the same time, this example shows that the Competency Standards and the Framework are really not in conflict. So, rather than

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overstate my case, I am simply concerned that the Framework's threshold concepts may cause us to backtrack unnecessarily concerning what broad concepts to teach, when that has largely been settled in our practice, aided by the Competency Standards.

The ACRL held online and in-person forums in 2014 and 2015 on the Framework and its threshold concepts. I attended most of those events and commend the work of everyone who organized and contributed to them. In an early 2015 online meeting, an ACRL officer mentioned that the organization's rules mandate that official statements such as the Competency Standards must be revised or "sunsetting" every five years. Although I wonder if this five-year sunset is a new rule, I do not think it automatically means that the Competency Standards are no longer useful as a prominent statement from and benchmark of our profession. Not incidentally, I wonder if it will be necessary to revise or set aside the Framework after five years.

For the short term, I believe that many librarians will continue to use the Competency Standards. Instructional librarians at my university finalized in 2014 a statement of student learning outcomes in information literacy that relies heavily on the Competency Standards. This year, ACRL officers have stated their interest in setting up a shared online space for librarians to contribute lessons and other artifacts relating to the Framework and the threshold concepts. This holds promise for articulating these new statements. I think librarians can support this effort and continue to work with the Competency Standards as it seems best for the situation. I

agree with the ACRL Board that there is no real need to map the Framework to the Competency Standards (ACRL 2015, p.2). It is more important for practicing librarians to advance information literacy than it is to consider one set of pedagogical concepts trumping the other.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

With this column, *Communications in Information Literacy* is retiring the Teaching Matters column, amicably and with mutual agreement among the journal editors, Janelle Zauha, and myself. A wonderful colleague and collaborator who enthusiastically promotes learning and reading, Janelle Zauha is now increasing her focus on the excellent and longstanding *PNLA Quarterly*, published by the Pacific Northwest Library Association. I plan to continue working in reference and information literacy instruction for the foreseeable future, balancing library practice, teaching, writing, and serving on the editorial board of *CIL*. Not least, I greatly appreciate the opportunity that *CIL*'s editors, Stewart Brower, Christopher Hollister, and Robert Schroeder, have given Janelle and me as column editors. They have high standards and produce a fine journal, but are kind and generous beyond words. I don't know how they do it.

I'll see you in the trenches.

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The CIL readership has been exceptionally fortunate to have seven years of *Teaching Matters* columns crafted by our esteemed colleagues, Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha. Pat and Jan are the thoughtful writers, collaborators, and colleagues we all wish to surround ourselves with on a daily basis; to say they have been a pleasure to work with is a monumental understatement. Pat and Jan helped CIL to grow from a fledgling, independent publication in the early days of the open access environment to an award-winning presence in the professional literature.

The editors of CIL offer their gratitude and a heartfelt salute to Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha.

*Christopher Hollister, Stewart Brower, and Robert Schroeder*

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