# REFRAMING THE FRAMEWORK: SITUATED INFORMATION LITERACY IN THE MUSIC CLASSROOM

**Erin Conor[1]**

"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy."– bell hooks[2]

## Introduction

Perhaps the story of your orientation to information literacy is similar to mine. It begins with some confusion: "Information literacy? What is that, exactly?" After a course or two in library school on teaching or information literacy (if you're lucky), you are thrown into the trenches of your early professional career. Then, in fifty-minute spurts, you must attempt to engage bored undergraduates in the finer points of keyword searching and Boolean logic, all in the name of this thing called "information literacy." As your confidence and experience grow, you realize that teaching can be immensely rewarding, even fun, and that information literacy is a complex and multi-faceted concept that encompasses far more that simply training in library search skills.

However, a vague sense of unease remains. "What am I doing with my time in the classroom? Am I really being as effective as I can be? And why does it feel like I am reinventing the wheel every time I teach a class?" My own unease coalesced into realization, and then transformation in my teaching practices, as I developed a deeper familiarity with the literature on information literacy, as well as a better understanding of the legacy of national guidelines issued by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association. In what follows, I present an approach to information literacy instruction that enables music librarians to

effectively engage with disciplinary faculty, use our own subject expertise to the fullest extent, and more readily grapple with changing national standards and guidelines.

**The Standards and the Framework**

ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (the Standards) represent the organization's first attempt at national information literacy standards and were approved by the ACRL Board in 2000. As presented in the Standards, information literacy is a response to the pressing challenges of the "Information Age" and the subsequent need to prepare students for employment in a new, knowledge-based economy.[3] Explicitly designed as an assessment tool, the Standards consist of five clearly defined standards for the information literate student, along with accompanying outcomes that can be used to measure a student's progress in meeting each standard.[4] Although the Standards emphasize the need for effective information literacy instruction to be integrated into the curriculum, they are designed to be applicable across all disciplines. The Music Library Association (MLA) released its own response to the Standards, the "Information Literacy Objectives for Undergraduate Music Students," in 2005. MLA's standards are identical in content to the ACRL Standards but include additional, discipline-specific outcomes.[5]

In 2016, the Standards were replaced by the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (the Framework).[6] The Framework represents an attempt to address the myriad changes to the information landscape and higher education since the Standards were first released. It draws upon many recent trends in information literacy, including the concepts of metaliteracy and metacognition, and the instructional design process developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe.[7] Central to the

Framework, however, are threshold concepts, "ideas that in any discipline are passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline."[8] Building upon the idea of threshold concepts for the discipline of information literacy, each of the six frames in the Framework represents a "concept central to information literacy."[9]

The Framework is a fundamentally different document from the Standards. A "cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation,"[10] it is not a list of skills or competencies, nor was it designed as an assessment tool. Like the Standards, however, it is intended to be applicable across all disciplines. Due to the relative newness of the Framework, its marked difference from the Standards, and the lengthy time for which the Standards served as the guiding document for teaching librarians, the influence of the Standards remains strong. The impact that the Standards have had on how librarians conceive of information literacy instruction, as well as how we as music librarians approach our information literacy work, is significant.

**Critical Perspectives on the Standards and the Framework**

Whether working from the Standards or the Framework, teaching librarians in the United States inevitably find themselves confronting the longstanding tension between the idea that information literacy skills, as defined in the Standards or the Framework, are transferrable across disciplines, and the reality that most academic librarians, and certainly music librarians, practice information literacy instruction from a discipline specific-viewpoint. As Heidi Jacobs has noted, "by necessity and by design, [teaching librarians] tend to focus our information literacy work within specific disciplines and

consider how we might best approach information literacy for our business, chemistry, psychology, or English students."[11]

As music librarians, we approach our work in the classroom by first considering what our music students need to know. But how do we reconcile local, discipline-specific needs with the mandate of national standards? Trapped in a version of Christine Pawley's famous Procrustean bed,[12] we can find ourselves stretched between the generally accepted assumption that information literacy skills, as defined by national professional organizations, are universally applicable in all disciplines, and the reality that we teach from a contextual, very discipline-specific viewpoint. Jacobs writes, "When we start with a framework of generic skills and then adapt them to our disciplines, we run the risk of putting the Standards first. . . . Instead, we need to put the discipline first and build our curriculum around disciplinary questions."[13]

Emily Drabinski has issued a similar call for librarians to develop a more contextual, locally responsive information literacy instruction practice. As she sees it, both the Standards and the Framework represent an "ideological statement that orients the attention of teaching librarians outward rather than inward," offering a "new global perspective that must be translated locally. . . . Librarians need an alternative for framing both information literacy practice and critique that is not dependent on engagement with global standards and frameworks, but rather local, situational needs."[14] Practically speaking, much of the information literacy instruction we carry out begins through conversations with our music faculty, careful consideration of the goals of the relevant course and the music curriculum overall, and reflection on the needs of the enrolled

students. This very situated way of approaching information literacy instruction sometimes seems at odds with our national standards and guidelines.

Music librarians working with information literacy are at a crossroads. The Standards have been rescinded by the ACRL Board and have officially been replaced by the Framework. However, at the time of this writing, MLA's "Information Literacy Objectives" remain in effect, and adoption of the Framework has been slow. The remainder of this article will address the call issued by Jacobs, Drabinski, and others for a more contextual, discipline-based approach to information literacy instruction. What would it look like to cultivate an information literacy practice that considers music first, and standards and guidelines second? How do we figure out what constitutes effective practices for the discipline of music, and where do we even begin? The answers to these questions can offer us a productive way of working with the Framework, collaborating with faculty, and moving forward with our teaching practices.

**Situated Information Literacy**

The idea of a more discipline-based, or socio-cultural, approach to information literacy, while not addressed in the existing music library literature, is not new. In her important 2005 article, Michelle Simmons discusses what has since come to be referred to as situated information literacy. She describes undergraduate learning as a process of acculturation into the norms and rules of a specific discipline. In order to be successful, students must understand how practitioners within their chosen discipline write, speak, research, formulate an argument, and evaluate and engage with sources. While students can struggle to learn these often "tacitly communicated rhetorical processes,"[15] faculty themselves may be so immersed in the discourse of their discipline that it can be difficult

to guide students through these unspoken practices.

Situated information literacy asks librarians to act as "disciplinary discourse mediators,"[16] translators who can connect between the expert and novice views of a discipline. The very nature of academic librarianship, from the work that we often do at the reference desk with students of all majors, to the multiple advanced degrees many of us hold in librarianship and other disciplines, gives librarians a unique, interdisciplinary perspective into the rhetorical practices of different disciplines. Librarians practicing situated information literacy use this unique perspective to help bridge the gap between faculty assumptions and student misunderstandings, working to reveal the "ecology of the disciplinary environment" and enabling collaborating faculty to then more successfully introduce students to in-depth, subject-specific practices.[17]

As an alternative method for approaching information literacy that extends beyond the generic and sometimes limiting constraints of standards and guidelines, situated information literacy holds great possibility for music librarians. With our rich history of bibliography and the blended identities many of us hold as both librarians and scholars and/or practitioners, music librarians are uniquely positioned to successfully implement a situated approach to information literacy.[18] Our deep subject expertise can enable us to cultivate a teaching practice that extends beyond the prevailing assumption that information literacy is a general, universally applicable skill. This more discipline-based approach to information literacy in turn offers much-needed tools for working more effectively with music faculty, and can help us to move beyond the limiting range of the one-shot instruction session.

**Situated Information Literacy and the Framework**

The concept of situated information literacy also offers a useful way to interpret and work with the Framework. Although the Framework is intended to be applicable to all disciplines, it approaches information literacy with a much more situated perspective than the Standards. As Nancy Foasberg notes, the Framework portrays information as a social phenomenon, one in which knowledge is created, adapted, and given meaning through social context. She writes, "When a person accesses, uses, or understands information, he or she does so within the purview of a specific community. The context of the community can change the meanings of particular messages, the value of different kinds of materials, what uses one can make of information, and who is able to access it."[19] Within the realm of ACRL, this community can be interpreted as academic discipline.[20] In the language of the Framework, to be an information-literate student often means effectively engaging with the unspoken rules and ingrained practices, the "tacitly communicated rhetorical processes"[21] of one's chosen discipline. As described in the Framework, information is more than just an artifact to be acquired; it becomes meaningful within students' disciplinary communities.

The Framework's grounding in threshold concepts helps to explain its situated perspective on information literacy. Threshold concepts emerged from the research of Jan Meyer and Ray Land, economists by training. As described by Meyer and Land, "A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress."[22] Threshold concepts can be common sticking points for students. They may also be so ingrained in the practices of a discipline that experts are unable to clearly

articulate the concepts, or even recognize their existence. The unspoken disciplinary practices described by Simmons are often threshold concepts for a given discipline. Threshold concepts are by nature deeply disciplinary; thus they lend themselves to a situated approach to information literacy.

**Situated Information Literacy in Practice**

What can situated information literacy for music look like, and what role might the Framework play? Situated information literacy begins with close faculty collaboration. This collaboration extends beyond discussions of what library research tools or organizational schemes students should know. Practicing situated information literacy means engaging faculty in an ongoing conversation with the intention of revealing important aspects of music as a discipline that students may be struggling with.[23] For me, practicing situated information literacy has meant that for the first time, I am having conversations with my faculty not just about the library catalog or databases, but about course assignments and syllabi. Adopting a situated approach to information literacy has transformed my view of the work I do in the classroom. If students do not understand how to formulate a successful research question for the discipline of music, if they do not understand the information life-cycle for our discipline, how we work with primary and secondary sources, or why we answer research questions the way that we do, then a discussion of searching and resources, the traditional toolkit for the teaching librarian, is not enough to enable their success as researchers.

One thing that the Framework does very well is facilitate this type of close collaboration with faculty. The Framework is not a set of universal, mandatory standards to which we must adhere. Rather, it is most powerful as a starting point for asking

questions that lead us to think more closely the nature of music as a discipline, and what we can do as librarians to initiate students into the practices of that discipline. Threshold concepts, as presented in the Framework, offer us a situated way to approach music information literacy that, as Jacobs urges, places the discipline of music first, and national standards and guidelines second.

In my work with faculty, the idea of threshold concepts has been an aspect of the Framework that has held particular resonance. Discussing student difficulties with research inevitably leads us to a series of over-arching, big-picture questions about the nature of the discipline, such as, "What are the major stumbling blocks to becoming a practitioner in music as a discipline?" and "What strategies, practices, and approaches do we as experts in this discipline take for granted?" This conversation began through collaboration with individual faculty members.[24] However, this approach has since permeated my work with faculty across the music department on my campus. Together, we are learning to see the discipline of music as an outsider would, and to think critically about why our discipline values the sources and methods that it does, how we ask research questions, and what voices carry the greatest weight in our collective scholarly conversation (and why).[25]

**Threshold concepts and the "Third Ear"**

In their work on threshold concepts, Meyer and Land discuss the importance of developing a "third ear," which is a term coined by Elizabeth Ellsworth. As described by Ellsworth, the third ear listens "not for what a student knows (discrete packages of knowledge) but for the terms that shape a student's knowing, her not knowing, her forgetting, her circles of stuck places and resistances."[26] The third ear is empathetic; it

listens for social context, for affect, and for lived experience. When practicing situated information literacy, cultivating a third ear can be a useful way of reminding one's self to consider the viewpoint of the novice researcher.

Collaborating with my faculty to develop our third ear has meant relentlessly questioning our assumptions about our students' knowledge of disciplinary practices. We begin with over-arching questions about the nature of music as a discipline, questions designed to reveal what Robert Farrell and William Badke have described as the "epistemology, metanarrative, and methodology" of a discipline.[27] This tends to lead to a series of much more specific questions, which shape our perspective in working with students. We ask ourselves:

- How do we define research discipline of music? What constitutes a valid research question?

- How do we answer research questions in our discipline? Do we consider some methods more valid than others? Why or why not?

- How do we work with sources in our discipline? How do we determine which sources are valid and/or reliable, and which are not?

These questions inform assignments and classroom planning.[28] They often help determine what content I cover when working with a class, and they provide a lens through which I can assess student understanding of the materials covered.

Developing our third ear has yielded new insights into areas in which students are struggling, as well as direct changes to my own teaching practice. For example, many students I work with have difficulty distinguishing between a personal interest and a valid research question for the discipline of music. They may not recognize, for instance, that

"Why I like John Coltrane and you should, too," does not inherently lead to compelling musicological research. In response, my faculty collaborators and I now devote much more attention, both during class and in assignments, to the idea of "pre-research." We talk with students about how to use sources to develop a compelling research question, how to determine what it is they need to know about their research topic, how to identify where to begin their research, and how to develop a successful research plan.

Through our collaborations, my faculty and I have also observed that many students have difficulty understanding how to work with the sources that they find in their research. They may not see that different types of sources can be utilized in different ways, and they don't always recognize the role that primary sources typically play in research in music as a discipline. For many students that I work with, identifying a compelling primary source and building an argument around that using secondary sources is an unfamiliar strategy. As a result, I now spend much less class time covering the mechanics of searching. I would like to help students recognize that research is more than simply the process of amassing a lengthy list of sources. During class, I provide the opportunity for guided search and exploration but spend much of my time working closely with students to aid them in interpreting and using the sources they find. My faculty and I try to help them see sources through a disciplinary lens: What role will this source play in helping you craft your argument? What led you to select this particular source above all others?[29]

**Conclusion**

Music librarians working in information literacy are at a critical juncture. Many of us have invested heavily in the perspective on information literacy espoused by the

Standards. Others wonder how to transition from the Standards to the very different Framework, and perhaps share some of the concerns raised in this article regarding the implications of over-reliance on national standards and guidelines. At the same time, MLA's own "Information Literacy Objectives" remain in effect and continue to represent one of the few guiding documents on information literacy specific to our profession.

This juncture is an opportunity. With our deep subject expertise, dual perspective as librarians and as scholars and/or practitioners, and long history of working closely with our user communities, music librarians are uniquely positioned to shape a situated information literacy practice that engages critical questions about the nature of music as a discipline. If the Standards were an assessment tool, the Framework is a starting point: for conversations with our faculty, for collaboration, and for conversations within our professional community. The Framework, and especially its grounding in threshold concepts, can offer us a way to work more effectively with faculty to reveal the essential practices in music as a discipline. Through situated information literacy, we can move our teaching beyond the transmission of knowledge about libraries and specialized resources. Rather, information literacy instruction becomes the process through which we enable students to become discipline practitioners themselves.

**ABSTRACT**

In 2016, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (the Framework). The Framework replaces ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, which had been in place since 2000. The departure of the Standards and the subsequent arrival of the Framework represents both a challenge and an opportunity for music librarians. How do we as a profession respond to the Framework, and how can we use it to work most effectively with music students and faculty? In this article, the author connects the ideas underlying the Framework with the concept of situated information literacy, outlining ways in which a situated approach to information literacy instruction enables music librarians to engage with disciplinary faculty, use our subject expertise to the fullest extent, and more readily grapple with changing national standards and guidelines.

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 Erin Conor is the Performing Arts Librarian at Reed College. She holds an M.L.I.S. and an M.A. in music history from the University of Washington. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2017 annual meeting of the Music Library Association in Orlando, Florida.

[2] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 12.

[3] For a thought-provoking critique of the Standards as emerging from a neoliberal ideology, see Maura Seale, "The Neoliberal Library," in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013).

[4] The Standards were rescinded by the ACRL Board of Directors in 2016 but may be accessed on the ACRL website until July 2017. See the Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.

[5] See the Music Library Association, "Information Literacy Objectives for Undergraduate Music Students," accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/?page=mlapublications.

[6] For the full text of the Framework, as well as related information, see the Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, accessed March 2, 2017, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

[7] Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

[8] ACRL, *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Heidi L.M. Jacobs, "Pedagogies of Possibility within the Disciplines: Critical Information Literacy and Literatures in English," *Communications in Information Literacy* 8, no. 2 (2014): 194.

[12] Christine Pawley, "Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling," *The Library Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (Oct. 2003): 426.

[13] Jacobs, 197.

[14] Emily Drabinski, "Toward a Kairos of Library Instruction," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 5 (September 2014): 481.

[15] Michelle Holschuh Simmons, "Librarians as Disciplinary Discourse Mediators: Using Genre Theory to Move toward Critical Information Literacy," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, no. 3 (2005): 297.

[16] Ibid, 299.

[17] Ibid, 306.

[18] Many of us may be practicing situated information literacy already, without describing it as such. See for example, Amanda Maple, Beth Christensen, and Kathleen A. Abromeit, "Information Literacy for Undergraduate Music Students: A Conceptual Framework," *Notes* 52, no. 3 (March 1996): 744–53. This article outlines the unique landscape of scholarly information in music as a discipline. The authors include suggested questions for faculty, which can help reveal the gaps between faculty

assumptions and student understanding. See also Kathleen A. Abromeit and Victoria Vaughan, "Info Lit and the Diva: Integrating Information Literacy into the Oberlin Conservatory of Music Opera Theater Department," *Notes* 60, no. 3 (2004): 632-52. Abromeit and Vaughan describe a close collaboration between faculty and librarian that aimed to help students more successfully navigate the interdisciplinary nature of opera theater research.

[19] Nancy M. Foasberg, "From Standards to Frameworks for IL: How the ACRL Framework Addresses Critiques of the Standards," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 15, no. 4 (2015): 703.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Simmons, 297.

[22] Jan Meyer and Ray Land, *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 3.

[23] A useful model for approaching these conversations with faculty can be found in Robert Farrell and William Badke, "Situating Information Literacy in the Disciplines: A Practical and Systematic Approach for Academic Librarians," *Reference Services Review* 43, no. 2 (June 8, 2015): 319–40, doi:10.1108/RSR-11-2014-0052.

[24] For more on my collaborations with individual faculty members, as well as the role that the Framework played in that work, see Erin Conor, "Engaging Students in Disciplinary Practices: Music Information Literacy and the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education," *Notes* 73, no. 1 (August 5, 2016): 9–21, doi:10.1353/not.2016.0087.

[25] Farrell and Badke helpfully frame these considerations in terms of epistemology (the nature of the sources a discipline values), metanarrative (the beliefs and values underlying a discipline), and method (the means by which a discipline conducts research). See Farrell and Badke, 323.

[26] Elizabeth Ann Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997): 71.

[27] Farrell and Badke, 323.

[28] This approach is heavily indebted to the work of William Badke, as outlined in his book *Teaching Research Processes: The Faculty Role in the Development of Skilled Student Researchers* (Witney, UK: Chandos Publishing, 2012).

[29] I have found Joseph Bizup's BEAM approach to categorizing sources to be helpful for introducing sources to students in a way that is consistent with the practices in music as a discipline. See Joseph Bizup, "BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-Based Writing," *Rhetoric Review* 27, no. 1 (January 4, 2008): 72–86, doi:10.1080/07350190701738858.