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Why the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* Enhances Information Literacy Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to clarify what the ACRL Framework is designed to do for teaching librarians. The article looks briefly at the need for change from the Competency Standards based on librarian concerns about their own teaching effectiveness. The short description of two of the foundational books, on which the Framework was based, are introduced so that instruction librarians can do their own research into the foundational concepts of the Framework for a deeper understanding of the value of this new approach to library teaching. Links to teaching resources are included.

Introduction

My goal in writing this article on the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy* (hereafter referred to as *Framework*) is to provide some clarity, inspiration, and encouragement for those teaching librarians who are looking at adopting *Framework* thinking into their information literacy teaching. "Literacy" is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as: "To scan writing, so as to take in the sense." In its simplest form, information literacy can be defined as the ability to scan bits and pieces of information, so as to make sense. Librarians generally get one shot to impart to college students some pretty critical and challenging concepts about information. These concepts are the building blocks to accurately assembling pieces of information into appropriate meanings and sensemaking, allowing students to be information literate.

Value and Problems with Competency Standards

Before looking at the *Framework* propagated by the Association of College and Research Libraries (hereafter referred to as ACRL), readers may want a bit of background regarding why the ACRL decided to abandon the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (hereafter referred to as the *Standards*) which were adopted in the year 2000 (Association of College and Research Libraries

[ACRL], 2000). The *Standards* have been used pretty universally in United States colleges and universities. The *Standards'* learning outcomes have been accepted by multiple legislative districts (Berg et al., 2014). Therefore, there was considerable concern about the ACRL deciding to make a dramatic change away from the *Standards*. However, over the sixteen years that have passed since the *Standards* were adopted, there have been many problems that surfaced regarding the *Standards'* use, including:

1. Attempting to cover too much content

2. Positing learning outcomes which are too large, or too small

3. Proscribing learning outcomes so vague as to be meaningless.
   (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 60–62)

Librarian Concerns with Current Teaching

In addition, there has been librarian dissatisfaction stemming from the awareness that, in many cases, students don't seem to understand why the librarian is in their classroom for one period in the semester, and students don't retain or use the skills taught during the librarian's session. Despite efforts by both writing teachers and teaching librarians, student research skills continue to show serious problems:

1. Context is the most important missing element in student "research"

2. Not understanding the big picture – not providing a summary, background, or overview of their topic

3. Failure to find relevant sources

4. Students often don't understand the meaning of the words they are using

5. Students don't know the "why" of research (Jacobson & Gibson, 2015).

A group of teaching librarians within the ACRL were appointed to examine the concerns about the *Standards*. They formed what came to be called the ACRL Framework Committee.

Framework Committee Task

The committee wanted a different way of imparting information literacy. They wanted to get away from teaching the particular skills and resources involved in an individual project and instead move toward teaching the universal "why" involved in research, so that what a student would learn for one research project could be transferable to any other research project.

The committee librarians wanted to focus on the processes of information creation: the process of searching, the process of reporting, the process of writing, the process of presenting, moving the focus away from the product.

Most of all, the committee wanted to avoid the possibility of librarians attempting to "add to" the *Standards*. They wanted teaching librarians to change their thinking and teaching dramatically in order to appropriately respond to the dynamic changes that have been happening in the information environment during the 16 years since the *Standards* were adopted (Jacobson & Gibson, 2015).

What the Framework is Not

The *Framework* is the result of their efforts (ACRL, 2015). The *Framework* is just what it claims to be – a framework – an outline – a sketched path, designed to help librarians focus their teaching on essential information characteristics. The *Framework* is not a definitive textbook. It is not comprehensive. Any of the six frames may be changed with future understandings. The frames are designed to provide at least some theoretical underpinnings for the sensemaking involved in information literacy.

Understanding by Design

The *Framework* has been built upon information and thinking derived from two books. One of the books, *Understanding by Design*, written by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, concerns the process of curriculum design. In their research, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) found that students often did not know why they were engaged in certain activities in class and were confused about what they were supposed to be learning. Wiggins and McTighe postulated that teachers were often so focused on the activities of teaching that they failed to communicate the basic understandings or what the intended learning outcomes were for the class or course. To combat this problem, they recommended what they termed "backward design" in developing a curriculum for an individual class or for a course.

Teachers are encouraged to begin their class preparation by answering the questions: What is the goal of this class? What focused learning outcome(s) do I want the students to understand by the time they leave the classroom? Teachers are encouraged to discuss the learning goal with their students. Students need to know the value and importance of their learning:

> Answering the "why?" and "so what?" questions that older students always ask (or want to), and doing so in concrete terms as the focus of curriculum planning is thus the essence of understanding by design…without such explicit and transparent priorities, many students find day-to-day work confusing and frustrating." (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, pp. 15–16)

Having started with the goal of the class, as a second step, teachers are encouraged to determine how they will know if the students have learned. The teacher will decide

how to assess the particular learning. In other words, what will the students do and understand that will demonstrate that the particular learning has occurred?

As a final step in class preparation, the teacher will want to choose activities or the method by which the teaching will be delivered. Will the teacher lecture? Will the students perform some activity? Currently, many teachers begin their planning with a learning activity into which students are thrown without any explanation of why. Students can do the activity, but don't have a rationale for doing the activity outside class. They may have learned a skill, but because the skill is presented as an independent activity, unrelated to anything else in their lives, there is little possibility of transferring that skill to other goals.

Preparing for an information literacy class by utilizing a template and a process, such as the one suggested in *Understanding by Design*, can help teaching librarians stay on track, so that their teaching provides support for important learning outcomes. The lesson plan can be sent to the professor prior to the class so that the professor can see how the librarian's teaching will support the professor's and the course's learning outcomes. These preparation practices enhance the value of the librarian teaching for the professor (Fulkerson, 2016).

Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding

Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge, edited by Jan Meyer and Ray Land, provides another explanation for the lack of retention of librarian teaching. Meyer and Land's book offers the possibility that ideas librarians teach are "threshold concepts" that are very foreign to students; librarians teach ideas and understandings that may very well be "troublesome knowledge" for students (Meyer & Land, 2006).

Awareness of the nature of what librarians are teaching should help them to understand why it is very difficult for students or anyone outside the "information discipline" to readily grasp what is being taught. Threshold concepts require mentally stepping over a threshold into a new way of thinking. Some threshold concepts are troublesome, as well as being outside the student's realm of thinking. For example, when a student is accustomed to finding and using whatever information is available on Google, it is very troublesome for them to recognize the possibility of copyright. Students expect internet information to be free: free to use, free to claim as their own, free to copy and paste. Copyright demands recognition of and perhaps compensation for the originator of the information regardless of where it is found. This is a troublesome concept.

Threshold concepts require change. Threshold concepts are transformative in that they require a new way of thinking and understanding. They are integrative; they bring several concepts together. They are irreversible and can't be readily un-known. And sometimes, they are troublesome (Hofer, Brunetti, & Townsend, 2013).

Value of the Framework

The *Framework* threshold concepts have been succinctly stated as simple sentences, but they cannot be comprehended and understood by simply memorizing the words. Information literacy and threshold concept understanding will probably take time, effort, and multiple exposures.

While threshold concepts are difficult to grasp, and probably impossible to impart in a single class, there are good reasons for implementing them in information literacy teaching. One reason is because "threshold concepts have the potential to help address the 'why' questions that students often pose: Why do I need to learn about this database? What's the point of citing this paper correctly? When will I ever need to know about peer review?" (Townsend, Brunetti, & Hofer, 2011, p. 856). Another reason to embrace threshold concept thinking is that once the student has crossed the threshold, the student cannot revert to their previous state of unknowing. Threshold concepts "stick."

Framework Resources Provided by ACRL and Two Others

On their website, the ACRL provides the *Framework* of threshold concepts for teaching information literacy. The ACRL Framework Committee defined six frames or characteristics of information. Each of the frames states a unique characteristic about information. The ACRL Committee provides a description of the stated concept and possible learning outcomes on their website (ACRL, 2015).

By providing six frames that describe important characteristics of information, the ACRL Committee gave teaching librarians goals and potential learning outcomes for their teaching. If librarians are using the *Understanding by Design* curriculum planning template, step one is covered. The Knowledge Practices which follow each frame offer suggestions of how the students will be changed by the learning, which could guide the librarian in designing assessments. At that point, the librarian needs only to decide how best to convey the learning to the student.

Encouragement and Conclusion

Threshold concepts are not "one and done." They are organically grown as the student matures in their understanding. The process of grasping and understanding threshold concepts is not the same process as the mechanical repetition of similar acts to produce a skill. Our culture still has the need for skilled workers, but more and more it needs creative problem-solvers who can transfer concepts from

individual situations to produce new, universally applicable solutions. The *Framework* offers teaching librarians a very malleable guide for introducing students and their professors to the nature of information. The *Framework* opens the possibility that librarians can further the teaching of the professor, rather than adding something extra for the students to learn.

Teaching librarians are information specialists who see where we have been and are not afraid to look for a way forward. Here are some resources for the intrepid:

ACRL resources	acrlframe@lists.ala.org
Florida Atlantic University Libraries	http://libguides.fau.edu/c.php?g=325774&p=2179692
University of Buffalo Framework posters	https://www.canva.com/sumerian2

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