Teaching Students, Not Standards: The New ACRL Information Literacy Framework and Threshold Crossings for Instructors

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Abstract

The new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education is an opportunity for IL instructors to ask themselves whether their current approaches to instruction are meeting the higher goals of IL education. Instructors might re-examine their pedagogical approaches by considering their own knowledge practices and dispositions in teaching IL. How might we best create a space in which the desired student knowledge practices and dispositions flourish? How can we approach IL education as fellow students – ones who just happen to be at a different point on the same path of lifelong learning?

Keywords

ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education; information literacy; threshold concepts; pedagogy

Following years of growing sentiment among instructional librarians that the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (2000) contained outdated notions of both student learning and the information landscape in higher education, the ACRL Board of Directors in June of 2012 unanimously decided that the Standards should be revised, and authorized the creation of a Task Force charged with drafting a new information literacy framework (Boylston 1). Over several revision projects, webinars, and conference presentations, librarians were invited to weigh in on the shape that the new document would take and the Task Force responded to their suggestions and concerns. The result of those revision efforts is the newly published ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (ACRL 2015).
As a former secondary school teacher turned academic librarian (and advocate of lifelong learning), I engaged with several of these revision feedback projects which, in turn, evolved into an ongoing collaboration with a group of colleagues representing the TRY University Libraries of Toronto (Toronto, Ryerson, and York). Together we’ve unpacked the Framework in two conference presentations and training sessions, as well as a wiki to expand the conversation with other academic librarians (TRY University Libraries of Toronto). Now, in a new role as a Research and Instructional Services Librarian at Western University, I am examining how the Framework has shifted my perspectives on the respective roles of the teacher and student in information literacy (IL) education.

While the ACRL Task Force intends the new Framework and its component frames, knowledge practices, and dispositions to guide instructors in designing curricula for students, I read the document differently: I see in the new Framework an opportunity to ask of ourselves if our current approach to instruction can meet the higher goals of IL education. In this document, I see an opportunity for instructors to reexamine their pedagogical approaches by considering student-focused IL knowledge practices and dispositions, and thinking of them from the point of view of the instructor. In other words, what are my knowledge practices and dispositions in teaching IL? How might my teaching evolve in order to facilitate a space in which the desired student knowledge practices and dispositions can flourish? The Framework in this light is an opportunity for instructors to consider their own knowledge practices and dispositions by adopting a beginner’s frame of mind, and to approach IL education as a discussion with fellow students—ones who just happen to be at a different point on the same path of lifelong learning.

What I find most compelling about this new Framework is that it inspires a different approach to IL education for instructor and student alike. The instructor must cross a threshold, evolving instruction from a point-and-click database demo style to an engaged and interactive IL discussion with students. The instructor occupies the role of coach, animator, or advisor leading the discussion, while encouraging students to become active agents in their own learning. In articulating a challenging threshold to be crossed for both the instructor and the student, the Framework offers examples of dispositions or attitudes for learning that instructors can model, inviting instructors to increase their emphasis on the students’ self-assessments. It levels the hierarchy of instructor/student by asking both parties to grow their abilities in the spirit of lifelong learning. The parallel is evident to me: in order to assist our students in crossing thresholds, we need to go on ahead first.

**The Beginner’s Frame of Mind**

The catalyst of the evolution from the 2000 Standards to the Framework begins with the theory of threshold concepts, drawn from the seminal works of Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land, which the authors define in their 2010 book *Threshold Concepts* and *Transformational Learning* as
the notion that there are certain concepts, or learning experiences, which resemble passing through a portal, from which a new perspective opens up, allowing things formerly not perceived to come into view. This permits 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, and results in a reformulation of the learner’s frame of meaning. ...In attempting to characterize such conceptual gateways we have suggested in earlier work that they are transformative (occasioning a significant shift in the perception of the subject), integrative (exposing the previously hidden inter-relatedness of something) and likely to be, in varying degrees, irreversible (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort), and frequently troublesome, for a variety of reasons (Meyer, Land, and Baillie ix).

This definition of threshold concepts then served as the seedbed from which the ACRL Task Force grew the frames that shape the Framework:

- Authority is Constructed and Contextual.
- Information Creation as a Process.
- Information Has Value.
- Research as Inquiry.
- Scholarship as Conversation.
- Searching as Strategic.

The challenges inherent in this transformation are substantial: to design information literacy sessions from a pedagogical approach outside both my own and my students’ respective comfort zones, and to create transformative sessions designed to engage with troublesome knowledge which will result in an integrative and irreversible learning experience for students.

I find the Framework responsive to the current climate of IL instruction. It speaks to the tremendous pressure academic librarians experience in attempting to fulfill multiple roles, meet numerous objectives, and address many different needs within the virtual or physical classroom—pressure which I feel may stem from librarians’ self-consciousness over our place in the lecture hall. In reflecting upon my own journey to academic librarianship, this theme of the ‘librarian identity crisis’ (born of the larger ‘library identity crisis’) recurred throughout my courses at library school and in the literature, and it persists in my professional practice. I have found it very curious that librarians question their authority in the classroom, and I have witnessed aspects of that self-consciousness colouring my own approach to IL classes.

Yet, librarians do have something very important to share with students, and it is that verb, to share, that offers a useful lens for interpreting the Framework and the exciting opportunities it presents for more meaningful and expansive IL discussions. The Framework calls for instructors to take a beginner’s frame of mind, as students
themselves committed to lifelong learning. Through this perspective, my empathy for the struggles inherent in the learning process grows, and my focus shifts from teaching Standards to teaching students.

**Dispositions for Instructors**

For example, the frame *Searching as Strategic Exploration* is an opportunity to cross a threshold from the canned search demonstrating databases to the messy process of research as exploration, sharing some of the challenges we’ve encountered in our own learning experiences and from our own beginner’s frame of mind. As we step down from the role of sage-on-the-stage, we have the opportunity to step into a more accessible role for our students.

From the student’s perspective, what is the value of watching a perfectly-constructed search string entered into a pre-selected database with all appropriate limiters applied to yield a reasonable number of useful results? This is a demonstration that we the instructors already have well-honed skills, and if our students are visual learners they might be able to mimic this search for themselves. Yet what we are truly offering here is an outmoded approach to education: a demonstration of rote learning. In this classic example of bibliographic instruction, we are demonstrating an ideal rather than demonstrating some of the key dispositions required of novice (and experienced) researchers: resilience, curiosity, creativity, and persistence.

For some, performing a canned presentation is comfortable, and conducting an interactive session that requires the engagement of the students at every step of the lesson is less comfortable: the instructor has less control over the results, it may require more engagement with a quiet class that isn’t forthcoming with ideas, and may not be successful in yielding the excellent search results at the end of the first try. But don’t we want our students to see research for what it truly is, a non-linear, messy process? I think we do a disservice to our students when we make research look quick and easy. I think there is greater value for the students in seeing us model the dispositions of resiliency and creativity in response to research challenges.

**Knowledge Practices for Instructors**

We might think of our evolving pedagogical approach in terms of knowledge practices, or demonstrations of our IL teaching abilities. In terms of pedagogical style, the Socratic Method is an effective way to demonstrate IL knowledge practices by asking increasingly complex questions to stimulate critical thought. The perfect, untouchable sage-on-the-stage may inspire an idea or two, but the teachers from whom I learned best were those who asked me questions instead of giving me answers; the ones who challenged me to think critically about the idea, task, or problem before me, and helped me to help myself. This style of learning is uncomfortable because it requires my active engagement as a student, and it requires the same active engagement of me as an instructor. However, from both perspectives the outcomes of this approach are compelling. When instructors identify their own learning challenges, ask questions of the
process, offer solutions to barriers and plenty of encouragement along the way, I find them accessible and inspiring as models of resilience and creativity in education.

To further illustrate this point, consider the frame Research as Inquiry, and how it challenges us to cross the threshold from database demo to in-depth research question analysis. One approach would be to show a video that demonstrates the features of a particular database within a flipped classroom model, freeing up our face-to-face time with the students to engage in a more complex IL discussion. This frame, and the knowledge practices associated with it, call on us to sit with and examine the research question instead of rushing to solutions or to resources. We can help students by encouraging them, by asking them to break down complex research questions into manageable parts, and by asking them to determine for themselves the boundaries around the scope of the question. In this way, I would model the dispositions of this frame by expecting more of my students: by coaching them to push past the first or easiest answer, by asking questions to help them develop their own research questions, and by encouraging them to seek multiple perspectives in their research beyond what might align with their thesis or hypothesis.

**Next Steps**

In adopting the Framework, academic librarians have an opportunity to take a greater and more active role in shaping our (often questioned) identity as leaders in IL education. I believe librarians’ identity as instructors might be more clearly pronounced and unmistakable if we challenged ourselves to expand our collaborations with faculty. We can become more embedded in their classes and engaged with them in conversations about the higher goals of information literacy, such as teaching students about evaluating authority and different types of authority, as well as students' role as creators of information, and the changing face of information privacy and the commodification of personal information.

Instead of setting standards to meet, this document calls for librarians to begin the conversation about IL education with our faculty, with library administration, and the university at large. Through the Framework-inspired strategy, we can collect and offer university administrators richer and more compelling data on librarians’ measurable and demonstrable impact on student success at our institutions. The evolution of our instruction will require us to reveal ourselves as flawed, curious, resilient, encouraging, and questioning educators.

Part of our identity as academic librarians has been to model what library research looks like, demonstrating navigation, and providing tools for information evaluation. It is time to examine where we can go from here.
Works Cited


