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Not a Challenge but an Opportunity: Harnessing the ACRL Framework to Situate Graduate Students as Active Members of the Academic Community

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CHAPTER 26

NOT A CHALLENGE BUT AN OPPORTUNITY

Harnessing the ACRL *Framework* to Situate Graduate Students as Active Members of the Academic Community

Wendy C. Doucette

There is NO more traditional library function for instruction librarians than teaching information literacy. Without sacrificing expected librarian services such as demonstrating searching and citation management, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* allows us to orient students with a high-level, integrated view of how the seemingly disparate pieces and requirements of graduate research form an integrated whole.

An Abbreviated History

In January 2000, the ACRL formally approved the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. This sixteen-page document discusses information literacy in the context of information technology, higher education, pedagogy, and

assessment. When librarians refer to the *Standards*, they most commonly mean the seven pages that list performance indicators and outcomes for the five standards concerning the demonstrable output of "the information literate student."[1]

ACRL's earliest active information literacy instruction policy is the companion piece to the *Standards*, the 2001 *Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction: A Model Statement for Academic Librarians*, itself a review of the 1987 *Model Statement of Objectives for Academic Bibliographic Instruction*. The 2001 document refers to itself as "a support structure on which librarians can build in creative and individual ways," offering "a variety of possible objectives from which to choose" and that "librarians should apply such elements of the IS objectives as are appropriate to the local setting and circumstances."[2]

The task-oriented, point-by-point levels of proficiency of the *Standards* have necessitated derivatives focused on specialized subject areas. Currently, ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards exist for journalism students and professionals, nursing, anthropology and sociology students, science and technology, teacher education, psychology, and visual literacy. Research Competency Guidelines exist for political science and literatures in English.

In January 2016, after three years of public review concerning the *Standards*, the ACRL formally adopted the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. This change caused intense discussion among instruction librarians, with a variety of responses on the American Library Association professional Listservs. While not specifically naming any individuals, negative reactions included anger from those who relied on the *Standards* for performance appraisals and assessment; confusion as to how the *Framework* would replace the *Standards*; and a feeling of having been blindsided despite the lengthy period of public review and comment. As is always the case, those who thought no change was necessary or would be unaffected by it, commented little. Proponents, such as Foasberg, tended to present intellectual (versus emotional) arguments,[3] providing comparisons and reassurances that the *Framework* would not only provide the same level of support as the *Standards*, but in a more open and holistic manner.

Defining the ACRL *Framework*

Since its release nearly two years ago, the ACRL *Framework* has incited a range of emotional responses from librarians. From indifference to passion to frustration and confusion, librarians continue seeking guidance and instructions for how to use it.

The *Framework* consists of six frames: Authority Is Constructed and Contextual; Information Creation as a Process; Information Has Value; Research as

Inquiry; Scholarship as Conversation; and Searching as Strategic Exploration. The frames are individually explained and supported by definitions of learners' knowledge practices and dispositions, which are similar to the *Standards'* performance indicators and outcomes.

Rather than viewing the *Framework* as a didactic burden or an imposition for teaching librarians, it is in fact a tremendous gift. Descriptive and open versus the more prescriptive *Standards*, the *Framework* allows academic librarians the creative freedom to demystify the structure of academic research as a functioning system. Since it is not restricted to learners at a particular educational level or within a specific discipline, this "richer, more complex set of core ideas"[4] allows for greater flexibility on the part of the instructor and increased connectivity to all disciplines and levels.

It may be that this additional creative freedom given to instructors is the unanticipated cause of the complaints of not knowing what to do with the *Framework* or how to teach it. The integral notion of "threshold concepts which are those ideas in any discipline that are passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline"[5] is likewise unintuitive. If we are suddenly faced with the prospect not only of fully supporting our students' needs but also of structuring regular academic epiphanies, it becomes easier to see why some may view the *Framework* as daunting.

From Theory to Practice for Graduate Librarians

To its advantage, the *Framework* has a solid theoretical base that can be used as a source of study, reflection, conversation, and growth. It remains, however, a high-level teaching tool, and for graduate librarians, a highly effective one. If we pull ourselves back from the realm of theory and conceptual understanding to the real-life, everyday world of graduate library instruction with its myriad teachable moments, we can begin to see the real utility of the *Framework*.

As academic librarians who work with graduate students already know, no matter how well students performed academically as undergraduates, they remain unprepared for the overall process of graduate school. The breadth and complexity of new subject matter and intellectual concepts, the increased workload and expectations, and the pressures internal and external to the program (financial, work, health, family) create a high-stress environment. While students desperately want to understand the new world in which they find themselves, they commonly fully comprehend the overall process only in hindsight.

Our mission in transforming libraries for graduate students is not only to assist with obtaining resources; it is to remind students of the big picture of how research functions and the objective it serves: growing the communal body of knowledge and understanding through discovery, insight, and dialogue. The longer they proceed in their programs, the more graduate students and doctoral candidates become immersed in their project at the detail level. This mind-set, while essential to formulating new thought in a way that is clear and replicable, may become a habit, inadvertently isolating and obscuring a larger connective understanding. As is the case with all thresholds, the shift from student to professional practitioner is fluid and relative and consists of multiple gradations. Matriculation is the most evident, and public, manifestation of achievement. For students in professional programs such as business or nursing, the end may be clear: a return to the new or established employment with the appropriate certification or degree. Students in more traditionally academic programs or those planning to remain in academia quickly discover a hierarchy whose peak remains ever ascending: after the master's, the doctorate, postdoctorate, lectureship, tenure-track position, and so on. Whether the immediate objective is capstone, thesis, or dissertation, graduate students exist on the lowest rung of this medieval ladder.

Scholarship Is a Conversation

While we cannot elevate graduate students from their position at the bottom of the academic hierarchy (only continued academic progress can do that), we can help to clarify their position as nascent members of the academic community.

Although the frames are presented in alphabetical order as equals, I believe the most important frame is Scholarship [Is a] Conversation. In workshops and discussions with graduate students, I liken scholarship to a river where academic dialogue is always flowing. Initially, we step into the stream of established scholarship without understanding the larger concepts, currents, and points of view. Gradually, we begin to learn who is speaking and to detect patterns. We come to understand that we are expected to contribute to the stream of dialogue in a clear, lucid, informed way. While certain scholars are regarded as more influential than others and tides may come and go, no one "owns" the river. No one will have the last word because academic dialogue never stops flowing. Through this metaphor, students move from seeing their projects as static academic papers to recognizing the actual role of academic publishing: to contribute to the corpus of scholarly communication and advance understanding on a particular subject.

The remaining frames are directly relevant to explaining the graduate process:

- Information Creation [Is] a Process:

  Akin to progressing through a graduate degree, this process happens over time. Pieces will shift, and direction may change as we progress towards a hypothesized but as yet unproven conclusion to the research question.

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual:

  As beginning students learn new facts and theories, they must also create the cumulative context to categorize them. Every discipline contains its own subsets and factions, opponents and proponents. One of the manifestations of this topic-specific categorization of related experts is the literature review.

- Information Has Value:

  As the internet's influence on daily life increases, students, whether as academics or as citizens, are increasingly aware of the importance of copyright and ownership. Practicing correct citation management and avoiding plagiarism to apply the precept of non-stealing and giving credit where it is due are increasingly recognized and becoming a core, expected value of responsible citizenship in online society.

The two frames I personally use the least are nonetheless valuable:

- Research as Inquiry:

  Reminds us that questions do (and should) lead to new questions, and

- Searching as Strategic Exploration:

  Acknowledges the value of persistence and serendipity.

All of the frames reinforce the fact that at the graduate level, students are obliged to become information creators and to contribute to the sum of academic knowledge. For beginning researchers, high-level scholarship remains a Brave New World, but one whose rules and expectations the *Framework* helps greatly to clarify.

The *Framework* as Road Map and Mirror

The flexibility of the *Framework* is a tremendous aid when teaching information literacy to graduate students, particularly at institutions without subject-specific graduate librarians. Because they are adults, self-initiated exploration is expected of graduate students and required the further they progress toward graduation. A one-size-fits-all approach may be feasible temporarily, but even in required courses, graduate students are poised to expand their research in different ven-

ues. The high-level stance of the *Framework* accommodates this diversity by allowing students to self-select the contextual examples appropriate to their own disciplines.

In 2016, I developed a series of Graduate-Level Research Support Workshops using the *Framework* as a guide. When giving these workshops live to students and explaining the multiple definitions and aspects of the frames, I realized almost immediately that the *Framework*, which was indispensable to me when developing content, should remain largely behind the scenes as discipline-specific theory. Empathy reminded me of the burden of struggling with the philosophy of my own discipline. Graduate students attend my workshops seeking clarity and support; why would I burden them with another discipline's theory? Although I continue to use the *Framework* to inform my own thinking, I rarely ever make it visible to students, beyond stating the names of the frames. Because I understand the dialogue behind them and because I adapt it to the needs of whatever group of students I'm teaching, the starting points of "Scholarship [Is a] Conversation" and "Information Has Value" are more than sufficient.

Graduate librarians are able to harness the underlying conceptual messages of the *Framework* and apply them to diverse groups of students because of their high-level adaptability and because they are true. For students in epidemiology or education or electronic media, scholarship *is* a conversation, information *does* have value, and so on. Whatever else we teach students (searching, citation management, citations, and more), the *Framework* gives us a construct and a reminder that all of these interrelated pieces fit together, and how.

Academic research follows a well-established process. Students have a place in it, and so do we. Rather than being afraid of the *Framework*, instruction librarians have an opportunity to use it as a launchpad for explaining diverse, critical concepts about metaliteracy and research in an accessible, practical way. It provides us with the contextual mapping to orient students to their role as active scholars and the freedom to highlight the best route. Whether our students are in their first semester or their last, and regardless of discipline or level of experience with academic research and writing, the *Framework* offers effective guidelines for navigating the scholarly landscape.

Notes

1. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000), https://alair.ala.org/bitstream/handle/11213/7668/ACRL%20Information%20Literacy%20Competency%20Standards%20for%20Higher%20Education.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
2. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Objectives for Information Literacy Instruc-*

tion (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2001), http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/objectivesinformation.

3. Nancy 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): 699–717.

4. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016) , paragraph 1, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

5. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework*, paragraph 2.

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