

## THIS IS REALLY HAPPENING

### Criticality and discussions of context in ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy*

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The development of the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy* has sparked an immense amount of conversation among academic librarians, though the profession is still far from consensus with regards to if, when, or how the document should be implemented. This essay argues that despite debates over various points within the text, the overall theme of the *Framework* is a call for librarians and educators to recognize the importance of context when discussing information literacy. As this relates to the curriculum of higher education, instruction and assignments can no longer afford to separate "school" from "real life." Classroom instruction must recognize the political, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions of information, as well as the systems of privilege and oppression that accompany these dimensions, and encourage students to critically engage with these systems when conducting research and creating information.

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## A LOT HAS HAPPENED

I was at a statewide library unconference a few weeks ago. In keeping with the unconference format, the day opened with all the attendees sitting around a big table, tossing out ideas for different sessions. Topics included "dealing with library renovations," "looking for more outreach opportunities," and "developing roving reference models." I recommended that we "talk about the *Framework*." Almost immediately, a colleague and friend of mine followed by recommending that we "talk about *Framework* fatigue."

I could easily relate to the sentiment. Beginning with the release of "Draft 1, Part 1" in February 2014, the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* has sparked more discussion, debate, and reflection on what it means to be an instruction librarian than any other event in my decade in academic libraries. The process of drafting, reviewing, revising, critiquing, and implementing the document has generated untold numbers of tweets, blogs, and conference presentations, and now we are beginning to see the conversation expand into the scholarly literature. It is also worth noting that all of this published and presented material, immense as it is, rests alongside still more conversations, taking place in coffee shops and conference rooms and a thousand other casual settings.

For those of us who have been following the process closely and trying to get a handle on where the professional consensus is, it has required quite a bit of time and energy. One of the most challenging aspects for me has been trying to find footing on ground that

always seems to be shifting. While some professionals have sought to explain the strengths of the document and discuss its implementation (Oakleaf, 2014; Townsend, Lu, Hofer, & Brunetti 2015; Witek, 2015), others have offered thoughtful critiques, voicing a variety of concerns and reservations (Beilin, 2015; Seale, 2015; Wilkinson, 2014). As I attended conferences this past year and spoke with librarians from wide and far, I was struck by how many people were effectively "in the middle" when it came to the *Framework*. They liked parts, disliked others, and were wondering what, if anything, they should do next.

Which is why, for the purposes of this essay, I would like to step back for a moment. I would like to set aside discussions of threshold concept theory, metaliteracy, and assessment of student learning. Likewise, I would prefer not address the structure of the *Framework*, parsing the difference between "knowledge practices" and "dispositions." I will not argue why the wording of a certain frame should be changed to have that "as" become an "is." I do not want to get into whether or not teaching information literacy is the job of librarians or other disciplinary faculty, or whether or not we can "teach the *Framework*" in a one-shot. I have feelings about a lot of these topics, and critical discussions around them need to continue, but for now I will leave these areas to my colleagues to address.

My purpose in writing this essay is to explore the *Framework* solely as a pedagogical document. To read the filed version, divorced from the earlier drafts and accompanying literature, what does the document say about our interactions with

students? Are there any overarching themes that appear within the text? How might these ideas be shared with colleagues outside of librarianship? How likely are they to be incorporated into the broader curriculum of higher education? In other words, what does the *Framework* mean for our profession and our practice?

## CONTEXT AND CRITICALITY

I have been on “Team *Framework*” more or less from the beginning, and despite the critiques that have been offered, I continue to find the document to be energizing and full of potential. That is not to say that I think it is perfect, only that I think it moves our work in a much better direction. But why? What about the *Framework* has resonated with me so much? In an attempt to better understand my own support, I tried my best to wipe the slate clean, forget about all of the conversations that have been going on, and re-read the document with fresh eyes. I printed a shiny new copy, took a walk across my campus, and sat down on a bench with a pen, a highlighter, and an open mind.

Over the next hour, as I read the text and scribbled notes throughout the margins, I rediscovered what I liked about it so much. The *Framework* talks about information as it exists “in the real world.” Unlike most of the curriculum of higher education, which creates a false binary between “school” and “real life,” the *Framework* addresses the notion of “context” head on, and challenges anyone thinking about information to situate themselves, and the information with which they interact, within that larger context. Gone is a curriculum formed by a series of steps, all of which must be completed in

order to prepare students for whatever comes next. The *Framework* certainly deals with concepts that are relevant for college students, but it is not solely for this group, and it contains ideas that are relevant for anyone interacting with information in contemporary society.

Beyond discussing context, the *Framework* also makes clear that we should be critical of that context as we interact with information. Researchers are encouraged to question how and why information is produced and disseminated, as well as how and why they could, or could not, use that information to achieve their goals. The text draws from the critical information literacy movement, which resists linear models of instruction that prevent “an analysis of how individual students in specific contexts and communities encounter information” (Elmborg, 2006, p. 194). Seale (2015) recently noted that the *Framework* borrows heavily from critical information literacy, and that the filed document “is not anything like the decontextualized, ahistorical, and apolitical Standards we knew and hated” (p. 2-3).

I will go through the six frames included in the document and investigate how the notion of context is discussed within each one. I understand that there is still debate over the wording and scope of some of these frames, and acknowledge that the document is not meant to be adopted as is by libraries, but rather adapted to each individual institution. Still, I think that reviewing these individual components provides a better understanding of the document as a whole, and gives librarians a clearer picture of what the *Framework* means and how it could be incorporated into the curriculum of higher

education.

## EXAMPLES FROM THE FRAMES

Of the six frames, “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” is the most explicit in its acknowledgement of the role of context, going so far as to include the word in its title. The frame’s definition states that “information resources reflect their creators’ expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used.” Here the document discusses the context which creates the information, as well as the context in which it is applied, and how “authority” is conditional in both settings. It goes on to state that researchers need “to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations.” This wording clearly is rooted in critical information literacy, and invites both students and educators to interrogate the context surrounding information and reveal the systems of privilege and oppression at work. Likewise, a disposition attached to this frame calls for students to “develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview.”

The next frame, “Information Creation as a Process,” shares a lot with “Authority is Constructed and Contextual,” in that the concept is centered on a context (in this case, a process), and discusses how that context contributes to these ideas of authority or credibility. The frame calls on students to “recognize that information creations are valued differently in different

contexts, such as academia or the workplace.” It is unfortunate that this frame lists only the examples of “academia or the workplace,” and does not address other venues for seeking and applying information. At the same time, however, the frame does not portray the former as preparation for the latter, and the underlying concept is seen as being applicable in multiple environments, rather than limited to just one or the other.

This discussion of context continues with “Information has Value,” which clearly states that “legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination.” It goes on to explain that “the value of information is manifested in various contexts, including publishing practices, information access, the commodification of personal information, and intellectual property laws,” and that recognizing these contexts allows researchers to “understand that value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices.” This frame invites us, and our students, to explore the interrelationship between oppressive systems and our valuing of information. A knowledge practice associated with this frame calls for students to “understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information.”

Of the six frames, “Research as Inquiry” is probably the least direct in its discussion of context, though the idea of “inquiry” itself provides the context in which information is being sought and applied. It also makes clear that “this process of inquiry extends

beyond the academic world to the community at large, and the process of inquiry may also focus upon personal, professional, or societal needs.” Here, again, the *Framework* addresses different settings, but does not separate the concept’s applicability between them, and instead notes that it is useful in multiple venues. There is also a disposition attached to this frame calling for students to “maintain an open mind and a critical stance” with regards to the information they encounter. Considering how that “critical stance” is acknowledged in the other frames, we can see that this frame encourages students to consider broader contexts of how information is created and shared as they use it to answer their own questions.

In the way that the previous frame implies context on the part of the person seeking information, “Scholarship as Conversation” discusses the context surrounding how information is created and debated. The frame includes language about “varied perspectives and interpretations,” and how multiple viewpoints must be considered as “users and creators come together and negotiate meaning.” It calls on students to “suspend judgment on the value of a particular piece of scholarship until the larger context for the scholarly conversation is better understood,” as well as including another disposition that researchers “recognize that systems privilege authorities and that not having a fluency in the language and process of a discipline disempowers their ability to participate and engage.” Readers of the *Framework* are reminded that there are no absolutes when it comes to information, and it would be disingenuous to present certain kinds of information as being more true or correct

than others.

Lastly, “Searching as Strategic Exploration” is similarly explicit about situating research within “the real world,” stating that “information searching is a contextualized, complex experience that affects, and is affected by, the searcher’s cognitive, affective, and social dimensions.” In many ways, that sentence encapsulates the *Framework*’s recognition of, and emphasis on, the need to discuss context in the classroom. It makes clear that information is made in different ways, valued for different reasons, and used to achieve different ends. If students are to be successful in their search for answers, they will need to consider a number of factors which go well beyond what librarians have covered in more traditional instruction sessions.

### MY POINT BEING...?

The main question I asked myself at the start of this process was “What does the *Framework* mean for our profession and our practice?” Teaching librarians are grappling with just how to answer that question, and I realize that the profession is far from consensus on if, when, and how to apply this text to our work. The document itself calls for individual programs to adapt, replace, or ignore these frames as each library sees fit. Considering those realities then, how can we observe the larger implications of the *Framework*?

Through my analysis of context and criticality in the document, I demonstrated that regardless of how individuals apply the *Framework*, the overall theme of the text is one of connecting academic research with the world around us. We cannot afford to

base our instruction on finding the information necessary to complete the assignment at hand without likewise discussing the political, cultural, and socioeconomic factors which contribute to the creation and dissemination of that information. Regardless of the nuances in how these frames are used by different libraries, any meaningful incorporation of the *Framework* requires that librarians and faculty recognize their own biases, and bring to an end the notion of neutrality in their work.

That means that a model of information literacy instruction which universally praises scholarly research and devalues alternative venues of information dissemination is no longer valid. To tell students “that’s the way it is in college” robs them of the opportunity to engage in these discussions of context, and it is incumbent upon us to recognize that students are already experiencing complex relationships with information in real time. This is the real world. To present rules and guidelines in a vacuum, devoid of context, deprives our students of the recognition that their lived experiences have value, and that they likely have encountered many of the concepts included in the *Framework*, even if they did not put those understandings in these specific terms.

While these ideas may seem challenging to some in the profession, there are a number of librarians who have embraced this approach to information literacy instruction, and are actively bringing discussions of contemporary context into their work. Tewell and Angell (2015) have developed new and different in-class activities to address the idea of authority. During the

CAPAL Conference in Ottawa, Pashia (2015) described how she had adapted her for-credit information literacy course to focus on media narratives surrounding the events in Ferguson, Missouri. And Pagowsky and Wallace (2015) have written about their experiences with collecting information related to the Black Lives Matter movement to share with students and faculty on their university campus. In all of these examples, librarians are moving their instruction beyond simple tasks, and are instead embracing the complexity of information and the context surrounding it.

In closing, I would like to reiterate my view that the *Framework* is an important document not just for information literacy, but for higher education. It represents a professional sentiment that instruction cannot be separated from the world in which it is taking place. It also challenges practitioners to interrogate many issues, including privilege and oppression, which have historically been ignored in the academy. There will almost certainly be resistance to these ideas, both within librarianship and outside of it, but we cannot say that the *Framework* has failed to spark new and necessary conversations about the nature of our work as librarians and educators.

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