SEEKING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ACRL FRAMEWORK

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The scope of this article is to address the possibilities and challenges librarians concerned with social justice may face when working with the ACRL *Framework*. While the *Framework* recognizes that information emerges from varied contexts that reflect uneven distributions of power, privilege, and authority, it is missing a cogent statement that connects information literacy to social justice. In this article, authors concerned with social justice and civic engagement will share their reflections on the *Framework* from a critical pedagogical and social justice orientation.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, after the release of the first and second drafts of the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*, a dozen librarians[1] responded with a statement titled "Social Justice and Civic Engagement in the new ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."[2] This group was concerned that the *Framework* lacked explicit articulation of the ways in which social justice issues intersect with information literacy education: social inclusion, access, critical awareness of the mechanisms of establishing authority, cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts, and civic and community engagement. In general, the authors of the statement for inclusion of social justice and civic engagement supported the revision in progress as an "articulation of information literacy [that] offers space for the contextual nature of research, scholarship, and information-seeking practices" (Baer, et al., 2014). The revision process was also an opportune moment to recognize the political nature of the work of information professionals in higher education.

Unambiguous connections between social justice, human rights, and information literacy can be found in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions'(IFLA) *Beacons of the Information Society: The Alexandria Proclamation for Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning* (2005) in which information literacy is declared a "basic human right...and promotes social inclusion of all nations" as well as redresses disadvantages and advances "the well being of all." More recently, IFLA's *Media and Information Literacy Recommendations* states that information and media literacy "bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor" (2011). Likewise, social justice and human rights perspectives in relation to information literacy and librarianship have been articulated by numerous LIS scholars (Durrani, 2008; Elmborg, 2006, 2012; Gregory & Higgins, 2013; Jacobs, 2008; Jaeger, Taylor, & Gorham, 2014; Kapitzke, 2003; Mathiesen, 2009; Phenix & McCook, 2005; McCook & Phenix, 2008; Morrone, 2014; Samek, 2007). These critiques could have informed a clearer stance on complex issues that affect students in the final draft of the *Framework* filed in February 2015. The *Framework* authors acknowledge a "significant effort to try and draft a frame about information as a human right that took a stronger social justice stance," but decided social justice components were better woven throughout the other frames instead (ACRL, 2015a).

Any document that seeks to distill and codify practices, goals, and values will be fraught and contested. The *Framework* offers improvements from the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (*Standards)*, such that it is intended to be flexible, nonprescriptive, and adaptable to local contexts.[3] However, the scope of this essay is to address the possibilities and challenges librarians concerned with social justice may face when working with the *Framework*. While the *Framework* recognizes that information emerges from varied contexts that reflect uneven distributions of power, privilege, and authority, it is missing a cogent

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statement that connects information literacy to social justice.

The authors who circulated the aforementioned statement on inclusion of social justice and civic engagement will share their reflections on the *Framework* from a critical pedagogical[4] and social justice orientation. [5] As Seale (2015) suggests, the *Framework* "clearly articulates the ways in which power influences information production and consumption," (p. 3) but primarily in three frames: "Authority is Constructed and Contextual," "Scholarship as Conversation," and "Information has Value." A focus on these frames will become clear as Chris Sweet examines the development of the *Framework* and the almost frame "Information as a Human Right," Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins seek critical consciousness, Dave Ellenwood analyzes the cultural orientation of the Framework, Andrew Battista and Yasmin Sokkar Harker discuss the Framework's construction of academic authority, and Jeff Lilburn searches for civic engagement.

THE FRAMEWORK CREATION PROCESS AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The *Standards* had been ACRL's guiding document for information literacy efforts since 2000; they were overdue for revision or replacement. With this goal in mind, ACRL created a Standards Review Task Force in July of 2011, which recommended revisions leading to the formation of another task force that created the new *Framework* (ACRL, 2015c). The first draft was released in February 2014 and included the following critical piece of information regarding the

move to threshold concepts and the drafting of the initial frames:

> Growing interest in the library field in threshold concepts as a different way of framing information literacy is evident in the research and writing of Hofer, Brunetti, and Townsend, and in an ongoing Delphi study to identify threshold concepts, which has informed this Framework."
> (ACRL, p. 5)

It should be noted here that a Task Force member was also a principal investigator in this Delphi study that heavily influenced both the frames and the move to threshold concepts. Having a P.I. from this study may not be a conflict of interest, but an over-reliance on this Delphi study for crafting the *Framework* is problematic.

A Delphi study is an established but not widely used qualitative research methodology that relies on multiple rounds of querying experts. It is named after the Greek oracle at Delphi because the methodology was originally developed by the RAND Corporation in the 1950s to predict the impact of technology on warfare (RAND). Unfortunately, just like the advice delivered by its namesake oracle, the usefulness and broad applicability of Delphi studies can be limited. Relying on a small number of experts has the potential to leave out the viewpoints of anyone not considered an expert. Moreover, researchers have found that experts in any field consistently exhibit certain types of biases and shortcomings (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006). Beyond this methodological limitation, it should be of some concern that the particular information literacy Delphi

study which heavily influenced an important national document was only in its early stages when the *Framework* was being drafted; as of summer 2015, the study's website indicates: "We are currently undertaking a Delphi study to validate the threshold concept approach for information literacy and to identify threshold concepts for information literacy" (Brunetti., Hofer, Hanick, & Townsend). In other words, roughly two years after the formation of the Framework Task Force, the Delphi study, which influenced the structure of the *Framework*, was still incomplete.

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The Task Force did an adequate job of soliciting and gathering feedback after each of the three drafts were released. However, the *Framework's* structure was always already defined as a result of the method in which feedback was organized and used. The feedback was coded to "the structure of the document, including each individual frame, the introduction, and other organizational sections of the document" (ACRL, 2015a). This decision to organize feedback by the existing structure seems to have ensured that the first draft of the frames would not change - and it did not. The only frame that was added after the first draft was "Information has Value," which first appears in draft two. The descriptions changed slightly, but for all the feedback that the task force received at the frame level (recall that the initial frames were based on the incomplete Delphi study), there were no substantial deviations from the first draft.

Concurrent with the petition for greater incorporation of social justice and civic engagement into the *Framework*, the Task Force experienced internal debate over the potential inclusion of a frame with the working title of "Information as a Human Right." According to a blog post by Task Force member Troy Swanson (2014), "[t]he heart of this draft frame viewed information and access to information as necessities for freedom of expression, healthy communities, the right to education, and universal human rights." Including such a frame could have resolved concerns regarding civic engagement and social justice in the *Framework*. In recent years a substantial amount of scholarship in the area of critical information literacy has established the important, fundamental connections between information literacy and social justice. Having a frame on Information as a Human Right would have acknowledged and furthered this important body of work. In the end, the Task Force decided against this frame because they "...felt that social justice was not its own frame and that social justice components were better served as pieces of other frames" (ACRL, 2015a). While social justice components exist in the *Framework*, nowhere does it explicitly mention "social justice" or "civic engagement." Moving from dated standards to threshold concepts is an improvement. However, librarians,

other faculty members, and administrators must read between the lines of the _Framework_ if they seek ways in which information literacy impacts social justice and civic engagement.

One of the foundational articles on threshold concepts lists five definitional criteria for identifying them. The last of these criteria is: "Troublesome—usually difficult or counterintuitive ideas that can cause students to hit a roadblock in their learning" (Hofer, Townsend, & Brunetti, 2012, p. 388). It is interesting to note that by all accounts "Information as a Human Right" was acknowledged as important, though was difficult to fit into the _Framework_. This potential frame also stimulated much debate both among the Task Force and the larger profession: in other words, it was troublesome.

SOCIAL INCLUSION: AWARENESS TO ACTION

Social inclusion is the extent to which individuals and communities have access to participation in social, economic, and political spheres. The obverse, social exclusion, is to be marginalized, or "expelled from useful participation in social life" (Young, 1990, p. 53). Social inclusion concerns issues of power and privilege, and the _Framework_ includes language that may be considered orientated toward critical consciousness raising in relation to the power and privilege of information production, dissemination, and use.

 For example, in the Information Has Value frame, the learner "understand[s] how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or

systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information," is "inclined to examine their own information privilege," and "understand[s] that value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices" (ACRL, 2015b). Acknowledging power, privilege, and marginalization is clearly a goal. The language in this frame signals the learner or "expert" to "understand how or why" and to "examine." But for what purpose will the student "understand how or why" individuals or groups are systematically marginalized? What follows, after a student "examine[s]" their own privileged positions (or lack thereof)?[6] Indeed, although some students may "be satisfied with the recognition that social and political inequality exists between peoples" (Harris, 2010, p. 281), that awareness should lead to action.

Four qualities should be considered when building a critical consciousness, including an awareness of the organization of power in society, critical literacy, examining and challenging normalized behaviors and values, and taking action to make society more just (Shor, 1993, pp. 31-32). Although there are passages in the _Framework_ in which students become "creators of information," "question traditional notions" and "come together and negotiate meaning," all of which locate agency and authority in the student, much of the language limits the learner, (or "consumer" or "expert"), to "recognize", "acknowledge", "identify", "understand", and to know "how or why." Without a clear statement on the connection between information literacy and social justice, critical educators will need to move beyond the _Framework_ if they wish to

encourage students to challenge the status quo and become involved with their communities in ways that lead to social change. Action, or participation, is vital for further engagement in social justice issues. Jean Anyon (2009) writes that research on social movements focusing on:

> why people participate in public contention, demonstrate that there are multiple reasons people become involved in social action, and simply having information about injustices-- even when those involve insult or injury to oneself--is rarely enough to motivate participation. The research reveals that of prime importance among factors that influence participation in public contention is the experience of participation *itself.* Research suggests that--although critical information and understanding of social system inequities or injustice are important-- it is not sufficient to get people engaged in ongoing contention. (p. 389)

Of course, the crucial question is, how can librarians build this type of critical consciousness? Fortunately the *Framework* is meant to be flexible and incomplete; the possibilities the *Framework* has opened allows for creativity (Beilin, 2015). Librarians will continue to find spaces to learn and make meaning with each other, such as within the #critlib community. [7] They will persist in claiming information and information literacy as a human right and highlight the connections to social justice. And they will be active in progressive library organizations[8], their own communities, and local contexts.

CULTURAL ORIENTATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

Another component of social justice absent from the draft *Framework* was the recognition of the importance of culture. There are many definitions of culture but the conception used in the radical multicultural education discourse is particularly pertinent. Education scholar Geneva Gay defines culture more broadly as "an aggregation of beliefs, attitudes, habits, values, and practices that forms a view of reality or as 'the modal personality of a unique group of people that provides rules and guidelines for appraising and interpreting interactions with events, people, or ideas encountered in daily life'" (1995, p. 159). Culture, she suggests, permeates all aspects of human activity, which includes teaching, learning and other knowledge practices. Viewed in this way, culture is an essential lens through which to view educational practices and is always operating whether it is explicitly mentioned or not.

If the draft *Framework* insufficiently addressed cultural dimensions of difference, little changed in the final publication. In fact, the *Framework* maintained about the same amount of references to, and sophistication concerning culture. On the positive side, an important reference to cultural differences in notions of intellectual property found in earlier drafts remained in the final *Framework*. The only other use of the term came in the following sentence of Authority is Constructed and Contextual in the final draft: "Experts understand the need to determine the validity of the information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some

sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others' worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and *cultural orientations*" [emphasis added].

While recognitions of culture are welcome, the *Framework* would have benefited from a stronger, more cohesive statement on culture. First, this statement should demonstrate an understanding of the fact that students engaging with information literacy education have myriad intersecting cultural contexts and histories including ethnicity/racialization, class, gender/ sexuality, and regional location and that students learn best when curriculum is firmly situated in cultural context. [9] Secondly, it should explicitly recognize that the *Framework* is essentially describing normative academic research and knowledge practices. In other words, it describes the culture of academic research. Although these academic cultural practices are always fraught and contested, they are historically largely shaped by cultures of dominance (i.e. European colonialism/ imperialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, heteronormativity, ableism, etc.). While in several places the *Framework* recognizes the possibility of hierarchy and marginalization in the way information is marshalled and circulated, it does not call out the fact that students will have to contend with these specific cultures of dominance as they cross the threshold into academic research expertise, or are acculturated into these sets of practices. The *Framework* could have addressed these issues and left more space for contestation and disagreement over these practices. Instead the document expresses a universality/cultural neutrality that is ultimately harmful.

ACADEMIC AUTHORITY: DEVELOPING A SKEPTICAL STANCE

The *Framework* recognizes that authority is constructed and contextual. By entering a new community that requires students to gather evidence and integrate it into their own writing, presentations, and research projects, new college learners must approximate a scholarly conversation in which they may not feel qualified to participate. In his 1986 paper, "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae explores the disproportionate balance of power between student and teacher as students learn to incorporate the language and evidence that the academy deems acceptable. When students begin their college education, Bartholomae suggests, they "try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing" that comprise the process of academic authority (p. 4). In this regard, authority is not only a criteria to evaluate information; rather, it is a currency that undergirds the entire system of their education.

If the goal is for students to recognize that "authoritative content may be packaged formally or informally," as one of the knowledge practices states, an interface like the *ACI Scholarly Blog Index* is an interesting example of how difficult this task is. The *ACI Scholarly Blog Index* is a database product that indexes blogs, a medium of information that is usually situated outside of the environment of traditional scholarship, and re-presents them with a veneer of academic authority. For example, it allows users to explore blog content according to a controlled

vocabulary, and it even suggests that users should filter their search results according to the educational credentials of each blog post author. ACI's vetting and indexing process is not entirely clear, but the interface takes disparate streams of content online and makes it appear like articles in a proprietary database.

Blogs are such a valuable source of information for students because they recognize them as existing outside of the cycle of academic authority. They also recognize that blogs can influence political and social discussions in ways that mainstream media cannot always control or predict. In fact, this is one of the specific examples mentioned in the *Framework*. With a new knowledge disposition, students will "critically examine all evidence—be it a short blog post or a peer-reviewed conference proceeding—and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need." The content that has been "curated" on the ACI site is no different than content that is available on the open web.

The Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame, then, creates a set of decisions for librarians. Perhaps this frame would compel libraries to forego purchasing or teaching with resources like the *ACI Scholarly Blog Index*, but more likely, a framework with a more explicit connection to the concepts and goals of social justice would open up space for a conversation about the role of blog writing amidst an increasingly diverse and fluid network of scholarly communications. More importantly, instructors would have a stronger means to connect user interfaces on databases like the ACI scholarly index to

the larger consequences of academic authority and information. As the *Framework* describes, experts "understand that authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community." The ramifications of this statement might be hard to comprehend for students who are entering college. Too often, the conventions of information interfaces reinforce academic authority in ways that alienate students from the production of their education. The *Framework* would benefit by outlining opportunities for students to consider and interrogate the motivations behind constructing and establishing academic authority.

The related "Scholarship as Conversation" frame raises a similar question: Who has the authority to participate in the conversation? The language of this frame attempts to address "authority" and the politics underlying it through phrases such as: "established power and authority structures may influence their [novice learners] ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information." It also brings up the possibilities brought by new formats, stating: "New forms of scholarly and research conversations provide more avenues in which a wide variety of individuals may have a voice in the conversation." Further, students are asked to "Identify barriers to entering scholarly conversation via various venues" as one of the knowledge practices. In doing so, the frame recognizes that there are "power and authority structures" that create a barrier to the conversation, but it does not look to the mechanisms that establish the "power and authority structures." Specifically, it does not look at the economic and political incentives and motivations for establishing

and maintaining "established power and authority structures" within the scholarly conversation. In short, the frame does not discuss what makes and what motivates the scholars in this "scholarly conversation," and it places them in a political vacuum.

There are many individuals and institutions participating in the scholarly conversation, and they all have different motivations based on their place within the system. For example, scholars are motivated to publish for tenure requirements, schools and departments seek to increase their visibility and prestige with publications, and companies use scholarship to increase their credibility. Additionally, there are graduate students, adjuncts, independent scholars, peer-reviewers, publishers, and editors who are all motivated by different incentives. Scholarship is a conversation, but for many people, it is also a part of their job - even an economic necessity.

CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The *Standards* included multiple references to the idea of an informed citizenry, and it made explicit connections between information literacy and informed and active citizens. However, the language of the *Standards* emphasized the need to follow and comply with existing practices and policies and, as such, offered a form of citizenship inclined to accept unchallenged existing social, economic, and political conditions (Lilburn 2007/08). Surprisingly, the word citizen (or citizenship, citizenry, etc.) does not appear once in the new *Framework*. The inclusion of references to "community learning" (Introduction) and an interest (in some frames) in power relations

(Seale 2015) gesture towards a more critical understanding of citizenship, but the closest the *Framework* comes to an explicit statement about civic engagement appears in the "Information Has Value" frame:

> Experts understand that value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices. However, value may be leveraged by individuals and organizations to effect change and may be leveraged for civic, economic, social, or personal gains. Experts also understand the individual is responsible for making deliberate and informed choices about when to comply with and when to contest current legal and socioeconomic practices concerning the value of information.

The clear articulation that existing practices can be contested is an improvement over the *Standards*. Still, there are problems. Opportunities for contestation are limited to "experts." Similarly, opportunities to effect change are restricted to "individuals and organizations," leaving unmentioned the possibility of myriad forms of collective action. Equally troubling is the fact that the ideas expressed in these passages are not reflected in the Knowledge Practices and Dispositions. Instead, learners are expected to "understand" how individuals or groups may be systematically marginalized by systems that produce information, and they are expected to "recognize" barriers to access to information sources, but there is no mention of any action that may be taken to remedy such situations. In the Dispositions, learners' contributions are limited to the "information marketplace," a

narrow description that seems to raise the value of information as a commodity over other dimensions of value. In short, the absence of Knowledge Practices and Dispositions that reflect civic engagement and an understanding that individuals, groups, communities, organizations, etc., can, in fact, effect change and work to correct injustices and inequities would seem to undermine any importance given to civic actions in this frame. The same could be said regarding the absence of other clear or explicit mentions of civic action and engagement elsewhere in the *Framework.*

Overall, while it is possible to point to particular improvements in the *Framework,* the new document does not sufficiently respond to recent scholarship addressing political ideologies underlying the *Standards* (See for example: Enright, 2013; Seale, 2013, 2015; Ryan & Sloniowski, 2013). As Jonathan Cope (2010) has argued, a critical theory of information literacy is one that would seek "to engage students as active social subjects charged with interrogating the social world and developing their own capacity for informed questioning" (p. 25). A critical theory of information literacy is one that would also encourage and empower students to act and would provide an answer to the following question: To what end do we teach information literacy, and to what end to do we help students become critical and engaged citizens? (Lilburn, 2013). To date, responses to the new *Framework* suggest that it is not a document that will lead easily or directly to the advancement of such a theory. In his thoughtful response to the *Framework,* Ian Beilin (2015) notes that from a critical information literacy perspective, the type of information literacy

advocated by the *Framework* is one that "accepts the existence of a particular regime of knowledge, and demands that we as librarians focus our energies on making students and faculty competent citizens of that regime." Indeed, because the *Framework* does not address the implications of what is simply described as "the rapidly changing higher education environment" and "the dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem" (Introduction), the particulars of the social and political contexts in which teaching and learning currently take place—increasing ties between higher education and the business world, growing social inequality and imbalances of power, dominant narratives about austerity, to give just a few examples—are simply accepted.[10] Consequently, the form of citizenship modeled by the *Framework* seems very similar to that constructed by the *Standards*: a citizenship that is more inclined to support and sustain existing social and political conditions than to question or challenge social injustices and the ideological foundations on which they are based.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE *FRAMEWORK*

Discussions in the preceding sections make clear that many of the concerns that prompted the authors of this article and other librarians to issue a statement in response to draft versions of the *Framework* remain unaddressed (or insufficiently addressed) in the final document. Early critical responses to the *Framework*, including some of those cited above, also point to ongoing concerns about reinforcement of hegemonic knowledge and an underlying political ideology consistent

with neoliberalism. While the move away from standards to an approach to teaching information literacy described as flexible and non-prescriptive is a positive step in the right direction, from a critical information literacy and social justice perspective, the opportunity to fully recognize the political nature of the work of information professionals in higher education has been missed. It is far too early to speak of consensus, but already there appears to be growing agreement that for librarians interested in critical information literacy teaching there is a need to move beyond both the idea of threshold concepts and the *Framework* itself.

Finally, any response to the new *Framework* must take into consideration Emily Drabinski's (2014) recent discussion about the role of standards and universal guiding documents for information literacy teaching. Drabinski convincingly argues that revision of the *Standards* "can't help but buttress the essential ideological power of standards-based instruction even as it responds to the critiques of the last decade" (p. 484). By situating the development of such documents within the socioeconomic context of a period in which higher education has increasingly shifted to prepare future employees and serve corporate interests, Drabinski describes an information literacy teaching practice that has been centered around and measured against externally defined standards and outcomes rather than one that focuses on the particular context of students and on the "teaching and learning moment" (p. 485). Drabinski turns to the concept of kairos[11] and, in particular, to the use of kairos in composition and rhetoric studies, to draw attention to the constructed nature of

standards and to propose a way forward that would "reorient instruction away from universalizing standards and frameworks" (p. 484). As important as it is to critically assess a document intended to serve as a "mechanism for guiding the development of information literacy programs within higher education institutions" (ACRL, 2015c), Drabinski's proposed "heuristic of the present" requires careful consideration as it may indeed offer an "analytic alibi for sidestepping debates about standards altogether" (p. 481).

NOTES

1. All of whom were contributing authors and editors of *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (2013).

2. Circulated to the profession in June 2014, and received around 130 signatures just prior to the ALA Annual Conference: https://iwu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3lWYIPLypVMHGnP

3. See Maura Seale's (2015) paper, "Enlightenment, Neoliberalism, and Information Literacy" for an analysis of the ways in which the *Framework* is a conflicted and contradictory document, including its stated opposition to prescriptive standards while simultaneously embedding a prescriptiveness via the Knowledge Practices and Dispositions.

4. Recent articles by Tewell (2015) and Schroeder and Hollister (2014) summarize the extent of literature on critical information literacy and the adoption by librarians of critical theory in their practice respectively. See Beilin's (2015) article for

an overview of critical responses to the *Framework*.

5. The aim of critical pedagogy is a more socially just world (Giroux, 2010).

6. For an excellent example of students examining their own information privilege, and then putting that privilege to use for the greater good, see Char Booth's post "on information privilege" at https://infomational.wordpress.com/2014/12/01/on-information-privilege/

7. Biweekly chats occur on Twitter. Visit http://tinyurl.com/critlibx to access a schedule of future chats.

8. Such as the Progressive Librarians Guild and Social Responsibilities Round Table (Kagan, 2015).

9. For example, Akom (2009) employs what he calls Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy, which successfully uses students of color's direct experience with racism to shape their academic discourse around and engagement with racism.

10. Joshua Beatty (2014) points to this same language as an example of the "rhetoric of crisis" used to advance neoliberal agendas.

11. Kairos, or qualitative time, Drabinski explains, is a "theoretical concept of time originating with the ancient Greeks" that "demands apprehension of the moment, and calls for action that is appropriate to that moment" (481).

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