Reorienting an Information Literacy Program toward Social Justice: Mapping the Core Values of Librarianship to the ACRL Framework

Lua Gregory, University of Redlands
Shana Higgins, University of Redlands

Abstract

Since the publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education librarians have grappled with the purposes, impact, and meaning of this teaching document for their daily instructional practice, for curriculum development, and for institutional and programmatic assessment goals. A strength of the Framework is its emphasis on context, an emphasis aligned with the goals of critical pedagogy and one that acknowledges investment in specific community needs. This article reflects on an attempt to contextualize the Framework for an information literacy program concerned with social justice and student agency by connecting it with the American Library Association's (ALA) Core Values of Librarianship. Specifically, the authors mapped the Core Values of Librarianship, such as democracy, diversity, the public good, and social responsibility, to the ACRL Framework as a means to put into instructional practice our values as librarians.

Keywords: social justice; ACRL framework; core values; critical pedagogy

Perspectives edited by Carolyn Gamtso

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Introduction

Since the publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2015) librarians, including the authors of this reflection, have grappled with the purposes, impact, and meaning of this teaching document for their daily instructional practice, for curriculum development, and for institutional and programmatic assessment goals. Following the circulation of the first drafts, many library professionals identified the emphasis on *context* in the *Framework* as one of its greatest strengths insofar as this emphasis supports the goals of critical pedagogy and acknowledges a necessary investment in specific community needs. Likewise, the encouragement to make use of the conceptual frames (or, if you prefer, threshold concepts) to develop learning outcomes specific to one's local contexts offers a liberating step away from what seemed an inflexible, mechanical standardization in the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2000). While the *Framework* still operates as a form of standardization, professional permission to create situated standardization may result in more meaningful teaching, learning, and assessment.

Reflecting on the *Framework* within the context of our instruction program led us to acknowledge that critical pedagogy, and the American Library Association's (ALA) Core Values of Librarianship, have guided our teaching and learning goals for a handful of years. By 2010, inspired by advocates of critical information literacy (Accardi, et. al., 2010; Cope, 2010; Elmborg, 2006, 2012; Jacobs, 2008; Kapitzke, 2003; Samek, 2007; Swanson, 2004), connecting information literacy with social justice pedagogy became an area of preoccupation. We were drawn to critical pedagogical practices such as challenging worldviews and normative "isms," as well as valuing the knowledge students bring with

them to the classroom. Joining critical information literacy instruction practices with social justice pedagogy had enabled us to use strategies in the classroom that challenged students' understandings of gendered roles, sexuality, environmental justice, and other social issues which drew from students' own experience and knowledge (Gregory & Higgins, 2013, p. 6).

Although we drew from the *Standards*, and now from the *Framework,* neither provided guidance in teaching that encourages and supports student agency and action, an absence previously discussed in "Seeking Social Justice in the ACRL Framework" (Battista, et al., 2015), written collaboratively with other librarians, wherein we identified language in the *Framework* that limited "the learner" (or "consumer" or "expert") to "recognize", "acknowledge", "identify", "understand", and to know "how or why" (p. 115) systems of oppression and injustices exist. The language of the *Framework* stops short of advocating curriculum and pedagogy that develops active responses after recognizing, acknowledging, or understanding systemic marginalization and underrepresentation, or once students have an awareness of these issues. Yet, the *Framework* "represents a professional sentiment that instruction cannot be separated from the world in which it is taking place" (Seeber, 2015, p. 162). We agree, and seek to teach in ways that develop both reflection and student agency. More specifically, we seek to teach in ways that realize Paulo Freire's concept of praxis, as discussed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (2000, p. 51), as a response, and in opposition, to oppression and injustice.

Thus, ALA's Core Values of Librarianship, a document that codifies the foundational values that "define, inform, and guide our professional practice" (2004, n.p.) seems relevant when considering reflection and action within the context of librarianship. Our interest in engaging with the Core Values stems from Samek's (2007) call for core values like intellectual freedom "to be continuously revisited by individuals, institutions, and societies as a whole" (p. 10), and from Jacobs and Berg's (2011) encouragement to use the ALA Core Values "to reengage with the possibilities and potentials within information literacy to meet larger social goals" (p. 385). For us, core values such as social responsibility, democracy, diversity, access, intellectual freedom, and the public good, illustrate "an activist perspective inclined toward social justice" (Gregory & Higgins, 2013, p. 2). We drew from these core values to imagine the possibilities of the *Framework,* by mapping them to each of the frames, with the goals of critical pedagogy in mind.

Connecting Texts: Mapping Core Values to Frames

Over several months in 2016, we carefully read the text of ALA's Core Values, the text for each frame in the adopted *Framework*, and looked back at the several iterations of the language of each frame in the *Framework* revisions, noting instances where language connected the two documents. We primarily focused on the narrative that introduces the main concepts for each frame rather than on the knowledge practices and dispositions in our textual analysis. For example, the text of the ALA Core Value, "Social Responsibility," states:

> The broad social responsibilities of the American Library Association are defined in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society; support for efforts to help inform and educate the people of the United States on these problems and to encourage them to examine the many views on and the facts regarding each problem… (ALA, 2004)

We determined that this text aligned most clearly with three frames, as seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The core value "Social Responsibility" mapped to phrases in three different frames

Frame	Mapped Phrase
Authority Is Constructed and Contextual	"…acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others' worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations." (ACRL, 2015)
Information Has Value	"…value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices. However, value may also be leveraged by individuals and organizations to effect change and for civic, economic, social, or personal gains." (ACRL, 2015)
Research as Inquiry	"This process of inquiry extends beyond the academic world to the community at large, and the process of inquiry may focus upon personal, professional, or societal needs." (ACRL, 2015)

In most cases, each of the ALA Core Values mapped to one, two, or three frames. "Information Has Value" was the exception; we connected the Core Values of democracy, social responsibility, privacy/confidentiality, the public good, and access to this frame. On the other hand, we did not map the Core Values of professionalism, preservation, and service to any frames; as currently written, we did not see any clear connections between these core values and the *Framework*.

After the mapping process, we created learning outcomes that, in some cases, used language from both the Core Values and the *Framework* (please see the Appendix for the complete list of learning outcomes). For example, in "Research as Inquiry" we hope students will learn to "seek multiple perspectives during information gathering" (ACRL, 2015) in order to draw from the diversity of human experiences, as well as to reflect on the "critical problems of society" (ALA, 2004) in order to develop research questions that address those issues and needs. We also drew from critical library literature in the development of learning outcomes. For example, a learning outcome for the frame "Searching as Strategic Exploration" encourages students to "examine how search systems and languages are constructed in order to understand the flaws and biases built into those information systems and vocabularies," and draws specifically from Safiya U. Noble's (2013) work on the biases built into algorithms, and thus search systems.

Learning Outcomes and Assessment for Critical Practice: Is it possible?

Creating learning outcomes indicates an intent to assess learning. Among critical pedagogy practitioners, assessment carries some negativity. Is it possible for critical practices to support assessment? What would this assessment look like? Historically, formal assessment in education (K-postsecondary) grew out of the social movements of the 1960s, in which inequities in education became broadly recognized (Shor, 2001; Sugimoto & Carter, 2015). However, the widespread recognition of inequality resulted in a "conservative restoration" (Shor, 2001, p. 34) of authority. Inequality became an "achievement gap" to be closed.

With the naming of the achievement gap in schools during the 1960s, public attention was acutely attuned to uneven student achievement in schools, as measured by standardized tests. This ideological shift from equity to achievement was grounded in the reformists' call for equality, but ultimately resulted in the positioning of student academic achievement over other measures of positive school outcomes. (Sugimoto & Carter, 2015, p. 22)

The rhetoric of an "achievement gap" enables the cultural elite, those with power and privilege, to avoid addressing inequality and instead blame schools, teachers, and parenting. Since the original enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty" program, the emphasis on accountability (standards, benchmarks) has increased exponentially without a concomitant promise to ameliorate the conditions contributing to poverty and inequality.

Assessment is criticized as a form of neoliberal accountability, as a project that disciplines and controls the workforce and specific communities, and abandons the goal of achieving equitable educational opportunity. It is an attempt to reduce complexity to a quantifiable metric, to link learning to returns on investment and the marketplace, and to fill reports for assessment auditors. Smyth and Dow (1998) argue that learning outcomes "appeared in the early 1980s as the outriders of the new technology of control within education" (p. 291-292), and are framed within the context of a larger agenda of structural changes in western countries which seek to

> push for higher productivity through technological innovation; lower wages along with reduced social benefits, and less protective working conditions; decentralisation of production to regions of the world with more relaxed labour and environmental restrictions; greater reliance on the informal economy (i.e. unregulated labour); restructuring labour markets to take growing proportions of women, ethnic minorities and immigrants; and a weakening of trade unions. (p. 292)

Havnes and Prøitz (2016) warn that using learning outcomes primarily for "purposes of managerialism, efficiency, benchmarking and control of student learning may weaken the functions of LOs that can otherwise provide direction to teaching and learning processes" (p. 214). In addition, while learning outcomes can guide teaching and learning, they can also be a form of control if the educator favors them over student agency in the classroom. Graf and Harris (2015) explain that there may be "unintended outcomes" which arise in the process of teaching, and are "most likely guided by student need or interest" (p. 17); embracing these unintended outcomes serves to empower students by "removing the power structure by which the teacher sets goals for students to meet" (p. 17).

Librarians concerned with critical practice struggle to negotiate conflicting aims of assessment. In a #critlib chat moderated by Maura Smale (July 15, 2014) focusing on assessment, Smale asked, "How can a critical librarianship perspective be applied to assessment?" Participants in the conversation noted that assessment "seems to be neoliberal in nature" (McElroy, 2014), and that in order for assessment to aid critical pedagogy, one must evaluate why assessment is happening; "Who benefits?" (Tewell, 2014). Librarians cautioned against the kind of assessment that is tied to a return on investment or administrative goals (Fister, 2014), and drew distinctions "between (good) formative assessment and summative assessment" (Pagowsky, 2014). And, if assessment is used within one's classroom or department, it can be useful for asking and answering "good questions" about learning (Drabinski, 2014).

Therefore, the kind of assessment that would support critical pedagogy may ask whether students learn course content, specifically course content related to awareness, consciousness-raising, and independence of thought. Critical assessment would be attentive to evaluating and reflecting on one's teaching methods, and how well these methods match the needs of our students and provide opportunities that lead to critical consciousness. Critical assessment would be sensitive to the unintended, unplanned learning taking place, as well as the reciprocal learning: What are my students teaching me? Critical assessment would question whether, when, and how the assessment of student learning benefits the students. Furthermore, critical educators can make use of assessment to determine "whether they are helping students to become more critically engaged in society" (Kahl, 2013, 2625). In other words, after learning of social inequities, what avenues exist for responding and taking action to redress them?

In consideration of the above concerns, the learning outcomes shared in this article were designed primarily for our own use, not for accountability or reporting purposes. We do not wish them to be tied to any funding decisions, or discussions on returns on investment. Rather, like the interviewee quoted in Eamon Tewell's forthcoming article, "The Practice and Promise of Critical Information Literacy: Academic Librarians' Involvement in Critical Library Instruction," we follow institutional assessment guidelines, and at the same time find ways to assess what is meaningful to us:

> Assessment culture privileges ways of teaching and learning that are
> quantifiable. I can't put "changed lives and enacted social change" on a rubric,

but I am pressured to report student learning findings in ways that are rubric-able. So I do the rubric, but I still do my own qualitative assessment alongside the stuff I'm required to report. (p. 30)

The learning outcomes we have developed, bridging the *Framework* and Core Values, meet our goals for a politically engaged, social justice-oriented curriculum and teaching practice that we hope will result in empowering our students and encouraging them to become critically active within their communities. Nonetheless, these social justice-oriented learning outcomes fit well within our college's general education learning outcomes for information and media literacy (IML). Thus we are able to assess qualitatively for "changed lives" at the department-level (in the classroom, in direct interaction with students), and more quantifiably under the college-wide rubric for IML. That said, assessment related to our new learning outcomes as an internal project within our department that answers questions about student learning and that supports critical pedagogy has barely begun, and is largely unfinished. We will be using our new learning outcomes next academic year.

From Reflection to Action in the World

Freire describes the relationship between praxis and humanity as one in which "human beings emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor" (2000, p. 125). Praxis in critical pedagogy involves both reflection and action, which takes place in a dialogic process between students and teacher(s), a co-dreaming where theory, ideas, or understanding are put to use to transform the world by alleviating injustices. Discussion in library literature, of late, has focused on how librarians practice critical pedagogy, and on how we realize its aims. Critical pedagogical practice varies widely, as it should, depending on our community and teaching contexts, and furthermore in how we understand critical practice in relation to our labor. Mapping the Core Values to the *Framework* has been a means to put into practice our values as librarians. We hope the learning outcomes developed will more explicitly communicate our values as LIS professionals to faculty and students. This project is also an exploration of praxis, still unfinished, led by the questions: In what ways are librarians able to support the aims of critical pedagogy, within the context of information literacy, which may lead to informed student action? Are we able to participate in transforming the world with our labor?

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Appendix: Learning Outcomes

Authority is Constructed and Contextual (Mapped to Democracy, Diversity, and Social Responsibility)

Students will learn to…

- question, and remain skeptical of, authority in order to remain open to new perspectives and a range of voices
- recognize that particular systems construct authority
- cultivate a critical approach in order to actively resist/subvert authoritative systems that privilege certain kinds of sources or views over others

Information Creation as Process (Mapped to Democracy)

- examine the underlying decisions and processes of creation in order to ask critical questions about how and why information was produced
- evaluate messages conveyed in information in order to determine if the information was produced to inform or (mis)inform

Information Has Value (Mapped to Access, Democracy, The Public Good, Social Responsibility, and Confidentiality/Privacy)

- create, distribute, and use information as a means to effect change
- use positions of information privilege in order to make information more equitably accessible and/or available
- understand how and why individuals or groups are systematically marginalized and create, or make use of, alternative sources and systems that support inclusive representation

Research as Inquiry (Mapped to Intellectual Freedom, Social Responsibility, and Education & Lifelong Learning)

- use the research process to identify and explore societal needs and issues in their disciplines, or across disciplines
- seek multiple perspectives during information gathering in order to draw from the diversity of human experiences

- reflect on the critical problems of society in order to develop research questions that address those issues and needs

Scholarship as Conversation (Mapped to Democracy, Diversity, and Intellectual Freedom)

- develop familiarity with modes of discourse in order to join conversations and circumvent systems of privilege
- resist normative structures that privilege certain voices and information over others by engaging in inclusive citation practices

Searching as Strategic Exploration (Mapped to Access, Diversity, and Intellectual Freedom)

- examine how search systems and languages are constructed in order to understand the flaws and biases built into those information systems and vocabularies
- make use of functions/options of search systems in order to preserve confidentiality and privacy and resist monetization of personal information [Connects with Information Has Value]