

## Themenschwerpunkt

# Information Literacy Threshold Concepts and the Association of College and Research Libraries' Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education

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### Summary:

The 2014 release of the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* had a significant impact on information literacy scholarship and practice in the United States. The revision process of the previous *Competency Standards* and the purpose and implementation of the new *Framework* are still widely discussed as librarians work out what the *Framework* means to individual institutions and to information literacy as a whole. Organized around six threshold concepts in information literacy as identified in recent research, the *Framework* reflects developments in the information landscape as threshold concepts have become influential. The authors, who began their research in threshold concepts at the same time as the use and discussion of information literacy threshold concepts increased in the United States, discuss how their work fits into a larger, national conversation on conceptual information literacy instruction and the creation of a high-profile document.

### Zusammenfassung:

Die Verabschiedung des Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education der Association of College and Research Libraries 2014 hatte beachtliche Auswirkungen auf Theorie und Praxis der Vermittlung von Informationskompetenz in den USA. Der Überarbeitungsprozess der früheren Standards der Informationskompetenz sowie Zielrichtung und Umsetzung des neuen Framework werden nach wie vor breit diskutiert, da Bibliothekar/inn/e/n nun konkretisieren, was das Framework für ihre jeweilige Einrichtung und für Informationskompetenz insgesamt bedeutet. Indem es um sechs threshold concepts gruppiert ist, die die aktuelle Forschung zu Informationskompetenz identifiziert hat, bezieht das Framework gezielt Entwicklungen der Informationslandschaft auf diese richtungsweisenden threshold concepts. Die Autorinnen, die ihre Untersuchungen zu threshold concepts just zu der Zeit begannen, zu der der Einsatz von und die Diskussion um threshold concepts in den USA sich ausweitete, legen dar, wie sich ihre Arbeit in einen landesweiten Diskurs um konzeptionell orientierte Vermittlung von Informationskompetenz und die Erstellung eines von der Öffentlichkeit vielbeachteten Grundlagenpapiers einfügt.

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## 1. Introduction

We are instruction librarians in the United States, working at a comprehensive university of approximately 25,000 mostly-undergraduate students. In our library, there are about sixteen of us who teach information literacy single sessions, invited in by professors to work with their students once, twice, or, on occasion, three times in a semester. We have come to instruction with varying levels of teaching experience, and work with a wide variety of disciplines, adapting to a diversity of faculty assignments and expectations. Identifying the content most meaningful in the context of a 50- to 75-minute instruction session has been the topic of numerous conversations. We work hard to figure out what it is that students need to understand about information, rather than offer quick demonstrations on the mechanics of locating and accessing information.

In our search to develop teaching materials and lesson ideas that promote deep learning over superficial search skills, we discovered threshold concepts. They reflected our desired approach to instruction; they focused on the whys of information instead of the hows. In 2012, we began to identify for ourselves those concepts we understood to be fundamental to one's understanding of information and how it works. During this undertaking, we learned about a large-scale study being done on threshold concepts in information literacy whose findings were quite similar to ours.<sup>1</sup> We realized that a collection of lessons aimed at transforming students' understanding of fundamental concepts in information literacy would be something librarians all around the country would want to contribute to and learn from. The idea for a book was born.

While we were editing our book, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released the initial draft of a new *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* in February, 2014.<sup>2</sup> The document, described in detail in the next section, introduced a new direction in information literacy pedagogy and included six threshold concepts. Its publication brought controversy, reflection, and conversation, which continue to this day. The timing of the Framework's release meant that our book with colleague Patricia Bravender, *Teaching Information Literacy Threshold Concepts: Lesson Plans for Librarians*,<sup>3</sup> published in 2015 by ACRL, would become inextricably linked with the *Framework*, a mixed blessing we never could have expected.

- 1 Lori Townsend, Amy R. Hofer, Silvia Lin Hanick, and Korey Brunetti, „Identifying Threshold Concepts for Information Literacy: A Delphi Study,“ *Communications in Information Literacy*, 10, no. 1 (2016): 23, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v10i1p23&path%5B%5D=228>.
- 2 Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education Task Force, „Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, Draft 1, Part 1“ (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2014), accessed February 2, 2017, <http://acrl.ala.org/ilstandards/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Framework-for-IL-for-HE-Draft-1-Part-1.pdf>.
- 3 Patricia Bravender, Gayle Schaub, and Hazel McClure, *Teaching Information Literacy. Threshold Concepts: Lesson Plans for Librarians* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries Press, 2015).

## 2. Background: From Competency Standards to the *Framework*

The *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* were developed by the Association for College & Research Libraries (ACRL) in 1999 and formally adopted a year later. They were intended to provide „a framework for assessing the information literate individual.“<sup>4</sup> The *Standards* offered librarians a tool for planning, assessment, and communicating the need to integrate information literacy skills into the curriculum. The five standards, each of which encompassed a subset of performance indicators, along with assessment outcomes, recognized the different skill levels involved in finding, accessing, evaluating, and using information:<sup>5</sup>

- I. The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.
- II. The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.
- III. The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
- IV. The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.
- V. The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.

The standards have served librarians in higher education in the United States for more than a decade as a way to teach and promote a formal definition of information literacy, what it is that students need to understand about information and how to best demonstrate that understanding.

Recognizing the dramatic changes to the information landscape since the creation of the original 1989 definition of information on which the standards were based,<sup>6</sup> the ACRL task force charged with reviewing the standards recommended their revision, which led to the creation of the first draft of the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*, released in two parts, in February and April of 2014.<sup>7</sup>

The draft was a marked departure from the competency standards. Rather than being a list of assessment standards with bullet-pointed measurement outcomes, the document was a *framework*, a multifaceted approach to the teaching of information use and creation, incorporating a diversity of ideas and theories, including the ideas of threshold concepts and metaliteracy, and it redefined information literacy as „the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the

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4 American Library Association, *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000), accessed December 21, 2016, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/standards/standards.pdf>.

5 Ibid.

6 „History of the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,“ *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, American Library Association (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015), accessed February 2, 2017, [http://acrl.ala.org/framework/?page\\_id=41](http://acrl.ala.org/framework/?page_id=41).

7 Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education Task Force, „Framework, Draft 1, Part 1“; idem, „Framework, Draft 1, Part 2“, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://acrl.ala.org/ilstandards/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Framework-for-IL-for-HE-Draft-1-Part-2.pdf>.

understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.<sup>48</sup> This redefinition reflects recently-defined types of literacies and new ways of accessing and sharing information.

The *Framework* is made up of six frames, each with a core concept (inspired by threshold concepts) serving as the main idea of the frame. The six frames/core concepts are as follows:

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

Each frame is comprised of the core concept, a brief discussion of that core concept, a set of knowledge practices, and a set of learner dispositions. The knowledge practices in each frame are a non-exhaustive list of behaviors that exhibit engagement in an individual's scholarly community in an information literate way. Learner dispositions are a learner's preferences and attitudes about the way they learn. Within the context of the frames, the task force included a list of possible learner dispositions that may accompany a student's understanding of each particular core concept, but learner dispositions may vary with different disciplines or areas of study. Each frame is intended to engage librarians in an exploration of a foundational concept that underlies information literacy. This will ideally empower students to understand the underlying concepts behind information use rather than merely the mechanics of finding, using, and citing information.

One example of a frame is Scholarship as Conversation. The idea behind this frame is that information published in scholarly communities is always written in and best understood within a context; the scholar can see scholarly communications such as articles, book chapters, conference proceedings and the like as voices within a conversation. Sometimes they agree, sometimes they disagree; they often build on each other and answer questions that arise in the work of other scholars. Regardless of the role in the conversation they play, they exist in relation to each other and are best read and understood in relation to each other. This concept, likely familiar to almost all librarians and faculty, may not be immediately apparent to students, who may be more likely to understand articles and other scholarly communications as mere stand-alone documents. In our positions as librarians, helping students understand the interconnected and interwoven nature of scholarly communications is key to helping them become information literate. This is distinctly different from teaching them to become proficient in a set of skills.

The *Framework* presents six frames, but it is also clear that the frames set forward in the document aren't the definitive list of core concepts in information literacy. There's an acknowledgement that

8 Ibid.

more core concepts may arise, and that the document has room for growth and change in order to accommodate them.

### 3. Reactions to the *Framework*

Over the two years following the unveiling of the first draft of the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*, the document underwent several revisions based on feedback from many constituents. Because the new document represented such a change from the past, the task force sought feedback in a variety of ways. A formal online survey form was distributed to academic libraries via email listservs, the task force members solicited direct email input from librarians, the *Framework* was discussed in two online hearings and one in-person hearing, and social media comments on Twitter and in blogs were collected by the task force. Using this feedback, the task force revised and rereleased two revisions before releasing the final version in January of 2015.

Responses to the *Framework* were mixed. Many embraced the new document as a more meaningful way to identify the core ideas and concepts students need to become information literate and offer librarians a way to communicate the value of these ideas to campus faculty. It offered librarians a way to discuss their work as experts within a discipline, instead of as providers of a resource or service to academic departments and their faculty. The frames show that information literacy or fluency is not „taught;“ it is integrated into every discipline and librarians work to facilitate that understanding in a variety of ways.

Others felt it offered no way to assess learning, that it required a complete overhaul of an instruction program to implement, and it left librarians with a less useful communication document to enter into curricular conversations with other departments. One of the primary criticisms of the new *Framework* was that it was just that, a *new* document, rather than the document revision they expected. No consensus of opinion was reached, and ACRL moved in February, 2015 to „file“ the *Framework* in a „constellation of documents.“<sup>9</sup> This action, a parliamentary procedure, left many to believe the document would be left to languish, when in fact, the opposite has proven to be the case. The *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* was formally adopted by the ACRL Board in January, 2016<sup>10</sup> and the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* were rescinded at the ACRL Board of Directors on June 25, 2016.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Karen Williams, „More From the ACRL Board on the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,“ *ACRL Insider*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/9814>.

10 ACRL Board of Directors, „Update from the ACRL Board of Directors on the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,“ *ACRL Insider*, January 15, 2016, <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/11232>.

11 ACRL Board of Directors, „ACRL Board Takes Action on Information Literacy Standards,“ *ACRL Insider*, June 25, 2016, <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/12126>.

## 4. ACRL Support for Framework since Adoption

In the period since the filing of the *Framework*, ACRL has initiated a variety of promotional and educational programs to help libraries and librarians transform the ideas in the document into reality. In October, 2015, ACRL launched the *Framework Spotlight on Scholarship*, a „weekly post series highlighting scholarship that uses, builds on, critiques, or responds to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.“<sup>12</sup> Also in 2015 were the formation of the ACRL Framework Advisory Board, establishment of a WordPress site for subscribers to read updates on the *Framework* and share ideas, and the appointment of Sharon Mader as Visiting Program Officer for Information Literacy. Her position was created to facilitate the transition and assuage anxiety surrounding its adoption.

Mader, a retired Dean of Library Services at the University of New Orleans, was hired to help librarians understand and use the *Framework* in their instruction. A former librarian with an educational background in education and educational technology, Mader worked previously with ACRL on professional development and training programs related to the *Standards*. In her role as Visiting Program Officer, she has been traveling around the country speaking in workshops and at conferences about the *Framework* and how to use it. She worked with the Advisory Board to develop a *Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox*, used in implementing the *Framework*. The sandbox, which opened in December, 2016, is an open access repository for materials contributed and shared by librarians for integrating the ideas of the *Framework* into their instruction.<sup>13</sup>

In November, 2016, ACRL appointed a team of Framework curriculum designers. The three-person team is tasked with creating professional development materials for librarians and deliver live workshops, or „roadshows,“ webcasts, online courses, and other in-person and virtual programs beginning in 2017.<sup>14</sup> A Framework toolkit, a package of content specifically designed for professional development on how to use the *Framework* in the classroom is in the works for early 2017. It is expected to be added to the existing list of eight toolkits available on the ACRL website.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Librarians Putting the Framework into Action

In addition to the support that ACRL is providing for the use of the *Framework*, librarians in higher education have found ways to constructively engage in the conversation surrounding the *Framework* and the ideas behind it. One example of ways librarians have done this is through conferences designed specifically with the theme of the *Framework* in mind. For example, LOEX, which hosts an annual conference in the spring, held a special autumn conference in 2015 that focused entirely on the *Framework*. It featured presentations on instruction, assessment using the *Framework*, the use

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12 Donna Witek, „Framework Spotlight on Scholarship: 'Teaching for Transfer' by Kuglitsch,“ *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, October 14, 2015, <http://acrl.ala.org/framework/?p=107>.

13 Sharon Mader, „ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox Launches,“ *ACRL Insider*, December 8, 2016, <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/category/information-literacy>.

14 Karen Malenfant, „ACRL Selects New Curriculum Designers/Presenters for the Framework,“ *ACRL Insider*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/?s=new+curriculum+designers>.

15 A current list of professional development toolkits on subjects like diversity, information literacy, and advocacy is available at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/proftools/toolkits>, accessed February 2, 2017.

of the *Framework* for teaching within various disciplines, and the idea of the additional frames that might be added, among other topics. Other conferences that either focused on the *Framework* or at least included a *Framework* theme include: *Engaging with the ACRL Information Literacy Framework* at the University at Albany, State University of New York, March 10, 2016; *What Does It All Mean?: Unpacking the Information Literacy Framework* at the Annual Indiana University Libraries Information Literacy Colloquium; *Implementing the New Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* Conference at Dickinson College, funded by the Pennsylvania Consortium for the Liberal Arts, May 24, 2016. These conferences and others, independently from ACRL, provided opportunities for librarians to have conversations about the *Framework*, to share their experiences, struggles, and successes.

Another way librarians have put the *Framework* into use is adapting it to use with instruction embedded within disciplines. For instance, librarians at the University of Colorado, Michelle Albert and Caroline Sinkinson, have worked with the composition faculty there to design a writing and information literacy curriculum that uses ideas from both the information literacy framework and the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (from the Council of Writing Program Administrators).<sup>16</sup> In addition, several subgroups of ACRL have been revising their documentation on information literacy within their particular disciplines, including the Communications Studies Committee of the Education and Behavioral Sciences Section (EBSS) and the Women and Gender Studies Section (WGSS).<sup>17</sup> The work and conversations that go into revising these documents, along with the documents themselves, help librarians to think about the meaning of the *Framework*, along with the accompanying ideas of threshold concepts and metaliteracy, within the contexts of the scholarly communication happening in their students' disciplines.

Other work in the field of librarianship strives to help librarians put the theory of the *Framework* into practice. Our book, *Teaching Information Literacy Threshold Concepts: Lesson Plans for Librarians* provides lesson plans by a variety of types of academic librarians, all aimed at helping transform student understanding of the concepts of information literacy. We chose to structure the book mirroring the frames within the *Framework* in order to support librarians' use and understanding of the *Framework*.

## 6. Conclusion: Why we use TCs in our work

The idea that there are foundational concepts in any discipline is a meaningful one to us. Focusing on the *why* instead of, or more accurately, in addition to the *what* helps us be better teachers. We work at understanding that content which causes students to struggle. It is different with each student; learners don't all get stuck in precisely the same place. What is common sense to one may be challenging for another. Focusing on such concepts, trying to help students understand why information looks

16 Michelle A. Albert and Caroline Sinkinson, „Composing Information Literacy: A Pedagogical Partnership Between Rhet/Comp and Library Faculty“ (paper presented at the Georgia International Conference on Information Literacy, Savannah, GA, September 25, 2015), paper 24, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gaintlit/2015/2015/24>; Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP), „Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,“ (2011), accessed February 2, 2017, <http://wpacouncil.org/files/framework-for-success-postsecondary-writing.pdf>.

17 Margot Conahan, „Updates from the Framework Advisory Board,“ *ACRL Insider*, July 11, 2016, <http://www.acrl.org/acrlinsider/archives/12202>.

different in different places or why we pay large amounts of money for access to certain information helps us get at what they understand in order to really learn.

A threshold concepts approach to teaching is student centered. It asks us to be aware of the knowledge we ourselves take for granted, to never assume others have the same understanding of an idea. The idea of troublesome knowledge, knowledge that a student may find foreign, confusing, difficult or contrary to a previously held understanding requires that we as instructors dig deeper and embrace that difficulty. It demands that we let go of our „expertise“ and meet students where they are. And, it is bound to be more interesting than a point-and-click, skill-based approach to instruction.

Most importantly, using threshold concepts offers instructors a way to work toward transforming students' understanding about information, to work toward literacy or fluency rather than looking for evidence of mastery. The 2000 *Standards for Higher Education* offered a list of performance indicators, signs to look for as evidence of competency, but little as to how to promote it.

While the debate continues over which concepts are the most critical and instruction librarians across the United States grapple with how to put into action the more sophisticated ideas that make up the new *Framework*, we welcome the ACRL's new outlets for sharing with and learning from library colleagues everywhere. We look forward to conversations with faculty in departments with whom we liaise to encourage the integration of the ideas contained within the *Framework* into their courses.

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