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From Standards to Frameworks for IL: How the ACRL Framework Addresses Critiques of the Standards

Nancy M. Foasberg

abstract: The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, since their publication in 2000, have drawn criticism for ignoring the social and political aspects of information literacy. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards Task Force responded with the Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education, which rethinks information literacy by acknowledging that it is a social phenomenon and by recognizing students as participatory learners. This article contrasts the constructions of information, information literacy, and students in the Framework and the Standards to show how the Framework addresses some of the critiques of the Standards.

Introduction

The concept of information literacy (IL) looms large in the literature of librarianship, and academic librarianship in particular.¹ The question of what kind of learning is represented by information literacy, however, is a vexing one. Various writers describe IL as a set of skills, a way of thinking, or a social phenomenon. Each of these approaches has different pedagogical and philosophical implications.² Documents describing information literacy proceed, implicitly or explicitly, from a set of assumptions about what IL is and what it can do.

This conversation exists not only as a theoretical debate in the scholarly literature but also as statements in more official and influential documents. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) produces a great number of guidelines and standards in all areas of academic librarianship, and in fact considers this work one of its most important contributions to the profession.³ The standards ACRL produces include



the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (the Standards), originally published in 2000. In 2012, the ACRL Information Literacy Standards Committee, tasked with reapproving the Standards, instead called for extensive revisions. The committee cited “changes in technology, scholarly communication and the information life cycle” as reasons for a major revision, but also listed several pedagogical concerns.⁴ Ultimately, the panel created another document, the Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education (the Framework). The Framework, which was “filed”—that is, placed among ACRL’s official records—in early 2015, differs from the Standards

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in ways that go far beyond accommodating technological change. Indeed, I will argue that the two documents embrace competing theories of information literacy. While the Standards describe a skills-based IL, the Framework defines IL as a social practice. For a comparison of the introductory text of the Standards and Frameworks, please see Table 1.

The Standards, which define information literacy as a set of abilities and enumerate in some detail what the information-literate student should be able to accomplish,

Although the Standards have always had their critics, they have also held a central position in many of the conversations about IL.

have been and remain very influential. ACRL, as the largest professional association for academic librarians, has the power and authority in the eyes of most librarians to set forth such a definition.⁵ Because the Standards bear ACRL’s stamp of approval, academic libraries in the United States have widely adopted them as a tool for defining, teaching, and assessing information literacy. Thus, although the Standards have always had their critics, they have also held a central position in many

of the conversations about IL.⁶ As Emily Drabinski writes, “It is difficult to imagine academic library instruction services without the competency standards and everything that has come after.”⁷

The Framework was originally proposed as a replacement for the Standards. In 2014, the task force charged with creating the Framework made multiple drafts available to the public for commentary and discussion. Ultimately, the ACRL Board of Directors “filed” the Framework.⁸ According to procedural rules, a “filed” document “is not binding on the assembly but is available for information and may be considered again at any time,” unlike documents that are “adopted,” that is, officially endorsed.⁹ The board formulated this status as a way of keeping the Framework flexible by permitting further revisions and allowing libraries time to experiment with the Framework before deciding whether it should replace the Standards. Thus, the Framework, although not officially adopted, is now part of “a constellation of documents used by information literacy practitioners” and sits alongside the Standards on the ACRL website.¹⁰ These two, very different, documents are thus presented together. The Framework is more explicit than the Standards about the philosophy that underlies it, but the Standards are also a theoretical document.



Table 1.

The language of the Standards and the Framework compared

ACRL Information Literacy Standards	ACRL Information Literacy Framework
<p>Standard One: The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed.</p>	<p>Authority Is Constructed and Contextual: 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. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.</p>
<p>Standard Two: The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently.</p>	<p>Information Creation as a Process: Information in any format is produced to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method. The iterative processes of researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information vary, and the resulting product reflects these differences.</p>
<p>Standard Three: The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.</p>	<p>Information Has Value: Information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world. Legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination.</p>
<p>Standard Four: The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.</p>	<p>Research as Inquiry: Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.</p>
<p>Standard Five: 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.</p> <p>-----</p>	<p>Scholarship as Conversation: Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.</p>
	<p>Searching as Strategic Exploration: Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops.</p>



When the Standards stood alone, they conveyed the impression that ACRL endorsed the theory of information literacy they express. By embracing a different concept of IL, the Framework complicates ACRL's message.

Both documents will likely remain prominent features of the discourse surrounding information literacy. Therefore, it

The Framework's embrace of a social constructivist philosophy—which holds that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through social interactions—makes it less reductive and more inclusive than the Standards' positivist approach, which assumes that information is objective and measurable.

is useful to clearly understand the underlying assumptions that make the visions of IL in the Framework and the Standards so different from each other. This article will argue that the Framework's embrace of a social constructivist philosophy—which holds that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through social interactions—makes it less reductive and more inclusive than the Standards' positivist approach, which assumes that information is

objective and measurable. Further, I will analyze the elements in each document that create these differences.

Philosophies of the Standards and the Framework

As several writers argue, the Standards proceed from a positivist understanding of the nature of information.¹¹ They frame information as a commodity external to the learner, which can be sought out, possessed, and "used." From this perspective, when students have the journal article or the book that they need, they have information. Their task is to decide whether that information is "good" according to specified parameters, so that they may use it as a tool to accomplish some specific task. The Standards portray information literacy as a skill that allows students to accomplish these tasks and provide specific ways of thinking about information. Finally, the Standards portray students as individuals who acquire these skills through practice. The Standards describe "the information literate individual," a person who is able to perform each of these tasks. Despite the highly specific nature of information-seeking in each of the disciplines, the Standards attempt to prescribe general practices for all students.¹¹

The Framework's theory of information is different. The Framework is organized

Information, in the Framework, does not inhere in information artifacts themselves. Rather, information is a social phenomenon produced and understood in specific communities.

into six Frames, which draw upon "threshold concepts," ideas that open up new ways of thinking for students.¹² However, taking into account the debates over the nature of information literacy, a more interesting move is the shift from a positivist point of view to a constructivist one.¹² Information, in the Framework, does not inhere in

information artifacts themselves. Rather, information is a social phenomenon produced

and understood in specific communities. Because the Framework understands information as socially constructed, its definition of information literacy hinges on a strong understanding of context. When a person accesses, uses, or understands information, he or she does so within the purview of a specific community. The context of the community can change the meanings of particular messages, the value of different kinds of materials, what uses one can make of information, and who is able to access it. Because the Framework, a product of ACRL, focuses on an academic environment, “context” translates to particular disciplines and also considers other aspects of context. Finally, the Framework positions students as learners whose understanding of information literacy changes over time and with exposure to different communities.

Because the Standards view information literacy as a set of universal skills and information as a commodity, they can express their definition of IL as a list of observable behaviors. The Framework’s more conceptual approach does not as easily lend itself to listing a similar set of steps. Rather, its constructivist understanding of information and information literacy allows us to consider how the value of information artifacts may differ from one context to another. The Framework better recognizes the complexities of information and information behavior, and explicitly makes space for students as participants in the process of knowledge production.

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Thus, the Framework moves us closer to a situated information literacy, one that values information based on its meaning within a specific context and community. The Framework is also friendlier to a critical information literacy, one that grants students agency to critique the social and institutional hierarchies surrounding information production and distribution.¹³

The Standards and Information

According to Benjamin Harris, early documents leading up to the publication of the Standards included the recognition that scholarly information is produced within a disciplinary context as a goal of instruction. However, the Standards as officially published offer little or no explicit recognition of the role of community in shaping information and information literacy.¹⁴

The Standards consistently describe information as a commodity to be sought or used. Throughout the Standards, the word *information* usually refers to information artifacts rather than their contents. The first standard tells us that one can acquire information to fulfill specific needs. The second standard is devoted to accessing information “effectively and efficiently” and is largely concerned with obtaining information artifacts by manipulating technical systems. In the third standard, information has specific “unique characteristics”—positive ones such as reliability, accuracy, and timeliness; and negative ones such as prejudice and manipulation. The standard presents these characteristics as if they inhered in the information artifact itself, rather than considering how



attributes such as “timeliness” or “reliability” may be understood differently in different disciplines. Standard Three refers to disciplinary differences only once; according to one of its outcomes, students are to “test theories with discipline-appropriate techniques.” This standard fails to connect disciplinary differences to either the search process or the criteria by which students will evaluate information. In the fourth standard, information is “applied” to particular tasks, while the fifth standard notes that laws and norms govern the use and availability of information.¹⁵

Thus, the Standards present information resources—articles, books, and others—as goods that can be acquired, have specific physical or digital locations, and possess particular characteristics. The information seeker acquires a commodity, rather than (for instance) participating in a conversation.

Cushla Kapitzke argues that framing information in this way causes it to be treated as a *thing* external to the learner. Imagining information as something that students must acquire and use, promotes, in her words, a “positivist epistemology in which there are singular physical and social realities . . . separate from the student.”¹⁶ This model lends itself to instrumental instruction because it focuses on bringing the student and the information artifact together. The Standards pay some attention to how students can “evaluate” and “use” information. But under this model, evaluation is a matter of applying certain standards to judge the value of an information artifact, and “using” information is about applying and manipulating what has been learned. By failing to attend to context and community in the production and use of knowledge, the Standards present a commoditized understanding of information as something that students acquire and put into use through a mechanical set of steps.¹⁷

The Standards recognize that different “types and formats” of information exist, that various kinds of information may have different purposes and audiences, and that students should consider carefully which types best fulfill their needs.¹⁸ However, while the Standards do not explicitly call for the use of scholarly or peer-reviewed materials, their emphasis on qualities thought to inhere in information artifacts, such as reliability and authority, lead librarians to emphasize scholarly publications when they work with students.¹⁹ Amy Mark argues that librarians teach students about research in a way that privileges peer review and reinforces the hierarchical structure of the academy.²⁰ The role of students’ voices in the Standards is to interpret the knowledge that experts produce and to create “information products” based on it.²¹ Although there may be room within the Standards to recognize the kinds of information produced in communities in which students may already participate, the Standards do not acknowledge this directly.

The Framework and Information

From the point of view of the Framework, information is produced and made meaningful within a specific community. The Standards recognize that disciplinary differences exist insofar as “knowledge can be organized into disciplines that influence the way information is accessed.”²² For the Framework, however, these academic communities are much more than a convenient way of organizing learning by subject. Rather, they govern the production of knowledge. Disciplinary norms establish which kinds of information are valuable, which directions inquiry can take, and how conclusions can be



drawn and supported. By emphasizing the social nature of information, the Framework more clearly recognizes the role of communities.²³

Some of the Frames make this relationship explicit. They emphasize the “collaborative effort within a discipline” to answer important questions, often through disagreement and debate.²⁴ Indeed, the metaphor of a conversation is the foundation for one frame, “Scholarship as Conversation.” A conversation is not a product that one obtains but a relationship in which one participates. In this model, “ideas are formulated, debated and weighed against one another” in a process that includes many different perspectives.²⁵ Even the scholarly approaches themselves undergo constant development by members of the community.

This is precisely the context that Troy Swanson argues is missing from the Standards, in which students “are not encouraged to understand where information is created and how it arrives in books, periodicals and online sources.”²⁶ The Framework identifies sources as the place where the scholarly conversation occurs—not the endpoint of a search process, but part of a continuing debate. Furthermore, by describing information as an ongoing practice, the Framework acknowledges students as participants.²⁷

The emphasis on community also allows a more complete description of how information is valued. The Frame “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” calls attention to the ways in which various communities decide which voices are authoritative and which not. This perspective avoids the view of sources as commoditized and external. From this perspective, authority does not inhere in a text but, rather, “is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority.”²⁸ Even within those communities, however, it is possible to question this constructed authority. This Frame specifies that students should “respect the expertise that authority represents while remaining skeptical of the systems which have elevated that authority and the information created by it.”²⁹ The evaluation of information happens not through a list of supposedly objective criteria but through a better understanding of what is valued within that community.

Under the Standards, Kimmo Tuominen, Reijo Savolainen, and Sanna Talja say, “The binary logic of information acceptance and rejection is represented, for example, by the standard of drawing a strict line between ‘scholarly and disinterested information’ and ‘biased information.’” This standard, they say, can lead students to “treat documents as if they were carved in stone, or contained higher-order authority.”³⁰ The Framework rejects this kind of authority, emphasizing instead that “information creations are valued differently in different contexts.”³¹ We can encourage students to think with nuance about the value of particular information objects, how they reflect the values of the community from which they emerge, and how the authority of these documents transfers into a new context (or does not). The task of evaluation, then, must be situated within the larger

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task of understanding the community that produced the information and that in which students deploy the information.

Understanding the process through which authority is granted also makes critique possible, providing opportunities for critical information literacy. In fact, “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” explicitly calls out the biases that may affect the way that information is created and distributed,³² while “Information Creation as a Process” recognizes “evolving creation processes,” hinting that these practices can change.³³

The Framework’s explicit emphasis on the context in which information artifacts are created and received allows much more scope for students, librarians, and subject faculty to approach this process critically. Through it, the Framework seeks to complicate some of the more positivist and commoditizing assumptions that the Standards make about information, moving away from both information as a commodity and the possibility of acontextually authoritative and valid sources. The Framework invites us to think more carefully about information—how it is produced (by people, within specific communities) and what it means to “use” information.

There are potential pitfalls in this emphasis on community. In particular, Ian Beilin argues that this focus on the “appropriate” use of sources may encourage students to assimilate within a particular field by accepting its conventions for granting authority.³⁴ However, being explicit about the process of constructing authority also makes clear that authority should be critically examined.

The Standards and Information Literacy

Given their different approaches to information, it is not surprising that the Standards and the Framework also express different understandings of information literacy. As they are both concerned with the goals of IL, both must attempt to answer the question of what it means to be information literate.

The Standards present information literacy as a set of abilities that we can evaluate through a checklist like the one they provide. The Standards assume that information-literate behaviors can be defined ahead of time by a body like ACRL, and that once learned, they can be practiced in all situations. While there are hints throughout the Standards that practices may vary in different disciplines,³⁵ the Standards are strongly based on the idea that information literacy itself is well defined and transferable. The introduction to the Standards claims that IL is “common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education.”³⁶ Curiously, however, many sections of ACRL have developed their own, discipline-specific versions of the Standards, undermining this claim of universality.³⁷

The Standards tend to promote the idea that information literacy is a universal, coherent, and consistent process that good students can master. Drabinski argues that this is, in fact, the purpose of the Standards:

In order to define their role, then, librarians needed to define two things: the information literate student, an abstracted, context-less future worker who would be produced through the labor of teaching librarians, as well as a set of learning outcomes that the teaching librarian could claim as her own domain. The Standards comprise the functional,



measurable learning outcomes that organize the identity of the student and the work practice of the librarian.³⁸

Each standard describes a step in an idealized version of an abstract research process, and these steps are arranged in something like the order in which the Standards imagine that students might perform them. James Elmborg notes that, although studies of student research practices have value in developing librarians' educational philosophy, "Universal models abstract and generalize the work of achievers, those who are committed and successful students and for whom school works."³⁹ He argues that students who struggle often do so for "more fundamental" reasons; they are not in tune with the "complex social networks" of schooling and literacy.⁴⁰ Far from comprising a universal set of skills, information literacy (like other literacies) is a complex social practice that holds meaning only within specific communities of discourse.⁴¹

Critics have long argued against this skill-oriented conception of information literacy. Elmborg contends that the Standards rest on the banking model of education, a view that regards students as empty containers into which teachers must deposit knowledge. Paulo Freire and others have critiqued this model.⁴² Laurie Kutner and Alison Armstrong, while recognizing that the Standards serve some practical purposes, argue for a "deep information literacy."⁴³ Heidi Jacobs calls for a praxis that recognizes the "complex situatedness of information literacy" as well as its inherently political nature.⁴⁴

Many of the critiques of decontextualized, skill-based information literacy come from the perspective of rhetoric and composition, because the rhetoric and composition community is deeply interested both in critical pedagogy and in literacy of all kinds.⁴⁵ Indeed, as Rolf Norgaard shows in his brief account of twentieth-century rhetoric and composition, the historical arcs of the two fields align.⁴⁶ Writing pedagogy has moved from a rhetoric that "tends to privilege the discrete text, divorcing rhetoric from social context, cultural power, and ideological position"⁴⁷ to a more critical and complex view of literacy, emphasizing both context and participation.⁴⁸ Information literacy has followed a similar trajectory.⁴⁹ The Standards' portrayal of IL as a set of skilled behaviors mirrors the idea that rhetoric is composed of discrete aesthetic skills.⁵⁰ However, like writing pedagogy, the thinking about information literacy has developed toward a recognition of the social.⁵¹ Situated literacy,

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which acknowledges context and honors what students already know, could make IL what Norgaard calls a "literacy worthy of the name."⁵²

It is in the relationship between research and writing that the shortcomings of the Standards as a description of a lived process become most clear. Jeff Purdue observes that the Standards describe the writing process and shows how they differ from the process of a writer in real life: "If I am doing good research, at no time do I merely 'extract and record' information. I wrestle with the material. I argue with the author, or make connections with other authors. And I engage in an activity that has the potential to change my life."⁵³



“Extract and record,” a reference to the second Standard,⁵⁴ is strongly reminiscent of the banking model, but writing allows students as well as faculty to push back against their readings, to question them, and to engage with them. Research is not about “finding” information that is external to the student; rather, Purdue calls for a “lived response to research.”⁵⁵ Similarly, James Elmborg argues that we could fashion the library as a “space where students actively engage existing knowledge and shape it to their own current and future uses.”⁵⁶ We can consider information literacy as an active literacy.⁵⁷

Because the Standards strive to define information literacy as a set of transferable, easily described skills, the goals of the Standards conflict with the development of a constructivist, context-specific view of IL. Ultimately, this is a problem for any standards document in a pedagogical context, particularly those that address highly context-specific practices such as literacy and information literacy.

The Framework and Information Literacy

If, as Norgaard argues, “literacy is the ability to read, interpret and produce ‘texts’ appropriate and valued within a given community,”⁵⁸ and if information literacy is a type of literacy, then a more situated and participatory vision of this concept is not only possible but also necessary. The Framework insists on the importance of context. Understanding disciplinary context is central to information literacy as the Framework conceives it, but the specificity of the local community in which discourse takes place is also considered. The document explicitly distances itself from the universalizing language of the Standards. This distance is obvious in the name change: the Framework explicitly disclaims the role of Standards. The Framework is “based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards, learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills.”⁵⁹

The shift from skills to concepts also suggests greater attention to context. Given that reading and writing are highly context-specific activities, the mastery of concepts within a specific domain is a more appropriate approach than the supposedly transferable skills

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described in the Standards. A move away from “skills” potentially facilitates a focus on the kinds of engaged inquiry that can grow from an acknowledgment of the contexts in which research and writing take place.⁶⁰ Although the Framework includes “Knowledge Practices” and “Dispositions,” which help to describe the way the Frames may play out in student work, it states explicitly that these should not serve as a “prescriptive enumeration of skills.” Furthermore, it specifies that, as libraries adapt this document to local

contexts, new practices and dispositions may be added to the list, while not all those listed may apply in any particular context.⁶¹

Rather than focusing on context-free skills, the Framework consistently designates as experts those who can navigate the appropriate disciplinary contexts in which in-



formation is produced and distributed. While an information-literate person under the Standards “evaluates information and its sources critically,”⁶² the Framework recognizes that “various communities may recognize different types of authority,” and that, while novices may rely on the superficial characteristics of a resource, “experts understand that authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community.”⁶³ That is, information-literate expertise comes not from a set of simple heuristics for evaluating information but rather from an understanding of the context in which authority is granted. The value of information is not inherent but is bound up with the practice of participation in a community and determined by “legal and socioeconomic interests.” One part of information literacy, then, is understanding those interests and deciding whether and when to cooperate with them.⁶⁴

Because the Framework understands information as a social phenomenon that takes place within a specific context, information literacy includes reading the social context as well as the material itself and understanding how the value of information changes as it moves between contexts. By acknowledging that “information creations are valued differently in different contexts,” the Framework explicitly makes space for a contextual understanding of information use, both inside and outside of academia.⁶⁵ Most of the contexts of interest to the Framework are academic; the title of the Framework “Scholarship as Conversation” makes that abundantly clear. At least, however, the Framework recognizes that there are no universal rules for academic research and writing. Instead, “Scholarship as Conversation” emphasizes the scholarly communities in which knowledge is produced, noting that each discipline has its own “sources of evidence, methods, and modes of discourse.”⁶⁶ Information literacy requires understanding that contesting earlier texts is an important feature of scholarly writing, and that writers must comprehend the community and the genre within which they write.

These are important steps toward Norgaard’s “situated, process-oriented information literacy” because they recognize that information is constituted within a particular community that uses memory to build on what came before.⁶⁷ These frames promote an understanding of information as writing—as original work that someone has created in a specific context, which students need to understand as they respond to the writing.

Information literacy differs from context to context. The Framework, as a product of ACRL, still focuses heavily on an academic environment, so the workings of IL in other contexts remain largely unexplored in that document.⁶⁸ However, even an academic context is far from monolithic. The Framework emphasizes local and disciplinary ways of knowing. Where the Standards attempted to define a universal set of skills that students could carry with them from class to class and onward into their careers, the Framework provides a more explicit philosophy that we can use to become more attentive to the contexts and uses of information.

A critical information literacy would ask not only what the practices are within a specific community but also whether these practices are just and how they can be made more so. In “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” and “Information Has Value,” the Framework acknowledges that bias, privilege, and power are implicated in the production of information. In these moments, the Framework begins to define critical information literacy as part of IL: to be information literate, a person not only must understand the process by which information is deemed “appropriate” but must also evaluate whether this process is a just one.



Learners versus Literate (or Illiterate) Students

Finally, the Framework's view of students is very different from that of the Standards. The student imagined in each document is also indicative of what we think information

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literacy can or should do. The Standards refer to "the information literate student" (posed against the invisible figure of "the information illiterate student") who engages in these various activities. The task of the librarian or teacher, in this model, is to encourage particular information behaviors that we find desirable and to evaluate students' adherence to these behaviors. This perspective makes sense from the point of view of creating a standard, because standards are designed to evaluate performance. The performance the Standards imagine is an idealized, generic version of the research process, which their structure approximates. As Elmborg points out, this structure is typical of successful (and often privileged) students whose behavior is similar to our (librarians, scholars) own.⁶⁹

The Frames instead portray a "learner" who is growing from a novice into an expert. These learners "are developing their information literate abilities."⁷⁰ Although the concept of "abilities" has crept back in, this focus on information literacy as continuously developing counteracts some of the problems with more binary conceptions of IL. Rosemary Green links the divide between information-literate and non-information-literate students to the deficit model of learning, arguing that "the term [illiteracy] and its implications

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function to demarcate groups."⁷¹ In fact, this dynamic is also present in the Framework, which uses the figure of the expert (and sometimes its counterpart, the novice) to illustrate different stages in information literacy development. However, during the course of IL development, the Framework portrays the relationship of students to information as often active and critical, granting students agency in how they deal with materials even when they are labeled as

novices. Further, the student in this formulation is not simply classified as information literate, but instead, actively works to develop these abilities.

The changes in the structure of the Framework suggest a move away from a prescriptive research process. The introduction to the Framework explicitly points to this move in its explanation of the alphabetical arrangement of the Frames. Later, "Searching as Strategic Exploration" makes explicit that no universal model works for all kinds of research, that a person's research process may change over time, and that research can



be complex and often requires several attempts. Research in the Framework is a messy, “nonlinear and iterative” process rather than a single, prescriptive set of steps.⁷² This gives us the opportunity to understand as valid the searching practices that students may use outside of an academic environment, while introducing new strategies as additions to the toolbox, not replacements for what they already know. Furthermore, by recognizing a variety of valid processes, this Frame suggests that students have agency to experiment with their own search processes and make informed decisions about what works best for them in a particular context.

Rather than positing an idealized information-literate person and walking through that person’s process, the Framework imagines someone who is working to develop these kinds of awareness and knowledge in contexts in which he or she might be a novice or an expert. The danger in this distinction is that of imagining the most interesting rhetorical work as the domain of experts only. For instance, “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” calls for a careful, critical examination of all sources, academic or otherwise, and recognizes that even novice learners can be skeptical and ask evaluative questions about sources. At the same time, this Frame compromises by admitting that novices “may need to rely on basic indicators of authority.”

However, the benefit of *novice* versus *expert* language is its emphasis on context. A person may think like a novice in one domain and an expert in another, and expertise develops gradually over time. In “Research as Inquiry” and “Information Creation as a Process,” novices appear in a state of continuously increasing sophistication.

If we understand scholarship as a conversation and research as a process of engaged inquiry, then the Framework also needs to consider students as potential participants in, rather than mere consumers of, these activities. It is through participation that information literacy becomes meaningful: “Facilitating students’ understanding that they can be participants in scholarly conversations encourages them to think of research not as a task of collecting information but instead as a task of constructing meaning.”⁷³

The overall structure of the Framework and many of its gestures toward better understanding communities, including those communities in which students may already be participants, are promising in this respect.

Some of the Frames, in fact, explicitly position students as potential participants in the conversation that the Framework describes. Students are encouraged to “develop, in their own creation processes, an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys”⁷⁴—that is, they are to think about sources rhetorically. They are “consumers and creators of information who can participate successfully in collaborative spaces,” they “contribute to the scholarly conversation at an appropriate level,” and they can choose whether to “comply with . . . [or] contest current legal and socio-economic practices concerning the value of information.”⁷⁵ Students are “contributors to the information marketplace.”⁷⁶ This economic metaphor runs the risk of once again reducing information to a commodity;⁷⁷ however, it does recognize that student work is also information and also has value. While some of the metaphors of consumption from

A person may think like a novice in one domain and an expert in another, and expertise develops gradually over time.



the Standards remain, the Framework makes a clear attempt to position the student as more than a consumer.

It is important to recognize our students as agents who move deliberately among communities and must work to understand the ways that information works in these new contexts, both because this recognition allows us more easily to recognize them as fellow seekers of knowledge and because it opens up the possibility of critical thinking. Under the Standards, librarians have a good understanding of academic expectations—however changeable and contextual those may be in practice—and hope to help students to meet those expectations. The Framework sees a series of nested communities with their own norms and hints that students can understand and question the practices of these communities.

The clearest example of this is in the “Information Has Value” Frame, which states that students may choose to question the highly restrictive, pro-corporate copyright laws that currently predominate most of the world. While the Frame stops short of critiquing copyright or calling for open access to scholarly materials, it does open up the possibility that both copyright and scholarly publishing can be challenged and perhaps changed. It hints that both the copyright system and the scholarly publication system are imperfect and temporary, encouraging students to make “deliberate and informed choices” about compliance or resistance to them. After all, students may one day be in a position to advocate for change to these systems.

Similarly, although I would like the Framework to be more explicit about the value of students’ unique voices, it makes some moves in this direction. First, by framing scholarship as conversation, the Framework makes clear that the authoritative voices of scholars can in fact be challenged and invites students to think about how they might do so. Second, through its acknowledgment of many different formats and its validation of different sources of knowledge, the Framework leaves some cracks in the walls of the academy where students’ experience can seep through.

Beilin argues strongly that the Framework could be used to encourage conformity, because an emphasis on understanding context can easily slide into a prescriptive view

The Framework makes clear that the authoritative voices of scholars can in fact be challenged and invites students to think about how they might do so.

of what sorts of participation are possible or desirable within that context.⁷⁸ These concerns are reasonable, but because the Framework makes such interesting gestures toward possible resistance, I am more optimistic. By acknowledging students’ agency and their participation in multiple communities that use information in disparate ways, the Framework imagines students as

participants who can change a community or recontextualize it.

Conclusion

The new Framework for Information Literacy embraces a different pedagogical theory of IL than did the Standards. The Standards are concerned with reproducible skills that students could carry from context to context, ignoring the nature of information as



communication and the role of students in transforming and challenging the materials they work with through their own scholarly endeavors. The Framework is based in a pedagogy emphasizing that all information is embedded in a social context and cannot be understood outside of that context. Additionally, it takes some steps toward understanding where students can see themselves in relation to that context, acknowledging the role of students as writers, and even challenging the unequal social structures in which information literacy exists. To support a truly critical IL, the Framework would need to make these challenges clearer and more fully acknowledge the role of students as writers. However, as an institutional document that is likely to see widespread adoption among academic libraries, the Framework makes many real advances.

What does it mean for a document that embraces a constructivist and at times critical vision of IL to gain the institutional recognition of a place on ACRL's website, though not ACRL's full endorsement? Its meaning relies partly on its reception. There is a risk that some librarians and library-adjacent institutions will attempt to treat the Framework as another standard by which they can measure supposedly universal skills. Dishearteningly, one company has already created a standardized test that purports to measure students' achievements based on concepts in the Framework, even though standardized tests seem a poor fit for assessing the context-specific dispositions championed

by the Framework.⁷⁹ Some librarians argue that it is possible to map Standards and the Framework together into a cohesive whole.⁸⁰ While it certainly makes sense to adapt some existing approaches to the Framework, I believe it is important first to grapple with the implications of the philosophy underlying each document. Precisely because it is not a

Precisely because it is not a mere repackaging of the Standards, the Framework offers an opportunity to improve our practice.

mere repackaging of the Standards, the Framework offers an opportunity to improve our practice. Thoughtful approaches to using the Framework to improve existing pedagogy will need to engage the philosophy underlying each document.⁸¹

If we are willing to engage with it, the Framework could encourage thoughtful debate. I have attempted to document some of the debates over IL in the library science literature. During the Framework's revisions, librarians took up important questions about information literacy, teaching, and philosophy in less formal spaces, including Twitter and blogs. These conversations affected the language in later drafts of the Framework. Most notably, a petition from the editors of *Information Literacy & Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* calling for explicit recognition of social justice in information literacy led to the inclusion of many of the elements I have analyzed.⁸² The Framework had an active hashtag on Twitter, #acrllframework, and has been a frequent topic of discussion on #critlib, a Twitter hashtag focused on applying critical pedagogy to librarianship. It has inspired blogs, workshops, and panels, including several at ACRL's biennial conference in 2015. Because the Framework explicitly encourages librarians to design the learning outcomes that are most appropriate for their institutions, it lends itself to the ongoing thinking and rethinking of information literacy pedagogy. Indeed, librarians have already begun developing assignments and activities for teaching with the Framework.⁸³ I hope that the Framework will encourage careful rethinking of information literacy pedagogy,



interesting experiments in teaching IL, and further critical thinking about the theories, implicit or explicit, underlying the work we do with students.

Acknowledgment

Some materials included in this article were previously presented at LACUNY Dialogues, an event held by the Library Association of the City University of New York (LACUNY).

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Notes

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