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Seeing the world through adult eyes
The ACRL Framework and continuing education students

How does the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy reflect our current understanding of adult learning theory? Is it beneficial to students whose life situations mean they are uniquely challenged to balance a variety of roles and obligations, and whose primary focus may not be a career in academia? How can we, as librarians who work more and more with adult students, incorporate the best of adult education theory into our information literacy instruction?

Who are adult students, and why are they here?

Although an 18-year-old residential college student is legally an adult, there is a world of difference between those students and the ever-growing number of "adult" students who constitute the largest portion of the U.S. undergraduate student population.[1] Labels such as "continuing" or "returning," "non-traditional" or even "post-traditional"[2] reflect their status as a unique population, with needs, motivations, and backgrounds that differ from those of traditionally aged undergraduate students. These students can be characterized by more than their advanced age: a 2002 report by the National Center for Education Statistics lists seven characteristics which, in part or in full, may define a "nontraditional" student. These include "being over the age of 24," not living on campus, working at least part-time, having delayed enrollment in post-secondary education, being enrolled in a program part-time, being financially independent, and having dependents, often in the role of single parent.[3] This definition offers a glimpse of the range of challenges students in this group face.

What do these challenges look like when they bring them in to the library? Credits earned for prior learning or life experience (such as CLEP tests) can jump-start them into upper-level classes without the grounding they may need to succeed. Their associates' degree from a community college may mean they had a session of "bibliographic instruction" 20 years ago, but (as many sitting in my office confess) they have no idea where to begin when faced with current library resources. The scaffolded approach to library instruction, which is often built-in to curriculum aimed at traditional-age undergraduates, is frequently missing programs focused on adult students. Compressed or accelerated programs can leave students feeling that they are awash in learning, trying desperately to figure out the most meaningful and relevant takeaways for this class. In this instance, a library session becomes "help me find what I need for this grade." I teach adult students

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in just such a compressed program and have seen the program help many students succeed, but it can be difficult to fulfill the requirements of a research paper in the seven weeks we have together: identify an appropriate topic, propose a research question, incorporate the professor's feedback, do academic research, and write a paper (in one's own voice) based on that research, citing each source accurately so as not to plagiarize.

What did information literacy for adults look like under the standards?

For many years, ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and Standards for Distance Learning Library Services were our roadmaps for working with adult students, most of whom are nonresidential students, even if the actual distance is very small. As that population has grown, the role of librarians working with them has evolved, as well. In 2006, when I began working in my current role, the very real and immediate need was to get anyone on campus aware of, and then interested in, the concept of information literacy. We did this by talking to faculty about how we could help students deal with information overload and by making efforts to get in front of classes in any way possible.

Those standards, with their linear progression and straightforward language, worked well with adult students, particularly in "one-shots," which are often (for better or worse) our major form of interaction with busy adults. Bill Badke, writing in 2008, defended this model of a linear, thoughtful process: "We help adult learners best by providing them with a research model along with strategies that model and use the digital tools they need."[4]

Adult education theory

Andragogy is the term most often associated with the early development of adult education theory as a separate field. Although it literally means "leader of man" (as opposed to *pedagogy,* or "leader of children"), Mal-

colm Knowles defined andragogy as the "art and science of helping adults learn."[5] Building on the work of other early theorists such as Cyril Houle, Patricia Cross, and Carl Rogers,[6] Knowles posited that adults differ from children in their learning in several significant ways, including having a different orientation to and motivation for learning, and a need to know why they need to know something before they work to learn it. Embedded within this theory is a strong emphasis on taking into account the current life experiences and roles of the adult student, as well as their immediate needs in those contexts. Jean Sheridan, writing in the journal *Research Strategies,* identified four distinguishing "assumptions" of andragogy:

1. Growth implies a movement from dependency to autonomy or self-direction.

2. Knowledge accrued becomes its own resource.

3. A person's social role becomes the prime motivation for further education.

4. Learning becomes problem-centered rather than subject-centered.[7]

In these assumptions, we see concepts that resonate with our anecdotal understanding of today's adult learners and the beginning stages of what has become the dominant theory in adult education: transformative learning. In his 1978 article, "Perspective Transformation," Jack Mezirow proposed a new theory of adult education. Over time, this theory came to be known as "transformative learning," and has gained widespread acceptance in the field of adult education. Mezirow posits that, in the process of learning, adults work through a ten-stage process, which ends with the incorporation of new perspectives, based on often unsettling points of learning, into one's life. At its heart, transformative learning is based on "critical reflection or critical self-reflection on assumptions" and "critical discourse where the learner confirms a best judgment by discussing assumptions and realizations with other adults."[8] This type of learning is likened by Mezirow to the experience many people have when "life crises" provoke a significant

change in perspective. Suddenly, that which seemed so certain as to be unquestioned (the love of a spouse, the presence of a parent, the identity we develop through our work) changes, and they see the world differently.[9] Chad Hoggan illustrates the broader objectives of transformative learning: ". . . TL is about learning outcomes that are more pervasive in a person's life and revolve around developing broader, more inclusive views of the world, becoming a more authentic person, and similar personal changes."[10]

Connections between transformative learning, threshold concepts, and the Framework

In their 2003 book *Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practicing,* Jan Meyer and Ray Land applied the theory of transformative learning to disciplinary thinking under the label of threshold concepts. Meyer, Land, and their coeditor, Caroline Baillie, define threshold concepts in the Editor's Note of their 2010 book, *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning:*

> . . . the approach builds on the notion that there are certain concepts, or certain learning experiences, which resemble passing through a portal, from which a new perspective opens up, allowing things formerly not perceived to come into view. This permits a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something, without which the learner cannot progress, and results in a reformulation of the learners' frame of meaning.[11]

The editors pay explicit tribute to Mezirow's work: "A number of resonances can be identified between the thresholds approach and work undertaken in the field of transformational learning. . . . We [recognize] a number of correspondences here with the instigative effect of threshold concepts, the liminal phase of thresholds theory and the process of integration it entails."[12]

Beginning in 2013, and running through the official adoption of the Framework for Information Literacy in 2016, ACRL followed a number of academic disciplines in identifying disciplinary concepts that would fit some of the five features of a threshold concept: transformative, (potentially) troublesome, (probably) irreversible, integrative, and (possibly) bounded.[13] Lori Townsend, Amy Hofer, Silvia L. Hanick, and Korey Brunetti's Delphi study, published in 2016, identified potential threshold concepts,[14] which the ACRL Standards Revision Task Force then built into the Framework. That study built on Hofer, Brunetti, and Townsend's 2013 work, which emphasized the teaching implications of moving to a threshold concepts model for information literacy. The broader vision of information literacy theory in the guise of threshold concepts is drawn out by Lindsay Roberts in her article entitled *Research in the Real World:* "Threshold concepts may allow learners to experience a deeper conceptual understanding of information practices, as well as an understanding of how these concepts may be applied across contexts, thus contributing to lifelong learning and adaptability."[15]

Problems with threshold concepts, transformative learning and the Framework

The theories of transformative learning and threshold concepts are not without their critics, however. Chad Hoggan, writing in the journal *Adult Education Quarterly,* points out that there remains an inherent tension within Mezirow's work, between the mundane and the aspirational: "Living within social systems involves lifelong learning, and the field of adult education encompasses this as much as it does the critique of those social systems."[16]

This tension is one we see frequently in critiques of the Framework. Hofer, Townsend, and Brunetti even point out this specific limitation of threshold concepts: "In

particular, threshold concepts do not directly address skill acquisition or learning at the level of performance indicators."[17] Hoggan further argues that transformative learning has been applied too broadly.

In a similar vein, advocates of threshold concepts are criticized for making too much of the distinction between "before" and "after." Lesley Gourlay, writing about the liminality of writing practices, argues that the visual of a "threshold" can be:

". . . misleading, with the image of the doorway unhelpfully implying a defined, straightforward transition from 'outside' to 'inside'. There is a danger that the metaphor can lead to an oversimplified notion of a clear transition point. . . . Instead it may be more useful to use the notion as one means of understanding aspects of a messy and complex process of learning and transformation over time."[18]

That is not to say that the Frames are useless when working with adult students. Several of the Frames contain helpful concepts that can be applied in adult education, although maybe not in the way the theorists who posited them would have intended. For instance, I use the "Searching as Strategic Exploration" frame in almost every class I teach: I have given up on canned searches (with sometimes amusing results in class) in an effort to show students that research is, almost without exception, a messy, creative, and iterative process. When they see me try—and sometimes fail and then try again—I am hopeful that it will free them to do the same. But to spell out the concept would produce quizzical looks, and to say that they are "transformed" by it seems to be stretching the case. Similarly, the metaphor of a scholarly conversation has been helpful in talking to my adult students about building on the work of others; however, most of them would freely admit that they don't really want to participate in the conversation.

A deeper look at "Authority is Con-structed and Contextual" is appropriate when considering how these adult students will use information, both during and after school. A discussion around the nuances of understanding who is funding the research, and who is publishing it is not just a fruitful discussion for helping identify strong sources for their research paper. My hope is that every student who comes through my class will take away a sense of questioning when they see the phrase "research says" in the newspaper.

I would argue that what we are teaching students is *informative* rather than *transformative*. Kegan puts it this way:

"Learning aimed at increasing our fund of knowledge, at increasing our repertoire of skills, at extending already established cognitive structures all deepen the resources available to an existing frame of reference. Such learning is literally in-*form*-ative because it seeks to bring valuable new contents into the existing form of our way of knowing."[19]

Notes

1. National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 303.40. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by attendance status, sex, and age: Selected years, 1970 through 2025," *Digest of Education Statistics,* May 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_303.40.asp?current=yes.

2. Louis Soares, "Post-traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education: A Manifesto for College Leaders," American Council on Education, January 2013, www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Post-traditional-Learners.pdf.

3. Susan P. Choy, "Nontraditional Undergraduates: Findings from the Condition of Education 2002," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2002, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002012.pdf. For the sake

of this article, I will refer to students who fit this definition as "adult" students.

4. William Badke, "Information Literacy Meets Adult Learners," *Online* (2008): 50.

5. Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy,* 2nd. (New York: Cambridge Books, 1980), 43.

6. For a helpful overview, see TEAL Center. "Adult learning theories," TEAL Center Fact Sheet (Washington, D.C.: American Institute for Research, 2011), https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/11_%20TEAL_Adult_Learning_Theory.pdf.

7. Jean Sheridan, "Andragogy: A New Concept for Academic Libraries," *Research Strategies* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 160.

8. Andrew Kitchenham, "Jack Mezirow on Transformative Learning," *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning,* edited by N. Seel (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2012), 1659.

9. Jack Mezirow, "Perspective transformation," Adult Education Quarterly, 1978: 100.

10. Kristine Alpi and Chad Hoggan, "Recognizing the value of Threshold Concepts: Application of a conceptual tool to professional students learning to be researchers," *The Reference Librarian* 57, no. 2 (2016), https://repository.lib.ncsu.edu/handle/1840.2/2719.

11. Jan Meyer, Ray Land, and Caroline Baillie, *Threshold concepts and transformational learning* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010), ix.

12. Ibid., xii.

13. Jan Meyer and Ray Land, "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising within the Disciplines," Occasional Report, Universities of Edinburgh, Coventry and Durham, Edinburgh: ETL Project, 2003, www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/docs/ETLreport4.pdf.

14. Lori Townsend, Amy R. Hofer, Silvia L. Hanick, and Korey Brunetti, "Identifying Threshold Concepts for Information Literacy: A Delphi Study," *Communications in Information Literacy* 10, no. 1 (2016).

15. Lindsay Roberts, "Research in the Real World: Improving Adult Learners' Web Search and Evaluation Skills through Motivational Design and Problem-Based Learning," *College & Research Libraries,* preprint accepted May 31, 2016.

16. Chad D. Hoggan, "Transformative Learning as a Metatheory: Definition, Criteria, and Typology," *Adult Education Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2016): 59.

17. Amy Hofer, Korey Brunetti, and Lori Townsend, "A Threshold Concepts Approach to the Standards Revision," *Communications in Information Literacy* 7, no. 2 (2013): 111–12.

18. Lesley Gourlay, "Threshold Practices: Becoming a Student Through Academic Literacies," *London Review of Education,* 2009: 88–89.

19. Robert Kegan, "What "Form" Transforms? A Constructive-Developmental Approach to Transformative Learning," *Contemporary Theories of Learning,* ed. Knut Illeris (London: Routledge, 2009), 40. ℤ

ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox is an openly accessible platform and repository for librarians and their educational partners to discover, share, collect, and use ongoing work related to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education in practice and professional development. The Sandbox is a dynamic resource whose content is created by contributors engaged in the Framework.

Through the Sandbox, visitors can both browse and contribute by searching for materials tailored to their needs and by contributing their own materials to share with others.

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox is freely available for searching and contributions at http://sandbox.acrl.org/.