

Structuration Theory as a Lens for Examining Agency and Constraints in Information Literacy Pedagogy

Don Latham^a Jesus Montiel^b Helen Julien^b and Melissa Gross^a

^aFlorida State University, USA

^bUniversity at Buffalo, SUNY, USA

dlatham@fsu.edu, jmmontie@buffalo.edu, heidijul@buffalo.edu, mgross@fsu.edu

ABSTRACT

Giddens' structuration theory is used to demonstrate to pre-service librarians how to consider structural constraints in their future work and develop agency in the face of institutional and political barriers. A rich example is provided by empirical findings over decades of research on information literacy instruction in academic libraries. Structuration theory provides an opportunity to reconsider these findings, to think about the constraints under which librarians struggle, and to identify those points of structuration where they exercise agency despite the seemingly intransigent organizational arrangements and political contexts limiting their instructional work. Instructional librarians are confronted by a range of structural constraints relating to campus power dynamics and resource allocations. However, understanding that opportunities exist to challenge existing institutional arrangements can motivate librarians to persevere in their critical professional efforts.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information literacy; pedagogy; academic libraries.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

structuration theory; agency; professional identity; instruction librarians.

Copyright 2025 by the authors. Published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.1940>

INTRODUCTION

A complaint commonly heard among pre-service librarians as well as professional librarians is that LIS education is “too theoretical.” An additional complaint voiced by many professional librarians is that they are so constrained by institutional and political factors they have little agency in doing their work. The contention of this paper is that structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, 1984) can be used to help pre-service librarians understand the dynamics of constraints and agency and prepare them to more effectively exercise agency in their future careers as professional librarians. Moreover, such an approach can demonstrate to students how theory can have practical and positive applications in their own lives. A useful example of how structuration theory can be applied to the work of information professionals is provided by looking at academic librarians’ practices and experiences in providing information literacy instruction.

Longitudinal and multi-national survey and interview studies into the information literacy instructional practices of academic librarians have revealed persistent structural challenges to these efforts (Julien 2000, 2006; Julien & Leckie, 1997; Julien et al., 2018, 2024, 2025). These challenges can lead to professional burnout and limit the effectiveness of this important work. Information literacy instruction is focused on developing critical thinking skills that are fundamental for students, and indeed all citizens. This is particularly true when misinformation and generative artificial intelligence increasingly pose challenges to information evaluation and use. Julien and Genuis (2011) emphasize that individuals “who are information literate are able to discern credible information from misinformation or disinformation. They used information ethically and skillfully” (p. 103). Information literacy education is essential to develop this judgment and to support academic success and civic engagement in a digital society (Julien et al. 2018). Thus, supporting librarians in their instructional efforts is meaningful and necessary.

Multiple theoretical lenses have been applied to explore the instructional challenges of academic librarians in diverse contexts. For example, scholars have explored working conditions in academic libraries from a neoliberal capitalist perspective (Espinel et al., 2023), and an Indigenous Knowledge lens has highlighted the role of building relationships in information literacy instruction (Littletree et al., 2023). In this paper, empirical data collected through a series of studies conducted in Canada and the United States over the past 30 years is considered from a structuration theory perspective. The paper focuses specifically on the structural aspects of the working environment the systems in which instructional librarians attempt to practice, and the ways in which librarians seek agency to fulfil their professional goals. Giddens (1979) argues that social practices construct and replicate systems over time. Structuration theory questions the norms established in systems by conceptualizing the agency, configuration, and power dynamics that resemble their social practices (Haslett, 2011).

THEORETICAL LENS

Structuration theory was developed by Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, as an attempt to reconcile the two main theoretical traditions in sociology—structure and agency. An emphasis on structure represents an objectivist view; an emphasis on agency represents a subjective view. The key question, according to this dualist view, is whether individuals are constrained by structure (society, institutions, organizations, etc.) or do they have agency over their actions? Giddens argues that both come into play and are evident in “social practices across time and space” (1979, p. 5). He further says that “the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction” (1984, p. 19). Structure has an influence on an individual’s agency, but the individual, or agent, also plays a role in maintaining and changing structure. Structuration, then, is “the interface at which an actor meets a structure,” and those who use structuration as a theoretical lens focus on the processes that occur at this interface (Gibbs, 2017). As Rosenbaum (2010) explains, structuration theory posits that “we routinely engage in situated and contextual interactions where we draw upon structural rules and resources and engage in social practices for a variety of purposes” (p. 123).

Structuration theory has been employed in a variety of research studies in library and information science. It has been used to investigate topics as diverse as everyday life information seeking (Savolainen, 1995, 2006), information use in managerial environments (Rosenbaum 1996, 2000), and the social, technical, and contextual aspects of online Q&A communities (Rosenbaum & Shachaff, 2010). It has provided a framework for assessing and addressing the information and communications technology sustainability gap in not-for-profit community centers in Melbourne, Australia (Stillman & Stoecker, 2005) and for exploring the emergence of digital poverty among parents in post-pandemic England (Ruiu, Ragnedda, Addeo & Ruiu, 2023). In studies of technology use, structuration theory has been engaged to show how human interaction could be supported or hindered by new technologies (Evans & Brooks, 2005) and how a professional development course helped South African teachers exercise agency in combining their subject expertise with their new knowledge of technology (specifically, mobile tablets) to enhance their teaching (Botha & Herselman, 2018). In library-focused research, structuration theory has been used to examine the tension between innovation (agency) and homogenization (structure) in the development of digital libraries (Dalbello, 2004), to study public librarians’ experiences with and views of service provision (Bouthillier, 2000), to explore the information practices of librarians within the context of their workplace (Huvila, 2013), and to analyze collaborations between academics and library staff in Australian and Vietnamese libraries (Pham & Williamson, 2020). With this rich history of application in information science, the theoretical lens of structuration theory seemed appropriate for considering our data.

WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Librarians with instructional responsibilities who have been surveyed and interviewed about their instructional practices and the challenges they face have consistently pointed to a range of structural constraints limiting their agency. A primary challenge is a lack of time to plan and to provide instruction. Often limited to a one-hour time slot and expected to teach many lessons within a limited window of opportunity, librarians are asked to respond to faculty requests for lessons that are not contextualized within curriculum, nor scaffolded on previous lessons. Limited staffing, technical, and classroom resources also limit librarians' instructional agency. A lack of understanding and support by library managers, disciplinary faculty who do not value librarians' expertise, and students who believe that they do not need information literacy instruction, along with a general lack of training for teaching among librarians (e.g., in instructional design, classroom management, and evaluation), combine to create very challenging conditions for instructional work. As one recent survey respondent stated, 'I feel stuck.' These conditions contribute to professional burnout (Julien & Genuis, 2009) and limit student learning. In addition, the power politics on most campuses position librarians as subservient to faculty, a context exacerbated by the predominant gender make-up of librarians versus disciplinary faculty (i.e., librarians are predominantly female and disciplinary faculty are predominantly male), and by the differences in typical educational levels of these groups (Julien & Pecoskie, 2009).

While these structural challenges limit librarians' agency, the empirical data does include examples of librarians investing significant effort to develop relationships with faculty that facilitate positive instructional efforts, and other examples where librarians find work-arounds to achieve their professional goals. Recently, some librarians report that implementing the Association for College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015), a theoretically grounded basis for instruction that resonates with some disciplinary faculty, provides an opportunity to overcome some of the structural barriers previously impeding librarians' practice (Gross et al., 2022). The *Framework* is one example of a point of structuration, where some librarians have managed to make a positive connection with disciplinary faculty, who see its value and as a result have come to more fully recognize the contributions that librarians can make to student learning. Another example of librarians' agency was clearly demonstrated in interviews with instructional librarians following the global COVID-19 pandemic, as they described proactively moving their teaching to the online environment (Gross et al., 2022). Both students and disciplinary faculty were grateful for these modifications, and some librarians felt that their expertise and contributions garnered increased respect as a result. This positive agency is important to highlight in the post-pandemic environment as we transition back to face-to-face interaction as opposed to an exclusively virtual environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The structural features of academic librarianship place it in a context marked by a lack of time, understaffing, and limited administrative support, which restrict the influence librarians and information literacy instruction have on students. This is compounded by the mixed reception librarians receive from faculty and upper-level administration, further limiting what they can accomplish. This often results in a so-called “one-shot” session (a one-hour intervention that students encounter only once during their program of study). Instruction librarians are often frustrated by this reality in which a few librarians are stretched thin to cover the needs of a disproportionately large student body. In this scenario, assessment of student learning is at best limited, and at worst overlooked. The lack of objective tests of information literacy makes it difficult to talk about student ability in a general sense, as well as to study information literacy outcomes using data analytics to gauge the impact of instruction on students at the institutional level, where decision-making is very focused on such data.

Instruction librarians have exercised agency within these structural limitations, and thereby increased their impact, by offering full courses in information literacy when they can, embedding themselves in online courses and adopting new applications and technologies (Zoom, Canva, Microsoft Teams, etc.), reaching out to students where they are on campus (such as setting up in dorms or other places convenient to students), performing outreach to instructors, and working to make their case with administrators. While it is difficult to expand information literacy instruction under these conditions, many librarians work to influence the views of students, instructors, and administration in order to increase interest in information literacy and advocate for expanding their reach. Representation may be key to making instructional librarians and their teaching concerns more visible. For example, librarians often make efforts to contribute to decision-making at the campus level by serving on committees. Seeking a voice in curriculum decision-making, in particular, can give librarians agency in relevant and important decisions that impact student learning. Librarians also need to consider the ways in which they may be unwittingly perpetuating the structural barriers revealed by our studies, by accepting difficult working conditions rather than actively resisting them. Such resistance is undoubtedly challenging, particularly in the neo-liberal higher education context, but librarians can turn to examples of successful agentic action by their peers for inspiration. In addition, further research can help by expanding its focus to how librarians can become more influential in the context of higher education and make information literacy a shared concern of all campus stakeholders. Without significant support from administration and buy-in from instructors, it is unlikely that the structural conditions that constrain information literacy instruction will be lifted.

CONCLUSION

Structuration theory is a fitting theoretical lens for understanding the interplay between persistent structural restraints and personal agency in the academic library workplace.

Specifically, the experiences of instructional librarians, challenged to meet a set of critical learning outcomes, demonstrate the necessity to consider the organizational and political structures that constrain the agency of these workers, while recognizing that personal agency remains possible, and indeed, is vital for achieving professional goals.

Structuration theory offers an accessible way for students to gain an understanding of the applicability of theory to practice and a greater appreciation for the dynamics of professional practice. It could be easily applied to other examples, such as public librarians providing social services information and school librarians navigating materials challenges. Other theories, such as feminist theory and critical race theory, can also be employed as ways of preparing students to develop agency and a professional identity in their future careers. Bringing relevant theoretical lenses to practice can help new librarians to more fully understand their workplaces, the expectations placed on their shoulders, and the opportunities to make positive change.

REFERENCES

- Association for College and Research Libraries (2015). Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
- Botha, A., & Herselman, M. (2018). Teachers become cocreators through participation in a teacher professional development (TPD) course in a resource constraint environment in South Africa. *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries*, 84(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/isd2.12007>.
- Bouthillier, F. (2000). The meaning of service: Ambiguities and dilemmas for public library service providers. *Library & Information Science Research*, 22(3), 243-272.
- Dalbello, M. (2004). Institutional shaping of cultural memory: Digital library as environment for textual transmission. *Library Quarterly*, 74(3), 265-298.
- Espinel, R., & Tewell, E. (2023). Working conditions are learning conditions: Understanding information literacy instruction through neoliberal capitalism. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 17(2), 573–590. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2023.17.2.13>.
- Evans, J., & Brooks, L. (2005). Understanding collaboration using new technologies: A structural perspective. *The Information Society*, 20, 215-220.
- Gibbs, B. J. (2017, August 21). Structuration theory. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/structuration-theory>.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis*. London: Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gross, M., Julien, H., & Latham, D. (2022). Librarian views of the ACRL Framework and the impact of COVID-19 on information literacy instruction in community colleges. *Library & Information Science Research*, 44(2). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2022.101151>.
- Haslett, B. B. (2011). *Communicating and organizing in context: The theory of structural interaction* [eBook edition]. Taylor & Francis Group
- Huvila, I. (2013). “Library users come to a library to find books”: The structuration of the library as a soft information system. *Journal of Documentation*, 69(5), 715-135.
- Julien, H. (2000). Information literacy instruction in Canadian academic libraries: Longitudinal trends and international comparisons. *College & Research Libraries*, 61, 510–523.

- Julien, H. (2006). A longitudinal analysis of information literacy instruction in Canadian academic libraries. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 29(3), 289–313.
- Julien, H., & Genuis, S. K. (2009). Emotional labour in librarians' instructional work. *Journal of Documentation*, 65(6), 926-937. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410910998924>.
- Julien, H., & Genuis, S. K. (2011). Librarians' experiences of the teaching role: A national survey of librarians. *Library & Information Science Research*, 33(2), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2010.09.005>.
- Julien, H., Gross, M., & Latham, D. (2018). Survey of information literacy instructional practices in U.S. academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 79(2), 179–199. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.2.179>.
- Julien, H., Latham, D., Gross, M., & Montiel Hernandez, J. (2024). Understanding information literacy instructional practices: Implications for preparing pre-service librarians. *Proceedings of the ALISE Annual Conference*. <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2024.1686>.
- Julien, H., & Leckie, G. (1997). Bibliographic instruction trends in Canadian academic libraries. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 22(2), 1–15.
- Julien, H., Montiel, J., Gross, M., & Latham, D. (in press). Information literacy instruction redux: What are instruction librarians doing now? *College & Research Libraries*.
- Julien, H., & Pecoskie, J. L. (2009). Librarians' experiences of the teaching role: Grounded in campus relationships. *Library & Information Science Research*, 31, 149-154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2009.03.005>.
- Littletree, S., Andrews, N., & Loyer, J. (2023). Information as a relation: Defining Indigenous information literacy. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 17(2), 4–23. <https://doi.org/10.11645/17.2.8>.
- Pham, H., & Williamson, K. (2020). Towards effective collaboration between academics and library staff: A comparative Australian/Vietnamese study. *Library & Information Science Research*, 42, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2020.101015>.
- Reed, K. L. (2015). Square peg in a round hole? The Framework for Information Literacy in the community college environment. *Journal of Library Administration*, 55(3), 235–248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1034052>.
- Rosenbaum, H. (1996). Structure and action: Towards a new concept of the information use environment. In S. Hardin (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 59th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science* (pp. 152-157). Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc.

- Rosenbaum, H. (2000). The information environment of electronic commerce: Information imperatives for the firm. *Journal of Information Science*, 26(3), 161-171.
- Rosenbaum, H. (2010). Anthony Giddens' influence on library and information science. In G. J. Leckie, L. M. Givens, & J. Buschman (Eds.), *Critical theory for library and information science: Exploring the social from across the disciplines* (pp. 119-130). New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Rosenbaum, H., & Shachaf, P. (2010). A structuration approach to online communities of practice: The case of Q&A communities. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 61(9), 1933-1944.
- Ruiu, M. L., Ragnedda, M., Addeo, F., & Ruiu, G. (2023). Investigating how the interaction between individual and circumstantial determinants influence the emergence of digital poverty: A post-pandemic survey among families with children in England. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(5), 1023-1044.
- Savolainen, R. (1995). Everyday life information seeking: Approaching information seeking in the context of "Way of Life." *Library & Information Science Research*, 17(3), 259-294.
- Savolainen, R. (2006). Time as a context for information seeking. *Library & Information Science Research*, 28(1), 110-127.
- Stillman, L., & Stoecker, R. (2005). Structuration, ICTs, and community work. *The Journal of Community Informatics*, 1(3), 83-102.