

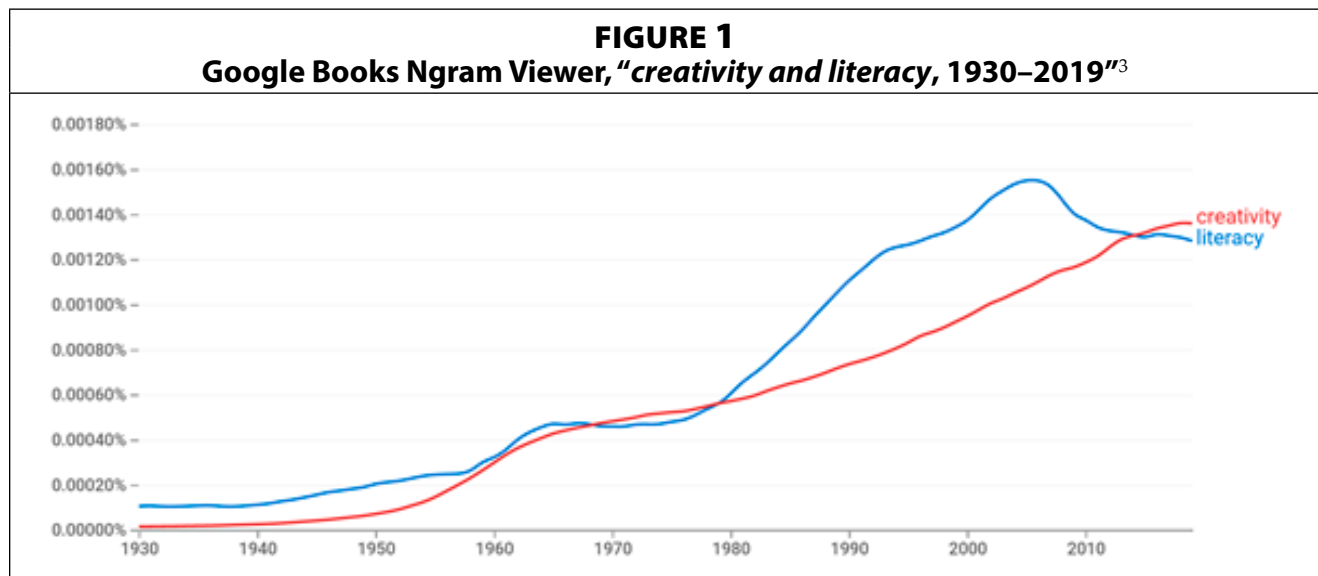
# Toward a Framework for Information Creativity

Mark Dahlquist

Recognizing the importance of information literacy in defining the primary focus of library instruction, this paper suggests the potential utility of a complementary principle of information creativity. Employers and educators now increasingly stress creativity's value and teachability; this paper turns to the work of John Dewey to suggest that the traditional distinction between creativity and literacy education is not only unavoidable but also potentially productive. This paper offers some initial suggestions as to what a framework for information creativity might entail, and proposes that an emphasis on information creativity could both highlight the familiar association between libraries and creativity and inspire a theory and practice of creativity that strengthens traditions of democratic social progress.

## Introduction: Creativity and the Moment

Since the early twentieth century, the word *creativity* has appeared with increasing frequency in English-language publications, its use rising sharply in the 1950s and continuing its upward trend thereafter.<sup>1</sup> This trend has continued in the first decades of the twenty-first century, as the value of creativity has come to be emphasized across an increasing variety of domains. The growing interest in this term is reflected in figure 1, which tracks the frequency of the words *creativity* and *literacy* in the Google Books corpus between 1930 and 2019.<sup>2</sup>



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The increasing social value placed upon creativity was described in 2002 by Richard Florida, who argued that a revolutionary “rise of the creative class” was evident in city planners’ and corporate recruiters’ growing interest in attracting young, nonconformist “creatives.” In Florida’s view, this population would usher in a “new Creative Age” in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

As Florida predicted, creativity has become one of the most desired “soft skills” in hiring decisions across industries, and its value has become visible in the architecture of workplaces and academic institutions. Businesses have replaced cubicles with colorful, open-concept lounge and office areas, and universities have invested in similar creativity zones: flexible spaces, often located in libraries or information commons, designed to promote ideation, collaboration, and creativity.<sup>5</sup> These campus and workplace changes have taken place as social psychology has increasingly challenged the idea that creativity occurs in moments of inner illumination mysteriously “gifted” to remarkable individuals, instead describing creativity as a capacity that can be developed and a process that occurs within social and material contexts.<sup>6</sup>

Creativity can be defined in a number of ways. It can be viewed, for example, as the capacity to devise novel solutions that are appropriate to particular contexts or as the imaginative capacity associated with the creative arts. It can be defined narrowly, as a capacity related to the development of individual talents or to the pursuit of social creativity and justice.<sup>7</sup> This paper suggests that Deweyan models of individual and social creativity offer a promising foundation for a creativity-focused framework designed to complement the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy*.<sup>8</sup> Such a creativity framework could also supplement, on the one hand, modes of design thinking modeled on commercial forms of creativity,<sup>9</sup> and on the other, forms of critical librarianship adapted from bodies of thought that did not focus on libraries as key resources for enabling social change.

Whether understood in connection with individual problem-finding, the creative arts, or social creativity, creativity has experienced a remarkable set of challenges over the past few years. The coronavirus pandemic, responsible for more than six million deaths between 2019 and 2022,<sup>10</sup> shuttered playhouses, soundstages, and cinemas—many for good—while discouraging young people from entering the creative arts.<sup>11</sup> Other challenges have arisen from social struggle, as groups with different transformational agendas sought to inspire, harness, or regulate the production and reception of creative works, while at the same time the development of transformer-based language models such as Chat-GPT has raised concerns about malicious uses of AI-assisted creativity.

The breakthroughs of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements in 2017 and 2019, respectively, have challenged and worked to reform practices and institutions that have long embedded racial and gender inequalities into creative industries and practice. Institutions such as the Academy of Motion Pictures, the governing boards of many theatres and publications (such as *Poetry* magazine), and municipal zoning boards across the United States (many of which had tolerated gentrification while seeking to attract young “creatives”) were challenged to reform their practices.<sup>12</sup> Reforming creative practice is an important dimension of these international social justice movements.

However, during this period of creative reform, a countervailing reaction has also strengthened. Authoritarian reactionary movements have attempted to limit the production and reception of creative work, whether by stipulating that government buildings should be constructed in “classical” style, attacking public support for the arts, or vilifying the “Magic

Kingdom” of the Disney corporation.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, this movement has sought to ban books from libraries and classrooms, with the aim of suppressing traits and practices associated with creativity, such as open-mindedness, growth mindsets, and whole-child education, seeing these as threats to conservative beliefs about race, gender, sexual identity, and sexual orientation.<sup>14</sup> Such challenges to schools and libraries are related to broader efforts to undermine forms of liberal democracy that have tended to sustain multicultural social creativity.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, since the Capitol Hill insurrection of January 6, 2022, American conservatives have increasingly endorsed the religious ethnonationalism of authoritarian leaders such as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, seeking “liberation from liberalism itself.”<sup>16</sup>

In view of these profound challenges to creative practices and institutions, this paper considers the potential value of the concept of *information creativity* to library instruction. This concept could serve as a companion or complement to the theory and practice of information literacy. This paper argues that despite the increasingly capacious, critical, and anti-oppressive nature of information literacy (especially as outlined by the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy*), a companion concept of information creativity could offer a distinctive means of fostering both individual human flourishing and forms of multicultural liberal democracy that can support progress toward social equity and justice.

This paper is not intended as a critique of information literacy, the value of which is well established.<sup>17</sup> It does, however, consider some of the tensions related to creativity that have long been recognized in discussions of information literacy, and it suggests that a framework for information creativity could guide the development of library-based activities and services that are less closely attached to the core information literacy practices of locating and evaluating information sources. In addition to providing a framework for instruction, an information creativity framework could also help connect and coordinate the various programs and services many libraries already offer that aim to inspire, support, and distribute creative work.

Although libraries have successfully promoted *information literacy* as a term encompassing most forms of library instruction,<sup>18</sup> it is important to recognize the enduring distinction between educational approaches that emphasize literacy and those that emphasize creativity. Historically, this distinction has been signaled by a variety of “dueling dichotomies” that employ different terms to describe a tension between educational approaches that value testable skills such as literacy, “the three Rs,” or “the basics,” on the one hand, and those that value more abstract qualities such as originality, self-realization, or expression, on the other.<sup>19</sup> Recent work in developmental psychology has tended to support the existence of a basic cognitive distinction between thinking that aims to evaluate information correctly (as a literate reader can do) and thinking that aims to imagine and explore new possibilities—a fundamental “explore-exploit” dilemma.<sup>20</sup> The persistence of this distinction in education and psychology suggests the potential value of developing a companion library instructional framework for supporting “creativity-forward” library instruction.

This paper looks to the writings of John Dewey, who came to be seen as the “national philosopher” of the United States during the first half of twentieth century, as a basis for conceptualizing information creativity. Although Dewey’s influence declined for a time following his death in 1952,<sup>21</sup> it enjoyed a resurgence in the 1980s,<sup>22</sup> when his work was revived by philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam. At the same time, belief in the value of Dewey’s educational writings was sustained by progressive educational theorists interested in “using Dewey to forge consensus among competing visions of the educational

future,” as Thomas Fallace observed in describing the use of Dewey by feminist educators such as Maxine Greene and Ellen Condliffe Lagemann.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with Cornel West’s 1989 *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Dewey’s work has also been extended by a range of African American thinkers, including Paul C. Taylor, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., Melvin Rogers, and Denise James. These thinkers have considered Dewey’s writings in connection with those of Black intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, and Frantz Fanon,<sup>24</sup> filling in Dewey’s blind spots and calling out his failings in order to produce a reconstructed Deweyan perspective that more emphatically challenges racist and colonial attitudes and practices.<sup>25</sup> It is in this spirit of multivocal reconstruction that Dewey’s model of equitable, democratic, and intercultural creativity carries particular value for conceptualizing creativity-oriented library instruction.

This paper begins by briefly considering some limitations and tensions that are evident in the history and development of information literacy. It then considers some of Dewey’s reservations about the adequacy of literacy as a general metaphor for educational practice and then offers a provisional description of some key features of an information creativity framework that could serve as a companion approach to the prevailing model of information literacy. In proposing a move from a monopolar to a bipolar conception of library instruction, this paper does not imply that locating and assessing information and the production of originality are separable activities. Rather, it suggests that understanding each of these activities on its own terms can foster individual and social creative potentials that have typically been overlooked under the unipolar information literacy framework.

### **Information Literacy and the Basics**

Some of the limits of a monopolar approach to library instruction rooted in the notion of literacy can be understood by historicizing the development of the concept of information literacy. Information literacy received its initial institutional definition in the 1989 *Final Report* of the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy,<sup>26</sup> during a period when literacy itself—the ability to read and write—was the subject of intense national debate. This controversy over an ongoing American “literacy crisis” was driven by the rise, beginning in the late 1970s, of the conservative “back-to-basics” educational movement, which advocated greater use of standardized testing and a return to educational fundamentals in order to reverse what back-to-basics activists described as ominous and precipitous declines in student-achievement scores.<sup>27</sup>

In books such as Paul Copperman’s *The Literacy Hoax* (1979) and Yale Pines’s *Back to Basics* (1982), back-to-basics activists stressed the dangers of an ongoing literacy crisis, and presented themselves as members of an insurgent movement for standards-based educational reform that was sweeping the country.<sup>28</sup> Although this movement received support from some members of minority communities who saw in standardized testing an underutilized instrument for addressing educational inequalities,<sup>29</sup> it was championed primarily by white conservative Republicans who argued that creativity was the educational problem. They held that during the permissive 1960s, “teachers began to emphasize ‘creativity’ in the English classrooms” under the influence of Deweyan teaching methods, with the result that schools had “shortchanged instruction in the written language” and produced a generation of students without adequate reading and writing skills.<sup>30</sup> The increasing frequency with which the term *literacy* appeared in publications during the 1980s (see figure 1) illustrates the growth of this controversy,<sup>31</sup> which was deeply rooted in social anxieties about race, class, and gender.

The influence of the back-to-basics movement was evident in the initial ALA definition of information literacy, which cited the movement's crowning achievement: the *A Nation at Risk* report, issued in 1983 by Ronald Reagan's Department of Education.<sup>32</sup> Like other back-to-basics documents, *A Nation at Risk* painted a stark picture of educational decline. It argued that test scores and other indicators revealed that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."<sup>33</sup> The ALA report that defined information literacy faulted *A Nation at Risk* not for its panicked rhetoric but for its decision to "largely exclude libraries" from consideration as a potential resource for solving the illiteracy problem.<sup>34</sup> An early bibliography on information literacy made the link between information literacy and *A Nation at Risk* clear, observing in 1990 that while "[Paul] Zurkowski in 1974 first used the phrase 'information literacy,' its "current meaning and use came in response to national education reform reports, including *A Nation at Risk*."<sup>35</sup>

In keeping with this Reaganite back-to-basics influence, the ALA *Final Report on Information Literacy* described information literacy as an essential skill akin to the ability to read and write: "a survival skill in the information age" that was important to all citizens, who needed to "know how to find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision."<sup>36</sup> By stressing the essential nature of the skill it defined, the ALA *Final Report* answered a question that had been posed almost a decade earlier, at a national White House conference during the Carter administration: "Do libraries, the traditional storehouses of information and knowledge, have a place in this fast-moving information age?"<sup>37</sup> The 1989 ALA *Final Report* answered in the affirmative. It argued that the place of libraries in the dawning information age would be to rescue the nation from the threat of illiteracy that the *A Nation at Risk* report so vividly described.

As it turned out, however, the literacy crisis identified by *A Nation at Risk* and back-to-basics activists was generally overstated and based on problematic assumptions, as progressive educators argued at the time. Richard Ohmann pointed out in 1976 that the purported decline in literacy as measured by standardized tests in fact reflected "an increase in equality and social justice" because the declines cited by conservatives reflected the growing percentage of US students taking college entrance exams and the growing number of women, immigrants, and people of color attending colleges and universities.<sup>38</sup> More recent analysis has tended to confirm this interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

Although the promotion of reading literacy and information literacy is surely laudable, the language of the ALA *Final Report* illustrates the drawbacks of relying too heavily on the metaphor of literacy to describe library instruction. For example, the report resorted to deficit representations of information "illiterates," observed that the "lives of information illiterates are more likely than others to be narrowly focused on secondhand experiences of life through television," and asserted that "minority and at-risk students, illiterate adults, people with English as a second language, and economically disadvantaged people" were among those least likely to have learning experiences that promote information literacy.<sup>40</sup> The *Final Report* presented the acquisition of information literacy as a form of liberation, but it did so in a way that is tonally problematic, promising the rewards of the Reaganite free market to individual learners who achieve information literacy:

There is ample evidence that those who learn how to achieve access to the bath of knowledge that already envelops the world will be the future's aristocrats of

achievement, and that they will be far more numerous than any aristocracy in history.<sup>41</sup>

In its description of “information illiterates” whose lack of literacy constituted a crisis, and in its frankly aristocratic language, the 1989 ALA *Final Report* presented basic and information literacies as closely related and somewhat mystified solutions to the same purported cultural and educational crisis.

The soaring and liberatory rhetoric of the *Final Report* reflected what researchers in the New Literacy Studies movement identified as a “literacy myth,” in which “literacy stands alone” as a force that “invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and economic mobility.”<sup>42</sup> This myth is linked to a long history of regarding literacy as a marker of superiority or even, anthropologically, as “the crucial factor distinguishing ‘civilized’ from ‘primitive’ peoples,” an attitude that has often provided a basis for systemic racism, serving for example to justify the “literacy tests” used to disenfranchise African Americans during the Jim Crow era.<sup>43</sup>

As this paper’s next section notes, information literacy instruction has since 1989 sought explicitly to reject and dismantle the core assumptions of the literacy myth. However, this paper argues that the assumptions supported by this mythologized popular conception of literacy can be further contested by more explicitly making room for creativity in library instruction, and that proponents of the back-to-basics movement were right to recognize creativity-oriented learning as a challenge to reactionary projects of conservative restoration and Reaganite efforts to justify existing social inequities.

### **The Creative Reform of Information Literacy**

Information literacy as understood and practiced today certainly encourages creativity and is different in many ways from the version of information literacy unveiled in the 1989 ALA *Final Report*. Moreover, it should also be noted that the practice of information literacy has always varied widely, and that library instructors in the 1980s worked in partnership with creative compositionists such as Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie.<sup>44</sup> Long before the 2015 ACRL *Framework* placed new emphasis on creativity,<sup>45</sup> creative practices were often incorporated into library or information literacy instruction.

For example, the 2000 *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* cited the educational taxonomy of Benjamin Bloom, who defined creativity as closely tied to synthesis, which was for Bloom the educational objective concerned with “putting together parts so as to form a whole.”<sup>46</sup> The revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy introduced by Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl in 2000 and widely adopted by information literacy instructors identified creativity, rather than synthesis, as a higher-order learning objective.<sup>47</sup> Thus, through Bloom’s taxonomies and other inlets, such as LEAP/VALUE learning outcome rubrics created by the Association of College and Research Libraries and the influential 1996 Boyer Report on the 2000 ACRL *Standards*, the value of creativity has been persistently asserted and articulated in connection with information literacy theory and practice.<sup>48</sup>

However, despite the longstanding presence of creativity in information literacy, there has been an enduring tension at the heart of information literacy. As David Bawden noted in 2001, “the term literacy has always had (at least) a dual nature” that encompasses both narrow and broader understandings of the term.<sup>49</sup> Christine Pawley similarly described information

literacy as a “contradictory coupling,” observing that “policies to promote ‘literacy’ have systematically worked to render some groups of people—indeed, the majority—less capable of active information use and knowledge construction than an educated elite.” Pawley argued that relying on the metaphor of literacy to describe library instruction could result in “Procrustean consequences,” by framing students as information consumers.<sup>50</sup> In 2006, James Elmborg cited Pawley’s Procrustean misgivings and turned to the writings of Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and especially Paulo Freire, as he and others worked to develop a model of critical information literacy that would avoid the reductive psychic and social consequences of which Pawley warned.<sup>51</sup>

The insights of Paulo Freire have played a crucial role in shaping critical information literacy pedagogy, and have been widely influential.<sup>52</sup> Though he was aware of the reductive notion of literacy championed by the back-to-basics movement,<sup>53</sup> Freire developed a more expansive and creative understanding of literacy, which was shaped by his experience teaching Brazilian agricultural workers to read (and thereby enabling them to vote, because until 1985 Brazil imposed a literacy requirement on voters). Whereas for the back-to-basics movement the term *literacy* had signified a need for educators to focus on testable basic skills, in Freire’s “problem-posing education” the term referred to a process of social solidarity and creativity with far-reaching transformational aims. Freire’s writings often articulated these aims in terms of a social awakening (*conscientização*) tied to Marxism and Christian existentialism and associated with a notion of social creativity.<sup>54</sup> For example, Freire argued that authentic education is that which “bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflections and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” and who work toward “the transformation of the world in behalf of the increasing liberation of humankind.”<sup>55</sup> This perspective is broadly consistent with Dewey’s conception of creative democracy.<sup>56</sup> Although there are important distinctions between the perspectives of Dewey and Freire, it is important to recognize the significant kinship between the ideas of these progressive educationalists.<sup>57</sup>

While Freire’s conception of creativity helped to define critical information literacy, Dewey’s conceptions of inquiry and creativity found their way into the 2015 *Framework for Information Literacy* with the help of Carol Kuhlthau, whose 2013 “Rethinking the 2000 ACRL Standards” helped to shape the *Framework*’s more creative and adaptable conception of information literacy.<sup>58</sup> In calling for this change, Kuhlthau stressed the importance of “inquiry,” and especially “guided inquiry,” to the information-seeking process:

Guided inquiry opens the inquiry process at Initiation, immerses students in background knowledge at Selection, guides in exploring interesting ideas at Exploration... and evaluates at the close.... By embedding a holistic approach within the inquiry process, information literacy develops as students’ understanding of content deepens.<sup>59</sup>

As a result of the advocacy of Kuhlthau and others, the 2015 *Framework* incorporated as one of its six frames the notion of “Research as Inquiry,” which defined research as a process of posing “increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry.”<sup>60</sup> In *Guided Inquiry* (2015), Kuhlthau cites Dewey as the foundational, though not the exclusive, source for her understanding of this term:

The underlying assumption of this book is that learning is a process of construction based on the educational theory of John Dewey... his most comprehensive work, *Democracy and Education*, first published in 1915, provides the foundation for inquiry learning.<sup>61</sup>

The incorporation of Dewey's concept of inquiry learning into the ACRL *Framework* points the way to an information creativity approach to library instruction that would give creative inquiry freer scope to operate independently from notions of literacy that Dewey regarded as fundamentally limiting. Such notions have persisted as unresolved tensions in the practice of information literacy, despite significant reforms.<sup>62</sup>

### **John Dewey and the Limits of the Literacy Metaphor**

Prolific and highly influential over a long period, Dewey continues to be viewed as arguably "the most prominent American intellectual for the first half of the twentieth century," and his ideas have retained, or regained, a wide currency among educators and academics in the twenty-first.<sup>63</sup> The incorporation of Dewey's notion of inquiry into the 2015 ACRL *Framework* represented an important shift toward a more flexible and creative understanding of information literacy.

Nevertheless, Dewey's presence in the *Framework* was in some ways incongruous, because Dewey repeatedly cautioned against relying too heavily on literacy as a metaphor for conceptualizing education more generally. Although he was a strong proponent of universal childhood instruction in reading and writing and a critic of economic and racial inequalities in access to literacy, Dewey had significant misgivings about overemphasizing literacy in discussion of education, expressing concerns that anticipate the "Procrustean consequences" described by Christine Pawley in 2003.<sup>64</sup> Writing of literacy in *Democracy and Education*, for example, Dewey observed that even though "in an advanced culture much which has to be learned is stored in symbols," an overemphasis on mere "technical information expressed in symbols" had resulted in an impoverished popular understanding of education that emphasized literacy at the expense of other modes of learning. He wrote:

Thus we reach the ordinary notion of education: the notion which ignores social necessity and its identity with all human association that affects conscious life, and which identifies it with imparting information about remote matters and the conveying of learning through verbal signs: the acquisition of literacy.<sup>65</sup>

Dewey regarded literacy as a poor metaphor for education because it failed to convey the important roles of learner-driven inquiry, experiential richness, and reciprocal communication in supporting authentic learning and social progress in a pluralistic society.<sup>66</sup>

Dewey's ambivalence regarding the notion of literacy was rooted in his perspective as a progressive educator who emphasized experiential learning and the importance of rich and varied communication with others, as opposed to learning by rote. Dewey described his educational philosophy in *Experience and Education*:

If one attempts to formulate the philosophy of education implicit in the practices of the newer education, we may, I think, discover certain common principles



amid the variety of progressive schools now existing. To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity... to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world.<sup>67</sup>

In this passage, Dewey's reservations about the use of literacy education as a model for broader educational practice come to light in his advocacy of the "expression and cultivation of individuality" and also in his preference for education that explores "the opportunities of present life" over education offered as "preparation for a more or less remote future." Dewey's belief that "the only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life" led him to criticize educational philosophies that regarded creativity and inquiry as coming after a period of mechanical literacy instruction (which might be described as learning "the basics"), during which "pupils are expected to use their eyes to note the form of words, irrespective of their meaning, in order to reproduce them in spelling or reading."<sup>68</sup> For Dewey, the practice of deferring creativity until after students had acquired literacy was a serious philosophical and educational mistake.

Dewey's critique of educational approaches that focus on acquiring literacy was linked to his belief that learners (whether beginners or experts) have a need to construct a reflective "experience" that integrates and renders meaningful the incessant sequence of fragmentary impressions encountered by individuals in the modern age. On the matter of literacy and experience, Dewey wrote:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses his desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses his ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?<sup>69</sup>

Dewey was always skeptical of the attitude that learners need to acquire basic skills before developing the ability to pose meaningful questions and discuss them with others.<sup>70</sup> "We always live at the time we live," Dewey wrote in *Experience and Education*, warning of educational theories in which "the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future."<sup>71</sup>

Dewey's rejection of this sacrifice puts his progressive understanding of education and inquiry at odds with literacy models of education such as the ACRL *Framework*, which stress the importance of building fundamental skills needed for later achievement. In particular, Dewey's educational philosophy cuts against the *Framework's* incorporation of the "threshold concepts" developed by Erik Meyer and Ray Land. The assumptions underlying the notion of threshold concepts are closely related to the notion of literacy instruction, because they include the idea that key creative possibilities are initially hidden beyond educational "thresholds" and can be explored only after "learning the language of the discipline," that is, only after understanding "troublesome" threshold concepts.<sup>72</sup> Dewey rejected the idea that learners should defer engaging in inquiry or creativity until after they have mastered the basics of literacy or other forms of gateway knowledge.

Dewey's reluctance to view education as literacy acquisition was also tied to his understanding of communication as a complex and reciprocal interpersonal and intercultural exchange that extends far beyond acquiring the ability to decipher written signs. Dewey famously expounded this idea in his 1934 *Art as Experience*, in which he argued that creativity is communicative and that creative thinking is widespread, rooted in shared human capacities, and not limited to those who have undergone lengthy training of the kind associated with formal education. Just as Dewey viewed scientific reasoning as an extension of ordinary human problem-solving, he understood works of art as acts of communication that deepen experience and share it among people and cultures. He wrote:

At their best they [works of art] bring about an organic blending of attitudes characteristic of the experiences of our own age with that of remote peoples. For the new features are not mere decorative additions, but enter into the *structure* of works of art and thus occasion a wider and fuller experience. Their enduring effect upon those who perceive and enjoy will be an expansion of *their* sympathies, imagination, and sense.<sup>73</sup>

Dewey characterized such experiential communication as a vexed issue, indeed "one of the most serious problems of philosophy"; nevertheless, he maintained that "art is a more universal mode of language than the speech that exists in a multitude of unintelligible forms."<sup>74</sup> For Dewey, progress toward a freer and more equitable social order depended on developing modes of communication that participate in the creation of beauty—and thus extend beyond the recognition of symbolic meanings. As Paul C. Taylor writes, for Dewey, "ethical life is bound up with an essentially artistic or poetic revisioning of the landscape of agentive possibility, and human personalities are always works in progress, fashioned at the intersection of community resources, social conditions, and ethical agency."<sup>75</sup> This is one reason Dewey thought the popular meanings of the term *literacy* did not adequately describe what students must learn as they acquire the ability to read and write while also encountering and creating new horizons of meaning and aesthetic possibility in connection with others.

### **Toward an Account of Information Creativity Practices**

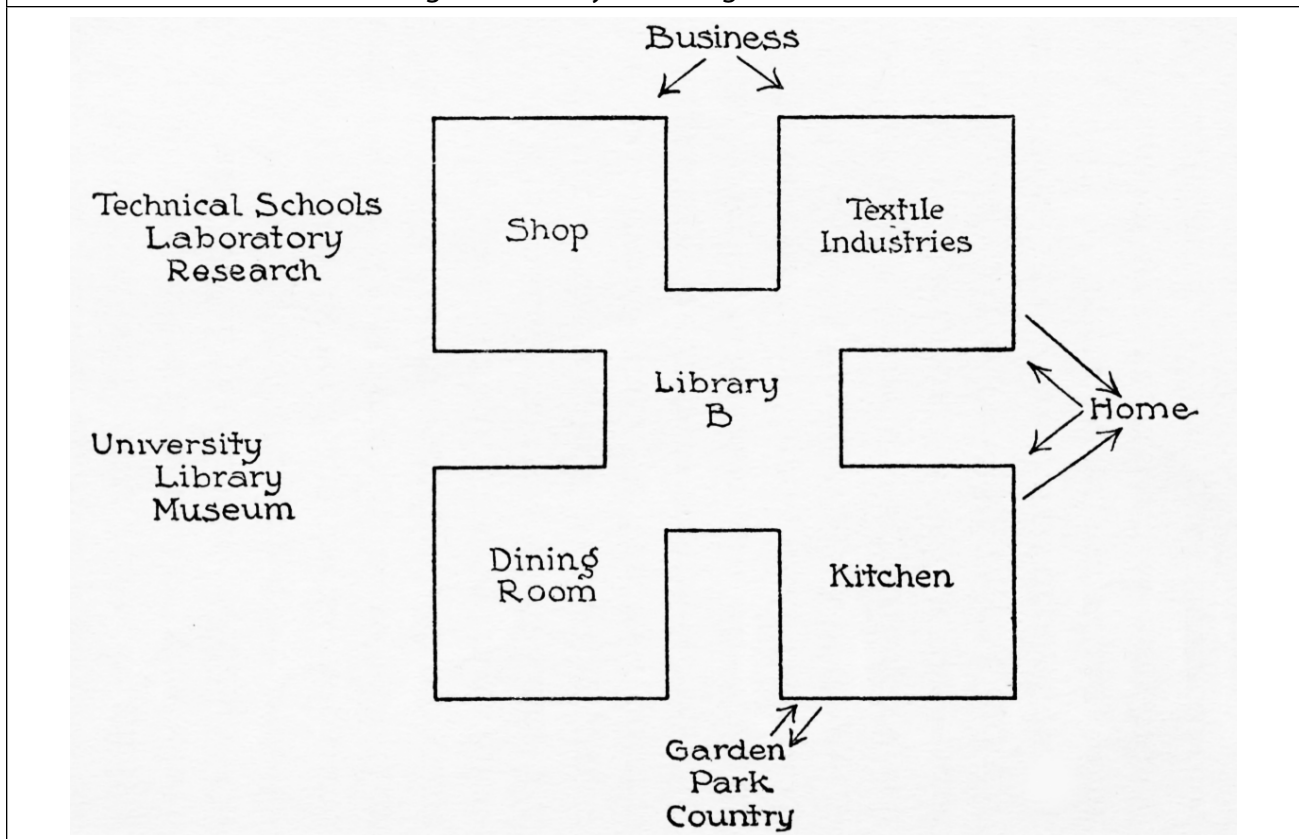
Dewey's belief that social institutions such as libraries and schools should be constituted "so as to make possible a better future for humanity" is a promising basis for conceptualizing library instruction as a service linked to social creativity.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, the rootedness of his educational ideas in developmental psychology connects his work to the creativity of individual learners. A key link between Dewey's educational writings on creativity and contemporary creativity research is his strong belief, which has been well corroborated by educational research, in the importance of intrinsic motivation in producing student creativity.<sup>77</sup>

Although Dewey's writings on creativity included a variety of interesting claims that could be considered for incorporation into an information creativity framework,<sup>78</sup> the present study draws mainly on Dewey's theory of intrinsic motivation, according to which learners should explore information in ways that open up new meanings and enrich their individual and social experience. This sense of "exploration" might draw on the way this term is used by Alison Gopnik and Christopher Lucas, as previously mentioned, as well as the reader-response literary criticism of Louise Rosenblatt, which relied on Dewey's conception of art to

describe interpretive “exploration” in which “both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning.”<sup>79</sup> An information creativity framework would apply these principles to creativity-focused library instruction and services.

Dewey’s characterizations of inquiry, creativity, and experiential learning were rooted in both developmental psychology and his experiences as an educator and designer of curricula and schools. A drawing published in *The School and Society* (1900) illustrates Dewey’s conception of experiential education, in which information resources would be centered in a school in which “the child shall have in his own personal and vital experience a varied background of contact and acquaintance with realities, social and physical,”<sup>80</sup> and in which the library would provide a central space for reflection and inquiry, a place where the day’s lessons and undertakings could be investigated and connected to emergent questions.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Conceptual Floor Plan, from *The School and Society***  
 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902), 95



Dewey explained that the diagram presented in Figure 2 represented his educational values rather than a floor plan for a particular space:

The object is to show what the school must become to get out of its isolation and secure the organic connection with social life of which we have been speaking. It is not our architect’s plan for the school building we hope to have, but it is a diagrammatic representation of the idea which we want embodied in the school building. On the lower side you see the dining-room and the kitchen, at the top the

wood and metal shops and the textile room for sewing and weaving. The center represents the manner in which all come together in the library; that is to say, in a collection of the intellectual resources of all kinds that throw light upon the practical work, that give it meaning and liberal value. If the four corners represent practice, the interior represents the theory of the practical activities.<sup>81</sup>

By situating learning activities amid workshops, kitchens, and textiles (laboratories and studios for art and music appear in Dewey's plan for the second floor), Dewey envisioned libraries as points of connection between experiential learning and information that would allow experiences to be more meaningfully understood. Discussing the space devoted to textiles, indicated in the above plan, he writes:

The basal fact in that room is that it is a workshop, doing actual things in sewing, spinning, and weaving. The children come into immediate contact with the materials, with various fabrics of silk, cotton, linen, and wool. Information at once appears in connection with these materials; their origin, history, their adaptation to particular uses, and the machines of various kinds by which the raw materials are utilized.<sup>82</sup>

Dewey conceptualized the library as a space surrounded by makerspaces, in a school extending outward into the social world—a vision that played an important role in the incorporation of libraries into American elementary schools in the early twentieth century.<sup>83</sup>

Dewey returned to the library-as-metaphor in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), his treatment of democracy and public opinion. In this foundational text of media studies, Dewey observed that many of his contemporaries (notably Walter Lippman, whose opinions were the chief target of Dewey's treatise) believed the expanding availability of information provided little hope for the cause of democratic progress. Dewey acknowledged the validity of Lippman's concern that because "the mass of the reading public is not interested in learning and assimilating the results of accurate investigation," such results "remain secluded in library alcoves, and are studied and understood only by a few intellectuals."<sup>84</sup> To respond to this skepticism about the interest of the *demos* in accurate information, Dewey returned to *The School and Society's* vision of a vibrant school library located at the center of a process of creative inquiry that aims to facilitate democratic social progress.

Replying to Lippman and other critics, Dewey observed that while the "mere existence and accessibility" of accurate information "would have some regulative effect," this information would also offer an "irresistible invitation" to those motivated to fashion it into compelling narratives, that is, to storytellers—those who translate facts and data into the art of human experience. Dewey writes:

Men's conscious life of opinion and judgement often proceeds on a superficial and trivial plane. But their lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. . . . Poetry, the drama, the novel are proofs that the problem of presentation is not insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling of it by emotion, perception, and appreciation.<sup>85</sup>

In Dewey's account, for information to serve the ends of democracy, "a subtle, delicate, vivid, and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it," precisely because "democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communication."<sup>86</sup> Writing at the close of World War II, Dewey saw habitual inattention as both a threat to democracy and a challenge to creativity; he turned to the idea of the library to imagine a response to this challenge.<sup>87</sup>

Whether as conceptual metaphors or elements of governmental recommendations, Dewey viewed libraries as crucial to learning and democratic social progress.<sup>88</sup> His perspective suggests the value of developing a framework for information creativity. Such a framework would embrace both the creative nature of social democracy (as emphasized by Freire, for example) and the forms of creative exploration and production associated with early childhood development and divergent or experimental thinking—and it would value these forms of creativity not as secondary to the practices of locating, evaluating, and using information but as primary activities in themselves.

Adopting the term *information creativity* for such practices, a definition such as the following might be proposed:

*Information creativity involves the experience of encountering, employing, transforming, or making informational objects for artistic, exploratory, or communicative purposes when creative originality or production is of primary concern.*<sup>89</sup>

Defined in relation to the ACRL *Framework*, information creativity is a companion concept that provides a necessary complement to forms of instruction grounded in literacy and threshold approaches to education. An information creativity approach would provide a fuller and freer scope for the operations of Deweyan "inquiry" by emphasizing the relation of inquiry to "experience," Dewey's other key term. These practices can be further characterized by identifying some of the activities and priorities information creativity could involve. For example, information creativity practices might:

- Facilitate the pursuit of nonresearch projects with creative orientations, such as artistic or reflective projects
- Deal with "problem-finding" when a topic or question has not yet been identified
- Facilitate experiential or surprising encounters with things, such as rare print materials, or make use of serendipitous methods
- Emphasize immediacy and minimize threshold limitations (such as in zine making, 3D printing, and video- and audio-editing workshops)
- Practice the innovative *presentation* of information (such as data visualization and storytelling), in which information is located and transformed for the sake of presentation or analysis
- Emphasize remediation and form (such as transforming a written argument into a video essay)
- Emphasize the *poesis* of the maker

Information creativity as sketched above would support library instruction that has either a more expressive focus (for example, on personal growth and experiential reflection) or a more technical focus (for example, on skills workshops teaching students how to use a particular creative tool) than is typical of information literacy instruction. Table 1 offers a preliminary typology that distinguishes the principles of information literacy from those of information creativity.

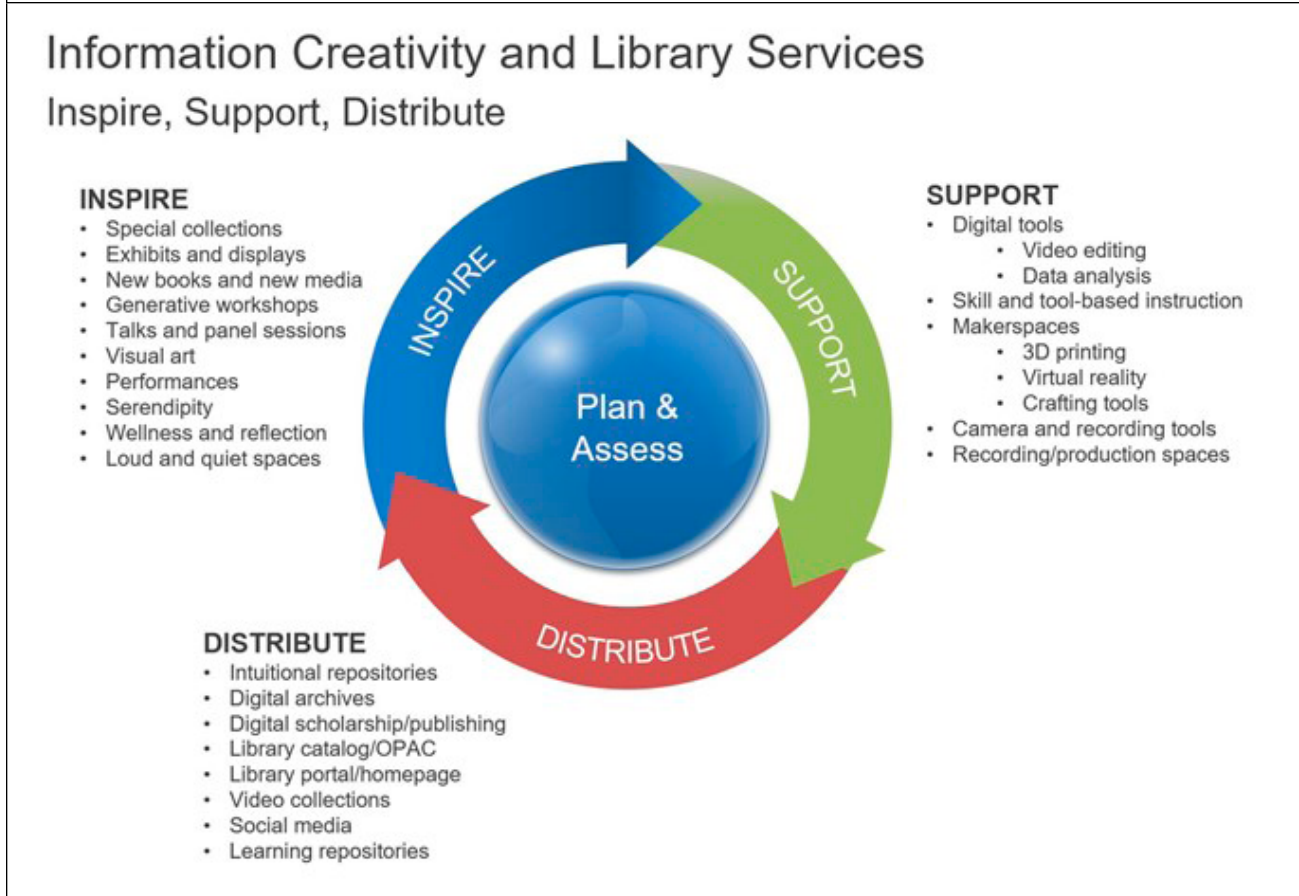
<b>Information Literacy</b>	<b>Information Creativity</b>
<b>Dispositions/Values</b>	<b>Dispositions/Values</b>
Authority as constructed and contextual	"What if?" experiment as resistance
Literacy; understanding symbols	Experience; sensation
Thresholds and understandings	Immediacy and skills
Information as data/content	Information as things/form; visualization
Scholarship as conversation	Spontaneity and expression
Arguments	Stories
Persuading an audience	Personal growth
Information has value	Reappropriation
Searching as strategic exploration	Serendipity through observation
Information creation as process	Information exploration
<b>Knowledge Practices</b>	<b>Knowledge Practices</b>
Locating information	(Re)presenting information
Identifying authority	Deauthorizing; speculative doubt
Breaking complex questions into simple ones	Hypothesizing and envisioning new connections
Demonstrating intellectual humility	Considering one's own experience and perspective
Evaluating authority	Making; <i>poesis</i>

It should be noted that the table's conceptual distinctions between literacy and creativity frameworks for library instruction are differences in emphasis rather than contradictions, such that each approach supports and enhances the other.

This typology compares the practices and values that might be emphasized in information literacy and information creativity learning sessions. However, this mirrored opposition obscures an important distinction between information literacy and creativity: like literacy, creativity is a skill one may learn or a disposition one may cultivate, but it is also an *activity* of creative production, one that invites libraries to adopt a wider and more systematic view of their efforts to foster, and perhaps measure, creative productivity.<sup>90</sup> Such an approach would not only inform the design and assessment of activities and workshops in which creativity is encouraged, but would also assist librarians across departments in coordinating services that are less recognizably linked to information literacy instruction. It may be useful to think of these activities as elements of an inspire–support–distribute model or cycle of information creativity, as illustrated in Figure 3.

In this model, activities such as creative workshops, exhibits, performances, and many archival and special collections instruction sessions (for example, those incorporating what has been called a *wunderkammer* element) could be classed as services that serve to inspire creative activity.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, library efforts to provide tools, space, instruction, and time for creating digital and material objects—whether such efforts take the form of makerspaces, digital tools, loaned equipment, or support for data analytics or video production—could be categorized as services that facilitate creativity. When libraries publish or showcase creative work (for example, in institutional repositories or via open-publishing initiatives) and cultivate conversations about the work produced by members of their communities, they are distribut-

**FIGURE 3**  
**The Inspire–Support–Distribute Cycle**



ing creative outputs back into the community, serving to foster new creative inspiration in a virtuous cycle.

Although the oppositions presented in Table 1 and the cycle depicted in Figure 2 are only schematic representations (like Dewey’s conceptual diagram of a library in a school), they nevertheless suggest some possibilities for coordinating library services and programs that are too often viewed as piecemeal and disparate. A framework for information creativity could remind community stakeholders of the value of libraries as engines of creativity<sup>92</sup> and could help libraries develop approaches to supporting creativity as a goal in its own right.

## Conclusion

Although the ACRL *Framework* provides significantly greater scope for creativity than the statements that preceded it, its central metaphor for information literacy emphasizes the acquisition of threshold skills as preparation for future creativity. This deferral of creative activity suggests the need for information creativity educational practices that focus on immediacy, reflective experience, and personal growth, as well as workshops focused on tools that can be used immediately. The widespread acknowledgement of the importance of information literacy among college and university instructors and administrators is an achievement to be celebrated and strengthened, but it is worth asking whether an overly unipolar insistence that “information literacy is *the* central and underlying priority of all library activities” has proven to be a limiting approach.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, if the term *literacy* has become sufficiently broad to describe all possible



forms of library instruction, one might wonder whether the term has become so broad that it has lost its usefulness in the absence of a contrasting instructional principle.

In the United States, the back-to-basics movement achieved its crowning success in 2001 with the passage into law of the No Child Left Behind Act, which emphasized phonics-based literacy instruction and introduced more standardized testing into public schools. In subsequent years, however, US public schools gradually adopted a more balanced approach to literacy instruction, in which the teaching of phonics occurred alongside activities designed to promote creative work and intrinsic motivation—a balancing that recalls Dewey's belief that traditional and progressive models of education are not always mutually exclusive.<sup>94</sup> Libraries are well positioned to develop practices for inspiring, supporting, and distributing creative production in the context of a more bipolar, or balanced, approach to library instruction and services—and to assess and present these practices in ways that demonstrate the value of libraries in supporting the individual and social creativity of students, faculty, and members of the larger community.<sup>95</sup>

In outlining the potential usefulness of a framework for information creativity, this paper has pointed out some limitations, historical and conceptual, of literacy and threshold-based approaches. Of course, it should be emphasized that despite these limitations, the need for libraries to provide and expand information literacy instruction has never been more urgent. However, just as libraries developed information literacy as a response to the real and imagined needs of the 1980s, the present moment calls for an approach that responds to the growing interest in creativity evident across a range of instructional, civic, and commercial contexts, and the need to respond wisely and justly to the growing challenges that now confront social and individual creativity.

This paper takes up the work of John Dewey as a useful and widely known orienting perspective rather than as a limit, bearing in mind the important question posed by Paul C. Taylor, of “whether and how much to appeal to the mighty dead in contexts that don't reward the invocation.”<sup>96</sup> When contextually appropriate, and when viewed in connection with its many interlocutors, Dewey's educational philosophy offers a useful frame of reference for conceptualizing library approaches to information creativity. As employers and universities continue to emphasize creativity's value as a practice and skill, libraries should consider the potential value of developing approaches for supporting the creativity of their patrons and for articulating a vision of libraries as sites of expansive forms of experiential reflection and creativity—capacities that can strengthen democratic communicative norms and underwrite both progressive social justice and individual human flourishing.<sup>97</sup>

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## Notes

1. Creativity became a topic of active discussion in the 1950s following a presidential address by Joy Paul Guilford to the American Psychological Association, later published as Joy Paul Guilford, “Creativity,” *American Psychologist* 5 (1950): 444–54. See also Harold Anderson, ed., *Creativity and Its Cultivation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).

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593–607. Freire himself cited Dewey only once in his published works. In a footnote to his essay “Education as the Practice of Freedom,” Freire remarked wryly that “on the subject of originality, I have always agreed with Dewey” while refuting accusations that he “plagiarized European or North-American educators.” Paulo Freire, “Education as the Practice of Freedom,” in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 57. Fallace, “John Dewey and the New Left,” 8, appears to overlook this reference by Freire. Freire’s reluctance to elucidate the relationship between his writings and Dewey’s has left the nature of this relationship open to speculation.

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60. ACLR, *Framework for Information Literacy*. Dewey’s most celebrated definition of inquiry appeared in his 1938 *Logic*, where it was described in terms of a problem or “indeterminate situation” that is transformed into a “unified whole.” John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953, Volume 1, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 108. Note, however, that this dialectical account of inquiry is not the only one Dewey provided; see James Scott Johnston, *Inquiry and Education*:

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62. See Alison Hicks and Annemaree Lloyd, “Deconstructing Information Literacy Discourse: Peeling Back the Layers in Higher Education,” *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, October 26, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000620966027>.

63. David Hildebrand, “John Dewey,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, November 1, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/dewey/>.

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66. See Dewey’s observations on literacy and the rise of fascism in Germany in John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 13, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 91–94.

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68. John Dewey, “Moral Principles in Education,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 4: 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 272. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 149.

69. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 29.

70. On the three Rs and literacy, see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 200.

71. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 51.

72. David Perkins, “Constructivism and Troublesome Knowledge,” in *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge*, ed. Jan Meyer and Ray Land (New York: Routledge, 2006). On the limits of threshold-concept theory, see also Elizabeth Wardle et al., “Recognizing the Limits of Threshold Concept Theory,” in *(Re)Considering What We Know: Learning Thresholds in Writing, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy*, ed. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2020), 15–35.

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82. Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, 53.

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