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Applying the Framework as a reflective tool

A teacher learner perspective

If you teach information literacy (IL) according to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,[1] then you have been introduced to terms like *knowledge practices, dispositions,* and *troublesome knowledge.* You may have also read several articles debating the Framework (for a quick overview, read Lane Wilkinson's "The Problem with Threshold Concepts").[2] Regardless of where teaching librarians stand on the Framework, the discourse surrounding it doesn't adequately address its potential as a reflective tool (as opposed to addressing student learning alone). This is ironic when considering that, at its core, the Framework's foundation is based in "critical self-reflection, as crucial to becoming more self-directed in [a] rapidly changing ecosystem."[3]

However, I believe that critical reflection is a two-way street. While we may be experts in our domain (IL), when faced with unfamiliar disciplines, it is not surprising if we displayed novice tendencies in these contexts, just like our students might. Neuroscience and writing researchers alike noted that experts "behaved like novices" when presented with tasks unfamiliar to their knowledge domain.[4] Peggy A. Ertmer and Timothy J. Newby present a model where expert learning is controlled through ongoing reflective thinking.[5] Studies by Paula M. Short and James S. Rinehart confirm this and point out that proficiency is also impacted by the complexity of reflection.[6]

Thus, librarians who find themselves novices (unfamiliar with a discipline) can grow their proficiency through deliberate reflective activities. If we are to develop as teaching librarians, we need to find ways to reflect on our knowledge practices, dispositions, and troublesome knowledge. According to Sheila Corrall, critical reflection can be advanced using three strategies: prioritizing reflective practices, producing contextually based information, and studying various reflective methods.[7]

This essay illustrates how I adopted the Framework's concepts as a stepping stone to creating a reflective practice that aided me in crossing my own threshold concepts and creating a reflective learning experience for my students.

Background

I have been a teaching librarian in the humanities and social sciences since 1998. Most of my teaching occurred within the context of first-year experience, where students are typically expected to produce a research paper. Before the ACRL Framework was introduced in 2015, I used the prescriptive Information Literacy Competency Standards[8] as a teaching guideline. I spent much of my lesson planning time designing activities that were perfectly inte-

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grated and met the requirements of the courses' research assignment. For the most part, I measured my teaching success quantitatively: how many students achieved the "correct answer" (chose the correct database, found the needed number of sources, used prescribed evaluation criteria to distinguish quality, etc.). Of course, when students who "got it" asked the same questions again (albeit for a different or related topic), I asked, "Did I provide enough examples?" when I should have asked "Did I explain the relationship between the examples I gave?"

It was after I struggled with applying the Framework that I truly understood what Thomas Farrell meant when he described himself as a *teacher learner* whose teaching is a form of professional development that can only be achieved through reflection.[9] The Framework was a game changer, and I needed to explore how it could help me reflect on my knowledge practices, dispositions, and troublesome knowledge in ways that inform my teaching and benefit my students. With this realization, I set out to investigate its applicability as a reflective tool from a teacher learner librarian's perspective.

Getting there from here: A reflective exercise

There are three fundamental ideas that I needed to accept before I could map the Framework as a reflective tool:

• information literacy is a discipline for which there exists disciplinary indicators, as suggested by Bill Johnston and Sheila Webber;[10]

• as a practitioner in this discipline, I am subject to experiencing threshold concepts that will require me to seek "enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing" in order to master my domain;[11] and

• as a teacher learner, I am no longer the source of, but rather a partner in, the learning process.

With this in mind, I looked at each frame with the lens of a teacher learner. My approach was simple. First, I studied the list of knowledge practices and dispositions suggested in the Framework, then I turned each statement into a process question, asking what it would take

to accomplish each objective in the present information ecosystem. For example, in relation to knowledge practices for the frame "Authority is Constructed and Contextual," I asked, "How would I help students define different types of authority in today's information ecosystem, and what are some possible obstacles to achieving this task?" In terms of dispositions, I might reflect on necessary shifts in how I approach discussions on authority with them.

To help me document my reflective activity, I used a process map. Process maps are effective in identifying the "how and why," illustrating context and depth, and prescribing language to concepts.[12] I should also state here that reviewing Graham Gibbs' reflective learning cycle[13] helped me ensure that I addressed its seven stages: description of what happened, feelings and reaction, evaluation of the experience, analysis, general conclusions, specific conclusions, and personal action plans. These stages allow me to organize my reflections. For instance, returning to the Authority example I provided, my reflective stages are detailed as follows:

• **Description of what happened.** Defining authority where basic indicators, such as credentials or type of publications, are insufficient or unclear can be challenging, particularly when considering the role of media and technology. Moreover, debated subjects are often multidisciplinary, complicating the task of assigning authority appropriately. For example, a policy expert's testimony on immigration policy may not be an effective use of authority when addressing rhetorical strategies employed in an immigration bill. What is the process through which a teacher navigates these complexities, and how can it be illustrated to learners?

• **Feelings and reactions.** Teaching about authority in unfamiliar disciplines is a frustrating experience. It is time consuming and requires a great deal of research just to become familiar with one aspect of the subject, much less the entire scope of a discipline. This feeling alone can impact a teacher's own view of competence.

• **Evaluation of the experience.** On the one hand, teaching students how to define authority in their context can be an overwhelming

task if a teacher is not familiar with the students' chosen topics. On the other hand, examining authority from an interdisciplinary perspective can be extremely valuable in making the connections and discovering ways of defining authority that may not be encountered in a singular approach to authority.

- **Analysis.** This situation is characteristic of troublesome knowledge. It brings to mind a time when I needed to research migraine treatments and the experience of dealing with the complexity of sources and information encountered in my research. In that scenario, I was effectively a novice learning to assess expert opinion. It took a great deal of time and research to identify answers from "authoritative sources." Teaching and learning about authority in this context requires a change of traditional perceptions of authority. It also demands a shift in our basic assumption that teachers need to be disciplinary experts, or at least a fresh look at where expertise and novice experience are best suited in the teaching process. Charles Scalfani's essay "Why Experts Make Bad Teachers" suggests that knowing a subject is not the same as being an expert, and that moving from novice to expert is a complex mix of trial and error over time.[14]

- **General conclusion.** Overall, teaching about authority from an interdisciplinary perspective makes more sense. Further, teaching authority should not be seen as an absolute, but rather as a continuous negotiation.

- **Specific conclusion.** From a teaching librarian perspective, defining authority should not start with a discussion of specific criteria, as I tended to do. Instead, students should be given the opportunity to check their understanding of authority in general and to contrast it with authority as it is defined in the discipline or disciplines within which they operate.

- **Personal action plans.** When discussing authority in my classes, I will start with a prompt and give students time to reflect on how authority is characterized in the sample they read without leading them to answers. My teaching role in this scenario will resemble a moderator. Students will actively work on developing expertise in their topic as I guide them to think about authority more broadly. To facilitate this, students might be asked to participate in process mapping by demonstrating the process by which they determine the authority of resources. This exercise could be accomplished in multiple formats, such as drawing or role playing, or one of the many other options discussed in literature about process mapping.

Reflections on this exercise

From a teacher learner perspective, this exercise uncovered opportunities to think about knowledge practices and dispositions in a new way. I came to appreciate the time factor in learning and was able to identify potential improvements that can extend student learning. For instance, in prior years, students were introduced to three print articles and were asked to rank them based on authority. Students identified the traditional measures for authority, but few went beyond looking at the structure of a print journal (abstract, author, references) as a way to determine the authority of the source. This all changed once I replaced the print sources with short videos. The students in this version of the activity lacked the obvious clues and had to rely on their own understanding of authority. They became emotionally invested and their lively discussions reflected this.

Shifts in their knowledge practices and dispositions were better observed by the class instructor and myself: students who used traditional criteria (the print journal example) tended to provide the minimum source requirements for their assignments, whereas students who were given the opportunity to construct their own ideas of authority provided a wider range of sources and were prepared to defend their selections.

Conclusion

If teaching librarians focus on being seen as experts in their students' eyes, they are effectively impeding the learning process. Like

Scalfani, I believe that what makes a teacher "a true expert is understanding,"[15] and I would add that to understand you must reflect.

The Framework offers students a great model for reflection on their learning, but how are we to teach it without experiencing it through their eyes? This was my main motivation for using the Framework as a reflective exercise. I needed to think about knowledge practices and dispositions from a nonexpert perspective. Each time I explore intended practices or dispositions in a frame, I contemplate how I would approach them as a novice or in a discipline that is unfamiliar to me. I go through a similar exercise to the one I've described here, hoping to identify potential learning obstacles or, better yet, unexplored alternatives.

There are probably other ways to apply the Framework reflectively, and I welcome the opportunity for future exploration with my fellow teacher learner librarians. Finally, I understand that this essay does not touch on assessment issues, and I do believe that reflection has a big role to play there as well but, unfortunately, that is a topic is for another essay.

Notes

1. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," ACRL, February 9, 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

2. Lane Wilkinson, "The Problem with Threshold Concepts," Sense and Reference (blog), June 6, 2014, https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/2014/06/19/the-problem-with-threshold-concepts/

3. Ibid., "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."

4. Sheila Corrall, "Crossing the Threshold: Reflective Practice in Information Literacy Development," *Journal of Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (June 2017): 43, https://doi.org/10.11645/11.1.2241.

5. David L. Sheinberg and Michael J. Tarr, "Object of Expertise," in *Perceptual Expertise: Bridging Brain and Behavior,* ed. Isabel Gauthier, Michael Tarr, and Daniel Bub, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2009), 49; Rebecca M. Howard, "Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty," *College English* 57, no.7 (1995): 788-806, www.jstor.org/stable/378403.

6. Peggy A. Ertmer and Timothy J. Newby, "The Expert Learner: Strategic, Self-Regulated, and Reflective," *Instructional Science* 24, no. 1 (January 1996): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00156001.

7. Paula M. Short and James S. Rinehart, "Reflection as a Means of Developing Expertise," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (November 1993): 501–21, https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X93029004006.

8. "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," ACRL, January 2000, https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/7668.

9. Alvin Pang, "Reflective Teaching and Practice: Interview with Thomas Farrell," *RELC Journal* 48, no. 2 (August 8, 2017): 174–79, https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688217707632.

10. Bill Johnston and Sheila Webber, "As We May Think: Information Literacy as a Discipline for the Information Age," *Research Strategies* 20, no. 3 (January 1, 2005): 108–21, https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RESSTR.2006.06.005.

11. Ibid., "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."

12. Leah Emery, Suzie Kitchin, and Helen Lawrence, "Process Drawing: A Tool to Promote Reflective Practice in Information Literacy," (PowerPoint presentation, Librarians Information Literacy Conference, Liverpool, UK, April 4, 2018), https://www.slideshare.net/infolit_group/process-drawing-a-tool-to-promote-reflective-practice-in-information-literacy-emary-kitchen-lawrence.

13. Graham Gibbs, "Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods," Oxford: Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic (1988), as cited in Sheila Corrall, "Crossing the Threshold: Reflective Practice in Information Literacy Development," 30.

14. Charles Scalfani, "Why Experts Make Bad Teachers," Medium (blog), July 21, 2016, https://medium.com/@cscalfani/why-experts-make-bad-teachers-ccaed2df029b.

15. Scalfani, "Why Experts Make Bad Teachers." ✸