

Emily Drabinski

# Turning inward

## Reading the Framework through the six frames

*Ed. note:* Welcome to “Perspectives on the Framework,” a new column for *C&RL News*. This bimonthly column will provide a forum for librarians to share implementations, best practices, critiques, explorations, and other perspectives developed from and in conversation with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. The plan for the column is twofold: to discuss practical tools and takeaways in addition to the theoretical content influencing our praxis. Each column will focus on different topics of interest to academic librarians whose responsibilities are in instruction, information literacy, assessment, and other related work. Authors will be drawn from a wide range of representation, including library and information science educators, past members of the Framework Task Force, and librarians from all types of academic institutions.

This column is managed and edited by a subcommittee of the ACRL Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee—Merinda Kaye Hensley, past chair of ACRL Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee (2015–16), Rhonda Huisman, chair of ACRL Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee (2016–17), and the inaugural subcommittee team: Elizabeth Galoozis, John Jackson, and Diane Fulkerson.

**W**hen the ACRL Board of Directors formally rescinded the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education at the 2016 ALA Annual Conference in June, many of us were startled to find that the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education was now the primary organizing document for information literacy from our professional

association. No longer simply filed, this star in the constellation of documents was formally adopted, and the Standards were receding to another part of the sky altogether. For many of us, this has been a fraught time, one marked by tense questions: Does this mean we have to use the Framework? What if I don't find the frames useful, or if I think they should be different? What if I want to continue using the Standards to organize my instruction program? What does the Framework mean for me?

It is difficult to address these anxieties in any general way—the answers will be local and contextual for each of us and our programs. At the end of the day, though, the Framework is a document, a piece of information in a larger discourse that we can engage and mobilize (or not) in any number of ways. Stepping back from the question of whether the Framework is true or right, we might ask instead how and whether it can be useful for understanding information literacy generally as well as the Framework itself. Reading the Framework and using its frames can tell us something useful about the authority and value of the document, along with its importance in our ongoing discourse about teaching and learning in libraries.

### Authority is constructed and contextual

The Framework centers context as a critical factor for assessing authority. While authority

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is sometimes considered something that can be evaluated on the basis of an author's credentials or the quality of the peer review process, the Framework emphasizes the conditionality of any of those evaluations. It matters less who an author is than who an author is talking with, how the information is received and circulated, and the reasons the work might be engaged in a given context. Authority is not a simple binary, but is instead determined in context and in conversation, and in relationship with structures of power that privilege some voices over others.

The authority of the Framework is constructed and contextual, too. It circulates in a community of ideas and is viewed as authoritative by some and not by others. When the Standards were rescinded by the ACRL Board, the authority of the Framework was contested by some who felt the Standards were a better representation of information literacy pedagogy and practice in some kinds of libraries. Others took the Board decision as evidence that the Framework was a "better" approach to information literacy instruction. Both positions, as well as others along the spectrum, help us understand and evaluate the authority of the Framework. The document may carry the imprimatur of the professional association, but its authority is not determined once and for all simply by its adoption. The Framework tells us that the authority of the document is always determined in the context of the audience—that's us—who receives it.

### **Information creation as process**

The second frame unsettles the idea that information is a "thing" that exists independently of the means of its own production. Poverty statistics, for example, do not merely exist as real numbers, but are reflective of contexts in which they are gathered, including what counts as poverty, who gets counted, and who does the counting. Understanding information means understanding the process of its production, too. The meaning of information is also determined in contexts of sharing and using in communities and groups.

The Framework was certainly the result of an extensive process: committee members were selected, a Delphi study was consulted, stakeholders were engaged, and the academic

library public offered continued public comment through electronic lists, email, Twitter, blogs, and other avenues up to and after the document's filing and subsequent adoption. Once on the website or printed at our desks, the Framework looks like a settled, final document. But understood through this frame, we can understand the document as the result of a contested process. Indeed, the meaning we make from it continues to be a process, as does our sharing of the frames with faculty and administrators on our home campuses. The Framework is a living document that will change as we make meaning from it together.

### **Information has value**

The Framework also articulates the importance of value for understanding how information works in the world. Information can be bought and sold, and can advance some economic and social positions and not others. Not everyone has equal access to the means of producing or disseminating information. When we understand that information has value, we can think more critically about whose voices we are able to hear, and what role we can play in amplifying others.

The Framework has value, too. It produces economic and reputational value for those who created it and have been tasked with implementing it as they become our conference speakers and workshop leaders, authorities on a newly sanctioned way of thinking about information literacy. The Framework also has institutional and professional value for librarians who will use it to connect with curricular initiatives and faculty interests on our campuses. This frame encourages us to think critically about what and how we value information literacy through the use of this document.

### **Research as inquiry**

In the Framework, research is less about finding answers and more about asking questions. Information is not primarily about discovering something once and for all, but instead about opening up a terrain of exploration, spurring the construction of new knowledges that build on and extend what has come before.

The Framework itself is a product of inquiry.

It responds to concerns raised by previous conceptions of information literacy, and engages literature and research from the field, including a Delphi study of expert practitioners. Similarly, the document does not provide any final answers. It does not define student learning outcomes or prescribe certain modes of teaching. Instead, it invites us to use the document to ask local and contextual questions about our information literacy practices. Understood through this frame, we can begin to think about what work might come next, and the kinds of research questions that the Framework facilitates, as well as those that it might obscure or leave behind.

### Scholarship as conversation

The Framework uses the metaphor of “conversation” to describe the ways that information and knowledge are produced through dialogue with others who share similar concerns and questions. Information literacy requires acknowledging the multiplicity of voices, and values putting them in conversation with one another as we attempt to make meaning out of what we read and write.

The Framework emerges from extensive professional conversation. As the document developed, the public comment period generated more than 1,000 pages of feedback that was read, reviewed, responded to, and, in some cases, reinscribed in successive versions of the Framework.<sup>1</sup> Many academic librarians were called to have and share opinions on the Framework, the Standards, and the merits of one, the other, or both. Even librarians who publicly rejected the Framework document were engaged in conversation about the document, even if only to say they would not talk about it anymore. Social media and traditional coverage of the information literacy revision efforts made the conversation aspect of scholarship impossible to miss: librarians could not stop talking about it. Since its adoption, that conversation has continued, on the Framework discussion list, via the #acrlframework tag on Twitter, in this and subsequent Framework columns in *C&RL News*, and in the sandbox ACRL will provide for librarians to engage and explore the meaning of the various frames. The Framework is one point of discussion in an ongoing and longstanding

conversation of what it means to be literate about information, but it is useful to acknowledge what it means that the Framework is determining so much of what we talk about.

### Searching as strategic exploration

Who we are and what we know plays a big role in the ways we seek out information. We don't all ask questions using the same languages or put our queries to the same pools of knowledge. With this frame, the Framework emphasizes the importance of searching both deeply and broadly as we make meaning out of information.

As academic librarians, most of us have access to the language of information literacy, and many of us look to our professional association as a place to begin our inquiry. But ACRL, the Framework, and information literacy are only places to begin the search process. Just as the Framework engaged metaliteracy, threshold concepts, and backward design, our own personal and institutional approaches to information literacy can extend beyond the Standards, Framework, or any other document produced by ACRL.

As we continue to develop, implement, reflect on, and revise our own local and contextual programs for teaching and learning in our libraries, the Framework serves as one document through which we can articulate and understand our own work. As we draw on the document for inspiration and support, we might also consider the ways that the Framework itself is a reflection of contextual authority and productive process. It both reflects and constructs value. The Framework prompts questions, and it ought to, serving as one point and platform in the ongoing scholarly conversation about information literacy, one that draws on work within and beyond our field. Perhaps most critically, the Framework, when read against itself, makes clear that what matters is not a single, binding statement of fact, but the meaning we make from this document and others as teachers and learners in libraries.

### Note

1. ACRL's “Framework for Information Literacy Appendices,” [www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframeworkapps](http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframeworkapps), accessed July 25, 2016. ¶¶