

## Continuing the Conversation: Questions about the Framework

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## CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

### Questions about the *Framework*

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This essay raises questions about the future of information literacy in higher education, given the prevalence of the *Information Literacy Competency Standards* in the library profession for the past 15 years, and the heated debate that took place regarding whether the *Framework for Information Literacy* and the *Standards* could harmoniously co-exist. We do not have answers to these questions, but we offer our perspectives on how the *Standards* have served academic librarians in the past and on how we envision the *Framework* and the *Standards* working together to further information literacy instruction. Our conclusion is that the *Framework* and the *Standards* serve different purposes and have different intended audiences and are thus both valuable to the profession.

## INTRODUCTION

When the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Framework)* was filed by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Executive Board, it became part of the association's "constellation of information literacy documents" (ACRL, 2015), including the existing *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (Standards)* and numerous discipline-specific information literacy (IL) standards. The discussion and debate generated by the *Framework* has been a revitalizing force in the profession. The authors of this essay advocated for retention of the *Standards* in our Open Letter (Dalal, 2015) because we believe that both documents offer librarians important ideas from which to draw inspiration and guidance. As we see it, the *Standards* are broader in their aim of articulating information skills for lifelong learning, are clearly and simply written, and are easy to communicate to a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., other librarians, co-teachers, disciplinary faculty, administrators, and accreditors). The *Framework* explicates a deeper level of understanding of academic research using the language of scholarship and is intended for an expert audience. Here we look more deeply into the *Framework* and its relationship to the *Standards*, and we share some of our questions and thinking about the strengths of each.

### HOW WILL THE *FRAMEWORK* IMPACT IL ADVOCACY AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT?

For many of us, the *Standards* have served as the basis for course, program, and

institutional IL learning outcomes, but the *Framework* is not intended for this purpose. Instead, its creators felt that IL learning outcomes should be created locally using the threshold concepts for guidance. Librarians are being asked to discard the five benchmark information literacy competencies that have become part of the higher education vernacular, and substitute new language without a compelling reason to do so. The *Framework* may be in its infancy, but if it does not set standard national outcomes, will it receive the same kind of widespread recognition and endorsement as the *Standards*? Such recognition has been key for many of us in communicating the importance of IL to our faculty and administrators. How might the dramatic shift from standards (recognized in K-12 and in higher education) to threshold concepts impact the efforts librarians have put into educating their faculty and administration about information literacy? We see this broad acceptance of the *Standards* and its vocabulary over the past 25 years as a persuasive reason to retain them even while enriching them with the benefit of those years and with some of the new viewpoints presented in the *Framework*.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) and the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) have integrated the language of the *Standards* into their documentation. MSCHE's *Developing Research & Communication Skills: Guidelines for Information Literacy in the Curriculum* acknowledges the *Standards* for having "significantly influenced the task forces that developed *Characteristics in Higher Education*" (Middle States, 2003, p.4). AAC&U's Information Literacy VALUE

Rubric (AAC&U, 2013) is used by a number of institutions across the country as a tool for developing learning outcomes and assessing college student learning. The traits on that rubric are ACRL's five standards nearly verbatim. Both MSCHE and AAC&U developed their IL tools based on the *Standards*. Can we expect these organizations, to which our administrators turn for guidance, to abandon the standards they have already endorsed and embrace the new concepts in the *Framework*? They would need a compelling reason to do so—does one exist?

Some institutions with established IL programs will not have much incentive to change their programs despite the introduction of the *Framework*. In New Jersey, for example, the transfer of credits from a community college to a public four-year institution has been guided since 2008 by the Lampitt Law's *Comprehensive State-wide Transfer Agreement* (New Jersey's Presidents' Council, 2008). It includes information literacy as an integrated course goal using the language of the *Standards*, thus firmly establishing IL as a learning outcome for general education courses in New Jersey post-secondary schools. With statewide support for IL in the curriculum, three New Jersey library committees worked together to develop the *Information Literacy Progression Standards (Progression Standards)* (New Jersey Library Association, 2009). This document identifies the performance indicators and outcomes from the *Standards* that students should learn in their first and second years of college. The *Progression Standards* have been used by New Jersey institutions for curriculum planning and course mapping, and for articulation agreements that guarantee credit transfer between

institutions. They have also been used to discuss IL expectations with faculty to help integrate IL into the general education curriculum (DaCosta & Dubicki, 2012). New Jersey institutions that are not using the *Progression Standards* have still used the *Standards* for outcomes development, collaboration with faculty, and assessment (Charles, 2015; Hsieh & Holden, 2010; Hsieh, Dawson, Hofmann, Titus, & Carlin, 2014; Scharf, 2014).

Where librarians have succeeded in gaining acceptance of information literacy as an institutional core competency, the *Standards* have played a significant role. We offer here a few examples from our own institutions. At the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), an institution-wide IL plan based on the *Standards* was approved in 2009 and became an essential outcome for student learning and assessment in each program. The wording of the *Standards* fits well with the culture of the institution and led to the plan's success. While the librarians at NJIT have been able to incorporate new concepts from the *Framework* in their instruction, they believe that a revision of the official plan is not necessary. Ideas from the *Framework* are already helping librarians and faculty improve their approaches to teaching, but the overall objectives remain those so well-articulated in the *Standards*. These ideas can now be found in some of the *Framework's* knowledge practices, but at institutions like NJIT, where initiatives using the *Standards* are already well in motion, it could be difficult or self-defeating to attempt to change from the language of the *Standards* to that of the *Framework* without good reasons to believe it would provide a substantial gain.

At Raritan Valley Community College

(RVCC), librarians and faculty have been integrating IL into the curriculum for the past three years. Using the *Progression Standards* as a model for learning outcomes, faculty have included IL student learning outcomes in many of their new or revised course outlines. During the development of an institutional rubric to assess these outcomes, a librarian presented faculty with threshold concepts and knowledge practices from the *Framework* for consideration. The concepts were considered wordy, confusing, and irrelevant to the work done by community college students; several faculty pointed to the AAC&U VALUE rubric as a useful model for its clarity and usability. The faculty unanimously agreed to develop the institutional rubric using the five original ACRL *Standards* and AAC&U VALUE rubric for guidance, defeating the librarian's attempt to shift the institutional focus to the ideas of the *Framework*.

When the *Framework* draft was first released, Rider University was in the process of updating its undergraduate learning goals related to IL, which had been entirely based on the *Standards*. After reviewing the draft *Framework*, the committee concluded that the threshold concepts in the *Framework* were too cumbersome to adapt and could lead to an unmanageable number of outcomes. The committee chair recommended that the librarians instead use the five simple criteria from the AAC&U VALUE Rubric.

We are not the only ones who recognize this issue. In one of several blog posts about the *Framework* and the profession's response to it, Jacob Berg (2015), Director of Library Services at Trinity Washington University, reported that his administration also "prefers" the AAC&U VALUE rubric, and

as a result he will not advocate for a shift to the *Framework*. In other words, his institution will continue to use the *Standards*, which prompted him to ask what political stakes might be involved in the shift from *Standards* to *Framework*. The earlier examples illustrate those stakes: as librarians look to revise curricula using the *Framework*, an administration that has already adopted the *Standards* will not be easily convinced to change without good reason, and the *Framework* as it exists does not provide an incentive. While the *Framework* can improve our teaching on an individual level and encourage us to think more broadly about our goals for students, for many of us real change needs to come at an institutional level and requires stakeholder support, as Badke (2011) and Oakleaf (2014) point out. Although IL learning outcomes can and should be adapted at the local level, national standards can help us align with other colleges and universities and with educational goals in K-12.

#### HOW CAN THE *FRAMEWORK* BE USED IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS?

While initially discussing how to use the *Framework* in our instruction programs, the authors questioned whether the *Framework* could be used for the assessment of student learning. Although the ACRL Task Force included sample lessons and assignments in the earliest drafts of the *Framework*, those were removed from the final document with the expectation that the profession would experiment, create, and share ideas in a sandbox or repository (Gibson, Carbery, Hensley, Miller & DiNardo, 2015, 56:20-57:14). Librarians appear to be excited by

the *Framework* and are sharing their lesson and assignment ideas through blogs and listservs; however, those are not the same as learning outcome assessments.

The *Standards*, written with outcomes assessment in mind, describe behaviors of the information literate person, and they follow Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956). The *Framework* includes knowledge practices, which are similar in concept and language to the performance indicators in the *Standards*, and some do lend themselves to assessment, but not as well as the *Standards*. The knowledge practices use terms like understand, recognize, and value, as opposed to the action verbs that we know work well when writing learning outcomes—words like determine, access, evaluate, and use. Meyer and Land's (2003) report, which informed the *Framework*, does not give guidance on learning outcomes; in fact, it discourages a one-size-fits-all set of outcomes. The authors of this essay believe ACRL could provide greater support to librarians engaged in the critical area of assessment.

The ACRL Task Force has been adamant that the *Standards* and *Framework* cannot co-exist and that mapping the *Standards* to the *Framework* is not possible or advisable. However, Rider University librarians have successfully blended ideas from the *Standards* and the *Framework* into a comprehensive IL learning outcome statement that is used college-wide.<sup>1</sup> They concluded that both documents contain useful concepts and could be merged.

It is not only practicing librarians who recognize problems inherent in the *Framework*'s usefulness for assessment.

Saracevic (2014), of Rutgers School of Communication and Information, argues that threshold concepts are not evidence-based, and therefore the *Framework* is unlikely to be useful for empirical applications. Oakleaf (2014), of Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, outlines useful steps for assessing outcomes using the *Framework*, but her article is not entirely supportive of the *Framework* for this purpose. She echoes one of our deepest concerns: although librarians can create their own learning outcomes with practice, they may have difficulty getting buy-in for their locally created outcomes from other important stakeholders.

While the *Framework* can aid librarians in improving their pedagogy it is not useful in engaging in assessment. During a recent ACRL Conference presentation, a librarian from Villanova asked a panel, "Was there any thought to practical assessment? . . . I can assess the *Standards*, as difficult as that is, but if I try to assess inquiry and open mindedness to authoritative structures, that's going to get difficult. Any ideas?" Alan Carbery, a panelist, responded that he did not use the *Framework* for assessment. He stated:

[The *Framework*] became useful for us after assessment, when we were finding out what students were having difficulty with, it was an awesome coincidence, or maybe it wasn't a coincidence at all, that the *Framework* was able to rethink, reframe, and go back into the classroom and change instruction as a result...I don't claim to be assessing the *Framework*, I'm assessing . . . authentic student work and I'm using the *Framework*

afterwards in the classroom. (Gibson et al., 2015, 55:06-56:18)

These comments helped us recognize that the *Framework's* usefulness lies in the potential to develop better instructional strategies and philosophies of academic discourse. For example, the dispositions in each frame may be difficult to assess, but they are still important ideas that should be conveyed to students to enrich their understanding of how information works.

In the well-known Dick, Carey and Carey model of instructional design (2014), writing performance objectives and developing assessments are necessary steps to perform prior to developing instructional strategies. The outcomes and performance indicators in the *Standards* explicitly support librarians in writing performance objectives. Following the principles of instructional design, the *Framework* can then be either a piece of the instructional analysis, a precursor to the task of writing performance objectives, or a tool for revising instructional strategies. Thus, the *Standards* are useful at the beginning of the instructional design process, while the *Framework* can be useful after assessment has revealed areas for improvement. As Carbery described above, he used the *Framework* in the revision process and subsequent modification of instructional strategies and materials. We think many librarians are in the same place as Carbery, with established programs that will benefit from revisions based on the ideas of the *Framework*, but without needing to completely overhaul learning objectives that are based on the *Standards*. Therefore we feel it is important that updated *Standards* continue to be part of ACRL's documentation.

## HOW CAN THE *FRAMEWORK* IMPACT INFORMATION LITERACY CURRICULUM MAPPING?

According to its introduction, the *Framework* was developed to give librarians and faculty a push to revise IL activities (i.e. research instruction sessions, course assignments, individual courses, and curricula). As such, it presents significant possibilities in influencing the creation of an information literacy curriculum map (ILCM) and in making an IL program more transparent. The *Framework* is intended to give librarians more pedagogical background in order to strengthen the cultures of teaching and learning at their institutions. It can assist librarians in aligning activities to institutional goals and/or the strategic plan of the library and the institution. According to Oakleaf (2014), "librarians can identify IL and discipline-based threshold concepts, conduct needs assessments, analyze academic requirements, sketch the curricular structure of their institutions, and learn about typical trajectories" (p. 512) to develop an ILCM. The *Framework* can frame an ILCM and the overarching vision or goals for an IL program, while the *Standards* can be aligned to them for individual courses, using learning outcomes derived from the performance indicators and outcomes.

So how do librarians and faculty develop a curriculum that will help students move from novice to expert information seekers within a field? Threshold concepts invite us to discover the broad understandings that are central to a discipline, and thus they are more suited to program development than to writing individual course outcomes. In other words, the *Framework* can be used to

identify broad themes that guide the ILCM, but the *Standards* can be used to develop the learning outcomes and assessment strategies for the program. However, we also need to follow up on the research question posed by Meyer and Land (2003)

on the degree to which threshold concepts, as perceived by teachers, are experienced by students, and with what variation. If it is accepted that these threshold concepts represent experiential entities in the minds of students, to what extent can they be constructively aligned? Might threshold concepts usefully provide a micro-perspective for examining learning environments?  
(p. 11)

Possibly, but this seems more likely to occur in conjunction with the *Standards* than through inchoate and obscure threshold concepts. Saracevic (2014) has acknowledged that the development of threshold concepts demands a great deal of work, but he has also stated that specific concepts can be identified for each discipline. Likely, this can also be done for a disciplinary ILCM. And because threshold concepts are grasped by students over time, a “spiral approach” to curriculum mapping can ensure that all concepts are addressed throughout a program (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 297).

Because scaffolding instruction through an ILCM requires buy-in from library colleagues and instructors throughout the curriculum, it remains to be seen how helpful the *Framework* will be in this regard, given the potential for resistance described above. The understanding of how the *Framework* should influence the

constituents at an institution is described in the Introduction:

Teaching faculty have a greater responsibility in designing curricula and assignments that foster enhanced engagement with the core ideas about information and scholarship within their disciplines. Librarians have a greater responsibility in identifying core ideas within their own knowledge domain that can extend learning for students, in creating a new cohesive curriculum for information literacy, and in collaborating more extensively with faculty. (ACRL, 2015, p. 3)

The *Framework*'s developers seem to believe that it will help faculty and librarians achieve these aims better than the *Standards*.

#### HOW DOES THE *FRAMEWORK* FIT WITH HIGH SCHOOL STANDARDS AND WORKPLACE IL?

College level IL skills are just one step in a long process of creating a 21st century lifelong learner. Standards have also been created by other library and education associations, including the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). Educational standards are increasingly common, as many states adopt the *Common Core State Standards*, which include IL

standards that align with the existing *Standards*. Many academic librarians work closely with school librarians to prepare high school graduates for college level work. The existing language of standards has allowed K-12 and college/university librarians to share a common vocabulary around learning outcomes, and it can help librarians in secondary schools prepare students for a smooth transition to higher education.

In its *Standards for the 21st Century Learner*, AASL (2007) identifies common beliefs that inspire the four standards for the 21st century, described briefly in their Learning4Life series as think, create, share, and grow (AASL, n.d.-b). Each of the four standards has skills (key abilities), dispositions in action (beliefs and attitudes), responsibilities (common behaviors), and self-assessments (reflection). The AASL document is a good example of theory and standards usefully co-existing. The *Framework's* knowledge practices seem to reflect the skills in AASL's standards, just as the *Framework's* dispositions echo their dispositions in action.

In fact, when the first draft of the *Framework* was released in two parts in February and April, 2014, the Task Force stated its intention to include in the June draft, components that “[map] the *Framework* and the American Association of School Librarians Standards for 21st Century Learners” and that “[map] the *Framework* and the 2000 ILCSHE” (Gibson & Jacobson, 2014, p. 2). In the June draft, however, they instead recommended that the ACRL Executive Board sunset the *Standards*. Since the release of the final draft of the *Framework*, the Task Force has

argued vehemently against using standards and theoretical concepts in the same document, but what is the substantive difference between a “knowledge practice” and a “performance indicator?” Retaining the language of outcomes and standards would allow librarians from K-16 to continue to use common terminology and a common articulation tool. A true update and revision to the *Standards* could allow it to be mapped to the *Framework* as was originally intended.

Calls for continuity between school and college librarians were also on the mind of Lesley Farmer, an original member of the Task Force. In a paper for the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Conference, she wrote: “Librarians can use AASL’s learning standards and ACRL’s *Framework* as springboards for thought, particularly in terms of articulating learning. The result is a developmentally appropriate set of concepts that reflects lifelong engagement with, and creation of, recorded information” (Farmer, 2014, p. 5). Information literacy is of importance to everyone in the profession charged with instruction in a formal educational setting. High school librarians use the *Standards* to identify goals in preparing their students for college. ACRL should continue to work with the *Framework's* design to ensure the scaffolding of skills from high school to college and in preparation for the workforce. Farmer poses an important question we should also consider: How can we “articulate learning” to reflect the acquisition of information literacy skills throughout formal education and beyond? After the widespread adoption of the *Common Core State Standards Initiative* in K-12 education, AASL published a 128-page *Crosswalk* in order to map those

standards to the *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (AASL, n.d.-a). Academic librarians could add a third column to the *Crosswalk* where the *Framework's* threshold concepts, knowledge practices and dispositions are mapped onto AASL and Common Core standards. Librarians could then continue to speak a common language as we work to transition students from high school to college.

Further pursuing this idea of transition, IL should also be considered with regard to the emphasis from employers on workplace readiness. According to a Project Information Literacy survey of employers in fields like engineering, technology, healthcare, education, media, government, and financial service, respondents wanted their newly graduated employees to have the ability to conduct real research (Head, 2012). Survey respondents defined research strategies in the workforce as not just searching for one response to solve a problem. but finding a variety of solutions. Employers are looking for graduates that are persistent and willing to read multiple sources of information, yet the current threshold concepts are focused on the kind of scholarship conducted by academics and less so on the skills needed in the workforce.

The Task Force's insistence that threshold concepts may be increased in number, changed, and removed, will be important as we consider the *Framework* in light of the real-world skills the majority of graduates—who will not go on to become academics—will need to be successful on the job.

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Librarians can extend the value of IL beyond the classroom by helping students understand the changing dynamics of the world of information and how this relates to their professions. Obvious connections between the skills and resources that will make students competitive in the job market can and should be articulated to students throughout their courses of study. Since employers are seeking employees who are agile and tenacious information seekers, the notion of employing threshold concepts to help students evolve their knowledge and skills over time seems favorable, but the current *Framework* has confined information literacy to a narrow, mostly academic context.

## CONCLUSION

The authors recognize that the *Standards* still exist within the *Framework's* knowledge practices. What we find untenable is the insistence that the ideas of the *Framework* are so far separated from the *Standards* as to be completely incompatible. Our discussions of the questions above have led us to the conclusion that the *Framework* and the *Standards* serve two different purposes and have two different intended audiences, but are both valuable in their own right. It is our hope that the ACRL Board and committees will re-evaluate how the *Framework* could lead to an updated yet easily understood, association-endorsed set of standards that can be as widely adopted as the original *Standards*. Perhaps, now that we have an overarching *Framework* that is

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intended to be malleable and adaptable, what is not needed are additional frameworks, but rather agreed-upon and endorsed learning outcomes that are specific to a subject area, institution, grade level, or target audience. We have invested 25 years in a foundation that is solid and it should not be discarded lightly. We can work to re-identify the universal IL skills that we want students at American colleges and universities to learn. We should do this together, not in isolation within our own institutions, but as colleagues across the profession who face similar challenges and have the same learning goals for our students.

## NOTE

1. “Students will be able to effectively and efficiently access needed information by being cognizant of search strategies, employing a repertoire of investigative methods, being motivated by genuine intellectual curiosity, and creating a self-regulating process of research by critically examining the research process itself along with how their own points of views have influenced and been influenced by that process.” (Rider University Office of the Provost, 2014, p. 74)

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