

# **Authority is constructed and created ... but not by you**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper engages in a critical review of information literacy practices as manifest through materials shared publicly on the ACRL Sandbox. Focusing primarily on the frames “Authority is Contested and Constructed,” and “Scholarship as Conversation,” we analyze lesson plans shared on the ACRL Sandbox that address those frames, including the positionality of the students for whom the lessons were created. Preliminary analysis finds that most of the lessons shared position students exclusively as information consumers, learning how to find and evaluate existing published research, rather than emphasizing their potential roles as producers. This perspective fails to capitalize on students as creators (e.g., from formal undergraduate research to social media). We conclude by presenting some ways in which information literacy instruction can be adjusted to prepare future librarians to recognize and respect students’ existing knowledge and build upon that knowledge.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Information literacy; Academic libraries; Critical librarianship; Information Use

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Information literacy instruction; ACRL frames; authority; LIS Education

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Framework) was adopted in 2016 as an attempt to encourage

librarians and educators to adopt a “richer, more complex set of core ideas” (ACRL, 2016, p. 7) than the previously widely used Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ACRL, 2000). The Framework is “based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards or learning outcomes (ACRL, 2016, p. 7).

Hicks and Lloyd (2021) suggest that the discourses of information literacy (IL) have two conflicting narratives. On one hand, librarians and teachers using the Framework speak to student empowerment. On the other hand, internal documents and conversations speak of the incompetence of students (p. 565), or through a deficit lens. In their study, Hicks and Lloyd looked at four major IL texts, including the ACRL Framework, and the introductions to sixteen other books exploring those texts (p. 563). Indeed, as noted in the Framework Appendices, “The frames are intended to demonstrate the contrast in thinking between novice learner and expert in a specific area; movement may take place over the course of a student’s academic career” (2016b, para. 4) as they gain expertise.

While Hicks and Lloyd captured the ethos of the larger schema of IL instruction, we were curious about what was happening in library practice - how were librarians teaching IL? What lessons did that instruction have for us as LIS educators as we train the people who go on to lead IL training? Were they, and were we, encouraging a spirit of growth? Do the documents speak to insiders through a deficit lens or empower outsiders? How does the insider/outsider paradigm manifest within these documents, if at all? We began with the following research questions:

- How do contributors to the ACRL Sandbox construct their lessons? Which topics are particularly resonant to them, and what concepts do they use to connect to students?
- What is the role of the learner and instructor in ACRL Sandbox lessons?
- What is our role as LIS educators in encouraging or discouraging our students from using a deficit-based approach to IL instruction?

## **EXAMINING THE ACRL FRAMEWORK**

The Framework posits that IL is a socially embedded process requiring its users to think critically and metacognitively about information, its creation, and its use through knowledge practices (concrete ways of producing content) and dispositions (behavioral or attitudinal tendencies). Library skills are embedded in the meaning of the frames. For instance, Frame 4, ‘Research as Inquiry’, includes knowledge practices that were present in previous standards and across various models of information literacy, such as the Big 6 (roughly: determine what the question is and break it down; and organize, and synthesize, and interpret information).

Some of the frames, though, require learners to determine where gaps are manifest or caused by social inequalities. Frame 3, Information Has Value, not only requires the learner to properly cite works but also to “understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information” (p. 16). This critical stance towards information use and

adoption provides a path towards understanding marginalization in what is considered true in vetted, published works that are taught in classes and held in libraries, potentially giving students a means to increase their own engagement with what is published and why.

Ideally, students advance toward adoption of new knowledge practices and dispositions. For example, under Frame 1 (Authority is Constructed and Contextual) advanced students “acknowledge they are developing their own authoritative voices in a particular area and recognize the responsibilities this entails, including seeking accuracy and reliability, respecting intellectual property, and participating in communities of practice” (knowledge practice) and “develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview” (disposition). How these practices and dispositions are discussed with outsiders (e.g., students) versus insiders (e.g., other librarians) might differ, though.

The Framework is a potentially liberating document; it acknowledges that authority can be found in outsiders’ voices, or those voices who have been traditionally left out of authoritative sources. Such unyoking from tradition can also present problems with justifying why students might seek scientific truth in peer-reviewed journals, for instance, over blog posts or opinion pieces. In other words, if you question authority, how can you determine what is true? The Framework also acknowledges that since the advent of the internet, students are producers and publishers of information rather than only consumers. As an example, Frame 3 (“Information has Value”), specifies that advanced students will acknowledge the work that they have built upon through citation; they are both consumer and contributor.

The ways that the myriad knowledge practices and dispositions are taught could either be liberating or punitive. The documents that are shared between practitioners in a repository such as the Sandbox are tangible products to review for evidence of how the Framework is being taught in situ. Some of the Frames (e.g., Frame 6, “Searching as Strategic Exploration”) lean more heavily on traditional library skills, teaching students how to find, evaluate, and use published information. However, other frames are more difficult to conceptualize. How are librarians (or others using the Framework) engaging students to contribute something of value within the cacophony of the Internet, when most librarians do not teach writing? How do they teach novices methods for finding gaps in the knowledge, or resolving conflict in the published record?

## **METHOD**

We began this project by exploring the ACRL Information Literacy Sandbox to explore lessons that were adapted to the new ACRL frames but still relevant to academic library practice. Every ACRL Sandbox resource has a title, abstract, and contributor, as well as number of times the resource has been downloaded. Additional information may include Resource Type, Information Literacy Frames Addressed, Disciplines, Type of Institution, Scope, License Type, and Keywords, though these fields are not consistent across all Sandbox resources. These resources are contributed voluntarily by librarians and other educators, and while there is a

professional committee overseeing the growth and direction of the Sandbox, the resources themselves are not peer reviewed.

We narrowed our analysis to two frames: “Authority is Constructed and Created”, and “Scholarship as Conversation” because the knowledge practices and dispositions align most strongly with critical aspects of creation of materials or ask students to look ‘under the hood’ at who is being privileged and why. The item titles, descriptions, and resource types were pasted into two spreadsheets (“authority” and “conversation”). There were 88 items under Frame 1 (Authority is Constructed and Contextual) and 77 under Frame 5 (Scholarship as Conversation). Twenty-five items were included in both sheets; contributors to the Sandbox are able to tag their resources with multiple frames so there is some overlap between the Frames. Note that some items are tagged with every frame, and these might be complete IL courses based on the Framework or publications about the Framework or its applications. We eliminated items that were tagged as professional development materials, white papers, conference presentations, publications, as they were determined to be inward-focused rather than outward-focused, as well as items that are no longer available. Rubrics and assessment materials were included because they would likely be seen by students. The process of elimination left 82 items in Frame 1 and 59 in Frame 5.

Group members then coded the remaining materials separately. The first round of coding was a descriptive thematic coding – focusing on the themes or subjects of each lesson in the words used by the authors. After thematic coding, the group discussed how they coded the materials, differences between individuals’ codes, and how the thematic codes could be categorized to describe the aims of the lessons more broadly.

The second round of coding, which will be described in the full paper presented at ALISE, will focus more closely on latent discourse analysis, studying how the lessons were framed, the values propagated by the lessons, and the roles of participants in the lesson (e.g., student as consumer, student as novice, instructor as expert, instructor as co-creator). The final analysis will combine the results of the two rounds of coding, looking for trends between lesson themes and discursive practices, analyzing codes across both levels of coding and discussing the themes and perspectives manifest in our coding.

## **Limitations**

The Sandbox is a bit of a hodgepodge. It contains merely a sample of documents that librarians working in IL and who know about the Sandbox have chosen to share with other IL librarians. It includes a wide range of materials, including lesson plans, teaching materials (e.g., worksheets and PowerPoints) as well as research about information literacy (publications and presentations). The teaching documents can be changed and adopted to meet an institution’s needs, and the Sandbox indicates how many times items have been downloaded, which might help us gauge their adoption.

## **FINDINGS**

Under Frame 1, Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame, the most common topics are news (17) and library (19), and news items are generally under the category of “fake news.” This topic is not surprising given the proliferation of the term within the political and social realms of the past seven years; it provides a ‘hook’ for conceiving information literacy within the context of everyday life. Additionally, this topic makes for an easier-to-deploy ‘one shot’ instruction session. And while these sessions do focus on bias, they don’t necessarily cover bias in depth. Source bias was addressed, but the biases that individuals bring to their reading of various information was not covered as strongly.

The concept of ‘authority’ varies within the lessons as well. In some cases, there is great effort expended to outline how the concept can vary depending on the phenomenon of interest. Having said that, there is still a strong reliance in many of the lessons on ‘authority’ as residing most significantly in peer-reviewed academic research articles. Other ways of knowing and personal experience are still downplayed in many instances.

Frame 5, Scholarship as Conversation, focused on evaluating sources as well. The lessons and items in both frames included many one-shot IL or traditional library skills lessons. Six were about evaluating science; 11 were about library skills. Several are associated with first year-level composition courses and focused on the process of writing, from evaluating sources to learning about literature reviews and the peer review process to proper citation. One theme from this frame is helping students envision themselves as scholars through enculturation into academia.

### **What is the role of the learner and instructor in ACRL Sandbox lessons?**

As anyone who has ever written a literature review understands, finding relevant research, evaluating its utility, and summarizing it is an active process. However, original research and communication establishes one’s authority. It shifts the landscape of what is known. In Frame 1 (Authority is Constructed and Contextual), learners are presented mainly as consumers of information rather than as creators in their own rights. Learners are asked how they evaluate something but are not generally asked about their own expertise and how they arrived at that expertise. Current students are often creators with their own authority on topics and few lessons pull on that expertise. While the Sandbox has a strong focus on evaluating news and strengthening traditional library skills, it also has some lessons that focus on establishing the student as an active instigator of research; it spans the continuum of the research process.

## **DISCUSSION**

The concept of information literacy has grown and changed significantly over the years. The Framework (2016) and these lessons provides a much more nuanced understanding of information literacy than the previous information literacy standards. At the same time, there are missed opportunities in the lessons and, in many cases, rigid understandings of authority.

The missed opportunities relate to working with learners as creators and authorities in their own rights. The focus in most cases is on learners as passive consumers, thus operating in a

deficit model. The focus in many lessons of authority as academic and degree-based demonstrates a rigid understanding of authority which does not seem to line up well with the notion of ‘authority as constructed and contextual.’ Further analysis could demonstrate how aspects of the lessons reflect changing viewpoints on publication and authority. That said, authority about academic concerns is often held by people with advanced degrees and/or experience, which should also be communicated to students.

### **What is our role as LIS educators in encouraging or discouraging our students from using a deficit-based approach to information literacy instruction?**

The more important question for us as educators is how does or how should this affect our teaching? One response is to teach from a strengths-based that portrays all parties involved in information literacy instruction as having strengths. This teaching perspective might ask our LIS information literacy instruction students to explore undergraduates’ information worlds and identify positive attributes that their potential undergraduate students bring to the information literacy encounter. We can model strengths-based instructional practices in our own teaching practices, but because academic library information literacy instruction is typically done in “one shot” episodes, we also need to engage with our LIS students about how to position their IL students as creators and authorities, and how to empower those IL students to grow their skills in unfamiliar domains without assuming a role of passivity, but rather, involving them as active agents in information evaluation and creation.

In our exploration of ACRL Sandbox resources, we did find examples that encouraged students to engage in an active and participatory way in their information literacy engagement. Another option for our teaching is to ask students to compare those lessons, with students as actors, to other lessons featuring students as recipients, and discuss how the lessons differed. Because creating and presenting a one-shot information literacy session is a common component of information literacy instruction classes, we could ask students to create two versions of the same lesson (student as actor versus student as recipient) and encourage them to modify lessons they find from other sources to engage the student as actor model.

Another topic worthy of classroom discussion is the issue of authority outside the academic context. Questions for discussion might include how to accommodate multiple ways of knowing (e.g., scientific research, Indigenous Knowledges, experiential knowledge) in a way that acknowledges the strengths of each. This topic ties into existing discussions of culture and inclusion and provides a venue for IL to extend beyond only academic research.

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