

Shifting from “stuff” to students: Moving toward constructivism using the ACRL Framework

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Abstract

The ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015), created to refocus on “foundational ideas about the [often uncertain] information ecosystem,” has required a shift away from the easier-to-implement discrete skills enumerated in the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000). As such, librarians around the country have been/are wary of the new *Framework* and wonder how to implement it into their practice. Underlying many of the changes in the new *Framework* is a shift away from the technical and mechanistic aspects of information literacy towards a more constructivist foundation that centers the student as a true constructor of her own knowledge. The *Framework* encourages librarians to value students’ expertise, experience, and authority in their own community and bring it to their new scholarly community.

In this preconference, the presenters will model constructivist pedagogy and active learning techniques by using the “jigsaw technique”, where attendees meet at tables to discuss each Frame and become “experts” on that Frame. The “experts” then move on to new tables and use their expertise to contribute to the discussion with a new group of participants. Tables will be offered a scenario in order to develop lesson plans or activities using the *Framework*. Attendees will learn about each of the Frames and will collaborate with others to develop student learning outcomes, lesson plans, activities and other interactive techniques based on the *Framework*.

During the workshop attendees will:

- Gain an understanding of the new *Framework* and how it can complement the *Standards* that may already be in place at their institutions;
- Develop lesson plans, activities, and techniques to use to integrate the *Framework* into their practice at all levels; and
- Begin to use the *Framework* to move towards a critical practice that places value on students’ integral role in their educational endeavors.

Theoretical Framework

In the last fifteen years, many librarians have used constructivism to create instruction based on the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000). However, the *Standards* tend to lend themselves to being taught in behaviorist and positivist manners. *Behaviorism* focuses on the transmission of information and places importance on the “stimulus-response nexus”, which is the intersection of a desired behavior and a reward/reinforcement (Johnson, 2007, p. 107). The *Standards* include numerous desired behaviors; however, they are problematic in that they do not treat students as individuals with unique motivations (Farkas, 2012). *Positivism* posits that information/knowledge is “neutral” and can be “obtained” – that it exists outside of any construct (Kapitzke, 2003). The *Standards* reinforce this “positivist epistemology in which there are singular physical and social realities, or ‘worlds,’ separate from the student....” (Kapitzke, 2003, p. 4).

By basing library instruction on the *Standards*, librarians were encouraged to teach students discrete skills. However, what was often left out of these lessons was the context for the skills students were learning, making it difficult for them to transfer their lesson. Another problem with the *Standards’* foundation is that it support Freire’s (1970/2000) banking model of education, in which librarians “deposit” information skills and abilities into students, and once deposited, no further development is needed. We want to see these same students’ previous experience and knowledge is recognized and honored.

To address these problems, we need to flip our way of thinking. When we started with the *Standards* and related Outcomes, we were teaching skills to students in the hopes that this collection of skills would foster certain habits of mind. When we base our instruction off of the *Framework*, what we are doing is providing students with the habits of mind and a context in which to better understand the skills they learn, and they do the situating themselves. The *Standards* focus on what *we want the students to do*, but the student voice tends to be lost in the process. How can we refocus on the student as active agent in her own learning?

The *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2015) can help us to refocus on the student’s role in the learning process and honor the student’s past experiences that he or she brings to the classroom. The *Framework* has foundations in threshold concept theory, constructivism, and critical information literacy. Threshold concepts offer a conceptual view of information literacy and move us away from discrete, mechanistic skills and towards overarching concepts and habits of mind; they are “...core or foundational concepts that...create new perspectives and ways of understanding a discipline or challenging knowledge domain [and] produce transformation within the learner” (ACRL, 2015). With the *Framework*, if students are able to grasp the concepts behind the various frames, they have a better mental model in which to contextualize different skills they learn, whether on their own or in the classroom. By striving to teach these threshold concepts to students, librarians can help with the transfer of learning from one context to the next.

The *Framework* also draws heavily upon constructivist learning theory. In constructivism, "...knowledge is constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experiences" (Driscoll, 2005, p. 387). While librarians had been (and still are) using constructivist pedagogy to create lessons based on the *Standards*, the *Framework* lends itself much more readily to this type of instruction. Within constructivist pedagogy, the emphasis is on the role of the student in constructing her own learning, within her own context. The *Framework* positions students "...as learners whose understanding of information literacy changes over time and with exposure to different communities" (Foasberg, 2015, p. 702). The much more contextual, socially constructed nature of information as portrayed by the frames allows librarians to highlight the students' role in understanding, relating to, and creating the information around them.

The revision of the *Framework* has been heartening to many librarians who strive to incorporate critical information literacy (CIL) into their instruction. In simple terms, CIL can be thought of as "constructivism + social justice"; it honors the experience and knowledge of the student and also recognizes and is critical of existing structures of power and privilege. While the *Framework* is not specifically based in CIL, it leaves more room to use a pedagogy that recognizes the cultural, social, political, and economic systems that influence our understanding and use of information (Beilin, 2015). According to Elmborg (2006), "Literacy is the ability to read, interpret and produce 'texts' appropriate and valued within a given community" (p. 195). The *Framework* emphasizes "dynamism, flexibility, individual growth, and community learning," (ACRL, 2015) while also recognizing that information has value and those that control privileged information have power within their communities.

With all this in mind, the authors urge librarians to use ACRL's adoption of the *Framework* as an opportunity to shift our focus from the "stuff" (what it is and how to find and use it) to the students, their relationship to information, how they can contextualize their information needs, and how they can best understand the value of information in various communities.

Workshop Activities

During the beginning of the workshop, the authors presented on the theoretical underpinnings of the *Standards* and the *Framework* and how the transition to the *Framework* allows librarians to emphasize the student role as active participant in the information ecosystem (see section above).

Then, participants were broken into small groups for the first jigsaw activity. Each table focused on two of the frames from the *Framework* so that each participant would become an "expert" in two frames. After reading through the text of the frames at their tables, participants were asked to consider the following:

- Discuss what each frame means
- How does this frame emphasize the student over the stuff?
- What are some of the challenges this frame poses?
- What questions do you have about this frame?
- What excites you about this frame?

For the second jigsaw, participants returned to their home tables, which were organized by the following topic/activity areas: scholarly/popular sources, internet evaluation, topic/keyword selection, database searching/Boolean logic, and citation/plagiarism/ethical use. Each group of participants was asked to create a lesson plan for their topic area, including learning outcomes, activities, and some sort of in-class assessment. Even though each group had at least one “expert” for each frame, groups were not required to address every single frame within their lesson. Instead, the authors asked them to focus on the most relevant one or two frames that made the most sense for their topic. After creating their lesson plans, groups made presentations, focusing on the frames that were involved, how it was different from a *Standards*-based lesson plan, and how they emphasized the student role.

Additional resources

The slide presentation and the lesson plans/activities created by the attendees can be found online: bit.ly/carl_framework

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