

## Re-Framing Information Literacy for Social Justice

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Abstract: The New ACRL Information Literacy Frameworks provide a more conceptual approach to teaching and learning information literacy in higher education.

Libraries in the United States have a long, although not uncomplicated, history of social justice. The American Library Association has issued a number of policy documents that underscore the profession's support for access to information and education, intellectual freedom, diversity, and resistance to censorship. ALA's Code of Ethics (2008), and the Library Bill of Rights (1996), both originally adopted in 1939, stress the importance of equity of services, of not discriminating against patrons for any reason, and of providing materials representing diverse points of view and not censoring materials due to the background of the author or because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval of content. Similarly, social responsibility, including responding to problems within society and being willing to take a stand on those problems, is considered a core professional value by ALA (2004). Jaeger, Greene Taylor and Gorham (2015) outline the actual and potential ways that American libraries advance social justice and support the human rights of their communities.

The authors also note that most of the discussion and work around social justice in libraries centers on information access, ignoring or glossing over the fact that simply having access to information or the technology through which much information is delivered is not the same as being able to understand, evaluate, and use that information, skills generally associated with information literacy. Librarians have long championed information literacy, implementing programs and services to facilitate the development of information literacy skills in their patrons. Nevertheless, information literacy is rarely discussed within the framework of social justice and human rights, especially within the arena of academic libraries. This article seeks to further the conversation by examining how information literacy relates to social justice and how librarians can further promote social justice through library instruction using the new Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL, 2015) *Framework for information literacy for higher education* as a lens.

Information literacy is widely recognized as a crucial set of skills for success in school, work, and personal life, as evidenced by its incorporation into accreditation standards (Saunders, 2007), and other policy documents like the *Degree qualifications profile* (Lumina Foundation, 2014) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities' *Essential learning outcomes* (AACU, n.d.). With regard to social justice, ALA underscores the importance of information literacy for full participation in a democratic society and indicates that information literacy skills could be integral in "addressing many long-standing social and economic inequities" (1989, para. 3). Sturges and Gasting (2010) build on the United Nations' Alexandria Proclamation and related documents from nations around the world to build a case that information literacy—not just access to information—is a human right, contending that there is "enormous, unexploited scope for professional activity in the area of Information Literacy and a clear map for such

activity can be derived from a line of reasoning that begins with the idea of an information right” (p. 202).

### **Background on the *Framework***

The Task Force that developed the *Framework for information literacy* acknowledges an interest within the library and information science community to address social justice within information literacy. Indeed, they report that an earlier draft version of the *Framework* included a “stronger stance” on social justice issues, but that ultimately they “felt that social justice was not its own frame and that social justice components were better served as pieces of other frames” (ACRL, 2015, question 16). The Task Force contends that the new frames provide scope for addressing these issues, and note that they specifically worked to integrate social justice components into the *Framework*.

Some stakeholders have expressed dissatisfaction with the Task Force’s response to social justice in the *Framework*, even launching a petition highlighting their concerns (National Forum on Information Literacy, n.d.) with about 130 signatories (Battista, Ellenwood, Gregory, Higgins, Lilburn, Harker, & Sweet, 2015). In particular, the group laments “that the new ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* does little to incorporate and explicitly articulate important critical habits of mind of information literacy development such as civic engagement and addressing social justice issues,” (para. 3) and noting that “emphasizing social inclusion; cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts; access issues; critical awareness of the mechanisms of establishing authority, including academic authority; and civic and community engagement would strengthen the *Framework*. Furthermore it would recognize the growing community of librarians committed to social justice and civic engagement” (para. 6). A number of the petitioners expanded on their critique the lack of social justice in the *Framework* in an article in *Communications in Information Literacy* in which they contend that “from a critical information literacy and social justice perspective, the opportunity to fully recognize the political nature of the work of information professionals in higher education has been missed” (Battista, Ellenwood, Gregory, Higgins, Lilburn, Harker, & Sweet, 2015).

At this point, it is worth considering why the Task Force chose not to include a separate frame on information literacy related to social justice. While acknowledging that he did not speak for the Task Force in his post, blogger and Task Force member Troy Swanson (2014) offered two main reasons for rejecting a social justice information literacy frame. First, the frames for information literacy were originally developed around the idea of “threshold concepts,” a theoretical approach which defines “thresholds” or particular concepts which students of the discipline must overcome in order to master understanding of that discipline. According to the theory, threshold concepts must meet five criteria:

- Transformative — cause the learner to experience a shift in perspective;
- Integrative — bring together separate concepts (often identified as learning objectives or competencies) into a unified whole;
- Irreversible — once grasped, cannot be un-grasped;
- Bounded — may help define the boundaries of a particular discipline, are perhaps unique to the discipline; T
- Troublesome — usually difficult or counterintuitive ideas that can cause students to hit a roadblock in their learning (Meyer & Land, 2003).

Swanson (2014) contends that information social justice as a frame was not “transformative ... it is not clear that one must cross this threshold in order to grow toward information literacy” and as such did not meet the criteria for a threshold concept. He argues that it works better as an

application within other frames rather than as a frame in its own right. Further, Swanson suggests that a frame centered on human rights and social justice would appear as a political statement or a values statement and as such did not fit the *Framework*.

Swanson's first point, that information social justice does not fit the requirements of a threshold concept, is difficult to address. Identifying and defining the six frames that are considered threshold concepts to information literacy was done primarily through a Delphi study, in which experts in the field engaged in an iterative cycle of feedback on proposed concepts in order to arrive at consensus on the final six. As is usual with Delphi studies, the participants are anonymous—they were selected by the Task Force but not identified to each other or to the public [In the interest of full disclosure, this author was part of that panel]. While it might be assumed that these experts would have insight into how people, and students in particular, their actual background and expertise is unknown. Apparently, no research have been done to directly study how students interact with information as identified in the frame in order to test their adherence to threshold concept criteria. Since the *Framework* was filed in 2014, and adopted in 2016, there has been ongoing discussion about the importance of threshold concepts as an underpinning theory (Beilin, 2015; Houtman, 2015; Wilkinson, 2014). If threshold concepts continue to be foundational to the *Framework* further research might be warranted to determine whether and how each frame, or new proposed frames, fit the criteria.

Swanson's second point, that a social justice frame might appear to be an unnecessary political statement, raises some interesting questions about higher education and the role of academic libraries. Swanson does not elaborate on why a political statement from ACRL is unnecessary, but one interpretation is that it is not the place of academic libraries to take a political stand and/or that the presentation and instruction of information literacy skills should be "neutral." However, as noted above, ALA, which encompasses ACRL, promotes social responsibility as a core value of librarianship (2004), and emphasizes many of the social justice aspects of information literacy (1989). At a broader level, fueled in part by student protests related to racism and diversity issues on campus, there has been much discussion about the place of social justice education in higher education, especially with regard to supporting democracy, civic engagement, and civil debate.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to undertake a thorough review of the literature on the role of higher education with regard to social justice issues, a number of writers make a compelling case of its importance, often drawing on the writings of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and John Dewey. For example, Nagda, Gurin, and Lopez (2003) discuss the tension between responding to the economic demands of the labor force to educate students for specific employment opportunities, and preparing students to recognize and contend with the social complexities actively participate in a democratic society. Freire notes the importance of teaching critical analysis in order to challenge established hegemonic structures and liberate people from oppression (Freire, 2000). Giroux is particularly emphatic the responsibility of higher education "to expand the pedagogical conditions necessary to sustain those modes of critical agency, dialogue, and social responsibility crucial to keeping democracies alive" (2011, p.13). He elaborates on the dangers of a neoliberal approach to higher education, which promotes market values over social justice issues, contending that it reinforces racist, classist, and sexist structures (Giroux, 2014). In an interview with *Truthout*, Giroux asserts that students are "now taught to ignore human suffering and to focus mainly on their own self-interests and by doing so they are being educated to exist in a political and moral vacuum" (Harper, 2016, para.10).

Such arguments are echoed by academic librarians. Battista, Ellenwood, Gregory, Higgins, Lilburn, Harker, and Sweet (2015) propose that by avoiding a social justice stance the *Framework* is accepting the status quo of neoliberal education and its inherent perpetuation of racist, classist, and sexist structures, while Beatty (2014) goes further to suggest that information literacy *Framework* documents and definitions actually embrace a neoliberal philosophy. Tewell (2015) argues the importance of a social justice orientation for information literacy in order to empower students to critique and challenge these inherent power structures. These arguments offer a strong case for reconsidering the appropriateness of an information social justice frame. Indeed, it could be argued that by avoiding taking a specific political stance, ACRL is by default promoting the status quo.

### **Addressing Social Justice in the *Framework***

If one accepts that social justice should be addressed in some way within higher education generally, and information literacy specifically, the question remains how best to address it. As noted above, the ACRL Task Force recognized the calls for social justice within the *Framework*, and responded by attempting to weave attention to social justice issues into the knowledge practices and dispositions that contextualize each frame, and through the suggested activities and assignments that accompany the frames, rather than creating a separate frame. Swanson (2014) suggest that two frames in particular—Information Has Value, and Scholarship as a Conversation—as areas that could benefit from a social justice lens. Battista, Ellenwood, Gregory, Higgins, Lilburn, Harker, and Sweet (2015) also include Authority is Constructed and Contextual to this list, and detail specific ways in which each of these frames could be used to address social justice issues and questions. Thus, this section of the paper will briefly review existing suggestions for these frames, and then detail possible social justice approaches to the remaining frames, followed by the proposal of a new, additional frame on information social justice.

Evaluating information resources for authority is one area that lends itself well to social justice education. Too often, students are taught evaluation through a checklist approach, in which certain credentials such as a PhD or affiliation with a research organization and publishing norms such as peer-review are accepted as surrogates for authority. While these criteria might be a good starting point, it is unclear how students are encouraged to go further in their assessment and in fact students might not see any need to critique information sources if they meet these initial criteria. As currently written, the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame does acknowledge that even standard sources and authorities might be questioned, encouraging students to “question traditional notions of granting authority and recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews” (ACRL, 2015) and to identify and acknowledge their own bias when evaluating sources. In this way, the *Framework* seems to open the world of scholarly conversation to consider marginalized voices and non-traditional publishing formats that might be otherwise overlooked. Students could be pushed even further to examine the structures and standards by which academic authority is traditionally constructed and to critique the ways in which these tend to privilege certain voices (Battista, Ellenwood, Gregory, Higgins, Lilburn, Harker, and Sweet, 2015).

The idea of authority can also be extended to discussions of Scholarship as Conversation, exploring issues of who is allowed or welcomed into the scholarly conversation. The *Framework* addresses this issue by encouraging students to recognize barriers to entering the conversation, including that “systems privilege authorities and that not having a fluency in the language and process of a discipline disempowers their ability to participate and engage”

(ACRL, 2015). Further, the frame acknowledges that widely accepted or sanctioned arguments might not represent the only or the best information on a topic. Again, Battista, Ellenwood, Gregory, Higgins, Lilburn, Harker, and Sweet (2015) expand the topic further by suggesting that the frame could also encourage people to consider scholars' motivations for publishing. For instance, for some academics, publishing is a requirement of the job and as such might influence them to choose certain publishing formats or outlets that are considered more prestigious. Further, scholars might also be motivated to or dissuaded from pursuing certain research topics based on whether that topic is sanctioned or considered worthy of study by others in the field. Certainly, some research topics are more likely to receive grant funding or more likely to be published, which could influence scholars' choice of those topics to study (see, e.g, Lawson, Sanders, & Smith, 2015).

When discussing the frame Information has Value, the emphasis tends to be on concepts of copyright and intellectual property, as well as related issues such as plagiarism and citation. However, ACRL does note within the knowledge practices for this frame that students should be aware of barriers to accessing information and of the fact that current systems of information production and dissemination marginalize certain groups. The frame also encourages students to "examine their own information privilege" (ACRL, 2015). These issues can also connect back to the frames on authority and scholarship as conversation, since a lack of access to information, due to cost or copyright restrictions, could impact a person's ability to join in scholarly conversation. Lawson, Sanders, and Smith (2015) challenge the conceptualization on information as a commodity rather than a public good, and examine open access as a way of equalizing access.

Information Creation as Process and Research as Inquiry both overlap with some of the frames above in terms of their social justice orientation. For example, Research as Inquiry focuses on the formulating research questions and the iterative process of investigating that topic, but the frame supports considering multiple perspectives and keeping an open mind with regard to information and its sources. These knowledge practices and dispositions could dovetail with considering different and alternative constructions of authority and thus widening the circle of scholarly conversation. Similarly, Information Creation as Process entails understanding how the format and packaging of information can influence understanding. This frame could be coupled with Authority is Constructed and Contextual to examine how formats that are often dismissed as not scholarly, such as blog posts and op-eds, could be considered scholarly or authoritative depending on the authorship, which could again widen the scholarly conversation to include other voices. This frame could also be connected to Information has Value to encourage students to consider the economic structures needed to produce different formats of information, and how those structures impact other aspects of the information such as access, authority, and so on. Pushed further, this frame could support the examination of how marginalized voices and unsanctioned topics might have to find alternative formats to enter the conversation if they are systematically excluded from more traditional formats.

On its surface, Search as Strategic Exploration, appears to be the most skills- and process-based frame, with its emphasis on defining research needs and developing search strategies. The knowledge practices include brainstorming for relevant keywords and concepts, and using search language including subject headings and controlled vocabularies appropriately. However, this frame could be expanded beyond these skills to include critical reflection on the structures and practices of searching. For example, Drabinski (2009, 2013) and Drabinski and Hann (2009) discuss how classification systems can reinforce racist, sexist, and classist systems

through the use of outdated or offensive language and dubious hierarchical structures. When teaching students how to navigate these systems, librarians could also encourage students to reflect critically on the language and systems and to consider how the terminology and hierarchies influence their understanding of the information they are retrieving.

### **Information Social Justice: Proposing a New Frame**

Since the *Framework* has already been filed and adopted, and librarians have already begun developing assignments, activities, and rubrics and publishing guides and books based on the new frames, efforts to add a new frame might seem belated. However, ACRL documentation and at least some Task Force members suggest that the *Framework* is open to ongoing change. The introduction to the *Framework* states that the frames are “flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards or learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills” (ACRL, 2015) and further contends that “these lists should not be considered exhaustive.” Likewise, Swanson (2014) characterizes the *Framework* as a living document and challenges ACRL members to propose a new frame centered on social justice, asking how it would be defined, and what knowledge practices and dispositions it would entail.

Even with the invitation to propose new frames, however, the fact that social justice is or could be addressed in each of the existing frames begs the question of whether it is necessary to create a new frame focused on social justice. There are several reasons that support the addition of a new frame rather than integration throughout the *Framework*. First, while the *Framework* introduces some larger and more complex concepts including social justice issues, it is unclear the extent to which most library instructors actually teach to these concepts. To date, the majority of information literacy activity and writing seems to focus on task and process-based skills such as locating and accessing information or properly citing sources (Morgan, 2014; Saunders, 2013; Saunders, 2009). Further, attention to social justice is really concentrated in three frames—Authority is Constructed and Contextual, Information has Value, and Scholarship as Conversation—and even in those frames it is limited to a couple of knowledge practices or dispositions. In reality, social justice is not truly integrated throughout the *Framework*, but is somewhat minimally included in a few places. Burying issues like attention to marginalized voices and critique of traditional constructions of authority deep in the *Framework* makes it less likely that these concepts will be given attention in the classroom and seems to reinforce the “othering” and systematic suppression of these issues and voices. Finally, the attention to social justice as currently written into the *Framework* seems to be mostly passive or reflective. Students are encouraged to recognize barriers, question traditional construction of authority, and examine their information privilege, but there is no suggestion that they could do anything to challenge or alter the system. Ultimately, the current *Framework* would seem to promote the status quo.

Thus, this paper concludes with a proposition for a new frame—information social justice—that would make ethical and moral questions of information production and use more visible and which offers a somewhat more active set of knowledge practices and dispositions to contextualize its implementation.

### **Information Social Justice**

Information is created within existing power structures, and those power structures can impact the production and dissemination of information as well as distort, suppress, or misrepresent information. To understand and use information most effectively, users must be able to examine and interrogate the power structures that impact that information, and analyze the ways that information can be used to both to inform and misinform.

## Knowledge Practices

- Learners who are developing their information literate ability:
- Analyze how each stage of the production, dissemination, organization, location, evaluation, and use of information can be impacted by power structures
- Identify and interrogate those power structures
- Analyze critically sources of information to go beyond basic checklist criteria of author credentials, peer review, etc. to body of research, methodologies, funding sources, conflict of interest, personal bias etc.
- Identify how the commodification of information impacts access and availability
- Recognize when information is missing, incomplete, or inaccessible and recognize the absence of information as an indicator of possible power dynamics and bias
- Analyze how information– both in its absence and its presence, in how it is created, arranged, accessed, etc.– informs opinions and beliefs about the people, ideas, or situations it represents or reflects
- Examine the ways that information can be used to persuade, promote, misinform, or coerce

## Dispositions

- Learners who are developing their information literate ability:
- Engage in informed skepticism when evaluating information and its sources
- Question traditional sources of knowledge and publishing venues
- Reflect critically on their own information behaviors and how they might reflect and perpetuate the status quo
- Question traditional constructions of authority
- Value information and sources from different perspectives
- Recognizes the impact of the filter bubble/echo chamber and actively seeks out diverse sources of information
- Are empowered to work for change in information structures (Saunders, 2016).

It is hoped that this new frame, whether ever adopted formally into the ACRL *Framework*, might serve as a spark to further conversation and action to address issues of social justice within information literacy instruction, and discussion of the purpose and place of social justice within academic libraries and higher education.

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