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# What Standards Do and What They Don't

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## CHAPTER 6\*

# What Standards Do and What They Don't

*Emily Drabinski and Meghan Sitar*

THE ACRL *FRAMEWORK FOR Information Literacy in Higher Education*, filed in February 2015 as one of the organization's "constellation of information literacy documents," emerged from the work of a task force charged with revising the 2000 *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* as part of a cyclical review process.<sup>1</sup> Rather than produce a piecemeal revision of the standards, performance indicators, and outcomes, the *Framework* offers a set of six heuristic frames through which academic librarians can envision and implement local, contextual approaches to information literacy. The *Framework* "is based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts" and "molded using fresh ideas," claiming to offer something other than a "prescriptive enumeration of skills."<sup>2</sup>

The *Framework's* emphasis on local context as a driver of teaching and learning in libraries suggests an affinity with radical or critical pedagogies in libraries. Indeed, one of the mainstay critical arguments against the *Standards* has been opposition to prescriptive, globalized outcomes.<sup>3</sup> The *Framework* offers a way of reconceiving information literacy that accounts for critical perspectives. The focus on local translation and use has meant widespread support for the *Framework* from many allied with critical information literacy perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

While we acknowledge the value of the incorporation of critical perspectives into the *Framework*, we want to suggest that the document, even as it

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argues against universalizing standards, is itself simply another standard. As a document emerging from the center of the professional body, the *Framework* can convey only an authorized account of information literacy. By strenuously claiming that it is not a standard, the language of the *Framework* disavows its own power as an organizing document. We argue that the disavowal of power only makes that power harder to identify and grapple with.

Simultaneously, the refusal of the task force to argue for the *Framework* as a new and superior standard sidesteps what would surely be a fractious professional debate. In the process, the refusal also cedes the power that standards have to communicate across disciplinary sites. Standards documents have transactional power, enabling librarians to communicate with institutional and professional accrediting bodies, for example, when making claims for their value. While librarians have mustered significant critiques of measuring value,<sup>5</sup> we must also persist in the environment we find ourselves in. The *Standards*, right or wrong, served a strategic function, enabling librarians to claim for themselves a place at the table.

This chapter makes two arguments, both of which attempt to move a discussion of critical information literacy from the domain of classroom practice to that of institutional critique. We suggest that the purpose of the profession's governing body is to produce the kinds of documents that enable librarians to fulfill institutional mandates and make claims for institutional resources. The *Framework*, even as it lays claim to a critical status, makes it harder for librarians to do this. In return, librarians are offered the promise of local freedom, a freedom that is very much constrained in a neoliberal context of reporting requirements and quantitative assessments. This is not an argument for producing a more critical, "better" set of information literacy standards or frameworks for the field, nor is it a rejection of standards altogether. Instead, we argue that standards are instrumental tools of institutional power that ought to be wielded strategically rather than disavowed. How might we use standards not as truth-telling mechanisms, but as doorways into conversations among ourselves and other standards-making bodies in higher education?

## What Is a Standard?

Standards are tools that order the world so that it can be navigated and comprehended without being made new each time. Lawrence Busch describes standards as "the ways in which we order ourselves, other people, things, processes, numbers, and even language itself."<sup>6</sup> Having something in common with rules, regulations, and mores, standards produce a legible social world that governs interactions among and between people and things, allowing us to reliably insert a plug into a socket to access energy and trust that the other drivers will stop at their red lights. Standards are necessary for social life.

Libraries are governed by a vast array of standards. Classification standards like the Dewey BIBFRAME and MARC 21 organize resource description. CQL and Z39.50 govern information retrieval systems.<sup>7</sup> NISO generates standards that order nearly every aspect of library technical practice, from the metrics and statistics we gather to the quality of paper deemed acceptable for our collections.<sup>8</sup> The American Library Association describes four general areas where standards and guidelines are recommended for professional practice: service, procedural, educational, and technical. Librarians who practice information literacy instruction are governed by a standard that defines “a level of excellence or adequacy in performance of library service.”<sup>9</sup>

Because they determine so much of how we behave in the world, standards are also about power. James C. Scott has usefully investigated forms of standardization that emanate from the state as a mechanism of control.<sup>10</sup> The standardization of last names, birth dates, and land tenure, for example, enable all kinds of state functions, from taxation to the administration of public health measures. They simultaneously produce resistance to those functions, as people governed by these standards evade taxes in protest of militarism or avoid mandatory vaccinations on religious or ethical grounds. Standards, as Scott argues, produce the state as “the vexed institution that is the ground of both our freedoms and our unfreedoms,”<sup>11</sup> both limiting and enabling everyday life.

If governmental standards are productive of state power, professional standards are productive of professional power. The Association of College and Research Libraries gains institutional power in part through its production of various standards. These standards then shape the professional practice of librarians who, whether they comply or resist their strictures, arrange their practice around the documents that emerge from the professional association. The *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* generated strong supporters, like those who signed the “Open Letter Regarding Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education,” where “the Standards are working well in New Jersey libraries.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the *Standards* generated enough opposition that by 2010, John Buschman could claim that resistance to them constituted “a significant portion of the theoretical ‘voice’ of IL thinking.”<sup>13</sup> Regardless of which “side” is “right,” it is difficult to contest that ACRL—through its production of the *Standards* and other documents in the information literacy “constellation”—sets the terms of the debate. The professional organization determines in part what we are all either for or against.

## How the *Framework* Is a Standard

The *Framework* document tells a story about itself that sets it apart from the structural and institutional forces that produced the IL *Standards* in the early part of the century. This story casts the *Framework* as the product of an excep-

tional present, “rapidly changing” and “dynamic and often uncertain,” requiring a “richer, more complex set of core ideas” to guide professional practice. The document simultaneously relies on the production of a discourse of change and uncertainty that requires a shift away from a standards document and the production of a set of fixed “foundational” ideas that are not subject to change. These foundational ideas are cast by the *Framework* document as work that articulates “essential” ideas, particularly threshold concepts, fixed “passage-ways or portals” to understanding in a discipline.<sup>14</sup> In this rendering, disciplines themselves are fixed; the doors may change, but the rooms remain the same.

Similarly, the *Framework* lists six threshold concepts that librarians defined for students in an unpublished Delphi study as being transformative, integrative, bounded, irreversible, and troublesome. These threshold concepts by their nature standardize the “troublesome knowledge” of a discipline, ordering list-like the stuck places of learning in the discipline.<sup>15</sup> As Lane Wilkinson writes, “threshold concepts have a way of reducing all of our students to a single idealized student who learns a particular way.”<sup>16</sup> Even as the *Framework* sets itself apart from the fixity produced by the *Standards*, it standardizes the experience of becoming information-literate, fixing in time “foundational ideas” that must be understood by teaching librarians. While the *Framework* asserts a “dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem,” its six concepts remain static truths that should be relied upon to guide local teaching practices and create a “new cohesive curriculum for information literacy.”<sup>17</sup>

It is worth noting that Jan Meyer and Ray Land did not intend threshold concepts to be defined list-like for disciplines as an approach to structuring curricula.<sup>18</sup> Instead, they were offered as a flexible framework for considering pedagogical approaches without focusing on learning outcomes. Megan Oakleaf writes, “While some educators have suggested threshold concepts for a particular subject area, no disciplines have yet codified an agreed-upon list. Rather most educators use the idea of threshold concepts as a stimulus for conversing with colleagues or way of reflecting on their own pedagogy.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Meyer and Land intended threshold concepts to circulate, as ideas do in scholarly discourse. The rhetoric of the *Framework* document and discussions around it suggests that the task force had circulation in mind as well. The *Framework* deploys threshold concepts in order “to create wider conversations about student learning.”<sup>20</sup> In their defense of the role of threshold concepts in the *Framework*, Lori Townsend, Silvia Lu, Amy Hofer, and Korey Brunetti position the *Framework* “as a part of an ongoing conversation.”<sup>21</sup> While we would not dispute the value of circulating ideas via professional and scholarly discourse—we are working on this book chapter over our summers!—we do believe this analysis fundamentally misunderstands the ways that power works in the production of centralized, consensus documents that emerge from our professional center. The *Framework* transforms intellectual work meant to

promote reflection about the philosophy and practice of teaching into a codified set of foundational truths intended to organize local information literacy learning outcomes. This is a structural effect of being a document codified as part of the professional “constellation of documents,” one that cannot be side-stepped simply by claiming to be outside that centralizing mechanism.

Since its filing, the *Framework* has been a site of the concentration of power. Resources, both human and financial, have flooded toward the *Framework* as it becomes a central node in professional discourse about information literacy. ACRL has approved funding for a Visiting Program Officer responsible for working with librarians to implement the ideas in the *Framework* and appointed an advisory board “for the growth and development of the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.”<sup>22</sup> Regional information literacy conferences like the Augustana Information Literacy Workshop and the Indiana University Libraries Information Literacy Colloquium focused their work on the *Framework* in 2015.<sup>23</sup> LOEX added a third event to 2015, a Fall Focus session focusing on the *Framework*.<sup>24</sup> ACRL 2015 offered workshops about the implementation of the *Framework*, and ALA Annual 2015 saw both updates on the *Framework* meant for a large audience and hands-on sessions to help librarians “get started” using the *Framework*.<sup>25</sup> Discussions of the *Framework* became so central to the professional discourse that some academic librarians professed “*Framework* fatigue.”<sup>26</sup> The concentration of resources in the hands—and careers—of librarians affiliated with the *Framework* is not wrong or bad or in need of correction. Rather, it is an expected outcome of the production of a standardizing document authorized by the professional association. One of the ways we can recognize the *Framework* as a standards document is by articulating it as a site or receptacle for professional resources and power. Acknowledging rather than disavowing this power can help critical librarians negotiate with and against the *Framework* as a standard for teaching and learning in libraries.

## How the *Framework* Is Not a Standard

As we have argued, the *Framework* functions as a standard. And yet, the *Framework* and the librarians who worked on composing it consistently argue that it is not a standard. This assertion suggests that the *Framework* will not be deployed as a standard, and so will not yield the institutional power that standards can produce. That institutional power takes the form of classroom space and library personnel as well as a place at the table in national conversations about higher education funding.<sup>27</sup>

Where the *Framework* fails for us as a critical information literacy intervention is in its disavowal of power. In claiming for itself no role in standard-

izing information literacy learning outcomes—while simultaneously fixing in place “big ideas”—the *Framework* gives up the platform on which librarians stand when making claims for resources at the institutional level. By adopting a document that asserts an anti-competency-based approach to student learning, ACRL potentially gives up its voice in broader national conversations about student learning in higher education. Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe shared her comments on the third draft of the *Framework* publicly on Facebook:

If the ACRL Board wants to try and change the higher education system and move it away from standards, competency-based models, and large-scale alignment of learning outcomes across institutions to facilitate transfer and accountability, that is certainly a decision the Board can make—though I think it ill-advised politically as out-of-sync with ACRL’s Standards for Libraries in Higher Education, the role ACRL has attained in setting a national standard for information literacy learning assessment, etc. If ACRL no longer states a national standard for information literacy learning, I believe we should be prepared for another profession—probably academic technologies—to step in and do so.<sup>28</sup>

In a higher education environment with a hyperfocus on accountability and the transferability of skills, we wonder what is lost if the *Standards* are sunsetted and the constellation of information literacy documents is reduced to the single star of the *Framework*.

This is not an argument that competency-based approaches are better, or that the culture of assessment and accountability should not be resisted. Indeed, a critical information literacy approach demands reflective and engaged classroom practice that insists on context-dependent teaching and learning in libraries. For librarians taking a critical approach to the work of information literacy instruction, the *Framework* appears to break away from the prescriptive, authoritarian aims of the *Standards*. Reactions to the *Framework* have included excitement about its potential to shift conversations away from learning outcomes and toward conversations about pedagogy and the “big questions” of information literacy. These are energizing possibilities to consider when examining one’s local teaching context, and the discussions around the *Framework* have promoted awareness of the need for a more critical approach to the work that we do. These are all aims worth supporting, and ACRL’s fostering of these discussions about pedagogy at the national level represents a breakthrough in the profession’s normalizing of librarians in the role of educator. The *Standards*, however, offer librarians *institutional* power, giving librar-

ians a tool for articulating our relevance in the higher education enterprise, with a national standard as evidence of the importance of our role in student learning. Without a shared set of information literacy learning outcomes that are sanctioned by our professional organizations, librarians risk giving away the profession's power to assert authority in conversations about learning in libraries.

## Conclusion

Critical approaches to teaching and learning in libraries have offered ways for individual librarians to think deeply and contextually about their practice. Threshold concepts have recently entered this discourse, as has metaliteracy, but these are just two strands of thought in a discourse that also includes critical race theory, queer theory, Marxism, feminism, and a broad range of other theoretical and political analytic tools and, yes, frameworks. The *Framework* document centralizes and normalizes just two of these approaches in the name of extending a critical perspective to information literacy writ large.

We see two central issues with this move. First, the *Framework* fixes in place a universalizing conceptual approach to the “big ideas” in information literacy. To the extent that critical approaches rely on resistance to fixed norms, the *Framework* becomes just another fixed norm to resist, to be contested because of the claim to truth it makes on behalf of itself and against the range of other ideas that could have been placed at the center of the profession. Why threshold concepts? Why not queer theory? And had queer theory been placed at the center, we would be asking, Why queer theory?

Second, the *Framework* fails to acknowledge both its role in producing itself as a center of professional, institutional power and the power that standards documents have and have had in producing the institutional space that allows for resistance to them. Proclaiming a break from the *Standards* document that preceded it, the first draft of the *Framework* specifically eschewed the *Standards* in its introductory material in a multi-paragraph section titled “Refocusing the Current Standards: Creating a Framework.” The document addressed the *Standards*' conception of information literacy “as a limited, almost formulaic approach to understanding a complex information ecosystem.”<sup>29</sup> While this section was removed from the final draft of the document in response to feedback gathered as part of the revision process, the blog post from ACRL president Karen Williams upon the board's acceptance of the *Framework* into its “constellation of documents” summarized the tension between the *Standards* and the *Framework*: “Many members expressed excitement about the *Framework* and intend to begin working with it immediately. Others see its value, but believe it pairs well with a set of standards. We've



heard so many perspectives on the value or lack of value of standards, that we feel conversation around sunsetting the *Standards* is best deferred until we've had more opportunity to see how the *Framework* builds."<sup>30</sup> The *Framework* and its presentation to the profession as suggestively anti-*Standards* explicitly cedes the power that standards produce for the profession as a whole. Given a higher education environment where compliance and accountability are standards-based, the *Framework* attends in interesting ways to the critical concerns of classroom practice, but obscures the very real operations of power that produced that classroom in the first place.

## Notes

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