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# A THRESHOLDS CONCEPTS APPROACH TO THE STANDARDS REVISION

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## CONTINENTAL DRIFT

The upcoming revision of the *Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* brings to mind Hollywood legend Mae West. She once said, "I used to be Snow White, but I drifted." Only in our case, the *Standards* didn't drift; the world around us did.

Before considering the trouble with standards—and a possible alternative way to do the ACRL *Standards*, we should have a moment of praise for standards. Standards remind us of our instructional goals at the national, programmatic, and individual levels, while helping us fulfill those goals. They help us orient newbies to our instructional content, formulate assessment strategies, and explain our practice to administrators and faculty. In short, they provide common language describing our teaching content. We need standards, and we need them to be good.

That is why, 13 years after they were adopted, the ACRL *Standards* are due for a retrofit. Think about it: They were developed around the same time that Larry Page and Sergey Brin were designing their PageRank algorithm. The current *Standards* do not account for the post-Google information landscape in which a blizzard of emerging technologies and unprecedented modes of information access have dramatically changed our culture. We are operating in radically transformed territory using a guidebook from another era.

## INTRODUCING THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

Threshold concepts are a theory of teaching and learning proposed by two British

educators, Jan Meyer and Ray Land. Threshold concepts can be used for teaching information literacy and could inform the *Standards* revision as well. There are five definitional criteria that make a concept a threshold concept:

- 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;
- Troublesome — usually difficult or counterintuitive ideas that can cause students to hit a roadblock in their learning (Meyer & Land, 2003).

Meyer and Land's approach is helpful in getting beyond procedural instruction, such as database demos, so that we can share the bigger concepts that make information literacy exciting and worth learning about. Their model also takes into account the relationship between the affective and cognitive aspects of learning. Threshold concepts resonate with what we experience both as students and as teachers about how real learning works.

Using threshold concepts helps us become more reflective, empathetic teachers while at the same time revealing the complexity underlying the content we teach. In fact, one of the most accessible applications of this theory is using it to improve our teaching practice. This is because threshold concepts

help us to deeply consider the teaching content itself.

If this learning theory sounds a bit familiar, that may be because it draws on other pedagogical models that librarians have engaged with over the years. What threshold concepts can add to the existing conversation is a focus on the transformative content that is unique to our field. A consistent finding of ongoing research to determine threshold concepts for information literacy is that while the proposed threshold concepts relate to the existing standards, they prioritize content in a way that the current *Standards* do not.

## STANDARDS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

The ACRL Information Literacy Standards Committee is well aware that the current mélange of competencies, outcomes, and performance indicators needs reworking. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards Review Task Force (2012) recommended extensive revision that not only encompasses other literacies, such as digital literacy and visual literacy, and students as content creators and curators, but also simplifies and de-jargon-ifies the current document (full disclosure: Lori Townsend, one of this article's authors, is a member of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education Task Force, which is charged with writing the new standards based on the earlier Task Force's recommendations). However, the revision plan glosses over a key problem with the current document: It does not fulfill the basic function of providing guidance to instructors in prioritizing what to teach.

Take a real-world example of this failure: You are a brand new instruction librarian,

psyched about your first job out of library school and getting ready to start teaching your first class. What will you cover? You have a few documents in front of you. You have a syllabus and an assignment, maybe. You have your instruction program's mission, which hopefully relates to the library and institution's missions and certainly references the ACRL *Standards*. So you are looking at that as well. But your eyes are glazing over, and there seems to be no way in. You either set aside the *Standards* or invest hours in modifying them so that they fit your need. What exactly is going wrong here?

The problem can be unpacked using a framework suggested by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, who are known for their "backward design" approach to curriculum development (1998). The current ACRL *Standards* show symptoms of all three common problems with standards that Wiggins and McTighe identify:

- The "overload problem": With 5 standards, 22 performance indicators, and over 90 learning outcomes, the *Standards* list an overwhelming amount of content for even a quarter- or semester-long credit-bearing course.
- The "Goldilocks problem": The *Standards* are both an aspirational document and a practical document. Therefore, wonderfully big ideas and important details coexist on more or less equal footing. Many outcomes are either too big or too small, with only a few being "just right."
- The "nebulous problem": Perhaps the most serious shortcoming of the current *Standards*, some statements are

so vague that they make it impossible to pin down what is and is not information literacy. Information literacy concepts are conflated with the overarching goals of undergraduate education, such as critical thinking or other literacies. Mission creep and overreach contribute to existing communications problems with faculty and administrators (Townsend, Brunetti, & Hofer, 2011).

Taking a giant step back, another issue with ACRL's *Standards* and with standards in general is that they often treat our content as settled. As James Elmborg (2012) points out in his work on critical information literacy, librarians tend to "stabilize problems and solve them" (p. 75). We often respond to the superficial symptoms of troublesome content rather than examining the underlying concepts that students may be missing. The beginning instruction librarian might default to database demos or "bibliographic instruction" (i.e., teaching to tools and processes) in the absence of profession-wide encouragement to understand and share the big ideas that are unique to our field.

## THRESHOLD CONCEPTS: PART OF THE SOLUTION

Threshold concepts address Wiggins and McTighe's overload problem by identifying and prioritizing the meaningful, difficult concepts that underlie seemingly straightforward content. They take care of the Goldilocks problem by placing our instructional content in its proper order: Details naturally fall into place underneath threshold concepts in a way that highlights how they are interrelated.

Addressing the nebulous problem is a major challenge in the *Standards* revision process. Mixing foundational principles of information science with new literacies or larger curricular goals muddies the waters. Threshold concepts can help by clarifying our focus and limiting our content to that which is unique to our discipline. This does not mean eliminating the pursuit of broader goals, such as critical thinking and lifelong learning, but it does mean pursuing those expansive aims while teaching our own content, as do the faculty of other disciplines in the university.

To take Elmborg's analysis into account, our standards need to acknowledge that the information landscape is shifting and complex. There are broad principles that librarians use to manage our understanding of the changes underway, and it is these principles that we need to teach. We do our students no favors by oversimplifying in an effort to make our material more palatable.

Remember one of the reasons we like standards so much in the first place: They offer a high-level understanding of information literacy. However, that big picture must be clear. The conceptual knowledge underpinning the skills and proficiencies we hope our students will gain should be obvious, distinct, and logically organized. It is essential to incorporate theories of information literacy, such as threshold concepts, which provide a context for reflective teaching into the new standards.

## THRESHOLD CONCEPTS: LIMITATIONS

A disclaimer: Threshold concepts are not a miracle cure for our standards ailments. In particular, threshold concepts do not directly address skill acquisition or learning at the

level of performance indicators. Similarly, threshold concepts are of limited use for one-shot instruction because a fundamental feature of crossing a learning threshold is that it takes some time to accomplish. Threshold concepts should not be the only teaching strategy in our toolbox, given that the 50-minute library session seems to be here to stay.

Furthermore, the threshold concepts for information literacy are not yet developed enough to generate the type of student assessment data currently sought by administrators, accreditors, and others who use the *Standards* to prove the library's value proposition. Neither is there a comprehensive curriculum that implements a threshold concept approach to information literacy instruction. We are in the early days of investigation, which is exciting; but much more work remains to be done before this vision is fully articulated.

## THRESHOLD CONCEPTS IN ACTION

As the saying goes, first you make your habits, then your habits make you. The old *Standards* both reflect and have helped to develop the practice of information literacy instruction. So it is a safe bet that the revised standards will have an impact on frontline librarians for the next decade or so. What would threshold, concept-based information literacy standards look like?

Consider an example, ACRL's *Standard 5*: "The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally" (American Library Association, 2000). There are three performance indicators and 13 outcomes listed under this

standard, encompassing wide-ranging issues such as electronic privacy and freedom of speech, as well as mechanical ones such as using proper "Netiquette" in online discussions. Overload, Goldilocks, nebulous - check, check, check.

A related threshold concept would be Information as a Commodity:

Thinking about information in economic terms positions students to better understand their responsibilities as consumers—and producers—of information. This understanding is key because it answers the "why" question behind academic practices that may otherwise seem mystifying or pointless, such as properly attributing a source. (Hofer, Townsend, & Brunetti, 2012, p. 403)

In other words, this is the big idea that we want students to deeply understand in order to make sense of many of the discrete points laid out in *Standard 5*, including why attribution is important, why we have copyright and fair use laws, and why they might hit a paywall searching on Google Scholar.

An important characteristic of threshold concepts is that they make tacit disciplinary or professional knowledge explicit. There is tacit knowledge that ties together the *Standards'* outcomes and indicators if you happen to be an expert; but being tacit, this knowledge is not available to students, or to faculty from other disciplines, or to beginning information literacy instructors. Keeping the big ideas unstated implies that conceptual understanding is not needed to achieve our learning outcomes. In fact, skill acquisition or tool use needs to come out of conceptual understanding if it is to be

transferable to new environments and, ultimately, to the workplace.

## CONCLUSION

Complex, conceptual understanding cannot be taught in one session but must be integrated into the broader curriculum or taught in the context of a credit-bearing course. Clarifying and prioritizing the content of information literacy will provide essential support for efforts in curriculum mapping and the development of credit courses. At the same time, threshold concepts help by providing a logical rationale for avoiding content not clearly connected to our disciplinary expertise. And while threshold concepts tie together a host of key concepts, guiding students across a threshold like “Information as a Commodity” will require increasing both student and teacher time on task.

This is really throwing down the gauntlet to librarians as teachers and subject experts. Teaching to threshold concepts requires seriously upping our game as instructors and recruiting greater buy-in from our institutions, disciplinary faculty, and students. Luckily, threshold concepts also provide an enticing new approach to lure faculty and administrative interest.

Isn't it time that we got serious about teaching the concepts that underpin real information literacy? That is where the *Standards'* revision should start. If not, we should pack up our database demos and go home.

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