12-19-2013

Minding the Gaps: Exploring the Space Between Vision and Assessment in Information Literacy Work

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REFLECTING ON THE STANDARDS [ARTICLE]

MINDING THE GAPS

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ABSTRACT

The current "ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standard Review Task Force" presents information literacy practitioners with an engaging intellectual endeavor: how might these standards be revised, rethought, re-envisioned? Regardless of what the review yields, the process is an excellent opportunity for us to think broadly and creatively about the *Standards* and to remember that they are not a fixed set of rules but a malleable and evolving document. Asking questions about the practical, pedagogical, and theoretical implications of the Standards and considering alternative approaches will yield engaging, fruitful, and necessary conversations not only about the teaching of information literacy but about our role as librarians within the educational mandates of our institutions.

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It would be nice if all of the data which sociologists require could be enumerated because then we could run them through IBM machines and draw charts as economists do. However, not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted. (William Bruce Campbell, 1963, p. 13)

Information Literacy lies at the core of lifelong learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion of all nations. Lifelong learning enables individuals, communities and nations to attain their goals and to take advantage of emerging opportunities in the evolving global environment for shared benefit. It assists them and their institutions to meet technological, economic and social challenges, to redress disadvantage and to advance the well being of all. (*Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning*, 2006)

The current ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standard Review Task Force presents information literacy practitioners with an engaging intellectual endeavor: How might these standards be revised, rethought, re-envisioned? The June 2, 2012, memo regarding the Task Force Recommendations states that the Association of College and Research Libraries's (ACRL's) current *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000) document "should be extensively revised" because information

literacy has evolved in the past decade due to "changes in technology, scholarly communication, and the information life cycle" (ACRL 2013, p. 1). Today's college students, the document notes, are "tasked with navigating a much wider world of information than ever before. . . . Students are not only information users, they are information creators. . . . Helping students become information literate is more critical than ever before" (p. 2). While I do not dispute that these revisions are important and timely, technological matters are not the only limitations of the current version of the *Standards*. Revising the existing standards to be more in keeping with technological advances does not address the questions that have been raised recently (Harris, 2009; Pankl & Coleman, 2009; Schroeder & Cahoy, 2010; Seale, 2009; Sutherland, 2009).

Regardless of what the review yields, I think the process is an excellent opportunity for us to think broadly and creatively about the individual standards and to remember that they are not a fixed set of rules but a malleable and evolving document. More importantly, to my mind, this process is also an opportunity for all information literacy practitioners to consider the *Standards* writ large: What work does a document like the *Standards* do in our profession? What work might we want this document (or another document) to do? What are the practical, pedagogical, and theoretical implications of having a central document formally called the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* and informally called the *Standards*? Are there other models we can consider? Are there alternative approaches? Are we asking too much of a single document? Asking some of these questions alongside the formal revision of the existing *Standards* will yield engaging, fruitful, and necessary

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conversations not only about the teaching of information literacy, but also about our role as librarians within the educational mandates of our institutions.

Elsewhere in my scholarship, I have argued that consideration of information literacy work must not be limited to the ACRL *Standards*; it must also take into account the vision of information literacy and librarianship articulated in documents such as *Alexandria Proclamation* (2006) and the American Library Association's (ALA's) *Core Values of Librarianship* (2004; Jacobs, 2008; Jacobs & Berg, 2011). According to the *Alexandria Proclamation*, information literacy "lies at the core of lifelong learning" and empowers "people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use, and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion of all nations" (para. 2). Further, it assists individuals and their institutions to "meet technological, economic and social challenges, to redress disadvantage and to advance the well-being of all" (para. 3). In response to the oft-stated belief that it is not part of a librarian's job to teach students issues related to global citizenship, Selinda Berg and I have argued that the ALA's *Core Values of Librarianship* "reminds us that part of our purview as professional librarians includes working toward values such as democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, the public good and social responsibility" (p. 385). In short, I do not see the ACRL *Standards* as the "be all end all" document regarding information literacy but, rather, believe that these three documents need to be put into dialogue with each other to raise vital questions and push our thinking about our information literacy practices and theories a step or two further. One way to move our thinking along is to place our discussions of information literacy in contexts broader than the current *Standards*.

For example, if we look at the *Standards* alongside documents such as the *Alexandria Proclamation*, two very different visions of information literacy emerge. In the *Standards*, information literacy is described in ways that emphasize the individual skills postsecondary students need to succeed in their academic endeavors, whereas the *Alexandria Proclamation*'s focus is less on classrooms and more on global concerns. In its more global focus, the vision of information literacy articulated in the *Alexandria Proclamation* aligns better with critical information literacy than the kind of information literacy described in the ACRL *Standards*. Many information literacy librarians and scholars, including myself, have been drawn to the idea of critical information literacy because it focuses not on problem solving but on problem posing. While the current ACRL approach focuses, for the most part, on solving problems such as distinguishing disreputable information from reputable information, avoiding plagiarism, and searching the complex information world efficiently, critical information literacy is, as Maura Seale (2010) described, more concerned with the "politics and processes of knowledge production" (p. 229). Drawing on the work of Cushla Kapitzke (2001), Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005) argued, critical information literacy "is a deliberate movement to extend information literacy further than the acquisition of the research skills of finding and evaluating information. Instead, it is the 'refram[ing] [of] conventional notions of text, knowledge, and authority' in order to ask more reflective questions about information: "Who owns and sells knowledge?" "Who has access to information?" and "What counts as

information (or knowledge)?" (p. 300). Critical information literacy is deeply informed by critical pedagogy and the work of Paulo Freire (1970, 2000). While we need to be mindful of not "importing" Freire's ideas into our information literacy work, Freire's ideas can help us see our work from different vantage points (Ronald & Roskelly, 2001, p. 612).

Freire was critical of the kind of education he called "banking education" where teachers "deposit" knowledge into students as if they were empty vessels: "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 72). Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 72). The "educational goal of deposit-making," he argued, must be replaced with "the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world" (p. 79). Through problem-posing education,

> people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (p. 83)

I think it is vital to keep in mind Freire's emphasis on the world "not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" because it helps us to connect the work we do with students with "a reality in process, in transformation" and reminds us that the work we do *can be* part of that process and transformation. Critical information literacy charges us with a mission beyond teaching students to find, access, evaluate, use, and understand information: it insists that we take an active role in this "reality in process, in transformation." Above all, we need to be cautious that our teaching does not become "vessel filling."

It is imperative at this juncture to point out some vital differences between the ACRL *Standards* and documents like the ALA *Core Values of Librarianship* and the *Alexandria Proclamation* because they point to two very different kinds of educational impulses (Jacobs & Berg, 2011). The ALA core values document and the *Alexandria Proclamation* are statements, while the ACRL standards document is a framework for assessment. Statements tend to be visionary, formative, and large in scope, whereas assessment frameworks tend to be more evaluative, summative, and focused. In many ways, it is unfair and illogical to compare a visionary statement with an assessment framework. However, when talking about information literacy, we often forget that the ACRL standards document is an assessment framework, not a vision statement. The distinction is often elided in practice since, for many, the ACRL *Standards* become the vision of information literacy because they shape our practice, goals, and curriculum. Similarly, documents like the *Alexandria Proclamation* often get forgotten or put to the side because they do not include concrete or specific goals that we can tangibly work toward in our daily classroom practices. The space between a statement and an assessment framework, then, seems to me to be where the most urgent discussions about information literacy and the *Standards* need to happen. What should our guiding information literacy document be? An assessment-based document? A visionary document? Or some sort of hybrid? How do we be visionary and practical?

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Before addressing these questions, I want to return to questions I raised in 2008 about rubrics and evaluation. Since publishing that article, more and more attention has been drawn to the need to assess what we do and how well we do it. I still believe, as I did then, that we need to be cautious about what we assess and how we assess it. In 2008, I wrote about the use of rubrics and their appeal in assessment: "In these instances, the creative 'messy work' of information literacy becomes neatly compartmentalized into sets of competencies and measurable outcomes with boxes to check with a yes or no" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 126). I also cited Rolf Norgaard (2003) who called this the "'off/ on' paradigm—one that suggests that information literacy amounts to a toggle switch, signaling something one either has or doesn't have" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 126). When we approach teaching and learning in this way, we approach education using the banking model Freire critiqued: We deposit skills and competencies into our students as if they were empty vessels to be filled. In this climate of assessment, however, what are our options?

As a way of looking anew at the role of assessment in information literacy, it is useful to examine what other similar disciplines are considering. In a recent article regarding outcomes assessment (OA) in the field of Composition and Rhetoric, Chris Gallagher (2012) drew attention to the differences between outcomes and consequences. He wrote, "OA is educational common sense. Define goals for student learning, evaluate how well students are achieving those goals, and use the results to improve the academic experience. Who could argue with that?" (p. 42). Gallagher suggested that we do in fact need to argue with this "educational common sense" noting there is a significant difference between outcomes and consequences.

Although Gallagher's focus is on writing programs and English studies, much of his argument is relevant to the work we do in information literacy and in libraries. Drawing attention to the *"practical difference* in the tendencies to which the terms *outcomes* and *consequences* lead," Gallagher argued that "focusing on outcomes tends to limit and compromise the educational experiences of teachers and students, while attention to consequences tends to enhance those experiences" (p. 43). Outcomes are the skills, knowledge, or abilities that students are expected to possess at the end of an activity, unit, lesson, or semester whereas consequences "are always emergent within educational experiences; they cannot be fixed beyond or outside those experiences" (p. 47). Gallagher's example from a writing program illustrates this distinction well:

> In outcomes assessment of student writing, for instance, we norm ourselves to read student writing 'against' (read: through) the outcomes. In so doing, we close our reading selves off from what is surprising or excessive or eccentric about the writing. In our narrow focus on whether outcomes have been met, we also suppress our sense of the singularity and potentiality… of the writer or the writing. Our reading starts not with the student's text, but with the outcome, or the rubric, which conditions what we are able (and unable) to see in the text. (p. 46)

To bring us back to information literacy, if our curriculum, our pedagogy, and our vision of information literacy is rooted only within the outcomes we articulate in our assessment frameworks, we will be unable to see what is "surprising or excessive or

eccentric" in the ways in which our students think about and use information. Given how quickly and dramatically the information world is shifting, it is imperative that we are in touch with what is surprising or excessive or eccentric in our classrooms and how our students are seeing, experiencing, and processing the information world around us.

In arguing for a more consequence-based approach, Gallagher is, helpfully, not at all naïve to the pressures of assessment throughout the educational system and argued that we "need to get involved in conversations in and beyond our institutions about the nature and function of post-secondary assessment" and "advocate for assessment models that we believe in and that are likely to lead to the consequences we desire for our programs, faculty, and students" (p. 48–49). I would second Gallagher's call for more conversations regarding assessment but would add that we, as librarians, also need to look beyond library information studies (LIS) and libraries for models of and discussions about assessment.

For these reasons, I want to draw attention to a document that Gallagher described as "a promising alternative framing and use of educational aims" (p. 51) because I think it could provide librarians with some useful ways to reconsider our current assessment frameworks. The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* document was adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP) in 2011. The *Framework* is based on the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition* (Writing Program Administrators, 2008) document, which "intentionally defines only 'outcomes,' or types of results, and not 'standards' or

precise levels of achievement" (p. 1). "The setting of standards," this document notes, "should be left to specific institutions or specific groups of institutions" (p. 1). There are a number of reasons why I think the *Framework* could be useful for our thinking about information literacy. First, the *Framework* focuses not on outcomes per se, but on "the rhetorical and 21st century skills as well as the habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success" (p. 1). "Habits of mind," *Framework* describes, are "ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students' success in a variety of fields and disciplines" (p. 5). The eight habits of mind identified by this document would, in my mind, work equally well for the work we do in information literacy: "curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, metacognition" (p. 1). Second, the *Framework* embodies a belief that "beyond knowing particular facts or completing mandatory readings, students who develop these habits of mind approach learning from an active stance" (p. 4). Third, the language used in the *Framework* is much less "off/ on" than the current (and problematic) language in ACRL *Standards*.

In its current state, the *Standards* document is, in contrast, less concerned with habits of mind and more concerned with standards, performance indicators, and outcomes. The language in the *Standards* is much more prescriptive, evaluative, and specific. In Standard Three ("The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system"), the performance indicators include skills such as "The information literate student articulates and applies initial criteria for evaluating both the

information and its sources" and outcomes such as "Examines and compares information from various sources in order to evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias" (p. 11). Taken as a whole, the language of the *Standards* suggest that once certain predetermined sets of skills are mastered—or to summon Freire (2002), "deposited" into a student— that student "has" information literacy, presumably for life. Conversely, it is also implied (and problematically so) that if a student does not have all of those precise skills, he or she is not information literate.

The *Framework*, on the other hand, uses language that suggests that fluency in writing and reading is an ongoing, recursive, iterative process and that skills and abilities will be developed and refined not only throughout a course or a degree, but in multiple contexts throughout a lifetime. As a way of contrasting the more binary and prescriptive language found in the ACRL *Standards*, here is an example of the language used in the *Framework* to describe the habit of mind of engagement:

> Engagement is fostered when writers are encouraged to make connections between their own ideas and those of others; find meanings new to them or build on existing meanings as a result of new connections; and act upon the new knowledge that they have discovered. (p. 4).

The language in the *Framework* does not itemize specific skills that are required. Instead, it uses words such as "fostered," "encouraged," "build on," and "act upon." The *Framework* guides teachers and students toward certain habits of mind and practices yet does not prescribe particular skills and tasks nor does it function as a

checklist of skills possessed or not possessed.

Significantly, the *Framework* was developed, in part, as a reaction against the kind of approach that foregrounded "standardized writing curricula or assessment instruments that emphasize formulaic writing for nonauthentic audiences" (p. 3). In other words, as Gallagher described, the *Framework*

> frames broad educational aims over a long period of time, giving the impression that it names only some of the consequences that alert teachers and students ought to pay attention to as they undertake teaching and learning experiences together. There is no attempt to atomize and make measurable detailed skills and content knowledge. (p. 52).

I am particularly drawn to how this document frames its aims over a long period of time and makes no attempt to "atomize and make measureable detailed skills and content knowledge" (p. 52). It is my personal hope that, as information literacy practitioners, we can move away from itemizing skills and indicators to determine an individual's information literacy and focus more on broader educational aims such as the development of particular habits of mind.

At this point, I anticipate the question "but how do we assess broader educational aims or habits of mind?" This is, of course, a valid question and one that Composition and Rhetoric has been grappling with intensely over the past decades. While fascinating and full of potential, the *Framework* has raised a number of questions within its target community, particularly in the area of

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assessment. As Kristine Johnson (2013) observed, not long after the *Framework* was published,

> Participants on the Writing Program Administration listserv (WPA-L) began to consider how habits of mind could be assessed or measured. Questions from within the discipline about assessing habits of mind highlight perhaps the major challenge of enacting the *Framework*: negotiating the tension between the spirit of the document and its public aims. (p. 529)

Johnson's next observation should also resonate with librarians:

> The spirit of the *Framework* asks writing teachers and program administrators to focus on the often-ephemeral intellectual processes that enable students to write and learn. Enacting the spirit resists elements of the national educational landscape, particularly the pragmatic impulse to quantify learning outcomes. (p. 529)

In other words, how do we count the intangible? Or how do we make the intangible count?

For information literacy librarians, to make the things we cannot count count, we may need to switch our attention, as Gallagher described, from outcomes to consequences, from skills, knowledge, or abilities we expect students to possess at the end of a process to those things that "are always emergent within educational experiences; they cannot be fixed beyond or outside those experiences" (p. 47). This switch would require information literacy librarians to do more than swap out terms or change our language. Replacing outcomes for

consequences without "changing the way our institutions and programs *approach* assessment, consequences (or whatever terms we might choose) will simply come to take on the valences that *outcomes* now has" (p. 48). In other words, as a profession we need to change our own habits of mind regarding assessment and outcomes: We cannot simply change the terms without changing how we approach the act of assessment.

As discussions of literacy testing, particularly high-stakes testing, have shown, literacy is never something one has or does not have, and the dangers of deeming someone literate or non-literate are deep and very real. I am concerned that in our attempts to be rigorous and to provide assessment tools with demonstrable results, we may be re-inscribing deeply problematic "literate/ non-literate" binaries. Again, I reiterate what I said in 2008:

> This is not to say that we should not use the ACRL *Standards* or use rubrics: When we use rubrics, however, we need to use them judiciously so that information literacy's tremendous potential for creative, critical, and visionary thinking does not become – literally and figuratively – boxed in and compartmentalized. The dangers of evaluative rubrics are that they attempt to fix what is fluid. (Jacobs, 2008, p. 257).

How do we do the kinds of assessments that are increasingly called for by our libraries and institutions without boxing in or compartmentalizing our information literacy work?

I have been increasingly concerned that the pressures for assessment have led us to

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focus our efforts in information literacy on the things that we can count or itemize. Such an approach is, of course, very logical. However, my concern lies with the fact that if our pedagogies, practices, curriculums, and visions of information literacy are guided by our assessment tool, what happens to the things we cannot count or measure? How do we measure innovation, creativity, or wonder? How do we measure a habit of mind? Or information literacy's impact on an individual's lifelong learning? Or how information literacy empowers individuals to achieve their goals? Or how information literacy works toward the social inclusion of all nations? It is, as far as I can tell, nearly impossible to measure such things, especially in the short term. Undoubtedly, this inability to count or quantify goals such as these is why the larger, loftier goals of information literacy we find in the *Alexandria Proclamation* or the ALA *Core Values of Librarianship* rarely register in any significant way in any of the standards-type documents.

My question for the profession, therefore, is not why the larger, loftier goals of information literacy get left out of assessment processes, but, rather, where might we find places to work toward these goals in our information literacy work? We need to be very mindful not to fall into a trap in which only the things we can count and measure count and the things that cannot be counted do not count.

Freire wrote that in the banking model of education, when students are seen as receptacles who receive, file, and store deposits from the teacher, "the more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is" (p. 72). We need to be similarly mindful that we do not see our students' performances on assessment rubrics as a form of receptacle: The more boxes we check on their assessments, the more we have filled the receptacle, the better a librarian we are. We must not fall into the trap of equating our students' abilities or our worth as librarians with ticks in boxes.

The *Framework*, as Johnson described, "projects a vision of education as interactional, a relationship between teachers and students" (p. 523). In this way, the *Framework* has the potential to move away from the pedagogical model Freire critiqued as "the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher" approach and toward what he calls the "teacher-student with students-teachers" where the teacher is "no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80).

In this article, I am not suggesting that we need to get rid of the ACRL *Standards* and replace it with a version of the *Framework*. Instead, I am suggesting that while we are discussing each standard listed, we should also take time to discuss what the standards do, what we want them to do, what their role in our programs are, what alternatives exist within our profession and beyond. Finally, the question I think is most imperative to consider at this juncture is this: In our assessments, are we counting

> IN OUR ASSESSMENTS, ARE WE COUNTING WHAT IS COUNTABLE AND DISCOUNTING THAT WHICH WE CANNOT COUNT?

what is countable and discounting that which we cannot count? This essay is not an attempt to offer a solution but is a call that we collectively pose the question of how shall we navigate the gaps between our assessment of information literacy and our vision of what information literacy might be.

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