

12-19-2013

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### Recommended Citation

Harris, B. R. (2013). The New ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards: Revising Reception. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 7 (2), 139-145. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2013.7.2.144>

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# THE NEW ACRL INFORMATION LITERACY COMPETENCY STANDARDS

Revising reception

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## ABSTRACT

The publication of educational standards inspires a variety of responses, from wholesale acceptance and deployment to criticism and blame. The author of this paper contends that the revision of the ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* must be accompanied by a critical, conscious, and conscientious reception by librarians and information literacy advocates.

## INTRODUCTION

The ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (Standards)* is currently undergoing revision and will be finished and published to fanfare and angst. Some of us will take hold of the new *Standards* wholesale and revise our instruction programming and planning. Some of us will resist, critique, and question the new version of learning goals, outcomes, and performance indicators; and some of us will long for the former document. Some of us may even be indifferent to this publication. These are all normal responses to change. We should encourage and understand these varied reactions.

But we should not forget the most important part of the process involved in the revision of the *Standards*. We have seen the current *Standards* criticized because they do not include or do everything we could possibly have imagined; likewise, we have seen a mass genuflection to their authority. We know better, this time. As we anticipate their revision, as professionals and information literacy advocates, we must prepare to revise our reception of the *Standards*. We must place the responsibility for a conscious and conscientious reading and deployment of the *Standards* squarely on the shoulders of those of us who utilize it to guide our teaching, instruction programs, professional practice, and research efforts.

**We must do more and better work to understand information literacy development as a community activity.**

The *Standards* include learning outcomes and performance indicators that hinge on an *individual* and his or her growth and development during the process of finding, evaluating, selecting, citing, and using

information. We know, however, that the individual as a learner is something of a fallacy. James Elmborg (2006) agrees, writing that “people produce, read, and interpret texts in communities, not in isolation. Communities reach consensus about interpretation, sometimes easily and sometimes contentiously” (p. 195).

The academic disciplines and educational programs that produce graduates—future professionals and, in some cases, professors—are the communities with whom most higher education librarians interact. We know that this is just one of many communities in which one may participate. Information is found, read, translated, and also created by a wide variety of formal and informal communities, from small social groups to large professional organizations. The individual is rarely in the position of learning and growing outside of these social interactions and responsibilities. Rather, it may be within the structure and order or the chaos and confusion of other voices from those communities that our most transformative information literacy learning events occur.

Do we change the word *individual* that is used in the *Standards* to better reflect the social complexities inherent in learning? This would be only a cosmetic change. The use of the word may stand, but it is our understanding of the word that must be complicated to consider the potential and limitations of learning objectives that focus on an individual who exists outside of time, history, and context.

Instead, we may begin by looking at ourselves, at the myriad communities that have helped us to form and hone our information literate practices, but also the ways that information has been found, circulated, and used by the communities in

which we have participated. Then, we must look to the communities of others to find similarities and differences as we understand the impact of the dynamics of these groups on information literacy development. I must add that this is not a project that has a distinct end point. As soon as we understand the information literacy dynamics of a group, that group will begin to change. However, the complexity of our perspective—a complexity that we can share with colleagues and others—will be much richer in comparison to the individual learner model.

**We must do more and better work to see the characteristics of student communities within the generic term, *students*.**

Projects to understand learners as members of varied information communities and the impact of those communities on their members might also create opportunities to help us identify specific populations that exist within the large, generic group we call *our students*. We use a number of terms like this to refer to a broad sweep of individuals. *Patrons* has been a popular term, as well as *users*—a troubling word in a way, since at one time it was most commonly associated with drug use before its adoption by computer/technology professionals.

Generic references to information communities that seek to totalize and collapse differences as well as similarities lead to generic learning objectives and outcomes. Tara Brabazon (2005) contended that one of the problems with programs dependent on educational standards is that “generic competencies undervalue and unravel the social diversity and plural complexity of our classroom and our libraries” (p. 16). I concur but add that this is not the fault of published competencies so

much as it is the fault of those who attempt to apply generic outcomes on large groups of learners. Further, we are not alone in this activity. Faculty, administrators, and students themselves may be guilty of these same kinds of references.

As we understand the information communities that intersect within our libraries and institutions, we should seek to identify the populations of people who share similarities, differences, et al. Again, this is another project without a discrete ending and would not necessarily result in a tidy, assessable conclusion, and perfect solutions. Instead, it would be another step in the process of revealing the complexities inherent within often generic populations.

Librarians and others would likely have different stakes in developing an understanding of the make-up of the information communities at their institutions. One might choose to locate and understand populations of researchers based on their familiarity and expertise in using library resources. One may look at a population of students and try to gauge the early adopters as opposed to innovators and Luddites. One may look at a population based on reading habits or interests. Ultimately, whether we attempt to understand students in relation to their research-related abilities or more general preferences and behaviors, this information will help us as we endeavor to identify and understand the diversity of our student communities.

**We must do more and better work to ensure that unexpected outcomes receive the same level of attention given to predetermined outcomes designed for assessment purposes.**

I am waiting for the day when I can title an

article, “Assessment is Dead. Long Live Assessment.” Assessment is and will continue to be an important factor in developing our information literacy programs and instruction as we gauge student growth and seek to tell the stories of our efforts to others. At a certain point, however, the need or desire to assess seemingly distracts from the needs and desires related to teaching and learning. Assessment is and should remain secondary to these activities, and yet, we increasingly find ourselves placed in the position of explaining our assessment methods before we even know what we hope to assess.

The *Standards* have served as building blocks for assessment strategies. By providing discrete goals, outcomes, and performance indicators for information literacy learning, the *Standards* have been used as a blueprint from which to plan activities and assessment. Only in our reception of the *Standards* for these purposes may we go too far, tending toward assessment-focused instruction—guided not by the needs of learners or the talents of professionals. We have all heard arguments against “teaching to the test,” but are we guilty at times of “teaching to the assessment” as well?

One of the unstated reasons for our enthusiasm over assessment relates to our interest in *figuring it out*—to determine the most effective and accurate ways to assess information literacy instruction and learning. Strategies now exist, and we have spent considerable time and energy across the profession to develop reliable assessment methods. From reviews of student work to complex ethnographic analysis projects, and from more traditional forms such as surveys and testing, we have a variety of options that have proven useful in our assessment efforts. The new

*Standards* likely will encourage a new crop of assessment strategies and methods.

It is important, though, if we are to maintain a bridge between teaching, learning, and assessment that we leave room—or rather, create room—for unexpected, almost accidental, learning outcomes and that we pay attention to these instructional consequences. We must be careful that we do not become so focused on the assessments we intend to conduct that we neglect the surprises that can occur in and outside of the classroom. In the future, innovation will not spring from yet another assessment strategy designed to gauge the performance indicators of a specific learning goal. Rather, ingenuity, creativity, and the longevity of our teaching and learning efforts may be based on what was not planned or intended: those outcomes that were not predicted in a set of educational standards.

**We must do more and better work to clarify our understanding of the *Standards* dealing with values, information, and information literacy.**

In 2008, I published an article on the learning outcomes in the *Standards* related to the ways a researcher’s values are reflected in the discovery, location, and evaluation of information, as well as its use in the creation of new information. Just as I was surprised to find these in a document with which I felt very familiar, the responses I received from readers confirmed that I was not alone. It may still surprise us when we see these references in the current *Standards*, considering the paucity of attention they have received during the life of this document.

This lack of attention has occurred for a number of fairly understandable reasons.

First, there are other learning outcomes that seem either more manageable or more necessary for students to achieve as they engage in their academic tasks. The time for instruction or discussion related to information and values just is not available. Second, I wonder if we have been uncomfortable with outcomes that require the presentation of personal values and beliefs. We have been careful to avoid pedagogies of disclosure in other professional activities (such as reference services), and have been equally cautious in the classroom. In this way, we have upheld one of our professional ethics—that we remain uninterested, or at least nonjudgmental, parties in the process of supporting others as they find, evaluate, and use information. Likewise, this may also be a barrier to our understanding of the relationship between information literacy development and the values of learners. Finally, as reflected by the revisions of the *Standards* conducted by groups that have removed values-related standards or revised them to relate only to the bias inherent in information, it is possible that some of us have decided that values are not at play when researchers locate, evaluate, and use information.

Let us go ahead and set aside that third possible reason. The Australian iteration of the *Standards*, which borrowed heavily from the ACRL document until a substantive revision was conducted, uses the term *underpin* to describe the activity between values and information. The values of a creator or publisher underpin the information, and the values of a researcher or interpreter will come into play during engagement with the information. Understanding the need for information in a given situation may reflect values of diligence and curiosity. The search for information may suggest values related to

exploration and discovery, and different values may come into play depending on the need for the information being sought. The evaluation of information could be associated with many of these same values, and there are a number of values related to ethics and appropriate social conventions in the use and attribution of information sources. Naturally, our values may become most evident as we become creators and distributors of information, as the efforts of our hard work are imbued with our personal beliefs and values.

Returning to the reasons that the relationship between values and information literacy has received so little attention, is it possible that we just have not figured it out yet? Is because there may be no way to assess the effort, thereby making it only optional? It is perfectly reasonable to want learning outcomes that we can set out to achieve and assess in a clear manner, but does this mean that we set aside those learning goals that are challenging to teach, and possibly, impossible to assess?

No. Heeding Troy Swanson's (2004) call (and incidentally, Swanson is a member of the current committee to revise the *Standards*), we "cannot see the role of information literacy within the curriculum as an objective, value-neutral skill set" (p. 72). We can try to ignore it or erase it, but we are unable to change the fact. Information contains values, and the thinking and behaviors associated with information literacy are informed by personal and community values as well. As we grow an information literate populace above and beyond the walls of the academy, we must tackle these learning outcomes that are hardest to achieve. We must believe that the effort will be worth it and will be reflected in the learning and development of our student communities—if not now, then

in their future lives as readers, researchers, and citizens.

**We must do more and better work to connect information literacy education at the university level to the lives and experiences of learners after graduation.**

The term *lifelong learning* is bandied about as a kind of hallmark platitude to explain why our efforts matter. This is one of those rare situations where we are more than happy to avoid specifics and set aside the need for assessments as we profess the universal value of information literacy education. Anyone who has done some background research into the origins of this concept and the way it has been deployed since—often ineffectually—will understand why this is a challenging term. And yet, we keep using it.

While we speak of instilling lifelong learning, we have yet to show that we are doing this, and how. Lloyd and Williamson (2008) have argued that generic educational standards for information literacy may be to blame for the lack of impact on our work in higher education on the lives of graduates, writing that they “may not prepare people to enter the workplace, or equip them with information skills or behaviors that they will require to meet challenges of work” (p. 9). This may be true, but I am not convinced that this is the purpose of the *Standards*. While we must be critical of any educational standards that define what we do and how we do it, I think we must be careful that we do not fault the document when the blame lies squarely with us.

Fortunately, in recent years we have spent more time working to determine the impact of information literacy in higher education on the professional and working lives of graduates. Some talent in prophecy would

be useful here; barring that, we can be conscious to relate the value of information literacy learning above and beyond the task at hand. However, I do not believe that we must begin teaching students vocational skills that they will need in their first or future jobs. I do not believe we necessarily must fabricate future personal tasks and find ways to guide students long before they have a need to develop those skills or remember those lessons. Rather, we might focus on the universal learning outcomes referenced in the specifics of the *Standards*.

In *Revising Information Literacy for Lifelong Meaning*—one of the few publications to make lifelong learning more than bumper-sticker fodder—Dane Ward (2006) explained that “to teach students about personally meaningful information and non-analytic information processes means first and foremost to create a space where the inner life can be nurtured, where creativity can emerge, where students can love the questions” (p. 398). The word *love* is key here. How often do we talk about inspiring and encouraging love as part of what we do? How often do the affective moves that can change a student for a lifetime become superseded by learning outcomes that mirror researcher’s worst habits? Do we focus more on efficient and effective searching, rather than encouraging learners’ to love the questions, and, thereby, love the process that will invariably reveal more queries and more to learn?

Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005) wrote that we must “communicate to students—both explicitly through explanation and implicitly through modeling—that research is not about finding information or facts, as most of the ACRL *Standards* suggest, but instead that research is about constructing meaning through active engagement,” and by “asking questions” (p. 308).

Engagement, inquiry, and the development of a critical perspective on what we find or observe in the world might be called faculties of information literacy. Above and beyond the discrete skills of the information literate, these are the kinds of abilities and behaviors that reach beyond majors and double-majors, into the hearts, minds, and spirits of our information communities.

## CONCLUSION

Looking at the charge and the constitution of the committee tasked with revising the *Standards*, there should be no doubt that additions and deletions will be substantive and valuable, made with diligence and conscience. However, a new document of outcomes and indicators will matter very little if our reception of it is not informed by the knowledge that our responsibilities as information literacy educators exist above and beyond its contents. To revise means to *see again*. Clearly, the process of revision should be applied to much more than the *Standards*.

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