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Review of Transforming Information Literacy Instruction: Threshold Concepts in Theory and Practice

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Review of *Transforming Information Literacy Instruction: Threshold Concepts in Theory and Practice*

By Amy R. Hofer, Silvia Lin Hanick, and Lori Townsend

Reviewed by Jane Hammons, The Ohio State University

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[BOOK REVIEW]

Hammons
Review: Transforming IL Instruction

Some librarians who approach *Transforming Information Literacy Instruction: Threshold Concepts in Theory and Practice*, by Amy R. Hofer, Silvia Lin Hanick, and Lori Townsend, may be expecting a guide for implementing the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015) into their practice. This is understandable, as the authors' research on threshold concepts and information literacy had a significant influence on the development of the *Framework* (Gibson & Jacobson, 2014). This book is not, in fact, specifically about the *Framework*, but is instead a broader exploration of the potential for threshold concepts to change the way librarians approach information literacy instruction. However, those who want to integrate the *Framework* into their information literacy programs should find much to value in this book, as should any librarian who is interested in learning about teaching information literacy from a conceptual perspective.

The book contains three parts, covering ten chapters. In Part I, Introduction to Threshold Concepts, the authors begin by describing threshold concept theory, originally developed by Jan Meyer and Ray Land. Threshold concepts are the essential ways of thinking or doing within a specific discipline that students must understand before they can progress in the field. After providing an overview of the theory, the authors engage with criticisms that have been raised against threshold concepts, and give convincing counter-arguments. Threshold concepts, they argue, are “unusually empowering” (p. 8) for librarians because they recognize librarians as subject experts. This view of threshold concepts resonated with the reviewer, who has found that introducing threshold concepts with faculty helps establish librarians' expertise.

In chapter 2, the authors analyze the five characteristics of threshold concepts proposed by Meyer and Land—transformative, irreversible, integrative, troublesome, and bounded—and detail the research they undertook to identify information literacy threshold concepts fitting these criteria. This included a Delphi study in which experts were asked to evaluate and propose possible threshold concepts. The number of potential threshold concepts changed over the course of the study, until the list was narrowed to six concepts.

In Part II, Exploring Threshold Concepts for Information Literacy, the authors describe five threshold concepts: authority, format, information commodities, organizing systems, and research process. The authors do not propose a standalone concept corresponding to the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame. Since the publication of the Delphi study, they have decided it does not work as a separate threshold concept (although it is woven into other concepts). While there is some validity to their arguments for excluding it, this exclusion

should not stop librarians who have found the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame to be helpful from using it. As the authors note, there does not have to be complete agreement among librarians as to what qualifies as an information literacy threshold concept.

Each chapter in this section begins with a definition of the concept, followed by an in-depth examination of the relevance of the concept for librarians and students. In chapter 3, the authors focus on authority, which is described as “a form of intellectual trust” given to information, that is “both constructed, built through expertise and persistent reliability, and contextual, limited to certain knowledge domains or situations” (p. 58). Students who understand this concept are able to make critical decisions about which information sources to trust. In their discussion of the concept, the authors consider the nature of academic authority and the role of librarians as authorities, and use maps as an interesting example to explore how the authority of an information source is both constructed and contextual.

In chapter 4, they examine format as a threshold concept. According to the authors, “each instance of a format shares a common intellectual and physical structure with others like it, and is intentionally produced to support or effect action” (p. 82). An understanding of format matters because the format of an information product provides clues about the purpose and creation process. A good portion of this chapter is taken up by a discussion of genre theory from the field of rhetoric. While the intent is to show how librarians understand format by contrasting it with a related concept from a different field, readers may find the introduction of a new theory at this point only confuses the issue.

The third threshold concept to be discussed, in chapter 5, is information commodities. The authors explain that information fits Marx’s definition of a commodity, as it is a “good,” has “value,” is produced by “labor,” and can be bought, sold, and privately owned (p. 105). Students who do not recognize this may struggle to make sense of the rules and regulations they encounter about accessing, using, or sharing information. To explain why this concept may be challenging for students, the authors provide a very helpful explanation of the “hidden aspects” of information as a commodity.

In chapter 6, the authors discuss the organizing systems threshold concept. Organizing systems “describe, categorize, preserve, and provide access to documents” (p. 132). While they are often accessed through computers, “organizing systems are designed by humans and thus reflect and reproduce human understandings and biases” (p. 132). Students usually have little understanding of how these systems work. For example, students often think of

algorithms as neutral, but this is not the case. Here, the authors reference the work of Safiya Noble, who has shown that Google search results demonstrate racial and gender bias. The authors argue that, without knowledge of how organizing systems such as algorithms are created and function, students will struggle to use them effectively and critically.

Research process is discussed in chapter 7. The authors state that “the research process is characterized by the formulation of an inquiry based on existing ignorance, the pursuit of information to answer, explore, and/or re-formulate the inquiry, the creation of new understandings in answering the inquiry using an appropriate method, and the communication of those new understandings” (p. 154). In exploring the concept, the authors consider the affective nature of research and discuss the role of ignorance and creativity within the research process. They argue that librarians need to acknowledge the uncertainty and fear that are common to researchers, and to recast ignorance not as something negative, but as a necessary state for asking good questions. Also, librarians can better help students if they emphasize that inquiry is “essential to the entire research process” instead of just the topic development stage (p. 161).

The authors end each chapter in Part II by comparing the concept being discussed with the five criteria for threshold concepts, and then provide multiple examples of more specific topics that librarians could teach that would engage students with the concept. For example, at the basic level, librarians could use information commodities to help students shift the way they think about citation requirements, while at the advanced level students could explore the relationship between information as a commodity and scholarly publication practices. Librarians who are interested in practical advice for teaching will likely find these last parts of each chapter to be very useful.

In Part III, Threshold Concepts for Information Literacy in Practice, the authors explore how librarians can use threshold concepts in their information literacy programs. In chapter 8, they consider threshold concepts in relation to assessment and accreditation. Although they provide examples of libraries that have incorporated threshold concepts into their assessment practices, the chapter is less a “how-to” guide than it is an argument that threshold concepts are compatible with current approaches to assessment and accreditation. At the least, threshold concepts “don’t disrupt what we need to do on the level of accreditation” and “do no harm to our current assessment practices” (p. 177). While their argument is convincing, this section may be slightly disappointing to those who were looking for more concrete advice on assessment.

In Chapter 9, the authors provide sample assignments and activities for teaching threshold concepts, as well as an outline for incorporating threshold concepts into a course. These assignments and activities will be most beneficial to librarians who teach credit courses, although librarians who teach one-shots should also find them useful. It would have been helpful, however, if the authors had considered a typical faculty request for a one-shot and shown how librarians could incorporate threshold concepts within the confines of the request.

The final chapter is a case study looking at the issue of fake news, or misinformation, from the perspective of authority, format, and information commodities. This chapter provides a useful illustration of how librarians can explore the same topic using multiple concepts, bringing out different facets of the topic depending on the concept. Their discussion of the ways that an exploration of social media's "influencer culture" can help students better understand information as a commodity was especially intriguing.

The authors acknowledge early in the book that the introduction of threshold concept theory has not been welcomed by all librarians. However, they continue to write about threshold concepts because threshold concepts have helped them to change the way that they teach and engage with their students. Librarians who are interested in finding out whether taking a conceptual approach to teaching can bring them the same benefits will find this book an excellent starting point, while librarians who have already embraced conceptual teaching should also find much of value. Those who have the opportunity to teach credit bearing courses will likely get the most practical value out of the book, but those who teach primarily one-shots will also find support for their efforts.

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