Communications in Information Literacy

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 12

7-12-2017

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Recommended Citation
Holliday, W. (2017). Frame Works: Using Metaphor in Theory and Practice in Information Literacy. *Communications in Information Literacy, 11* (1). https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2017.11.1.44

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Frame Works: Using Metaphor in Theory and Practice in Information Literacy

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Abstract

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education generated a large amount of discourse during its development and adoption. All of this discourse is rich in metaphoric language that can be used as a tool for critical reflection on teaching and learning, information literacy, and the nature and role of theory in the practice of teaching librarians. This article explores the metaphoric entailments of the Framework as a way to deepen our understandings and practices of information literacy.

Keywords: information literacy; teaching and learning; academic libraries

Perspectives edited by Carolyn Gamtso

Holliday, W. (2017). Frame Works: Using metaphor in theory and practice in information literacy. *Communications in Information Literacy, 11*(1), 4-20.

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Frame Works: Using Metaphor in Theory and Practice in Information Literacy

Since 2014, when the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released initial drafts of the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (ACRL, 2015), the Framework has played a central role in the discourse on information literacy in academic libraries. That discourse has focused on multiple issues, including theory (threshold concepts and metaliteracy), the position of academic libraries within their institutions, and the role of official professional standards. During this time, I was having conversations with colleagues about the use of metaphor as a reflective and analytical tool to interrogate and better understand our teaching practices. The Framework, with metaphor central to its very title, was a common focus of these discussions. In one of these conversations I suggested, what if the current debates over the Framework are, in part, just a metaphor gone awry? What if the discourse reflects different understandings of the Framework's central metaphors?

This essay, then, emerged out of thinking and conversations with librarians about metaphor as a tool for critical reflection on teaching and learning and on the Framework itself. It is based, in part, on a workshop conducted with Anne-Marie Deitering and Merinda Hensley at the European Conference on Information Literacy in October 2016 and a keynote address at a Maricopa Community College conference, Implementing ACRL's Information Literacy Framework: Instructional Strategies and Collaborative Opportunities, in November 2016.

The title, Frame Works, is deliberate. It reflects my argument that metaphors do conceptual, theoretical work in shaping our teaching practice. Both the Framework and the Standards are discourses. Discourses, created in specific social contexts, are tools that mediate or guide our actions (Gee, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 2007). Some tools, like hammers, make some actions possible (pushing a nail into a wall) and constrain others. The discourses in the Standards and the Framework are not necessarily right or wrong; rather, they are different tools that enable us to do (and not do) different things. As discourses, the Standards and the Framework include tacit assumptions about information literacy and learning, and metaphor is one way of teasing out these assumptions and determining how to best use the conceptual tools they afford.

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DOI: 10.15760/comminfolit.2017.11.1.44

Both the Standards and the Framework were developed, explicitly or not, to do different kinds of work. The Standards outlined a series of learning outcomes and performance indicators that, when assessed, would signal that a student had achieved “information literacy.” The Standards have been critiqued for being too rigid, too focused on generic and mechanical search skills, and for ignoring larger contexts of information creation and use. The Framework was developed with a different purpose in mind. It outlines interrelated core concepts, rather than strict learning outcomes or skills. It also builds upon the work of threshold concept theory, which argues that there are portals through which students must pass to gain a more “expert” and enlarged view of an academic discipline. There has been much debate in the academic library profession about what the shift from Standards to the Framework means for our practice as teaching librarians. This essay will not adjudicate ACRL’s decision to rescind the Standards and adopt the Framework, nor will it engage in the debate over the empirical or face validity of threshold concept theory. Rather, I hope to demonstrate how metaphor can be used to engage with theory and analyze our professional discourse. This is not a formal discourse analysis. Nor is it comprehensive. I selectively reference a few texts that comment on the Framework intentionally, because they utilize metaphor in a way that furthers my thinking. My analysis looks at the metaphoric entailments in these texts and does not engage with the arguments of the authors’ in their entirety and complexity.

My thinking on metaphor is heavily influenced by George Lakoff’s and Mark Johnson’s, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Their research posits that metaphor is more than creative and imaginative language. Rather, it structures our very thinking and, consequently, governs our actions. Some of our metaphors arise from the fact that we are bodies in space that act in a certain way. We use these spatial orientations metaphorically all the time. Happy is up, so we can say: “I am feeling up today” and other English speakers will understand what we mean. Your spirits soar or sink; you wake up; you fall asleep (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 14-15).

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing as another. Lakoff and Johnson use the example of love throughout their book. Love is a journey is one common metaphor. This implies that love happens over time, and that it requires some action or work on the part of the lovers (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 44). Madness is another metaphor for love. We say, “I am crazy about her” or “He’s driving me mad.” This metaphor suggests that love is something we do not control, which then might shape our actions in a

relationship. Neither of these metaphors is right or wrong. In fact, they both might capture aspects of love that help us make sense of that experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 49).

Metaphors structure action. We act according to the way we conceive things. In the case of teaching and learning, our metaphors afford or make some actions possible, while constraining others. So, the classic metaphor, learning as filling a head with knowledge, prescribes teaching actions that focus on information transfer, as in a lecture or tutorial. Paulo Freire, famously, described the banking model of education in which students passively receive deposits of knowledge from their expert teachers (Freire, 1968). Another metaphor for learning is "creating a tool box." This metaphor leads towards the use of teaching activities that enable students to "pick up" different tools and learn how to use them in actual practice. Vygotsky, and others who built upon his initial Activity Theory, use the tool metaphor extensively. Learning, for Vygotsky, happens when learners engage in activity, mediated by tools such as concepts and language. Further, tools are created through activity, and these ultimately become internalized as part of our ongoing activity and learning (Vygotsky, 1968; Vygotsky 1978). The "tool box" metaphor picks up on the idea of something flexible that you carry around with you for continuing learning and use.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are systematic, but only partially: they highlight some aspects of a concept and hide others. Metaphors are coherent but not always consistent. No metaphor completely matches what it is trying to describe. The metaphors for learning described above, banking and tools, do not necessarily describe the same aspects of learning. Neither one is completely right or wrong. They both "work" to help us understand something about learning. They each describe different aspects or features of learning that frame our thinking and shape our actions in particular ways. Sometimes we need to fill up our heads with a bit of knowledge; sometimes we need to grab our tools.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors are based on common experiential and cultural gestalts (or big pictures), which enable us to see one thing like another thing. Because they depend on common understandings, metaphors are also culturally specific. Lakoff and Johnson provide this example:

> An Iranian student, shortly after his arrival in Berkeley, took a seminar on metaphor from one of us. Among the wondrous things that he found in Berkeley was an expression that he heard over and over and understood as a

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> beautifully sane metaphor. The expression was "the solution of my problems"— which he took to be a large volume of liquid, bubbling and smoking, containing all of your problems, either dissolved or in the form of precipitates, with catalysts constantly dissolving some problems (for the time being) and precipitating out others. He was terribly disillusioned to find that the residents of Berkeley had no such chemical metaphor in mind. And well he might be, for the chemical metaphor is both beautiful and insightful. It gives us a view of problems as things that never disappear utterly and that cannot be solved once and for all. All of your problems are always present, only they may be dissolved and in solution, or they may be in solid form. The best you can hope for is to find a catalyst that will make one problem dissolve without making another one precipitate out. (p. 143)

As you can see from this example, sometimes metaphors break, or they work because they open our thinking in unexpected ways. Schön (1979) has written about "generative metaphors" that we can use to develop new framings and solutions to problems. In this way, metaphors are tools for critical reflection. They help us understand areas of experience that are not easily apprehended in their own terms, such as teaching and learning. Indeed, research shows that "teacher talk" is full of metaphor. Teachers use metaphor both to explain concepts to students, but also to describe and better understand their work as teachers (Garcia, 2013; Griffiths & Tann, 1992; Munby & Russell, 1990).

Metaphor might also help address the "theory versus practice" discourse in education and information literacy. In this construction, there is a perceived wall between the two, with some suspicion on both sides. From the practice side, theory is too dense, abstract, full of jargon, and not grounded in the "real world." For those on the theory side, practice is idiosyncratic and subject to misperceptions that might not reflect deeper realities. A lack of theorizing leads to actions that lack coherence and explanatory power, and might even contradict a teacher's goals. Without guiding theory, we are all experimenting in isolation.

Arguably, we all use theory, even those of us who say that we are not, all the time. Griffiths and Tann (1992) argue that there should be no divide between theory and practice and what is seen as conflict is "better construed as a mismatch between the observer's theory and the practitioner's theory" (p. 71). Moreover, they describe two kinds of theory, public and private. Public theory is what most of us think about when we hear the word. It is formal

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and published. Private theories are those that come from our experiences and underlying assumptions. But they are, and should be related, according to Griffiths and Tann:

> Personal theories need to be revealed (at different levels) so that they can be scrutinised, challenged, compared to public theories, and then confirmed or reconstructed. 'Personal' and 'public theories' need to be viewed as living, intertwining tendrils of knowledge. (p. 71)

Theory, like metaphor, shapes our thinking and also our actions. Bazerman (1992) suggests that theory is best seen as a "heuristic for action":

> Theories at their best help us manage the manifold and inchoate realities we move among. They give a shape to our experiences and desires; they allow us to project our actions into a universe to which we have attributed some order. They allow us to make our actions reflective rather than reliant only on the impulses of spontaneity, habit and the unconscious. (p. 103)

Bazerman's attention to reflective action is useful here. Our teaching actions will benefit from a better understanding of our assumptions, our ordering of the world. Theories, public and private, provide ways of making sense and, ideally, guiding our actions in useful ways. Marshall (1990) suggests that metaphor is an essential tool for this kind of critical reflection about teaching. She describes how reflection is embedded in belief systems that are generally removed from awareness. As Lakoff and Johnson suggest, metaphors can help us describe those things that are hard to apprehend, including what many call "theory."

In this view, the metaphors we use to talk about things like learning and information literacy are actually public theories. Common cultural understanding is required for a metaphor to "work." Thus, metaphor might help us uncover our collective and often unnamed assumptions and conceptions in ways that more direct discourse sometimes cannot. Metaphors can also "break." In some cases, they do not explain "enough," or with enough clarity, to be useful. In other cases, our understandings of a metaphor (or the underlying concept we are trying to understand) are so divergent that we do not "see" the metaphor in the same way. These divergences can help us work through difficulties in our practice and bring our assumptions into the public sphere of discussion and reflection. Sometimes, as in the chemical metaphor, a seemingly broken metaphor can generate new approaches, even solutions, to problems.

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What follows is a description of some of the ideas that emerged from recent conference discussions about metaphor. Some of the ideas are mine, and some come from participants and co-presenters, although all (mis)interpretations and "breakage" are mine alone.

Let us begin with the term "standard." Standard has fewer obvious metaphoric meanings, as a rather well-defined and concrete term. But it does have subtle metaphoric entailments, defined as features that are a necessary part or consequence of that thing. Two common images related to standards emerged in my recent discussions: bars of gold, representing the gold standard, and standard poodles, representing the idea of dog breeds. In the case of the gold standard, the metaphoric entailments are solidity, weight, and value. For poodles, the entailments suggest fixed, prizewinning characteristics. In both cases, these entailments define a fixed point and, in the case of dog breeds, a collection of characteristics the define success or perfection. The shared entailments between the standard poodle and the "information literate student," operating at a metaphoric level, are telling. I do not mean to imply that librarians aimed to "breed" a certain class of information literate students when writing the Standards. Indeed, that is a crude and offensive formulation. Rather, the underlying common features of standard poodles and "the information literate student" illuminate some of the reasons for a discomfort with and opposition to educational standards: namely, that the qualities we aim for are universal, measurable, and inhere in the student. This is, by no means, an insight that is new or unsaid. Indeed, there is a well-regarded body of information literacy literature on this very idea (Drabinksi & Sitar, 2016; Pawley, 2003).

Frameworks and frames have much richer metaphoric entailments than standards. When asked to describe, and even draw, the images that came to mind when thinking about the word "framework," colleagues came up with images of building frames, scaffolding, and a series of windows. The entailments of these images include a sense of solidity and structure, but with open spaces between the structures. They are extensible and sometimes unfinished. Extending the building metaphor, the frame provides a structure that is foundational, but the final results, when you add the siding, paint, adornments, roof, etc., can look much different. A common frame might result in two different buildings, each suited to a particular environment and human needs, and which might reflect a specific cultural tradition or personal aesthetic. You can add rooms to the original structure, adding a new framework and connecting it to the old. You can tear down buildings (and their underlying frameworks) and rebuild.

One participant said that skeletons came to mind when she thought of the word framework, and I find the particular entailments of that image compelling. A human skeleton is an underlying structure, with many features in common. Our underlying skeletons are coherent, if not identical, but the forms each body takes are myriad. The skeleton metaphor places the student at the center of learning, as embodied actors. In using a framework metaphor to guide actions in information literacy education, the purpose becomes one of creating foundational support, but the students themselves "put flesh on the bones."

With this one shift in a word and attendant metaphors, from Standards to Framework, we see two different purposes, potentially, of information literacy education: creating the ideal information literate student or supporting students across diverse and multiple trajectories of becoming. Of course, the skeleton metaphor can break down. The Framework (skeleton) was created by "expert" librarians (not crafted by evolution) and, as an institutional document, have as much "standardizing power" as the Standards (Drabinksi & Sitar, 2016). But no metaphor will explain or describe every phenomenon perfectly, as Lakoff and Johnson suggest. Instead, the skeleton metaphor is useful as a generative metaphor that might inform ways to read and use the Framework. For me, it opens up the possibility of intentionally using features of the Framework (specifically, its very "framiness") to place students at the center of my thinking about learning goals. I cannot predict how students might grow, but I might provide some useful coherence to the underlying structures that that students themselves develop, integrate, and shape over time.

The standard and framework metaphors also highlight how they surface particular features of public educational theories. Standards highlight a behavioral tradition that prescribes our teaching actions along the lines of the measurable and uniform (standardized tests), while Framework affords the idea of construction (picking up tools and building). Frameworks also allow for the possibility of co-construction with our students, understanding that learning means more than memorizing standard processes and procedures, but only comes alive when students apply, reflect, and make meaning in *their* process of putting flesh on the bones.

Thresholds are another prominent metaphor in the discourse on the Framework. While the final version of the Framework filed by ACRL backed off of the initial reliance on threshold concept theory, it is still "baked into" the discourse. Even if the document does not call the

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six concepts in the Framework "threshold concepts," they are a major foundational ground because of the document's citations to threshold concept theory, the Delphi study used as an origin to some of the Frames, and the professional discussion leading up to the final document.

Threshold concept theory, at its most basic level, is the idea that learners face challenging points in their learning, particularly of disciplinary content, and that a deeper, expansive learning in the discipline requires that students move across those thresholds (Meyer & Land, 2003). While this may seem obvious, from our experience as learners and teachers, that students have bottlenecks and "aha!" moments, the use of the threshold metaphor turns out to be less straightforward than it might seem. While the images related to standards and frameworks might be diverse, they share entailments that illuminate some common understandings. From brief, and admittedly limited, discussions with colleagues, this is not true for the idea of thresholds. When I asked one audience how many of them imagined crossing a threshold as entering or leaving a space, the room was divided about equally in half.

This key distinction is revealing. Threshold concept theory originally emerged out of academic disciplines. Disciplines have boundaries, often heavily policed. The question about whether information literacy is a discipline and can, therefore, have threshold concepts has been central to the debate over the Framework (Fister, 2014; Swanson, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014). Wilkinson's (2014) critique of the Framework extends well beyond the problem of discipline and highlights the tension between the universalizing and conforming potential of both the Standards and the Framework. His use of the threshold metaphor, rhetorically through images, is provocative, in the productive sense of revealing the complex, possibly contradictory metaphoric entailments of thresholds. All of the images of thresholds Wilkinson uses are from the vantage point of outside looking in: a doorway into a dwelling, a fortified border crossing, and an image of a doorway overgrown by nature and looking into a dark interior. The images convey the sense of bounded and, some cases, restrictive and policed space.

These metaphoric entailments (confinement, policing) highlight many common critiques of the Framework. The concepts or frames have the same potential to universalize, are based on a narrow conception of information literacy that privileges academic discourse, and still valorizes the individual student. In this view, the threshold metaphor might serve as a

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caution to the way that we approach the concepts and practices outlined (or prescribed) in the Framework. Is our goal to help students cross into a room (an information literacy room or disciplinary room)? What do students do once they cross the threshold? Can they get out? Are there rooms within rooms, or multiple thresholds? If so, is there an order or sequence? The metaphoric entailments related to boundedness, a key theoretical construct of threshold concepts, can be, well, troubling if we picture the movement across thresholds as one from outside going in.

But what if we imagine thresholds from the perspective of leaving a bounded space? Indeed, half of the participants in my recent discussions suggested this is what they pictured. Meyer and Land, the original proponents of threshold concept theory, also describe thresholds in this way. The preface to *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning* includes an image of a 17th century Scottish lintel that reads: "Peace to those who are entering, and safety to those about to depart." Land, Meyer, and Baillie (2010) write:

> It is a modest reminder that a threshold has always demarcated that which belongs within, the place of familiarity and relative security, from what lies beyond that, the unfamiliar, the unknown, the potentially dangerous. It reminds us too that all journeys begin with leaving that familiar space and crossing over into the riskier space beyond the threshold. (p. ix)

What if much of the problem with the threshold concept theory underpinning the Framework was that the metaphor broke down? In essence, by using the term threshold to describe challenging points in learning, we have not been operating from a shared understanding of the threshold metaphor. Threshold metaphors work, in a certain way, when talking about students "entering" a discipline; the boundaries are clearer, the troublesome spots potentially easier to identify, and the end goal of enabling students to participate in a disciplinary conversation matches the metaphor of crossing thresholds into rooms.

But for many, the threshold metaphor breaks down for information literacy because it is not a traditional academic discipline and because of the idea of fixed or policed borders. We might provide some disciplinary-focused tools, but we hope that students' use of those tools can "cross-over" and be picked up and used in completely different settings. Indeed, Vygotsky used the metaphor of bounded space when describing a child undergoing the

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messy process of learning at the developmental stages between 7 and 12: "Then the child's thought bumps into the wall of its own inadequacy, and the resultant bruises…become its best teachers" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 165). This metaphor implies that the child, through learning, will eventually leave that bounded space and move towards greater autonomy and freedom.

For some, the threshold metaphor "works" better from an assumption that information literacy provides a way *out* of bounded spaces, with restrictive and received ideas, and into unbounded spaces: the world of meaningful work, civic life, community, and personal meaning. These places can be scary and dangerous, not just because of the unknown, but because of various structures and enactments of power. In this view, the ideal aim of information literacy education is to help develop the knowledge and tools that enable learners to recognize (and even fight against) the dangers and distortions in different landscapes so that they can travel with care and even change their broader worlds (Kapitzke, 2003; Lloyd, 2006; Nicholson, 2015; Tewell 2015).

Beilin (2015) captures the tension between these two readings of the threshold metaphor. He suggests that the reading of the threshold metaphor as outside moving in means that the Framework might end up operating in much the same way as the Standards: "Even though it seeks to empower that individual, who could potentially work to change the conditions of information production and dissemination that exist today, the Framework necessarily concentrates its efforts on the solitary mastery of the existing system" (Beilin, 2015). From a metaphoric perspective, that existing system might be read as a bounded space, with the learner assumed to be moving from outside to inside. He provides a counter reading of thresholds in his conception of information literacy learning:

> These 'troublesome concepts', once grasped, allow the learner to readily understand the assumptions and terms of debate in a field. But I would argue that at this point the learner has in some sense reached the starting point, not the end point, of learning on a deeper level. (para. 19)

In this sense, one can picture a student in a series of rooms, getting those Vygotskian bumps and bruises, and then using that learning of troublesome concepts to cross a threshold, better prepared, to shape their journey in the wider world. In this way, flipping the direction of the metaphor might shape our actions as teachers in different ways.

Viewing how other academic fields, such as composition, approach the metaphor is instructive. There are productive parallels between teaching writing and teaching information literacy, including the fuzziness over definitions as a discipline, the focus on teaching foundational and transferable skills, often in a single course or even 50-minute session, and the idea that these "generic" skills (writing and information literacy) "serve" the work of learning in the disciplines.

In *Naming what we know: threshold concepts of writing studies* (2015), writing instructors and theorists approached threshold concepts using different metaphoric entailments. The very cover of the book demonstrates that the editors have an "inside-out" view of thresholds, with a photograph taken from inside a room out into a landscape. The authors, in fact, have used multiple, sometimes contradictory metaphors, and in doing so have a much more flexible sense of threshold concepts. Yancey (2015) writes in the introduction,

> At first glance, [threshold concepts] may seem like a kind of canon, a list of the defining key terms of the discipline, with an explicit emphasis on definition and the implication of dogma. At a second glance… they seem much more contingent—presented here not as canonical statement, but rather as articulation of shared beliefs providing multiple ways of helping us name what we know and how we can use what we know in the service of writing…In one version, threshold concepts function as boundary objects, allowing us to toggle between the beliefs of the discipline and those of individual institutions; in another version, they function as a heuristic or portal for planning; in yet another version, they seem a set of propositions that can be put into dialogue with threshold concepts from a subdiscipline or from a different discipline for a richly layered map of a given phenomenon. (p. xix)

There is very little about bounded spaces here. Instead, Yancey uses a geographic or landscape metaphor. Concepts about writing become maps and guideposts that help us, as teachers and learners, see and navigate various aspects of that landscape. Threshold concepts, in Yancey's view, are mapping devices that provide details about the terrain of concepts (what some call curricular content) and the relationships between those concepts. The map might also highlight certain features. There are roads, political boundaries,

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topography, and vegetation layers, for example, that shape and help make sense of the landscape.

Yancey also uses the term "boundary objects," which are translating devices between different communities of practice. According to Starr and Griesemer (1989), boundary objects:

> may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds. (p. 393)

A geographic reading of the threshold metaphor suggests that the frames or concepts in the Framework might be viewed as boundary objects. How might the metaphor of boundary objects, rather than thresholds, shift our approach to information literacy instruction? The concepts in the Framework (and concepts developed locally) could be seen as tools placed in the hands of students. If the Framework, to use another metaphor, helps us "frame" and "read" certain features of an information terrain, how might it help our students see and navigate in new and useful ways?

As an example, at my institution we have used the framework as a springboard to identify the concepts that we would like to place in our learners' hands. One of those concepts is "information is not neutral." We think that this is an effective tool for students to critically think about the information they encounter and seek out, and to understand that there are forces (political, economic, cultural, disciplinary norms) that might influence and distort the knowledge that is created, accessible, and preserved over time.

We are still at the beginning stages of this work, so I have no practical answers or models to offer here. Instead, I hope I have demonstrated how using metaphor to approach information literacy discourse can be generative. Viewing thresholds as boundaries between the safe and the unknown, for example, opened up my thinking about concepts as boundary objects. It enabled me to see students as active agents in the larger discourse of the Framework, an element that had been missing for me before. It enabled me to see how the frames (or at least parts of them) *work* as a tool for teaching and learning.

Metaphor might also help us move beyond what Ede (2004) calls "theory hope," which she defines as:

> The general hope that I believe many scholars in composition, myself included, hold that if only we can work through an idea or issue at the level of theory, it will inevitably have significance for practice…Such hope can become so powerful that it encourages scholars to forget how complex and situated the messy and impure world of teaching is. Such happens when scholars articulate zero-sum arguments about the consequences of this or that theory for practice or establish unreasonable litmus tests that theories must pass at the level of practice if they are too considered valid. (p. 186)

This is not to say that the debates over theory and the political and institutional effects of the Framework are inconsequential. Rather, my goal here is to propose metaphor as a device to see theory (and the Framework) not just as a body of knowledge, but as what Ede (2004) calls a situated practice, even a set of practices depending on context and need. The accessibility of metaphor, based on common understandings and experiences, can highlight the connections (and disconnections) between public and private theories. In this way, metaphor is a mapping tool that might help academic, librarians, and students cross into riskier, but far richer, terrain.

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