

DIKTUON: *The Framework for Information Literacy and Theological Education: Introduction to the ACRL Framework*

by William Badke

The [*Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*](#) arose out of a revision of the [*Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*](#) introduced by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2000. The task force that worked on the revision recognized that a new approach was needed which focused not on standards but on key concepts that guide scholarship in research. In the words of the task force, the Framework “is based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards, learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills.”¹

Essential to the new version is the “threshold concept,” which can be defined as a key insight that forms a doorway into a new understanding. The use of threshold concepts in the Framework is based on the work of Wiggins and McTighe² which was adapted to an information literacy setting by Townsend, Brunetti, and Hofer.³ Why were threshold concepts chosen as the essential structure for the Framework? First, they open the door to a deeper understanding of information literacy within scholarship, thus providing a means for librarians and faculty to build more significant information literacy instruction into the curriculum. Second, the threshold concept is increasingly being adopted within academia as a whole, thus providing a common understanding between librarians, professors, and academic administrators.⁴

There are six threshold concepts in the Framework, though others may appear in future versions. They are Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information Has Value, Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration. In the Framework document each concept comes with “Knowledge Practices” (activities that demonstrate competent use of the concept) and “Dispositions” (mindsets and attitudes arising from the concept).

The concepts, taken together, describe the nature of scholarship and scholarly inquiry,⁵ though each discipline will view the Framework through its own filter. It is essentially from this adaptability of the Framework document that the most criticisms have come. The Framework, not being a set of standards, becomes difficult to conceptualize and challenging to translate into particular information literacy skill-sets, especially when each discipline views the Framework differently. It

¹ “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” *Association of College & Research Libraries*, accessed April 13, 2015, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

² Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

³ Lori Townsend, Korey Brunetti, and Amy R. Hofer, “Threshold Concepts and Information Literacy,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 11, no. 3 (2011): 853–69.

⁴ See Michael Thomas Flanagan, “Threshold Concepts: Undergraduate Teaching, Postgraduate Training and Professional Development: A Short Introduction and Bibliography,” accessed April 13, 2015, <http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>.

⁵ See, for example, the author’s Prezi presentation, “What is Scholarship?” which incorporates each of the Frames: <https://prezi.com/sq7xqbuxrr9p/what-is-scholarship/>.

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has been criticized as either overly complex or simplistic, as wedded too strongly to disciplinary structures, and as lacking in emphases for social justice issues, among other things.⁶

In February 2015, the Framework for Information Literacy was “filed” by the ACRL Board rather than simply being adopted. This indicates approval by ACRL but allows for the document to evolve over time. Essentially, it is not “set in stone,” as was the previous standards document.

Philosophy of the Framework

The Framework is built upon some key presuppositions. First is *metalinguistics*, the idea that information comes in a multitude of formats, all of which need to be addressed in information literacy instruction. The second is *constructivism*, which argues that meaning comes from the bottom up rather than top down. Each person constructs his or her own meaning out of the information sources available, so that there are multiple possible meanings rather than just one. Constructivism demands that the information literate person weigh options and make decisions in an environment in which, as one of the Frames describes it, “Authority is constructed and contextual.”⁷

Means of Integrating Framework Concepts into Education

Megan Oakleaf has made it clear that threshold concepts do not lend themselves easily to outcome statements and assessment of learning. Rather, outcomes are developed within particular educational contexts that determine each concept’s nature and priorities.⁸ While some librarians have clamored for a set of sample assignments to teach each frame, the task force that created the Framework views the threshold concepts as best taught within existing information literacy instruction so that the concepts are integrated with what librarians are already doing successfully.⁹

Here, a key requirement is that the Framework break free of the librarian silo and foster a strong discussion about student research and information use within academia as a whole. If, as theological educators often argue,¹⁰ critical thinking and skilled problem solving are foundational learning goals, then enlisting something like the Framework as a tool for student development is essential. This means faculty and academic administrators must be on board. That is no small task for disciplines in which content still has prominence over process and in which knowledge is all too often seen as what a student knows rather than what a student can do with acquired content.

Value of the Framework

The framework’s primary importance lies in its ability to describe today’s world of scholarship, to identify how scholars think and how they do their work in a broad sense, recognizing that each discipline (context) determines its own authority and discourse. The challenges:

⁶ See, for example, Lane Wilkinson, “Archive for the ‘Information Literacy’ Category,” *Sense and Reference: A Philosophical Library Blog* (2014), accessed April 13, 2015, <https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/category/information-literacy/>; Ian Beilin, “Beyond the Threshold: Conformity, Resistance, and the ACRL Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education,” *In The Library With The Lead Pipe* (February 2015): 1-9, accessed April 13, 2015, http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/beyond-the-threshold-conformity-resistance-and-the-acrl-information-literacy-framework-for-higher-education/#identifier_7_6254.

⁷ For a history and analysis of the concept of constructivism, particularly as described by Piaget, see Ernst Von Glaserfeld, “Cognition, Construction of Knowledge, and Teaching,” *Synthese* 80, no. 1 (1989): 121-140.

⁸ Megan Oakleaf, “A Roadmap for Assessing Student Learning Using the New Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 5 (2014): 510-511.

⁹ Donna Witek, “Sunrise, Sunset”: A Reflection on Assessment and the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,” *ACRLog*, January 27, 2015, accessed April 16, 2015, <http://acrlog.org/2015/01/27/sunrise-sunset-a-reflection-on-assessment-and-the-framework-for-information-literacy-for-higher-education/>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Charlotte McDaniel, “Reflection Seminars as Loci for Critical Thinking,” *Theological Education* 40, Suppl. (January 1, 2005): 63-73; Margaret M. Mitchell, “Playing with Fire: The Task of the Divinity School,” *Criterion* 48, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 2-7.

1. Translating the emphases of the Framework into learning outcomes will be as difficult in theological disciplines as they will be in other disciplines.¹¹
2. The constructivist foundation can be problematic for those theological schools that base their understanding of truth on biblical revelation, however that revelation is to be understood. Are there multiple possible meanings to virtually anything, or is meaning at least to some degree pre-determined by the textual bases of faith?
3. While the threshold concept approach of the Framework is becoming increasingly common to academia, the Framework document is a difficult read, and even if its message is understood by academics, librarians need to translate the “so what” portion of the process to faculty, showing how the Framework can be operationalized in developing theological student researchers.
4. There appears to be a missing element in the Framework – the role of narrative in research. Research is based upon a history (narrative) of scholarly discussion regarding the issue at hand and a personal narrative of the researcher.¹²

A Path to Operationalizing the Framework

If we think of the Framework as describing scholarship in broad terms, then a first step is surely to consider how each Frame (threshold concept) would need to be shaped to deal with disciplinary demands and disciplinary culture in theological studies. Oakleaf suggests several helpful steps to such shaping, focusing on articulating measurable outcomes out of each threshold concept, then determining how instruction and assignments can be designed to develop those outcomes, followed by putting everything into a curriculum map so that student information literacy development can be conceptualized through student programs.¹³

While not everything in theological education is measurable in these ways, if we were to adapt Oakleaf’s approach to theological education, it might look like these examples:

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual: For a biblical studies course, do close readings of key articles, showing how scholars present evidence for their assertions; trace the development of a concept from the scholar who first voiced it through a pattern of supporters and critics, to its current state; consider with students a significant theological debate (for example, the clash between Jacob Neusner and E.P. Sanders),¹⁴ and look at the reasons why scholars’ views may differ so markedly.

Information Creation as a Process; Searching as Strategic Exploration: For a church history course walk students through a particular event, helping them see how discussion about it developed from primary documents into secondary literature. Then, in an assignment built around a research problem, have students identify the primary literature that is available to them along with the secondary materials that are best able to help them wrestle with the problem. Students will summarize primary documents, identify the major secondary sources, and consider how those sources have interpreted the primary materials.

Overall, threshold concepts are not standards to be slavishly followed, but understandings that, once grasped, are reflected in the ways in which students do research. Instruction and assignments that foster better understanding of Framework concepts create the ability in students to operationalize those concepts in real research situations.

¹¹ Oakleaf, “Roadmap for Assessing Student Learning,” 510-511.

¹² William Badke, “Research Is a Narrative,” *Online Searcher* 39, no. 1 (January 2015): 68-70.

¹³ Oakleaf, “Roadmap for Assessing Student Learning,” 510-514.

¹⁴ Jacob Neusner, “The Use of Later Rabbinic Evidence for the Study of Paul,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 2, ed. William Scott Green (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980): 43-63; E.P. Sanders, “Puzzling out Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 2, ed. William Scott Green (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980): 65-79.

These may seem to reflect the tasks of the professor, not the librarian. Yet this is the essence of the Framework's approach, in that it provides a document with which librarians can engage professors in discussion regarding the development of student scholarly research ability. The greater the understanding of the Framework by librarians, the more those librarians will become crucial to informing the professor's instruction and assignments.

Considerations for the Future

The Framework, though a work in progress, is available as a resource to be used. Many of its elements are valuable to our understanding of theological research as strategic inquiry within a conversation. Seeing information creation as a process that needs to be understood tends to work against the notions both that all information is created equal and that information just appears without having gone through such things as editing and peer review. The recognition that authority is constructed and contextual (though tempered by our understanding of biblical revelation) warns researchers that they dare not make categorical statements without the evidence to support them.

However, it is the tendency of such documents to sit on the shelf and not to be enlisted actively. If theological education is going to benefit from the Framework's insights, theological librarians and faculty need to work together to determine learning outcomes for the various frames and then to develop instructional sessions and assignments that will make these genuine threshold concepts — transformative understandings that both create student scholars and enable them to engage in significant research.

Some theological institutions, especially those uncomfortable with constructivism and multiple understandings of information, may be inclined to see the new approach as unhelpful. Criticisms will continue to abound as the Framework evolves. For many academic librarians, the suggestion that ACRL "sunset" the 2000 Standards raised such a protest that ACRL has agreed to let the older Standards reside alongside the new Framework.¹⁵ Thus, some theological librarians may opt to continue with the Standards and ignore the Framework.

Yet, for all of the challenges, the Framework does carry strong insights into the nature of scholarship and is adaptable to local disciplines and situations. To ignore it or reject it without considering its value may well be detrimental to our students in their development. If the Framework can be enlisted and adapted to our needs, as the above examples demonstrate, it may well prove fruitful in giving our students insights into how knowledge is constructed and how best to engage in significant theological research and writing.

¹⁵ Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education.