
For Your Information

Using Information Literacy in Public Libraries

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ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education has made waves among academic librarians since it was filed by the ACRL Board in 2015. Although the ACRL Framework's primary intended audience is academic librarians, librarians in all types of libraries engage in information literacy instruction with their patrons. Sonnet Ireland shares her perspective as a public librarian on the impact that the ACRL Framework has had on her view of information literacy and how it has impacted her hands-on work with patrons.—*Sarah LeMire, Editor*

Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel." Socrates reminds us that education is not just about earning a degree and finding gainful employment; it is also about fulfilling ourselves as human beings. We easily make the connection between education and libraries in academic institutions, but we sometimes forget to include public libraries in that equation. I first noticed this when I was invited to join the NOLA Information Literacy Collective Executive Board,¹ a group that hosts a free annual forum dedicated to information literacy, in 2013. At the time, I was an academic librarian at the University of New Orleans, where I served as both a government information librarian and one of the reference and instruction librarians. As a result, I became quite familiar with ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education when it was released in 2015. When the NOLA Information Literacy Collective began working on local training sessions for academic librarians in the area, I saw the potential for its use by both public and school librarians. I felt it was obvious that we needed to include these librarians in our training efforts. After all, most of the students that I worked with were completely lost when it came to the very basics of research. Many of them did not even consider coming to the library until I reached out to their classes. School and public librarians are the first librarians that most people will interact with in their lifetimes. Including them, in my mind, would maximize our efforts and help the public as a whole. Most of my academic colleagues seemed surprised by this, assuming that public librarians had no use for any instruction tools. This is, of course, a misconception, as I would verify when I abandoned my tenure for a position with the St. Tammany Parish Library. To my delight, I found that public librarians do so much more than reference. We frequently have classes, workshops, and programs to help our patrons learn different skills, such as using a database or even just using a computer. While academic librarians primarily focus on the degree-earning learner, public libraries serve the lifelong learner.

Whether our patrons (or other librarians) realize it or not, the public library is designed to develop and encourage the lifelong learner in all of us.

INTRODUCING THE ACRL FRAMEWORK FOR INFORMATION LITERACY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education is comprised of six frames, or concepts.² Though I find some of the language cumbersome, I do believe it seeks to put into words what many instruction librarians know instinctively about information literacy. This is important since it can be very difficult to teach something we cannot identify or describe. Below are the six frames from the ACRL website. Please note that the frames are presented in alphabetical order to allow librarians more freedom in how they prioritize and utilize them in individual instruction sessions. I would also like to clarify that these frames are fluid. Many academic librarians disagree on the exact nature of each frame and may interpret them differently. Its flexibility is actually one of the benefits of the Framework; it can be used in myriad ways and bend as our instruction needs develop over time.

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
 - In other words, communities (societies or organizations) decide what makes someone an expert in a given field. Some examples include organizations like the American Bar Association or the American Forensic Association. Being an expert in one field, however, does not make a person an expert in all fields. In fact, expertise can be relative. The flip side of this is that fringe communities can attempt to bestow expertise on people who may not deserve it. So it is important to assess the community determining the guidelines for being an expert in a field. My favorite example is superheroes. Supergirl, who draws her power from a yellow sun, can only be a hero on planets with a sun similar to Earth's. Since Krypton has a red sun, she was just a regular person on her home planet.
- Information Creation as a Process
 - The format information takes can be just as important as the information itself. Different media requires different lengths. Legislators cannot rely on Twitter to publish new laws—they must be published in their entirety in a durable and easy-to-navigate format. Meanwhile, temporary information requires a quicker medium, such as flyers or Twitter. Other information actually demands a particular format. For example, DIY and makeup tutorials are usually better in video format than they would be written as text. This frame can also address the flow of information and how understanding that flow can add to a person's information literacy skill level.
- Information Has Value
 - This one is the simplest and could survive without a translation. It is the concept that information is valuable, but its value is determined by the other frames and by the information seeker. So an article that discusses different theories of how humans could colonize Mars might be priceless to someone trying to solve that problem, but it would only be of passing interest to the average reader. As with all goods and services, it is a question of supply and demand. It is not just the number of people who demand it, but how badly they demand it. Another part of that value is acknowledging that the information is the intellectual property of someone else. If information has value, then taking credit for someone else's idea is the same as stealing. By equating information with more tangible items, we can better understand the true significance of not paying the copyright fees for publications or for plagiarizing an author.
- Research as Inquiry
 - Research is not a one-step action. It requires asking and finding the answers to questions, which leads to more questions. Rinse and repeat. Even if you publish a paper, it will lead (if not you) others to ask even more questions. Thus exists the circle of scholarship, which dovetails nicely into the next frame.
- Scholarship as Conversation
 - Practically every scholarly paper, book, article, blog, etc. was written in response to a question that the author was trying to answer. Often, those questions come from other scholarly papers, books, articles, blogs, etc., which will lead to more papers, books, articles, etc. Sometimes, the scholarship is a response to someone else's answer to a question, continuing into infinity and beyond. The entirety of the scholarship in a given field can be seen as a huge conversation among the different authors, often beginning hundreds of years ago and continuing today. This can be true even in the case of recent technology. While you may be interested in the issue of fake news and social media, you might also find articles on the issue of yellow journalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries relevant.
- Searching as Strategic Exploration
 - Research is also not a straight and narrow path. It is a long winding road we all walk down. Often, we get distracted, wander down a side path for a little while to see the lovely trees or explore another area, before we end up back on track to our destination. For this one, I like to lighten the mood and use the example of a site like Wikipedia, where one can easily spend hours reading article after article. After all, we have all experienced time loss when exploring online. In this example, I use Wikipedia to remember what has happened on my favorite shows, like *Orphan Black*. An hour later, I have managed to read my way through

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multiple articles, landing on one about the Monlam Prayer Festival in Tibet. Embrace those side trips when using databases or reading scholarly articles, within reason, because you may find something that changes the way you think about what you are actually researching. You may even find an entirely new area to research.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Now, what does this have to do with public libraries? Everything. All of these concepts can be used in a public library setting. Patrons who are not currently in school can be more vulnerable to misinformation. They may not have as much exposure to different types of people with different kinds of views. They may not have someone, such as a professor, challenging why they think a certain way. They may not have an external reason to exercise their critical thinking skills on a regular basis. Instead, I see patrons who believe television doctors over their own physicians. They do not realize that those doctors are talking about general information, while their own doctors are familiar with their specific issues. I help patrons who no longer know who they can and cannot trust. They hear that mainstream media is now fake news, and they believe their Facebook newsfeeds and their friends' posts (which actually are filled with fake news). I hear some patrons discuss various conspiracy theories with each other in the library. They believed that all elections are rigged and that Hillary Clinton had already been chosen as president. Even after the surprising results in November 2016, they maintain that this election was an anomaly in a rigged system. These are only a few reasons why the public library is vital to them. In a time of uncertainty, the only thing many of my patrons trust is the library and our librarians.

INFORMATION LITERACY FIGHTS FAKE NEWS

In response to this need, I developed a sixty-to-ninety-minute class called "Fact or Fake? Learn to Tell Real Information from the Scams" for the Causeway Branch of the St. Tammany Parish Library. We talk about the difference between fake news, satire, and biased news. In the class, I teach the patrons how to assess information (or a website) with RADAR. Mandalios explains that RADAR stands for Relevance, Authority, Date, Appearance, and Reason for writing.³ We talk about different news items and assess them with these criteria. One sign of fake news is clickbait, which is when the headline of an article is sensationalized to encourage people to click on it. Often, the article has little or nothing to do with the subject of the headline, which means the information is not relevant to what they actually wanted to read. Authority can be trickier, but I encourage patrons to do research on who writes and publishes the information

they read or watch. Clicking on any About Us links or doing a simple search on Google for the author or publication will provide a lot of information. This also extends to who is quoted in the article. How does the author know about a conversation between our President and the President of China? If we do not know who the source is, we cannot assess their believability. If we at least have some key details about the person, we can make a better judgment about their comments. I also point out the importance of checking the date on information. Frequently, we share information online without realizing that it is old news.

Since many of our patrons are older, RADAR allows me to have fun with the acronym as it represents both the technology used to detect objects and a beloved character on the TV show MASH. MASH was a television show in the 1970s and 1980s about doctors, nurses, and other support staff stationed at the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in South Korea during the Korean War. The character I am referring to is Corporal Radar O'Reilly, the Company clerk who seemed almost psychic throughout the show. Radar could hear the choppers coming in, often with casualties, before anyone else could. He also had a habit of handing items or information to the commanding officer before he was asked. Finally, he was the person everyone at the 4077th would go to if they needed something. No matter how hard it was to find the particular item or information, Radar always knew how to get it. Because of these attributes, RADAR really resonates with my patrons.

The patrons also learn keywords for identifying bias, as well as the different types of bias that exist. Since my patrons are aware of my love of mysteries and crime programs, I give them the example of a television detective who is convinced that a woman was murdered by her husband. I find that this scenario works beautifully for the biases that I cover. I take the patrons along different steps of the investigation and point out a specific bias held by one of the characters. Scenarios include confirmation bias:

The detective only focuses on information that implicates the husband. She points out the fact that the husband was having an affair and the neighbors heard the couple fighting earlier the day of the murder, but she dismisses the fact that DNA and fingerprints were found at the scene that do not match anyone living in the house.

Focusing on bias in a crime show helps demonstrate how different types of bias work without sending the class into a frenzy of political discussion. I am also careful to point out that bias does not make a person evil. We all have bias; the key is to know what that bias is so that we can take it into account.

Logical fallacies are also discussed to help patrons identify when a source is using faulty logic. This is a tactic seen in everything from social media posts to newspaper articles. In this exercise, separate little scenarios are used to make

each logical fallacy more vivid. For example, correlation vs. causation is clarified by the following scenario:

Vandalism increases in the summer. Suspiciously, so do ice cream sales. Obviously, the consumption of ice cream leads to a form of madness that causes good citizens to vandalize property . . . No. In reality, both rates go up because of the time of year. Kids are out of school and are bored (unless they join the Summer Reading Program), so they get into trouble. It is hot in the summer, so we all enjoy ice cream even more than during the rest of the year.

Focusing on bias and logical fallacies, instead of just fake news, helps the patrons identify issues with any story before they share it on social media. After the class, they realize that ten articles that cite the same solitary research study are not as useful as one article that cites multiple resources that they can read for themselves. They also learn simple ways to verify a particular story, such as triangulation—i.e., finding the story in at least two other reputable sources. In this context, reputable sources are defined as news sources that have a long-standing reputation of being legitimate, such as the *New York Times* and the *National Review*. I remind them that reputable sources can have bias, but they are not fake. I also teach them how to double-check the story on a fact-checking site, such as First Draft News,⁴ iMediaEthics,⁵ and Snopes.⁶ Some patrons disagree about the reliability of Snopes, so I offer many alternatives and stress the most important part of any fact-checking site—the sources. If a site offers citations that patrons can go to and assess for themselves, then they can look at the actual evidence and make their own decisions. The goal is for patrons to think about what they read before adding it to the vicious cycle of misinformation.

Finally, the class covers the different kind of scams that exist online, over the phone, and even through the mail. After all, what is fake news but an attempt to defraud citizens of something even more valuable than money—the way they think and understand the world. We talk about protecting ourselves from catfishing, phishing, and spam. They learn how to assess an email address and a web link, as well as how to report fraud or attempts at fraud.

INFORMATION LITERACY OR METALITERACY?

Is the term information literacy enough? Mackey and Jacobson say no, “the emergence of social media and collaborative online communities requires a reframing of information literacy as a metaliteracy that supports multiple literacy types.”⁷ I agree, and so I have started to embrace the term metaliteracy. They further explain, “metaliteracy promotes critical thinking and collaboration in a digital age, providing a comprehensive framework to effectively participate in social media and online communities.”⁸ Metaliteracy more

accurately includes other, more specific, kinds of information literacy, such as media literacy, digital literacy, visual literacy, and so much more.

With this in mind, I developed another class called “On the Money: Using the Library to Improve Your Financial Literacy.” In this class, I teach patrons how to find financial information through the library catalog and our databases. I also direct them to reliable sites where they can find information on almost any financial question imaginable. We focus on government sites, such as the Federal Trade Commission,⁹ the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau,¹⁰ and Benefits.gov.¹¹ These are sites created specifically to protect consumers and connect them with the resources they need. I also emphasize the importance of promoting sites like these. There is a real concern in the government information world that these particular sites may disappear. Without voicing a political view, I explain how important it is to let their representatives know when the government provides a resource that they find important.

I also demonstrate how to use various government and nonprofit organization sites that can provide guidance on general or specific financial topics. We discuss the pros and cons of using various free personal budgeting software programs, as well as the types of security they provide. Patrons learn how to assess any other sites or financial software programs they might find. I advise them to find the Security section of any website that wants access to their financial information. They also learn how to look up what those security terms mean and how they function to protect their information. I then demonstrate some search techniques that can be used with their favorite search engine to locate sites that might develop in the future. The point of the class is not to simply give the patrons all the information they need, but also to teach them how to find information for themselves in the future.

Finally, the library also offers basic computer courses. In a series of four classes, (“Intro to Computers,” “Intro to the Internet,” “Intro to Email,” and “Internet Safety”) patrons learn how to use a computer and navigate a mouse, how to access the Internet and search the web, how to create and use an email account, and how to protect themselves and their computers. Here, I use information literacy principles to teach the patrons how to determine whether an email or website is legitimate. Patrons not only learn basic skills for using technology; they also learn how to think critically about the information they receive online, whether through a website or an email.

THE FUTURE

I have even more classes like this planned for the future. In fact, I am working on a class about continuing education throughout adulthood. Many of our older patrons are retired and are interested in learning new skills or just exercising their brains by taking a class. I have directed many of them

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to our library resources, such as Learning Express 3.0 and Hoopla, which offers many of The Great Courses video and audio classes. I have also demonstrated free massive open online courses (MOOCs) like Coursera and edX. Since this is a common need, I am developing a class that will explore these resources in-depth and show patrons how to find other MOOCs in the future. These are courses that will help engage older patrons who are looking for something to do with their time, while also exercising their minds and information literacy skills.

CONCLUSION

We are doing a lot of great things to teach our patrons information literacy or metaliteracy skills, but ours is just one of many public libraries offering classes like this. With the rising profile of fake news, librarians of all backgrounds have been called to action. For example, the Oakland Public Library offered “Stop Fake News!” classes in the beginning of 2017.¹² The librarians showed patrons how to find reputable sources through the library. They also provided patrons with the tools to identify fake news. The Gail Borden Public Library offered a similar program in January 2017 called “Librarians vs. Fake News.”¹³ This session was live-streamed over YouTube, and the recording of the event is available on their site. If that surprises you, then check out what your local public library has to offer. Better yet, invite public librarians to any local information literacy gatherings or training sessions you have. As this year’s Chair of the NOLA Information Literacy Collective, I am making a conscious effort to do just that. This year, our free forum will broaden the focus to public and school librarians, as well as academic librarians. We plan to have journalists and other non-librarian professionals talk at the forum about the importance of various forms of information literacy. While conferences or webinars with official library associations help librarians develop these skills, we also need to organize at a grassroots level to train ourselves and fellow librarians. Now more than ever, it has become clear that these information literacy skills are

needed by all ages. We can no longer afford to focus our efforts in independent groups, based on what type of libraries we serve. We need to work together to educate all people or offer them the opportunities to educate themselves, at least. See if there is a local group in your area, like LILi (Lifelong Information Literacy)¹⁴ in California. If not, start your own! Find a way to do what we are doing: encourage collaboration and discussion between academic, public, and school librarians. You might be surprised to find how many public librarians are doing everything they can to promote information literacy skills.

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