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# "PUSHING BACK," "TAPPING IN," AND "OPENING DOORS":

## *Examining Workplace Information Practices to Inform Information Literacy Instruction in Professional Programs*

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## DEMONSTRATING ACRL FRAMEWORK CONCEPTS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The work done to map or crosswalk the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (the Framework)[1] to discipline-specific information literacy (IL) outcomes in fields like social work has generated helpful tools for librarians to communicate the relevance of IL to faculty and students, and to situate IL skills in academic programs. Yet both the published literature and professional discourse among academic librarians continues to center on the challenges of collaborating with faculty, embedding IL meaningfully into program curricula, and establishing the place of IL instruction in many professional programs. One way to reinforce these mapping efforts and enhance our ability to communicate about IL is to set aside our library-centric definitions and listen to how practitioners describe their information practices and experiences in the field.

Several ACRL companion documents align IL with disciplinary ways of knowing by comparing the ACRL Standards or Framework with professional guidelines and standards.[2] These documents open doors to conversations with faculty in professional programs. However, the nature of these documents is aspirational. They articulate best practices and expectations, meaning that the context-specific lived experiences and material conditions of practitioners in the field are overlooked as evidence of how these guidelines and standards are performed or experienced. In their efforts to map the Framework concepts to the practices of journalists, Katherine Boss et al. found "a range of tensions and frustrations in translating the Framework from a holistic document to a disciplinary-specific, practitioner-based field".[3] These "contextual tensions" were the result of work environments that were markedly different from the academic environment in which the Framework concepts were conceived. Seeking evidence of IL in professional practice environments, though they frustrate attempts to cleanly map IL concepts to contexts outside academia, can actually be generative, allowing librarians to hear and see authentic experiences of IL. Building on the strengths of these efforts, this research project sought to reach out beyond the walls of academic institutions and gather evidence from various fields of professional practice to explore how—and if—these concepts align with practice so that librarians can not only "*assert* the importance of information literacy"[4] (emphasis added) to a

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field or profession but *demonstrate* it. Looking for evidence of IL's "inherent dimensions, textures and relations of the practice… its discourse and operationalisation and the various ways in which it is experienced"[5] in the contexts in which students will be working after graduation can help develop IL instruction that prepares them for lifelong information literacy, and not just academic literacy. There is often a great difference between what students should do and what they actually do in their academic work, just as there is in workplaces and fields of practice; basing instruction efforts on guidelines and best practices prepares them in theory but does not help them meet the practical challenges and realities of the workplace information environments or learn to be information literate professionals.

Effectively communicating the relevance and significance of IL for students and faculty in professional programs has been a challenge for many librarians, and collaboration with faculty is often recommended in the literature as a practical solution to addressing the deficits identified in students' IL skills and to incorporating IL instruction into professional programs.[6] However, this collaboration is sometimes promoted without problematizing the presumptions about the meaning of IL which is the basis of these teaching collaborations. Some scholars have demonstrated the need for librarians to unpack the language we use to describe IL and examine its inherent concepts through the perspectives of various academic disciplines.[7] Alison Hicks and Annemaree Lloyd, for example, call for academic librarians to challenge our "epistemological premises and discourses"[8] about IL and question why we continue to collaborate with faculty on *our* terms and use *our* definitions to communicate about IL with faculty instead of the discourses of different disciplines or professions. There is some evidence that librarians are addressing this challenge and applying insights developed from workplace IL research into their instruction, and using that evidence to expand the reach of IL instruction.[9] Additional efforts to apply existing research findings as well as seek new evidence from practice environments can help librarians make IL instruction relevant to students who are becoming practitioners rather than researchers or academics. By asking more open questions about IL, qualitative research can bring new evidence to bear on our instruction and liaison efforts and help build a shared understanding of IL that can demonstrate the significance of IL to practice environments and bring professionals and practitioners on board for IL instruction,[10] especially in programs where the curriculum is bound by professional accreditation requirements and there may be no capacity or appetite for incorporating "other" skills outside the discipline.

## THE RELATIONAL NATURE OF INFORMATION LITERACY IN PRACTICE

Over four years and three separate studies,[11] the author gathered descriptions of IL in practice from qualitative interviews with people working in direct practice with service users in health and social service settings, including hospitals, social service agencies, and community health centers. Twenty-five participants, ranging from undergraduate practicum students to Master's trained professionals with more than 15 years of clinical experience, came from the fields of child and youth care work, social work, and nursing. In response to open, semi-structured questions about their work, participants described how they sought, accessed and used information in their work with clients and patients, and provided examples of challenges, opportunities, affordances and limits on information use in their workplaces.

Similar to findings from studies of other professionals,[12] the IL practices, skills and knowledge described by these participants were shaped by their specific learning and practice environments, professional and workplace cultures, and their social interactions within those environments. The most significant feature of IL as they described it was the centrality of interpersonal relationships in all of their information-related practices. They described IL in terms of the work they did for clients: resourcing clients with information and services; providing patient education; referring them to programs and agencies; advocating for client needs; navigating the healthcare and social care systems, and negotiating competing information needs. Conversations with these participants made clear that interpersonal relationships are fundamental to the development and practice of IL in their workplaces.[13] This understanding is essential to seeing the Framework in a new light, applying it to IL education efforts, and communicating IL concepts in language that learners can see themselves applying in fields of practice.

# REFRAMING FRAMEWORK CONCEPTS THROUGH A PRACTICE-BASED LENS

Hearing evidence of how the ACRL Framework concepts are applied in practice highlights nuance to existing definitions, as well as new knowledge practices and dispositions relevant to specific contexts. Three frames in particular were relevant to the participants' information practices and illustrate how the contextual and relational nature of their work stretches our understanding of these concepts.

## *Authority is Constructed, Contextual, Contested, and Contingent*

The construction and contextualization of authority was a variable, ongoing process. For these professionals, the client's or patient's experience was the highest authority, and the practical authority of any information source was contingent on meaning derived from their interaction with clients or patients. The participants indicated that the practical authority of information was always contingent on their clients' abilities, needs and desires, even if the contextual authority (e.g. the authority of research evidence) was uncontested. Authority was also contested. Whether or not authority was recognized, accepted, or applied depended on their client's history, experience, and current cognitive and emotional state. The fact that authoritative sources (such as academic research articles, practice guidelines, government legislation) exist and could be recognized as such did not always bear on how the participants used them with clients. A social work student explained,

> there are official articles, and peer-reviewed articles, and research and stuff like that, that are going to be major resources going forward… but there are also unofficial ones …[that] are coming from the more personal, more empathy touching side of things where you gain a greater understanding of what it is like to live in that world.

Participants recognized the contextual nature of their own professional authority in terms of what information got leveraged in certain situations. They were very aware of their power to shape how, when and why information was created and used, and their ability to push back against that authority. One participant described the challenge of "learning how to navigate this difficult system and having sometimes what we call pushing back and really having to [say] 'I'm hearing what you're saying, but this is what my client needs.'" Another participant shared a different perspective on information sharing with a client-centered focus:

> In terms of sharing [client] information, there's only certain circumstances where we get to do that and it's not free information. People can't call me out of nowhere and ask for that, I have to actually have consent and that makes sense.… I am a huge believer in working together as a team because we're all working with the same individual for hopefully the same goal, so I don't want to hold information back, I'd much rather share information, but to do that …we'd have to get consent. And the client can revoke that at any time.

In this way, the ability to use authoritative information was dependent on a clients' ability or willingness to participate in the use of that information. It was also contingent on time constraints in the workplace, resource availability, and most importantly, on the nature of the relationships their clients had with them and with the system. Participants recounted how their clients' experiences of marginalization, oppression, previous involvement in social and health care systems impacted their perceptions of authority and their pursuit of information. They described a critical rejection of certain expressions of authority based on understanding and respect for their clients' experiences with authority. A youth worker stated "[youth] are going to listen to their friends before they're going to listen to any professional, especially with a lot of them being in systems and stuff, they're not going to listen to the professional." Through their comments, these participants demonstrated understanding of the function of information in their social setting and how authority was tied to function.

Related to this, participants valued the personal and experiential authority of colleagues much more highly

than documentary information, because experience was required to evaluate, interpret and effectively use that type of information. As one health social worker explained, "not having someone who has some acumen and expertise and honestly, like business-to-business relationships with other folks, is really, really difficult for anybody in crisis or otherwise or who's having any sort of health or social need, that requires some sort of system, navigation and connection." Acumen and expertise in how information flowed through the health or social care system was also considered necessary for creating practical value for clients so that they could benefit from the information that care providers shared.

## *Information Value is Co-created*

For the health and social care professionals who were interviewed, information value was not inherent to the source itself, but is created for, with, and through relationships with others.[14] Value is established in context, in real time, and in person. The ACRL Framework describes "several dimensions of value, including … as a means of negotiating and understanding the world."[15] The value that professionals established in information sources for their clients helped those clients negotiate and understand the health and social care systems they were in. For example, one youth worker described their skill in their "ability to gather collateral or pick out certain information" in government disability assistance forms so that the information provided on the form would have the most benefit for the client. They saw themselves as contributors to the bureaucratic information systems they worked in, and were confident enough to modify information sources to create value specific to individual clients. They also understood the value for others in the information they created, recognized their information privilege and the power that it gives them relative to their clients.

Many of the participants described a lack of control over whether their clients will recognize value in information sources and in their use. One participant described their work as "a collaborative intervention… I can offer information and support, but I can't forcefully persuade anyone to accept it." The practical value of information for clients mattered to participants, and their comments suggest they understood that information has no value if people cannot or will not use it. They recognized barriers to access due to their clients' age, education level, socioeconomic status and health status, and noted that much ostensibly valuable information had no real value for clients who did not have the capacity, resources or interest in using the information that was available to them. A social worker recognized that clients who were connected with service providers may be "experiencing some distress that's affecting their ability or their willingness to look for information. They're experiencing a moment where they may require assistance first to cope with that distress in order to be able to look for information, process it, understand what might be relevant for them and to make decisions." This comment demonstrates that the value of certain information could depend on the timing in which it is shared. Similarly, a practicum student in a childcare center expressed frustration at their clients' unwillingness to receive information:

> if you are thinking about an information sharing component, parents do not really care.… If they ask then they are interested, but they will not take the time out of their day to actually go through [the print resources provided] …I haven't seen many parents actually go out of their way to see the resources. I think part of it is probably like, yes, they are in a rush, they are busy, they just want to get their kid and get out of there, but part of it is a preconceived notion that nope, this is my kid and I am going to parent them how I want.

That value is co-created in social spaces and contingent on the relationships between service providers and clients is essential to understanding the information practices of these helping professionals.

## *Searching is Strategic and Tactical*

The key search skills articulated by participants were persistence and pragmatism. Almost every participant's information seeking strategy was to ask colleagues first, and then to look for information independently if necessary. As one student put it, information seeking "is just about asking, really … [and] if asking isn't going anywhere then looking!" Developing relationships with colleagues and building professional networks by "putting

yourself out there" and "tapping into local resources in the community" was described as the most expedient and effective way of connecting clients to resources and finding resources for themselves. Search strategies were also based on their understanding of how their professional skills and knowledge could be leveraged in the information environment. One participant described the importance of "stamina and skill sets that a social worker would have to keep trying, knocking on different doors and trying to free up system pieces that are stuck. … And so we understand how to keep pushing through the barriers [to resource access] and how to free them up."

Previous research on the information practices of nurses has highlighted the challenge in translating the Framework's emphasis on unlimited and persistent searching to workplace contexts where time constraints limit the amount and type of information seeking possible.[16] Similarly, the participants in this study described the material, temporal, social and interpersonal realities of practice environments that constrained how much they were able to use search strategies or empower their clients and patients to do so. Participants repeatedly commented on information that was unstable, unverifiable, inaccessible, inaccurate, or non-existent, and described a lack of information relevant to specific client groups or particular geographic areas. They also consistently described the practical limitations of helping clients search for information due to factors like information overload, lack of access to technology, or poor information literacy skills. One social worker stated, "it can be hard to discern sometimes what is useful to that specific client *in that moment for their experience,*" indicating their interest in focusing on concrete actions that can help with the client's immediate information need regardless of what better information might be relevant to longer term outcomes.

In many of the environments they described, the needed information was simply not available, and they did not have time available to search for alternative resources. They were constrained by the realities of their clients' situation and searched for information strategically to meet the specific needs and capabilities of their clients, choosing strategies for clients based on their understanding of their clients' past experiences and current needs. One social work student with experience working at a youth health center shared their thoughts on the challenges of searching for someone else: "what I've learned is that I can't work harder than them, I need to find a balance in really working from where they're at and doing the best I can and seeing where they're at in terms of their motivation to do differently too, and that changes every day."

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Through their actions of recognizing authority, creating value, and searching strategically, these participants put these Framework concepts into action and firmly placed those actions in the context of work with clients. Thus, approaches to IL instruction with students in practice-based professions should be contextualized not only in students' workplace experiences but more specifically in their interpersonal and interprofessional interactions with clients and colleagues in those workplaces. IL instruction that focuses on individual skills and knowledge for personal development will not prepare students adequately to be information literate in most practice environments.[17] Rather, "linking information literacy to a setting in which students have personal investment and [social] connections increases the chances that new IL concepts will hook into their previous knowledge and be retained."[18]

Reframing these concepts through a practice-based lens provides gives librarians some insight as to how IL instruction can be incorporated into professional programs. Experiential learning, in which students are engaged in "direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities,"[19] is a key educational approach in many of these programs, and one with which librarians could align IL instruction. Thinking of IL in terms of experiential learning prompts librarians who teach IL in practice-based programs to reconsider why most instruction focuses on "codified" information sources like scholarly articles[20] when there is little evidence that they are used in practice, and why instruction is concentrated in academic courses instead of practice-based courses. In terms of the Framework, we can ask whether the Framework as a whole applies to practice in non-academic environments, or if only certain frames have significance, and if modifications to the Framework might benefit students in these programs.

The Framework guides librarians to think about information literacy more broadly and acts as a "starting point for asking questions that lead us to think more closely about the nature [of a] discipline, and what we can

do as librarians to initiate students into the practices of that discipline."[21] Gaps in education mentioned by participants, and perceived lack of transferability of the research skills they were taught to large parts of their jobs indicates that there are opportunities for aligning IL instruction with disciplinary practices through practicums and field courses, and practice-based professional programs generally. Since the nature of helping professions is working with people, IL knowledge practices and dispositions should be re-thought and adapted to this kind of interpersonal, service-based practice, instead of an individual, independent, and performance-based academic environment.

Participants all mentioned that they learned IL-related skills and practices on the job rather than through formal education. When given the opportunity to reflect on their professional practices and identify those practices as information work, participants considered how prepared they felt to perform this kind of work and noted distinct divisions between "textbook work" and direct work with clients in system navigation, case management, resourcing, and counseling. As one social worker put it, "I wear different hats within this role. So when I am wearing the service navigator [hat], textbook work is put to the side." "Textbook work" was the work they associated with academic research skills learned in university and applied to clinical counseling practice. Many participants noted that some instruction on system navigation and internet search skills would be a helpful addition to the theory they learned in their academic programs. These comments suggest that librarians may be focusing instruction efforts on one small aspect of students' future work—using research evidence in clinical practice—and be neglecting how IL is practiced in other aspects of their work as helping professionals.[22] As one participant mused,

> "When I think about, you know, navigating resources or information literacy in university, a big part of social work role… is navigating things… and I found what I learned in university was less than what I could have learned reading through [a] page online. So …all of those pieces that you need to know while navigating and that the clients really benefit from you knowing have been more just on the job figuring out as I go."

These findings echo previous research that has found helping professionals want scenario-based instruction that reflects the lack of time and resources available for information seeking on the job, and that relates to client-centered practice.[23] Scenarios and case studies designed to have students apply IL concepts to workplace situations are promising teaching tools to address the workplace contexts in which helping professionals will seek, acquire and apply IL.[24] Likewise, approaches to teaching distinct IL skills like evaluation should focus more on how information is used, rather than how it is created. For example, librarians can introduce information evaluation rubrics for online information use with clients that include context-specific and client-focused definitions of authority, value, relevance, and appropriateness.

Beyond classroom teaching approaches, part of librarians' liaison work might be helping faculty and students see system navigating, case management, and information provision work as IL, making implicit IL skills explicit, opening doors to reflective information practice and critical awareness of information literacy in their professions. Communicating the alignment between IL and critical practices and pedagogies in other disciplines[25] may also be a way to start conversations with faculty on this topic, help make IL explicit in experiential learning and workplace learning, and "aid in surfacing tacit values, practices, and assumptions related to information literacy in their fields".[26] Librarians can highlight connections between social justice education and critical information literacy, presenting its strengths as "a problem-posing, multi-dimensional, creative, intellectual, process-based approach intended to support student agency," that aligns well with practice-based learning, "as opposed to a traditional technical, mechanical, behavioral, strategic, skills-based approach.[27]"

As a key pedagogy in most professional programs, practicums and field courses provide compelling opportunities for librarians to incorporate IL meaningfully into the curriculum. As has been argued elsewhere, the practicum experience provides a place for students to relate IL skills and knowledge to practice and help them make connections between how they use information in practice as students, employees and members of a profession.[28] By helping students develop professionally relevant IL skills, and not just academic literacy skills, librarians can demonstrate "the importance of the research practice connection across the curriculum more

forcefully and facilitate the development of more information literate EBP practitioners."[29] It will also help librarians move past questions of whether or if students are using library services and resources in the field and instead ask how students demonstrate IL in practice and how IL instruction can support them in doing that. Other researchers have suggested that field instructors are "a neglected audience in terms of librarian outreach";[30] approaching these instructors with an openness to helping them surface IL skills in students, beyond accessing academic research, may open doors to more effective outreach.

Building on another key pedagogy in many helping professions, Librarians can align IL with the reflective practice that is part of these students' education. IL concepts can be incorporated into the reflective activities already occurring in practicum seminars and other courses, by working with faculty to design activities that direct some of this reflection to workplaces information experiences as they relate to professional standards and ethics, client-centered practice, and workplace contexts. For example, students could be invited to reflect on experiences of collaborative information seeking with clients, searching for programs and services in their communities, assessing information sources for application with different client groups, or translating academic knowledge into practical information for clients. Much of this teaching may already be taking place in the curriculum; bringing librarian expertise to conversations with faculty and advocating for explicit assessment of these practices as IL may offer a way to infuse student learning with IL instruction that is sustainable and scalable for both librarians and faculty.

## CONCLUSION

When we listen to people describe their information work, we can hear where, where, and why IL is practiced in terms that have meaning in professional practice contexts. We can also hear how ACRL Framework concepts apply to practice, and how they do not. Additional efforts to explore IL outside academic contexts with qualitative research methods can help shift the focus from library-centric definitions of IL and find evidence of existing strengths, competencies, and "situated understanding" of IL[31] that can inform approaches to teaching in relevant and meaningful ways to pre-professional students and their instructors.

The ACRL Framework provides space for exploring IL from diverse perspectives and with various research methods. Qualitative research evidence can be used to develop our understanding of how educators can best support and enrich their experiences. Sara Miller argues the Framework "provides a rich site of inquiry for bringing together information literacy theory and practice, … opening doors for creative collaborations between librarians and disciplinary faculty."[32] In the spirit of greater, more fruitful collaboration with faculty and students, expanding our critical approaches to teaching with the Framework allow us to see it as a living, changing thing capable of being unpacked, stretched, and added to by other disciplinary theories and professional practices.

As Miller further argues, "[s]ince the practices of disciplinary information literacy are inextricably entwined within those larger disciplinary values and assumptions, finding effective places and methods for information literacy integration within disciplines involves identifying and examining these nuances—bringing tacit disciplinary processes and understandings to light."[33] This work requires reaching out beyond our academic institutions to people who are doing the things that we are preparing our students to do, to help us learn the processes, practices and ways of knowing to make connections. Evidence from practice can be used to design relevant teaching interventions to make learning stick, make it transferable, and make it lifelong, reflecting peoples' authentic experiences in the work they do. This work also requires some pushing back against the idea that IL is a distinct academic skill, separate from disciplinary ways of knowing and doing. Rather than asserting IL as a set of knowledge practices and dispositions that students require to graduate university, instruction efforts should acknowledge the messy realities and "contextual tensions"[34] of IL practice in workplace contexts, build on strengths developed through experience, and use opportunities for embedding IL concepts into skills, knowledge and practices already valued and recognized in specific professions.

## NOTES

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