

Joining (scholarly) Conversations

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In the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, the ACRL has designated “Scholarship as Conversation” as one of six frames for understanding information. In playing with this idea, I think it’s not just scholarly information that is constructed through interactions, but all information.

In the Framework - <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework> - the Scholarship as Conversation frame has some really interesting text and while it is geared to academic information, I think the concepts apply more broadly.

“...a given issue may be characterized by several competing perspectives as part of an ongoing conversation in which information users and creators come together and negotiate meaning...”

“Developing familiarity with the sources of evidence, methods, and modes of discourse in the field assists novice learners to enter the conversation...”¹

In my work with students, I’ve found they struggle to understand scholarly articles – in effect they can’t find a way into the conversation. This reminds me of listening to my husband and his brother talk about hockey – as dedicated fans they have a shorthand code that leaves me on the outside – it’s full of names I don’t know, numbers I don’t understand and expressions that don’t make any sense. I hear similar comments from students reading article, but I think this isn’t confined to academic learning. ANYTIME we enter a new hobby, a new town, a new area of interest, we grapple with similar problems. Learning how to join these conversations is kind of understood – you listen to people with more experience, start hearing patterns in the conversation, ask questions and make small steps into the dialogue, usually around people you trust to correct you or at least make allowances for being new.

BUT – I haven’t done a really good job being clear to students that this same strategy applies to joining academic conversations – I was encouraging them jump in at the deep end and just flounder around until they ‘felt’ more comfortable. (SIGH – I know – looking at it now, I can see how this was doomed to be ineffective).

More recently, I’ve been more explicit about teaching students to read scholarly materials, and part of that is to see them as lines of dialogue in long-running conversations, rather than the final word on any aspect of research. This introduces the element that the article could be . . . wrong(!) about some things – or at least open to question, which in turn has sparked some very interesting discussions. It also allows me

to talk about responding to an article as though the author was there – asking questions, checking definitions of new language, clarifying the numbers by drawing them out etc.

Teaching different kinds of search techniques can also help students see articles in context – see that information changes with the addition of new data and new perspectives. I use Google Scholar as an academic time machine – while references can tell you a lot about the conversations that took place before a given article came out, the ‘Cited by’ function in scholar can lead you to the article’s future and how it has influenced conversations since its publication. Using a bit of history to either compare two articles in a field, or even review a fairly current article but ask students what might be different if the study was done today can also help them to see information as evolving rather than static (articles on social media use work really well for this).

Homework questions to think about

What do we need to know to join conversations?... And how do we find that out?

What changes (for us, for students, for others) if we teach information as conversation?

How can we incorporate this idea into what we do?

- Teaching classes?
- Working at a reference desk?
- Designing ways to access information?
- Helping other join our conversations?

1. Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). (2015). *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework> (consulted April 2016)