

# Framing Digital Literacy: The *ACRL Framework*

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## **Abstract**

The Association of College and Research Library's (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* is a key document for developing and guiding information literacy programmes. In this opinion piece the author posits that the Framework is inclusive of themes and elements that support digital literacy as well, whether it is viewed as a unique literacy or as part of the broader literacy of information literacy. The paper explores the background of the Framework, definitions of digital literacy, and the ways in which the Framework connects to digital literacy. The author argues that the Framework is a relevant guide for digital literacy initiatives.

## **Keywords**

Information Literacy, Digital Literacy, ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, Library Instruction Programmes, Academic Libraries, Programme Development, Instructional Design

## **Introduction**

In the digital environment information, knowledge, and content is rapidly produced, shared, re-used, and reimagined. Librarians are in the thick of this environment, and one of our crucial roles is to foster information literacy in order to equip patrons to be informed and successful participants in this environment. In the academic library community, and beyond, there is increasing interest in this particular environment and in approaching “digital literacy” as a unique literacy. Distinct digital literacy initiatives are already in place in Australia and the United Kingdom, and are emerging in other regions, including Singapore. As we advance our digital literacy planning and programmes, there are various documents, reports, and frameworks that we may wish to refer to and use. I believe that, while it is put forth as a framework for information literacy, the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (the Framework) by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) can also help guide our development of digital literacy programmes and the ways in which we approach digital literacy teaching and learning in academic libraries. In addition to its flexible nature and conceptual approach there are specific ways in which the Framework directly connects to aspects of digital literacy that some may argue are exclusive to it. While the Framework mentions “digital literacy” only once (in the Appendix), the emphases of the document on learners creating content and knowledge and on contextualizing information directly connects to those specific aspects of digital literacy. Additionally, the Framework as a whole highlights the broad, integrative nature of information literacy and conceptual ideas that ground

information literacy, which also pertain to digital literacy. Whether we consider digital literacy as separate from information literacy or as one of the many literacies incorporated into information literacy (like I do), the Framework is a valuable, relevant document to use in order to further enhance our information literacy programmes with digital literacy elements and to develop digital literacy programmes.

### **Background of the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education***

For years academic librarians relied on ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (the Standards), approved in 2000, when developing information literacy programmes and activities in the United States as well as other areas of the world, including Singapore. In June 2016, ACRL suddenly rescinded the Standards and essentially replaced them with the Framework. The evolution and endorsement of the Framework was a multi-step process. In 2011 ACRL established a Task Force to review the Standards. That Task Force passed on a charge to the revision Task Force which produced the Framework (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p.15). Part of the charge to the revision Task Force was to "update the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* so they reflect the current thinking on such things as the creation and dissemination of knowledge... and the expanding definition of information literacy to include multiple literacies, for example, transliteracy, media literacy, digital literacy, etc." (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p.15). Note that this is the one line in the Framework that specifically refers to digital literacy. The Framework was filed in February of 2015, adopted by the ACRL Board in January 2016, and then effectively replaced the Standards in June of this year when, quite unexpectedly to many, the Standards were rescinded.

Now the Framework is the primary document adopted by ACRL to guide the development of information literacy programmes. The rescension of the Standards and effective replacement with the Framework caused much discussion, excitement, and even controversy in the academic library community. In part due to the flexible nature of the Framework, many libraries are now exploring how to best utilize it. We can benefit from it by using it as a guide as we integrate digital literacy elements into our information literacy learning practices and as we create programmes that highlight digital literacy.

The move from the Standards to the Framework is a change from the skills-based approach of the Standards to a more flexible and contextual approach; it is "called a framework intentionally because it is based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts with flexible options for implementation, rather than a set of standards or learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills" (*ACRL Framework*, 2015, p. 2). These core concepts, or frames, are (in no sequential order):

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

These frames can also be thought of as “threshold concepts.” The reliance of the Framework on the idea of threshold concepts as they apply to information literacy, as well as the integration of metaliteracy as a foundational concept, are significant aspects of the Framework. Threshold concepts “are those ideas in any discipline that are passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 2). These concepts are troublesome and challenging for learners to grapple with. Learners move through threshold concepts or suddenly grasp them; they don’t meet or master them. The learning goals (not learning outcomes) related to these concepts are outlined in the Framework as Knowledge Practices (how or what learners think or know) and Dispositions (how or what learners do or act). Finally, the Framework “draws significantly on the concept of metaliteracy, which offers a renewed vision of information literacy as a set of abilities in which students are consumers and creators of information” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p.2).

### **Defining “Digital Literacy” and “Information Literacy”**

There are different definitions of digital literacy. Jisc, “the UK higher, further education and skills sectors’ not-for-profit organisation for digital services and solutions” defines digital literacy as “the capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society.” (Jisc, 2015, para. 3). Deakin University, an Australian University with an established digital literacy framework, asserts that “being digitally literate means being able to search and navigate, think critically and analyse, create and communicate information using a variety of digital media” (Deakin University Library, 2016, para. 1). The American Library Association (ALA) defines digital literacy as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills” (Visser, 2012, para. 2). The recent *NMC Horizon Project Strategic Brief* (2016) states that digital literacy “embodies these precursor’s [media literacy and information literacy] philosophies ... while upgrading them for the digital age... addressing users not only as consumers, but also as content producers” (p. 4). Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Libraries (2016) recently defined digital literacy as “the set of abilities needed to interact with the digital environment to access, use, and manage information, and to create and share new content and knowledge in an ethical manner using digital technologies” (para. 5).

As approaches to information literacy teaching and learning are evolving, so too is the definition of information literacy. With the new Framework also comes a new definition of information literacy from ACRL: “information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 3). Part of this definition that stands out when considering its relationship to digital literacy is how it describes information literacy as a set of integrated abilities, which are connected, not sequential, and can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. Another aspect that speaks to digital literacy is that the definition includes knowledge creation and participation as integral to information literacy. This definition is inclusive of digital literacy, as is the Framework.

While the *Horizon Strategic Brief* (2016) asserts that digital literacy upgrades information literacy, I believe that information literacy is the umbrella (p.4). Information literacy is still an overarching literacy, and digital literacy falls under it. The Framework allows for this vision of information literacy and digital literacy and even supports it. Considering the definitions of digital literacy and information literacy that I just presented, the key elements that distinguish digital literacy from information literacy are digital content creation using digital tools/media/technologies and the restriction to the “digital society,” or environment. Beyond its definition of information literacy, the Framework addresses these seemingly distinct aspects of digital literacy as part of the guidance that it offers for information literacy learning and programmes.

## **Content Creation**

### *Metaliteracy*

One of the shifts from the Standards to the Framework is the move to seeing learners as not just users of information but creators and contributors of content and knowledge as well. The Framework clearly acknowledges the role of learners as content producers, particularly through the infusion of metaliteracy into the document. Metaliteracy, according to Mackey and Jacobson (2011), who apply the term to the information literacy environment, “promotes critical thinking and collaboration in a digital age, providing a comprehensive framework to effectively participate in social media and online communities” (p. 62). Metaliteracy encourages participation in social media and online communities, not just use and consumption. This type of participation could range from joining in an online conversation to making and sharing short video clips to communicate information using various technologies. Furthermore, metaliteracy “offers a renewed vision of information literacy as an overarching set of abilities in which students are consumers and creators of information” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 2). Fister (2016) states that metaliteracy “broadens the definition of information literacy from finding and using information effectively to producing and sharing content in the participatory and fluid environment of the digital age” (p. 4). By using the concept of metaliteracy to help shape the Framework, it provides groundwork for information literacy as a literacy that includes creating content and contributing to the information environment. As Foasberg (2015) states, “the Framework better recognizes the complexities of information and information behaviour, and explicitly makes space for students as participants in the process of knowledge production” (p. 703). This participation in knowledge production is a key element of digital literacy as well.

### *Knowledge Practices and Dispositions*

Several of the Knowledge Practices and Dispositions associated with the core concepts of the Framework specifically highlight the learner’s role in content creation and knowledge contribution. For example, Knowledge Practices for learners grappling with “Information Has Value” include that they “decide where and how their information is published; understand how the commodification of their personal information and online interactions affects the information they receive and the information they produce or disseminate online” and “make informed choices regarding their online actions” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 6). Dispositions related to this frame include that learners “see themselves as contributors to the information marketplace rather than only consumers of it...” (Association of College and Research

Libraries, 2015, p. 6). While this is the frame most closely aligned with content creation, other frames speak to it as well. Learners working with the concept of Scholarship as Conversation, for example, “contribute to the scholarly conversation at an appropriate level, such as local online community, guided discussion ....” and “see themselves as contributors to scholarship rather than only consumers of it” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p.8). These are all Knowledge Practices and Dispositions that are explicitly linked to digital literacy in that they highlight creating and sharing information; there are others in the document that also highlight learners as active creators of knowledge in the information environment which, of course, is a largely digital one.

### **Contextualizing Information literacy**

#### *A Flexible Framework*

So, what about digital technologies? From the definitions of digital literacy presented earlier, and common to most definitions of digital literacy, if a person is digitally literate, s/he needs to be able to use digital technologies effectively in order to create and contribute to the digital environment. The Framework allows for a wide range of interpretations, implementations, and ways in which learners can demonstrate their information literacy learning and abilities. These methods may include proficiency with digital tools, among other areas, in relevant contexts.

The Framework encourages librarians to adapt it to local contexts; it is a flexible document that doesn't list specific learning outcomes, exact skills, or tools that students must master. As Fister (2016) states, “this document is not an exhaustive checklist of what students should master, but rather is subject to change and is open to different interpretations” (p.2). It is not surprising, given the theoretical underpinnings and approach of the Framework that it doesn't specify the use of digital tools (or any tool for that matter) or note the distinct environment, or context, of the digital environment.

#### *Local Contexts and Communities*

The Framework presents “a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation,” and it states that “each library and its partners on campus will need to deploy these frames to best fit their own situation, including designing learning outcomes” (2015, p. 2). These proclamations allow for a variety of ways in which librarians can use the frames in teaching information literacy. Both the frames (threshold concepts) and their associated Knowledge Practices and Dispositions can certainly lend themselves to learning outcomes that fit specific situations or local contexts that necessitate the thoughtful use of digital technologies. As Fister (2016) states, the frames/threshold concepts are “fundamental ideas about information that overlap and can be combined into a sophisticated grasp of how information works regardless of context” (p. 3). The Framework is not rigid in detailing the ways in which learners successfully move through the threshold concepts or demonstrate their information literacy abilities through their Knowledge Practices and Disciplines; these ways are left to us to fit to local contexts.

These local contexts can be interpreted in numerous ways, and can include social group or community, discipline, class, assignment, project, or problem. No doubt that these

contexts will often be part of the digital environment, particularly as we are moving into more e-Learning in academia. I believe that the digital environment, and specific communities within it, can also be considered local contexts into which information literacy learning can be placed.

Foasberg (2015) states the “the Framework insists on the importance of context. Understanding disciplinary context is central to information literacy as the Framework conceives it, but the specificity of the local community in which discourse takes place is also considered” (p. 708). A “local community” can be interpreted as any number of digital communities, ranging from a class conducted via e-Learning to a social network; the digital environment itself allows for multiple contexts that can be explored through the frames presented in the Framework. As Seeber (2015) states, “to tell students ‘that’s the way it is in college’ robs them of the opportunity to engage in these discussions of context, and it is incumbent upon us to recognize that students are already experiencing complex relationships with information in real time” (p. 162). This “real time” and much of students’ “real world” experiences take place in the digital environment and can be contextualized within specific communities, etc. in that space.

### **Highlighted Concepts**

While the Framework doesn’t specifically state that learners need to be able to use digital technologies in order grasp the frames or to demonstrate their Knowledge Practices and Dispositions, it also doesn’t list other specific types of systems, tools, etc. that learners need to employ. The Framework highlights concepts that underpin information literacy and, within it, digital literacy. This conceptual approach gives us the freedom to identify the ways in which learners move through the threshold concepts and develop their information literacy abilities. These ways may include using digital tools to create and share knowledge.

These specific ways can, and should, include interactions with the digital information environment, which necessitates the use of digital technologies. The Framework defines information literacy as a “set of integrated abilities;” these are abilities that combine and intersect in order to create a whole. With its approach the Framework emphasizes threshold concepts, which are “passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p. 2). As I also explored earlier, the infusion of metaliteracy into the Framework affirms the importance of critical thinking as applied to digital communities and interactions. Through the frames that it presents, and the approaches that it encourages, it clearly indicates that cognitive skills and processes are necessary for moving through the threshold concepts and for fully realizing information literacy. These skills and processes, of course, also ground digital literacy.

As noted in the previous definitions of digital literacy, digital literacy is not limited to the use of digital tools and interaction in the digital environment, but it also requires a basis of critical thinking and the abilities to analyse information and the information environment. The Framework provides ways to help learners advance in these areas as they delve into the core concepts, or frames, presented in it in relevant contexts. Again, these contexts can certainly include the digital environment.

### **Fake News in the News**

These contexts not only can include those within the digital environment, they must include the digital environment if learners are to be truly information literate. As I'm writing this there is a lot of media attention on the impact of fake news on the recent presidential election in the United States. Several years ago, Eli Pariser (2011) drew our attention to the "filter bubble" which, in part, can be the result of consuming individualized, customized news based on a person's preferences and opinions as presented through their online searches and Facebook interactions. Many of us have included this notion of the "filter bubble" into our information literacy activities and have further developed learning experiences to help teach learners how to scrutinize not only their online behaviour but how that impacts the information that they interact with. Pariser published his book *The Filter Bubble* in 2011, so this phenomenon is not new. Media is now widely reporting on not only how the mechanisms incorporated into social networks result in influencing the news that we are exposed to when using them, but also on the prevalence of fake news which increasingly spreads through those social networks. Current events indicate that instead of busting the filter bubble, we have collectively become more encased by it.

In fact, there were recently two prominent headlines in the online edition of the *New York Times* referencing fake news and how strategists may utilize data provided through Facebook quizzes to target voters. One of the articles, "How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study" examines how one false tweet about paid protestors being bussed to an anti-Trump demonstration was shared at least 376,000 times on Facebook and Twitter (Maheshwari, 21 November, para. 2). Another story presented as part of the same issue online, an opinion piece, looks into how "a data firm eventually hired by the Trump campaign, Cambridge Analytica, has been using Facebook as a tool to build psychological profiles that represent some 230 million adult Americans" and may use these profiles and data points to target and reach voters (Funk, 19 November, para. 3). Both of these stories, and a range of others currently being produced on these topics, illustrate the seriousness and importance of information literacy and of digital literacy. In these cases, individuals need not only to be able to use digital tools and technologies and to produce information, but absolutely must exhibit critical thinking and an understanding of how "information is produced and valued" (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, p.3). As former United States President Barack Obama states, this is an "age where there's so much active misinformation, and it's packaged very well, and it looks the same when you see it on a Facebook page or you turn on your television." (Woolf, 20 Nov 2016). These examples are from a notably contentious election in the US; however, the concerns that they speak to, such as the easy spreading of fake news and commercialization of information, are not unique to the United States. These are prevalent aspects of the information environment in the digital environment that reach across borders. The Framework provides us with a mechanism that we can utilize to teach learners not only applications of technical skills but also, and significantly, the

structure and influence of the digital environment and the abilities to critically analyse and assess it.

### **Conclusion**

Many libraries are developing and implementing programmes that address digital literacy, which is undoubtedly a competency that is importance for living and working in today's society (Jisc, 2015, para. 3). Some libraries have successful established programmes that specifically address digital literacy while others, like NTU Libraries, have been integrating digital literacy elements into their information literacy programmes. The publication of the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* gives us another opportunity to scrutinize our information literacy programmes and to enhance their further development. The document does not specifically refer to digital literacy as a disparate literacy, nonetheless it is a significant document that can help librarians guide and develop not only information literacy programmes but digital literacy programmes (if we choose to label them as such) as well. Through its emphasis on creating and contributing to the information environment, adaptability to local contexts, and the way in which it features conceptual components that link to digital literacy abilities, the Framework can directly inform digital literacy activities as a part of its guidance on information literacy. Furthermore, the “foundational ideas” about the information ecosystem upon which the Framework is built emphasize ideas that are relevant to multiple literacies, including digital literacy. In our current information environment, and in academic, work, and our broader society, digital literacy is necessity. Librarians have not been ignoring digital literacy; it is an indispensable component of information literacy. As we look to models and schemes to assist in structuring digital literacy programmes and including digital literacy aspects into our information literacy programmes, this prominent document can provide us with both direction and support.

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