

Introduction

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The greatest defect in theological education today is that it is too much an affair of piecemeal transmission of knowledge and skills, and that, in consequence, it offers too little challenge to the student to develop [their] own resources and to become an independent, lifelong inquirer, growing constantly while [the student] is engaged in the work of the ministry.¹

– H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Advancement of Theological Education* (1957)

IN 1983, SOME THIRTY YEARS BEFORE THE ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE AND Research Libraries (ACRL) released the first draft of the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (the *Framework*), the idea of frameworks for teaching and learning in theological libraries was already being proposed. In a paper entitled “The Structures of Religious Literature: Conceptual Frameworks for Improving Bibliographic Instruction” at Atla’s 37th Annual conference, Andrew D. Scrimgeour, then the director of the Ira J. Taylor Library at Illif School of Theology, accented “the importance of cognitive structures, or frameworks, in the learning process.”² This invocation of “frameworks” didn’t seem merely adventitious or just rhetorically convenient. Indeed, Scrimgeour acknowledges in his address the influence of Raymond McInnis, a longtime reference and instruction librarian from Western Washington University and

theorist of library pedagogy, whose approach was informed by instructional psychology, and who emphasized building library instruction around conceptual structures and disciplinary research strategies.³

As befits a theological librarian, Scrimgeour cites the above epigraph from H. Richard Niebuhr as an “indictment of the seminary enterprise [that] also indexes my efforts in bibliographic instruction.”⁴ Chronicling his pedagogical progression from a greenhorn “magician” librarian (the whiz with sources) to more of a teacherly “guide” (focusing on search strategies), he offers commentary that might strike a reader today as surprisingly contemporary, if not proleptic of current discussion about frameworks and threshold concepts. Using concepts, he explains, aids intelligibility, provides structure, and situates whatever concept is being addressed in conversation with already familiar concepts, thereby activating student learning. And he also echoes McNinnis’s stress on student learning as an iterative and associative process, in implied contrast to student learning as rote mastery. As Niebuhr himself suggests in *The Advancement of Theological Education*’s assessment of instruction in theological libraries, “[m]ost schools provide an orientation session in the library at the beginning of the course, and this has value, but hardly touches the need to discover the working relationship between the classroom and library.”⁵ Scrimgeour’s paper deftly encapsulates the intellectual energy and attention given to creative instruction that theological librarians have long exhibited in their efforts to work with students to make that “working relationship between the classroom and library” more durable.

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I start the introduction to *Information Literacy and Theological Librarianship: Theory and Praxis* with this particular historical excursus to highlight how theological and religious studies librarians have long been engaged in discussions and innovations in library instruction and how, along with their educational context, that imperative for innovation was shaped by figures and scholars in religion, as well as peers in the profession. By looking to instructional psychology, the work of librarians like McNinnis offered his colleagues in theological librarianship a theoretical matrix within which to challenge and reimagine how their instruction could be more effective and enduring. What Scrimgeour’s paper adumbrates is, in many ways, a prescient theoretical engagement of what was then labeled “bibliographic instruction” and is now more often branded as “information literacy”⁶ (see Image 1).

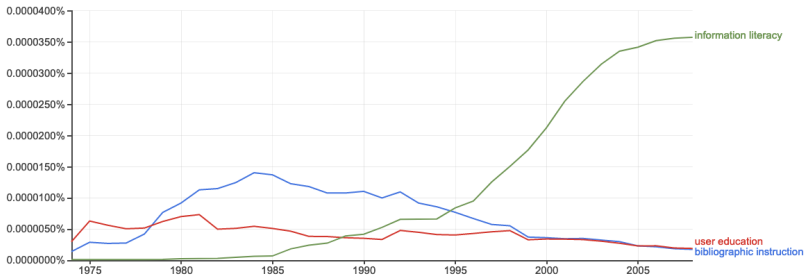


IMAGE 1 Google n-gram graph of library instruction terms, 1974–2008.

Although the term “information literacy” is of relatively recent vintage, the idea of library “user education” has formative nineteenth-century antecedents. Writing in 1880, Boston Public’s and Harvard Library’s Justin Winsor and the University of Rochester’s Otis Hall Robinson argued that library instruction for user education must focus “special attention on the *how* and *where* of [knowledge] acquisition” [emphasis in the original].⁷ Indeed, Robinson underscored the import of “hands-on” experience for students, and articulated at the American Library Association’s annual conference in 1881 three objectives all library instruction should strive to achieve: the need to “develop the art of discrimination” by judging the value of books to develop critical judgment, for students to become independent learners who teach themselves, and thereby become lifelong learners.⁸ But for Robinson, and other contemporaries active in library pedagogy, like Raymond C. Davis of the University of Michigan, a premium was placed on the *bibliographic* side of instruction: that is, imparting technical mastery of the card catalog and classification schema and knowledge of reference sources to students in the librarian’s capacity as a “professor of books.”⁹ Even for twentieth-century advocates and innovators, such as Evan Ira Farber, who pushed for greater curricular integration (even called for by Robinson in 1880), library instruction still rested more on the materials to be sourced and less on cultivating critical judgement and “the art of discrimination.”¹⁰

Contemporary usage of “information literacy” is often traced to Paul G. Zurkowski’s 1974 white paper for the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, *The Information Service Environment Relationships and Priorities*.¹¹ “[I]nformation literates,” Zurkowski explained, possessed “techniques and skills” in the “application of information resources” and “information solutions” used for problem solving.¹² In contradistinction to bibliographic instruction, the concept of information literacy reoriented learning from the primacy of books to how the learner could discern and navigate myriad

sources and types of information. Echoing Zurkowski, the Association of College and Research Libraries proclaimed in 1989 that information literacy was an information age “survival skill.”¹³ And by 2000, ACRL released *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, a comprehensive document detailing techniques and skills for information literacy, which displaced their earlier “Model Statement of Objectives for Academic Bibliographic Instruction” (1979, 1987).¹⁴

Since its initial circulation in draft form in February 2014, *The Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (officially adopted by ACRL in 2016) has transformed the conversation around information literacy instruction from mastery of standards and discrete performance indicators to more flexible approaches grounded in threshold concepts. Whereas the *Information Literacy Competency Standards* provided a highly structured task-list of learning objectives, the *Framework* concentrated on more abstract approaches for stimulating critical judgement that valorizes the role of the learner over the skill. Centered around six “frames” (Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information Has Value, Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration), the document makes an argument for how foundational concepts in information literacy can be (as Jan Meyer and Ray Land describe threshold concepts) transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded and troublesome.¹⁵

As a relatively freshly minted librarian at the time the draft *Framework* was first released, I found the conceptual approach animating the document theoretically consonant with the pedagogical techniques I learned as a secondary school teacher. In particular, it was easier and more intelligible for me to crosswalk threshold concepts in my own home discipline of American religious history, as well as religious studies and history, to information literacy frames, like “Scholarship as Conversation” (around which one of this volume’s contributors, Kaeley McMahan, bases her chapter). Identifying those parallels and building library instruction around twinned disciplinary and information literacy threshold concepts, I’ve been able to be imaginative with more applied and authentic assignments that balance the instrumental and intrinsic value of even meat-and-potatoes library learning (e.g. databases and the catalog); that is to say, I’m able to teach an information literacy frame through a threshold concept in a disciplinary context by designing an activity that requires library resources to do exactly what professionals do for their research and writing.¹⁶ While not unproblematic, the *Framework’s* embrace of threshold concepts nevertheless helped punch out a pedagogical space for me to be inventive while also giving me wider berth to leverage my domain expertise.¹⁷ Confronted with a laundry list of standards and performance indicators, I doubt I would be as creative or

immediately apt to envision how disciplinary concepts and information literacy could be placed in dialogue meaningful to both.

That meaningful dialogue is the genesis of this book, and the contributions are illustrations of how that dialogue can be contemplated and achieved. Marshalling personal experiences, best practices, and theoretical explorations unique to religious studies and theological librarianship, this volume places both areas in conversation with the *Framework*. The subtitle of this volume, *Theory and Praxis*, embodies the complementary ways the contributors successfully reckoned with the influence of the *Framework* on information literacy in the multiple educational settings where theological and religious studies librarians work. And so *Information Literacy and Theological Librarianship* includes librarians working in seminaries, small liberal arts colleges, regional religious universities, as well as divinity schools that are part of R1 schools. While not unique, that kind of institutional plurality is profoundly important to theological librarianship, only matched by the equal import of the library's role in the student's intellectual and professional trajectory, as well as, often, their devotional and vocational path.

In his second thesis from *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx argues that “thinking that is isolated from practice is ... purely *scholastic*,”¹⁸ and it is this productive tension that contributors from the “Theory” section hold in equipoise: whether revealing and interrogating the suppositions of instruction (Osinski), understanding our information ecosystem (Kuehn), reimagining our teaching with international students in mind (Veldheer), or descrying connections between theological disciplines and information literacy (Badke). And if theory is speaking to practice in *Information Literacy and Theological Librarianship*'s first half, then in “Praxis,” practice, in the form of case studies, is enlisted to theorize concretely: by curriculum mapping for existing courses (Miller), reimagining and rearticulating information literacy principles and policies (Board), leading credit-bearing courses (McMahan, LeBlanc and Tsonos), or teaching with special collections material (Anderson and Stetler).

While the body of scholarly and practical literature around the *Framework* is already large (and growing), there's a comparatively exiguous amount of work examining both contemporary information literacy practices and theory as well as theological and religious studies librarianship (and some of that work done by contributors to this volume). *Information Literacy and Theological Librarianship* provides the first sustained *Framework*-era intervention, and I hope it will be a bellwether for future mediations on the instructional challenges and opportunities unique to our specialization, as well as those common to all library colleagues in higher education.

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Notes

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, *The Advancement of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 209, quoted in Andrew D. Scrimgeour, “The Structures of Religious Literature: Conceptual Frameworks for Improving Bibliographic Instruction,” in *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship*, eds. Melody Layton McMahon and David R. Stewart (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 163.
2. Scrimgeour, 164.
3. See Raymond J. McInnis, *New Perspectives for Reference Services in Academic Libraries* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).
4. Scrimgeour, 164.
5. Niebuhr, Williams, and Gustafson, 129. But let’s not credit Niebuhr et al. with too much insight or even good sense about instruction. In a section risibly titled “Teaching Methods,” just a few paragraphs down on the same page as the epigraph, the authors aver in language redolent with gendered contempt that “a student-centered pedagogue is not a teacher, but a nurse.”
6. The conflation of terms, I would argue, is a specious equivalence.

7. Otis H. Robinson and Justin Winsor, "College Libraries as Aids to Instruction," in *Circulars of Information of the Bureau of Education, no. 1–1880* (Washington, D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1880), 21.
8. J. M. Tucker, "The Origins of Bibliographic Instruction in Academic Libraries, 1876–1914," in *New Horizons for Academic Libraries*, eds. R. D. Stuart and R. D. Johnson (New York: K.G. Saur Verlag, 1979), 271.
9. Peter Herson, "Instruction in the Use of Academic Libraries: A Preliminary Study of the Early Years as Based on Selective Extant Materials," *The Journal of Library History* 17, no. 1 (Winter, 1982): 20.
10. Helen Tibbo, "User Instruction Issues for Database Searching in the Humanities," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, vol. 65, supp. 28, ed. Allen Kent (New York: CRC Press, 1999), 332.
11. Shirley J. Behrens, "A Conceptual Analysis and Historical Overview of Information Literacy," *College & Research Libraries* 55, no. 4 (1 July 1994): 310.
12. Paul G. Zurkowski, *The Information Environment: Relationships and Priorities* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1974), 6.
13. *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1989), as quoted in Tefko Saracevic, "Information Literacy in the United States: Contemporary Transformations and Controversies," in *Information Literacy: Lifelong Learning and Digital Citizenship in the 21st Century: Second European Conference, ECIL 2014, Dubrovnik, Croatia, October 20–23, 2014*, eds. Serap Kurbanoglu et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 20.
14. Saracevic, 20.
15. Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land, "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge (2): Epistemological Considerations and a Conceptual Framework for Teaching and Learning," *Higher Education* 49 (2005): 373–88.
16. See Bobby Smiley, "Crosswalking the Disciplines: Reimagining Information Literacy Instruction for a History Methods Course," in *The Grounded Instruction Librarian: Participating in The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, eds. Melissa Mallon, Lauren Hays, Cara Bradley, Rhonda Huisman, and Jackie Belanger (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019), 43–52.

17. For a philosophical critique of the *Framework*'s use of threshold concepts, see Lane Wilkinson, "The Problem with Threshold Concepts," *Sense and Reference* (blog), June 19, 2014, <https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/2014/06/19/the-problem-with-threshold-concepts/>.
18. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Press, 1992), 422.