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How AASL Learning Standards Inform ACRL's Information Literacy Framework

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Abstract:

The definition of literacy has changed over century, and now information literacy is being reconceptualised. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) 2007 Standards for the 21st Century Learner are predicated on multiple literacies. These standards focus on cognitive processes, and incorporate dispositions. The standards also presuppose that learning skills develop throughout life. Librarians should seek articulation between K12 and higher education information literacy, reflected in the standards. The Association of College and Research Libraries drew upon several aspects of AASL's standards: developmental approach, inquiry-based learning, knowledge creation, incorporation of the affective domain, and collaboration. In revisiting their information literacy standards, ACRL's task force reconceptualised information literacy as a framework, with frames that describe threshold concepts characterizing of domain of information literacy.

Keywords: Information literacy, AASL, ACRL, standards, threshold concept, articulation

Developing and implementing literacies/learning standards requires deep analysis about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that one needs in order to be what was traditionally called the "educated" person. What does it mean to be educated? What does it mean to be literate? The definitions for both terms have changed greatly over time. Being educated could mean having the equivalent of a high school diploma and a European tour, to "An educated person is one who has undergone a process of learning that results in enhanced mental capability to function effectively in familiar and novel situations in personal and intellectual life" (Mohanani, 2005). Over the years, being literate has meant being able to decipher a known text (e.g., the Bible) to being able to write original text. Now literacy implies that one can create knowledge communicated through emerging technologies. Since libraries deal with recorded information, they can legitimately ask what knowledge, skills and dispositions are needed to consume and produce recorded information that contributes to society? And furthermore, to what level, how well, should students be able to do this?

For today's students to survive and thrive in society, they need to make informed decisions and act effectively and responsibly. The preconditions for those processes include the ability to determine what information is needed, how to find and evaluate it, and how to comprehend and interpret it. Because today's society raises new issues, memorizing old answers to daily problems does not suffice, and even old responses to recurring issues may result in negative consequences. In short, individuals need to keep learning – and know how to learn. In the process, individuals are creating new knowledge.

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) 2007 Standards for the 21st Century Learner were predicated on the ideas articulated in the paragraph above. The term “information literacy” occurs in just one paragraph, noting only that it has become more complex: “Multiple literacies, including digital, visual, textual, and technological, have now joined information literacy as crucial skills for this century” (p. 3). Interestingly, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2011) has adopted the wording of “media and information literacy” to capture the idea of content and format. Even the term “information” can be tricky to define, let alone “data.” Is a sunset data or information?

The American Association of School Librarians (2007) cleverly sidestepped the problematic term “information literacy” when it used learners as its linchpin; they stated that “learners use skills, resources, & tools to:

- Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge.
- Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge.
- Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society.
- Pursue personal and aesthetic growth.” (p. 3)
- Each standard is then parsed into specific indicators that demonstrate learner skills, dispositions in action, responsibilities, and self-assessment strategies.

AASL sees their standards as:

- A comprehensive vision for student learning in libraries
- Consistent with school district vision
- Compatible with National Educational Technology Standards and 21st Century Skills
- Preparing students for a future of change.

The emphasis in the AASL standards is clearly on cognitive processes, although the affective domain is addressed in terms of some of the dispositions, such as curiosity, openness, and aesthetic appreciation. Factual, or declarative, knowledge is subsumed in the processes. For instance, in order to respect intellectual property rights, a learner must be able to describe and understand those rights. AASL describes the learning destination and, to some degree, the benchmarks along the way to reach the destination, but does not stipulate the specific path or the vehicle to use. Those steps need to be determined by the instructor or learning guide.

The AASL standards also cleverly begin the discussion by asserting common beliefs (or described as core values), which serve as preconditions for the learning standards: reading, inquiry-based learning, explicitly taught ethical behavior, technology skills, equitable access, expanding information demands, social context of learning, and the importance of school libraries. In recent years AASL has emphasized inquiry-based learning, which does not always align well with notions of high-stakes testing, although it has great potential since it

typically involves students reading novel (as in new to them) informational text. The last belief underscores the contribution of school libraries: convenient equitable access to rich resources, and collaborative instruction and practice in using these resources.

The underlying principle is that education focuses on student learning, and that library programs—including professional librarians—can play a significant role in optimizing the conditions for learning. This line of thinking maps easily onto the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which increasingly drives K-12 instruction. Most school librarians leverage CCSS to promote their collections and cross-curricular transfer of learning. The American Association of School Librarians even provides supporting documents that show how standards can be met at each grade level. A case could be made that this overarching process approach would also map onto higher education learning outcomes with little change; however, such increments are not feasible in post-secondary situations,

On the other hand, AASL's beliefs or pre-suppositions could well be mapped into higher education's conceptual frameworks. The beliefs also make sense in the academic community as they stand, with the proviso of the academic librarian assuming the role of resource-rich collaborator. Fortunately, university library systems tend to assign subject liaisons to provide a dependable source of information and information literacy processes. The high stakes testing environment does not exist to the same extent in higher education, except for some national praxis tests. However, even then, few faculty need to coach students in test-taking. Furthermore, programmatic comprehensive examinations are usually locally designed, and should reflect pre-identified student learning outcomes.

It should be noted that academic librarians also run into the stumbling block of the term "information literacy," particularly since it wasn't in general parlance at the time of many professors' own academic preparation. Academicians seem to be more comfortable with the terms "critical thinking" (which usually refers to the ability to comprehend and analyze a given document, but which excludes the ability to locate relevant and worthy documents) and "research skills" (which does not address the ability to respond to unintended information problems).

In the final analysis, learning should truly be lifelong, and it makes sense that P-20 formal education should try to articulate (i.e., compare across levels) curriculum either to identify equivalencies or to build upon prior learning. That articulation process tries to avoid too much overlap, and to promote seamless transfer from one level to another. To a degree, the concept of college-readiness assumes that kind of articulation in that high school graduates should possess the skills and knowledge to be able to learn and apply post-secondary curriculum. Post-secondary librarians too often assert that students do not come into the library with these skills. Oakleaf and Owen (2010) examined the AASL learning standards, and noted how the standards applied to sources that students use in college: websites, articles, books, reference materials, and data. The researchers also noted that many entering college students did not have those skills.

To close that literacy gap, school and academic librarians are called upon to work together. Librarians are the logical articulators since they work with all students and all curricular areas, and witness the developmental aspects of learning. They can act as institutional representatives and catalysts, aware of student and faculty needs, practices, and parameters. To that end, both types of librarians should work with their respective communities to advance the conversation about learning expectations and the roles that they can play. These

conversations can inform standards development and deployment. Furthermore, academic librarians should lobby loudly for school librarians to be present and active at every educational level, insuring that K-12 students have the opportunities needed to meet AASL standards. Even though librarians are seldom the top decision-makers, they can yield powerful influence when both school and academic librarians support articulation between educational levels.

Just as school and academic librarians should articulate information literacy instruction so that incoming collegiates will be college ready, so too should academic librarians consider articulating with workplace librarians such as special libraries to ensure that college graduates are career-ready. Because many high school students go directly into the workplace, school librarians should articulate information literacy efforts with workplace librarians as well as academic librarians.

Assuming that entering college students gained literacy based on the AASL learning standards, what information literacy competencies should post-secondary librarians expect those students to demonstrate? Many such librarians would probably respond with a sigh, and say, “none.” Nevertheless, academic librarians could set baseline expectations, and then identify next-step literacies/learning standards. Considering that English and mathematics disciplines routinely require incoming students to take placement tests, and then be assigned to the developmentally appropriate course, some remedial in nature, could that approach be applied to information/learning competencies? Might all students be required to take the ETS iSkills test, and then be placed in information/learning competency courses, or have such explicit instruction be embedded in an appropriate general education course co-taught by a discipline faculty member and an academic librarian?

The reason for this entrance consideration is one of accountability. Natural consequences will result, such as academic or workplace failure. A more responsible response would be that librarians and other teaching faculty would provide the opportunities for students to meet reasonable learning standards through instruction and practice, and provide timely interventions, so that graduating students are indeed prepared to survive and thrive in today’s society – and improve it.

Building on the AASL model, some information literacy competencies should be expected of all post-secondary students, as it is with general education requirements. Students with a major should be able to apply those competencies at a deeper level within their area of specialty. For instance, mathematics majors should be able to think and solve intellectual problems as a mathematician; they should be able to identify, access, and use the canon of mathematics information sources.

This approach emphasizes the developmental nature of information literacy, but does not imply a scope-and-sequence curriculum of skills for higher education, especially since student learning outcomes are ultimately the province of each higher education institution. Instead, the new AASL standards helped ACRL (Association of College and Research Librarians) librarians rethink their stance on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that post-secondary students should develop and achieve by the time they graduate. Academic librarians acknowledged the importance of the affective domain in learning, and rather than casting competencies as skills, they used the term “knowledge practices.” Academians also appreciated AASL’s emphasis on inquiry-based learning, and the movement to information

production. By the time that students earn degrees, they should be capable of conducting original research and generating new knowledge.

Academic librarians also rethought the idea of instruction, informed by AASL's standards. They understood more than ever the need to collaborate with teaching faculty, not just coordinate one-shot sessions. Typically, K12 school librarians codesign instruction with classroom teachers more than academic librarians do, but the practice of embedded academic librarians has gained traction, and fits the academic culture. Such efforts can result in more integrated approaches to information literacy that translate into academic domain terminologies such as thesis statements and hypothesis testing.

Taking these ideas into consideration, the librarians who constituted the ACRL task force to revise information literacy standards embraced the notion of developing expertise and recontextualized information literacy as a set of threshold concepts that would characterize the domain of information literacy. They developed six "frames" or intellectual "lenses" by which to consider information literacy:

- Information has value
- Format as process
- Authority is constructed and contextual
- Research as inquiry
- Searching as exploration
- Scholarship is a conversation

Each frame includes a description of the concept, followed by knowledge practices, which can be considered as representative indicators, dispositions, and sample learning activities and assessments. Academic librarian practitioners are intended to reflect on these frames, and use them to drive deep conversations with academic communities about the nature of information literacy, and how to help students understand and apply these concepts throughout their lifelong educational journey.

In sum, librarians use their informed perspective, taking into account the environments in which they work, to state what students need in order to be prepared for the next rung in life relative to recorded information. Since recorded information is used in all curricula, it makes sense that librarians should collaborate with the rest of their educational community to optimize the likelihood that students can meet those standards. To that end, ACRL and other academic library organizations are wisely and pro-actively re-examining the tough questions of learning, literacy, and education, and librarians' roles in addressing these issues. Librarians can use AASL's learning standards and ACRL's framework as springboards for thought, particularly in terms of articulating learning. The result is a developmentally appropriate set of concepts that reflects lifelong engagement with, and creation of recorded information. The implementation of those standards is another question, needing to identify the resources and services required to provide the conditions for students to meet the standards. And so lifelong education continues...

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