

NOTES ON "THE FRAMEWORK"

By Marvin Hunn

The Association of College and Research Libraries has promulgated a "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." The Framework outlines six ideas that help "novices" (=undergraduates) understand "expert" research. Most regional accrediting agencies have added information literacy to their standards; they don't explicitly require the Framework approach to information literacy, but the Framework is guiding introductory research courses at many schools and is being referenced by accreditors regularly.

The Framework is here: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilFramework>. I want to discuss the frame entitled "Authority is Constructed and Contextual," but first let's briefly consider a few points from the "Scholarship as Conversation" frame.

Scholarship as Conversation

Below are three points from the SC frame with my comments at the end.

1. Framework: **Communities of experts** (such as "scholars, researchers, or professionals") engage in "sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of **varied perspectives** and interpretations."
2. Framework: While "some topics have established answers through this process," **other topics "may not have a single uncontested answer."** As a result, experts are "inclined to seek out **many perspectives**, not merely the ones with which they are familiar."
3. Framework: However, those who attempt to enter the conversation will discover that "**established power and authority structures**" can "**influence their ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information.**"

MTH: Throughout the Framework, we have the concept of communities of experts who debate and critique, agree and disagree. Formal publication is the main means of contributing to the conversation. Footnotes are one evidence of the conversation. Quality assurance measures like peer review are supported by the communities. Good.

"Power structures" promote some people or viewpoints, and actively or passively impede others. I suppose this includes editors, peer reviewers, tenure review committees, job interview committees, and various informal social networks that influence decisions and opportunities. Elsewhere the framework raises the specter of power structures that are biased and discriminatory. It is clear from other parts of the Framework that the "varied perspectives" and "many perspectives" are different social agendas based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

Below are some points from the AICC frame with my comments interspersed.

1. Framework: "Information resources reflect their creators' **expertise and credibility**, and are **evaluated** based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various **communities** may **recognize** different types¹ of **authority**. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required."

MTH: According to the Framework, communities confer authority. This is a social standing, a status. Sometimes the authority is conferred on a person, sometimes on a source/book.

"Level of authority" involves the degree of certainty the researcher needs for a specific context. For example, consider two health contexts: you might require extremely credible sources of information about your diagnosis and possible treatments before agreeing to brain surgery, but you might accept a stranger's casual recommendation for toothpaste. (The stranger is an "authority" because he has used the toothpaste.) We are only concerned with the context of formal scholarly research, so we want a pretty high level of authority.

Sources are "evaluated" to see if they have a high enough level of authority. That one authority might be a higher level than another suggests that authorities are not perfect. Even the highest authority can be wrong. Thus point #4 below says "experts understand the need to determine the validity of the information created by different authorities." In points 3-5, the Framework emphasizes communities and authorities can even be bad actors, silencing alternate viewpoints. There is a need for "skepticism." In #3 experts are skeptical of authority, but in #5 novices respect authority but are skeptical of systems that elevate authority.

Why evaluate authorities? I would say, to seek truth. The Framework never mentions truth.² But students, scholars and society all want truth. Authorities may be trusted (within limits) because we think they might direct us to a good approximation of the truth or an important fragment of the truth. We remove authority status from those who prove to be wrong too often. Truth is much more important than the social rank of authority or expertise. What is the process the community uses to discern if a person should be deemed an authority (credible expert) on a given topic? I think truth must be a factor. But the Framework is silent. The Framework wants to avoid the word 'truth.'

So how does one evaluate? The Framework assumes novice undergraduates, as non-experts, are dependent on secondary sources written by expert authorities. The Framework never explicitly speaks of novices using primary sources, but I think the Framework assumes novices will consult primary sources

¹ The Framework mentions three types of authority: authority can arise from subject expertise such as a PhD, from societal position (e.g., government spokesperson), or from special experience (e.g., being an eyewitness). We are only concerned with scholarly authority.

² The Framework does not use the word "truth" but once it does speak of "validity" and we will discuss validity when we get to that passage.

after first reading good secondary sources. Novices begin with partially trusted authorities, but they are also skeptical about authorities. Novices are not fully equipped to independently evaluate specific claims and arguments. However, they can use authorities to evaluate claims of other authorities. The Framework expects novices to mature and eventually critique authorities, but it does not explain how to do so.

2. Framework: “Experts understand that **authority is a type of influence** recognized or exerted within a community. “

MTH: Authority is not limited to single communities. Because different communities talk to each other, there must be common ground that provides a basis for cross-community understanding and debate. The common ground probably includes some mutually accepted authorities on some topics/issues. It *must* include some mutually accepted “facts.” (The Framework does not mention facts, just as it does not mention truth.)

3. Framework: “Experts **view authority with an attitude of informed skepticism** and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought. “

MTH: Experts do not dogmatically cling to a viewpoint just because an authority holds that view. Experts also listen to other views with a willingness to learn. Again we ask, how do experts assess and decide which view is correct? Again we note, the Framework does not answer our question. In #3 experts are skeptical. In #5 novices are skeptical.

4. Framework: “Experts understand **the need to determine the validity of the information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others**, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations. “

MTH: The Framework does not use the word “truth,” but here it does use the word “validity” with the meaning of truth. Authorities can be wrong. Experts are able to discern when authorities are wrong, and experts “need” to assess claims because they are seeking validity. Experts need to acknowledge personal bias that might keep them from properly assessing validity. In #5 this is applied to novices.

I think scholars should listen to and learn from others on the fringes of their community and in other communities. However, I also think every community of experts must critique viewpoints that are unsound, unsupported, untrue, unhelpful, even malignant. Critique is part of what it means to be a scholarly community. It is neither bias nor discrimination to use power to favor truth over error.

5. Framework: “An understanding of this concept **enables novice learners to critically examine all evidence—be it a short blog post or a peer-reviewed conference proceeding—**and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need. **Thus, novice learners come to respect the expertise that authority represents while remaining skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority and the information created by it.** “

MTH: The “system” involves experts within the community forming opinions about what is valid and about who they trust and respect and who they will count as authoritative. Debate and critique are

essential to scholarship. But the system also includes bias that can corrupt the experts and the process. Some skepticism is warranted.

The Framework speaks of novices critically evaluating “all evidence” but, in context, evidence means sources like blog posts and conference papers. It does not mean the primary evidence or data experts use in their papers. Further, the main scrutiny seems to be on asking questions about the origins, context and suitability of these sources. So novices evaluate sources, perhaps without engaging with the scholarly arguments and evidence. Novices look at clues like origins of a source. Was this research on smoking paid for by the tobacco industry? The novices respect the experts, the novices are not able to engage with the actual substance of the arguments, but the novices can look for bias. This is too shallow to be called a critical examination.

In my view, we should ask the novices to write papers on topics they are qualified to address in a substantive way, so they can seriously critique what the experts say. Novices need humility, but they need to get past superficial assessment based on things like a source’s “origins, context, and suitability for the current information need” and instead assess the scholarly substance.

Following Foucault and the social constructivist movement, much has been written about use of persuasion to win or maintain social control, and about the postmodern idea that the act of claiming “truth” is a rhetorical trick to control others, not an honest epistemic claim. According to this view, we are all controlled by interpretive communities which mediate our knowledge of truth. Our own knowledge is constructed in that it is contingent on convention, human perception and experience in the communities.

We sometimes see this perspective in biblical studies. Consider Amador, *Academic Constraints in Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Rhetoric of Power* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). In his view, the academic field of scholarly biblical studies seeks to perpetuate its authority and power by imposing constraints on interpretation and regulating discourse. The discipline approves certain methods, agendas and topics in order to maintain control. It claims experts have true knowledge (centering power in the community) in order to maintain control. Thus says Amador.

But what do you say? You will be teaching people influenced by postmodernism and deconstructionism. What will you say to the students about biblical inerrancy, scholarly error, truth, fact, approximation, objectivity, bias, discrimination, abuse of power? How is it possible to research, learn, grasp the truth, share the truth? This touches on epistemology, theology, hermeneutics, historiography, sociology, psychology, communication. You need BOTH a personal research method theory, AND personal research practices that backup what you teach. So get busy.