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The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (in prison)

Using the frames to teach incarcerated students

As a sophomore at Goucher College—with a growing awareness of the connections between race, class, education, and incarceration in the United States—I decided to volunteer as a writing tutor with the Goucher Prison Education Partnership (GPEP). GPEP “provides men and women incarcerated in Maryland with the opportunity to pursue an excellent college education” in classes where “students are held to the rigorous academic standards for which Goucher is known.”¹

As an upper-middle-class white woman with no family or friends in the correctional system, this was my first direct experience with corrections in the United States.² I knew there were problems with the justice system, but seeing firsthand how deprived and dehumanized the students I worked with were on a daily basis made me incredibly sad and angry. To see the faces and hear the stories of people who are often so invisible, especially to people in my privileged position, changed my life. I expected them to be somehow fundamentally different from me, but they weren't. We were peers working toward the same goal: a college degree.

As a writing tutor, I saw how the college-preparatory and first-year writing programs were integral to helping GPEP students find their voices, understand their values, and participate in a larger academic discourse. Beyond the positive impact I saw anecdotally, the data show positive outcomes for people who participate in these programs—people who pursue

education in prison have between 16% and 28% lower recidivism rates than those who do not.³ I eventually graduated from Goucher and moved on from tutoring with GPEP, but my experience tutoring GPEP students continued to inform how I engaged with the world.

During graduate school at the University of Maryland (UMD), I had the pleasure of being a part of McKeldin Library's Research and Teaching Fellowship.⁴ Part of this fellowship was teaching information literacy to students in the university's first-year writing program. This is where I first encountered the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education and began to see how integral information literacy is to everything our students do. It got me thinking about the incarcerated students I tutored. What kind of support did they get for their research? As far as I knew, the library was not holistically integrated into the GPEP program, students had no Internet access, and each professor constructed the research component of their courses differently.

Due to a variety of institutional and infrastructural challenges, it seemed students were not held to the same “rigorous standards” as their nonincarcerated peers. It was then that I began to explore how the Framework could be used to

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support the rigor of research for students pursuing higher education during incarceration.

Why librarians?

The number of colleges and universities participating in college-in-prison programs has grown slowly over the past decade, and this growth will continue as more incarcerated people are once again granted access to federal financial aid.⁵

With an increase in demand, academic institutions need to find ways of supporting incarcerated students' unique needs and barriers to access. If academic libraries are to provide equitable access to all students, they need to actively seek out a role in these prison education programs.

Fred Patrick from the Vera Institute of Justice—a national nonprofit focusing on reforming justice systems⁶—writes that “to ensure that students [pursuing higher education in prison] are better able to gain admission to college programs post-release, transfer credits, and be competitive with other college graduates in the job market, the quality and content of postsecondary education programming in prison should be equivalent in all material ways to that which is offered in the community.”⁷ When it comes to research and access to information, however, incarcerated students' experience cannot be equivalent in all material ways.

Why the Framework?

All correctional facilities prohibit access to information to a certain extent, but the interpretation and enforcement of limitation varies across institutions. Not unexpectedly, information about weapon-making or criminal activity is prohibited everywhere. However, many prisons have broader restrictions on material, including information about human anatomy, non-Christian religious material, critical perspectives on the justice system, and materials discussing systemic racism.⁸

Incarcerated people are limited in the types of materials they have access to as well as in modes of access. One challenge incarcerated students face that sets them apart from their peers who are not incarcerated is limited or no access to the Internet. In facilities where students do have ac-

cess to the Internet, content restrictions mean that many databases are off limits even if they do have access to a secure Internet connection.⁹ These barriers highlight the truth of Patrick's remark that “making college-in-prison work requires ingenuity, flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to push the envelope of what seems possible.”¹⁰ This is where the Framework comes in.

As much of what we teach in information literacy sessions with new college students revolves around finding sources using databases and evaluating different kinds of online resources, this forces librarians who teach information literacy in prisons to get creative. Since incarcerated students simply do not have access to information that college students who are not incarcerated do, how do we give them a “materially equivalent experience”? In this, the Framework's flexibility is an asset. The use of threshold concepts and dispositions allows for a broader method of teaching essential concepts rather than specific skills. Where the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education focused on finding and evaluating particular kinds of information, the Framework allows us the flexibility to teach the same concepts, even when we don't have the online tools upon which we might normally rely. While many librarians still disagree about the efficacy of the Framework versus the Standards, because the Framework intentionally “redefines the boundaries of what librarians teach and how they conceptualize the study of information within the curricula of higher education institutions,”¹¹ it is an excellent tool to approach integrating information literacy into the curriculum of college-in-prison programs.

But how?

As I prepared to teach my first information literacy session with GPEP as an MLIS student, I knew that the Framework would be helpful, but it was also overwhelming. The stakes of this session felt high. This class session was literally my only shot. I would never get a chance to see or interact with these students again. My clearance to go into the facility was one-time-only, and I could not share my contact information with the students. How was I to teach them about “Scholarship as Conversa-

tion,” when we could not even have a sustained conversation?

As a new teacher I had a lot of enthusiasm but few instructional tools in my toolbox. All of the teaching I had done up to this point used students’ free and open access to the Internet along with the resources our University Libraries provided in physical and electronic format, and provided some context for our current digital landscape. How was I going to teach these concepts to students who didn’t have the same privileges?

Using foundational concepts from the Framework and Backward Design, I came up with student learning outcomes for the class session. I decided to focus on two frames, “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” and “Scholarship as Conversation,” to address students’ difficulty with source evaluation and incorporating sources into written work.

I planned two activities: a source evaluation activity where we looked at four different sources on the same topic and had a conversation about each source type, its strengths and weaknesses, how we might use each, and how we might interpret them in conversation with one another. The second activity used the same sources, but worked on summarizing and paraphrasing. We never got to the second activity because the students were so engaged with the ideas we were exploring about source evaluation. This was an adapted version of an activity I had led and observed before, but the conversation was so different. I had students at UMD who were engaged and saw the utility of learning the skills of source evaluation, but this was different. These students were engaging in a heated debate, seeming to grasp that source evaluation goes beyond finding a “good” or “bad” source. They were “maintain[ing] an open mind when encountering varied and... conflicting perspectives.”¹² These were the most engaged students I had (and still have) ever taught. I only had 50 minutes with them, but we went deep.

I left the session energized and excited about how the class had gone, but also sad. I was never going to see these students again,

and they were just a fraction of all the students in the GPEP program. Here were students who were ready to engage meaningfully with the foundational concepts of information literacy, but had few opportunities to do so.

While teaching this session was impactful for me (and I hope for some of the students), this one-shot was not enough. “The Framework is not designed to be implemented in a single information literacy session in a student’s academic career,”¹³ but at that moment, that was all these students were getting. Because incarcerated students often don’t have the opportunity to develop the same research skills and use of practical tools as their peers in the community, understanding foundational information literacy concepts and being able to apply them across a variety of information contexts is integral.

While this represents a challenge, it also presents a wonderful opportunity to support incarcerated students while implementing the full vision of the Framework. One of the biggest “challenges of implementing the Framework” is “mapping out in what way specific concepts will be integrated into specific curriculum levels.” The relative newness and small size of many of these programs present an opportunity to work closely with administrators and faculty to integrate information literacy into the curriculum.

While faculty are often hesitant to give librarians a place at the table when planning curricula, course objectives, student learning outcomes, and assignments, in this context, librarians can be invaluable to teaching faculty. Because of the limitation of working inside the correctional system, even when they are teaching courses they have taught before, faculty must radically redesign their courses to fit within the regulations of the correctional facility. These limitations create a need that librarians are uniquely suited to fill with the help of the Framework.

Conclusion

Since my first experience teaching information literacy in prison, I’ve gone back one time and run the same session. Now that I’m finished with graduate school and in a full-time faculty position at an institution that does not have a credit-granting program for incarcerated students, I find

that my ability to dedicate the time and energy toward this cause is limited. I think this is a limitation for many of us, who find ourselves stretched too thin, with many more ideas than we have the capacity to execute. But we do need to advocate that librarians have a seat at the table when our institutions do expand to include incarcerated students. Whether this means creating new liaison areas or new positions, academic libraries must work to holistically support incarcerated students in collaboration with teaching faculty, and the Framework is absolutely essential to this work.

Notes

1. “Goucher Prison Education Partnership,” Goucher College, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.goucher.edu/learn/goucher-prison-education-partnership/>.

2. While the proportion is shrinking, in 2017, there were six times the number of black Americans incarcerated than white Americans, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/30/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/>.

3. Patrick Oakford, Cara Brumfield, Casey Goldvale, Laura Tatum, Margaret diZerega and Fred Patrick, *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), 19; Robert Bozik, Jennifer Steele, Lois Davis, Susan Turner, “Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States,” *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 390, doi:10.1007/s11292-018-9334-6.

4. “Research and Teaching Fellowship,” Teaching and Learning Services, Universities Libraries, University of Maryland, College Park, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.lib.umd.edu/tl/fellowship>.

5. For more information on the history of federal aid for incarcerated students, see Dan Pens, “Prisons Lose Pell Grants,” *Prison Legal News*, December 15, 1994, <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/1994/dec/15/prisoners-lose-pell-grants/>; U.S. Congress, House, Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, HR 3355, 103rd Cong.,

2nd sess., introduced in House October 26, 1993, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/3355/text>; Vera Institute of Justice, Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative Update (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/second-chance-pell-experimental-sites-initiative-update/legacy_downloads/Second-Chance-Pell-Fact-Sheet-June-2018.pdf; U.S. Department of Education, Secretary DeVos Builds on “Rethink Higher Education” Agenda, Expands Opportunities for Students Through Innovative Experimental Sites, 2019, <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/secretary-devos-builds-rethink-higher-education-agenda-expands-opportunities-students-through-innovative-experimental-sites>.

6. “About,” Vera Institute of Justice, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.vera.org/about>.

7. Ruth Delaney, Ram Subramanian, and Fred Patrick, *Making the Grade: Developing Quality Postsecondary Education Programs in Prison* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2019), 18, <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/making-the-grade-postsecondary-education-programs-in-prison.pdf>.

8. “Banned Books Lists,” Books to Prisoners, accessed December 10, 2019, www.bookstoprisoners.net/banned-book-lists/.

9. To learn more about the work being done to provide access to library databases in higher education in prison programs, see <https://www.ithaka.org/news/ithaka-awarded-grant-improve-higher-education-prisons>.

10. Delaney et. al., *Making the Grade*, 2.

11. Association of College and Research Libraries, “Appendix 1,” Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Chicago: ACRL, 2016), accessed on November 30, 2019, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframeworkapps#suggestions.

12. Association of College and Research Libraries, “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Chicago: ACRL, 2016), accessed on November 30, 2019, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework#authority

13. ACRL, Appendix 1, Framework. *ZZ*