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ACCentuating Epistemology in the ACC Frame

A Case for Integrating Personal and Discipline-Specific Epistemologies into the ACRL Framework

A quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a post-truth information ecosystem, where we regularly encounter fundamental disagreements about what constitutes truth itself. This problem is ultimately an epistemological one—how to operate within competing understandings about how knowledge is achieved. In order to help students become information literate in this increasingly complex landscape, we must be able to turn to our profession's guiding documents on how to approach the epistemological nuances of information evaluation.

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education does touch upon some of the epistemological elements of source evaluation, particularly in the first frame, Authority is Constructed and Contextual (ACC).[1] This frame has been one of the more controversial, with some scholars and librarians suggesting that it espouses a post-truth position. As such, with the ACRL Framework up for revision, this frame is a prime candidate for clarification.

Because the ACC frame acknowledges that cognitive authority is constructed and contextual, not inherent and absolute, it has been criticized for its potential slide into absolute relativism.[2] There is concern that by acknowledging the social construction of authority, this frame necessarily allows for a situation in which all authorities are created equal, and thus all claims can have some truth value, depending on the context.

Nevertheless, a number of thoughtful analyses[3] have illustrated that the ACC frame allows for a middle path, wherein there is space for both an explicit acknowledgment of the value of diverse forms of knowledge and a commitment to careful judgement about truth. In order to achieve this middle path, Lisa M. Rose-Wiles asserts that "an epistemological approach to discussing belief, authority, expertise and truth is sorely needed."[4] We believe that the ACC frame already attempts to encourage such an approach, if only implicitly. In addition to highlighting the places where the ACC frame alludes to the epistemological aspects of source evaluation, we identify areas where it could attend more explicitly to (1) how students' own personal epistemological development acts as a compass for moving from novice to expert, and (2) the disciplinary epistemological contexts in which authority is constructed.

Personal Epistemology in the Authority Frame

Students enter the classroom with a whole host of beliefs and experiences that will influ-

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ence the way they engage with information. One such set of beliefs are epistemic beliefs (also referred to as personal epistemologies), which are a person's beliefs about human knowledge, like how certain knowledge can be, how we come to know, and the criteria we should use for evaluating knowledge.[5]

While there are still diverse models for understanding these beliefs, there is a general consensus that epistemic beliefs are developmental, progressing from absolutist, to multiplist, to evaluativist.[6] A student with an evaluativist mindset understands that, although knowledge is uncertain, evolving, and filtered through human experience, it can be evaluated based on a framework of evidence and soundness of argument. In progressing towards evaluativism, students may move through a phase of multiplism, where they see knowledge as wholly subjective, but eventually they reintegrate "the objective dimension of knowing, by acknowledging uncertainty without forsaking evaluation. Thus, two people can both . . . 'be right'—but one position can have more merit ('be more right') than the other to the extent that position is better supported by argument and evidence."[7]

Some LIS[8] scholars have argued convincingly that there is a strong theoretical connection between personal epistemic beliefs and the development of information literacy, particularly in regard to how individuals engage with source evaluation. As such, it is not surprising that there is implicit compatibility between how the ACC frame describes information literate "experts" and more sophisticated, evaluativist approaches to knowledge.

The ACC frame states that being information literate requires the willingness to *recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews* and *develop and maintain an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives*. Sophisticated evaluation of information sources requires abandoning a naive quest for a single, unassailable truth in order to achieve a more fulsome picture of the world. This vision of information literacy mirrors epistemological development, which involves understanding (and ultimately synthesizing) diverse perspectives.

Additionally, evaluativists assess claims with an understanding that, although knowledge is ultimately uncertain, it is possible to make reasoned judgements about evidence in order to come to provisional conclusions about truth. This idea is reflected in the ACC frame's reference to the necessity of *seeking accuracy and reliability* and the *need to determine the validity of the information created by different authorities*. As the frame describes it, *experts view authority with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought*. This statement aligns with evaluativist epistemologies, which hold that while knowledge is always evolving and provisional (thus openness to new perspectives is crucial), knowledge claims can and should be evaluated skeptically against evidentiary criteria. Finally, there is a metacognitive element present in both the ACC frame and the development of an evaluativist epistemology. An evaluativist approach to knowledge involves engaging in a process of self-reflection, where an individual also examines their own thinking and assumptions as a part of evaluating as a source of information. Similarly, the ACC frame calls out the need for students to approach source evaluation with *a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview* and to be *conscious that maintaining these attitudes and actions requires frequent self-evaluation.* A greater reflective awareness of one's own information evaluation activities goes hand in hand with more sophisticated personal epistemologies.

Given that the ACC frame already implicitly guides students towards a more evaluativist personal epistemology, making these epistemic elements more explicit would enhance this frame. For instance, a more specific reference to epistemic beliefs could be included (suggested additions to the frame are indicated in bold): *Learners who are developing their information literate abilities develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases,* worldviews***, and beliefs about knowledge.*** Even a small modification like this could encourage instructors to attend to the way students' epistemic beliefs influence the way they evaluate information.

Additionally, the spirit of an evaluativist epistemology could be adopted to describe the practices or dispositions of experts related to authority evaluation. For instance, the frame could include a knowledge practice that describes engagement with different authorities to make careful judgments about knowledge claims. Referencing the practice of judgement involved in source evaluation would address some of the criticisms that this frame is an instrument of pure relativism and encourage students to see source evaluation as a holistic process of critical examination.

While an individual's epistemic beliefs, and how they are deployed during information evaluation, are ultimately personal, these beliefs do not develop in a vacuum. In fact, many of the questions of how to engage with evidence are driven by the interface between an individual's own beliefs about knowledge and the disciplinary communities in which they are learning.

Disciplinary Epistemologies in the Framework

When the ACC frame describes authority as contextual, one of the primary contexts it refers to is the disciplinary community where knowledge is developed. As Stefanie Bluemle[9] describes, cognitive authority is established within a social interaction between a source of information and a community that grants the authority to the source. Each knowledge community has a set of norms concerning how and when cognitive authority might be granted, and these norms are ultimately based on epistemological assumptions about which processes will reliably lead to knowledge.

These assumptions underpin the disciplinary paradigms that shape authority evaluation in that community. As Lisa Saunders and John Budd[10] argue, helping students understand these disciplinary paradigms is crucial for developing their information literacy; these paradigms affect everything from what avenues of research are pursued to what methods and standards are used, both of which are used to assess authority and credibility of an individual source. Rather than seeking to indoctrinate students within a certain way of thinking, it is necessary for students to deeply understand the culture and knowledge practices in a given discipline so that they can engage with them critically.

While the Framework was written to work across disciplines and is often applied in introductory-level writing and research skills courses, much of the work of developing information literacy also happens in disciplinary courses where students learn how to apply the skills, practices, and dispositions within the relevant field. Fittingly, several subject-specific sections of ACRL have developed their own companion documents to the Framework,[11] which explore the specifics of how knowledge, trust, and authority are constructed in their fields.

These Framework companion documents are extremely valuable for the details they provide about the different epistemological norms and markers in field-specific contexts; librarians can use them to help students explore their disciplinary epistemology. For example, the STEM companion document explains that STEM fields "traditionally rely on evidence-based, reproducible research using the scientific method" and that authority is "traditionally conferred based on a scaffolded series of scholarship and training within higher education,"[12] while the journalism companion document explores the myriad ways in which authority and credibility are deciphered when reporting, including "academic expertise, lived experience, and information that is and is not publicly available."[13] Lived experience narratives are an important potential facet of authority for journalists but are far less commonly accepted as a mark of authority or credibility in STEM. Distinguishing between different epistemological norms and practices within and across disciplines is important for students as they develop their information literacy.

The Framework itself does currently include some references to disciplinary epistemologies. The ACC frame has some explicit mentions of communities and disciplines, outlining how experts *recognize schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms.* One of the relevant knowledge practices is that learners *understand that many disciplines have acknowledged authorities in the sense of well-known scholars and publications that are widely considered 'standard,' and yet, even in those situations, some scholars would challenge the authority of those sources*. These are helpful elements that certainly allude to disciplinary-specific notions of authority, but they could be improved by being more explicit about the relationship between disciplinary epistemological paradigms and the construction of cognitive authority. The beginning of the frame could be modified to reflect discipline-specific ideas: *Information resources reflect their creators' expertise* ***and the authority they have been granted by one or more communities****, 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—****whether across academic disciplines or outside of academia—recognize different processes and criteria for granting authority.*** These updates would more clearly explain the social process of authority-granting within disciplines.

Additionally, a new knowledge practice could be added that describes how learners should understand that different disciplinary communities have different paradigms and norms that influence how knowledge is created and authority is granted. Emphasizing disciplinary frameworks for knowledge evaluation is useful because it encourages students to think critically about the communities that grant authority to information and how that process functions.

Finally, the updated Framework could specifically recommend referring to the companion documents; while the subject-specific considerations that they contain are impractical to include in the Framework itself, they are critical for helping students understand the knowledge practices they are learning to operate within.

Conclusion

As we help students navigate the complexities of the twenty-first-century information ecosystem, it is critical that the ACRL Framework continues to evolve to address the epistemological nuances of this ecosystem, particularly in regard to source evaluation. The de-

velopment of students' personal epistemologies is always happening in tandem with their exploration of disciplinary epistemologies, and librarians sit right at the nexus of these trajectories. This is part of the larger process of helping students develop their identities both as individuals and as scholars within a given field, work that is often part of liaison librarianship (e.g., helping STEM students develop their "science identity").[14] By more explicitly integrating epistemological concepts, the Framework will better guide librarians in helping cultivate students' epistemological growth and disciplinary engagement.

Notes

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3. Andrea Baer, "It's All Relative? Post-Truth Rhetoric, Relativism, and Teaching on 'Authority as Constructed and Contextual,'" *College & Research Libraries News* 79, no. 2 (February 1, 2018): 72, https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.2.72; Lisa M. Rose-Wiles, "The Framing of Authority in the ACRL Framework on Information Literacy: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Truth, Authority, Expertise and Belief," *Reference Services Review* 52, no. 2 (May 7, 2024): 202–17; Laura Saunders and John Budd, "Examining Authority and Reclaiming Expertise," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 1 (January 8, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.102077.

4. Rose-Wiles, "The Framing of Authority in the ACRL Framework on Information Literacy," 11.

5. Dorothe Kienhues, "Epistemic Beliefs," in *Oxford Bibliographies*, Education, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199756810-0084.

6. Deanna Kuhn, Richard Cheney, and Michael Weinstock, "The Development of Epistemological Understanding," *Cognitive Development* 15, no. 3 (July 1, 2000): 309–28, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2014(00)00030-7.

7. Kuhn et al., "The Development of Epistemological Understanding," 311–312.

8. Troy Swanson, "Information Literacy, Personal Epistemology, and Knowledge Construction: Potential and Possibilities," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13, no. 3 (December 15, 2006): 93–112, https://doi.org/10.1300/J106v13n03_07; Troy Swanson, "Information Is Personal: Critical Information Literacy and Personal Epistemology," in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Library Juice Press, 2010), 265–77; Matthew Kelly, "Epistemology, Epistemic Belief, Personal Epistemology, and Epistemics: A Review of Concepts as They Impact Information Behavior Research," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 72, no. 4 (2021): 507–19, https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24422.

9. Stefanie Bluemle, "A Close Look at the Concept of Authority in Information Literacy," *Journal of New Librarianship* 8, no. 2 (July 25, 2023): 1–28, https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/14/1.

10. Saunders and Budd, "Examining Authority and Reclaiming Expertise."

11. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Standards, Guidelines, and Frameworks—Alphabetical List," accessed January 5, 2025, https://www.ala.org/acrl/

standards-guidelines-and-frameworks-alphabetical-list.

12. ACRL Science and Technology Section, Information Literacy Framework Task Force, "Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics" (ACRL, August 1, 2022), https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/acrl/content/standards/Framework_Companion_STEM.pdf.

13. ACRL Education and Behavioral Sciences Section, Communication Studies Committee, "Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education—Journalism" (ACRL, April 6, 2022), https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/acrl/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Journalism.pdf.

14. Livia Olsen, Kendra Spahr, and Carol Sevin, "Science Identity and Librarianship: How Do Students Develop and Where Does the Library Fit?," Science & Technology Section poster presentation at the American Libraries Association Annual Conference, Washington DC, June 23, 2019.