CAIS Paper: The Kairos of Information Literacy as Professional Practice

Using kairos as an analytic lens, this paper examines the debate around ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy as an example of professionalizing discourse. Rather than leading librarians inexorably to the best way to understand and teach information literacy, kairos surfaces the discourse as productive instead of the profession itself.

The proposed paper addresses the ways that kairos, or qualitative time, can help librarians understand and intervene in debates around standards in information literacy instruction. Building on an article I published in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (2014), I provide an analysis of the scholarly conversation surrounding the new Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education. The Framework and the feedback process that has accompanied its adoption has been remarkable for its transparency and the extent of solicitation of public comment. This conversation, while framed on all sides as the pursuit of "what's right" for information literacy educators, has not achieved consensus. I argue that consensus around the truth is not the function of professional conversations like this one. Rather, the discourse is itself a mode of professionalization, the mechanism through which librarians reconstitute themselves as librarians, professionals with authority around a particular intellectual and practical domain: information literacy.

The shift from the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education to the Framework has been marked by dissent. Practitioners and theorists have argued against the adoption of the Framework on the grounds that "there's just no scientific evidence in favor of threshold concepts as a successful way to teach students anything" (Klipfel 2014) or have dismissed the Framework as "pedagogical gimmicks" (Wilkinson 2014). Others have defended the Framework as an "authentic and useful statement on information literacy and learning" (Swanson, 2015) and threshold concepts as "grounded in research on teaching and learning (Townsend, Lu, Hofer, and Brunett, 2015). Indeed, the process of gathering public comment on the Framework produced more than one thousand pages of commentary from outside the revision committee (Task Force 2014). Even before the Framework was formally approved by the ACRL Board of Directors, scholarly articles had already appeared in the literature, addressing assessment using the Framework (Oakleaf 2014) and using the Framework to teach health sciences information literacy (Knapp and Brower 2014).

Are threshold concepts real? Can they be proven? Can teaching under a threshold concepts framework improve student learning? Were the Standards a better description for what librarians should teach and what students should know? Rather than sink into this irresolvable debate, the analytic frame of kairos enables researchers and practitioners to understand both the Framework and the Standards as products of their respective qualitative time. Understanding both as temporally bound enables librarians to refocus attention on particular classroom situations, taking a micro rather than macro view of teaching and learning.

Kairos is a theoretical concept of time originating with the ancient Greeks. Contemporary composition theorists and practitioners have used kairos to trouble the stability of both the content of the classroom and the teaching methods deployed (Kinneavy 1994). In its origins, the concept was used to give shape to the present as always already embedded in

a context, produced by social and political forces and demanding responsive and proportional action in order to effect change: the present does not exist outside of the conditions that precede it, and the conditions of the present shape what is possible in the future. For the ancient Greeks, *kairos* offered a way of understanding the *when* and the *how* of human intervention in the world, and the changes such intervention could produce. In the context of library instruction, kairos shifts the focus away from interrogating the truth of standards, providing an analytic alibi for sidestepping debates about standards altogether, shifting attention away from the construction of what Pawley (1994) has called the "Procrustean bed" of standards and toward the students too often stretched to fit inside it. As a heuristic, kairos allows us to apprehend structures that appear as timeless and eternal as constructed in and through the materiality of time. Such apprehension allows us to manipulate those structures to ends beyond simply verifying or disproving their validity.

My presentation will begin with an exploration of these roots of kairos as an idea. Best articulated through the debates between Plato and the Sophists, this exploration will suggest that the Sophists were correct: not only does temporal context determine the best ways of teaching, it also determines what counts as the point of departure for any debate. Moving forward in time, I will then briefly describe the ways that kairos has been used by composition scholars and practitioners in the contemporary classroom. A kairotic approach to teaching writing demands developing assignments around what matters in the immediate lives of students, and providing correction that helps students achieve master of standards of grammar and syntax, but also enables them to see how those standards function as systems of power that are subject to change. Finally, I will discuss the ways that a kairotic analysis can help librarians understand the function of professional debates about information literacy. If these debates do not lead inexorably toward a consensus regarding the "correct" way to understand information literacy and the methods of achieving them, what do these debates accomplish? I will suggest that the conversation and conflict itself is what matters: it serves to construct a profession of librarianship in the present, poised to act in the future.

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