



---

Volume 59 | Issue 2

Article 6

---

2016

# Is Authority Always Constructed and Contextual? A Classical Challenge to the Framework for Information Literacy

Nathan Rinne  
*Concordia University*

*The Christian Librarian* is the official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). To learn more about ACL and its products and services please visit <http://www.acl.org/>

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Information Literacy Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Rinne, Nathan (2016) "Is Authority Always Constructed and Contextual? A Classical Challenge to the Framework for Information Literacy," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol59/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Christian Librarian by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolf@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolf@georgefox.edu).

# Is Authority Always Constructed and Contextual? A Classical Challenge to the *Framework for Information Literacy*



Nathan Rinne, Reference, Instruction, and Cataloging Librarian  
Concordia University

---

## ABSTRACT

The 2015 *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (or *Framework*) is the latest effort of academic librarians to provide relevant guidance for the teaching of information literacy. One claim made within this “living document,” in line with current academic trends of constructivism and social constructivism, is that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual.” Questions are raised concerning authority’s relationship to the idea of truth, and an effort is made, largely through a Socratic method of inquiry, to delve into the meaning of the *Framework’s* statement on authority using the further explanations provided concerning this particular “frame,” as well as the context of the entire document. Connections between the nature of authority, responsibility, and the ethical direction of the *Framework* are considered, and the relevance of the matter of truth is brought to bear here as well. Finally, the conclusion is reached that in light of the investigation’s findings, the current statement that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” is fraught with significant difficulties, and a statement akin to “Issues of Authority are Contextual and Nuanced” is warranted instead.

---

## Introduction

On February 2, 2015, the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (hereafter just *Framework*) was recognized by the board of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) as “one of the constellation of information literacy documents from the association.”<sup>1</sup> This document finds its genesis in the desire of librarians and their partners to more effectively promote an educational reform movement known as information literacy, and to do so particularly in the midst of the “rapidly changing higher education environment” and “dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem.” In such a fluid environment, the responsibilities of students, teaching faculty, and librarians are also seen to be changing, demanding that the foundational ideas about this “ecosystem” be paid attention to, and a “richer, more complex set of core ideas” be put forth.

---

1 This is no longer the case after June of 2016, the old *Information Literacy Competency Standards* having been rescinded.

The previous ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards*, published in 2000, were believed by many to be too skills-based, and liable to be abused in an assessment-driven environment. Alternatively, the *Framework*, with its “cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation,” is meant to give a more dynamic, vivid, and all-encompassing picture of what it means to be “information literate” – and how to achieve the same. This is seen in the titles of the “frames” that make up the *Framework*, for example: “Information Creation as a Process,” “Research as Inquiry,” and “Searching as Strategic Exploration.” Another aspect of the *Framework*’s more multi-dimensional picture of information literacy, particularly noticeable in frame titles such as “Scholarship as Conversation,” is that it highlights the important social dimensions involved not only in the creation of information, but the formation of information’s creators themselves (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2015).

Certainly, as can be seen from the above, the authors of the *Framework* are earnestly contending to make information literacy relevant in the midst of today’s cultural and academic environments. Of course, this also holds true for another frame in the *Framework*, the topic of this paper. Headed by the assertion “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” it attempts to describe the nature of authority with, primarily, the following statement:

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 types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required. (ACRL, 2015)

This statement initially resonated with the author on a number of levels. After all, Wikipedia and news sites are authoritative enough for some purposes, while for others they certainly are not. And in deciding where to get information that is appropriate for meeting our needs, does this not depend on things like what our needs are, who we are, and why we need what we need? And do not art critics and literary stylists, for example, have their various authorities, while sociologists and physicists, for example, have their respective authorities?

That said, if these are the kinds of things that the authors of the *Framework* meant to communicate, is this best expressed by simply asserting that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual”? Is it not likely that this statement will be taken to be describing a universally active process – that is, it gives the impression of being an all-inclusive claim not dependent on any particular context? And if this is the case, do librarians have an academic responsibility to give additional consideration to this matter? Librarian and philosopher Nathan Filbert seems to suggest this, when, regarding the *Framework* as a whole, he says that “we are claiming and requiring of

ourselves a robust and comprehensive understanding of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and experience of human life in the infosphere” (Filbert, 2016).

### **Initial Questions for the *Framework***

If one is inclined to set aside time to reflect on the *Framework*’s treatment of authority, questions like the following may arise: How do the concepts of expertise and credibility (which presumably, based on the above statement, go hand in hand with authority) fit with the constructed and contextual character authority is said to have? And what might concepts that one would think are connected with authority (like knowledge, experience, responsibility, trust, and truth) have to do with this statement? When we use the phrase “speaking with authority” in a positive context, “strength [of conviction] we can trust in” comes to mind – does truth as well? In addition, many believe that the *Framework* is based on the educational philosophy known as constructivism, which is related to “social constructivism” (e.g., Foasberg, 2015; Badke, 2015). This, in turn, has many connections with the philosophical school known as pragmatism (Hickman, 2009; Kivinen & Ristela, 2003), which is itself a form of relativism. Of course, the frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” gives the unmistakable impression of acknowledging this debt to constructivism in its very title. What does this mean for our inquiry?

For example, does the *Framework*, upon closer inspection, give the impression that it is indifferent to the matter of truth – or even that truth is really only about the usefulness and expediency of ideas (i.e., it only concerns viable actions)? And if this is the case, can the idea of truth therefore be reduced to “what our peers will let us get away with saying” as stated by the late Richard Rorty (2009), pragmatism’s most prominent contemporary proponent (p. 176)? This paper looks to ask, albeit via indirect means, to what degree this may be *true* about the *Framework*, however ironic this statement may seem. And if this is the case, do librarians want to leave that impression – or perhaps “get away with” leaving that impression? Or, would we prefer to communicate that truth, *at the very least*, has something to do with “being in accordance with the actual state or conditions; conforming to reality or fact; not false” (“Truth,” 2016), to say nothing about its connection with ethical issues? If the answer to this question is “yes” – and if questions like those posed in the previous paragraph are unable to be addressed in a satisfactory way – might it be necessary to re-examine and perhaps “re-frame” this part of the *Framework*?

In the *Framework*, each frame is accompanied by a primary explanation like the one quoted above (it is set apart in bold in the *Framework*) as well as a longer, additional explanation. I will explore these in some detail below for the frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual,” with reference to the corresponding “Knowledge Practices” and “Dispositions” of the frame as well as the entire document. I will attempt to utilize a Socratic method of inquiry, asking several questions in an effort

to encourage critical reflection, and giving special attention to particular questions I think are among the most significant. *While all of the following statements and questions put forth – and the wider context they provide – are important for and relevant to our inquiry (perhaps particularly for the potential non-librarian audience), those that are italicized are the ones the paper’s concluding section most directly addresses. Some readers familiar with the topic matter and this kind of debate may prefer to read the bold and italicized portions in the following sections and then move right to the paper’s conclusion.*

The *Framework* certainly does make assertions, but it has also been put forward as a document to be discussed, debated, and negotiated. It has in fact been declared a “dynamic, living document that can be changed in the future without needing a vote and full [Association of College and Research Libraries] Board approval” (Williams, 2015). Going along with this, librarian and critical information literacy theorist Ian Beilin has stated that “[The *Framework*] is a progressive document, but it will require librarians to resist it in order for it to be a radical one” (2015). I, on the other hand, am not encouraging resistance *per se*, but I am issuing a call for those involved and interested in this issue to engage deeply in rational thought and discussion. It seems appropriate to me to consider what might be some of the shortcomings and problems with the assertion “Authority is Constructed and Contextual,” and to consider whether a “re-frame” might be appropriate.

## Drawing Out the Meaning from the Main Statement

(I have broken the main statement up into four parts, hence the numbering.)

### ***1. “Information resources reflect their creators’ expertise and credibility...”***

The words “expertise” and “credibility” here are clearly intended to dovetail with the concept of authority, and the meaning of both words can be easily understood in this context. The correlation with expertise in particular suggests a requisite theoretical and/or practical knowledge of (i.e., “know that” and “know how”) the matter or thing one’s authority concerns (increasing one’s credibility). And undoubtedly, in many cases, this knowledge is preferably accompanied by a strong appreciation or affection component. From the information users’ practical standpoint, all of us are concerned to obtain “authoritative content” (to use a phrase from the “Knowledge Practices” section of this frame): information sources and resources we can trust, particularly when our information need pertains to the things we value the most (family, friendships, health, money, valued possessions, education, winning wars, winning games, spiritual life, etc.). When it comes to the needs we sense for reliable information, we all value persons who know what they are talking about and can put their knowledge into practice, perhaps even if we do not trust their judgment (or possibly, even their character) when it comes to other matters.

**2. “...and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used.”**

Persons choose to look at and evaluate information resources because they presume that it will meet some kind of information need that they or someone else they are helping has. This could be, for example, the simple need to satisfy curiosity, to solve a specific problem, to become more educated regarding one’s profession or desired profession, to be “well-rounded,” to spur further thought on a topic, to get to know an author, etc. So a variety of persons may be interested in the same resource for very different reasons or even a variety of different reasons, as they look to meet different needs. In addition, one also evaluates any resource with any number of contextual factors in mind. Perhaps, for example, a professor does not adopt a textbook because, for all its strengths, it assumes some knowledge her students don’t have.

So far, so good. Now we move into more difficult territory.

**3. “Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority.”**

The fact that “various communities may recognize different types of authority” means that authority – evidently all authority given the lack of any qualification – “is constructed.” What is the meaning of “constructed” in this statement? Later in the *Framework*, under the frame “Information Has Value” we read that “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities... understand that intellectual property is a legal and social construct that varies by culture.” A definition of construct that seems to go along with this is “an idea or theory containing various conceptual elements, typically one considered to be subjective and not based on empirical evidence” (“Construct,” 2016).

Does it then follow that authority is constructed by a community, and that this is wholly a subjective, albeit a corporately subjective, process – perhaps largely unconcerned about “antics” of “familiar objects,” or things, as Richard Rorty (2009) might say (p. 310)? This might seem to be the case, but looking carefully at the statement we note that authority is said to be constructed because communities “recognize different types of authority.” In this context, *what is “recognize” primarily intended to make us think about here?* Is it the importance of the antics of things, that is, empirical considerations? Is it that we can perceive or intuit that there are enduring principles, or reasons,<sup>2</sup> not necessarily at odds with empirical considerations for authorities to be recognized? Or *is this statement only meaning to describe what “is” (maybe authorities are simply those one depends on or even needs to depend on?)* sidestepping or ignoring these kinds of questions?

---

2 Or, there is some kind of ultimate, singular principle or reason underlying reality?: “Reason” (exercised by the “measure of all things,” man), the “laws of nature,” other “Forces,” “Universal Consciousness,” “Universal Collective Unconsciousness,” “Mind,” “World Spirit,” “The ‘Best’ which calls for proportion and equality,” “eternal universal essences,” “Plato’s forms,” “Divine Being/s,” etc.

More: *Is it the communities themselves who are recognizing and thereby constructing the authority, period?* This is, after all, what the statement says. On the other hand, again, the question of why we recognize and how we recognize authority lies in the background here. Therefore, is it something or someone else that acts as an authority which the community recognizes, meaning that the something or someone else who is recognized “constructs” it? (Note the following explanations in the next section where “exertion” is discussed) In other words, some “who” or “what” is initially attempting to establish – or is perhaps simply exercising – the authority which communities then recognize as such? And of course this question arises as well: *What if the “community” disagrees among itself about issues pertaining to authority?* Is there anything at all that is potentially trans-cultural and trans-historical which might be able to, at the very least, allow them to continue talking with one another – or even encourage them to?

**4. *“It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.”***

This statement looks at authority from the standpoint of information need – what kind of authority will be able to help in each situation? Different levels of authority, therefore, might be a factor of critical importance when it comes to determining the kind of source or resource needed. For example, a woman who is studying for the Medical College Admissions Test (M-CAT) is not going to be satisfied with a study book that either does not particularly deal with this topic or is not written by persons who are able to help her navigate the terrain and succeed. With this duly noted, *the question that occurs is whether or not, in this or that context, authority might be improperly constructed and why.* More specifically as to its construction, it is either not really present in spite of its being “recognized,” or it really is present even if it is not recognized or, perhaps, not fully recognized.

To conclude this section, the meaning of the third part of the main statement (my numbering) was found to be more difficult to discern, and this problem affects the fourth part as well. The next section will continue the process laid out above, in the hope a satisfactory explanation can be found for the third statement.

## **Drawing Out the Meaning from the Further Explanation of the Main Statement**

**1. *“Experts understand that authority is a type of influence recognized or exerted within a community.”***

While the first statement (again, my numbering) in the previous section associated authority with expertise and credibility, this understanding of authority seems to be much more all-encompassing (like the third statement in the previous section). Authority is a “type of influence” that, “within a community” is either “recognized” or “exerted” (or both, perhaps?). It might seem to go without

saying that someone or something exerting influence is, at the very least, likely to be recognized as an authority. And *what, one wonders, are we supposed to think of when it comes to this “recognition”?* Unenthusiastic acceptance, perhaps along the lines of “inconvenient truths”? Something akin to “officially recognized” by a community, exemplified by one’s attaining the responsibility of an “office” in an “institution”? *Simply a more “organic” kind of process that just “is,” where influence exerted in a community amounts to authority (related to “soft power”)? “Might makes right” (related to “hard power”)?* Just about benevolently using power to create some measure of social predictability? All of the above? *What about any enduring principles and reasons, perceived or intuited, as mentioned above?*

And what, by the way, can we say about these “experts” who provoke such questioning? This leads us into the next sentence:

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

*The reader of the Framework cannot help but notice that he is constantly confronted with appeals to authority, that is, “experts.”* For those familiar with the history of Western thought, particularly its modern and postmodern currents, this may cause some pondering. As the philosopher Luc Ferry (2011) put it concerning Rene Descartes’ influence on Western thought (most famous for saying “I think, therefore I am”): “[Descartes] declared that *all past beliefs, all ideas inherited from family or state, or indoctrinated from infancy onwards by ‘authorities’ (masters, priests) must be cast into doubt, and examined in complete freedom by the individual subject*” (p. 130).

Of course many resisted Descartes, and perhaps there are few who would claim to be disciples of him in their thinking today, but this skeptical aspect of his program became part and parcel of Western views of knowledge. As such, putting the best construction on the *Framework* one assumes that its authors certainly expect their schools of thought to be questioned, and perhaps even welcome questioning.

Here one also may note that even the most traditional advocate of obeying authority (often adherents of religious faiths) generally will not insist that authorities, at least on earth, should never be challenged, nor that alternative voices can never be heard. In addition, regarding “changes in schools of thought,” one notes that when it comes to *things like knowledge of how to persuade, playing a musical instrument, or adding two pairs of apples to get four, there is much that does not appear to change at all.*

**3. “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. 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.”***

Here the impression is given that the information produced in the academy by academic authorities is only one kind of authority being discussed – again, there is a very all-encompassing perspective that is being put forth. The default orientation towards authorities is that verification is needed in order to “determine the validity of the information” these “different authorities” create.

Even the novice learner, we are told, can ambitiously strive to examine all evidence and ask relevant questions (about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need). And as to whether the novice needs to be concerned about their own personal biases, the “Dispositions” noted below indicate that this is indeed the case: “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities... [d]evelop awareness of the importance of accessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview.” The authors of the *Framework* are to be commended here: *in addition to our tendency to focus on the things we appreciate at the expense of other things, some questions are not even thinkable to us due to the particular biases we have inherited and this may indeed be something, at least given this or that issue, that we might want to alleviate.*

On the other hand, perhaps those congratulations are a bit premature. After all, the *Framework* does not clearly address the following important question: Is it possible that a person might develop one’s dispositions and abilities to such a degree that one can reasonably be said to have “arrived” and overcome bias? Assuming that this is not the case (another “best construction,” I would say), another question nevertheless arises: if personal biases or inclinations (to choose a less “loaded” word) will inevitably continue to affect us, just what is it that causes us to start to question the inclinations, worldviews, orientations, and privileges that inevitably affect and continue to affect all of us? *Does the Framework mean to say both that personal biases can be overcome to this or that degree, and that it will happen in the context of conversations where content (arguments, “all” evidence, etc.) is taken seriously and seriously being discussed?*

Other questions continue to inevitably arise from the issues covered by the *Framework* here, related to one’s own attitudes and motivations – one’s own orientations. In light of this, the word “privilege,” clearly an important theme in the *Framework*, seems to be inherently problematic. In the context of the above statement (and elsewhere as well), one gets the impression that awareness of privilege is important only, or at least primarily, because of matters of cultural and socioeconomic power (see Foasberg, 2015). This kind of power deriving from one’s privilege, often translated into forms of political power, is certainly an important factor for any truth-seeker to be aware of. And yet, would not a wider notion of privilege have room to say, for example, that a certain Native American is indeed privileged to be aware of – and to have even personally experienced –

the kinds of knowledge and good things treasured in their culture? If so, making this notion of privilege explicit would seem to be appropriate.

And what about the notion of privilege and the historical [i.e., Western] academy? Do those holding positions of authority and influence have a responsibility to, at the very least, make a case for what have been called “Western” educational norms and practices? *Should our privilege and cultural orientation look to uphold scholarship that is not only concerned with matters of justice (and solving problems revolving around cultural conflicts), but is also, perhaps even primarily, interested in discovering the unknown and remembering – sometimes perhaps re-discovering – the forgotten?* And that this means, in part, finding real answers in addition to creating new and exciting questions? *Is a natural inclination towards these things, perhaps deriving in large part from one’s privilege, potentially something that we might examine and conclude that we should, in large part, retain?* And here, we might also hearken back to this paper’s previous section (“Drawing Out the Meaning from the Main Statement”), where questions were raised concerning principles and reasons that have some “staying power”, that endure.

And could this possibly mean *things* – things beyond fundamental particles and “laws of nature” that is – *that endure*? After all, it seems that many of the things in the world – making their presence known with their more or less intractable ways – have been structuring our attention from humanity’s first breath. Other than a few scholars who have attempted to find acceptable avenues of exploring the richness of notions such as these (Gumbrecht, 2004; Crawford, 2015) focusing on such ideas is quite rare in the academy of today. While all institutions have, in truth, unspoken limitations on academic freedom (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), one might question today whether institutions where certain approaches to social justice hold sway are much interested in research that might seem to reinforce or harmonize with anything that could be construed as “traditional” (see, e.g., Haskins, 2013; Dines, 2016). After all, it is strongly felt by many that in the past too many limits, for example, have come about due to the privileged exercising of these kinds of social constructions.

**4. “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...”**

*Authority represents expertise, and, based on previous statements in this frame, the impression is given that this has something to do with a person’s level of expertise derived from experience (knowledge or “know-how”).* In like fashion, different types of authority all represent expertise, that is the pertinent knowledge and know-how, but in different ways. For example, in the “Knowledge Practices” section we read that “learners who are developing their information literate abilities... define different types of authority, such as subject expertise (e.g., scholarship), societal position (e.g., public office or title), or special experience (e.g., participating in

a historic event).” For the first two kinds of examples mentioned in particular, subject expertise or societal positions, it is easy to imagine that one might often have, for good reasons, mixed feelings and thoughts pertaining to these – having a love/hate relationship of sorts. This is undoubtedly a common existential experience, and perhaps accounts for the rest of the sentence discussing skepticism, as well as the shift in talk from “communities” to “systems.” What distinguishes a community that “elevates” an authority from a “system” that does so? Here, in spite of the common currency of the word “system,” further explanation would be helpful.<sup>3</sup>

**5. “Experts know how to seek authoritative voices but also recognize that unlikely voices can be authoritative, depending on need.”**

Even those who will advocate for more objective forms of authority based on some kind of philosophical reason or principle recognize that “unlikely voices” can be authoritative, but the question here is *why*? Why do we recognize, or why should we recognize this? Is it because we see that they, perhaps over and against “the man” – and perhaps encouraged by “special experiences” – believe that it is important to be true and to seek truth and even the truth? Or something else? And *if matters of truth – and perhaps with this, justice – are indeed at issue, should the Framework strive for appropriate language that could somehow make this explicit*? I note that in the “Knowledge Practices” section, it does say persons “developing their own authoritative voices” should “recognize the responsibilities this entails, including seeking accuracy and reliability.” The question however, is “why”? To “participate successfully in collaborative spaces,” to be sure. But the wider question is this: is it simply about avoiding potential consequences, for example, one should do this so as not to discredit one’s self and those one associates with? *Is the thing of real import here asking “relevant questions” with the intention of undermining power structures perceived or intuited to be unjust? Or are there deeper concerns that should be addressed here?*

---

<sup>3</sup> At this point, another important question that perhaps should be addressed arises: Is this understanding of authority – with its close association with expertise – opposed to the way the former *Framework* committee member Lane Wilkinson wanted the *Framework* to read? Commenting on an earlier version of the *Framework* that did not contain the sentence “Information resources reflect their creator’s expertise and credibility,” Wilkinson interpreted things thusly: “This frame deals with *cognitive authority*, which deals... with trust and credibility... Being an expert is having a certain body of knowledge or know-how; being an authority is having credibility within a sphere of influence *independently of knowledge or know-how*. It’s all in the context” (Wilkinson, 2014, italics mine). Later in the post, he writes: “Of course, in many cases, authorities obtain their credibility by being experts or reliable sources for knowledge. But, it’s not a requirement” (Wilkinson, 2014).

In other words, it seems that Wilkinson here is suggesting that expertise is somehow wholly “objective” whereas authority is wholly “subjective.” In brief, a person can legitimately be said to have authority so long as they have gained trust in one of their spheres of influence – perhaps only possessing the appearance of having real knowledge and know-how? Or, on the other hand, is Wilkinson contending that a significant enough percentage of persons will recognize others as authorities without any consideration of who a person is (their profession or office), or their knowledge and know how – thereby making this the case? In either case, it seems that this is an unsatisfactory solution.

**6. “Novice learners may need to rely on basic indicators of authority, such as type of publication or author credentials, where experts recognize schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms.”**

In this next section, we are specifically dealing with the academy once again. Since this final statement seems to go hand in hand with the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame, it will be covered in the next section.

And at this point, *we might sum up our inquiry thus far by putting it in the form of the following questions:* How do we know whether we should regard what person X writes or says as authoritative? Is there some intrinsic value to what person X says (e.g., some agreement and connection with what we might call objective reality or truth) or is it all just a social construct in a given context either because “reality” as such is denied to exist or is denied to be knowable by us in any reliable way? What is the truth here? In like fashion, as also hinted above, we may also ask whether there is intrinsic value to what persons say when it comes to ethical issues. The next section of the paper begins to look at this issue in greater detail.

### **Considering What Has Been Said Above in Light of the Entire Framework**

*The wider context of the Framework also helps us to better understand the wider ethical issues involved in the questions about authority we have been exploring – as well as their connection with matters of truth.* People understand that when we speak about matters of authority, we also have in mind the responsible exercising of that authority: being accountable, having a duty, being invested in the matters or things one’s authority concerns, and in short, being true. In like fashion, if we recognize that a person is responsible for something, we simultaneously recognize that they need to possess the necessary authority to carry out their tasks.

First, the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame refers to the “new insights and discoveries occurring over time [that happen] as a result of varied perspectives and interpretation.” Clearly, this is a statement about the nature of scholarly inquiry that needs to be explored and critiqued more, and from a variety of angles, including disciplinary (is there something about *some* disciplines which makes them “enduring” as well?) and sociological angles (are the reasons for the “conformity, uniformity, predictability and consensus” [Beilin, 2015] common in scholarship in every case only sociopolitical?) Connecting this with the comments made above about scholarship and “schools of thought or discipline-specific paradigms,” a particular question comes to the fore: *Is it, with the help of persons of various perspectives, only advantageous (in terms of explanation or perhaps even politically) “models” and “maps” that can be “discovered” – and never real truth* (in which case, scientists may rightly ask here: “is it only provisionally true that the earth is spherical, or that objects of varying

mass fall at the same speeds?”<sup>4</sup>)? If it is only the former and never the latter, do we have any responsibility to help persons understand distinctions such as this? And then, *do we need to reflect here on what it might be that distinguishes something we call a “useful fiction” from propaganda?*

Second, *what about the matter of truth – particularly the truths about justice – when it comes to the Framework’s implicit and explicit ethical statements?* In the “Information has Value” frame, we read that “information possesses several dimensions of value... and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination.” Later on, in the section that follows, it says that “value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices.” At the same time, “value may also be leveraged by individuals and organizations to effect change and for civic, economic, social, or personal gains.” Finally, the *Framework* seeks to urge appropriate civil disobedience: “the individual is responsible for making deliberate and informed choices about when to comply with and when to contest current legal and socioeconomic practices concerning the value of information.”

No one can make the claim that the new *Framework* is not concerned about important ethical issues. There might even seem to be something “teleological” about the moral direction that the *Framework* eagerly provides here, certainly going beyond mere “description.” Given the powerful emotions and convictions involved in this, perhaps one might be forgiven for thinking that there is at least something about our moral convictions that shouts “truth!” Should we not all honestly face the temptations we have to seek security, comfort, and autonomy above matters pertaining to truth and justice? But can one be forgiven for believing that there exists not only sound moral judgment, but that sound moral *knowledge* exists as well (i.e., something that everyone shares or at least should be able to share) as it perhaps awaits “activation” through basic human interaction? And if so, *can one not only be forgiven but perhaps even permitted to encourage others to notice the implications of what the authors of Framework are asserting – namely, that they, somewhat conflictedly, both seem to want truth and not want truth?* Perhaps relatedly, as Arthur Allen Leff (1979) put it some years ago, we want to “be perfectly ruled and perfectly free, that is, at the same time to discover the right and the good and to create it”.

## **Conclusion: A Proposed Way Forward**

Clearly anyone endeavoring to explain issues related to authority faces a daunting task. An earlier version of the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame in the *Framework* was obviously realized to be too simple: “Experts understand *that*

---

4 Sometimes, as in the case of Newton, certain truths – that is, regularities that occur in nature and can be tested and harnessed – are discovered (that may indeed require some helpful metaphors on our part) that later demand, for the sake of honesty/accuracy/truthfulness, to be supplemented – that is, put into an even bigger picture of what the “whole truth” is (as they say in the field of law). And on and on.

authority is the degree of trust that is bestowed and as such, authority is both contextual and constructed” (Wilkinson, 2014). Even though issues of trust cannot be cleanly separated from notions of authority, one is readily able to understand why such a statement did not make it into the final document (or, perhaps, “*Framework 1.0*”). If anything is clear about issues pertaining to authority it is that, as the foregoing discussion shows, they are fraught with difficulty and require an extraordinarily high level of nuanced thinking.

“But perhaps,” one might say, “you have been treating this question largely in an ‘originalist’<sup>5</sup> fashion, when we should be highlighting the fact that this is a ‘living document’ – that is, one that is evolving.” In other words, your argument assumes a certain “stability” of words, meanings, or things in general that is wholly unwarranted, at the very least, for such an intentionally flexible document. “And besides,” one might add, “persons are not going to agree with all issues pertaining to moral authority, tied up as they are with the various views of the universe, or ‘cosmos,’ as a whole<sup>6</sup> – and views about where or how purpose and meaning are ultimately to be found.”<sup>7</sup>

So, in light of this, does it not makes sense to see things like the *Framework* as “kairoitic texts” (Drabinski, 2014) and nothing more – meaning that we should “approach standards as functional” (Drabinski, 2014)? Even though the *Framework* makes assertions, do we really need to be overly concerned “over what is true and right,” embracing what amounts to undesirable reification? (Who, after all, wants a positivistic search for “acontextually authoritative and valid sources” contrary to a “more situated and participatory vision” [Foasberg, 2015]?) Even as we, simultaneously, continue to insist persons should conform themselves to the moral norms we are currently in the habit of asserting for ourselves and the communities we serve? Insofar as the *Framework* presents itself as a useful tool in attaining these temporary goals *en route* to higher goals, why not use it in just this way?

There is however, something inherently problematic here. Does true progress mean that we are always changing the world in accordance with our vision, or that we are always changing our vision? If we want to say “both” to this, we should note what the ever insightful G.K. Chesterton (1909) wrote, namely:

---

5 This is the idea, particularly in jurisprudence, that the original intent of author’s works should be conformed to in subsequent interpretations of them.

6 Is it a multiverse? Is it an eternal cosmos? Is it good? Is it evil? Is it neither good nor evil? Is it in need of our assistance? Is it the Creation? Is it good but “fallen”? Etc.

7 Are clues of this to be found in “nature”? Are clues of this to be found within ourselves? Individually? Collectively? Both? Is there guidance to be found in some “divine revelation”? If so, how could one know which divine revelation? Etc.

[progress] should mean that we are slow and sure in bringing justice and mercy among men: it does not mean that we are very swift in doubting the desirability of justice and mercy... We are not altering the real to suit the ideal. We are altering the ideal: it is much easier” (p. 195).

When it comes to being clear about important matters such as these, persons like Chesterton would seem to be decidedly against building the airplane while we are in the air, and point us towards the need for at least *something* solid.

So, in light of the foregoing discussion in this and previous sections, are there any anchor points that could be agreed on?

I think there are. First, take the question of whether authority is incontestably contextual in the sense suggested by the statement “Authority is Constructed and Contextual.” Consider, for instance, Cicero’s observation that “Nature produces a special love of offspring,” and Epictetus’ assertion that “Natural affection is a thing right according to Nature” (Lewis, 1996, p. 99). Is it not, in fact, the *default* “societal position” of parents to be responsible for, and to be quite invested in, their offspring, to become expert guides in reference to them in their particularities?<sup>8</sup> In like fashion, consider the argument of 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, pointing out the curious fact underlying the evidently universal feeling of thankfulness: “Gratitude for favors only makes sense because a favor goes beyond what is just” (Holmes, 117). As for justice, one notes that Spinoza, following Plato, pointed out that “the beauty of proportionality” can cause one to “abhor a situation that would bring one into disproportion with everyone else” (Goldstein, 2014, pp. 204, 392, 39), and that this, in turn, harmonizes with the Golden Rule. This is just a sampling of things that it seems various groups of human beings do not so much design or construct (unconsciously or consciously), but rather, as if by intrinsic design, something a “human community of practice” recognizes and receives willingly (at least in theory, i.e., “sounds like a good idea”).

And this can be seen to go hand in hand with the kinds of things that the motorcycle mechanic philosopher Matthew Crawford says in his most recent book, *The World Outside Your Head*. He notes, for example, “the world is known to us because we live and act in it, and accumulate experience... we think through the body” (Crawford, 2015, pp. 50-51). In other words, at least certain things “outside our head” subsist “authoritatively,” creating what the literary scholar Hans Gumbrecht has called “presence effects” (2004, p. 108). These, in effect, exercise their own intrinsic meaning as they help structure our attention, thereby anticipating our minds’ interpretive

---

8 It would seem to be the case trans-culturally and trans-historically that people recognize it is right for parents – their “societal position” – to be responsible for their own children. Some go further and assert that it is right that parents and all others recognize certain rights of the child (see the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

activities. Current trends in Western education, on the other hand, would even seem to suggest that facts are true for individuals only if they can be proved (McBrayer, 2015).

Therefore, unless cultural traditions can be identified that exhibit both long-term endurance and a persistent tendency to contradict all of these evidently common experiences, why assert that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual,” giving the likely impression that it is *always and only constructed* but never really “given” – “a given”? Interestingly, it would seem to depend on the wider context of the statement, “authority is contextual” to determine whether or not authority, in particular cases, can actually be said to be constructed in the sense meant by the *Framework!* In other words, authority, in an unanticipated “meta”-move, turns out to even more contextual than the statement suggests. Why? Because it gives the clear impression of undermining the intended meaning and goal of the phrase “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” itself, a phrase which is meant to highlight and emphasize the importance not of experiences common to all human beings, but rather the diversity and variations of human experience.

Academic currents espousing the wisdom of social constructivism, and its sister, pragmatism, might seem to suggest the statement “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” is what we want. But given things like those that have been pointed out above, is not a degree of skepticism called for here? Does not this statement, with its seemingly universal claim, introduce all manner of demonstrable confusion as well as call into question the importance of the matter of truth itself – and with this, rational discourse? If the student at a religious seminary, for instance, were to insist that authority is constructed and contextual, he might well find himself failing to graduate.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging that many would no doubt contest this seminary’s actions, we nevertheless cannot simply respond by saying “This just goes to show that authority is constructed differently in different contexts.” True?

Former Library of Congress librarian Thomas Mann, author of the *Oxford Guide to Library Research* (2015), after reading a rough draft of my paper, said this to me:

The problem with the assertion that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” is that it is self-invalidating. The statement itself claims to be a *universal* truth about authority, maintaining that authority is always dependent on social constructions and contexts. If that is true, however, then the very assertion of that claim is itself nothing more than yet another statement grounded on a particular social construction that has no more authority to it – no more claim to true understanding – than any *other* statement claiming “authority” that has the power of some *other*

---

<sup>9</sup> Note, for example, the claim made by the Apostle Paul at the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of the book of Romans, in the New Testament of the Bible: “For there is no authority except from God...”

social group behind *it*. This unarticulated and concealed proposition behind the statement leaves the door wide open to the very proliferation of hostile “us vs. them” groups that all are capable of amassing considerable power – with power being the ultimate determinative of which views shall prevail. Moreover, since the statement that “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” cannot possibly be a universal truth without contradicting itself, then the door is wide open to consider *other* statements regarding the nature of authority (and truth); and some of those other statements may indeed have much better claims to universality (T. Mann, personal communication, May 24, 2016).

When put so bluntly, it is difficult to resist Mann’s analysis. When the influential Richard Rorty defined truth as “what our peers will let us get away with saying,” how does this not, in effect, make truth liable to being nothing more than a power play for one’s advantage? From which it follows that it is *really true (!)* that it is ultimately only things that overpower other things that can be said to exist – to be. This certainly puts a new spin on what Aristotle said about truth, namely that “to say that which is, is and that which is not is not, is true”! With this assumed, the best among us can only be those who take and lead leaps of faith into oceans, hoping that the evolving beliefs we think are “good” – and not just our genes – will be spread and passed on. Here, any classical notions of knowledge as “justified true belief” are banished, as *whatever can function to win*, if only temporarily, is all that remains for us to hope in. On the other hand, what if what we ultimately need is just such knowledge, and real wisdom, perhaps even involving a truth that even goes beyond “accuracy” – implying perhaps even a *goodness* that goes beyond our own subjective impressions?

Even if one thinks that such questions are not ideal for an increasingly secular age, should we not at least honestly wrestle with the issues presented above – and perhaps be content to assert that “Issues of Authority are Nuanced and Contextual”? *Here is something I think almost all of us can agree is true - at least now - full stop.* Perhaps being concerned about what is really true is more important than where the academic trends of constructivism and pragmatism seem to be taking us. At the very least, re-framing this statement from the *Framework* would allow for those who want to ask questions like this – and who in fact believe the answer is affirmative – to continue in their practices without finding them unintentionally undermined. †

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Rinne is a Reference, Instruction, and Cataloging Librarian at Concordia University in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He can be reached at [rinne@csp.edu](mailto:rinne@csp.edu).

---

## REFERENCES

- Association of College and Research Libraries. (2015). *Framework for information literacy for higher education*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework> (accessed 27 May 2016).
- Badke, W. (2015). The Framework for information literacy and theological education. *Theological Librarianship*, 8(2), 4-7.
- Beilin, I. (2015). Beyond the threshold: Conformity, resistance, and the ACRL information literacy framework for higher education. In *the Library with the Lead Pipe*. Retrieved from <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/beyond-the-threshold-conformity-resistance-and-the-acrl-information-literacy-framework-for-higher-education/>
- Chesterton, G. K. (1909). *Orthodoxy*. New York: John Lane.
- Construct. (2016). In *Oxfordictionaries.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/construct](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/construct)
- Crawford, M. B. (2015). *The world beyond your head: On becoming an individual in an age of distraction*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Dines, G. (2016, April 8). Is porn immoral? That doesn't matter: It's a public health crisis. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/04/08/is-porn-immoral-that-doesnt-matter-its-a-public-health-crisis/>
- Drabinski, E. (2014). Toward a kairos of library instruction. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(5), 480-485. doi:10.1016/j.jacalib.2014.06.002
- Ferry, L. (2011). *A brief history of thought: A philosophical guide to living*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Filbert, N. W. (2016). Framing the framework: The rigorous responsibilities of library and information science. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 55(3), 199. Retrieved from <https://journals.ala.org/rusq/article/view/5929/7517>
- Foasberg, N. M. (2015). From Standards to Frameworks for IL: How the ACRL Framework addresses critiques of the Standards. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 15(4), 699-717. Retrieved from [http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/portal\\_libraries\\_and\\_the\\_academy/portal\\_pre\\_print/articles/foasberg.pdf](http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/portal_libraries_and_the_academy/portal_pre_print/articles/foasberg.pdf)
- Goldstein, R. (2014). *Plato at the Googleplex: Why philosophy won't go away*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gumbrecht, H. U. (2004). *Production of presence: What meaning cannot convey*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Haskins, R. (2013, March 13). Three simpler rules poor teens should follow to join the middle class. Retrieved from <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/03/13-join-middle-class-haskins>
- Holmes, A. F. (1997). *Fact, value, and God*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Hickman, L. A., Neubert, S., & Reich, K. (2009). *John Dewey between pragmatism and constructivism*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Kivinen, O., & Ristela, P. (2003). From constructivism to a pragmatist conception of learning. *Oxford Review of Education*, 29(3), 363-375. Retrieved from <http://scicom.esi.uclm.es/alfonso.nino/DDCII/pdfs/KivinenRistela2003.pdf>
- Leff, A. (1979). Unspeakable ethics, natural law. *Duke Law Journal*, 1979(6), 1229-1249. Retrieved from <http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2724&context=dlj>
- Lewis, C. S. (1996). *The abolition of man*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2015). The coddling of the American mind. *Atlantic Monthly*, 316(2), 42-53. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>
- McBrayer, J. (2015, Mar. 2). Why our children don't think there are moral facts. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/why-our-children-dont-think-there-are-moral-facts/?\\_r=3](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/why-our-children-dont-think-there-are-moral-facts/?_r=3)
- Rorty, R. (2009). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Truth. (2016). In *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/true>
- Wilkinson, L. (2014, July 22). Is authority constructed and contextual? [Blog post]. *Sense and Reference*. Retrieved from <https://senseandreference.wordpress.com/2014/07/22/is-authority-constructed-and-contextual/>
- Williams, K. (2015, February 4). More from the ACRL board on the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education [Blog post]. *ACRL Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/archives/9814>