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Using the Frame Information Creation as a Process to Teach Career Competencies to Advertising Students

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CHAPTER 6*

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Because information source types in advertising are dynamic and numerous, teaching Information Creation as a Process represents a critical part of information literacy education for students in advertising and marketing programs. Since these programs place great emphasis on career skills, addressing this frame should be situated within an awareness of professional practice. The transfer of information skills from college to career is not necessarily a simple corollary. There is evidence that information skills are situational, and that the transfer of skills from education to work only occurs at basic levels.[1] Annemaree Lloyd, a prolific researcher in the area of workplace information literacy, argues that information literacy is not a set of discrete skills but rather a socially constructed set of concepts, practices, and values, and that educators should be aware of other information contexts outside of the bounded world of college in order to teach the transfer of those competencies.[2] Fortunately, the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Framework) allows us to address this transfer through the focused instruction of underly-

ing concepts of information and how those concepts might apply in varying contexts. This chapter will look at how students struggle with the concept of Information Creation as a Process, give an overview of the advertising information landscape, and present progressive learning activities with suggestions for possible assessments.

Moving students through the threshold concept

Information Creation as a Process is a foundational concept that, when learned, leads to better execution of research activities by addressing deeper research problems. Unlike other frames, it cannot be directly tied to a specific research activity, such as looking for information, using search tools, or choosing good sources, though it is related to all of those. Understanding this concept enables students to search for information more strategically (Searching as Strategic Exploration) and to recognize how a source's method of publication may impact an evaluation of authority and usefulness (Authority is Constructed and Contextual). At the heart of Information Creation as a Process is the idea that information is delivered to a particular audience by means of a publication method that is selected with intention. How we find, evaluate, and use information is impacted by the way the information was created and for whom it was created. The foundation of this frame is the understanding of information as rhetorically situated. By this I mean recognizing the intended audience, the typical conventions of the genre, and the motivations behind producing that type of information as more important than the superficial characteristics, such as how one accesses that information.

Experts recognize and classify information, albeit perhaps unconsciously, by how it is created, whereas students tend to see information as a blur. While this might have always been true for college students, the digitization and "Googlization" of the information world has only compounded the problem.[3] Different types of information are much easier to distinguish when physically manifested and placed in different locations within a library. However, databases and web-scale discovery aggregate various types of information into one interface, blurring the boundaries further, making source differentiation even more difficult for students. In my experience, students, even well-informed ones, place more emphasis on the database in which the information was found or that it was found on the open web than on the method in which it was created—not surprising given that the boundaries of means of access seem better defined.

It is easy to get caught up in the importance of teaching students to recognize format, but it is essential that they understand why they are doing so

beyond the requirements of an assignment sheet or a checklist. Search engines have fundamentally changed students' native information-seeking behavior, and they are quite comfortable relegating information search—and evaluation for that matter—to an algorithm. Librarians' awareness of the effect of Google on student research is well documented in Hofer, Townsend, and Brunetti's study on applying threshold concepts.[4] Therefore, in grasping this particular threshold concept, a student must first grasp the need to approach research strategically as a motivation to learn to recognize how and why information is created. This means addressing why this should matter to them; otherwise, teaching format turns into a meaningless requirement. This could be accomplished by demonstrating research strategies connecting need to source type so that they see how strategy can be more effective.

Once students understand why they should care to distinguish between sources, the problem of source differentiation can be addressed through discussing how and why different information types are produced, identifying ways students might determine how a piece of information is produced, and comparing source types that on the surface seem very different but share similar creation processes. For example, having students find the same information type, like newspaper or trade magazine articles, using different tools can help them move past the tendency to classify information by means of access. Including recognition of source type any time sources are discussed, such as in annotated bibliographies or research journals, can also help reinforce recognition of information creation processes. Given that the information landscape will probably look very different in their professional lives, doing this kind of work with college students is essential in the transfer of concepts and practices to multiple settings.

Once students are able to distinguish between different types of information, they need to recognize when certain information products may be preferred. As Seeber suggests, it is important that we do not present any one type of information as better than another.[5] For example, presenting peer-reviewed articles as the most authoritative source without connecting to the context of use can elicit black and white thinking about authority on the part of the student. When working with students in evaluating information, students can compare pieces of information that may seem similar on the surface but represent different levels of usefulness. Also, having students compare the types of information sources preferred in different contexts and build awareness of the information products preferred within their chosen discipline helps them to refine their understanding.

The language of the frame may seem to suggest that we teach the entire information creation process for different information types, like newspaper articles, trade articles, journal articles, collected essays, etc. This may feel prohibitive within the scope of undergraduate instruction and is indeed

impractical if there is a need to teach many source types beyond the scholarly research article, as is the case in advertising. Grounding instruction in an awareness of information as message and discussing the process of creation for specific types commonly used in the discipline should be sufficient. It is also important to note that not every information creation process is as extended as the scholarly publication cycle, so the emphasis on process can seem contrived for certain types of information. At a graduate level, it is potentially more critical for students to have a more refined understanding of information creation processes, particularly as they embark on becoming authors themselves.

The advertising information landscape

For advertising students new to the discipline, the types of information that might be used for research can be mystifying. Information sources are wide-ranging and represent both formal and informal publishing processes: market research, proprietary and free data sources, scholarly research, trade/industry publications, general media publications, association or special interest group publications, and varying primary information sources. These sources are created for widely varying purposes and audiences and are distributed in a myriad of ways, and this directly affects how we search for and use this information. Furthermore, the advertising industry is fast-paced, requiring professionals to keep up with emerging information products.

Business sources are usually utterly unfamiliar to incoming students and, in fact, they usually lack general knowledge of business practices that inform the information creation process. Students have admitted to me that the freshmen-level information literacy instruction they received felt very remote from the experience of researching within their major, a good argument for the disciplinary application of information literacy instruction the Framework promotes. The fact is that instruction on the scholarly publication process has only some bearing on secondary research in advertising. While there is a representative body of scholarly inquiry in marketing and advertising, there is a divide between academic research and the information products preferred by practitioners. Some faculty members emphasize the importance of theoretical literature or scholarly research on practical application, and some do not. Either way, much research in advertising exists outside traditional academic publishing. Information sources created by marketing firms and industry associations tend to have the same glossy look as popular sources on the web. This puts further importance on students understanding the information creation process, given that acceptable and unacceptable sources more closely resemble each other on a superficial level.

High value is placed on specific advertising industry publications, recent consumer data, and good market analysis; students should learn to recognize preferred source types. In advertising, the more specific and comprehensive the information is to the target market, the better. Expensive proprietary resources, like market research reports or national consumer data, include extensive primary research with much greater specificity than free information online. Sometimes, these sources will post limited teaser reports online for free, but this type of information potentially represents a lack of competitive edge for an advertiser. For finding data sources, students must strategize information search based on the specificity of their need as well as identify how the data was created in determining usefulness.

The difference in resources available to students and those available to professionals potentially makes the transfer of information literacy skills from the university to the workplace difficult. Some information products for advertising are intended for corporate purchase and may not provide a university license. On the other hand, the amount and quality of information to which a student has access often outstrips that available in the professional world, depending on the size and type of the employer. An agency may subscribe to specific consumer data sources but not the large business information databases available through a library. As a result, it is critical that students learn what information types are proprietary and how to supplement with free and public library sources.

Talking to faculty

The Framework shifts information literacy from a set of explicit tasks to essential concepts, but faculty may not understand teaching research as addressing concepts. Some of the work involved with reaching out to faculty is to reshape traditional conceptions of information literacy education, particularly if existing university learning outcomes are based on the Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education.[6] This particular frame is difficult to communicate to faculty because it is not directly tied to an explicit research function. I have found the best way to create a common language with the faculty is to start by discussing the problems that they see evidenced by their students' work and then supplying the threshold concepts that might lead to those problems. The top problems mentioned by my faculty relating to this frame are a lack of strategic thinking in research, an overreliance on Google, overreliance on one type of source, and a lack of awareness of the quality sources valued in the profession. As one professor put it, she constantly has to tell her students, "Stop surfing and start searching."

I help faculty understand that students do not strategize in their research partly because they cannot distinguish between different types of sources in a meaningful way. Expert problem solvers perceive underlying principles, whereas students do not, and experts employ strategy and planning, whereas students do not plan or adjust for failure.[7] This can partly be connected to a lack of domain knowledge—in this case, how disciplinary information is created. In educating students to become expert researchers, which is certainly a type of problem solving, we must teach how and why information is created.

Another selling point for this type of instruction to faculty is that it is critically important for students to recognize and classify information in a meaningful way because they will probably be accessing market information through different tools after graduation. Furthermore, even if they intend to enter a career path unrelated to research, students still need the ability to read and understand marketing information and recognize the creation process is part of that. Clearly, understanding this frame is essential in the transfer of research skills to the professional world.

Engaging the students

The following learning activities represent a sequence that builds understanding of this frame and other related frames progressively. They are designed to create an active learning environment and to address the transfer of concepts to professional practice. These learning activities generally follow a four-step process for teaching concepts: presenting a concept, modeling application of the concept, practicing application of the concept in a low-stakes setting, and finally engaging students in the transfer of the concept to other contexts.

Learning activity 1: Resource comparison chart

Student learning outcomes:

- Identify the uses, advantages, disadvantages, specificity, and means of access for various information sources used in advertising.
- Match research needs to potential information types and search tools.

This learning activity introduces students to the various types of advertising information, encourages recognition of the intended audience and purpose of each type, and emphasizes why these matter. Before this activity, students need at least minimal knowledge of accessing business resources, which may be accomplished through a pre-session online tutorial. The research guide also represents an important piece of scaffolding for the students.

Before students begin the source comparison chart, it is important that the purpose for the exercise is discussed. One essential element of transfer for students is to be actively engaged in determining how concepts might look in other contexts.[8] I connect the work we are doing in the class as important to their future professional life in that the tools they will have may not be exactly the same ones they have as a student. It is difficult for students to completely understand what their research needs will be in their future professions, but this introduces the idea that their information environment will change. We also do a short activity demonstrating the importance of searching strategically for the purpose of transfer and motivation. This could involve having the students start with a background source, like an industry overview, and discuss how it could aid their research. Another option would be to compare information found by searching for a professional association versus information found by blind Googling. Once the students understand the importance of recognizing different source types, they are ready for the comparison chart.

Because there are so many possible source types, it is important to focus on the most essential ones for the chart, keeping in mind what might be needed for the course's research project. The questions on the chart include:

- Who is the intended audience?
- What are the essential characteristics of this information type, including how and why it was created?
- Describe at least two ways you can access this type of information.
- How might you use this type of source in your research?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of using this type of source in your research?

It is important to model the kind of thinking that the students need to do in completing the chart by walking through the thought process needed to answer the questions for one source type. The students are then split into groups, assigned a specific information type, and tasked with answering all the questions on the chart for their assigned type. Using group work in this way is a method of scaffolding for the students, allowing them to think through the concept with others and with the librarian.

This activity is intended as introductory, and therefore it is not expected that students will be able to learn everything about the information creation process of every source type and how they might be used. Rather, the activity is intended to start students on the path of distinguishing among these source types. The groups each report out to the class, allowing the others to finish filling out their chart. As a closing activity, there needs to be a metacognitive exercise so that students can articulate what they have learned about the concept and how that might transfer to future research projects. This could be a one-minute written response or a quick discussion of how they might use what they learned in a given specific research scenario.

Learning activity 2: Problem-based case studies

Student learning outcomes:

- Identify the limitations of information on companies, industries, markets, and consumers.
- Match research needs to appropriate types of information.
- Solve an information problem through strategic search and critical thinking.

In this session, students learn more about the advertising information landscape with a particular emphasis on how that might limit what they can find and how to overcome those limitations. Before delivering this session, an online tutorial on different information types and how to find them may help students be successful in the class, particularly if it has been a while since their last interaction with advertising research or if students are unfamiliar with all the information types you present in the class.

The session begins with a quick discussion reinforcing the idea that information is created and published for specific reasons, and that knowing why it is created and who creates it is key to performing deep research. Then, a set of cards with information regarding the creation process for advertising resources are distributed to student groups, with each group receiving the same set of cards. These cards should match the content delivered through the pre-session tutorial, so they should have some familiarity with the content on the cards and how to find examples of those types of information. The topics for the cards include North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes, syndicated market research, government data, company hierarchy, business directories, professional association reports, national consumer surveys, business journals, etc. *Business Information Needs and Strategies* by Abels and Klein can be very helpful in putting these cards together.[9] Taking an example card, I think aloud as to how the fact on the card might impact research. The groups then split up the cards among themselves and each student does the same with their cards, reporting these ideas out to the group.

At this point, each group is given its own research case study to work with for the remainder of the class. I inform the students that these case studies are based on actual research projects from the professional world. The case studies identify a client, the client project, and what they need to know from secondary research. These studies are problematic in that the topics chosen do not have clear answers, given the way business information is produced. For example, one case study is secondary research for an ad campaign for the local transit system. The difficulties lie in the fact that transit is not a traditional consumer product, competitors are not clearly definable, and local information must be found. Problems to address might include a need for a different level of geographic specificity than might be available, finding

non-traditional consumer products, a NAICS code that is too broad for the company, or a brand that is part of a larger corporation.

Before the students begin their research, they are provided guided questions to encourage strategic search. It has been shown that problem solvers who have deliberately created solution strategies tend to attribute challenges faced to a weakness in the strategy rather than to factors beyond their control.[10] Actively encouraging students to strategize is essential, given that many students tend to give up when research seems to hit a dead end. This could be accomplished by having them work through a set of guided questions:

- What specific questions need answering?
- What source types should we consider?
- What tools might be best?
- What problems do we foresee?
- What terms might we use for the search?

Once students have created a strategy, have them divide the tasks for search and begin their research. The information process cards, the list of requirements for secondary research in the case study, and a detailed research guide provide scaffolding. This activity gives the librarian the opportunity to work with individual groups in order to suggest other avenues of reframing research questions. As they work, students are asked to answer these questions to report out to the class:

- What types of information did you use for your research? Are there any new information type cards you would create?
- What problems did you encounter in performing your research? How did these problems relate to how or why information is created?
- How would you solve these problems?
- What ambiguities might remain that should be clarified through primary research?
- What advice would you give another student about performing secondary research in advertising?

These questions move students through recognizing information types, recognizing how the information creation process does impact how they should search, considering changes in strategy in order to perform deeper research, and reflecting and summarizing on what was learned. In reporting out to the whole class, the students benefit from seeing how different research problems might be resolved. This type of research takes much longer than a class length will permit, and it is critical to emphasize that point so students understand that research is a lengthy and iterative process. The significant point is that they explore the case study enough to articulate the challenges presented and discuss strategies for overcoming those challenges. In other words, students are focused on thinking through research rather than simply

producing answers. This activity could be assessed by having students create applications cards on which they write how the concept might apply in their everyday experience, which can help a student to feel more personally engaged. Since it is difficult for students to picture the context of a professional scenario, it is enough that they recognize the concept and that they have the confidence to transfer it to another context, even if it is not a professional one.

This learning activity could be reframed to focus on Information has Value by giving the same case study to all groups, but giving them varying levels of access. For example, one group could represent a large firm with access to several expensive databases while another group could represent a small firm with only free Internet sources or public library sources. Students could also simply discuss how their research might change if they did not have access to the high-price resources.

Learning activity 3: Research deconstruction

Student learning outcomes:

- Can recognize perceived industry value of specific information sources
- Can match research needs to appropriate types of information
- Can break down complex information problems to solvable questions

This learning activity has students take a research artifact specific to the discipline and reverse engineer the research process by analyzing how sources inform the work, what information types are preferred, and what questions might have been asked. This activity works well for starting students on a major research project and connects to other frames, particularly Research as Inquiry. I have used this activity in disciplines other than advertising with simply a shift in the research artifact used for the class.

This is intended as an upper-level activity, so students should have a firm grasp of different business information sources and how to find them. Research artifacts in advertising include market research reports, scholarly literature reviews, trade articles, marketing plans, and campaign plans books. I have the students deconstruct a campaign plans book because it is something they are expected to create themselves, both in school and in the professional world. A plans book presents the campaign strategy, example advertisements, analysis, and media plan with supporting evidence from primary and secondary research. It is difficult to get a professional research artifact in advertising because this type of work is proprietary. In working with my faculty, I discovered that the plans books created by the winning teams in the National Student Advertising Contest work well for this activity, given that they are

accessible, of high quality, and unlike professional plans books, include reference lists.

I like to start this activity with a few questions to prime students for what they are about to learn:

- How does secondary research inform an ad campaign?
- What types of sources are preferred for a campaign plans book?

They may not know the answers, but the research deconstruction will help them to answer these more fully. We also discuss the ways sources are used, based on Bizup's BEAM method.[11] This method was intended originally for academic writing, but used more broadly, the concept can be applied in this very different context. To illustrate how sources are used for the students, I give an example campaign and go through specific sources for that campaign that fall into the categories of background sources for establishing the context, exhibit sources, like data on which they perform their own analysis, and analysis sources that represent another's interpretation of exhibits. Using this method helps alleviate the confusion of primary and secondary sources with primary and secondary research and encourages students to think about how the different information types are functioning in their work.

After these initial discussions, students are broken into small groups with a copy of an advertising plans book for each group. They are to highlight places in the plans book where secondary research is evident. Because these plans books do not include formal citations, students must identify what types of sources might have been used, though the reference list can provide some help. Once the students finish their research deconstruction, they report out to the class. The group presentations can be guided by these questions:

- What research questions do you think were asked by this ad team?
- What types of sources, background, evidence, or analysis did they use to answer those questions?
- Do any source types seem to be preferred? Why do you think they are preferred?
- What source types are not being used? Why do you think they are not preferred?

After the students have engaged with an example of good secondary research, they move to creating a concept map for their own project, organized in any way that makes sense to them. An example concept map for the plans book the students deconstructed is helpful for those who may not have made a concept map before. On their map, the students must include major areas of research, specific questions for those areas, and possible sources that might answer those questions. The students' concept maps can be used to assess this activity by looking to see how well students matched their research questions to appropriate source types and how well they broke down all aspects of the problem. Using an online concept-mapping tool like Mindmapfree.com or

MindMeister allows students to send you a digital copy of their maps while keeping a copy as reference for their project. A one-minute response or quick discussion might also be included on how they made decisions about which sources to include on their concept maps and what sources were excluded, based on the processes used to create them.

Conclusion

Teaching recognition of the information creation process is certainly not a completely new idea to the Framework, but this document does encourage us to consider teaching this concept as a direct goal of information literacy instruction. In working toward becoming expert researchers, it is essential that advertising students learn concepts about the nature of information itself so that they may transfer their understanding to new contexts outside of college. This can be done through the active engagement of students in that transfer process. Though teaching threshold concepts may seem daunting, particularly for lower-level students, it is possible to break down the concepts into progressive learning goals. At lower levels, students need to acknowledge the importance of recognizing the information creation process and begin to discern differences among source types. As students move into the upper levels, the work that remains is to reinforce their understanding of the different types of information and how they can leverage that understanding for more sophisticated research. Keeping the theory of threshold concepts in mind, as instructors we can acknowledge that our students will not necessarily learn the concept within the space of a one-shot session, but we can inspire them to start thinking about information and research in a new way. Cementing that understanding and realizing its greater implications comes as students continue to practice research outside of the classroom.

Notes

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