



## Toward a *Kairos* of Library Instruction

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### ABSTRACT

Information literacy instruction in libraries is organized by the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards. Currently under revision, these Standards define a set of external, abstract learning objectives that have been productive of a teaching role for librarians. Simultaneously, the Standards have generated a substantial critical literature that contests the objectives as a “Procrustean bed” that distracts from the particular teaching and learning contexts. This paper offers an alternative organizing heuristic for instruction in libraries. *Kairos* is an ancient Greek theory of time married to measure. Used by both Plato and the Sophists to understand the emergence of truth from context, *kairos* has been deployed by composition studies to gain a critical perspective on teaching student writing. Used to understand the context that generated both the first set of Standards and their revision, *kairos* can usefully direct the energy of teaching librarians toward their particular students and classrooms.

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Contemporary group instruction in libraries is organized by and around the Association of College and Research Libraries’ Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education ([Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000](#)). This set of performance indicators and measurable outcomes, first adopted in 2000 and currently under revision, structures the way information literacy programs are organized, delivered, and assessed in American colleges and universities. The Standards have productively enabled librarians to define for themselves a teaching location within the academy: librarians define and take pedagogical responsibility for information literacy learning outcomes and their assessment.

While the Standards have animated much of the literature, organization, and practice of information literacy instruction, they have also generated significant critique. As John [Buschman \(2010\)](#) has usefully pointed out, opposition to the Standards has formed “a significant portion of the theoretical ‘voice’ of IL thinking” (p. 96); the discourse of information literacy includes, like any articulation of an ideology, significant resistance to dominant modes of thought and practice. Much of this critique has focused on the ways that the Standards function as what Christine [Pawley \(2003\)](#) has called a “Procrustean paradigm,” forcing the varied forms of information production, seeking, and use into an atomized set of mechanistic requirements disconnected from the concrete practice of particular students producing, seeking, and using particular information in everyday academic life. Such a paradigm fixes in place definitions of the terms *information* and *literacy* ([Seale, 2010](#)), thereby reifying hierarchies of knowledge production ([Elmborg, 2006](#)).

These critiques are primarily concerned with the fixity of the Standards. Because Standards are abstract and posited as universal, they fail to account for the local and contextual nature of teaching and learning. While the Standards productively organize instruction practice, they do so along an axis of external outcomes. The librarian’s translation of abstract, global learning outcomes to concrete local practice, even when highly attuned and customized, necessarily begins outside of the classroom. Anticipated outcomes are either defined in alliance with or in opposition to the Standards, preceding an evaluation of the information needs of a particular group of students, students whose needs are understood through the lens of external, standards-based heuristic. This is even more the case when the Standards align with what [Sloniowski \(2013\)](#) has called the “audit culture” of assessment and accreditation. When resources flow to departments and individuals who can demonstrate proof that globally defined learning outcomes are being locally met, the pressure to teach and assess to the Standard rather than the student becomes even stronger.

Critiques of the Standards promise to give teaching librarians theoretical models and practical suggestions for resisting the strictures of abstract and globally-defined learning outcomes. Maria T. [Accardi \(2013\)](#) has usefully framed a feminist approach to information literacy instruction that centers an ethic of care. Others have offered alternative teaching and learning models grounded in learning theory ([Dunaway, 2011](#)) and critical reflective practice ([Booth, 2011](#); [Jacobs, 2008](#)). Maura [Seale \(2010\)](#) and Andrea [Baer \(2013\)](#) have suggested emphasizing knowledge construction in the classroom as a strategy for undoing notions of the student as an information consumer.

These critiques and others have shaped mainstream thinking about teaching in libraries, evidenced in part by the ways the proposed

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framework subsumes much of their substance, particularly in its emphasis on students as “content creators” (Gibson & Jacobson, 2014, p. 250) and information literacy as institutional guidelines as less prescriptive than spurs to dialog within institutions (Gibson & Jacobson, 2014, p. 251). However, the interventions have done little to offer an analytic alternative to generating external, abstracted, and globally defined standard approaches to information literacy instruction. Even if critics of the Standards find the new framework to be “better” and “more correct” than the 2000 document, the revision process and document it produces will still represent an ideological statement that orients the attention of teaching librarians outward rather than inward. The revised ACRL framework will give the field a new global perspective that must be translated locally. The problem of the Procrustean bed will continue, even if the bed is more comfortable for some of us.

What is missing from both the critiques of standards-based teaching in libraries and the professional response to those critiques is a way of conceptualizing information literacy that shifts focus away from re-making the bed. Librarians need an alternative for framing both information literacy practice and critique that is not dependent on engagement with global standards and frameworks. Drawing on the literature of composition and rhetoric, librarians might productively reorient their work toward local and immediate contexts using the idea of *kairos*, or qualitative time. *Kairos* demands apprehension of the moment, and calls for action that is appropriate to that moment. 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. *Kairos* shifts the object of analysis away from abstract standards and toward a local, material capacity to discern content and pedagogy in a given classroom situation. *Kairos* is a heuristic of the present, offering an analytic alibi for sidestepping debates about standards altogether, shifting attention away from the construction of the Procrustean bed and toward the students too often stretched to fit inside it.

### KAIROS AND STANDARD TIME

*Kairos* is fundamentally an argument against timelessness. 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. 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.

While definitions of *kairos* can be difficult to fix in linguistic place, perhaps a suitable condition for a term that embraces the momentary and our responses to it, the concept is fundamentally material. For the ancients, *kairos* had two concrete, if related, meanings: *kairos* referred to the “long, tunnel-like aperture through which the archer’s arrow has to pass,” and *kairos* was the moment “when the weaver must draw the yarn through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth being woven” (White, 1987, p. 13). In both cases, *kairos* referred to the critical time in which a change must be made—an arrow shot, or a piece of cloth woven. Homer’s *Iliad* provides a definition for *kairos* as “the lethal or critical point for the body to receive a wound” (Wilson, 1980, p. 180). The kairic part of the body required special protection, like Achilles’ heel, to keep the vulnerable point relatively safe from harm.

Such material meanings persist as the sense of *kairos* shifts more narrowly to an understanding of time and timeliness. Often understood as an abstraction, *kairos* frames time as a material force, one which determines the actions that take place during and within it. John E. Smith (2002) contrasts kairic time with *chronos* as a way of understanding qualitative time as enmeshed in the world. *Chronos* refers to “the uniform time of the cosmic system,” the kind of time that marks “the

quantity of duration, the length of periodicity, the age of an object or artifact, and the rate of acceleration of bodies” (p. 47). *Chronos* is time in terms of numbers and subordinate conjunctions—e.g., 10 min, before or after, four years old, 12 mph—socially constructed and accepted as the markers of the passage of time. *Chronos* allows us to mark human history, rendering time abstract and at a remove that allows us to account for it in a way that everyone can understand. *Kairos*, on the other hand, refers to time linked to the occasion, the opportunity, and the action. It is the qualitative aspect of time, or time married to measure. Ecclesiastes 3:2 (Revised Standard Version) is an example of kairic time: while there is the chronological time when a person is born (e.g., June 16, 1975), there is also the kairic “time to be born, and a time to die,” as well as “a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.” *Kairos* measures both time and its context, allowing us to understand the present as sociohistorically informed.

As a heuristic, *kairos* allows us to apprehend structures that appear as timeless and eternal as constructed in and through the materiality of time. This is the sense of *kairos* that animated the Sophists in their understanding of the nature of truth, a position that contrasted with that of Plato. For Plato, *kairos* mandated that the teacher, in possession of an eternal truth, account for the quality of the present for the student—what he knew, needed to know, and was capable of knowing—when developing a pedagogy to lead the student to abstract, idealized truth (Kinneavy, 2002). For the Sophists, in contrast, *kairos* applied even to the truth itself: what it was possible to conceive as truth was determined by the moment in which truth was defined. In Sophist thinking, nothing escaped the critical context of timeliness, not even the Platonic ideal.

### THE KAIROS OF STANDARDS

*Kairos*, then, demands that we understand all truth claims as embedded in a context, and all actions as measured responses to that context. As an analytic frame, *kairos* destabilizes apparently solid accretions like the Standards—and the continuing demand that we revise them—as something other than natural and eternal. In the field of information literacy, the demand to generate collectively defined and globally shared concepts of information literacy and the information literate has become a natural and necessary project for the profession. Understood through the lens of *kairos*, this demand can be seen as a response to socioeconomic contexts, a demand we might usefully resist. Understanding the *kairos* of the Standards disrupts the sense of both the Standards and the demand for their revision as necessary and natural parts of the work that librarians do.

Apprehending the *kairos* of the current Standards provides a useful example of the ways linking time and action can de-naturalize accepted norms of professional discourse and practice. It is difficult to imagine academic library instruction services without the competency standards and everything that has come after. Since their publication in 2000, ACRL units have developed discipline-specific standards for science and technology (2006) and anthropology and sociology (2007). The organization has established an Institute for Information Literacy that, since 1999, has conducted an immersive information literacy teacher-training program for more than 1300 librarians (ACRL History, 2010). Information literacy is institutionally embedded via a host of committees and subcommittees across the various units, divisions, and roundtables of ACRL and ALA, and through ACRL’s Library Instruction Roundtable and Information Literacy Coordinating Committee.

As pervasive as information literacy has become, the concept only entered the discourse in 1974, when Paul Zurkowski, then-president of the Information Industry Association, introduced librarians to the concept of information literacy (Zurkowski, 1974). In a talk he gave to library professionals, Zurkowski defined the present as one in which “an overabundance of information” that “exceeds our capacity to evaluate it” has become “a universal condition” (p. 4). For Zurkowski, this was

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