Queering Library Instruction: Embracing the Failure

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WHEN THE FIRST DRAFTS of ACRL’s Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education became available,¹ they drew intense scrutiny among some in the library community. Those opposed to the Framework argued that the move away from standards as a way of conceptualizing information literacy was “concerning,” largely because the Framework lacked specificity, because it diverted from other trends in education relying on “widely understood” standards, and because it would make information literacy difficult to assess.² On the other hand, some in the profession, including myself, saw the ambiguity and rejection of standardization in the Framework as an opportunity. The Framework, when read through the lens of queer theory, may be liberating to those who teach information literacy, particularly when accompanying undergraduate composition courses. Librarians who approach information literacy in queer ways, whether they acknowledge it or even recognize it, find themselves performing a role that rejects process-based instruction for information seeking, questions the nature of authority in scholarly publishing, challenges the format of the peer-reviewed journal article, seeks out the voices absent

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from scholarship, and embraces the failure always to find exactly what one seeks.

Queer theory defies a firm definition, which makes it difficult to simply apply to something like the Framework. In fact, just as with sexual orientation or gender identity, “queerness” may be read or interpreted in scholarship that doesn’t actually name it or classify it as such. As a movement, queer theory is rooted in sexuality studies and rejects heteronormative structures, characterized by attending to the tension between boundaries and focusing on the Other. Queer theory is deconstructionist in that it rejects the idea that identities are stable and static, or that behavior may be easily quantified or categorized. Instead, queerness is about fluidity. This perspective, described as “ephemeral, antagonistic, opportunistic, adversarial, and spontaneous,” may be a bit uncomfortable for teaching librarians who adhere to positivist educational theory at the core of their teaching philosophy. This chapter will explore how scholars have considered queer theory and attend to tension that has existed for centuries in the closely related disciplines of composition and rhetoric so that we may consider queer theory’s potential for information literacy instruction and the Framework.

The definition and scope of the term rhetoric has long been challenged and debated, but the core concept remains that it is the practice of mastering the communicative message. University composition courses have maintained that the written form of rhetoric should be “earnest, well-intentioned and product-centered.” But some postmodern rhetoricians now reject that notion as too simplistic, suggesting that the traditional deficit model of education reduces the act of writing to a “neutral, technological skill that is seen as merely functional or performative.” As library instruction often accompanies composition courses, alternative trends in the study of rhetoric matter to us, especially those of us who contest the process-based instruction to which information literacy is sometimes reduced.

Whereas other critical theories focus on examining evidence of oppression due to economic reinforcements in Marxist theory or patriarchal reinforcements in feminism, queer theory focuses on exposing the tension that exists in power structures built upon binaries and heteronormativity. Queer theory broadly champions the Other, particularly when the Other resists or eludes any defining characteristic. For example, those who identify as transgender may reject the sex assigned to them at birth. Scholars have begun using the queer theory lens to examine rhetoric and composition studies pedagogy in general, and even information studies. D. Diane Davis, in her book Breaking Up [at] Totality, interrogates the power structure of teaching through what can be read as a queer theoretical perspective. She argues that in order to destroy binaries and dichotomies in teaching that perpetuate patriarchy and capitalism, teachers must embrace the reality that they are imposters. She suggests
that teachers are not unlike drag queens, because teaching, like gender expression, is a role “we perform, rather than an essential quality.” Masculinity and femininity are the complex result of conscious and subconscious behaviors, and are no more based on biological sex than a teacher’s genetics impact their effectiveness in the act of teaching. She quotes Gregory L. Ulmer as asserting that because education is “fully inscribed within the logic of Late Capitalism, enjoying the patronage of multinational corporations and any other entity with funds,” the role of teaching then becomes a sort of character performance in order to perpetuate the status quo that requires students to enact characters as well. As successful pupils, students perform that they “have mastered something, and…[perpetuate] the myths of community and identity.” The characters that students are modelling, and the work products that result from this modelling, are often inauthentic outside of the staged classroom environment.

As an example, consider the type of prescriptive writing assignments that appear in some composition courses, such as the rhetorical analysis or the researched argument. Davis calls for composition courses based on postmodern concepts where students “engage in ‘genuine’ writing,” which evolves from an organic process that resists fitting into a particular genre. The staged writing assignments of many first-year composition courses characterize the types of writing that students may engage in as employees or involved citizens, but they largely ignore writing for other purposes. The library research that accompanies composition courses can be just as limiting and prescriptive. Instead of exploring resources and asking questions that lead to new questions, students are compelled to find sources that fit the requirement of a certain arbitrary number of journal articles and perhaps an equally arbitrary number of books, Web-based resources, and so on. Because these prescriptions focus on the format within which “legitimate” information often appears, they make writing about the quantifiable, objective elements of writing so the person performing the role of instructor may rely less on the subjective elements when assessing quality.

Library instructors who embrace queer theory while teaching information literacy alongside a composition course may operate from the perspective that librarians exist in a liminal space between theory, discipline, faculty, and student. Once the power of the teacher/student dynamic has been blurred, eroded, or confused, librarians may then cultivate environments for students’ educational desires focused upon information seeking that emerge through serendipity. These are environments similar to those that J. Jack Halberstam discusses when describing the “queer art of failure,” where we may endeavor “to discover our inner dweeb, to be underachievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget to, [and] to avoid mastery.” This kind of failure allows us to expose the tension perpetuated by dominant power structures, empowering students to navigate within
them in a mode of resistance, or even to reject them entirely. As Joshua Adair and Paul Walker suggest, “Queer in the classroom can be(come) anything…. It requires being open about oneself with students and facing their disdain and regard in equal measure.”

If this model were adopted in a widespread manner, education would transition away from authoritarian classrooms with grades and prescriptive assignments, and classes would begin to look more and more like study groups where no one performs either role of student or teacher, as all have opportunity to instruct and learn.

A significant theme in Halberstam’s work and queer theory as a movement involves the questioning of intentionality. In the field of rhetoric, and thus the overall learning objective of undergraduate composition courses, intentionality is imperative. Rhetoric has been reduced to “the art of telling someone else by words precisely what you mean to say”; thus information literacy becomes the art of using authoritative resources to find precisely what you intend to find. While both writing and information-seeking behaviors are complex and nonlinear, they are frequently reduced to an iterative process or procedure when taught. Much of the scholarly work on information literacy “stress[es] the development of applied skills that assume a rational, unconstrained information-seeking agent operating in an environment free of social hierarchies,” suggesting that many librarians, and even ACRL’s Information Literacy Competency Standards, rely on the traditional positivist model of education. Simply put, positivism in library instruction proposes that if students are provided instruction in appropriate use of information skills and strategies, they will be able to articulate their research needs, find resources that fulfill those needs, and assess the resources in a quantitative manner. There have long been rejections of this, alongside calls for information literacy to liberate learners for the purpose of social justice. For instance, in 1992, Michael Winter asked: “Is [information literacy instruction] really an attempt to empower the excluded, or is it simply a desire to allow them equal access to the mainstream canon?” Winter’s question frames the argument for change among library and information professionals embracing a critical perspective, largely by “encourag[ing] students to engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information’s production and dissemination.” But perhaps this alone isn’t enough, and ACRL’s new Framework for Information Literacy reflects that perspective. Library instructors who apply queer theory, a theory “essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world,” draw attention to the power structures that influence user information-seeking behavior and information discovery.

Both writing and information-seeking behaviors offer depths of potential for exploring Halberstam’s “queer art of failure.” Just as composition courses are often structured around writing multiple drafts to result in a perfect “final draft,” information literacy glorifies the final products of information
gathering. Composition instructors encourage students toward a draft that is complete in the sense that it most represents the physical manifestation of the student’s intentions for the topic. In reality, this version is just the last one completed before submission for a grade, publication, or another purpose. It is possible that writers find things they would change about a piece of writing long after that “final” submission. The iteration they turned in represents a manifestation of thought at that time. The same is true for information seeking. A queer perspective of information seeking suggests one can never succeed at a truly exhaustive search, given geographical, formatting, linguistic, and other cultural constraints. Thus one would embrace the failure of the collected resources on any given topic that serves to represent the conversation that exists within the range and effort of access possible at the time.

Perhaps another opportunity to explore Halberstam’s “queer art of failure” would be for librarian instructors to facilitate research by rejecting the quantifiable, objective elements of information seeking that are often relied on for assessing writing. Librarians who protest and rebel against irresponsible prescriptions for resources that reinforce dominant forces and resist perpetuating the concept that good searching begins with well-crafted research questions and highly scrutinized search strategies, demonstrate authentic information seeking away from the idea of a prescriptive assignment. Librarians can “be open,” as Adair and Walker suggest, by modelling the same fear, curiosity, and fumbling mechanics of the honest, evolving, and underdeveloped information-seeking process, rather than a falsely confident seeker of the well-crafted research question. When students see that librarians improvise away from a script when searching, they may see that failure to find exactly what one seeks to find can be freeing and empowering. When a research question and search query are well crafted, we have certain expectations about what types of answers might be found. When we stumble through, the unexpected may fuel curiosity to a much greater extent than the expected.

Concepts of authority loom large in Halberstam’s examination of the queer art of failure, as well as in studies of composition and information seeking. This may be because they both often participate in a social dynamic that requires, for instance, faculty to publish in order to attain tenure and promotion. If one must perform within this social dynamic for job security, it may be the case that they are no longer able to examine the power structures at play with objectivity, as the dynamic forces them to assert their own authority in a subject area through publication. When “publish or perish” exerts such a powerful force in academia, it begs the question as to whether faculty are assigning the use of peer-reviewed, scholarly work in assignments to teach the use of sources in writing or merely reinforcing the dominance of the source itself. Embracing failure through queer theory means rejecting prescriptions of an arbitrary number of peer-reviewed journals as a means to assert that resources
are authoritative in, for instance, a researched argument paper. Instead, librarians who expose the gaps that exist in peer-reviewed publishing, an industry that holds a great interest in reinforcing its dominance, would be exposing the power structures at play that reinforce the status quo.

Using queer theory to question the role of peer-reviewed articles in composition courses should not stop with questioning authority. Debra Journet takes a queer lens to the classic Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion (IMRD) format used in many disciplinary journal articles. These journal articles often reduce the research process into a formal, impersonal, seemingly objective exploration for truth and also often ignore truth in failure. Journet says that this format “eliminates all the false starts, groping for ideas, and mistakes that characterize the experiential narrative of research and writing.” Because the format so clinically strips the personal from the process and the product, novice writers and information seekers cling to recurring patterns, and thus mimic the model of eliminating uncertainty and mistakes from the record to perpetuate the process. Further, scholarly journals, often owned by large publishing conglomerates, reinforce positivism by publishing articles that show evidence of new relationships, but largely ignore studies that discover failure or a lack of relationship. This was acknowledged by a recent editorial published by one of those large publishing conglomerates, Elsevier, on its Elsevier Connect platform. An unproven hypothesis or the absence of a correlative relationship, according to traditional academic publishing, is too often equivalent to knowing nothing. Results must be statistically significant and carefully documented with evidence to become established fact through publishing mechanisms. Thus, scholars are left exploring relationships that may have already been explored and abandoned by others who have already tried and have had little or no mechanism for which to share their failure. As Halberstam argues, “There is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner.” When students are able to see beyond the publishing industry’s focus on successful scholarship and recognize its inattention to failures, their perception about failure in scholarship changes, as well.

As stated earlier, this rejection of positivism may be uncomfortable for many in the teaching librarian profession, particularly those who relied on the Information Literacy Competency Standards. The Standards, a strongly positivist document, dominated the conversation about library instruction for nearly two decades. However, ACRL’s recently adopted Framework for Information Literacy suggests there is room for anti-positivism, and a queer perspective, in librarianship. For instance, while it defines information literacy, it fails to describe an information-literate individual, suggesting that information literacy exists on a spectrum whereupon individuals fluctuate between illiterate and
literate depending on the subject, geographic constraints, and even interest in the topic. This poses a significant difference from the previous definition for information literacy. Further, some of the frames, such as “Scholarship as Conversation” and “Searching as Strategic Exploration,” describe tenets of research as always in motion and needing constant examination. The frame “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” would serve as a convenient place to use queer theory in library instruction. Library instruction programs are built around our hope to empower students to succeed at identifying acceptable and appropriate information based on evaluations of authority, relevance, and reliability to fit their information needs. However, authority, by its very name, reinforces dominant structures and subjugates the minority or Other, which suggests that if we embrace the failure we will expose an undervalued, but perhaps equally as interesting, voice. The Framework suggests that information literacy attends to authority by defining it broadly, as “subject expertise (e.g., scholarship), societal position (e.g., public office or title), or special experience (e.g., participating in a historic event).” However, expertise, social position, and experience have often largely been a privilege of majority or dominant forces. Thus, in order to truly examine for authority on a topic, librarians may use queer theory to seek and teach to resources that amplify the voices of the subverted and subjugated, and not necessarily those that appear among the most authoritative.

Some scholars, however, argue that the scholarship containing the authentic expression of the subverted may, in fact, not exist at all in scholarly work. Elizabeth Ellsworth suggests that “key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely ‘empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’ are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination.” Her essay is a case study of employing critical pedagogy in a new course following a racially charged series of conflicts at her institution. She discovered that she was unable to fully break down the pre-existing forces of dominance in her classroom because students were, either consciously or subconsciously, continuing to respond to them. She suggests, in the following quotation, that this extends into scholarship:

White women, men and women of color, impoverished people, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, are not silenced in the sense implied by the literature on critical pedagogy. They just are not talking in their authentic voices, or they are declining/refusing to talk at all, to critical educators who have been unable to acknowledge the presence of knowledges that are challenging and most likely inaccessible to their own social positions. What they/we say, to whom, in what context, depending on the energy they/we have for the
struggle on a particular day, is the result of conscious and unconscious assessments of the power relations and safety of the situation.26

Perhaps our role as librarians, then, is to acknowledge these missing pieces by attending to them. When we facilitate the “Scholarship as Conversation” frame,27 we must look for the voices missing in the conversation, to assist students in building a perspective on the conversation of their topics as “a coalition among the multiple, shifting, intersecting, and sometimes contradictory groups carrying unequal weights of legitimacy within the culture.”28 It is only when our students’, and our own, perspectives about a potential topic become less focused on the solidly apparent, and on whose voices are missing, have we truly approached understanding the conversation. The potential that exists in investigating the voices that are missing is giving attention to the failure, or rather, whose experience has failed to become present.

The “conscious and unconscious assessments of power relations” that Ellsworth speaks of is what Thomas Rickert calls “ambience.” Although not explicitly queer, Rickert’s concept of ambience serves as tool to attend to the liminal, or the space between dichotomies and binaries. This ambience, like queer theory, resists strict definition. Rickert discusses ambience as a sort of expansion on the idea of frame of reference into, rather, an aura of reference; he says that all experience is filtered through these conscious and subconscious constraints, and that we have no choice but to apply them when we both send and receive messages.29 For librarians who teach about information literacy accompanying a composition course, Rickert’s ambience complicates ACRL’s “Information Creation as a Process” frame.30 Rickert asserts that the process of writing has no finite starting point, and therefore the research process associated with it has an equally ambiguous beginning. He says that “ideas emerge in the complexity of interaction beyond our individual control, since the ambient situation worlds us.”31 If this is true, then the entire concept of plagiarism becomes about exerting control over the student as Other, because the articles, books, advertisements, eavesdropped conversations, and participated conversations all become a part of a writer’s ambience. Authors often may not know the source of their thoughts or ideas. As librarians, we are often called on to teach information seeking so that students may avoid plagiarism, but the truth is that it may not be entirely preventable. When we, for instance, facilitate a conversation between a discipline faculty and a student following an accusation of plagiarism, our role may be to communicate that the nature of ambience means that not all of what is traditionally deemed plagiarism (the unintentional, at least) may be all that bad.

Postmodern scholars suggest that the postmodern phase for rhetoric and composition is an important one that very well may see the pedestal upon
which the researched argument paper is shadowed by various other formats for communicative action. As librarians have historically tied so much of the formative assessment of information literacy to the assignments in the freshman-level composition course, we must attend to this potential. But the tenets of queer theory already co-exist within the Framework of Information Literacy and should be capitalized on to further resist the reduction of information literacy to a procedural, positivist concept. Librarians who use queer theory in library instruction, similarly to how Adair and Walker say that composition should be taught, would perform for students the idea that information literacy cannot be acquired or strictly achieved. Instead, engaging critical, and particularly queer inquiry in information seeking “attempt[s] to offer rhythm—even a seductive beat—but we cannot plot out each specific step, nor can we faithfully reproduce lyrics that they might be memorized and repeated.” This rhythm has long served as an off-beat in librarianship, among those who have rejected process-based instruction for information seeking, questioned the nature of authority in scholarly publishing, challenged the format of the peer-reviewed journal article, sought out the absent voices in scholarship, and embraced the failure to always find exactly what one seeks. While Adair and Walker indicate that embracing this perspective in composition can be both “liberating and frustrating,” perhaps the Framework will allow more to hear that seductive beat and acknowledge and recognize their own queer perspective, and embrace the failure.

Notes
4. Ibid.
5. Rolf Norgaard, “Writing Information Literacy in the Classroom: Pedagogical Enactments and Implications,” Reference and User Services Quarterly 43, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 221.
8. Ibid., 238–39.
9. Ibid., 237.
17. *Framework for Information Literacy*.
21. Ibid., 46.
23. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 120.
24. *Framework for Information Literacy*.
26. Ibid., 313.
27. *Framework for Information Literacy*.
30. *Framework for Information Literacy*.
33. Adair and Walker, “Turned On.”
34. Ibid.

Bibliography


