

Open-Mindedness is an Achievement: Prototyping a New Threshold Concept for Information Literacy

Mark Lenker, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Bias is an increasingly important theme in information literacy teaching and research. We want students to check their own propensities for confirmation bias as they select their sources. We want students to be aware of political polarization and the impact it has both on their research and on their view of the world. We want students to be careful of search algorithms that tend to reinforce their existing attitudes or to further cement problematic stereotypes.

These are all distorting influences that we want our students to avoid, and this aversion finds expression in the way we talk about these influences: “Watch out for,” “Avoid,” or simply “Don’t.”

But what if we had language for what we want students to positively achieve or embrace with respect to information on controversial questions? The way we use language in talking about research can make a significant difference in students’ understanding and choices. A study by Holliday and Rogers (2013) suggests that students adopt more thorough research practices when their teachers frame research in terms of “learning more about” their subject as opposed to “finding sources on” their topic. Maybe changing the way we talk about bias could make a similar difference.

The term open-mindedness suggests a desirable attitude of self-control in situations that might leave one prone to bias. But open-mindedness is not a central topic in the literature of information literacy. Instead, it is much more common to see open-mindedness mentioned as a desirable disposition, full stop. There is no extended discussion of what open-mindedness means or attempts to clarify what it should mean. An example of this pattern occurs in the “Research is Inquiry” frame of the *ACRL Framework*, where the dispositions associated with the frame mention the importance of keeping “an open mind and a critical stance” and showing “intellectual humility.” In much the same way, the dispositions for the frame “Authority is constructed and contextual” include “develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview” (ACRL, 2015). It is encouraging to see these ideas mentioned, but it leaves students and teachers with the unacknowledged question of what it means for one’s mind to be appropriately open. (A noteworthy exception to the trend of leaving open-mindedness unquestioned is a 2015 blog post by Kevin Michael Klipfel, who argues that open-mindedness is an “intellectual obligation to follow the evidence” (Klipfel, 2015).

How might a coherent understanding of open-mindedness inform teaching about bias in information literacy? In this paper, a new threshold concept is proposed: “Open-mindedness is an achievement, not a trait that one has by default. It requires careful attention to the best available evidence and argument on a question. It finds its fullest expression in the context of a loving pursuit of truth.” This threshold concept is built from philosophical ideas about moral aspects of attention, the nature of open-mindedness, and love as a motivation for learning. Examining these ideas in greater depth will allow for an assessment of the proposed concept’s suitability as a threshold concept,

using the characteristics of threshold concepts described by Meyer and Land in their seminal report (2003). The goal for this paper is to provide a starting point for future discussion of open-mindedness as a topic for information literacy instruction.

Attention

Open-mindedness is deliberate *moral attention* applied to beliefs and points of view that are different from one’s own. The concept of moral attention was first expressed by Simone Weil and later developed by Murdoch (1970) and Flanagan (2019). Essentially, moral attention is careful examination of one’s judgments about someone or something in order to understand that person or thing more clearly. Moral attention is motivated by a sense of care for the object of one’s understanding or by concern that one has not been fair in arriving at one’s judgments about the object. Most important for the threshold concept, moral attention requires effort and focus—it is not just happening to see the moral factors in a situation. Instead, it is a matter of trying to look past one’s pre-formed interpretations in order to let the other appear as they really are.

To illustrate the exacting reflection that moral attention involves, Murdoch provides the example of a mother (*M*) questioning her own disapproval of her daughter-in-law (*D*):

M tells herself: “I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.” Here I assume that *M* observes *D* or at least reflects deliberately about *D*, until gradually her vision of *D* alters....*D* is discovered not to be vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. (Murdoch, 1970, p. 17)

In Murdoch’s example, *M* would not have made these discoveries about *D* without making the effort to question her judgments about *D*. One can imagine a researcher undertaking a similar examination of their own motivations and assumptions for hot-button issues like politics or health, and how those dispositions influence their information choices. A successful examination would require significant focus and effort.

Open-mindedness is moral attention applied to beliefs, especially in comparing one’s current beliefs alongside the beliefs of others. The open-minded person makes an effort to question their preconceived ideas and interpretations in order to take an honest look at others’ points of view. They do not always agree with what they see, but they make the effort

Open-Mindedness is an Achievement

Taylor (2016) argues that open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue, which supports the idea that open-mindedness is an achievement. As an intellectual virtue, open-mindedness is an excellence of character in intellectual matters, especially forming or revising beliefs. Such an excellence does not occur without considerable practice or cultivation.

Furthermore, no single virtue ever amounts to much on its own. To contribute to a good life, virtues need to operate in

concert with one another. Taylor identifies humility, courage, and diligence as complementary virtues for open-mindedness (2016). In the absence of humility, i.e., the recognition that one might have more to learn, there is little reason for open-mindedness to engage in the first place. In addition, entertaining new ideas can be disquieting: doing so might involve exposing strongly held beliefs to the possibility of revision. It can also mean enduring disapproval from others who want you to conform to their way of thinking. Open-mindedness requires courage.

Finally, especially in the case of learning through information sources, actually following through on the open-minded motive requires significant focused attention. Consider someone doing research on the web: they need to strategize to escape their own particular filter bubble, seek out quality representatives of alternative points of view, then work through these accounts, making sure to really understand what they are saying, even though the researcher's first impulse might be to ignore those who hold different beliefs. Open-mindedness requires much deliberate effort, or diligence. The exercise of open-mindedness as well as its complementary excellences shows remarkable character, which supports the threshold concept's description of open-mindedness as an *achievement*.

Open-Mindedness Follows Evidence and Argument on a Meaningful Question

William Hare, the most influential philosopher of open-mindedness, offers this description: "Open-mindedness involves a willingness to form and revise one's views as impartially and as objectively as possible in light of available evidence and argument" (Hare, 1985, p. 3). Hare's emphasis on evidence and argument shows the suitability of open-mindedness as an ideal aim for information literacy. Evidence and argument form the backbone of research.

Hare also points out that open-mindedness requires something sufficiently questionable to be open-minded about. To use Hare's example, it makes no sense for an innocent person to say, "I'm keeping an open mind about whether I am innocent or guilty" (Hare, 1993, p. 19). Innocent people typically know they have not committed the deeds they have been accused of. But Hare maintains that it is possible to be open-minded about things that are questionable in principle, even when there does not appear to be a serious challenge. For example, a biologist might be willing to undertake an open-minded examination of theories about the origins of intelligent life but still view the theory of evolution as the most viable possibility.

Hare's requirement that open-mindedness only applies to beliefs that can be meaningfully questioned is another point of connection between open-mindedness and information literacy, particularly the frame "Research is Inquiry" from the *ACRL Framework* (ACRL, 2015). In the author's experience, this is an area where many students and instructors struggle significantly. Consider the familiar example of the student who asks for help finding an opposing viewpoint just so that they can satisfy the requirements of their research assignment by refuting it in their paper. If instructors had better language for conveying the point of research and the importance of an open mind, maybe this question would not appear so often in this conclusion-driven way.

Open-Mindedness and the Loving Pursuit of Truth

The final element of the threshold concept worth noting here is the idea that open-mindedness is best motivated by the loving pursuit of truth. It is possible to imagine an open-minded researcher driven by a sense of fairness (All sides deserve to be heard) or by fear of error (What if I make an avoidable error because I failed to consider another point of view?). In educational contexts, however, love of truth is the most desirable motivation for open-mindedness. One of the aims of information literacy is to foster a lifelong love of learning, and open-minded pursuit of truth is the purest instance of that love.

The idea of truth as an object of loving desire goes back at least as far as Plato, who views *eros* as the desire for knowledge that draws us out of complacency with what we already know. Writing about *eros* in Plato's *Republic*, Allan Bloom (1991) offers this description of the philosopher as a lover of truth:

The philosopher learns as other men love -- simply because it seems good and an end in itself; as a matter of fact, learning is an erotic activity for him. Love of learning is another expression of man's *eros*, of his longing for completeness. Such a man wants to know everything, aware that no part can be understood without being considered in relation to the whole. He is the man who can preserve his disinterestedness even in the difficult human questions which concern him most immediately, because he is more attracted by clarity than life, satisfaction of desire, or honor. (p. 393)

Bloom shows us an open-minded researcher so in love with their subject matter that they do not want to miss out on anything, not even those aspects of the truth that run counter to their apparent interests. Love motivates the learner's openness.

Of course, not all research is disinterested, nor should it be. People conduct research to cure diseases, evaluate career opportunities, and decide what to feed their kids. But the ideal of the open-minded lover of truth offers a touchstone that shows us when we are being open-minded, when we are not, and how it makes a difference.

Open-Mindedness is an Achievement – Is It a Threshold Concept?

In their seminal paper, Meyer and Land (2003) identify threshold concepts as ideas worthy of special focus in instruction. These concepts are difficult to learn, but they hold remarkable promise for transforming students' perspectives. Meyer and Land present five essential characteristics for threshold concepts. "Open-mindedness is an achievement" fits neatly with four of these characteristics; one attribute requires closer examination. For Meyer and Land, threshold concepts are:

1. *Transformative*: "Open-mindedness is an achievement" introduces the idea that the researcher's mindset can make a difference in the outcomes of their investigation. It shows that exercising the best mindset for learning will take considerable effort. Both of these considerations should change the way students look at the challenge posed by a question that requires research.
2. *Irreversible*: After time spent looking for a conceptually coherent understanding of open-mindedness, the author

does not foresee himself lapsing back into the idea that open-mindedness means remaining neutral, or that being open-minded means passively hanging back and letting ideas sort themselves out. Instead, open-mindedness demands commitment. Students will likely also find that there is no going back to their unexamined ideas about open-mindedness.

3. *Integrative*: “Open-mindedness is an achievement” shows the deliberate attention that the open-minded researcher must bring to their investigation. Successful research integrates both mastery of research sources *and* cultivation of a research mindset.
4. *Conceptually bounded*: Meyer and Land (2003) note that threshold concepts are “Possibly often (though not necessarily always) bounded in that any conceptual space will have terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual areas” (p. 4). Townsend, Brunetti, and Hofer (2011) interpret this to mean that threshold concepts normally are ideas that arise within a discipline’s particular field of inquiry, and that falling outside a discipline’s content can be grounds for disqualification as a threshold concept. Is open-mindedness an important topic for information literacy? More on this below.
5. *Troublesome*: The sheer amount of literature on open-mindedness suggests it is both an important concept and a slippery one. But there is another, more urgent indicator of the troublesomeness of open-mindedness. Studies by the Pew Research Center on polarization and media choices indicate that people in America are not open-minded on matters that have a huge impact on our lives together, and that the situation seems to be getting worse (Dimock, et al., 2014; Gottfried, et al., 2019; Mitchell, et al., 2014). We do not easily learn to be open-minded on our own—which sets limits on our learning that are *troublesome* indeed.

“Open-mindedness is an achievement” displays four of the five essential characteristics for threshold concepts. But what about the fifth, the idea that threshold concepts are “conceptually bounded”? Does this mean that open-mindedness must be a central topic in information literacy to be a threshold concept for information literacy.

Admittedly, open-mindedness has not been a significant focus in the literature of information literacy. This paper presents a case that it should be. More importantly, “open-mindedness is an achievement” challenges the idea that threshold concepts are important only for students working in a discipline. Open-mindedness is most important for researchers working outside their discipline (or who have no discipline). Experts in a discipline know that there are many voices in their field worth taking seriously, and they have methodological techniques that encourage objective research. Non-expert researchers do not have these advantages, which leaves them more prone to bias in their learning. Open-mindedness, with its emphasis on consulting evidence and argument, can help non-expert researchers, like general education students and voters considering an issue outside their field of expertise, recognize the importance of evidence for their beliefs—both evidence that supports their views *and* evidence that calls those views into question.

Acknowledging the unresolved question of disciplines and threshold concepts, the considerations above make a strong case that open-mindedness is both sufficiently important and

complex to be a focal point for information literacy, especially in light of information literacy’s growing concern about researcher bias. Reflection on open-mindedness and its challenges in research contexts should cultivate a metacognitive awareness of when one is or is not being open-minded. Such an awareness is a crucial part of information literacy’s promise for developing self-directed learners.

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