

# THE PRACTICE & PROMISE OF CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY IN LIBRARY INSTRUCTION


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# WHAT I MEAN BY “CRITICAL”

Finding ways to intervene upon the  
white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy  
(bell hooks, 1981, 2006)

Anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic,  
anti-ableist



All I want for Christmas is  
the abolition of imperialist  
white supremacist  
capitalist heteropatriarchy



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Applies critical theory and most often the ideas of critical pedagogy to libraries

More than just instruction; a way of thinking about information literacy and libraries as a whole

Critical information literacy “takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption.”

- Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (2013)

“When we limit [information literacy’s] potentials to outcomes and standards, we run the risk of minimizing the complex situatedness of information literacy and diminishing – if not negating – its inherent political nature.”

- Heidi Jacobs, “Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Praxis” (2008)

# WHAT DOES CRITICAL IL LOOK LIKE?

Examining library subject headings to show how information organization is rife with white, patriarchal assumptions and systemic discrimination (Drabinski, 2008)

Developing feminist teaching methods that promote collaborative classrooms and position lived experiences as valid ways of knowing (Accardi, 2013)

Teaching economics of scholarly communication by having students jot down when they encounter paywalls and reflect on barriers these costs create (Warren, 2010)



RESEARCH STUDY

# SURVEY

12 questions, such as:

“Do you incorporate critical information literacy into your instruction?”

“Briefly describe some of the benefits to making critical information literacy part of your instruction, if you find that there are benefits.”

“What advice might you give to academic librarians who seek to make critical information literacy a part of their practice but are unsure of how to do so?”

# SURVEY RESPONSE

156 responses received in total

64% were in their first nine years of post-MLS library work

67% worked in a university

# INTERVIEWS

8 questions, such as:

“Tell me about how you first learned about critical information literacy.”

“What factors contribute positively to your practice of critical information literacy?”

“Are there theoretical or conceptual understandings that inform your practice of critical information literacy?”

# INTERVIEWS

13 participants recruited from survey

Interviews conducted Jan. and Feb. 2016

Took place via email (8 interviews) and Skype (5 interviews)

TEACHING FINDINGS:  
CONTENT

# THEMES

- 1 Classification
- 2 Search Examples
- 3 Academic Conventions and Access
- 4 Corporate Media
- 5 Alternative Media

# CLASSIFICATION

“I’ve had students look at LC and Dewey classifications as ‘anthropologists from the year 2815’ and they try to hypothesize values the cultures that produced these ways of looking at information had - thereby opening up the idea that knowledge is conditional on time, place, and power.”



# SEARCH EXAMPLES

“I also make use of search terms that also have the effect of consciousness raising, like if it’s a business class, or a session where they have some sort of career-exploration topic, using something about the gender wage gap or something like that as a search example can be interesting and powerful.”

# ACADEMIC CONVENTIONS & ACCESS

“We look at the economic power structures that limit access to academic information (overpricing, password protection). We consider how peer review can lead to quality control or suppression of newer or more radical views.”

# CORPORATE MEDIA

“I frequently design one-shot class sessions built around a few open-ended questions, and hope for students to drive the discussion. The topics have included bias in search algorithms and how editorial processes in popular media are designed to perpetuate the status quo, rather than truly ‘report the news.’”

# ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

“I do a lot of teaching with zines, focusing on self-publishing and the amplification of frequently marginalized voices -- this always includes opportunities for students to make and share their own work.”

FINDINGS:  
TEACHING METHODS

# THEMES

- 1 Discussion and Dialogue
- 2 Group Work
- 3 Skip the Database Demo
- 4 Reflection
- 5 Problem-Posing

# DISCUSSION AND DIALOGUE

“I lecture as little as possible and like to have students work together, present findings/ideas/reactions/etc. to the class, and then engage in a whole-group discussion. Again, I attempt to engage students in material that (a) they can relate to; and (b) will get them thinking. This ranges from group work exploring a variety of sources surrounding the murder of Trayvon Martin to acting out a scholarly debate on the coming out process.”

# GROUP WORK

“It is difficult to establish trust in a one-shot lesson -- I need student input to understand where they're at, what they are working towards, what gets them engaged. With group work, they are feeding off of an energy or a mood that's already been established. I find group work then allows students to be more open in their ideas and more open to error.”



# SKIP THE DATABASE DEMO

“Instead of simply demo-ing a database, I facilitated a role-playing activity in which [students] assumed the roles of scholars, and we then had a discussion about who gets to be a scholar and thus who has a voice in the literature. This was all new to them, and I think they were able to both understand what ‘the literature’ is and problematize academia in ways they hadn’t before.”

# REFLECTION

“Allowing students time to reflect or posing questions that ask them to consider how/if the lesson is meaningful to them is important part of the classroom experience for me. Ideally, it adds a small jolt to their experience and communicates to students that I’m here for them, that I want to be useful and purposeful addition to their classroom, not some intruder with my own agenda.”

# PROBLEM-POSING

“I have started asking the faculty to help me think of a problem the class could work on together, which I think is the best thing to have happened for my teaching in a long time.”

**FINDINGS: CHALLENGES** |

# THEMES

- 1 Time/the One-Shot Model
- 2 Lack of Support
- 3 Student and Faculty Expectations
- 4 Teaching the Basics
- 5 Assessment Culture

# TIME/THE ONE-SHOT MODEL

“It takes more time to enact critical information literacy instruction--time to plan, time to reflect. This is not the kind of teaching you can do on autopilot.”

“Well, one-shots are such a garbage can, really. Even the most sophisticated pedagogy is really, really limited in that format.”

# LACK OF SUPPORT

“If you’re trying to teach from a more critical perspective and no one else in your library is interested in that perspective, it feels lonely. People don’t always get what you’re trying to do, even if you try to explain it to them.”

# STUDENT AND FACULTY EXPECTATIONS

“Students don’t always recognize critical pedagogy as teaching, because it doesn’t look like most of the teaching they’ve experienced before.”

“Many instructors, and some of my colleagues, assume that library instruction equals a demonstration of the catalog or of a specific database, so redefining expectations is essential for incorporating critical information literacy.”



# TEACHING THE BASICS

“It’s difficult to both help students grasp the basics (e.g. how to work through the call number to find a specific book) and branch out into a more critical approach to research. It’s helpful to know the rules before breaking them...I worry that sometimes the critical approach may actually do a disservice to our first-gen students, if emphasizing the critical side displaces opportunities to practice the basics.”

# ASSESSMENT CULTURE

“Assessment culture privileges ways of teaching and learning that are quantifiable. I can’t put ‘changed lives and enacted social change’ on a rubric, but I am pressured to report student learning findings in ways that are rubric-able. So I do the rubric, but I still do my own qualitative assessment alongside the stuff I’m required to report.”

**FINDINGS: BENEFITS**

# THEMES

- 1 Increased Engagement
- 2 Meaningful for Students
- 3 Meaningful for Librarians
- 4 Connecting with Faculty
- 5 Creating Community

# INCREASED ENGAGEMENT

“It is a way to have an authentic connection with students, which I think assists in learning but certainly keeps students more engaged in the classroom. It is also a way for me to enact my values in my work, which keeps \*me\* engaged, and prevents burnout.”

# MEANINGFUL FOR STUDENTS

“Describing the power structures gives teaching a real-world relevance. It helps break the mold of ‘the library is for books and journals’ and allows students to see how IL concepts will apply in their life beyond college.”

# MEANINGFUL FOR LIBRARIANS

“I don’t think I’d still be doing what I’m doing if I hadn’t learned or figured out that I could use critical information literacy in the classroom, because I would be so burned out and bored by point-here-click-here teaching. Not that I don’t experience burnout at all, of course...but I guess very early on in my career I had this sense that *there has to be something more than this*. I knew I was capable of so much more than teaching students to click on stuff and type words in a box!”

# CONNECTING WITH FACULTY

“As I’ve been exploring CIL I’ve been continually amazed at how many other faculty on campus come from a critical or social justice background! CIL helps me make immediate and deep connections with the faculty I relate to and with whom I work with as I teach IL sessions.”



# CREATING COMMUNITY

“I find that the best library instruction sessions are where the students are given a lot of agency to fulfill a task or an assignment. Their ideas, the formation of community (as brief as it is within a classroom), and their shared dialogues are inspiring. These are the moments that education really becomes inclusive and students are allowed to be thinking, sharing beings.”

**THINK PAIR SHARE ACTIVITY** |

# THINK PAIR SHARE

- 1 Think: “What does your ideal instruction session look like?”
- 2 Pair with the person next to you. Describe your ideal instruction session with them, and discuss: “What barriers do you face in making this happen? How might these barriers be removed?”
- 3 Share your thoughts with the group by reporting back on your discussion.

# QUESTIONS & THOUGHTS

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slides: [tinyurl.com/criticall](https://tinyurl.com/criticall)

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