TRANSFORMING LIBRARY INSTRUCTION:

EXPLORING CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY IN A NORTH DAKOTA CONTEXT

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What I’d like to do today is first, establish the importance of addressing critical information literacy at the current moment. Next, I’ll provide a summary of critical information literacy in theory and practice. I’ll then discuss my personal experience with the theory and practice of critical information literacy, and examine potential barriers and conditions affecting the practice of critical information literacy in North Dakota. Finally, I’ll point to possible future directions for critical information literacy instruction in our context.

Why talk about critical IL?

The first thing I’d like to address is – why talk about this? I admit, as my research at times took me down unexpected paths that drifted away from the immediate, practical concerns of information literacy instruction, I worried that a potential response to all of this would be, “so what?” So, I’d like to establish that now, before moving onto the subject itself.

Critical information literacy might seem like a niche topic, and in some ways, it is. However, if we take a look at the current state of the scholarly conversation surrounding information literacy in academic libraries and recent changes in the field more generally, we can see that the influence of critical information literacy is far-reaching.
The instance that inspired me to begin taking a deeper look at critical information literacy came on May 24th of this year, when Emily Drabinski, a librarian at Long Island University – Brooklyn, tweeted from the Workshop for Instruction in Library Use conference that editors of the journal *Communications in Information Literacy* stated that “Critical Information Literacy is the most prominent theoretical frame in published articles” in the journal (2017). This provided some concrete support for something I’d suspected, which is that critical information literacy was drifting from the margins to the center, at least within the scholarly discourse.

The past several years have also seen the release of a number of books, as well as a journal, dedicated to topics associated with critical information literacy and critical librarianship. Beginning with *Critical Library Instruction: Theories & Methods*, by Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier in 2010, proceeding years brought the publication of *Information Literacy for Social Justice and Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* in 2013, *Critical Journeys* in 2014, *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas* in 2016, and this year, the forthcoming *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, and the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*. While each of these titles comes from the publisher Library Juice Press, which has carved a niche in this area, 2016 also saw the publication of the two-volume *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* from ACRL, providing more evidence that this school of thought is edging into the mainstream.

While those examples are limited to the literature, we can see other ways that critical information literacy is having broader implications on our community of practice. In a 2016 article, Seale noted that “the Framework seems to have taken to heart many of the critiques offered by the critical information literacy movement” (p. 82). Keer, in a *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* chapter, provides more support for this interpretation, writing that the vision of information literacy on display in the Framework “[shows] that library leadership is moving toward adopting more critical perspectives,” (2016, p. 67). Fister, writing this year, termed the current moment an age of critical IL, in contrast to the
preceding age of standardized IL – not specifically naming the Framework, but gesturing to the move away from the Standards (2017).

What is critical IL?

With its significance and influence in the field established, what is critical information literacy?

Critical Pedagogy

Critical information literacy finds its foundations and inspiration in the educational model of critical pedagogy, which is “the theory and practice of social transformation that links education to social justice. . . . In practice, critical pedagogy is a joint engagement between teachers and students to bring about social justice by enacting change,” as defined by Sengupta-Irving & Yeh, (2014) in the Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice.

Critical pedagogy’s origins lie with the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his experience teaching literacy to Brazilian peasants in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, Brazil was under the rule of a military junta, with the lower classes living under feudal conditions. For the peasants with whom Freire worked, attaining literacy was a step toward obtaining the right to vote. In light of the oppressive conditions under which the peasantry lived, Freire’s goal in his critical pedagogy was not only to teach literacy, but to foster critical consciousness (conscientização) – empowering the peasants as subjects with the capacity to enact transformational social change.

In the literature of critical IL, Freireian critical pedagogy is often present in the rejection of authoritarian modes of teaching, and the associated opposition to what is termed the “banking model” of education. Educators are warned against re-creating forms of oppression by acting as an authoritarian presence in the classroom or pedagogical space. If the goal of empowering learners in society is to be realized, they must first be empowered in their own education.
Following from this idea is the rejection of the banking model of education. As characterized in the literature of critical pedagogy, the banking model assumes in students a deficit or lack that can only be corrected through the teacher’s deposit of the correct facts, knowledge, or skills. In such an educational model, the learner has little or no agency, and is instead the passive receptor of the content as dictated by the educator or education system, and the larger systems of power in which they’re embedded.

**Critical Information Literacy**

So how does the influence of critical pedagogy play out in critical IL?

Looking at definitions offered by Tewell (2015, 2017) and Downey (2016), who have synthesized the foundational literature and conducted interviews with librarians who self-identify as practicing critical IL, we can see two common threads: a focus on student agency and empowerment, and an orientation toward social justice goals.

In his literature review, “A Decade of Critical Information Literacy,” Tewell defines critical information literacy as “an approach to IL that acknowledges and emboldens the learner’s agency in the education process” and “does not focus on student acquisition of skills,” but “instead encourages a critical and discursive approach to information” (2015, p. 25). In a separate forthcoming article, Tewell defines critical information literacy as something that “empowers learners to identify and act upon oppressive power structures” and “strives to recognize education’s potential for social change” (2017, p. 3).

Downey adds that she interprets critical IL as “an expanded version of information literacy that places the learner at the center in a more empowered role and focuses on the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural aspects of all types and stages of information and the research process” (2016, p. 173). In each of the above examples, we can see the focus on both student agency and social justice.

The self-consciously political social justice orientation incorporates a rejection of neutrality as a worthy goal or even a possibility in librarianship. An oft-cited quotation is the title of Howard Zinn’s autobiography, *You Can’t be Neutral on a Moving Train*, reflecting the idea that neutrality always
operates in tacit support of the status quo and established power structures. The student-centered dimension of critical IL functions to upend this pretense of neutrality, centering the students not only in the educational activity of the classroom, but positioning them within the nexus of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural systems and empowering them to enact transformative change upon those structures.

**What does critical IL look like in practice?**

To get a sense of what critical IL can look like in practice, we return to Downey (2016) and Tewell’s (2017) phenomenographic research. Both identify two primary approaches librarians use to integrate critical IL into their instruction: those associated with the content covered, and those that rest on the method of instruction.

Tewell and Downey’s studies have identified several commonly used content elements. Classification systems and subject headings are critically examined. Critically loaded search term or topic examples, such as Black Lives Matter or the wage gap may be used, serving both to call student attention to these issues, and providing an opportunity to critically evaluate the sources addressing them. Academic conventions, such as the peer-review system, and issues of access, like database costs, may be discussed. Issues related to corporate media, like ownership consolidation and search engine bias, and the use of alternative media sources, like zines, are also common topics.

Critical methods include those inspired by critical pedagogy, and aim to directly engage students as a means of avoiding the banking model of education. These methods may take such forms as discussion and dialogue, group work, skipping the database demonstration, and problem-posing.

Finally, the literature of critical IL and critical pedagogy more broadly identify several common barriers to implementing this kind of instruction. Among the most frequently mentioned are student resistance to unfamiliar methods; the curricular power of faculty, which limits the autonomy instruction librarians
have in planning a class session; the difficulty of assessing the outcomes of critical IL; and especially time, and the extent to which library instruction is still confined to the one-shot.

**My “Critical Journey”**

In a nod to the title of Robert Schroeder’s book of interviews with critical librarians, *Critical Journeys*, I’d like to take a moment to talk about my experience with critical IL.

I discovered critical IL through the #critlib twitter hashtag, sometime during the second year of my MLIS program, around 2014-2015, and found that it resonated with me on some level. The amount of preparation for IL instruction provided in my grad program was minimal, and here I saw an approach that seemed to flesh out library instruction, while providing a theoretical grounding and opening up space for the kind of critical thinking and working through big ideas that, in my opinion, is such an important part of a liberal arts education.

When I began at VCSU in the fall of 2015, the ideas I’d been exposed to through critical IL immediately informed and inspired the instruction work I’d begin to do. I never really felt like a practitioner of critical IL, but as a model of meaningful, deeply engaged instruction, critical IL functioned more as an aspiration to work toward.

A key moment in my experience with critical IL came exactly one year ago today (October 6, 2016). Drawing loose inspiration from a chapter I’d read in the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*, I made my most concerted attempt yet to take a critical IL approach in one of my regular instruction assignments – it fell flat.

While I recognize that enjoying success in one’s first attempt at anything is very unlikely, in reflecting on the experience, I had a realization. The chapter that had inspired me recounted a particular experience the author had in the classroom, and the author is a librarian at Columbia University in New York City. Needless to say, there are a lot of differences between Columbia and VCSU.
Reflecting further, I thought about how so many of the voices in critical IL - in conversations on twitter, and especially in the published literature - tend to come from other metropolitan areas, large land-grant or flagship public universities, or smaller, often elite, private colleges. In short, all very different contexts than VCSU.

This mirrors a trend that extends beyond critical IL into the whole of library literature, in which contexts like mine, and I’m sure many of yours, are underrepresented, if not completely invisible. We can guess that this is a result of the types of institutions from which people tend to publish: those that offer faculty status or tenure track librarian positions with requirements for publication, and have adequate funding to support academic activities like conference travel. Critical librarians frequently highlight the importance of asking whose voices might not be represented in the scholarly conversation, and here’s a prime example within our own profession.

Throughout the critical IL literature, context is often cited as an important factor for consideration. Within critical pedagogy, in fact, a central tenet is the necessity of re-making critical pedagogy for your own context. However, the invisibility of rural voices in the conversation mean that critical IL nevertheless tends to be addressed in a way that centralizes a generalized set of urban/suburban/metropolitan experiences and concerns.

**Critical IL in a North Dakota Context**

In considering critical IL in the context of North Dakota, there are two factors I’d like to examine, beginning with the cultural differences that exist among different regions.

Providing support for just one example of these cultural differences is a 2008 study by three communication researchers connected to NDSU. In “A Regional Analysis of Assertiveness,” Sigler, Burnett, and Child studied assertiveness in communication styles between students at four campuses, two in North Dakota and two in the New York City metropolitan area. The results supported their
hypothesis, with New York men and women scoring as significantly more assertive than North Dakota men and women, and North Dakota women identified as particularly non-assertive. Possible reasons for North Dakotans’ lack of assertiveness suggested in the authors’ discussion included: the benefits of developing an assertive style in densely populated areas; the cultural homogeneity of North Dakota minimizing the need for assertiveness in facilitating communication across cultural lines; a stronger presence of traditional gender roles as a result of North Dakota’s agrarian history; and the lingering effects in the Northern Plains of the Scandinavian code of conduct – or, perhaps more appropriately, code of conformity (Avant & Knutson, 1993) – called Janteloven.

In the classroom, one can imagine how a disposition among the students away from assertiveness might impede the practice of critical IL, which thrives on student involvement and a critical treatment of the status quo. Alternatively, the assertiveness of metropolitan students may be more likely provide opportunities and open avenues for the discussion or examination of critical topics. In a pedagogical method that centers student agency, an unwillingness among students to enact agency can be a barrier – particularly in the context of a one-shot, where we don’t have the luxury of taking the time to work through that reticence. Downey (2016), Keer (2016), Tewell (2017) and others have highlighted student resistance as a common barrier to critical IL, and that barrier may come with an extra degree of difficulty for those working in less assertive cultures.

The second contextual factor affecting the practice of critical IL in North Dakota reaches back to the origins of critical pedagogy with Freire in Brazil, where this pedagogy was developed in its own particular context, for use with a population under the immense strain of political oppression.

This association with the oppressed carries over into conversations around critical IL, where it’s common to see critical IL discussed in the context of helping subaltern groups. In a recent blog, Fisher (2017) typified this sentiment:

Critical information literacy, which applies critical pedagogy to information literacy instruction, felt like something I already knew without knowing what to call it. Most of my career has been
focused providing information literacy instruction to community college students whose life experiences are often highlighted by mistreatment and oppression due to their (perceived or actual) class status, socioeconomic status, immigration status, languages spoken, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender; with those students, I always felt it was necessary and urgent to honor their experiences and openly address the power systems inherent in producing and accessing information.

For many of us, it’s not so clear cut. Downey has acknowledged the challenge of adapting Freire’s methods for privileged students, and noted that “some [interview] participants questioned whether college students were oppressed and debated if they were in fact the opposite and were poised to become oppressors. A major question that began to emerge for me . . . was who gets to decide who is the oppressed and who is the oppressor?” (2016, p. 182).

The reality is that the students I see largely don’t belong to those groups we’d be quick to consider oppressed. They’re white, they’re likely middle class, and they’re from a culturally homogenous region.

At VCSU, nearly 85% of our students are white, roughly mirroring the demographics of the state of North Dakota, which is the fifth whitest in the country (VCSU, 2017). Beyond this, about 76% come from either North Dakota, Minnesota, South Dakota, or Montana. Looking at other four-year universities in the North Dakota University System, we see white undergraduate percentages of 80% at UND, 86% at NDSU, 76% at Mayville, and 77% at Dickinson (NCES, 2015).

What effect does this racial and cultural homogeneity have in the classroom? To get an idea, we can look to the 2004 article, “Teaching Race Without a Critical Mass,” in which authors Rand and Light discuss the challenge of getting their predominantly white students to critically engage with the topic of affirmative action in political science and law classes at UND. In their experience, the authors found that their students, due to their homogenous backgrounds and environment, “often undervalue classroom diversity, are slow to move beyond their predispositions about the topic, and tend to personalize the issues” (p. 317). Furthermore, the homogenous classroom may result in their existing opinions simply being reinforced, and discussion on these grounds might even prove detrimental to any non-white
students who in the class. Rand and Light conclude: “Thus, in our experience . . . without much exposure to differing perspectives, [white students] are ill-equipped to critically examine stereotypes and ill-prepared to work in diverse environments and to appreciate the value of multiple perspectives and differing experiences” (p. 332). The example of teaching affirmative action in political science and law classes is particularly interesting, as the goal isn’t the transformative consciousness of critical pedagogy, but simply getting students to understand the case law, and why the Supreme Court had ruled, in Grutter v. Bollinger, that race was a legitimate factor to take into account during the admissions process. Rand and Light’s findings demonstrate the following statement from critical educator Kincheloe, who wrote, “from the privileged perspective of the dominant culture, it may be difficult to empathize with the travails of those who have been deemed to be ‘different.’ When one is a part of different privileged groups, he or she is less likely to notice the ways that the marginalized are judged by particular norms” (2008, p. 24).

How then, is one to pursue critical goals with a group that largely belongs to, as Kincheloe says, the privileged, dominant culture? The answer, it seems, is very carefully.

The method Rand and Light developed to address the problems they identified involved several class sessions, and included viewing a documentary showing the firsthand experience of several minority applicants. In the book chapter “Reflections on My Use of Multicultural and Critical Pedagogy When Students Are White,” Sleeter (1995) described a method that built over the course of a semester, and included a service-learning component in which students worked directly with members of minority or disadvantaged groups. Where any program of critical pedagogy benefits from the availability of time, the additional barriers that must be surmounted when working with primarily white or privileged students require more time yet. As Downey notes, “critical pedagogy in the purest sense as it was understood and enacted by Paulo Freire and his followers would be next to impossible to pull off in library classrooms” (p. 106). In an instruction culture that still rests heavily on the one-shot, perhaps
pulling off even a semblance of critical information literacy with a privileged population is just not realistic.

**Inspiration for Future Directions**

What does this mean, then, for those who may wish to pursue critical IL, but work with a relatively privileged, culturally homogenous population? Do we just give up and return to the safe haven of standards-based instruction?

I don’t think that’s the case, but we do need to take to heart, and take seriously, the exhortation to remake critical pedagogy – and thus critical information literacy – for our own context. Since our context isn’t represented in the library literature, this will require looking elsewhere for potential paths and inspiration.

The answer may begin with focusing on that which makes us “other,” our rurality itself. I was surprised, after first arriving at VCSU, at how often students described themselves as being “from a small town” – to me, they’re all from a small town. But however common this background may be among their peers, their rural identity is strong. When considering their upbringing in a mediated environment centered on urban and suburban spaces, one can get a sense of where this identity comes from.

To find a field that has already been working through applying the ideas of critical pedagogy in a rural context, we can look to the literature of composition and rhetoric. This keeps with an existing trend within the literature of critical IL of looking to composition. As Baer (writing in 2016 at *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*) states, there are “strong links between writing and information literacy instruction, both of which center largely on inquiry, knowledge creation, and critical engagement with information sources. Writing and information literacy education thus overlap and complement one another.”

*Rural Literacies* (2007), by compositionists Hogg, Schell, and Donehower (of UND), and Reichert Powell’s *Critical Regionalism* (2008), serve as places to begin.
Published just a year apart and using different terms to define their subjects, *Rural Literacies* and *Critical Regionalism* nevertheless display a number of similarities in their treatment of rural and regional spaces. In a parallel to the state of the literature in critical IL, the *Rural Literacies* co-authors note early on that, “literacy research in our field is skewed toward urban sites and subjects. Many of our theories and research paradigms for literacy presume an urban or semi-urban setting and do not account for the experiences and realities of rural places and peoples” (2007, p. 12). Notably, they see this bias in critical pedagogy as well, referring to its ideologies as “typically associated with urban settings” (2007, p. 34). Contrasting the regional to the cosmopolitan, Reichert Powell sees a similar situation in United States culture more broadly, in which “cosmopolitanism is taken to be a positive virtue,” and is thus the frame through which the scholarly discourse is conducted (2008, p. 27).

Both works then point to the ways in which this centering of the metropolitan or cosmopolitan results in the creation of a false universal that erases the rural or regional. Referring to standards-based education specifically, the *Rural Literacies* co-authors argue that standards are a way of enforcing a norm based upon a metropolitan bourgeoisie. As they write, “‘standardization’ is code for erasing differences of culture, race, ethnicity, class, and linguistic usage” (2007, p. 23). Reichert Powell, meanwhile, claims that cosmopolitanism “has one important blind spot: its own locatedness,” and quotes political theorist Calhoun, who argues that cosmopolitanism assumes its foundations “to be universal, when in fact they are representative of particular social locations” (2008, p. 27). From the standardized, universalized metropolitan or cosmopolitan viewpoint, the rural and regional don’t fit in, and are thus seen as sites of deficit and lack, problems that need corrected.

The authors’ pedagogical goals largely align, as well. Both books point to the importance, in dealing with the rural and regional, of avoiding both the tendency to romanticize the supposed permanence of rural places, and the preservationist celebration of past ways. The *Rural Literacies* authors point to a pedagogy of sustainability that values the past while recognizing that change is a necessity if rural places
are to survive into the future. Specifically, the authors argue for the “need to work with students to help them see the economic, social, and political issues encountered in rural areas as interconnected with larger social and political patterns present in urban and suburban contexts and vice versa” (2007, p. 30). Reichert Powell gestures in a similar direction, writing:

To understand the full effects of the impact of injustice, of uneven development, of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism, progressive intellectuals and educators must reclaim the supposedly tranquil or quiescent (depending on one’s political perspective) spaces of regional culture as vital spaces of cultural strife. And to do this means developing critical strategies capable of recognizing conflict and struggle in forms unique to specific landscapes, and implementing tactics for intervention and action specific to those landscapes (2008, p.28).

In this strongly worded statement, we see an analogue to the goals of critical pedagogy and critical IL, but with a centering of the regional or rural. Both Rural Literacies and Critical Regionalism, then, offer a framework for approaching the concerns of critical information literacy, but with a practice (praxis) that might look quite different from what we’ve seen offered in the literature of critical IL so far.

As I mentioned at the beginning, critical IL might seem like a niche concern, and this sort of abstract approach isn’t for everyone. However, if as Fister said, critical IL is the defining information literacy concept of the post-Standards era, and these conversations are going to happen with us or without us, rural academic librarians would do well to assert ourselves, both charting our own path and ensuring our spaces – and our students – aren’t erased.

Going forward, I’d like to think about how a critical information literacy instruction based in rural literacies and critical regionalism might look. Referring back to the critical content and critical methods outlined in Tewell (2017) and Downey’s (2016) work, we can begin to think about how our own specific critical content might apply to those categories.
References


