Transforming Library Instruction
Exploring Critical Information Literacy in a North Dakota Context

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Terminology:

• Critical Librarianship (#critlib)
  • Critical Library Instruction
  • Critical Information Literacy
Today I will:

• Establish the importance of addressing critical information literacy in the current moment.
• Provide a summary of critical information literacy in theory and practice.
• Discuss my personal experience with the theory and practice of critical information literacy.
• Examine potential barriers and conditions affecting the practice of critical information literacy in North Dakota.
• Point to possible future directions.
Why discuss Critical Information Literacy now?
Critical information literacy is most prominent theoretical frame in published articles. Surprising! #WILU2017
“The Framework seems to have taken to heart many of the critiques offered by the critical information literacy movement.” (Seale, 2016)

The Framework shows that “library leadership is moving toward adopting more critical perspectives.” (Keer, 2016)

Fister (2017), calls the current moment one of “critical information literacy,” as opposed to the previous age of “standardized information literacy.”
What is Critical Information Literacy?
Critical Pedagogy: Foundation & Inspiration for Critical IL
What is Critical Pedagogy?

“Critical pedagogy refers to both the theory and the practice of social transformation that links education to social justice. . . .”

(Sengupta-Irving & Yeh, 2014)
What is Critical Pedagogy?

“In practice, critical pedagogy is a joint engagement between teachers and students to bring about social justice by enacting change.”

(Sengupta-Irving & Yeh, 2014)
Paulo Freire

• Brazilian educator (1921-1997)
• Developed critical pedagogy while teaching literacy to peasants living under an oppressive, authoritarian dictatorship
• Goal not only literacy, but critical consciousness (conscientização)
Two Key Freireian Concepts for Critical Information Literacy:

1. Anti-authoritarian Pedagogy
2. Opposition to Banking Model of Education
Critical Information Literacy...

• “Acknowledges and emboldens the learner’s agency in the education process.”
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• “Does not focus on student acquisition of skills,” but “instead encourages a critical . . . approach to information.” (Tewell, 2015)
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• “Empowers learners to identify and act upon oppressive power structures.”

• “Strives to recognize education’s potential for social change.” (Tewell, 2017)
Critical Information Literacy is...

“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.” (Downey, 2016)
Two threads common to discussions of Critical Information Literacy:

1. Focus on student agency & empowerment
2. Social justice orientation
Critical Information Literacy in practice:

• Critical Content
• Critical Methods

(Tewell, 2017, & Downey, 2016)
Critical Information Literacy in practice:

• Critical content
  • Classification systems & subject headings
  • Search term or topic examples
  • Critical source evaluation
  • Academic conventions and access
    • Scholarly vs. popular
  • Corporate media
    • Google: See Berg, “Googling Google,” in →
  • Alternative media

(Tewell, 2017, & Downey, 2016)
Critical Information Literacy in practice:

• Critical methods
  • Discussion and dialogue
  • Group work
• Skipping the database demo
• Problem-posing

(Tewell, 2017, & Downey, 2016)
Commonly Identified Barriers to Critical IL

• Student Resistance
• Curricular Power of Faculty
• Difficult to Assess
• Time
My “Critical Journey”
Rural contexts, rural librarians, and rural students are underrepresented in – if not completely absent from – the scholarly conversation.
Context is key...

...but our context is invisible.
Two Factors Affecting Critical Library Instruction in North Dakota

1. Regional cultural differences

2. Student demographics
ND vs. NYC: One minor, but meaningful, comparison.


Studied indications of assertiveness in communication styles among students at four campuses, two each in ND & NYC.

### Table 1 Regional Location and Biological Sex Means and Standard Deviations for Assertiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regional Location</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper Midwest</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8.37</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-3.64</td>
<td>26.28</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Metropolitan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17.41</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12.83</td>
<td>25.18</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Midwest region</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>24.78</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Metropolitan region</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.89</td>
<td>24.49</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>21.73</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>26.82</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Possible explanations:

• The necessity of developing an assertive communication style in densely populated areas.

• Cultural homogeneity – need for more assertiveness when communicating across cultural lines.

• Stronger presence of traditional gender roles as a result of North Dakota’s agrarian history.

• The Scandinavian code of conduct *Janteloven*. 
North Dakota Nice

May mean we don’t get this, but also means we don’t get this.

@EamonTewell @EamonTewell · 24 Sep 2015
First class of the semester begins w/ student asking why we’re here, says the library is stupid. Teaching: still not easy!

@marccold @ibelin I asked the class why they thought they were there (no one knew) but that led to talking abt what they wanted to know

@marccold @ibelin so, a positive outcome to a rude new-semester awakening
Two Factors Affecting Critical Library Instruction in North Dakota

1. Regional cultural differences
2. Student demographics
Critical Information Literacy & Student Demographics

“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.” (Fisher, 2017)
VCSU Student Demographics

• Fall 2017
  • 84.5% white
  • ~76% from ND, MN, SD, MT

• White undergraduate percentages at other NDUS institutions (Fall 2015 data via NCES):
  • UND: 80%
  • NDSU: 86%
  • Mayville: 76%
  • Minot: 67%
  • Dickinson: 77%
Why this matters:

  • Authors, instructors in political science and law at UND, found that due to their homogenous backgrounds and environment, students “often undervalue classroom diversity, are slow to move beyond their predispositions ... and tend to personalize the issues.”
  • Discussion of critical content in homogenous classrooms potentially detrimental to the few minority students.
  • Homogenous classroom may even result in students’ existing opinions simply being reinforced. (Potential for backlash.)
  • “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.”
Joe Kincheloe, in *The Critical Pedagogy Primer*:

“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.”
How do you pursue critical pedagogy with a privileged population?

• Very carefully.
So now what?
Inspiration for future directions

• Why composition studies?

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.” (Baer, 2016)
Similar criticisms of their field:

• “Literacy research in our field is skewed toward urban sites and subjects . . . and [does] not account for the experiences and realities of rural places and peoples” (p. 12).

• Critical pedagogy is “typically associated with urban settings” (p. 34).

(Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007)
Parallels with critical information literacy

• Questions standards-based education.
• Opposed to the idea that rural areas are lacking because they’re not like urban/suburban spaces.
• Pedagogical goal is to “help [students] see the economic, social, and political issues encountered in rural areas as interconnected with the larger social and political patterns present in urban and suburban contexts and vice versa” (p. 30).

(Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007)
Parallels with critical information literacy

“To understand the full effects of the impact of injustice, of uneven development, of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. . . 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” (p.28).

(Reichert Powell, 2008)
Inspiration for future directions

Honoring & centering our students’ rural, regional identities.

What might this look like in practice?
References


Tewell, E. (2017). The practice and promise of information literacy: Academic librarians’ involvement in critical library instruction. *College & Research Libraries*. Advance online publication. [https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.0.0.16616](https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.0.0.16616)
Questions & Comments