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Article

Critical information literacy instruction for the development of political agency

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Abstract

Critical pedagogy is an educational movement which gives people the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility necessary to engage in a culture of questioning. These abilities are of benefit to young people, increasing their political agency through heightened awareness of social injustice and the means by which to communicate and challenge this. A central feature of the critical pedagogical approach is critical literacy, which teaches analysis and critiquing skills. Critical literacy has been recommended by a number of authors as a valuable aspect to include in information literacy (IL) instruction. Critical IL could contribute to enabling the development of political agency and increasing meaningful and active involvement in democratic processes.

With the focus on the value of IL becoming increasingly important within library and information science (LIS), it is important to be aware of its roots, the problems yet to be overcome and to consider ways in which the concept can be developed. The paper argues that it is necessary for IL to adopt a critical approach in order to meaningfully engage with the democratic social goals of LIS and address some of the limitations of IL theories. The paper focuses on the ways in which the theory of critical IL may be of benefit to young people of secondary school age, in terms of increasing their political agency through increased critical abilities, channeling their perceived political cynicism and distrust into critical thinking and a sense of agency, increased political knowledge, efficacy and participation. It is suggested that libraries could contribute to critical IL instruction in partnership with young people and people in teaching and parenting roles, and that it is important for the LIS profession and discipline to embrace the inherently political nature of pedagogy and LIS practices to effectively apply critical theories.

Further research into the ways in which IL can contribute to democratic goals would be of benefit. A current PhD research project which explores a methodology for identifying the needs of young people in order to apply critical IL practices for political agency is introduced.

This paper is based on a presentation given at LILAC 2013.

Keywords

critical information literacy; critical pedagogy; democracy; political agency; political participation; secondary schools; librarianship; UK

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1. Introduction

Critical pedagogy is an educational movement which gives people the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility necessary to engage in a culture of questioning. These abilities allow young people to challenge perceived inevitability of social injustice, and engage in meaningful participation and leadership. Critical literacy is a key feature of critical pedagogy, which teaches analysis and critiquing skills around the relationships between texts, language and power. A number of authors have recommended the inclusion of critical literacy in IL instruction (critical IL), which could enable people to develop political agency and become informed and actively involved in democracy.

Political agency refers to the idea that centralised and nationalised concepts of political participation are limited and do not take into account the ways in which people engage with political and social issues within local and individualised environments (Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2010, pp.192-3). There are many ways in which people can participate in politics, such as collaborative decision-making and action, which are not accounted for in traditional measurements of formal political participation. Giroux (1988) is critical of the degree to which traditional methods of participation reflect and respond to the needs of citizens, particularly those who are marginalised and disenfranchised, and advocates the need for citizens to be able to use their critical capacities and exercise their own voices, to participate in non-traditional methods of political engagement in order to strengthen democracy (Giroux 1988).

A critical approach to IL would be of benefit to the library and information profession and wider society. There is a relationship between the emancipatory potential of information, political agency and the democratic responsibilities of the library and information profession, but there is a conflict between current IL practice and the recommendations of theorists who suggest that information literacy needs to take a critical approach in order to realise the emancipatory potential of information and the democratic responsibilities of LIS (both the discipline and profession). Critical pedagogical theorists believe that education that goes *beyond* providing access to information to actively teaching critical thinking skills. This would be of benefit to individuals, particularly young people during their period of formal education. It could equip them with the skills they need to understand the political system and their place within it, and, where necessary, to challenge this (Shor and Freire 1987; Giroux 2012; Whitworth 2011; Kapitzke 2003).

A number of weaknesses in the interpretation and theories of IL will be identified, to draw attention to underlying issues which would need to be addressed in order to fully engage with a critical theoretical approach. Gaps exist in the theory of IL which means that IL focuses on skills-based technical aspects of information seeking. It does not adequately address critical thinking skills which enable people to critically assess the information they encounter and the structures in which the information and knowledge is held.

The paper first discusses the political attitudes of young people in the UK, in order to give an example of a context in which critical IL could contribute to addressing an issue of participation and political agency in a specific demographic group.

2. Political attitudes of young people in the UK

The political participation of young people is important for the functioning of a democratic society; not only because they are voters and leaders of the future, but because they are citizens in their own right. A number of social changes are being implemented to reflect a changing representation of adolescents and the degree to which their political views can be heard. A deal was struck for the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 which gives 16-year-olds the right to vote (Hennessy 2012). It is important that these new voters are provided with the resources to be knowledgeable, form opinions about what they are being asked to vote for, and have the interest to involve themselves in the election process. A strong case is made for the lowering of the voting age for general and local elections: citizenship education, youth engagement campaigns and high-speed interactive media give the current generation the ability to be the most politically aware and educated ever (Coatman 2008), and many argue that 16-year-olds should be able to apply this knowledge and awareness in practice, especially because at 16, people are able to take responsibility for their education and employment status, and can marry and join the armed forces. Campaigners for a lower voting age often claim that by not allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, the message is sent that their views are not valid and that they are not full citizens. This has a marginalising effect which influences their future participation (Coatman 2008).

It is important to note, however, that campaigners do not simply argue that lowering the voting age will result in successful participation. They argue that suffrage must be accompanied by effective citizenship education and other formal education which will provide young people with the information and skills they need to become knowledgeable and actively involved. The campaign group Votes at 16 (2012) advocate a holistic approach:

> Citizenship education must be drastically re-designed and embedded into the wider syllabus before we have any hope of producing 16-year-olds, and adults, who are willing to engage in the political process.

Much has been written about the decline in young people's political participation, levels of political knowledge and prevailing attitudes of political cynicism and apathy. For example, The Hansard Society (2012, p.23) found that young people are less likely than older people to be interested in politics, feel knowledgeable about it, and vote. Other research has identified that many young people feel ignored and unheard by politicians and political parties (Molloy 2002 cited in Gerodimos 2010; The Power Inquiry 2006). Young people often lack a sense of agency and motivation to participate:

> While young people are interested in social and political issues they do not focus their concerns on engagement with formal political systems. Many hold negative views about politics, such as feeling that they have little control over what the government does. (Grundy and Jamieson 2004, p.237)

It is frequently found that young people are not concerned with political issues and have little desire to involve themselves in the democratic process, which some would suggest is the result of a decline in a sense of civic duty (National Centre for Social Research 2010). This decline in civic duty itself has a number of possible explanations, including a decline in faith of the degree to which politicians represent the interests of the people and the point of participating at all (Dermody et al. 2010). Research into youth engagement has identified that where young people do engage with civic life, there has been a move from involvement in wider forms of civic engagement to more individualistic activities (Byebee et al. 2004; Delli Carpini 2000). Young people's political attitudes are believed to be strongly linked to their sense of personal efficacy and exposure to news (Benton et al. 2008, p.92) and that those with a higher sense of personal efficacy are more likely to feel it is worthwhile to engage in political activities (p.92).

The National Foundation for Educational Research (Benton et al. 2008) conducted research into the political attitudes of 16-18-year-olds as part of longitudinal study. They drew a number of conclusions, including that their participants expressed moderate interest in formal political participation and had moderate intentions to participate in the future (Benton et al., p.ix), and that "Year 11 students (age 16) are not politically apathetic but are increasingly aware of politics and of its influence, in part through increased exposure to news and current affairs" (p.ix). Furthermore, they found that "Year 11 students exhibit low levels of trust in politicians and political institutions, such as the European Union (EU)" (p.ix). In terms of attitudes towards 'traditional' or formal political engagement and activity, the research found that although the majority of participants did not support a political party or feel likely to get involved in local politics or contact politicians, they did feel attached to voting as a civic right and responsibility (p.ix). The attitudes and predicted behaviour identified were deemed sufficient to warrant concern about a "continued 'democratic deficit' within British society" (p.ix).

However, the issue of young people's political engagement is complex and levels of political participation are not easily measured. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (White et al. 2000, p.43) argued in their research into young people's politics that "it is not possible to assess whether young people are more disenchanted with politics than their predecessor generations" and suggest that concern about a 'democratic deficit' are misplaced (p.44). It has been suggested that young people's participation is simply changing, rather than being in decline. Although it may be the case

that young people's conception of civic engagement and participation is narrow and often limited to activities requiring minimal time, effort and commitment (Benton et al. 2008, p.ix), some research has found that young people are in fact *more* civically and politically minded than young people of previous generations (Selwyn 2007). This is evidenced by higher levels of volunteering, charitable donation, interested and involvement in non-formal and single-issue political causes (Selwyn 2007).

Conceptions of politics are inextricably connected to attitudes towards politics. Much research has found that young people demonstrate low levels of engagement with politics when they feel that politicians do not represent their concerns and that politics in general is 'not for them' (Benton et al. 2008, p.35). This disengagement does not necessarily correlate with levels of political interest or knowledge, but there is a measurable impact with regard to political participation in young people. There is a demonstrably lower level of political activity in people whose political attitudes towards politics are negative or apathetic, which raises concerns regarding formal methods of political participation such as voter turnout (Park et al. 2004, p.31).

It is apparent, therefore, that there may well be a problem with young people's participation, be it the forms of participation they are willing to engage in, the knowledge they are applying to decision-making scenarios, or indeed their general faith and belief in the democratic system as a whole. The degree of the problem is open to debate, but it is generally accepted that the political participation of young people is important for present and future democratic society. Regardless of whether or not levels of participation and engagement are lower than they have been in previous generations, it is still important that young people are provided with the means to become politically knowledgeable and make informed decisions about the world around them.

A wide variety of solutions have been suggested to help young people become engaged and informed. Recommended approaches appear to cover all bases from formal political education, youth forums, lowering the voting age, providing information through the media (primarily television), to changing politicians and political representation. A recurring recommendation is education for democracy, including citizenship and political education (Benton et al. 2008; Keating et al. 2010; Sunshine Hillyguss 2005). These recommendations include reference to the importance of young people's ability to become independently knowledgeable about political issues in order to make informed decisions, although Manning and Edwards' (2013) systematic review questions whether research has found that civic education has any impact on political participation.

As this paper will explore, library and information science, particularly IL education, has a key role to play in enabling young people to develop the ability to become active and informed political agents. Information literacy is an area of library and information science in which the values of information access and democracy have an opportunity to be demonstrated, particularly in relation to young people's democratic engagement. It is necessary to explore the background of IL and possible problems and gaps within the concept in order to address its shortcomings and build upon it in a conscious and meaningful fashion.

3. Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is an educational movement which gives students the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility necessary to engage in a culture of questioning. These abilities allow young people to challenge perceived inevitability of social injustice, and engage in meaningful participation and leadership. Henry Giroux argues that civic education is the cornerstone of democracy, citing Castoriadis' statement that people must not only have the right to participate, but that "they should also be educated [in the fullest possible way] in order to be *able* to participate" (Castoriadis 1996 cited in Giroux 2011, p.144). Giroux advocates for the necessity for critical pedagogy in education in order to "help students to develop a consciousness of freedom, recognise authoritarian tendencies, empower the imagination, connect knowledge and truth to power, and learn how to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for agency,

justice and democracy" (2012, p.116). He argues that education is fundamental to democracy (Giroux 2011, p.3) and states that critical pedagogy is the best opportunity for young people to develop the knowledge, skills, and sense of responsibility needed to seek agency, justice and democracy (Giroux 2012, p.117).

Giroux (2010) believes that young people have been scapegoated as an explanation for social problems such as crime, poverty and violence, arguing that they are presented as a threat to society: "[y]oung people have become a generation of suspects in a society destroyed by the merging of market fundamentalism, consumerism, and militarism" (p.12). He claims that adult society lacks the critical capacity and political language to acknowledge injustices and inequalities within neoliberal capitalism and the military-industrial complex. Of Giroux's belief, Gage (2004) writes:

> Giroux suggests that adults have written their own dystopian values of selfish individuality, fear, greed, and cynicism onto the lives of youth and children without providing them voice or forum to imagine alternative perspectives and ways of being external to the dictates of a rapacious and homogenizing consumerism. (p.68)

In order to provide young people with a voice, education systems must take a critical approach and challenge the frameworks and processes that prevent young people from imagining alternate perspectives. Critical pedagogy advocates a change of direction in teaching practices, from a vertical and authoritarian format to a more horizontal structure. Although respect for educators is still important, it is argued that learners can only truly learn to think critically if they are also able to challenge the problems within power and knowledge structures in their educational environment as well as the wider world.

Although critical pedagogical theory has not yet widely been applied to library and information science and very much remains on the margins of IL discourse (Cope 2010, p.24), it has been recommended by a number of theorists within the discipline who believe it is an important area with which to actively engage, particularly with regard to IL provision (Doherty and Ketchner 2005; Accardi et al. 2010; Elmborg 2006; Eryaman 2010; Gage 2004; Kapitzke 2003, Whitworth 2011). Each learning environment would have to develop its own approach based on the needs of the students in order to take a truly critical pedagogical approach. It would not be appropriate to use critical pedagogical theory to produce a framework that could be rolled out on a large scale, due to the specification of theorists that any practical application should be reflective and based on the needs of the specific groups involved.

3.1 Critical literacy

Critical literacy is derived from and genealogically linked to the work of Paulo Freiere, the Brazillian philosopher, activist and educator (Patel Stevens and Bean 2007, p.5). He achieved recognition for his work in literacy education with adults to challenge repressive cultural and political forces which prevented empowerment. Critical literacy is a key element of critical pedagogy, which teaches analysis and critiquing skills around the relationships between texts, language and power, as a way to develop a language for challenging social injustice. Henry Giroux is a key theorist in this field, and he builds upon the work of Freire.

Morrell (2004) defines critical literacy as "the act of decoding texts, analysing the underlying power structures, and using the analysis to drive equitable change". It is based on the belief that education needs to go beyond teaching 'functional literacy' because education is inherently political; it is connected to "the acquisition of agency and the ability to struggle with ongoing relations of power" (Giroux 2011, p.147). This nature of education makes it a precondition for creating informed and critical citizens (Giroux 2011, p.147).

'Critical thinking' is a well-documented term that occurs frequently in academic literature in a wide range of areas, as well as specifically within literature regarding IL and the skills it teaches students. It is often used without definition or a description of what these critical thinking skills comprise, which may cause some confusion when read alongside texts from other disciplines which use the term in a different way. There are several definitions for the term 'critical thinking', which tend to differ depending on the discipline in which it is referred to. Most librarians and media specialists in schools use "critical" in the sense of detecting flaws in logic, factuality, or argumentation (Kapitzke 2003) with reference to the authority, accuracy and relevance of sources and whether they contain bias or assumptions. It is important to acknowledge that critical literacy differs from the philosophical concept of critical reading (Patel Stevens and Bean 2007, p.6). This is also referred to as critical thinking, and focuses on skills to apply to reading, such as identifying rhetorical devices. In contrast, they argue:

> Critical literacy views text meaning making as a process of construction with a particularly critical eye toward elements of the particular historical, social, and political contexts that permeate and foreground any text. Because critical literacy has its roots in critical pedagogy and therefore in Freirian and neo-Marxist approaches to social theory … questions about power, privilege, and oppression are paramount. Thus, the reader is always looking behind the text to identify its hidden agendas, power groups with an interest in its message, and a recognition that all texts are ideological….

The term critical literacy is used to denote a particular critical theoretical concept with an inherently political approach, which explicitly deals with issues of social justice and equality. As is evident in Luke and Freebody's (2008) Four Resources Model of Critical Literacy, the political nature of education and reading is emphasised:

> **Coding practices: developing resources as a code breaker:** How do I crack this text? What are its patterns and conventions? How do the sounds and marks relate, singly and in combination?

> **Pragmatic practices: developing resources as a text user:** How do the uses of this text shape its composition? What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives?

> **Text-meaning practices: developing resources as a text participant.** How do the ideas presented in the text string together? What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed for this text?

> **Critical practices:** What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both read and write this naively and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent or absent?

Critical literacy provides an opportunity for IL to make a real contribution to the democratic goals of library and information science. It can provide people with the knowledge, awareness and agency needed to participate meaningfully in political processes, and challenge social injustice, including participation in 'formal' and normative forms of political participation such as voting, but also through less formal methods such as protest and collective action. This should be a major element of IL instruction in school and public libraries to enable people to become actively and meaningfully involved in the democratic process.

Critical thinking skills and some degree of critical analysis does take place within formal education within subjects such as English and history, and more informally in other aspects of education, and although these skills can theoretically be taken beyond the subject and applied in everyday life,

there is a lack of research about where young people may be engaging critically with information. Research within library and information science has identified a deficit of critical thinking and critical literacy skills in some young people (Cody 2006; Oberman 1991; Taylor 2012), as well as a lack of IL skills (Rieh and Hilligoss 2008), which may be key to effective democratic engagement (Breivik cited in Garner 2006, p.12; Kapitzke 2001, 2003). These findings mirror concerns that there has been a "failure to maintain a critical awareness of information in the general population" (Whitworth 2009, p.131).

4. Information literacy

Information literacy is becoming an increasingly important focus in library and information science; it is often seen as a way in which the value of the profession can be defined in an age where the educational role of librarians has arguably replaced traditional curation activities (O'Connor 2009a, p.274). The majority of readers will be familiar with the concept of IL, its definitions and various frameworks, but it is worth discussing issues of definition before exploring criticisms of aspects of IL which hinder its abilities to perform the democratic functions that LIS purports to promote.

4.1 Problems of definition

Information literacy is a complex concept, comprising of a variety of skills, decision-making, cognitive and affective elements (Williams and Wavell 2006, p.4). Kapitzke (2003, p.40) states that the meaning of IL has never been fixed, despite its being the topic of numerous conferences and a considerable body of scholarly work. Although there is a general consensus about what constitutes an information literate individual, there are a number of specific definitions set out by different organisations and groups. CILIP (2011) defines IL as:

> Information literacy is knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner. This definition implies several skills. We believe that the skills (or competencies) that are required to be information literate require an understanding of:

- A need for information
- The resources available
- How to find information
- The need to evaluate results
- How to work with or exploit results
- Ethics and responsibility of use
- How to communicate or share your findings
- How to manage your findings

This is a well-acknowledged definition that is generally adopted by libraries in the UK, particularly within schools and further/higher education establishments. However, IL is a developing concept and its implementation is iterative; new elements are developed regularly and its place within libraries and education is constantly being negotiated.

4.2 Criticisms of information literacy

Although information literacy has a number of strengths, a number of criticisms have been made, including criticisms regarding aspects of its development. For example, Foster (1993, p.346) claimed that IL is "an effort to deny the ancillary status of librarianship by inventing a social malady with which librarians as 'information professionals' are uniquely qualified to deal". Tyner (1998) suggests that the lack of a simple definition, as previously identified, may in part be due to the idea that IL as a concept exists as the result of a need of the library profession to market their role to the educational community following exclusion from educational policy, such as the US report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Similarly, O'Connor (2009b, p.493) suggests that IL was a concept developed out

of a reaction to the threats faced by traditional access-oriented librarianship roles. She suggests that IL legitimated the profession in that it created a more flexible, educational jurisdiction for librarians (p.499). This in itself is not necessarily negative and does not negate the value and relevance of IL (p.506), but O'Connor argues that this does become potentially problematic when librarians make claims to teaching roles through IL instruction, even if the claim has been "widely accepted by librarians as legitimate" (p.502), because IL itself emerged as a concept before a strong theoretical grounding for it was developed, which has resulted in competing and conflicting ideologies within IL (p.503).

A number of authors argue that the LIS profession has not yet succeeded in living up to its claims of strengthening democracy and helping people to become independent and critical thinkers (O'Connor 2006, p.225). The LIS profession has not substantively engaged with pedagogical theories (Kapitzke 2001; 2003) and has "failed to achieve a critical consciousness about how we act to perpetuate mainstream culture" (O'Connor 2006, p.225) and the social and structural inequalities within it. Despite making efforts to apply theories to practice, it has been argued that a lack of a critical approach has resulted in a failure to reflect upon LIS effectively; Gage (2004, p.73) accuses the library and information profession as having become a "hollowed out reification of consumer society" which systemically fails to problematise issues of importance.

The lack of deep engagement with critical theory has led to an overemphasis on a positivist approach (Kapitzke 2003, p.11), which critics argue impedes the development of critical reasoning (Pankl and Coleman 2010, p.6). Whitworth (2009, p.113) suggests that information literacy's tendency towards a positivist approach to knowledge reduces IL education to sets of "rubrics" or "skills", which prevents learners from being able to use what they learn creatively in new and unexpected situations and does not challenge people to question what they know. Elmborg (2006, p.193) argues that "the library literature has been slow to embrace critical approaches to literacy or to integrate critical perspectives into research or practice". Engagement with critical theory would allow LIS to develop a critical consciousness of its practices (Elmborg 2006, p. 198) and gain a better understanding of the ways in which we can empower students through "transformative information seeking capacities" (O'Connor 2006, p.235).

It has been argued that LIS has been stripped of any political dimension; Buschman (2007, p.1492) criticises LIS for being simultaneously both under- and over-theorised in approach, arguing that "LIS cast as a science has flattened libraries and information systems/products into objective and neutral entities studied without reference to context or power", while suggesting that at the same time "an over-theorised notion of power and domination proliferates within areas of LIS theory adapted from postmodern sources". The idea of what counts as political has become very narrow (2007, p.1489) which limits the abilities of LIS to fully engage with critical concepts of education as a source of political agency and wider notions of information access within a democracy.

4.3 Information literacy for democracy

The library and information profession often promotes its professional values, citing major works such as S.R. Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science* (1931) and Michael Gorman's *Enduring Values* (2000). Much has been written about the democratic potential of library and information science, presenting information provision, education and public space among the ways in which libraries contribute to democratic ideals (Belfrage 2000; Buschman 2007; Garner 2006; Hill 2009; Jacobs and Berg 2011; Joint 2005; Kranich 2001; Madsen 2009; Worpole 1995). Considerable emphasis is placed on the ways in which libraries can actively engage people with democratic participation through helping them to become independent learners with strong IL skills, which will enable them to find the information they need in order to successfully participate in political life (Jacobs and Berg 2011). However, libraries do not always make explicit efforts to function democratically or support democratic society (Buschman, 2007) and there are concerns that professional values may have "lost their traction or relevance in the daily work librarians perform" (Jacobs and Berg 2011, p.391). It is suggested that the LIS profession needs to reconnect with its

core values; in the United States, this refers to the ALA Core Values, identified as including "democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, the public good and social responsibility" (Jacobs and Berg 2011). In the United Kingdom the relevant statement of values would be CILIP's ethical principles for library and information professionals (2012). Jacobs and Berg (2011) discuss the ways in which librarians can reconnect to these values through approaching information literacy from a critical angle in order to create an "informed and educated citizenry" and make the democratic goals of LIS explicit in policy to reaffirm the profession's commitment to its core values (p.392). A critical approach to information literacy has been recommended by a number of theorists and is explored in the following section.

5. Critical information literacy

A number of limitations and problems within IL and political participation have been explored. These problems could be addressed through the introduction of critical element to IL with its roots in critical pedagogy, as suggested by a number of theorists, but not yet widely applied in practice. The development of a critical approach to IL (or, critical IL) in the UK could improve young people's political knowledge, critical awareness and ability to challenge structures of power and control.

Critical information literacy involves a commitment to social justice within capitalist societies (Elmborg 2010, p.74), that includes working to empower people through their abilities to question dominant values and beliefs in society (Cope 2010, p.19). Through the process of questioning, and challenging the reliability and biases inherent in texts and other information sources, people gain awareness of social injustice. This necessitates an alteration of the way in which education is viewed. Elmborg (2006) states:

> A critical approach to information literacy development means changing the view of education as the transfer of information or "getting the right knowledge into students' heads" to an awareness of each person's agency and ability to make meaning within the library setting. (p.194)

This is a challenging idea and has not been widely adopted in UK practices of IL. Critical IL research and writing is emerging on a small scale from the United States and Australia (Accardi et al. 2009), but with the exception of the National Information Literacy Framework Scotland (Irving and Crawford 2007) which does refer to critical information literacy, there has not yet been significant engagement with the concept in the UK. Librarianship has an important role to play in enabling young people to participate meaningfully in society through providing critical IL education, which in theory would increase the political agency of individuals and enable them to navigate a complex information environment, in which sources of information may not be reliable and accurate.

Critical information literacy endeavours to help people to develop practical skills and techniques, including ways of thinking critically and acknowledging the reasons behind the attitudes and opinions they hold. This includes emotional rather than rational responses to political issues and concepts (Swanson 2009, p.274). This goes beyond skills typically associated with 'critical thinking'. Critical IL aims to "reverse trends of exclusion from political participation and enable people to participate in the decisions and events that affect their lives" (Whitworth 2009, p.118). This includes giving young people the skills to understand the underlying messages in the information they encounter, and to think critically about where they get information from. At present, there is no formal acknowledgement of critical information literacy in UK curricula (or indeed worldwide) in primary, secondary, further or higher education, and therefore engagement with critical elements is often dependent upon individual librarians and the environments in which they work.

6. Challenges

If information literacy practitioners wish to engage with critical IL in their work, they may face a number of challenges, which are explored in the following section. These include professional as well as practical issues which are raised by authors discussing problems within LIS in general and issues pertaining to the application of critical theory to LIS.

6.1 Limited school resources

The implementation of critical information literacy requires, in the first instance, staff within schools who could provide instruction in this area. These staff would not necessarily have to be librarians, but given the pressure under which the majority of school teachers are already working, it would most likely be inappropriate to place an added responsibility solely on the shoulders of teachers. Critical information literacy is at its strongest when a collaborative approach is taken, which acknowledges that learning does not only occur within the school environment, and that IL practices do not just occur within the library. For example, in my observations of humanities lessons as part of my PhD research, teachers and students discuss which sources of information are reliable, and students report speaking to adults and friends about to what extent television news is presenting a biased picture of current events. Parents have been identified as having a significant educational role (Whitworth 2009, p.185). Librarians and teachers may be able to work in partnership with a number of groups including students and their families to build critical information literacy and political agency in young people, which although potentially beneficial presents a practical resource challenge if schools wish to engage a range of 'stakeholders'. LIS has a central role to play in critical information literacy, and school librarians should be able to engage with this to best meet the needs of their learners. However, school libraries are not currently a statutory requirement in the United Kingdom, and where libraries are present, many of these are not staffed by qualified librarians, and some are not staffed at all. As O'Connor (2009a, p.280) notes, "School librarians have been perpetually in short supply". This presents a significant resource challenge.

6.2 Qualification and education of library workers

In order for school librarians to be able to critically engage with pedagogical theories, relevant topics would need to be addressed in the education of librarians themselves. This is difficult because educational theory does not often feature as part of librarians' professional training and there is not often a requirement for librarians engaged in teaching work in the United Kingdom to hold a teaching qualification. It could be argued that the lack of a teaching qualification and the familiarity with critical theoretical approaches that may stem from the study of education and teaching would make it difficult for librarians to include a critical element to their work. The issues and values raised by critical pedagogical theory are often challenging and critical of existing practices, which can be difficult to stand up for without prior immersion in the theory and without a network of colleagues also engaged in similar work. Although individual librarians may be engaged with substantive political issues and the nature of education, the library and information science profession does not have a toolkit or training structure for engagement with the political pedagogical issues that would necessarily be raised when seeking to change practice within educational environments. The inconsistency of education and training of people working in school libraries places limitations on the implementation of critical information literacy instruction to support citizens' engagement with politics, as well as limiting the ability of the library profession to engage with important political issues in its own practice. A national scheme for critical literacy instruction would not be advisable due to critical pedagogy's emphasis on the importance of the development of critical literacy instruction that is tailored to meet the needs of the learners within each environment. It is important for individual schools and educational establishments to embrace critical pedagogical approaches which meet the needs of their own learners. The absence of a theoretical grounding in pedagogical issues within LIS and the lack of a support network familiar with critical pedagogical concepts may prove problematic when trying to encourage individual

libraries and schools to make steps towards critical IL instruction. This is a large area of concern without a clear solution, but in order to effectively introduce a critical element to IL practice, a discussion around what constitutes professional education for librarians would need to be had.

6.3 Challenging the status quo

A lack of relevant education is not the only reason that challenging the status quo would likely prove difficult for the library and information profession. School librarians in particular lack power within their environments and often struggle to protect their jurisdiction as educators (O'Connor 2009a, p.282). Furthermore, librarianship is considered to be a "feminised profession" (Haras and Brasley, 2011; O'Connor 2009a, p.272) with workers under the power of patriarchal structures, which results in workers less likely to try to change the culture in which they work, including teaching practices which may reinforce social injustices and inequality. A reluctance to engage with more challenging issues has been identified; Cope (2010) suggests that "LIS commentators tend to shy away from more complicated discussions of social and political power" (p.13), and Streatfield et al. suggest that there may be an unwillingness to engage with more challenging aspects of librarianship:

> Commentators on education librarianship have increasingly pointed to the tendency of librarians to focus their IL efforts on those aspects that are most familiar to them (information seeking and selecting) rather than the more challenging aspects of evaluating and making sense of information to answer questions and solve problems (2011, p.17).

This inability and unwillingness to change the status quo would certainly prove problematic for the development of critical IL practices. However, Gage (2004) argues that the library and information profession has a responsibility to act:

> What I am suggesting here is to hold libraries and LIS schools responsible for living up to their rhetoric as institutions concerned with democracy, human emancipation, intellectual freedom and quality living standards in a way that reinforces the political, moral and civic role of libraries as more than institutions aimed at preserving the interests and legitimacy of class, commerce and professional stagnation. (pp.73-74)

Elmborg (2010, p.74) argues that librarians need to "position themselves with those who struggle", thereby placing themselves as educators among learners and making a commitment to social justice, with a real focus on the democratic education of the learner, focusing on empowerment rather than discipline, raising rather than ranking, and inclusion rather than exclusion (Elmborg 2010, p.69).

Those working in the library and information science profession have a responsibility to substantively engage with issues such as critical information literacy, especially during a period of mass privatisation, dissolution of public spaces and erosion of public values. We must understand "the implications of their policies, practices, and services and how they function within broader social matrices that often serve to reproduce dominant social formations that thwart many of the values and missions traditionally addressed by the library profession" (Gage 2004, p.69). By conceptualising the bigger picture, we would be able to conduct ourselves in more reflective and socially responsible ways.

7. Conclusion

With the focus on the value of information literacy increasing, research into its development for the benefit of citizens and democracy is both relevant and novel. This research proposes a critical approach to IL, building on the recommendations of authors who have explored the topic, in secondary schools, to channel young peoples' political cynicism and distrust into critical thinking

and a sense of agency, increasing political knowledge, efficacy and participation. Librarians have an important role to play in critical IL instruction, and must engage with the political issues surrounding pedagogy to effectively apply critical theories. This work will not be without barriers and difficulties, but these must be addressed.

To some extent, library and information science has lost its way in terms of its professional responsibilities, due in part to a lack of ability to adequately express the social value of the work conducted on a daily basis by practitioners, including those engaged in IL tuition. The development of an information literacy framework has arguably been valuable in terms of setting clearer educational jurisdiction for library and information science, but has not yet gone far enough in engaging with pedagogical theory and critical analysis of IL and its potential social impact. Critical information literacy is an approach that could be taken to further develop information literacy theory and practice in a meaningful way, both in terms of its potential real world impact and also in terms of fully engaging with professional issues about the role and responsibilities of library and information science, including allowing us to "examine the unexamined and question the unquestioned, both in terms of our accepted bodies of knowledge and their associated research agendas and methodologies" (Leckie et al. 2010, p.xii).

The concept of critical information literacy is relatively new to LIS, and although it offers an interesting potential development to information literacy theory, there are few examples of how it could be applied in practice, especially in the context of secondary education in the United Kingdom. There is little understanding about abilities young people may already possess, where and how they develop critical information literacy skills through formal and informal education, and what aspects of critical information literacy would be of benefit to them in terms of increasing their political agency. Although teachers and librarians may be individually engaging with critical educational concepts, there is not a standard level of provision, and it is not well understood to what extent librarians and teachers in the UK are engaging with critical approaches.

Further research into the application of critical pedagogical approaches to information literacy would strengthen IL theory and practice and give it the legitimacy and theoretical component identified by Buschman (2007) and Kapitzke (2003) as lacking from the discipline, as well as enable it to engage with and reflect upon the political issues within LIS practice that have been removed and flattened over time (Gage, 2004; O'Connor, 2006). It would be useful to identify what types of critical literacy instruction already occur within schools and other learning environments, and to identify ways in which LIS could contribute to this work through critical information literacy instruction, in order to avoid replicating work already taking place outside of LIS and repeating claims the jurisdiction that may not be valid (O'Connor, 2009a, p.502). I am currently undertaking a PhD research project with the goal of finding ways in which critical information literacy could be adopted within a secondary school environment. The research aims to provide an insight into the critical information literacy skills of a small sample of young people aged between 14 and 15. The research is taking place in a secondary school in Yorkshire, England, and involves several research stages including questionnaires, repertory grid interviews, diaries and focus groups. It will also include observations of classes including sociology and history in order to identify where students are applying critical literacy and how they interact with teachers and their peers when they talk about issues relating to politics, society and current affairs. The research aims to get an insight into how the students use information to make informed choices, to see if they engage in activities such as fact-checking or reading more widely around a topic, and to identify if they use critical literacy skills when they are exposed to information about politics, society and current affairs. It is hoped that an outcome of the research will be a set of recommendations regarding how libraries and schools could introduce elements of critical information literacy into their existing information literacy practices, both within and beyond the library.

The development of a theory of critical information literacy aims to help librarians to engage more critically with the important work they do to help people develop critical thinking and information seeking skills. Ideally, this engagement with substantive professional issues within library and

information science will in turn be beneficial to citizens whose political agency will be strengthened by the introduction of a coherent, direct method of addressing the challenges associated with becoming informed and knowledgeable participants in a democratic society, which would support wider society through more meaningful engagement with democracy. Contributions to the practical application of critical theory in school environments will be of benefit to the discipline, which has been criticised for a lack of examples and frameworks for practice (Gibson 1986, p.86). Although the research does not aim to produce a framework that could be rolled out on a large scale, due to the specification of critical pedagogical theorists that any practical application should be reflective and based on the needs of the specific groups involved, the research aims to provide a foundation for further development of critical approaches to information literacy practice through solid examples of a real-world situation and suggestions about how librarians can make conscious acts to contribute to aims of social justice.

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