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How power relations affect the distribution of authority: implications for information literacy pedagogy

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Abstract

In this article we report on the distribution of authority over information practices observed in a postgraduate taught course at a large research university located in the UK. The course was designed using principles from information literacy (IL) pedagogy and represents the operationalisation of *Radical Information Literacy* (RIL) theory. By analysing course documentation, assessed online discussion board posts and through interviews with teaching staff and students we examine how and why the distribution of authority is a complex matter; not least that the liberatory intentions of the Programme Director actually contain repressive dimensions in practice. We identify that students are subjected to techniques of disciplinary power, including surveillance and normalisation, and that they resist these by communicating outside of official discussion board spaces. Such resistance is not necessarily problematic, as it enables learning. Notably, students demonstrate development of IL practices through, for example, shaping their information landscapes, digital stewardship and critical reflection.

Keywords

distributive authority; information literacy; information practices; postgraduate students; Radical Information Literacy

1. Introduction

Information literacy (IL) has been defined by Limberg et al. (2012) as 'a set of purposeful information practices' (p.95) where the dominant discourse has traditionally focused on a set of generic skills, reified into IL standards (e.g. ALA, 2000), most commonly associated with Library and Information Science (LIS). There has been considerable scrutiny and criticism of this functional approach; Tewell (2015) reviews various critiques of IL and how these have informed the development of 'critical' information literacy in LIS, which is defined by Simmons (2005) as

'an approach to [Information Literacy] that acknowledges and *emboldens the learner's agency* in the educational process. It is a teaching perspective that does not focus on student acquisition of skills, as information literacy definitions and standards consistently do, and instead encourages a *critical and discursive approach to information*.' (Simmons, 2005 quoted in Tewell, 2015, p.28 our emphasis.)

This is a busy territory, through which primary researchers who are designing and validating teaching programmes are also working on such critical approaches. Whitworth (2014) argues for *Radical Information Literacy* (RIL), with the aim of empowering individual and networked learners to take control over information practices through the 'distribution of authority' (Whitworth, 2014, p.1). RIL is an example of a *critical pedagogy* because it

illuminates the relationships among knowledge, authority, and power. It draws attention to questions concerning who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values, and skills, and it illuminates how knowledge, identities, and authority are constructed within particular sets of social relations. (Giroux, 2013)

Our intellectual and empirical project is located in RIL, where the research presented in this article comes from a larger study called “Stewarding and Power In Digital Educational Resources” (SPIDER) project. Specifically we address Whitworth’s (2014) claim by providing empirical evidence that examines how a specific postgraduate course aims to ‘distribute authority more widely over information practices’ (Whitworth, 2014, p.1). Note that we focus explicitly on RIL because the postgraduate course unit in SPIDER was specifically designed using principles from RIL, which allows us to examine how the operationalisation of RIL theory plays out in practice.

We examine the role that power plays in the distribution of authority within the course in relation to RIL. In order to do this, we consider the aims of one particular Postgraduate Master’s course unit that are proactively premised on RIL, the claims made by its Programme Director, and we examine how and why these are met by looking at data obtained from students. The original contribution to the field is the reporting of new empirical evidence in ways that illuminate how power influences the distribution of authority, and how this impacts on RIL pedagogies. Importantly we give recognition to the tensions both in the university and in the student community regarding the endurance of centralised authority and what this means for ‘distribution’. In order to do so, we investigate the ‘liberative’ and ‘repressive’ dimensions of power present in the course, as described by Brookfield (2005, p.120) in his engagement with critical theory. We do this because Whitworth (2014, p.112) identifies RIL as a critical theory of education, and specifically draws upon Habermas’ idea of ‘communicative rationality’ as a means of evidencing the distribution of authority. We use Brookfield’s (2005) conception of ‘Foucault as critical theorist’ (p.123) to uncover the oppressive dimensions often contained within emancipatory adult education practices (p.121). We specifically consider three techniques of disciplinary power viz. surveillance, normalisation and resistance and use Gore (1998) as a key structuring tool in the research.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1 Introduction

University postgraduate programmes of study and accreditation are sites of power, whereby knowledge is generated through research and scholarship, codified, and transferred to students through teaching, textbooks, and supervision. Authority (or the right to control what is known and is worth knowing within a lecture, assignment and discussion) is embedded in being *the* authority within a discipline. The asymmetrical relationship is evidenced in the design of the lecture room, the use of symbolic titles and robes through to the design and delivery of the student experience. The student buys, and buys into, the elite structure of knowledge production, whereby power is dispositional in the sense of both securing outcomes, and the social relational power involved in the ‘ability of an actor deliberately to change the incentive structure of another actor or actors to bring about or help to bring about outcomes’ (Dowding, 1996, p.5). Legitimacy in the location and exercise of power is located in a combination of tradition and the modern, particularly the endurance of professional cultures, codes of practice and peer review within ‘academic tribes and territories’ (Becher and Trowler, 2001), overlain and often interrupted by corporate systems, quality assurance and technical audits (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). The interplay of the agency of the student and the structuring impact of the university systems is at the core of our enquiry, where the SPIDER project is concerned with studying a proactive shift in power relationships. The entitlement to trouble decisions about learning and to democratise active participation in learning has a long tradition in education (for example Dewey, 1920) where notions of complex distributions in the inter-relationship of the academic with and for and about the student are where we locate our enquiry.

2.2 Radical Information Literacy theory

As Tewell (2015) recognises, pedagogical neutrality in IL is impossible, and generic skills-based instruction is at odds with student engagement in the learning process (p.24). Indeed, Whitworth (2014) argues that IL has become 'institutionalised' within the library and information science, which has ultimately 'damaged the development of IL' because it neglects community-based judgements about information (p.73). While we recognise that much valuable work is being undertaken regarding this matter in LIS (e.g. <http://libraryjuicepress.com>), it is out of the scope of this article to examine it in detail. Suffice to say that we focus on a shared concern over institutionalisation, where Whitworth proposes Radical Information Literacy (RIL) theory which is located within the critical information literacy tradition (see for example Anderson, 2006; Dunaway, 2011; Elmborg, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Mark, 2011; Tewell, 2015; Whitworth, 2009, 2011; Wink, 2005). RIL is directly concerned with the 'application of principles of informed, direct democracy to the scrutiny of information exchange within organisations and communities... in order *to more widely distribute authority over information practices*' (Whitworth, 2014, p.1, our emphasis).

Following Whitworth (2014) we locate our conceptual contribution in the claims about the distribution of authority from the elite academic to the empowered student, so enabling different types of learning.

Notably we are concerned with how the student shifts from the technical competence of accessing information from a library through to more radical notions of an entitlement to know with authority, to make judgements that may not be under the direct control of the academic. Hence IL is about developing agentic control of the self to know in relation to information that can be known, and how others involved (authors, academics, fellow students etc.) know (Elmborg, 2006).

We begin with the ACRL (Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, 2016) conceptualisation of IL as a framework that:

...draws significantly upon the concept of metaliteracy, which offers a renewed vision of information literacy as an overarching set of abilities in which students are consumers and creators of information who can participate successfully in *collaborative spaces*. Metaliteracy demands behavioral, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive engagement with the information ecosystem... Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning (p.3, our emphasis).

In operationalising the framework for IL education, ACRL (2016) acknowledges the role that 'authority' plays in IL:

Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. *Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required* (p.4, our emphasis)

Consequently, the distribution of authority is about enabling the student to investigate the power and legitimacy of a knowledge claim, to recognise the plurality of such claims, and to develop alternative notions and sources of expertise. This requires a student to enter a field of knowledge production, and in doing so they inhabit and take up a position in what Lloyd (2010) describes as an *information landscape*, which is defined as: '... the communicative spaces that are created by people who co-participate in a field of practice' (p.2). Thus RIL sees the university as the site

where the student is enabled to not only enter but also to scope and shape the information landscape, and so develop:

the ability to know what there is in a landscape and to draw meaning from this through engagement and experience with information. This ability arises from complex contextualized practice, processes and interactions that enable access to social, physical and textual sites of knowledge. (Lloyd, 2010, p.2)

Designing programmes of study that both retain the university landscape (quality systems, performance reviews, quality audits, validation and accreditation processes) but enable the student to enter, explore, define and rework the intellectual landscape (reading, thinking, discussing, writing, reflecting) requires a critical, dialogic approach. This is not only about the student working alone, but following Brookfield's (2005, p.64) engagement with Habermas, there is a sense of how the distribution of authority is dependent on dialogues between students and teaching staff that promote 'communicative rationality' i.e. producing communications between people that 'are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding' (p.254). Therefore, any knowledge exchange relationships need to respectfully enable voices, and recognise plurality of argument standpoints, where there is a shift towards liberatory or democratising forms of power:

Repressive power is seen as restraining and coercing, bending its subjects to its will. Liberatory power animates and activates...in adult education the release of liberatory power is prized...Adult educators talk emphatically of empowerment...the possibility of converting "power over to "power with" them ...continues to this day to exercise a hold on educators' imaginations (Brookfield, 2005, p.120).

2.3 Foucault as a critical theorist

Brookfield (2005) describes an 'ideal' classroom therefore as one that is a 'power free zone', but reflects that this does not happen in reality because '...apparently emancipatory adult education practices often contain oppressive dimensions' (p.121). To understand better the gap between the ideal and reality, Brookfield (2005) draws upon Foucault as a 'critical theorist' (p.123). Despite these two theorists coming from very different traditions, Allen (2003) considers this approach to be legitimate because it illuminates 'the tension between "consensus and conflict, ideals and reality" or, to put it more broadly still, between rationality and power.' (p.3).

According to Lynch (2011, p.19), *force relations* are always present that 'consist of whatever in one's social interactions that pushes, urges or compels one to do something'; our conceptualisation follows Brookfield's argument that 'power relations are manifest in all adult education interactions, even those that seem freest and unconstrained' (2005, p.130). To summarise, we specifically use Foucault's theories of disciplinary power to gain understandings regarding the distribution of authority in a postgraduate course with the aim of improving IL pedagogy within this and other contexts.

Disciplinary power is successful in regard to structuring agential practices because of hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and the examination. The examination combines the techniques of hierarchical observation and normalising judgement in a 'normalizing gaze' (Hoffman, 2011, p.32). Hierarchical observation is a consequence of 'compulsory visibility' (Brookfield, 2005, p.135) and to attain this 'the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly' (*ibid.* p.135). A particularly helpful metaphor is the *panopticon* (Foucault, 2006, p.41), originally conceived by Bentham as a system of control, and when designed as a building it comprises a circular arrangement of separate prison cells, each containing a single inmate, and a central tower occupied by prison guards that is lit in such a way that the guards can look into the cells of the prisoners, but the prisoners cannot tell if the guards are watching them or not, and therefore the prisoners must assume they are being watched at all

times and behave accordingly. Hence the challenge we have set ourselves is to investigate that while authority is to be distributed in respectful and enabling ways, the mechanism of surveillance impacts on and structures educational practices: 'a relation of surveillance, is inscribed at the heart of teaching..., as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency' Brookfield (2005, p.136). In order to do this, we have drawn upon the work of Gore (1998) who investigated eight techniques of disciplinary power to construct statements about power relations in pedagogy. In this research, we focus on two of these, viz. surveillance and normalisation, and how students *resist* these techniques. According to Foucault (1990) power and resistance are two sides of the same coin: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (p.95). This is fundamental to power relations because 'without resistance, without two bodies (or minds) pushing or pulling against each other, there is no power relation. And through resistance, power relations can always be altered.'(Lynch, 2011, p.24)

From gaining understandings of resistance we aim to draw conclusions about power relations that will be instructive with respect to developing IL pedagogy. In undertaking this work, we acknowledge the important contributions that have been made in the field of critical information literacy research (for example Pashia, 2017; Tewell, 2015 and references therein), that draw attention to the limitations of teaching IL according to generic information literacy standards: we support arguments made by Doherty (2007) and Elmborg (2006) that IL teaching cannot be generic; and agree with Tewell (2015) who argues that it is the

writings, words, and work of others that helps us ... to achieve praxis via the reciprocity of theory, practice and action, and to thereby provide educational opportunities with emancipatory possibilities for both our students and ourselves. (p.37)

3. Methodology and methods

3.1 Context of the SPIDER study

The research reported in this article comes from a larger project called "Stewarding and Power In Digital Educational Resources" or SPIDER. SPIDER is a case study of a postgraduate course, located in a UK-based university, where the focus is on how disciplinary power influences the distribution of authority over information practices, and the impact this has on IL pedagogies. This is a challenging methodological matter as the espoused claims in the validation documents are located in RIL but the university retains the ultimate authority for quality that is invested in the Programme Director as the 'frontline' deliverer and guardian of the student experience. The student is located in relation to both: to the university in terms of the authority of degree awarding powers, and the Programme Director in relation to the teaching, learning and assessment processes. There are a range of complexities involved, not least the 'compliance' of the student to university regulations regarding assessment and the award of credits and then final degree, interplayed with the 'liberation' narrative of RIL where students are expected to think and do differently in order to have authority over their learning.

We set out to address these matters in a number of ways: first, by undertaking primary research where, as independent researchers, we have access to data that are not possible to collect through templated programme evaluation; second, by combining methods (documents, interviews, discussion board data) that allow us to see student experiences and activities from a range of standpoints; and third, to think with new insights into the data about how power works by using thinking tools from the repertoire of Foucault and Habermas.

In the academic years considered in this study (2015-16 and 2016-17), the unit had an enrolment of 120 students, of whom 38 were distance learning students. The subject matter of the course is educational technology and the course is designed in ways that bring distance learners as far as

possible into the on-campus learning experience. There is a great deal of diversity in the cohorts, with the distance learners described as a 'cohort of English speaking, UK-educated mid-career professionals' while the campus students were '...typically not native English speakers' and 'had little or no prior experience of the UK education system, or life in the UK more generally' (Webster and Whitworth, 2017, p.77).

An important part of the unit is a series of three separate assessed online discussions, in which on-campus and distance learning students are brought together in 'working groups' of 5-7 students. As the unit progresses, learners are expected to use the discussion spaces increasingly independently, with little intervention from teaching staff. Thus, they are expected to make judgments regarding the appropriateness of information with respect to the tasks they are engaged in, and to consequently display authority (Webster and Whitworth, 2017).

3.2 Researcher positionality and informed consent

In this research, we acknowledge that, as researchers, we are part of the social world that we are investigating and accept that we have power over the researched within the research relationship. In order to mitigate this imbalance, we have endeavoured to be transparent with regards to the purpose and intended outcomes of the research; each participant was given a letter of invitation together with a description of the research, a Participant Information Sheet, and was required to sign a consent form, in accordance with the Research Integrity and ethical consent procedures of the university where the research took place.

Separately, we recognise our biases in terms of the data which are selected and those that are excluded. We accept that our understanding of the distribution of authority presented here is based on our understandings of data and it may not necessarily lead to the truth (Das, 2010; Mitra, 1998).

3.3 Types of data

The full SPIDER project has produced a range of data sets. These tend to be of two main types: first, data about *programme design and development* and second, data about the *student experience of the distribution of authority*.

The data about *programme design and development* is based on a study of: (a) university documentation for postgraduate programmes of study, (b) the programme documentation (e.g. unit aims, course assessments, marking criteria), and (c) in depth interviews with the Programme Director (held during October 2015 and July 2016) regarding the aims of the course, his thoughts regarding the planned distribution of authority and reflections regarding the unit after it was completed.

The data about the *student experience of the distribution of authority* is based on a study of assessed discussion board posts and post-course interview data. We pay particular attention to discussion board data from the second assessed task (completed March 2016), because the students were *required* to reflect on this particular activity *as part of the task* and this enables us to compare 'mandated reflections' (Brookfield, 1995) with reflections obtained from interviews with students *after* grading. Individual interviews were conducted with 14 students: the first cycle were completed during October 2015 (or October 2016) and explored students' motivations for study and expectations of the course; the second cycle of interviews took place *after* the unit had been graded in June/July 2016 (or between July-September 2017). During the second interviews, the students were asked to reflect about their experiences of the course with particular attention given to their experiences of group working, how they felt about posting to discussion boards, what they had written on the boards (and why) and reflections regarding their IL. We specifically asked them a series of questions that explored techniques of disciplinary power including surveillance, normalisation and resistance, as outlined in the conceptual framework. By comparing interview data from the Programme Director with reflections from students (both from discussion boards and

interview data) we sought to gain understandings of the ways that authority is distributed, how power relations influence this distribution, and the implications for IL pedagogy.

4. Findings and discussion

In the following paragraphs we provide data to contrast the 'aims and claims' made by the Programme Director with the experiences of students who studied the course in order to gain understandings that may be useful for IL pedagogy and IL theory development. With respect to data analysis, we use our conceptualisation, i.e. of Foucault as a critical theorist (after Brookfield, 2005, p.123), to uncover power relations.

4.1 Aims (and claims) made by the Programme Director regarding the distribution of authority

The Programme Director developed the course with an espoused fundamental aim of *distributing authority over information practices*, which is a key component of both RIL theory and IL pedagogy frameworks (e.g. ACRL, 2016). The course represents the operationalisation of RIL theory from the intentions outlined in the validation documents and the realities of the student experience.

The first part of our investigation is therefore to identify the ways that the course encourages the distribution of authority. We asked the Programme Director how the course is designed to accomplish this:

'I want to create a space which promotes the *kind of interactions that I like to see* students develop... I want them to *realise they have authority: that their opinions, their judgments, are solicited, and valuable* and to encourage them to overcome *the relations of domination* that I understand are there... a relation that can be overcome is the one in class, the one where they feel they *should be listening to what I'm saying, seeking my approval, following my lead: that as 'the professor' I must be acceded to*. Of course I have knowledge they don't, but I yearn to see *more debate in class, more open discussion, particularly between students in a whole-class situation* (meaning, where I am also involved, as opposed to in small group work). It happens very rarely. The course information landscape aims to inspire them *to undertake independent explorations*. It provides them with tools to structure this exploration, or to help them understand and categorise things they find along the way... Encourages them to *develop information literacy skills* relevant to both this academic landscape and, hopefully, in their *future professional life*.' (October 2015, our emphasis)

Once you have a *genuine community* there is more reason to *reach consensus*...What we've got is an academic higher education setting, but we are not looking at people's ability to use the library; what we are looking at is the ability of people to process information and *learn* these things in terms of practice...they have *real information needs* and these information needs are being driven by the fact that *they are being assessed* so their shared learning need comes about from asking 'how do we get everybody in this group to come together to get the best mark?'...The fact that it is a higher education setting here gives this particular interaction instrumental purpose. There is a goal; their goal is to get a good mark. People say 'I can't provoke discussion in an unassessed environment' and the reply? *Is there a goal?* Here they have a goal, they have a reason to do it ...and while there is still a bit of the *fear factor* that I am concerned about, *so be it*, I think what they have got here is a *very real information task and a real goal around which a community of practice can form*. (June 2016, our emphasis)

These excerpts reveal two claims regarding the distribution of authority viz. the *course design* facilitates independent explorations by students and allows them to shape their information landscapes; and that *assessment* provides groups with real information needs and leads to the formation of genuine learning communities, and it is interesting that 'community of practice' is

adopted as a normalised understanding of a group of learners (as distinct from the functionality of 'cohort' or 'year group'). The Programme Director outlines the predicaments he faced, by acknowledging the *repressive* dimension of power that persists, through 'relations of domination', in the course. The Programme Director recognises a greater authority compared with the students – that he is the source of authority that is then 'given out' (or distributed) – and there is an implicit assumption that some, if not all, learners aren't aware that they possess authority at the outset of the course. It is interesting to note here that the Programme Director designed a space for the kinds of interactions that *he thinks* are worthwhile, which emphasises his authority in shaping the 'community' and the 'practices' within. He is absolutely clear (from reflecting on his practice) that assessment is important in the distribution of authority, but he recognises that it causes tension; while assessment potentially enables the formation of a 'genuine community', the 'fear factor' he observes in students is a consequence of (or exacerbated by) assessment, and is fundamentally repressive in nature, and therefore tends to inhibit the distribution of authority. Such tensions are referred to by Brookfield (2005, p.121) as the 'repressive dimensions of emancipatory practices'. Understanding the role that assessment plays in shaping the distribution of authority is central to this research; before discussing this in detail, we wish to make clear the authority that the Programme Director holds.

4.2 The authority of the Programme Director in the course

The Programme Director has substantial authority (and by extension so does his teaching assistant) which is a function of, for example, his subject knowledge, research outputs, prior professional experience and position within the university. His authority is a significant contributor to the 'relation of domination' that he is trying to overcome. The following excerpt, posted by the Programme Director at the start of the assessed tasks, seeks to guide students (and therefore enable them to undertake independent explorations) but also *codifies* and *underlines* his authority:

Please do have a look at the pages in the week 3 course content, and on assessment, which contain some *advice on how to engage with these assessed discussions*, and provides a *marking rubric*. The opening questions are as follows, but please remember these are just starting points - let's allow the discussion to evolve as it evolves, there are no 'right' and 'wrong' answers. The point, and what *grades are awarded for*, is to *discuss these points, not just 'answer' them*. You may find the discussion evolves into different areas. *...I'll check in as regularly as I can and make contributions*, and [teaching assistant] is also here to help out, but this is, in the end, your space...(December 2015, our emphasis)

The post provides guidance but it *reminds* students of the authority of the Programme Director as assessor, contributor and administrator of the course; the distribution of authority amongst the cohort is therefore tempered by this. When we reviewed the course materials available to students in the course VLE, it was evident that the Programme Director provides *detailed* guidance to help learners to achieve the instrumental goal of getting high marks, and we argue this guidance has conflicting impacts on the distribution of authority. For example, he provides an extensive reading list, which enables learners to make a start on the tasks. The list is a means of enabling independent explorations, and is therefore intended to be 'liberatory', but as it contains 41 'core' texts and more than 100 supplementary texts, it *emphasises* the Programme Director's subject knowledge, particularly as the first two texts on the core list are books written *by him*. Moreover, the list primarily reflects the *Programme Director's* information choices, his information needs, and is part of the 'ecology of resources' (Luckin, 2008) that he has developed and drawn upon when shaping *his* information landscape. We argue therefore that this list *reinforces* his authority and potentially makes the students more likely to accede to it. This is a predicament that is difficult to resolve: the Programme Director recognises that students need guidance in order to complete the tasks but this 'scaffolding' (e.g. Luckin, 2008) emphasises his authority, and such authority is underpinned by the university quality processes regarding standards expected for a master's degree at a UK based university.

4.3 Reflections taken from discussion board tasks

The student experiences of distributed authority are located in the midst of this predicament, and so we present some excerpts that were posted to discussion boards by students after the second assessed discussion task was completed. When taken at face value, reflections from all groups tend to support conditions for communicative rationality: typically students wrote that contributions were valued, different views were respected, that discussions led to consensus and we infer therefore that genuine communities were formed. We provide some examples, starting with reflections that were overwhelmingly positive:

Student A:

I have learnt a lot from your contributions... during the discussion phase ... members were able to express their view point freely

Student B:

We all together put forward different points of view, and discovered problems, and discussed the feasibility of the solution as a *team*

Student C:

Being part of a group made the work more meaningful. Having a duty towards peers provides a closer, more internal motivation.

Elsewhere, students provided reflections that were more nuanced and that addressed authority. For example, Student D:

The [activity] is a *simulation* of a 'community of practice'...Each community of practice has different levels and types of authorities. *Everybody can express opinions, but not everyone has the final say.* Authority is not equally distributed between the different parties of a community or the different individuals. Political and social factors influence the scheme of work of the community and accordingly the decisions and quality of work. As we see from our activity, we could not get all information we needed from other groups. *We as a community of practice needed to collaborate with other communities to make a better decision* (our emphasis).

Certainly there is a shared language here with the Programme Director in regard to 'community of practice', where Student D recognises the difficulties that different 'communities' face when reaching decisions, and how access to the 'right' information within a given context is important, which is an important aspect of becoming information literate (e.g. ACRL, 2016, p.4; Whitworth, 2014). Student D makes a point regarding the power to make decisions within communities of practice (e.g. Wenger, 1998), and refers to her group as one, which suggests that she considers her group to be a genuine community. In a different group, Students E and F engage in a dialogue about group decision making. Student E is generally very positive:

It was fascinating to see how people made suggestions and how other members of the group developed those ideas *beyond their original boundaries*... I believe we were quite lucky with the people involved in our group. Every member was given the chance to present their ideas and had a *decent amount of encouragement* to post (our emphasis).

Student E states that group members were 'encouraged' to post, and we speculate that this could be partly or wholly due to assessment. We return to this point later. Student E appears somewhat surprised that their group ended up with a hierarchical structure and concerned about how this distribution of authority could impact on assessment:

The only thing I found difficult to comprehend was *how the group ended up having a hierarchical structure and how individuals would be graded if they didn't have the opportunity to take a leadership role*. Thanks to [teaching staff] (you two have been great at guiding the group towards our final objective) (our emphasis).

She also acknowledges the role that the teaching staff played in shaping discussions. In reply to Student E's reflection, Student F justified his role in the decision-making process:

There were some occasions, however, when I felt that we were not going anywhere by saying we agreed on doing whatever the others thought was going to be fine or keeping on asking if the others agreed to doing one thing or the other and waiting for everyone to respond before making a decision. I have been a manager before, and making these sorts of difficult decisions is part of being a manager. *That's why I felt the need to take the lead sometimes* and make certain decisions for the team (our emphasis).

Student F's reflections are in accord with the hierarchy that student E observed. Moreover, Student F implies that he was frustrated by the group repeatedly seeking agreement with each other and therefore took charge and had the authority to do so from previous experience. His reflection highlights a prominent feature of discussion board posts, across all groups, namely the high level of agreement and politeness between participants. We coded this phenomenon 'excessive politeness' and sought to understand the reasons why the groups were generally very polite with each other. We were concerned that the (excessive) politeness we observed could mean that the groups may not actually be *real* communities in the sense that Wenger (1998) characterised them, as we might expect more conflict, debate and disagreement if they were. It seems as if there is a tension between the possibilities for such debate as a quality ideal and the demands of assessment as a quality imperative. This led us to examine evidence of how assessment might affect the 'tone' of discussions. Online discussion boards (whether assessed or not) are by their very design classic examples of panopticism, as recognised by Boshier and Wilson (1998). In the course, all discussions are stored and can be read by other working group members, authorised teaching staff, information technologists, administrators and researchers; the participants were therefore under surveillance and subjected to a normalising gaze that can influence what they posted to boards, and how posts were written.

We subsequently interviewed students about their experiences of the assessed discussion board tasks, using Gore's framework (1998) to ask them about surveillance and normalisation. We found, unsurprisingly, that all interviewees were expecting their posts to be monitored by the Programme Director (and teaching staff) because the discussions were assessed. We also found that the students adjusted what they wrote to the boards due to this surveillance and the normalising gaze of staff *and* their peers. Surveillance by teaching staff was an issue for the students and we found that most groups used other communication tools to 'escape' this and were therefore *resisting* disciplinary power. In the following paragraphs we provide evidence to uncover relationships between surveillance, normalisation, resistance and assessment.

4.4 Surveillance

We start with Student G, who describes her experiences of using the discussion boards and the reasons why her group chose to conduct some discussions in *WhatsApp*. She begins by talking about surveillance on the boards:

in the first [activity] *I really felt like I was being watched* because I'd never done it before and because [Programme Director] was on it as well as [teaching assistant], and because we were at the start of the course (our emphasis).

4.5 Normalisation and the influence of assessment

She continues by describing why she normalised her behaviour:

I felt I had to impress people and so *I didn't want to be too controversial* and I wanted just to be really encouraging to everyone. I certainly *didn't feel free to write anything...* I definitely felt that I modified my behaviour but only as far as what I would do in a *professional environment* (our emphasis).

The normalisation she describes is consistent with informed learning, of 'thinking like a professional person' (Bruce, 2008, p.49):

I thought it reflected a *professional environment* in a lot of ways insofar as you had to be polite and you had to say "yes I agree with you" because that's what you have to do in real life anyway (our emphasis).

Student G continues by talking about the rules of the course before reflecting on the role that culture and societal norms play:

you have to do it respectfully and *that was one of the rules that [Programme Director] gave us all at the beginning...* I think is interesting about the cultural aspect of it because I don't know whether for me or for other people it would have been different. I think most people are very polite anyway so I'm not sure if those rules had a particular effect but it would be interesting to see what it would be like without them whether people would be a bit more informal or how it would work without them (our emphasis).

When asked more about the politeness we observed on the boards, Student G revealed that this may have been influenced by assessment:

and there is the marking as well because on the first one I was thinking I don't want to disagree with whoever it was because *I don't want their marks to suffer for it*. Like if you disagree and you were correct then it might make you look good but *it's going to put someone else down* so there are two reasons firstly you don't want their marks to suffer for something that you said and secondly the social reasons you just wouldn't want to be the one that was making someone else look bad and making their results go down. (our emphasis)

4.6 Resistance to using 'official' discussion board space, and the influence of assessment

It is clear that Student G was motivated by marks, and that surveillance and normalisation affected her posts. In order to overcome surveillance, her group used WhatsApp to communicate, outside of the discussion boards. One of the reasons cited was that it was less 'official' and therefore allowed different types of interactions:

and I think [WhatsApp] was a way to talk that *wasn't so official* as the discussion board so we did a lot of congratulatory stuff, just sort of more socially. I think we could have said the congratulatory stuff on the discussion boards, but I think I said "can anybody answer these posts?" and I would *never have said that on the discussion board* because if somebody's watching and marking it they would go "actually yes nobody has written on this for a while" and therefore we *would be marked down* for so and so. ..Therefore it is a *more friendly and informal way* of doing it (our emphasis).

Student G also used it to prompt her colleagues to reply to posts on the discussion board without notifying the Programme Director:

it was a way for us to prompt somebody to do something... other people hadn't put much on or anything on I think and I had written something quite meaty and I wanted to see what other people had written but nobody had replied, and so I checked WhatsApp to see if anybody had replied and I asked has anybody had time to look at it (our emphasis).

This lack of replies caused Student G some anxiety and at one point she found that she responded to her own posts:

I remember that I had written loads and at one point I felt I had to reply to myself because there was nobody else on the boards (our emphasis).

Interviews revealed that other groups used social media in a similar manner. For example, Student H:

[t]here was another girl who was not very active so me and [Student J] were trying to get her to speak so if she didn't appear on [course VLE] we had to find a way to speak with her. So we started a discussion on Facebook and said "look this is what's going on". Whatever we discussed with her we posted to the discussion board. *There were a lot of times when we told to log on and speak and write something because we were all marked* (our emphasis).

Student H specifically mentioned that her contributions were driven by assessment:

[t]here were many times I didn't want to contribute to the discussion but I knew I had to do it...if the discussions had not been marked would [I] have contributed? I don't feel I would have contributed as much, *if I didn't feel it would have impacted my grades* I would speak but not as much. (our emphasis)

Assessment therefore is particularly important and students resist surveillance by stepping away from the discussion boards. This placed students in a potentially difficult position, because the Programme Director stipulated that only those discussions posted *within* the course VLE would be assessed:

please remember, *only what appears on this board can be graded*. If you use any other discussion medium as a group, that's fine, but you'll need to post some kind of summary of that 'external' discussion here if it is to be allowed for in the grade. (October 2015, our emphasis)

4.7 Digital stewardship and the influence of assessment

Despite this constraint, we found that some groups were not entirely happy with the discussion board space, and they therefore chose to use tools that were more appropriate to *their* learning needs. By choosing to move outside of the 'official' discussion board space the groups were not only *resisting* surveillance but making decisions about their information needs, and therefore were shaping their information landscapes. This *digital stewardship* (Wenger et al., 2009), is an indication of the distribution of authority. The following two excerpts provide examples of digital stewardship. In the first, Student B reflects on the reasons why his group moved away from the course VLE:

[o]ur own VLE *proved to be tricky sometimes*...I valued that, as a team, we made use of different ways to communicate, group our ideas and give shape to our preliminary decision and strategy. Gmail, Facebook, Google Drive, and the chat room in [course VLE] helped us explore the use of social media and Web 2.0 *tools to better communicate and write collaboratively* (our emphasis).

In a different group, Student C succinctly summarises how her group shaped its information landscape:

[w]e clearly adapted to [course VLE] and *used complementary solutions to tailor our learning process*. In some way, *we adapted and used technology to suit our learning and communication needs* (our emphasis).

These reflections are examples of groups within a particular context, moving towards communicative rationality, taking ownership of their information needs, and increasing their IL through, for example, better communication (e.g. Lloyd, 2010, Whitworth, 2014). This wasn't an easy decision to make because the 'fear factor' that the Programme Director alludes to was present. During interview, Student B made clear the tensions between achieving good marks in the assessment and the group's decision to communicate outside of the course VLE:

[w]e knew there was *a risk of not having all this "external" work being marked ...*, but we assumed the risk for the *benefit of our own teamwork* since we decided we were not *going to let technical issues related to the usability of VLE get in our way to perform our work*. (our emphasis)

These reflections illustrate that digital stewardship was necessary to overcome the technical limitations of the VLE. While these groups were willing to assume the risk of communicating outside the course VLE, it was the case that other groups were less willing to do so.

For example, Student G said that:

[t]here was not much point in doing stuff outside of the discussion board because you won't get marks for it.

This is an interesting reflection because Student G was happy to resist surveillance and prompt colleagues to post to the discussion board using What'sApp, but didn't think it was appropriate to use other technologies in case the group lost marks.

4.8 Reflections from interviews compared with those from discussion boards

Interviews with students revealed that surveillance and normalisation had other consequences that are important for IL pedagogy. Earlier, we gave examples of reflections posted to discussion boards that were very positive. However, because these reflections were part of the assessment, they are *mandated* reflections (Brookfield, 1995, p.12) and we have to be cautious in our reading of them. From interviews, we found that students sometimes provided very different accounts of their group working than those posted to discussion boards. For example, Student J specifically spoke about how she actually felt compared with what she wrote to the boards:

I am a lot of a control freak so I want to stick to deadlines and do things right ... so when [Student K] was not posting I was getting really annoyed because her performance would potentially affect mine as well. *An individual reflection might hurt the feelings of other people...* If you see my discussion board posts, the posts that I refer to [Student L]. The ones where I put a ":-)", it means I don't really agree with you but I'm not going to say anything. The ones with him where I put a ":-)" they hide you know, well... [laughs]. (our emphasis)

The question that the Programme Director needs to ask himself is whether or not mandated reflections, posted to discussion boards, that can be read by peers and staff are particularly valuable as a means of understanding the distribution of authority and we urge due caution.

4.9 Examples of gaining authority

On a more encouraging note, we are able to report that the students we interviewed were generally very positive about the discussion board activities. For example Student J commented about her IL and authority in her professional practice:

before coming here I didn't even know what information literacy is and now I know what it is, I have read some of the theories of it and I have an understanding of it, and I know how to teach it as well whereas before I didn't know what it was.

And Student G talks about how the course has changed her practice and given her authority:

I have learned something massive [from the tasks] and it would completely change the way that I work now... I learned recently about how to be critical of other people's work and how to be critical of papers. I always thought that these people they obviously know what they're talking about so I've always just taken every paper I have read as a given... but I began to understand what it meant to be critical about people's work in a positive way and in a constructive way so I feel I've learned a lot ... I think being on the discussion board probably helped... On some topics I have authority but I still think it depends on which area you are learning about. For example in areas where I have professional experience and now the ability to read academic papers, that I don't think I had at the start of this course, ...I feel that if I put all of those pieces together that *I do have authority*. (our emphasis)

Given the different examples in this section, it is apparent that distributing authority is a complex business. Techniques of disciplinary power suggest that communicative rationality cannot be achieved in the current context. There is a clear gap between RIL theory and how the course plays out in practice, what Carr and Kemmis (1986) call the 'theory-practice gap'. This difference reveals limitations in the enactment of RIL theory in course design, in line with observations made by Brookfield (2005, p.121) regarding the oppressive dimensions of liberatory practices. The Programme Director simply cannot know with any certainty the ways in which the students resist disciplinary power, although it is evident that resistance *enables* learning. These findings can therefore be deployed to rethinking RIL in order to refine the theory, where notions of power from Foucault appear to be helpful in refining this particular critical theory of education.

5. Conclusion

In this article we set out to examine the role that power plays in the 'distribution of authority over information practices' in a specific course unit, so as to gain understandings that may be useful in various contexts. Our investigation revealed that the Programme Director has considerable authority, and we suggest that he may want to limit the amount of guidance he provides, because symbolically and in reality this tends to *reinforce* the authority he has. It is somewhat ironic that in his well-intentioned attempts to distribute authority he reminds students of the authority he holds.

We found that in spite of robust and defensible research intentions, power relations inflect the authority that the Programme Director aims to distribute. The data supports the Programme Director's assertion that assessment provides both a genuine learning need and also contributes to the 'fear factor' that he is trying to overcome. Online discussion boards are a useful way to help distribute authority, but we observed techniques of disciplinary power such as surveillance and normalisation in them. Such disciplinary power is integral to the university status, regulations and quality assurance required of degree awarding institutions, not least one that is an elite research-intensive university. Significantly, while we note that the students 'bought into this' through the proactive choice of this university and programme, we did find that students *resisted* surveillance by communicating outside the course VLE where they couldn't be monitored by teaching staff and weren't subject to the 'norms' of the course. Such resistance is a *positive* outcome of power relations because it enables students to have fruitful discussions, to learn, to shape their

information landscapes, and to demonstrate digital stewardship; all of which are important with respect to developing IL (e.g. ACRL, 2016; Bruce, 2008; Whitworth, 2014). At this point it is also important to recognise that the course can be considered as an example of the Programme Director *resisting* the dominant discourses of what IL education is: he has operationalised RIL in order to move away from institutionalised, generic notions of IL rooted in library science (Whitworth, 2014, p.74).

We recognise that the 'relations of domination' present in the course are difficult to overcome: repeatedly we were told by students that they were not happy sharing certain views on the discussion boards, in view of the teaching staff and each other. For example, we found that the 'mandated reflections' that were part of the assessed discussion board tasks need to be viewed cautiously because students were (unsurprisingly) unwilling to reveal their 'true' feelings in a space where they could be read by colleagues and teaching staff. Such reflections are instruments of disciplinary power, and are, according to Foucault (1978), examples of *confession*:

the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points...that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us. Confession frees but power reduces one to silence. (p.60)

This is a particularly important point because IL education pedagogies and frameworks are built on reflective practice (e.g. ACRL, 2016; Bruce, 2008) but the *requirement* to reflect limits its usefulness. At the very least, we suggest that mandated reflections should not be posted to discussion boards because they should not be viewed by those in assessment roles. Techniques of disciplinary power are important in this setting, and we suggest that the Programme Director should focus his attention on ideas of surveillance and normalisation, because these are appropriate to understanding and developing IL in students.

After completing the unit, students were able to reflect on how their IL progressed and were able to provide examples of learning that they can incorporate into their practice. We found that students were generally upbeat about the assessed online discussion tasks and we recommend them as a tool to help distribute authority. We were particularly encouraged by the different ways that groups responded to the tasks; we found that each group had its own informational needs and groups constructed and developed their informational landscapes accordingly and consequently demonstrated digital stewardship. These findings support the views of other researchers (e.g. Bruce et al., 2006; Bruce, 2008; Lupton, 2004; Tewell, 2015 (and references contained therein); Whitworth et al., 2011) that IL teaching is context specific and cannot be generic.

Our contribution to the field is to provide more nuanced understandings of what it means to both distribute and to be in receipt of the distribution of authority. Reading the data through 'surveillance', 'normalisation' and 'resistance' has used theorisation to bring novel insights into the experiences of RIL. Moreover, we contend that independently designed and delivered primary research that involves access to both discussion boards *and* interviews with the students is vitally important. This is because a course evaluation based on only reading the discussion boards does not give detailed access to how the students position themselves relationally to the Programme Director, and to each other, in the receipt of the authority that is being distributed to them.

This research has questions that still need to be addressed. The first is that we don't know if it is appropriate to *maximise* the distribution of authority amongst the students, or whether it is sufficient for them to recognise that they *possess* it. We speculate that authority should be distributed as widely as possible, as enabling students to develop agency is fundamental to critical information literacy (e.g. Elmborg, 2006), but we don't know what this would mean in practice, and whether or not this is even desirable (either to educators, university administrators or the students) in this or other settings.

More research is needed in other situations to develop further understandings; we recognise that RIL is just one strand of critical information literacy, and that information systems are also affected by racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, and class oppression (e.g. Beilin, 2014; Pashia, 2017). In future outputs from SPIDER the aim will be to explore further how different dimensions of power impact upon IL pedagogy.

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