Anniversary of IL Special Issue 2024

before information literacy: field notes on the end of IL

nicholae cline
Librarian for Media Studies, Gender Studies, and Philosophy, Indiana University. Email: nacline@indiana.edu. X: @nicholae.

Jorge R. López-McKnight
Librarian, Austin Community College. Email: jorge.lopez-mcknight@austincc.edu.

Abstract

"Information Literacy is empire," so goes this piece that reflects on the past and present to consider a future of IL as a learning paradigm and pedagogical framework. In sketching out the temporo-spatial and socio-cultural dimensions and consequences of IL, we critically interrogate its normative and disciplinary aspects while positioning and examining it as a product and project of empire. Following from such a premise, we detour through an exploratory meandering of alternative lenses and paths for IL that engage with and support the information worlds and knowledge systems of marginalised communities that have been subjected to epistemological violence through various interlocking logics of dispossession, domination, commodification, and control. This piece, which is really an invitation that is also a story—a groove, moving off vibrations of theories and concepts from critical library and information studies, decolonial imaginaries, fugitivity, and abolitionist modalities gestures towards a decolonial and liberatory vision of IL that is plural, expansive, speculative, collective, improvisational, and oriented towards the liberation and freedom of all beings.

Keywords
critical information literacy; decoloniality; fugitivity; information power; information worlds; normativity; pedagogy

---

for all the learners whose worlds are already information literate with or without information literacy

1. no beginning because there is no ending

1.1 Before. After. Beyond. Ahead.

Such words mark relationships to time and connections, to what is not yet here and what yet might arrive; a future-oriented marking of hope and progress, optimism, and maybe, even, romance. And such terms can take for granted and assume certain relations, logics, formations, stories, and ways of life and being about the past and now, leaving questions of domination, reproduction, investments, cohesion, and desires unmarked and untraced. Against the very conditions of hope and romance that future dreaming projects, what can spill out are current, historical, and deliberate forms of hierarchical social relations and the materiality (of conditions of re/productions of knowledge) of a racial-colonial social order.

Yet, perhaps these terms, these words, this—or these—future worlds, will undo such loss and punishment, abandonment and violence, captivity, that we witness, that are part of our lives under the current social order. Dreaming possible futures can presuppose, can speak with innocence (and humility). Futuring is dangerous practice, and powerful. Yet even still, we do; thinking with Jennifer Brown's (2022) speculative pedagogical world-making/breaking question as a keynote speaker, *"How do we allow ourselves to dream radically yet responsibly, to speculate boldly without replicating those same [structural] harms of the past [and present]?"*

From the light of the question above, which is an offering of permission for our radical imaginaries and journey, information literacy is not yet here, thus we're (still) in the before, which suggests that IL is in a state of always arriving, and yet already here and there, elsewhere. Taking it to another place, this before and after IL, which includes an end and beginning that is really a break, our visions of what is on its way that has not yet happened and cannot be over (but already here), we know—like IL itself—when this arrives it will already be past.

Still, with all of this in mind, unsettling us, making us hesitate, and raising concerns (while also guiding us to reflect and contemplate for—and in—this moment and movement, an occasion of marked static time), we offer thoughts on the futurity (one of many) of IL and thoughtfully consider *what are we (still) trying to make possible with, and from, it*.

So, we come to this project—an arrival that is also a departure that is also an endless detour—with a deep commitment to thinking about any kind of framework or project of learning (including (critical) IL) as necessarily supporting and facilitating rather than foreclosing the creation, nourishment, and proliferation of information and epistemological worlds. And this project is orchestrated and operates as a return to only break from IL, not as a recovery or corrective or repair, but to live in and dig into that break and absence. Learning, which is not the same thing as education (not the same as schooling), is generative, joyous, world-making modes of being and processes that not only encourages but necessitates exploration, experimentation, play, and change—as well as, at times (and sometimes at the same time), failure, rupture, and the destruction of what has been, what has come before, what is, and what seems to be inevitable. The learning we dream towards—and at the heart of any IL worth its salt, any form of this approach that continues to exist and shape our theory, discourse, and practice as educators and knowledge workers—is always speculative, collective, fugitive, and improvisational, and oriented towards our liberation and freedom.

And let us insist from the outset that IL is a product of empire, and persists as a project of empire; by way of this, which is to say not because of it, we imagine beyond empire, and this is to say we imagine beyond the settler colonial and anti-black state, which then is to say that we imagine outside the need for IL and its ways (and worlds) of knowing and learning and being (human) that it facilitates, mandates, and encloses. And this *outside* of IL, turns back around to demand just what to do about IL in the now to set in motion an after.

1.2 Memories and dispatches of/from the field

As a product of the university/academy—and thus as a product of colonial empire—IL is embedded within, and constitutive of, the civilising, disciplinary, and assimilative structures of the capitalist/colonial project that seeks to dominate, extract, steal, own, commodify, and weaponise knowledge and knowledge relations. We know well that IL—much like librarianship—is neither neutral nor objective nor universal and certainly not apolitical or ahistorical, and it is important to confront the many ways in which these fields and disciplines also serve the interests and agendas of the powerful and reproduce the systems and structures that underpin the ongoing dispossession and subjugation of marginalised communities, beings, and ways of being and knowing.

This confrontation arrives as our primary relationship to the form of IL being taken up in this special issue is one of and through institutionalisation; this is to say, we have been, and continue to be, institutionalised, worked in and by, and trained in the very institutions and workplaces carrying out the function, management, and production of IL. As credentialed and professionalised mid-career public academic library workers at vastly different sites in academia (and who were there when the *Standards* left and the *Framework* emerged) who continue to have IL work responsibilities, who know our communities' information literacies predate IL, and who continue to see the devaluing and disregard for non- and anti-institutional literacies and knowledges of all kinds, we have a close, complicated, and tightly-articulated relationship and interaction with IL. We accept and proceed from this positionality, and this shapes the articulation of any critiques, interventions, or interruptions we offer.

While the genesis of our thinking, imagining, and critical dreaming with and against IL does not begin (or end) with our reactions to Paul Zurkowski's 1974 report, we must acknowledge that work as a foundational text that has shaped and still haunts information literacy theory and practice in the present (and beyond). It also makes clear the shaky capitalist and colonial foundations of the field/discipline, and the problematics of this were apparent when we revisited this formative work. The field/discipline must confront and address this lineage and reality, and contend with what it means for our work and this framework today and as we continue to imagine forward (and imagine otherwise). And in this response (such as it is, such as has emerged in dialogue and conflict with this and other early works), we are grappling with how to see forward from (and within) such a place and history (if seeds can grow from the ground we are standing on).

2. gesturing toward, gesturing forward

What, or perhaps who, anchors, organises, and is the core and at the centre of a (future) IL? Such a question summons and unsettles an incomplete list of possibilities (syllabi; discipline/field; learners' information worlds; (critical) frameworks; communities and gatherings; association's sanctioned documents; departmental learning outcomes; or some combination or

something else entirely), and meditating on the many questions we ask, imply, or respond to in this piece will follow from and facilitate possibilities (paths, approaches, *teloi*, practices) or offer and determine a route (and roots) of praxis. *Yet, still a question (and a seed) is one of how we conceive and believe learning happens—how it is known and unknown—and expressed. And this directs us to consider what, or who, does IL begin, stay with, and end on or with?*

With the increasingly critical praxis turn in the field, a promise and, perhaps, progress is put towards a different horizon than the trajectory from the long arc of IL (Accardi et al., 2020; Bright & Colón-Aguirre, 2023; Mallon et al., 2023; Smith & Hicks, 2023). And we continue to be moved, and inspired, by projects and currents in the field's critical scholarship (Brown, 2022; Douglas, 2021; Ellenwood, 2020; Espinel & Tewell, 2023; Hicks, 2018; Littletree et al., 2023; Loyer, 2018; Moreno, 2023). Without being dogmatic or theoretically and ideologically hegemonic, we await—and there must be—a break as there is differing and competing paradigms and politics with IL projects and pedagogies of social justice which determine the roots of injustice, deep-collaborative relations, and theories of change and action. Dreams and horizons of justice originating from equity or inclusivity, or anti-racism, are configured by and follow from those politics and in(ter)ventions, which are not slight variations but altogether different lines of flight from decolonial or abolition (or even liberatory) politics. At stake are not merely analytical or conceptual issues and critical delineations of (and divergences from) political projects and pedagogies, but—truly—the materiality and reality (and continued existence) of information worlds, institutions, relations, learning, and living differently to produce anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, Black and Indigenous futures and lives.

Here, we offer a series of frames and theories to consider new lenses and paths through which we see and understand IL, in the present as well as where it might be headed (where it might be moved to future travel). This is not meant to be a comprehensive accounting of the ideas that might help us see our way into (or out of) IL, but rather a sketch, a gesturing, a collection of notes for reflection, dreaming, and movement.

2.1 Information worlds + normativity

How exciting and energising it is that Elfreda Chatman's theories and concepts are (re)surfacing and renewed for a new, emerging generation of critical scholars, practitioners, and students interested in power, change, struggle, and politics (Gibson & Cooke, 2021). But still even in this resurfacing there is an absence in IL. Chatman (1999, 2000), with co-authors (Burnett et al., 2001), make contributions that offer generative potentialities and resonances for an IL in the future, for what IL might become, and, most critically, for what it might do. Animating and charging our dispositions and orientations—and of consideration and connection to IL—are her small worlds and normative behaviour theories. Meditating in and along with these conceptualizations, we see ways to expand, deepen, intervene, and challenge, while honouring and linking generously, ethically, and clearly to her lineage of thought.

In Chatman's (1999) contextualised public/social life of small worlds of information seeking and behaviour, she determines that "...information is really a *performance*…It carries a specific *narrative*…has a certain *form"* (p. 208). Moving from this, we're moved by the possibilities and expressivities of *form* (both as noun and verb) itself—the politics and power, the materiality that are already present inside of in*form*ation and per*form*ance, and thus inside the public/social small information worlds of learners. Yet, if these forms of information and performance contain narrative, as Chatman concludes, the small (learning) worlds of which these forms are part then

necessitate *storying* the inhabitation of them, and their sociality as Harney and Moten (2013) would say, and the meaning-making happening and expressed within such forms. Directed this way, social and community form/s as IL are put to question and responds to the unasked question of how might our IL landscapes, circuits, and frameworks look if the information and performances in learners' small worlds of learning were acknowledged, accounted for, and configured as collectively-situated, contextualised social practices and processes (of makings and activities) composed of complexity, expansiveness, precision, and particularities (and peculiarities) that are not apolitical, individuated, and absent of power relations and structures and that should (must) be honoured and attended to?

Such is the challenge, which is to say an opportunity that is an opening of possibility, in imagining an IL in the after that is capacious, carrying force and motion, and which is set against the violent and dispossessive colonial and anti-black present (and futures to which it leads).

Still thinking along with—and honouring—Chatman and her co-authors, her theory of normative behaviour, and the concepts that undergird it—social norms, worldview, social types, and information behaviour (1999; Burnett et al., 2001)—offers a path (one of many) for IL to consider and engage with the movement and place of normativity itself within the field's practices, theories, methods, discourses, paradigms, frameworks, and methodologies. This work and theory in particular help us better understand the intersections and dynamics of the many, sometimes overlapping "small worlds" as they relate to, confront, or are overwritten by or within larger and normative information ecologies and economies. Further, we see this as providing a critical challenge to the foundational normativity of critical IL's enclosed epistemologies of theorists and the prevailing notion and positioning of IL as a neutral or universal or liberal approach that can or should be taught, especially when it overrides, invalidates, or destroys the world-sustaining practices or embodied/collective knowledge of communities that have been violated by Eurocentric and/or Western systems of information, categorisation, and control.

2.2 Discipline, disciplinary, and subject-formations

"Discipline is Empire" is a story Katherine McKittrick (2020, p.36) tells us, and from our location and position, as we expressed above (in a different measure)—IL is not just a product of empire, but has been, continues to be, and seems to imagine itself in the future as a professionalised and institutionalised continuous project of empire.

This story stays close as we observe a current (re)emergence in an investment, a strong curious interest, for the (future) field of IL to make a discipline turn (Maybee et al., 2023). Another story even closer to critical librarianship is "Disciplines as Domination" by Jennifer A. Ferretti (2020) that is interrogative of systems, power and knowledge relations, and production. As this turn keeps turning toward (or away from) disciplinarity, the intellectual project of praxis that is IL should tend to and pay careful attention to these stories, formations and ethos of the field, its lines of empire and domination, and its attached and circulating dynamics, forces, and politics of power and material and difference.

Again, a challenge that is an occasion, which is an invitation, to reproduce differently.

Still on this turn, even deeper still, it is important to think with, and through, this disciplinary turn (whether towards or away from), and the ways in which such a turn marks a history, present, or future that is structured by, and structuring, the disciplinary power (Foucault, 1995) that allows

for the creation of norms, standards, and practices. These normative forces, insidious and banal, are part of a larger, disciplinary process of normalisation, institutionalisation (Ahmed, 2012), subjectification, professionalisation, and control that are difficult to see unless we go looking for them; we who have already been shaped by them; we who have disobeyed and been found by them again and again.

Yet, perhaps discipline/d assembly can be a transportive and regenerative dream of new political subjectivities that provide us time together of connectedness, of directed, intensive disciplined collective study of which rigor and practice return us to learning spaces reconfigured outside of (and beyond) normative disciplinarity, and undo a field's repressive and permanently established contours (Yang, 2009). Maybe discipline as *to teach* can shape and function learning to produce differently. (Maybe but maybe not.)

And we wonder about the obeyed and obeying subjects formed by institutions, fields, disciplines (like IL) that are beholden to and part of logics and systems of power, and a portrait emerges: a neoliberal individual (Seale, 2013) who engages with and understands information in a disconnected and solitary way, even if there is an attention to context, power, and entanglement within an information ecosystem. An information literate individual is positioned and constituted as atomised, then, and their literacy in this way is shaped and understood as a function of their individual ability to or skill of assessing, valuing, and discovering information. While there is undeniable value to this ability, skill, or role within societies as they are currently configured, the atomisation required by or that is an inadvertent consequence of IL education is conducive to (and even supports)—at the very least does not threaten—the larger projects of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy; while some of these skills may very well help us move through the world such as it is, we question whether IL as currently formulated can move us towards the world we need, one of collectivism, radical care, or liberation.

In this way we gesture towards the inherently, potentially conservative and liberal impulse of IL that, like other individualist modes such as self-help, philanthropy, and diversity, equity and inclusion, focus on individual or institutional efforts or acculturating us to the oppressive, extractive, capitalist/colonial systems in which they are enmeshed—even if they are attentive to these structures or have an analysis of power—rather than dismantling them or fundamentally changing the world and how it is configured.

3. a closing, which is always an opening

Through sitting with and cultivating these ideas and provocations, we have to ask: how is IL (now and in the future) fighting, and organised, against the co-optation of radical ideas, the marginalisation of dissenting voices, and the reinforcement and reinscription of capitalist extraction, white supremacy, and settler colonialism? How does it address the material and structural conditions that enable or constrain information access and agency, such as the digital divide, the surveillance state, and the commodification and accumulation of information? Does it facilitate and support or does it thwart the development of critical consciousness, the formation and maintenance of collectivism and solidarity, and the larger abolitionist project of dismantling oppressive systems and institutions that regulate information, and creating new forms of information that are liberatory and communal?

And further: How do we move beyond the normative and disciplinary project or force of IL, and is it necessarily and inevitably so? If IL's praxis of transformation is based on more efficiency,

more inclusivity, more expansion, what world is that building and moving us towards? Does IL hold the horizon of liberation in view, and does it move us there? What does an investment in the future of IL obfuscate and avoid, erase? What must it need to (not) remember or dismember?

We don't necessarily have answers to these questions, but we feel the urgency and necessity of offering them so they can be thought, considered, explored, and potentially responded to by those who come after us.

But one thing we do know: insofar as IL (or literacies; and we should always be seeking and supporting local and communal variations, rather than universal or totalising frames) should continue to exist as a learning paradigm or pedagogy, it cannot constrain or in any way foreclose upon the existence and survival thereof, but rather must engage deeply with and support the proliferation of information worlds and the knowledge systems (the habits, relations, performances, theories, methods, orientations, expressions, practices, and processes) of the many relationships, entanglements, encounters, and communities whose worlds constitute and animate ours.

Declarations

Ethics approval

Ethical review was not considered necessary in alignment with guidance at Indiana University or Austin Community College on the conduct of ethical research.

Funding

Not applicable.

AI-generated content

No AI tools were used.

Acknowledgements

References

Accardi, M. T., Drabinski, E., & Kumbier, A. (2020). Beginning and extending the conversation. *Communication in Information Literacy, 14*(1), 1-11.

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.

Bright, K. and Colón-Aguirre, M. (2023). Special guest editorial: Inclusive pedagogies and services. *Reference Services Review, 52*(1), 3-6.

Brown, J. [California Conference on Library Instruction]. (2022, June 10). *CCLI 2022 keynote: Speculative pedagogies for liberation* [Video]. Youtube.

Burnett, G., Besant, M., & Chatman, E. A. (2001). Small worlds: Normative behavior in virtual communities and feminist bookselling. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 52*(7), 536.

Chatman, E. A. (1999). A theory of life in the round. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science, 50*(3), 207-217.

Chatman, E. A. (2000). Framing social life in theory and research. *The New Review of Information Behaviour Research, 1*, 3-17.

Douglas, V. A. (2021, June 25). *Counternarratives in information literacy* [Keynote Transcript]. Workshop for Instruction in Library Use (WILU) Closing Plenary Session.

Ellenwood, D. (2020, August 19). Information has value: The political economy of information capitalism. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe.*

Espinel, R., & Tewell, E. (2023). Working conditions are learning conditions: Understanding information literacy instruction through neoliberal capitalism. *Communications in Information Literacy, 17*(2), 573–590.

Ferretti, J. A. (2020, 4 August). *Disciplines as domination: How interrogating traditional research and knowledge will help make our libraries and archives more equitable*. Medium.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (2nd ed.). Vintage Books.

Gibson, A. N., & Cooke, N. A. (2021). Connecting Chatman to this moment. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies 3*(3), 1-7.

Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study. Minor Compositions.

Hicks, A. (2018). Making the case for a sociocultural perspective on information literacy. In K. P. Nicholson & M. Seale (Eds.), *The politics of theory and the practice of critical librarianship* (pp. 69–85). Library Juice Press.

Littletree, S., Andrews, N., & Loyer, J. (2023). Information as a relation: Defining Indigenous information literacy. *Journal of Information Literacy, 17*(2), 4–23.

Loyer, J. (2018). Indigenous information literacy: Nêhiyaw kinship enabling self-care in research. In K. P. Nicholson & M. Seale (Eds.), *The politics of theory and the practice of critical librarianship* (pp. 145–156). Library Juice Press.

Mallon, M., Nichols, J., Foster, E., Santiago, A., Seale, M., & Brown, R. (2023). *Exploring inclusive & equitable pedagogies: Creating space for all learners*. Association of College & Research Libraries.

Maybee, C., Kaufmann, K., Tucker, V., & Budd, J. (2023). Recognizing information literacy as a discipline: Reflections on an ACRL 2023 panel discussion. *College & Research Libraries News, 84*(10), 363-368.

McKittrick, K. (2020). *Dear science and other stories*. Duke University Press.

Moreno, T. H. (2023). Centering justice/decentering whiteness: The case for abolition in information literacy pedagogical praxis. *Reference Services Review*, *52*(1), 133-148.

Seale, M. (2013). The neoliberal library. In L. Gregory & S. Higgins (Eds.), *Information literacy and social justice: Radical professional praxis* (pp. 39–61). Library Juice Press.

Smith, L. N., & Hicks, A. (2023). Taking stock of critical information literacy. *Journal of Information Literacy, 17*(1), 1–5.

Yang, K. W. (2009). Focus on policy: Discipline or punish? Some suggestions for school policy and teacher practice. *Language Arts, 87*(1), 49-61.

Zurkowski, P. G. (1974). *The information service environment: Relationships and priorities*. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science.