Anniversary of IL special issue 2024

Critical information literacy: The challenge, the criticism, and the need for reflection and research

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Abstract

This think piece examines the recent literature surrounding critical information literacy, the criticisms within this that the theory has not centered anti-racism within its scholarship, and the challenges toward its implementation. It concludes that more time and space should be given to IL practitioners to explore CIL, and how we should foreground Critical Race Theory and openly acknowledge white supremacy within our praxis.

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1. Positionality statement

I have never written a positionality statement in any of my writing before, and am guided by the advice of Homan (2023) in doing so.

I am a white, cis-gendered, straight, able-bodied woman in my late thirties from the North of England. My pronouns are she/her. I have lived experience of post-natal depression and bereavement which continue to shape my life. I have worked in education since I was 23, within higher education for the last nine years. I hold a MSc in Information and Library Management which I completed through distance learning whilst working full time as a librarian, and later completed a PGCHE and FHEA, and I have my MCLIP, though I have not revalidated for four years. I am a parent to a small child, and I work full time. I have been learning about critical library pedagogy since Alan Carberry's 2017 LILAC keynote gave me the vocabulary to do so and I have co-edited a collection of chapters that explores this concept in practice. I work in an academic librarian/liaison role and I absolutely love teaching and working with students and researchers, though I recognise that librarianship and higher education has colonialization and

white supremacy ingrained within it. I acknowledge that my ethnicity, class background, sexuality, gender identity and abled body have afforded me unearned privileges and I wish to improve my understanding and practice around critical information literacy, guided by the experience and scholarship of people of colour and those with lived experiences different from my own.

2. The current and the criticism

Critical pedagogy is a teaching and instructional praxis that aims to emancipate learners and encourage a more critical consciousness; critical information literacy (often shortened to CIL) is the theory related specifically to the ways in which power systems control the creation and distribution of information (Drabinski & Tewell, 2019). It is possible to teach CIL using a non-critical pedagogy, such as the more traditional banking methods of lecturing, however as critical pedagogy aims to enact social justice within teaching, the theory complements this praxis.

Since Elmborg's heavily cited 2006 article and Tewell's literature review a decade later in 2015, the thinking and practice of CIL within academic libraries has grown exponentially. Pagowsky and McElroy published a two-volume collection of essays and think pieces in 2016 that introduced many librarians, including myself, who reviewed the book for CILIP's Information Professional, on how to implement the theory into their practices. This inspired a book I co-edited with Elizabeth Brookbank which is a collection of fifteen chapters showing examples of how critical library pedagogy is being implemented in practice by librarians in the U.S, Canada, and the U.K. (Brookbank & Haigh, 2021). Communications in Information Literacy ran a special issue on critical library instruction in 2020 (Accardi, M. et al). More recently, The Journal of Information Literacy has a special issue dedicated to exploring "the scope and possibility of critical information practice" (Smith, L. & Hicks, 2023, p. 1).

Although interest is growing, the development of critical library instruction over the past fifteen years has been rightly criticised for its avoidance of addressing white supremacy (Leung & López-McKnight, 2020). As Naomi Smith et al.'s work on digital racism shows (2023), there is a "silence" within academic librarianship surrounding the inequalities embedded within the technologies widely used in libraries within both patron-facing and management systems that perpetuates the injustices found more widely within academia. Academic libraries have also been accused of not prioritising social justice and anti-racism within IL instruction (Williams & Kamper, 2023). We as educators need to explicitly name whiteness and white supremacy within our CIL teaching as one of the systems of power and oppression that decide what authority is (Leung, 2022), what "quality" is, and what "acceptable" information sources used within higher education looks like, and we need to be supported in doing this by our managers and leaders.

For a wider IL audience, the implementation of CIL theory into lifelong teaching and learning is important if we are truly to be able to make informed, critical, balanced judgements about any information we find and use (Information Literacy Group, 2018). However, the works in the aforementioned collections (including in my own chapter) are mostly either individuals working within institutions making personal changes to praxis, or groups making incremental changes to departmental practice. The work of Mirza et al. highlights how work in critical library pedagogy tends to be individualistic rather than collective, reliant on "the initiative and agency of individual teachers" (2023), which exacerbates neoliberalism within the institution, continuing to reward the individual performance of those teachers engaging with it as being innovative and inspiring,

rather than leading to solidarity and collective action within the profession. As Leung & López-McKnight put it in their profound and challenging reaction to 2010's "Critical Library Instruction: theories and methods" (Accardi, M. T. et al., 2010), "Progress in the profession is generally defined by a liberal marker of attainment that has no real, concrete impact in the lives of those most marginalized." (2020, p. 14).

Through changing the way we think about CIL, from an individual to a collective praxis, which acknowledges white supremacy and reflects on the ways in which it is upheld within our profession, our work as critical librarians will have more impact on the IL of those we support and teach.

3. The challenge

Although there are many published think pieces (like this one!)[1] on the theory and practice of CIL, and a marked interest in it at library-practitioner conferences and training events (Brookbank et al., 2019; CILIP London & Haigh, 2022; UHMLG, 2023), it is less prevalent within conferences aimed at library leaders and managers. Most of the chapters within Brookbank and Haigh (2021) and Pagowsky and McElroy (2016) focus on implementing critical pedagogy into the work being done in libraries by library workers who have the time and space to implement it. Even in these instances, practitioners must deal with negative responses to addressing white supremacy and CIL from academics, senior managers, or peers within their teams (Brayton & Casey, 2019). "Push-back" from faculty and library colleagues, as well as resistance encountered from students, is explored in Williams and Kamper's article, which describes critical librarianship as "practically toothless in helping to dismantle policies and practices that reproduce inequities" (2023, p. 234).

Senior managers within organisations like higher education institutions need to show a "demonstrable commitment" to anti-racist practice in order for more staff to feel comfortable in speaking about and reporting racial issues (Lancaster University Race Equality Network, 2020). Leaders managing teams that deliver IL support need to be committed to their staff's implementation of a more critical pedagogy that includes learning from CRT, and support staff in dealing with any push-back they encounter. This support could include facilitating opportunities for staff to pursue teaching qualifications or training in personal pedagogies, financing conference and training attendance for all team members, including team members that are not presenting a research output and attributing any innovations to all the team members that did the work. Any implementations made should not be add-ons to an already full workload; tasks should be renegotiated to accommodate the time needed to fully engage with this work.

Personal pedagogies are an emerging area of thought within IL (Aston & Walsh, 2021) as more IL practitioners look to develop their teaching practice. More funded practice-based research is needed on how pedagogies that centre voices and experiences of the students, such as culturally sustaining pedagogies, can be successfully implemented in IL classrooms. Culturally sustaining pedagogy aims to stop seeing the literacies of communities of colour as "bridges" to thinking, writing, and speaking like the accepted standard (i.e., white) (Paris & Alim, 2017), and

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[1] This is an issue in all aspects of critiquing the structure of higher education – lots of writing, not much doing. As Jones-Devitt et al. ask, "why is writing an article the conduit, rather than by taking action?" (2020, p. 88). However, in hierarchical neoliberal structures that seemingly reward conformity and complacency, writing is sometimes all we have.

is the pedagogy that most speaks to me personally as one that can truly lead to critical reflection and a more CIL. As Paris notes in a 2020 interview, however, culturally sustaining pedagogies cannot exist in educational institutions as they are, and teachers continue to work against the systems that employ them (Caraballo et al., 2020). The same, I would argue, applies to IL practitioners.

One-shot teaching is often cited as the norm in a higher education context, and critiqued by librarians accordingly (Pagowsky, 2022), however there is some growth in online academic skills modules that semi-embed some IL teaching in courses (Withorn et al., 2021). Re-evaluating the content of these modules, which were often created as a response to all teaching moving online very quickly due to the 2020 lockdown (Bastone & Clement, 2022; Lomness et al., 2021; Morris & McDermott, 2022), through a critical lens is paramount, in order for this to not become the tick-box exercise that neoliberal one-shot library instruction has become.

4. Keeping up with the discourse

Keeping up with the discourse is hard and having the time and energy to do so is a privilege. As Brady states, though, not having the time to engage in scholarship harms librarians personally, and the profession more widely (2023). Further professional development in understanding the wider critical theories that influence people's IL is high on my own CPD agenda, but it requires an institutional, sector-wide commitment to giving staff the time and opportunity to develop their understanding so that CIL can progress as a theory and lead to a better-informed community of practice. We need to be better informed about issues related to CRT, especially if like myself you grew up with white privilege, with higher education as an expected life-event, and are therefore the part of the water in which everyone swims (Blackwell, 2018; Chiu et al., 2021). Clarke notes in their 2022 conference paper for LOEX, that without engaging with the issues of racism and the scholarship of critical librarianship and oppression within education owing to white supremacy the same harms are perpetuated within the IL classroom by "acculturating students to racist systems" (2022, p. 38).

Eight years ago, filled with the vocational (over)confidence and awe of a newly qualified librarian in her first higher education post, I remember internally disparaging those who couldn't keep up with all the changes in librarianship. Then in 2020 I became a parent, financially responsible for three people during a pandemic, and had a mental health crisis, and now I recognise that I was extremely privileged to be able to spend my "free" time reading around my day job. So, given the time and energy constraints my circumstances now see me working within, I may have missed huge chunks of scholarship in this piece that I would otherwise have cited. The Zotero library of the CRT Collective is incredibly useful in finding scholarship on CRT related to LIS and IL, as well as the cheekily-captioned reading list at the end of the thought-provoking blog on slow librarianship by Meredith Farkas (2021). The work of conferences such as CALC in adding videos of their conferences and training sessions to their YouTube channels is also a valuable source to keep up with what is current.

When examining how women's limited education led to them not being involved in politics Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) wrote "we are little interested about what we do not understand." I see my own continuous professional development as a feminist praxis; I have the opportunity and access to information that my great-grandmothers could only dream of because of the work done by feminists in expanding women's educational opportunities. Acknowledging and furthering an understanding of white supremacy, CRT, and how this impacts digital technologies

are possible given the time and space to learn about and recognise them and sit with and reflect on the feelings they provoke.

5. Conclusion

To further CIL theory and practice, there needs to be collective action to embed time to learn, reflect, and grow as a praxis within academic librarianship. We all need to have the time and space to properly understand and reflect on the issues of CRT and how it should inform IL teaching and scholarship. This prioritisation of staff learning and professional development needs to be implemented by managers who can influence the re-distribution and delegation of work and encourage a cultural shift towards embracing the sometimes difficult and challenging work of embedding CIL into academia.

Declarations

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