

## Anniversary of IL special issue 2024

# Cruel optimism, or, this time will be different!

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## Abstract

Information literacy (IL) is an important means by which academic libraries prove their value within higher education and to broader (sceptical) society. Yet if IL is an array of sociocultural practices that are ultimately about how we find meaning in and engage with the world, then it cannot be taught or obtained in a classroom, even through the most carefully considered (critical) pedagogy. As a result, we find ourselves in a "stuck place", in a relation of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011) with IL, a relation in which we return again and again to the thing we desire, with the expectation that *this* time, things will be different; everything will work out. What if academic librarians were to acknowledge and refuse the ambivalence of our cruel relation with IL and envision ourselves as helping students learn "how to library" instead? If we de-centred this particular version of IL within academic librarianship, what might we make room for? What alternative spaces for thinking might open up?

## Keywords

academic libraries; information literacy; information literacy theory; library instruction

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## 1. Introduction

"Google can bring you back 100,000 answers. A Librarian can bring you back the right one."  
Neil Gaiman

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When we received the invitation to contribute to this special issue of *Journal of Information Literacy* (JIL), we were extremely flattered, having worked with Alison Hicks on other projects, and greatly respecting her work. The assignment felt almost too easy—only 2000 words, an intentionally provocative think piece, and about information literacy (IL), a concept we have not only been researching and thinking about for the majority of our careers as academic librarians but have also been teaching at the university level. And yet we kept putting it off; not just the actual writing, but even the initial brainstorming about what we might write. Nearly a year passed with only vague conversations and an increasing sense of frustration at our own inability to say more on a phrase and a concept we understood so intimately and had had so many feelings about previously.

In our seemingly unproductive conversations, we returned frequently to Eisenhower and Smith's essay "The Library as 'Stuck Place': Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University," which closes out Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier's (2010) collection *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. The impact of this volume cannot be overstated; it popularised critical IL and critical library pedagogy among practitioners and scholars, ushering in a new moment within the IL project, and raised awareness of critical approaches to librarianship more broadly. Eisenhower and Smith's (2010) essay is not a straightforward endorsement of the necessity and importance of critical library instruction, however. Instead, it highlights contradictory impulses within IL discourse, the goals of the neoliberal academy, and the practice of critical library pedagogy. Whereas professional texts, standards, and guidelines establish a direct connection between IL and the formation of autonomous liberal subjects (Seale, 2013; 2016), the "commodification of information—and the technology it depends on—raises questions about the forms of subjectivity IL can produce" (Eisenhower & Smith, 2010, p. 308). Within the context of contemporary higher education, in particular, which seeks to impart in students disciplinary knowledge and skills for information work, "the ideal role of IL is to reduce friction in the flow of potential labor and (future) capital" (Eisenhower & Smith, 2010, p. 316). Moreover, the authors continue, librarians' agency within the classroom is limited and our ability to engage in critical pedagogy largely depends on our relationship with faculty (Eisenhower & Smith, 2010). Finally, while our engagement with critical library pedagogy is motivated in part by a desire to resist neoliberal "motives of efficiency" (Eisenhower & Smith, 2010, p. 316), such counterhegemonic efforts are always subsumed by the university and the library as evidence of innovation and partnerships—of "value." Eisenhower and Smith (2010) conclude that critical library pedagogy represents a "profoundly ambivalent" (p. 315) and even "negligible" practice (p. 316), where, at best, thinking might occur. Critical library instruction is a *stuck place*, an impossible practice marked by unreasonable desire.

We gravitated towards the notion of *stuckness* because it so perfectly encapsulated what we were experiencing—we were intellectually stuck, unable to say something meaningful about IL, a concept that has been central to librarianship for 50 years and key to our own scholarship and professional practice. We gravitated towards it because the discourse around academic library instruction feels, to us, similarly stuck; never-ending circular discussions that spiral nowhere and resolve nothing. As Hicks (2018) describes, an "overwhelming focus on teaching has meant that librarians have lost sight of what IL is or could be within communities today" (p. 70).

## 2. Cruel optimism

If the emergence of capitalist modernity instantiated specific temporalities, namely, the linear time of progress, forever moving forward into the future, neoliberalism has introduced other

sorts of temporal forms, including, we suggest, stuckness. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant (2011) explores the strategies people use to “manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine,” (p. 10) i.e. the sense of ongoing crisis experienced by people before the systematic dismantling of postwar social welfare programs under neoliberal policies. One such strategy, Berlant argues, is entering into a relation of *cruel optimism*:

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (Berlant, 2011, p. 1)

Cruel optimism is both enabled by and produces stuckness. In a relation of cruel optimism, we return again and again to the thing we desire, with the expectation that *this* time, things will be different; everything will work out. We remain in a constant state of vigilance, holding on to the possibility that something might happen, for a desire we often can’t even fully name or identify. Berlant refers to this temporality, our ordinary present, and which we would connect to neoliberalism, as *impasse*. Impasse, they argue, is a holding pattern (Berlant, 2011, p. 5); “induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown” (Berlant, 2011, p. 10). Subjects living within impasse are “overwhelmed, forced to change, and yet also stuck” (Berlant, 2011, p. 21) and so turn to optimism, “a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable” (Berlant, 2011, p. 14).

In 1974, spurred by a sense of an emergent crisis of information illiterate workers facing a new information-based society and economy, Paul Zurkowski coined the phrase “information literacy”; academic librarians have existed in a relation of cruel optimism with this political project ever since. Zurkowski’s concept was strategic and profit-oriented, a means to advance the financial interests of the information industry through the commodification of information (Enright, 2013; Drabinski, 2014; Nicholson, 2016). Librarianship in turn has deployed the concept in strategic and self-interested ways. IL has inspired standards, guidelines, journals, professional development programs, and conferences. Librarians are acculturated into the IL mythos in library school curricula and in their first jobs (Pho et al., 2022). The pursuit of IL is at the heart of recent efforts by librarians to tackle fake news, dis/misinformation, and artificial intelligence in library classrooms, replacing earlier efforts revolving around Wikipedia or the internet. IL is an important means by which academic libraries prove their value within higher education and to broader (sceptical) society (Pawley, 2003; O’Connor, 2009). These efforts are inextricable from librarianship’s ongoing sense of crisis (Buschman, 2003; Drabinski, 2016; Popowich, 2021) due to the mass adoption of personal computing, the expansion of the internet, and the ideological, political, and economic ascendancy of Silicon Valley over the past 30 years. IL forms the boundaries of our professional domain; it proves our relevance; it defends us. This understanding of IL lies at the core of our profession, and we very much like that it reaffirms our vocational awe, and we keep returning to it, as though this time (critical pedagogy) will work, or this time (social media influencers) or this time (antiracist pedagogy) or this time (AI). We have been treading water with IL for a long time, stuck in an impasse. This impasse is not solely of our creation; it is structured by the institutions in which we live and work. We cannot easily

change the material and structural conditions of our instructional labour; we cannot socialise the corporate university. Our investment in IL has led to burnout, feelings of being overwhelmed, professional anxiety, overthinking, and lack of confidence.

### 3. “How to Library”

And yet, IL is not something any one of us can just teach to students, not during a semester-long course, let alone a one-shot. If IL is an array of sociocultural practices that are ultimately about how we find meaning in and engage with the world (Hicks, 2018; Lloyd, 2005), then it cannot be taught or obtained in a classroom, even through the most carefully considered (critical) pedagogy. It is unattainable, “an [un]reasonable desire” (Eisenhower & Smith, 2010, p. 306), one that demonstrates how “the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (Berlant, 2011, p. 2).

Instead, what if academic librarians were to acknowledge and refuse the ambivalence of our cruel relation with IL and envision ourselves as helping students learn “how to library” instead? If we de-centred this particular version of IL within academic librarianship, what might we make room for? What alternative spaces for thinking might open up?

Academic libraries and higher education institutions are not natural, and using them effectively requires acculturation, a process librarians are well-positioned to facilitate. We are not calling for a return to decontextualised and uncritical *bibliographic instruction* but rather for teaching “how to library” with an emphasis on the broader social, political, and economic contexts within which libraries and higher education were created and function, similar to what Lea and Street (1998) describe as an “academic socialisation” (p. 158) approach to academic writing. Using a situated practice lens, Lloyd (2005) describes IL as “a way of knowing” that “requires engagement with information through the discourse and discursive practices specific to [a given] context” (Lloyd, 2005, p. 84). Understanding how academic libraries work and how to effectively use their systems and tools is undoubtedly instrumental, but IL instruction is, and always has been instrumental, as Eisenhower and Smith (2010) observed some fifteen years ago. Moreover, it is questionable whether an IL model grounded in the practices of faculty and librarians can meet “a learner’s future civic, leisure, and workplace information needs” (Hicks, 2018, p. 75); what if we stopped stubbornly insisting that it can? It is this pretence, this fantasy, that is cruel. “How to library” is also better scoped to our agency in the classroom (Douglas, 2021; Leung & Lopez-McKnight, 2020; Mirza, Nicholson, & Seale, 2023) and our time (Nicholson, 2019; Nicholson, Pagowsky, & Seale, 2019). “How to library” might also give us space and time to explore IL in more generative ways that might intersect with our daily work but are not necessarily of it (Pho et al., 2022; Smale, 2017). Instead of endlessly rehashing how to teach IL in our research and scholarship, we might be better able to engage with disciplines and perspectives outside of LIS (Seale, 2013; Nicholson, 2014; Hicks, 2018).

We might not be able to change the material conditions of our lives and workplaces without great effort, but we can refuse to engage in a relation of cruel optimism that comforts us and affirms our sense of importance while we spiral in stuckness. We can refuse the impossibility of this work.

## Declarations

### Ethics approval

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### AI-generated content

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