

Conference report

LILAC 2024: Hidden knowledge, empathy and understanding

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The experience of the LILAC 2024 conference as one of the student Rowena McCrae-Gibson award holders.

After receiving the email that I had won the student bursary to attend LILAC 2024 and doing many happy dances, my head became full of worries. I had never been to a conference before, let alone travelled to one by myself! From the get-go, however, the inherent empathy and compassion was impressed on me as the organisers of LILAC went out of their way to make me feel comfortable and safe. As time went on, I chose my parallel sessions and read the abstracts for the keynotes and got more and more excited as the date got closer. Every aspect had been thought through by the organisers: from the tweets that were sent out from the LILAC account prior to the conference to the New Professionals breakfasts that were held every morning of the conference (these ensured that you could at least recognise some faces as the days went on). The conference seemed to be set out to clear any murky, hidden knowledge that one might not know on the first time attending a conference.

On the first day of the conference, I arrived at an atrium full of smiles and excitement as everyone prepared for the delegates to arrive. There were pastries, coffee (thank goodness!) and biscuits for everyone's early-morning breakfast needs. There were stickers to decorate your badges, which everyone particularly enjoyed (I went for coffee and plants; the essentials), and you could peruse the posters that detailed the different information literacy (IL) pursuits of multiple institutions.

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The first session of the day was led by Rachel Davies and Joe Larkin (2024) and examined the hypocrisy of librarians when we teach our students and asked questions like “what do we tell students to do that we don’t do ourselves?”. They questioned why we do this; is it due to vocational awe and the shame that comes with it? Is it because we are responding to assessments and classes that we ourselves do not have any control over? Rachel and Joe posited “authenticity as accessibility for students”, to give students help when “navigating the hidden curriculum” (Davis & Larkin, 2024).

Uncovering hidden knowledge was a theme I noticed throughout the conference, and it was mentioned at least once in each of the sessions I attended. The keynote speech for the first day, a panel discussion about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and IL spoke about how AI could be used as a great leveller for students who struggle with communication, and that it could be a key tool for accessibility (Nephin et al., 2024). This was mirrored again in the final session of the day: *The Information Literacy behind Information Literacy: A (Wild!) Discussion* (Haworth et al, 2024), where the language, or multiple languages, of IL was discussed and then debated as a barrier to engagement.

The first day finished with a networking evening and the IL Awards. The sentiments of the winners were consistent to the ones I’d heard and would hear throughout the conference; that IL didn’t have to be intimidating and complicated and that little steps, such as the ones in the University of the Arts London’s (2024) *12 days of AI*, would make a big difference.

The second day began with the new professional’s breakfast, ran by the IL Group sub-committee that gave new professionals (defined as having under 5 years’ experience) a chance to meet people before the day started. There was a lot of laughter as we compared stories and challenges from our work!

The keynote from Day 2 was an inspiring talk given by Maha Bali (2024), from the University of Cairo. Even though she wasn’t in the room (she Zoomed in), she was incredibly receptive and accommodated the activities she’d planned based on the reception of the audience. She talked about how to teach students to ethically use AI and used very well-received cake metaphors to do so: if you’re time-poor, you could buy a cake from a supermarket and present it, however if you ran a bakery, you shouldn’t sell things that were made by another (especially if you don’t know who is behind the making!) A favourite quote from her was: “things that are meant to touch people’s hearts shouldn’t be created with AI” (Bali, 2024).

The day ended with two of my favourite sessions: *Academic Libraries and Neurodiversity*, led by Emma Finney (2024), and *Accessibility 101*, led by Eva Garcia Grau (2024). Emma led the session with compassion and honesty and gave us tools that would help the library become a more inclusive space that would help anyone, no matter their neurotype become information literate. They also impressed on us the “unwritten rules of the library” (Finney, 2024), which we as librarians would know, but not a student starting university for the first time! How could we help make these rules more obvious and clearer?

The session led by Eva Garcia Grau featured some fidget toys (no, they weren’t why this afternoon was one of my favourites...mostly) and humorous videos demonstrating practices that would lead to barriers in students’ learning such as a covered mouth, backgrounds that would make words disappear and random monologues about unicorns (which I’m sure would be

applicable to all). These practices, when pointed out, seem like obvious hindrances, but it's surprising how many rarely think about them.

After the sessions ended for the day, there was the conference party. This featured food, drinks, brilliant conversations, and wonderful dancing! The stereotype of librarians as quiet, stiff, shushing individuals was certainly broken left, right and centre as delegates shimmied their way through the night!

It was a testament to the dedication of the delegates as we all turned up bright and early for the final day of LILAC 2024. The first session of the day was particularly thought-provoking as Andrew Preater, Darren Flynn, Teresa Crow, and Rosie Hare discussed the social class perspectives within academic libraries and the imposter syndrome phenomena that comes from not being middle-class. A quote that has stayed with me from this session was surrounding what we should instil into students when they first come into the library: "there is a place for you, you are welcome here" (Preater et al, 2024).

Andy Walsh's (2024) keynote on Playful and Compassionate Approaches for Inclusive IL Instruction embodied the *playful* approach to learning as all the delegates did a Mexican wave to start off. Andy discussed the benefits of having a compassionate, psychologically safe environment to teach IL in; one where the power dynamic is shifted and there is increased inclusivity. More than that, however, Andy commented on how "there is no correct way of being information literate" (Walsh, 2024) and that "being information literate might mean/require different things due to context" (Walsh, 2024). IL may seem complicated and scary to those who don't understand it, but through compassionate and playful teaching we can help students feel more comfortable and more receptive to learning.

The conference finished on a high note as Jess Haigh (2024) asked us to "reflect on 50 years of information literacy". Everyone was smiling and laughing through their exhaustion and questioned how the discipline has evolved and will evolve in the next 50 years.

Every person at the conference made me feel welcome as a first timer to any conference. The movements of each day were clearly articulated through the website and the X page. The nerves I had felt prior to my attendance were assuaged as people came up to me and asked for my story. Each of the sessions echoed the sentiments and values of the conference: compassion, empathy, and integrity. The *hidden knowledge, unwritten rules and hidden curriculum* of academic libraries were sought to be uncovered and examined.

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