Conference report

LILAC 2024: Compassion, authenticity, and positive pragmatism

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Abstract

LILAC 2024 was hosted at Leeds Beckett University in March 2024. This conference report explores the key themes of compassion and authenticity for ourselves and for our learners, and shares the positive and pragmatic approaches presented during the event. These themes were realised through a range of sessions on topics including: artificial intelligence and critical AI literacy; playfulness, creativity and visual approaches to induction; and inclusive design in our teaching and our libraries. The pragmatic and innovative examples shared at LILAC, within a spirit of compassion and inclusiveness, encourage us to recontextualise existing IL skills and literacies for our learners, which have never been more important.

With its abundance of practical ideas shared within a reflective and convivial atmosphere, LILAC is hard to beat, and 2024's conference hosted by Leeds Beckett University (25-27th March 2024) was no exception.

As might be expected, a common recurring theme throughout was Artificial Intelligence (AI). The first keynote – a panel discussion on AI – set the tone, offering a reset moment and reminding us of the opportunities AI poses for us as a profession. Day-to-day, many of us may be in the

thick of hasty policy-drafting and academic integrity-related panic, but LILAC gave us the space to reflect on the uses of AI and how it impacts our information literacy (IL) models, our teaching and our interactions with our library users, whether they are students, academics, young people or the wider community.

As the panel reiterated, there is nothing new for us with AI. We have the same challenges in supporting the development of IL and critical literacy skills, only now we need to meet them more quickly. It was reinvigorating to listen to our expert panel emphasise that there has never been a better time for us to promote criticality and critical thinking, and to make IL and AI relevant to our learners. Dr Anna-Lena Hoh's session on the link between digital and information literacy in the context of AI and plagiarism also reminds us of the need for transparency – some of our student learners are not necessarily *academically* digitally literate, and open conversations about AI tools, ethics and academic integrity are important. In relation to this, Maha Bali shared her thoughts on critical AI literacy in an enjoyable online keynote which made excellent use of voting tools and metaphors to capture the thoughts of her audience. Home baking or shop-bought cake, anyone? There was broad agreement that our learners need to develop their knowledge and criticality before reaching for AI tools – again, nothing new here. AI is only a research or conversation *partner* and cannot do everything a human can do. Indeed, AI should not be used for *matters of the heart*, and authenticity must be maintained. On a practical level, LILAC presenters suggested that the value of AI lies in high time/low stakes tasks, such as CV templates, interview questions, or the research process, especially if fed with a specific set of data to work with. AI can help to demystify a topic, describe images or translate languages, and in these respects it has the potential to act as a leveller. All that said, there remain concerns around ethics, environmental sustainability, accessibility and the alienation of those lacking digital skills.

This positive pragmatism was complemented by a sense of compassion and authenticity throughout the conference. Andrew Walsh's keynote on compassionate pedagogy and playfulness reminded us that we should move more towards our learners' needs and meet them where they are at, regardless of what we or others think our learners *ought* to know. Accepting and welcoming the diversity of our learners, perhaps using play as a means to include and interact with everyone, permits us to adapt our session content to empower learners and overcome barriers.

In this spirit, two complementary sessions offered motivating examples of ways to rearticulate and recontextualise our services for arts students. Karen Fisher's (Leeds Beckett) session on serendipitous searching shared exciting work undertaken around induction activities for artists/art students to foreground our engagement with these students and within their artistic practice, particularly to support footfall in reaching pre-pandemic levels. Useful approaches included aligning induction with the concept of taking a visual journey, with students bringing their own photographs of campus for use as a starting point for visual research, keyword identification and generation and image database searching. One further approach, *the incident room,* asked students to present research in a visual way using a *researcher as detective* analogy. A week after the initial investigating team briefing, students returned to explain research to their chief inspector. Fisher shared that this task-based approach was a prime opportunity to offer advice and for students to see connections and where research might lead. The potential of visual inspiration encompassed rethinking displays of print resources to align with academic themes and referrals to powerfully emphasise the role of browsing rather than searching, whilst embedding visual literacy.

Wood and Appleton shared the results of a research project at Leeds Arts University, demonstrating how their approach to IL teaching evolved into three distinct themes for arts and design students, *teaching, handling, and making*. Tactile special collections items such as zines, were brought into the studio to embed library and metaliteracy within artistic and studio culture. As a result, online resources pages were renamed for clarity, ownership and autonomy and to foreground distinctive *human* outputs. Both sessions usefully modelled practice of the distinction between *inspiration* and *information* for arts and design students, as well as the opportunity to reflect on the nature of human creative outputs in an age of generative AI (GenAI).

The University of Sheffield's Creative Library Project is an inspiring example of how we can bring creativity and compassion into our interactions with our learners. The presenting team from Sheffield shared their practical *messy* workshops to demonstrate how to liberate the library through information creation. Following a connecting activity to encourage interaction and connection on our tables (designing a bookmark based on a favourite book), we participated in a short artistic project, such as creating blackout poetry from pages of books, collaging, and building fidget toys. At Sheffield, such activities are often focused around events such as Reclaim The Night, Black History Month and Disability History Month. The sharing of affirmations and hopes at the end was a joyful conclusion to the workshops and strengthened the feelings of authenticity and compassion within the room.

Emma Finney's session on Academic libraries and neurodiversity complemented the playful and creative compassionate pedagogies set by Andrew Walsh and the University of Sheffield team. Attendees were invited to share their preferred level of involvement in activities and discussion with communication stickers, while Emma set expectations around feedback; how and when to ask questions, and how activities were denoted in her slides - all techniques which could be used to reduce anxiety among learners. It was useful to consider the meaning of terms such as neurodiversity (plural, relates to all and includes all the brains in the world from mine to yours) and neurodivergent (singular, relates to the person who diverges from the dominant way of thinking and communicating) and the range of conditions which come under *being neurodivergent*. This led to a discussion about how we can all be agents for change and promote inclusivity for all, by designing this into not only our teaching but also our processes and making our *unwritten library rules* more explicit. Practical ways in which we can accept and welcome our learners into our libraries and classrooms include clear signage and use of photographs, providing materials in advance of meetings or sessions, and recognising the necessity of doodling, drawing and movement for some learners.

Continuing the theme of how to use visuals and/or appeal to visual learners, Halliday (Loughborough) and Harding's (House of Commons Library) session on using memes in information literacy teaching was refreshing. This was a fruitful opportunity to contextualise and critically appraise memes, offering strategies to appraise potential images for copyright issues, cultural sensitivity, or appropriation. Considering these processes specifically around memes was a useful starting point for a reflection on how these could/should underpin all areas of our practice. Our panellists advised memes should take into account audience and be used sparingly, whilst demonstrating the potential for memes to break tension and make sessions more memorable, especially within induction and icebreaker activities.

A key theme of this year's conference was the importance of continuing to apply and remodel our critical approaches to sources and Salma Abumeeiz (UCLA) offered a thoughtful

consideration of how to unpack information hierarchies and how we can address and navigate these issues, including respectful use of *alternative* or previously overlooked sources through resources such as the cite black women collective. As with the GenAI discussions, navigating these issues requires us to recontextualise the same skills and IL approaches we need to bring to the contemporary information landscape to navigate credibility, power and reflecting on our own biases.

With meaningful reflection and spirited discussions on the changing IL terrain and how we might foreground IL skills to navigate these, LILAC 2024 shared and instilled the spirit of compassionate pedagogies and positive pragmatism. Upon our return and looking ahead to the upcoming 24/25 academic year, we're sure not to be the only delegates adding some LILAC-inspired enhancements to our repertoire.