Project Report

Teaching critical information literacy through popular culture: A media studies approach using the Oz texts

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Abstract

This project report describes a 15-week undergraduate curriculum integrating Critical Information Literacy (CIL) with media studies theory for art and design students. Using multiple adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz*—Baum's 1900 novel, the 1939 MGM film, *The Wiz* (1978), and *Wicked* (2024)—as primary case studies, the course replaces conventional library-based information literacy (IL) instruction with a critical and culturally engaged approach. Through these familiar texts, students interrogate the authority, bias, and power structures embedded in historical and contemporary information systems. The curriculum introduces theoretical frameworks including encoding/decoding, semiotics, adaptation theory, and algorithmic critique, progressively building students' capacity to apply complex concepts to both historical and digital contexts. This model has increased engagement among creative students who often resist traditional IL teaching, with evidence of lasting transfer of CIL concepts into creative practice. The approach is adaptable across disciplines and demonstrates the value of popular culture as an accessible yet rigorous site for developing CIL.

Keywords: art education; critical information literacy; curriculum design; information literacy; media literacy; pedagogy

1. Introduction and context

Teaching information literacy (IL) to art and design students presents particular challenges. Many students in creative disciplines enter higher education with advanced visual literacy and an ability to interpret and produce complex visual narratives. Yet they may perceive the skills traditionally associated with IL—navigating academic databases, evaluating scholarly sources, mastering citation—as distant from their future professional needs. For some, such instruction

appears as a procedural requirement rather than a critical tool, often divorced from the creative and interpretive processes they value.

At my institution, this resistance was apparent in early attempts to integrate standard IL instruction into studio-based courses. Students often described library sessions as an interruption to creative work rather than a resource. However, the same students, when engaged in discussions of popular culture, demonstrated sophisticated intuitive understandings of visual rhetoric, symbolism, and audience reception. This contrast suggested an alternative approach: bridging Critical Information Literacy (CIL) theory with media studies pedagogy through the analysis of familiar cultural texts.

CIL, as developed by scholars such as Tewell (2015) and Drabinski (2014), reframes IL as a critical, socially situated practice. Rather than focusing solely on the technical competencies of locating, evaluating, and using information, CIL invites students to interrogate the systems that produce and circulate information: who controls them, whose perspectives they amplify or exclude, and how these systems reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies. For creative students already accustomed to the evaluative discourse of studio critique, this reframing offers a natural connection—provided the content is accessible and relevant.

Popular culture offers such a point of entry. Most students are familiar with *The Wizard of Oz* in at least one of its many forms. *The Wizard of Oz* is a widely circulated American story, originating as a 1900 novel and later adapted into a 1939 film, that explores authority, spectacle, and the search for home—motifs that continue to shape its global cultural reception. This cultural familiarity enables them to engage quickly with theoretical frameworks without the barrier of learning an unfamiliar narrative. Moreover, analysing adaptations of Oz across a 125-year span provides a rich lens for examining how meaning is constructed, contested, and re-encoded in response to shifting social, political, and technological contexts. This report documents the design, implementation, and outcomes of a curriculum built on that premise.

2. Theoretical framework

The pedagogical framework for this course integrates CIL with established media and cultural studies theories, treating popular culture texts as case studies in the production and negotiation of meaning within information systems.At its core, CIL shifts the focus from "How do I find credible information?" to "Who decides what counts as credible, and how are those decisions shaped by power?" (Drabinski, 2014; Tewell, 2015). This critical stance aligns with art and design students' existing awareness of audience, message, and medium. It also demands that IL be contextualised historically, culturally, and technologically, rather than treated as a neutral, universal skill set.

To scaffold this critical engagement, the curriculum draws on several interrelated theories. Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model provides the foundational structure, articulating how texts encode preferred readings aligned with dominant ideologies, while audiences may produce negotiated or oppositional readings. This conceptualisation resonates strongly with students accustomed to anticipating how audiences might interpret their creative work.

Linda Hutcheon's (2006) theory of adaptation deepens the analysis, positioning adaptation as both repetition and reinterpretation. The Oz texts provide striking examples of re-encoding:

Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) emerges from Progressive Era discourses around industrialisation, populism, and moral didacticism; MGM's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) reflects Depression-era desires for escapism and technological spectacle; *The Wiz* (1978) reimagines the story through African-American cultural perspectives in the post-Civil Rights era; and *Wicked* (2024) offers a feminist, queer-inflected reframing that interrogates moral binaries and questions official histories.

Roland Barthes' (1972) semiotics offers analytical tools for examining how signs and cultural codes operate within these adaptations, while his concept of "myth" parallels CIL's interest in how certain perspectives become naturalised. Marshall McLuhan's (1964) media theory emphasises the shaping force of technological form—whether novel, Technicolor film, stage musical, or streaming release—on narrative and reception. Judith Williamson's (1978) work on advertising underscores how media texts function as cultural technologies that construct subject positions, a key consideration in analysing adaptations aimed at different demographic and ideological markets.

Finally, the framework extends these historical theories into contemporary critiques of algorithmic control and data bias. Scholars such as Haider and Sundin (2019) have argued that search engines now constitute one of society's key infrastructures for knowing and becoming informed. Their ubiquity in everyday life—embedded in phones, browsers, and social media feeds—renders their operations nearly invisible, even as they shape what information can be found and what remains hidden. This invisibility, as Haider and Sundin note, produces both epistemological and civic challenges: while search and recommendation systems appear to democratise access to knowledge, they are commercially and technically centralised, structured by logics of monetisation, ranking, and visibility that reproduce existing inequities.

In this sense, algorithmic platforms function as modern "wizards": powerful yet concealed arbiters that mediate the flow of information and define what counts as relevant, credible, or authoritative. Situating these dynamics within CIL foregrounds that critical engagement with information must address not only content and interpretation but also the infrastructural and ideological systems through which knowledge is produced, circulated, and naturalised.

3. Curriculum implementation

The 15-week course is structured into four sequential modules, each anchored by one Oz text. The progression is designed to move students from foundational CIL concepts toward increasingly complex, intersectional, and contemporary applications, while keeping the theoretical load manageable through scaffolding.

The first module uses Baum's novel to establish CIL's emphasis on context and authority. Early sessions situate the text within its Progressive Era milieu, drawing out the political, economic, and cultural factors shaping its production and reception (Hutcheon, 2006). Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is introduced here, with students asked to demonstrate dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings of a chosen passage. This exercise is often revelatory, helping students recognise that they already employ sophisticated interpretive strategies in their studio practice. McLuhan's (1964) dictum that "the medium is the message" is then explored through a creative mapping exercise, in which students render Oz's geography based solely on textual description, revealing the constructedness of narrative space and its ideological

implications. The module concludes with an application of Williamson's (1978) advertising analysis, as students design promotional material for the novel that foregrounds its ideological underpinnings.

The second module shifts focus to the 1939 MGM film, introducing adaptation theory and historical contextualisation. The film's Depression-era re-encoding is analysed alongside changes in medium, casting, and production values, with students attending closely to how technological affordances shape narrative and meaning (Hutcheon, 2006). This module also brings in broader socio-historical contexts, including gender norms, economic anxieties, and emergent mass media structures (Barthes, 1972). The mid-semester assignment requires a sustained analytical paper, with prompts allowing students to explore topics such as surveillance and authority, queer readings, economic allegory, or disability representation, all framed through CIL concepts and supported by scholarly research.

In the third module, *The Wiz* (1978) serves as a case study in intersectional re-encoding. Semiotic analysis foregrounds the transformation of signs and symbols when translated into African-American urban contexts (Barthes, 1972), while historical study of 1970s social movements—Black feminism, post-Civil Rights activism, urban arts—provides critical background. Here, the course pivots toward contemporary concerns by introducing algorithmic auditing. Students investigate how *The Wiz* is represented across search engines and recommendation systems, drawing connections between historical media marginalisation and contemporary digital bias (Noble, 2018).

The final module addresses contemporary cultural critique through *Wicked* (2024), pairing Gregory Maguire's novel with its stage-to-film adaptation. Analysis focuses on how revisionist narratives challenge the moral binaries of the source material and the political implications of reframing villainy, authority, and historical record (Hutcheon, 2006). Students examine tensions between radical narrative content and commercial production, a discussion especially resonant for those entering creative industries. The course culminates in synthesis work using oppositional reading strategies informed by bell hooks (1992) and queer theory (Halberstam, 2011), enabling students to integrate multiple frameworks into their final projects.

Assessment is structured to reinforce progressive learning: early assignments focus on applying a single theoretical model; mid-course work demands integration of theory and context; final projects require multi-framework analysis and original critical insight. Weekly low-stakes exercises maintain engagement and provide opportunities for formative feedback.

4. Student engagement and learning

From the outset, this approach elicited a markedly different response from art and design students than traditional IL instruction. The use of familiar cultural texts lowered the barrier to engaging with complex theory, while the emphasis on visual and media analysis aligned with students' strengths.

Students repeatedly articulated moments of sudden comprehension when connecting CIL frameworks to their own practice. One graphic design student, introduced to Hall's reading positions, commented: "I never realised that what we do in critique—talking about how different people might read our designs—is the same thing as these three reading positions" (Hall, 1980).

Similarly, the Williamson (1978) advertising unit gave students a vocabulary for phenomena they had long intuited, with one noting: "Now I can explain why certain adverts make me uncomfortable instead of just feeling manipulated."

Assignments linking historical media to contemporary digital systems proved especially impactful. Algorithmic auditing exercises prompted several students to examine their own social media presence, with one illustration student re-conceptualising a character design after recognising its reinforcement of gender stereotypes discussed in class (Noble, 2018). Others documented platform bias affecting the visibility of their artwork, in some cases developing these observations into capstone projects.

Peer learning played a significant role in fostering CIL competencies. Group discussions revealed how varied backgrounds—regional, cultural, and racial—produced divergent readings of the same text, concretising CIL's assertion that information interpretation is shaped by positionality (Tewell, 2015). Collaborative semiotics exercises allowed visually adept students to assist peers struggling with theory, while those with stronger writing skills helped others articulate their insights academically.

Follow-up conversations with students and alumni indicate that these skills persist beyond the course. Graduates have reported applying CIL concepts in professional contexts, particularly when developing social media strategies, engaging in design critique, or navigating client-driven content constraints.

5. Challenges and adaptations

Several challenges emerged in implementing this curriculum. The most immediate was student scepticism toward the academic analysis of entertainment texts, often rooted in a belief that critical engagement might diminish enjoyment. Addressing this concern early—emphasising that critique can deepen rather than detract from pleasure—proved effective, with most students embracing the approach by the third week. This aligns with Hall's (1980) assertion that oppositional readings can coexist with pleasure, rather than functioning in opposition to it.

The density of theoretical readings also posed difficulties. Full essays by Barthes (1972) or McLuhan (1964) often proved overwhelming; breaking readings into focused excerpts, supplemented by guided questions and visual analysis exercises, improved comprehension. Introducing theory through familiar visual materials before moving to textual sources provided a "bridge" between students' existing competencies and new concepts, a strategy supported by CIL pedagogy literature (Tewell, 2015).

Balancing accessibility with academic rigour required deliberate alignment of learning objectives and assessments. While some colleagues questioned whether popular culture texts could sustain high-level critical work, student output consistently demonstrated that they could— provided the analysis was grounded in robust theoretical frameworks and contextual research (Hutcheon, 2006).

Variation in students' historical knowledge and academic writing skills also necessitated adaptation. Brief, targeted lectures provided essential context without overburdening the syllabus, while embedded writing instruction and peer review supported the development of scholarly communication. Collaboration with the campus writing centre further reinforced these

skills. This aligns with Drabinski's (2014) argument that authority is negotiated and contextual, and therefore must be scaffolded for students unfamiliar with disciplinary discourse.

Finally, technological access and literacy varied. Providing multiple access options for primary texts and step-by-step guidance for digital assignments ensured that students could participate fully regardless of their starting point. In algorithmic auditing activities, some students lacked prior experience with social media analytics, requiring additional technical guidance and alternative options for completion.

6. Conclusion and implications

This project demonstrates that popular culture can function as a powerful vehicle for CIL instruction, particularly for students in creative disciplines who may resist traditional approaches. By tracing adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz* across more than a century, students engage with a coherent narrative thread while encountering diverse historical, cultural, and technological contexts. The integration of CIL with adaptation theory, media studies, and intersectional analysis enables them to see how meaning is actively constructed, contested, and reimagined.

The success of this approach rests on its alignment with students' existing literacies, its scaffolded introduction of complex theory, and its explicit connection between academic analysis and professional creative practice. Evidence from student work and alumni feedback suggests that the skills developed—critical analysis, contextual research, awareness of bias and authority—extend beyond the course into both academic and professional domains. These outcomes suggest that resistance to IL instruction in creative fields is not a fixed student disposition, but a product of pedagogical approach and perceived relevance.

The model is adaptable to other cultural texts and disciplinary contexts, provided that the chosen materials have undergone significant re-encoding across time and media. Its emphasis on connecting theory to lived cultural experience offers a pathway for making IL both relevant and transformative, fostering not only analytical proficiency but also the critical consciousness necessary for navigating—and shaping—the complex information systems of the contemporary world.

Declarations

Ethics approval

Ethical review was not considered necessary in alignment with Ringling College of Art and Design's guidance on the conduct of ethical research. The project involved evaluation of a standard curriculum and analysis of anonymised student feedback and work for pedagogical reflection, with no sensitive personal data collected.

Funding

Not applicable.

AI-generated content

No AI tools were used in the creation of images or other graphical elements. An AI tool (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely as a writing assistant to support editing for clarity, to check UK English spelling, and to format references in APA 7th style. All content was conceived, drafted, and substantively written by the author, with AI assistance functioning only as a language and formatting tool. The author is responsible for all final content.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks colleagues in the Liberal Arts Department of Ringling College of Art and Design for feedback on the curriculum design and Alfred R. Goldstein Library staff for resource support.

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