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Ian Beilin
New York City College of Technology

Anne E. Leonard
New York City College of Technology

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Ian Beilin and Anne E. Leonard

Ian Beilin is an Assistant Professor and Instruction Librarian at New York City College of Technology in Brooklyn, NY. He holds an MSIS from the University at Albany and a PhD in History from Columbia University. His research interests include the ideological or political dimensions of information, and how literacy functions as a form of social and cultural capital.

Anne E. Leonard is an instruction and reference librarian at New York City College of Technology and a member of the library department's instruction team. She holds a MLIS from the University of Texas at Austin and an MS in Urban Affairs from Hunter College. Her academic interests include the professional status of academic librarians, the use of geographic information in high impact educational practices, and critical information literacy.

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Abstract

Critical Information Literacy does not dispense with teaching 'rules' (of grammar, citation, research, writing, etc.), but also places these elements within larger frameworks of critical dialogue, creative thinking and learning, and political and historical inquiry. All of these elements together empower students far more than a mastering of the rules and techniques of research. "Research and Documentation for the Information Age" is the critical information literacy course currently offered by the Library department at New York City College of Technology. With the luxury of three credits, we emphasize integration of library skills into all facets of assignments rather than presenting them as discrete competencies to be mastered and measured. Students come away not only with the ability to succeed in the world, but also with an ability to better understand their world's origins, structures, and functions, and with a clearer idea of how those structures are contingent and open to challenge. In other words, critical information literacy enables students to believe that they have the ability to change their world.

Introduction

”Quality of urban life has become a commodity, as has the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism, cultural and knowledge-based industries have become major aspects of the urban political economy” (Harvey, 2008, p. 31).

Information literacy instruction is a frequently discussed topic in library literature, on blogs, at innumerable conference panels, and among library and teaching faculty alike. Most often these discussions address information literacy as a set of skills, some basic and others more sophisticated, that students and faculty need to have in order to find and effectively evaluate information resources and how to make the best use of these sources for research and learning. Less frequently considered are the political, social, economic, cultural, and local contexts of information literacy. For this reason, a number of librarians, educators, and information theorists have taken to using the term “Critical Information Literacy” to designate an approach to information literacy that takes these contexts into consideration and integrates them into information literacy instruction in a way that complements a larger agenda of critical pedagogy.

While critical information literacy can also be approached as a set of general principles and guidelines, a particularly effective and meaningful concept of critical information literacy considers the importance of place. At New York City College of Technology (City Tech), located in downtown Brooklyn, NY, and part of the City University of New York, librarians have designed a semester-long course in information literacy and research methods which is driven by a conception of critical information literacy that is rooted in the life experiences and particular conditions that our diverse body of students brings. Critical pedagogy, in addition to encouraging a questioning approach to existing social, political, political, and cultural institutions, also seeks to validate and utilize students’ knowledge and perspective.

Critical pedagogy also transforms what might be termed traditional information literacy; that is, rather than separate the instruction of information-seeking and research skills from the critical analysis of information, the course weaves this analysis, as much as possible, into all instruction, transforming the skills that librarians everywhere teach daily into the skills to question. This article provides an overview of City Tech Library’s course and shows how critical information literacy informs all aspects of the course’s multifaceted approach to teaching information literacy and research skills.

Scholarship in Critical Information Literacy

The concept of critical information literacy can be traced back to the critical pedagogy movement pioneered by Paolo Freire in his immensely influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). One of Freire’s key contributions was to call attention to and criticize the ‘banking concept’ of learning, whereby the goal of

teaching is to 'deposit' knowledge into the heads of students so that they can accumulate a full 'account' which they will be able to use after graduation for their own profit and success. The critical pedagogy movement has labored to replace this approach with one that does not treat knowledge as a bankable commodity or currency, but that encourages students to become active producers of knowledge by sharpening their analytical and critical skills and by validating and utilizing their own existing stock of knowledge.

The ideas made popular by Freire and those inspired by him, so frequently encountered in other areas of educational research and instruction, appeared less frequently in the library literature until relatively recently. Much of traditional information literacy instruction in libraries has continued to promote varieties of the 'banking' model of learning, even if the digital revolution has prompted a shift toward a greater emphasis on teaching information-seeking *skills*. Only since 2000 have a significant number of scholars working in library and information studies attempted to apply the concepts and approaches of critical pedagogy to library and information literacy contexts. These voices have called attention to the fact that although we might strive to teach students how to critically analyze sources on the Internet for their reliability or 'authority,' we are failing to help them develop the critical apparatus with which to make such judgments (Seale 2010; Badke 2012).

Among these recent publications, probably the most cited in recent years has been James Elmborg's 2006 article "Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice." There, Elmborg asks a fundamental question of library instructors that is directly inspired by critical pedagogy: "Should librarians 'serve' the academy by teaching its literacy skills unquestioningly, or should librarians participate in the critical reflection undertaken by 'educators,' a reflection that leads us to challenge, if necessary, the politics of academic exclusion, and to participate in the creation of new and better academic models?" (p. 197). Elmborg proposes a critical information literacy agenda that transforms traditional information literacy, more narrowly conceived as a set of skills needed to successfully navigate academia and produce quality research, into a central part of the educational mission. Librarians, he insists, like all teachers and scholars, need to serve as a critical lens through which one can view established knowledge regimes. Proponents of critical information literacy demand of librarians that they no longer serve as enablers of existing educational paradigms and no longer use information literacy skills teaching as an unwitting means of affirming existing power relations within academia and beyond. Elmborg's call was accompanied by, and has been followed by, other important voices, including Doherty (2007), Hall (2010), Jacobs (2011), Simmons (2005), and Swanson (2004). The recent volume, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, edited by Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinksi and Alana Kumbier (2010), which collects a wide variety of contributions to the theory and practice of critical information literacy, can serve as

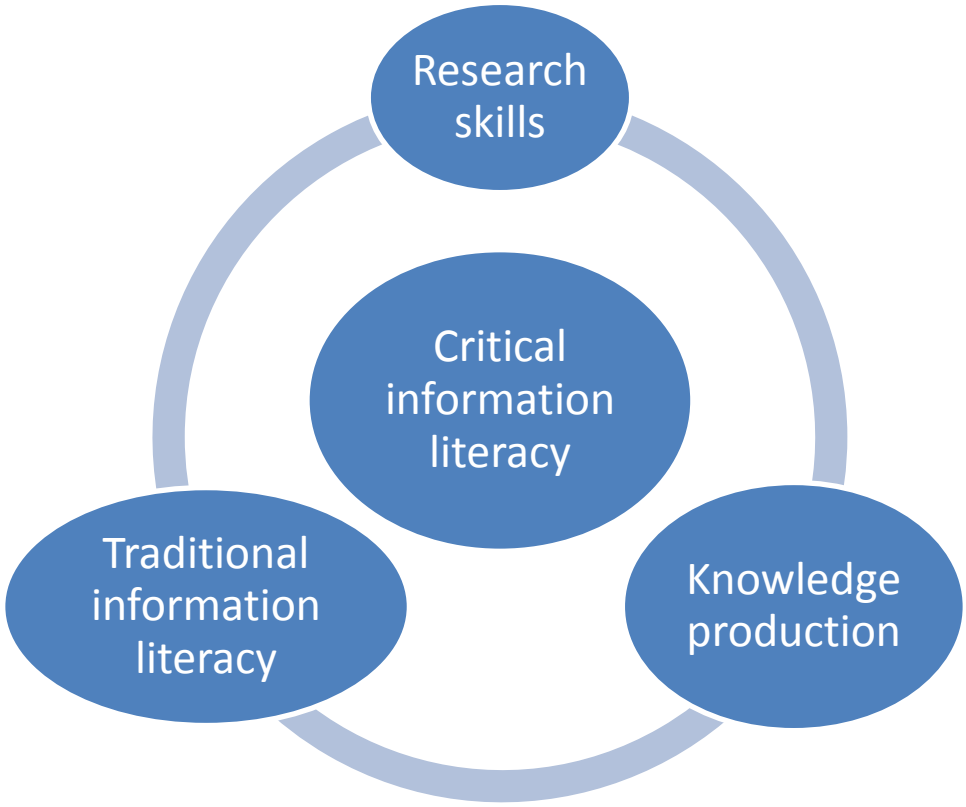
a useful measure of how far critical information has advanced in the priorities of many instruction librarians today.

Despite the increased interest in critical information, this growing literature has tended to shy away from describing actual library pedagogical situations and contexts in which critical information literacy takes place. Librarians could be helped by learning more about what strategies can be used to implement and realize critical information literacy, especially on a scale greater than the customary one- or two-shot library instruction sessions. Conspicuously absent from the literature thus far is an illustration of how critical information literacy can be implemented in a credit-bearing course offered through the library. This is what we will provide here.

LIB 1201

LIB 1201, Research and Documentation for the Information Age, is City Tech Library's first credit-bearing course. It is part of the flexible core for the college's new General Education requirements, and it has been a required course for majors in a few departments at the college: radiologic science, chemical technology, entertainment technology and emerging media technologies. With the luxury of three credits, we are under less pressure to limit ourselves to the teaching of traditional library and research skills. Instead, we begin with an overview of the lifecycle of information and a discussion of the history of information dissemination and information technology. We then explore contemporary issues in media and information from social, economic, political, and ethical viewpoints. In this segment we do introduce traditional information literacy skills such as searching for information on Google or on databases, but the systematic treatment of those skills comes later in the course. We also discuss the organization and classification of information and the documentation of both resources and processes.

Throughout the semester, students contribute to a course blog in the form of reading response posts, comments on one another's posts, and reflections upon their own experience as information consumers, producers, and researchers. Through use of open pedagogy tools, in particular the OpenLab, City Tech's open platform for learning and sharing, we foster a classroom where students assume the role of content creators from the very first class meeting. Students are participants in a networked information community of inquiry, actively responding to class readings, viewings, and discussions. They also contribute knowledge that comes out of both their life experiences and particular fields of study.



Critical information literacy is LIB 1201's organizing principle. As the diagram above shows, critical information literacy can be metaphorically described as a sun around which the planets of traditional information literacy, research skills, and knowledge production revolve. In our approach, the latter are not simply taught as sets of technical skills. Instead, students acquire these skills as they are reading, writing, and engaging in discussions about how searching, researching, and writing are activities embedded in specific social, economic, and political contexts. For example, most search engines and databases they might use to search for data or analysis are commercial products whose purpose is to produce profits for the company's shareholders or owners. While most students know this, they are encouraged to stop and consider various implications and ramifications of this fact, *before* they learn how to use these valuable tools. We encourage them to discover and suggest to each other the ways that this fundamental economic feature of our information landscape affects searches and search strategies, as well as the results that they retrieve.

How It Works

We teach research skills over several class meetings, as many credit-bearing library courses do. We accomplish this through a scaffolded research paper assignment that includes preliminary research, finding a topic relevant to the information issues discussed in class, formulating a critical research question, creating an

annotated bibliography and an outline, and writing multiple drafts. Students receive credit for the assignment only if they submit all components of the assignment; this requirement communicates the interdependent nature of each component of the assignment. The research paper is intended to help students learn how to select and narrow an appropriate topic, conduct research, write a research paper through multiple drafts, and to construct bibliographies, but it is also intended to allow students to explore in greater depth and detail a specific issue from the first part of the course. This is another moment when they are required to think critically about information as they are in the process of searching for and researching it. It is also an opportunity for them to identify a personal interest and connect it to themes of the course. For example, one student interested in professional sports investigated how HIPAA laws affect disclosure of athletes' illegal drug or steroid use (Johnson, 2012). Another student interested in a specific Japanese youth subculture explored how social media facilitated its global spread (Woods, 2012). Student learning outcomes express conventional information literacy competencies (ACRL, 2000), and students develop those competencies through reading, blogging, research, and writing assignments. Yet the focus on teaching information literacy skills is confined to just a few weeks of instruction. Students become critical thinkers with their research papers, but become knowledge producers as they develop a final project in which they are required to create new research resources or information tools that respond to their own local information needs.

At the same time as we teach research skills through a critical lens, the students teach us about the information spaces they occupy. Understanding the difference between our information space and theirs–and recognizing the diversity of experience and knowledge that our students bring to the classroom–is an important opportunity for pedagogical reflection and improvement. This is also an indispensable part of a critical pedagogy. Not only is it a means for us to revise, reconsider, and improve our classroom discussions, reading assignments, and in-class activities, it also encourages the students to create and inhabit their own information spaces (quite distinct from their instructors' spaces), assisted and diffused by interactive Web 2.0 tools such as the OpenLab.

Encouraging students to explore aspects of their own information experience and to share their own knowledge is important because it serves to activate their critical faculties. Much of traditional information literacy focuses on general skills that suit generally prevailing standards, practices, and institutional arrangements. For some students, this requires learning new vocabularies, concepts, and approaches to information acquisition. There is often a danger that students will either not make the leap to this different world, or will reject the one that they do know as somehow illegitimate or unreliable. Our approach recognizes, respects, and uses students' existing knowledge bases for the purposes of both raising their critical awareness of information issues and cultivating information literacy skills. Doing this involves encouraging students to share their own experiences of information acquisition,

searching, and sharing. It includes encouraging them to share information derived from sources that they might not find legitimized by library or other faculty at the college. Some bring the perspective of first- or second-generation immigrants who are able to share knowledge or experiences of another culture to bear on many of the information issues discussed in class. Often these issues hinge on differences in technology or access to technology.

The students' final project of the semester gives them freedom to respond creatively to the information sources and research tools that they have discussed in class and used to complete research assignments. Working in groups, students develop a prototype for a research tool, information resource, or educational game that fills information needs they have that have not been met by existing research tools or resources. Students have produced resource guides, zines, research tools, and even games that bring to light the gaps and oversights in the information spaces they have come to inhabit throughout the course. Student work often addresses local information issues, such as information resources for specific populations (transfer students, veterans, students raising families), exposes gaps and failures in information provision from the institutions that are supposed to foster their education and development (CUNY, City Tech), or provides guidance to fellow City Tech and CUNY students who are ill-served by online marketers, chain stores and restaurants, and the mass media.

How Information Literacy Issues Become Critical Information Literacy Issues: Two Examples from LIB 1201

Information literacy in an academic context is closely tied to the issues of academic integrity and plagiarism, and a discussion of plagiarism is a key lesson in the course. The pedagogical approach we take moves beyond a basic definition and practice characterized by the prohibit-and-punish model that prevails in undergraduate education. We devote class time to teaching strategies for summarizing external sources and introducing ideas or quotes from students' research. When we investigate the topic of plagiarism we assign readings and focus class discussions on published authors, university presidents, government officials, and others whose acts of plagiarism were detected and publicized. One student, recognizing that academic proscriptions and "real-world" responses to plagiarism are very different, investigated these differences in his research paper. Commenting upon CNN's 2012 suspension of Fareed Zakaria over accusations of plagiarism, he wrote, "Instead of being fired, he was suspended. Why have the rules changed for plagiarism?…The consequence should have been much tougher in his case, yet this does not seem to have had much effect on his credibility" (Laylor, 2013). By calling attention to a certain discrepancy between what most of his instructors tell him and what the society around him seems to validate, his written work integrated information congruent with the themes of the course with a critical

approach to understanding and synthesizing the complexities and inconsistencies of academic or journalistic integrity.

The concept of gatekeeping–that editors exist who determine what gets published and what does not–frequently resonates with students. They see its potential to unjustly suppress information created at the margins, or by the marginalized, rather than as a means of controlling the quality of published information. Students bring a socioeconomic perspective to many of the course readings and discussions. In particular, the section of the course in which we discuss the production of knowledge, mass media ownership consolidation, and the corporate control of many outlets of scholarly communication inspires responses such as this from one student's blog post: "Experts cost when they are linked to the powerful and large organizations. Realistically this is how the world works. I have the knowledge and you want it. It will cost you." (Marsh, 2012). This quote well illustrates the students' valuable prior knowledge and beliefs about capitalist society and corporations as controlling economic actors–knowledge that we as teachers continuously acknowledge. We attempt to change the mindset that this is "the way things are" by offering examples, such as new interpretations of fair use guidelines and the flourishing alternative print media present in zine culture. Cultural and social changes wrought by the Internet have the potential to effect further changes. We encourage students to move beyond cynicism and passivity and to explore how information culture could be different.

Conclusion

In LIB 1201, critical information literacy is driven by our desire not simply to enable our students to succeed according to the rules of academia (and the world), but to question those rules, and to see how information literacy itself is defined and shaped by the rules that structure society more generally.[2] We continue to look for new ways to cultivate and nurture the practice of questioning among our students. As more libraries develop curricula and systematic approaches to teaching critical information literacy, we hope that a corresponding pedagogy will evolve and continue to develop. The ongoing challenge for us and for all librarians working to develop this pedagogy is to find the best ways of encouraging students to be active

[2] We would add this caveat, however: we do have an obligation to pass on 'hegemonic' knowledge to our students, albeit critically. Official knowledge and skills necessary to succeed should not be the exclusive possession of those who receive a privileged education. Elite knowledge is a type of knowledge to which all students are entitled. In fact, many underprivileged students demand this knowledge, since it is obviously linked to acquiring a higher standard of living (or even merely a decent standard of living). Therefore, teaching critical information literacy should not involve a simple *negation* or *dismissal* of dominant discourses, as is sometimes recommended or even demanded in the critical pedagogy literature.

participants in and contributors to their information worlds, rather than mere executors, however sophisticated, of information-seeking skills.

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