



Agency in Education: Critical Pedagogy and Information Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Library professionals must examine their pedagogical methods critically, and discover where their well-intentioned habits for education may be sourced from the dominant "banking" method of education, a hierarchical structure where learners are vessels for information from above, rather than being active participants in the creation of information through dialogue. The intention of this article is to bring awareness to incoming library professionals about the applications of critical pedagogy for information literacy, both for our patrons' benefit and our own as teacher-students. The use of critical pedagogy can inspire independent thinking in learners when they understand themselves as collaborators in the information landscape, as well as how they come to the classroom with inherent knowledge from their socially constructed existence. To engage in a fully engaging, exciting learning experience, we must approach our patrons without a sense of intellectual authority, meeting our community where they are and respecting their concerns, struggles, and goals.

Introduction

In our roles as library and information professionals, we have a unique opportunity to contribute to a more educated, democratic and civically engaged public. Fundamental to this goal is education of the public in critical information literacy, especially in this age of information overload; if a society is without the ability for individuals to make informed choices knowing that all the information they take in is socially, economically, and historically constructed, that society cannot be fully democratic. The goal of critical information literacy is for each individual to be able to trust their own experiential knowledge and reasoning skills in order to question why, for whom and by whom a certain piece of information would be constructed and shared. I argue in this article that teaching critical information literacy requires the use of critical pedagogies, which are theories of teaching that seek to “transform oppressive structures in society using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning.”^[1]

Critical pedagogy in the classroom goes beyond teaching; it seeks to challenge systems of education under capitalism that work to reproduce and maintain systems of exploitation by platforming ideals of independence, competition and consumption. Alternatively, critical pedagogy encourages the breaking down of hierarchy between teacher and student, and asks students to become agents of their own education, collaborating with educators and others to “facilitate greater dialogue, critique, counter hegemony, and praxis.”^[2] Critical pedagogy encourages a horizontal flow of information processing through dialogue between teacher-students and student-teachers, leveling the hierarchical nature of education.

A hierarchical system of education, where the teacher is the provider of information and students are the vessels, encourages students to see themselves as information consumers, rather than collaborators. The banking method does not encourage reflection, curiosity, agency, or confidence in one’s ability to engage in an intellectual dialogue. The ability to interact in a dialogue with our community is an important part of the librarian profession, and ideally our workshops, services, and funding would be

funneled towards the most urgent needs of our community. Ultimately, critical pedagogy emphasizes the emancipatory and liberating potential of education and is always political because it is at the “intersection of power and the acquisition of agency.”^[3]

Critical Pedagogy’s Origins

The origins of critical pedagogy come from the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which examines how the dominant “banking method” of teaching reinforces passivity and fatalism in oppressed classes of people who have been conditioned to think their existence is static and out of their control. In the banking method, students are mere vessels of information.^[4] Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy encourages the breaking down of hierarchy between student and teacher, encouraging learners and instructors to learn from each other, and cooperatively reflect on the world in order to change it.

As educators, librarians should understand themselves to be both facilitators of knowledge, but also perpetual *students* of the world. Rachel Hall calls for the inclusion of critical literacy programs in public libraries in order to nurture the democratizing products of education as outlined by American educator John Dewey. She says that using “problem-posing” methods of teaching allows for conversations to happen, therefore including the public in the efforts to make change in their locality, and sourcing the most relevant problems directly from the community. Librarians should not only teach digital literacy by teaching the use of technology and developing technical skills, but also by modeling a critical approach about using technology, orienting users to be critical of information creation processes and dissemination which are influenced by human systems that contain bias, misinformation, and socio-cultural aspects.

The goal of critical pedagogy is to understand education as a dialogic, communal practice, especially since learning usually happens in an incidentally social way. Think of children, who learn from watching their parents do daily tasks, and often copy what they see without prompting: humans exist in a social context, and learn daily just by experiencing the world around them. Critical pedagogy encourages us to consider each

individual as a source of personal, experiential knowledge which can be shared to create a more democratic environment in which we learn from each other.

Information Literacy

The Association of College and Research Library's (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy* is anchored by six key concepts that must be comprehended in order to be successfully literate in information.^[5] They are as follows:

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

The truth is that critical information literacy has no set lesson plan; it must be relevant and contextualized for whatever group of learners are present, which entails the usage of critical pedagogy. Learning only happens when we engage critically in the context affecting our teaching audiences. Thinking of the classroom as a collaborative space for learning also removes the burden of being a traditional authority figure from the instructor, and invites the students into the creative process of learning where they can present issues that are relevant and meaningful to them. But what this approach must also keep in mind is that the established norms of education to which students and teachers alike are accustomed replicate patterns of power. While critical pedagogy's goal is the de-hierarchization of education, the instinct for many of us may be to grab control wherever possible in the face of frightening change. Paulo Freire specifically warns us to be wary of pursuing action without any reflection on theory, which will result only in the replication of the existing systems of oppression.

Teaching Critical Information Literacy Critically

The problem information literacy faces under neoliberal formal education is the treatment of information as commodity, harming the authenticity and reliability of information in a system which “defaults to instructing students to be consumers and not

critical thinkers.”^[6] One of the key components of information literacy outlined by the American Library Association, however, is the understanding that information is created through a process which is never isolated. As Christine Pawley writes, “Information never stands alone—it is always produced and used in ways that represent social relationships.”^[7] This is why dialogue is one of the more important aspects of critical pedagogy, replicating the way that information is socially constructed and then eventually agreed upon or disputed.

In addition to dialogue, inquiry and curiosity is another habit that critical information literacy taught with critical pedagogy attempts to instill in people. Curiosity is political in that it is “drawing attention to the appearance of mixing and hybridization that disturbs the recognition and common sense of the police order.”^[8] In other words, curiosity pokes holes in traditional modes of thinking which exist to validate borders, authority, and oppression. Teaching inquiry as a part of the information literacy process teaches us to reflect on assumptions we make, and to reconsider what has been instilled in us.

Heidi and Dale Jacobs in “Transforming the One-Shot Library Session into Pedagogical Collaboration: Information Literacy and the English Composition Class,” write that “effective research does not happen in just one sitting but involves iterative processes such as revision, reworking, rethinking, and above all, reflection.”^[9] This case study tells us that experiential learning, where students engage in the process and praxis (reflection and action) of researching is the most direct way for students to learn information literacy. Emphasizing learning as a process of reflection, inquiry, and conversation between scholars covers many aspects of the ACRL *Framework*, including Scholarship as Conversation, Research as Inquiry, and Information Creation as a Process.^[10]

Overall, the role of critical information literacy is “an expanded version of information literacy that places the learner at the center in a more empowered role and focuses on the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural aspects of all types and stages of information and the research process.”^[11] These lessons are taught through critical pedagogies that must include dialogue, mutuality, contextual relevance, and problem-posing or

experiential learning.

Conclusion: Democracy, Agency and Critical Education

Overall, critical pedagogy questions hierarchies of knowledge, and invites all people to the table of education in an effort to produce a more democratic and equitable society. As public libraries and other spaces for education see continued cuts to funding, it is essential that we as emerging library professionals commit ourselves not to a passive role as information holders, but as active co-creators with our patrons for a more democratic and critically educated society. The idea of a “learning society”^[12] which enables people to participate in democracy to identify and solve collective problems collaboratively is one way to encourage the responsibility we all have to being educated in order to be agents of change. The idea that we are all life-long learners also discourages capitalistic competition and individualism, favoring instead curiosity, collaboration and mutuality through dialogue. Democratizing the information landscape is easier said than done, but encouraging everyone’s critical involvement in their roles as information producers and consumers is a great place to start. In “(Mis)information, information literacy, and democracy,” Lupien and Rourke call for the implementation of democratic pedagogies in the public sphere, hoping to democratize the information landscape and break down the barriers of academia in order to benefit everyone with a horizontal flow of information.

While the authority of traditional information systems is challenged by the horizontal mode of information creation, it also means that people are unable to get assurances as much as they used to. In the past, information production was limited to those with the resources and status to disseminate it; institutions of church and state were the usual sources of information, and were structures protected from criticism because a majority of the people were unable to seize those means of knowledge production and dissemination. With the leveled field of information creation, sources of information are not just varied but also authoritatively questionable, meaning that a turn towards critical information literacy, which “urges students to approach all information, regardless of

the type or source, with a critical eye” and to be reflective of their role as information consumers and producers, could be a solution to this democratization of information. [13] As the amount and availability of information steadily increases in our digital age, we’ve witnessed a great cultural transformation in the authority of traditional media sources. Many critical information workshops are already adopting critical pedagogical approaches, working collaboratively with students to become aware of their concerns and questions, intrinsically engaging them in the inquiry process of research. By breaking down hierarchies of knowledge and instruction, we are all able to take responsibility for and attend to the failures of our education, whether it be from a point of self-advocacy as students, or community engagement as citizens. Ultimately critical pedagogy inspires agency in people’s ability to learn, and Henry Giroux reminds us that “agency is the condition of struggle, and hope is the condition of agency.” [14] It is my belief that critical pedagogy is the hope we need to keep showing up for liberating and emancipatory qualities of education.

Author Bio:

Mac McAree (they/them) is a master’s student in the Dual Degree Program at New York University and Long Island University, pursuing the emancipatory potential of education to make our world more equitable through information literacy. They are a Queens native and are passionate about the value of literature, community, crafting, and astrology as lenses into the self.

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