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# Critical Library Instruction as a Pedagogical Tool

Nicole A. Cooke, University of South Carolina

## Abstract

The opportunity to expand pedagogy is an especially good thing for library educators, particularly when library professionals do not have formal training as teachers and instructors. We have a responsibility to ourselves and our students to grow intellectually and share growth and new knowledge with others. We should be promoting and practicing critical self-reflection and thinking critically about and even critiquing the information we consume and the sources from which it originates. This is an ongoing and iterative process that requires that we consistently read and remain abreast of new and interdisciplinary ideas that can challenge and inform our practice. This perspective essay details my personal journey of critical self-reflection, or *conocimiento*, that facilitated the strengthening and deepening of my critical library instruction and pedagogy.

*Keywords:* critical pedagogy, critical self-reflection, *conocimiento*, *Critical Library Instruction*

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## Critical Library Instruction as a Pedagogical Tool

*Books are a form of political action. Books are knowledge. Books are reflection.  
Books change your mind.*

*-Morrison as told to Solomon, 2016*

Books change and expand our minds, just as information changes and expands our minds. Moreover, books and information change and expand our pedagogy. The opportunity to expand pedagogy is an especially good thing for library educators, particularly when library professionals do not have formal training as teachers and instructors. Whether we instruct one-one-one at a service point, teach 60-minute one-shot sessions, or teach credit bearing multi-week courses, library professionals are indeed educators, and as such, we have a responsibility to ourselves and our students to grow intellectually and share growth and new knowledge with others. We should be promoting and practicing critical self-reflection and thinking critically about and even critiquing the information we consume and the sources from which it originates. This is an ongoing and iterative process that requires that we consistently read and remain abreast of new and interdisciplinary ideas that can challenge and inform our practice. Such was the case when I read *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods (CLI)*.

The publication of *CLI* in 2010 was indeed groundbreaking. Not only did it introduce critical theory and a critical lens to countless library and information professionals, it gave a name to the work and conversations many were already having. We are aware of the power that comes with being able to name something, and this text both validated some existing and ongoing conversations, and it simultaneously gave permission to extend these conversations. *CLI* confirmed that having a critical library and information science (LIS) practice was a good thing and, in fact, encouraged us to develop one if we weren't already asking the hard questions about the information we seek and share, and situating said information within the larger historical and sociopolitical contexts.

*CLI* was published when I was still working as an academic reference and instruction librarian and it provided an opportunity to counter my more traditional instructional training (i.e., the ACRL Immersion Program) with an approach that felt more natural, substantive, meaningful, and effective. But it was when I became a graduate LIS faculty member in 2012 that I more clearly saw the impact of *CLI*. I had a clear and accessible text

for my reference, instruction, and diversity classes that students actually gravitated towards, could relate to, and that dared them to think more analytically and contextually. As the subsequent and companion #critlib movement continued to grow, it became easier to introduce critical conversations and controversial topics into classroom discussions. In addition, as the literature expanded in this area, it was evident that students were becoming more and more interested and invested in critical perspectives and critical self-reflection. Students were also giving serious consideration about how they might engage in a critical professional practice.

## Critical Self-Reflection

As I think about the future trajectory of critical library instruction, particularly as it pertains to my own teaching and scholarship, I think about two things: critical self-reflection and critical action. My work has been very much focused on issues of social justice, diversity, equity, inclusion (JEDI), which fits naturally with *CLI* and #critlib. Our critical conversations need to better and more fully encompass even more issues of race, oppression, privilege, and other hard topics that make people uncomfortable. In 2019, I shared an autoethnographic accounting about a student who was a self-proclaimed feminist pedagogue and expert in *CLI* (Cooke, 2019b), yet it didn't stop them from making a racist remark in class. This type of disconnect suggests that we need to shift from critical discussions to critical action. But how do we move from talking academically about things we think or know we should care about to authentic, genuine, and empathetic action? How do we operationalize the values and tenets put forth by *CLI* and JEDI in such a way that results in action in all facets of library practice?

The aforementioned student and questions led me on a personal journey of critical self-reflection, or *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2002; González-López, 2011; Pitts, 2016). Building on critical self-reflection I engaged in as a new assistant professor (Cooke, 2014), I am particularly attuned to and grateful for the women of color who have come before me and have been brave enough to share their stories. Their stories are vital and lifegiving in the sense that seeing yourself in their words and experiences allows you to concretely know that you are not alone and that your feelings and experiences are valid and worthy. Faculty of color have unique and often painful experiences in the academy and our stories are not often reflected in the literature (and when they are, we face criticism and disdain (Cooke & Sánchez, 2019)). As such, we have to push forward, take risks, and write for ourselves and encourage those coming up behind us. We have to look outside of the straight white

patriarchal version of academia and the “canon” in order to truly see ourselves and establish our place within the landscape. We need to create our own canon and make our value known.

These current rounds of critical self-reflection are no different; I turned to another woman of color to help me process my surroundings and experiences in the classroom and on campus. Scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) posits *conocimiento* as a form of “spiritual inquiry” (p. 542) that is achieved through creative acts that involve the mind and the body (in my case, this is the writing process). A transformation process, *conocimiento* is a “way of sensing and learning, a way of taking in and reaching out to others on a similar path”; it questions conventional knowledge’s current categories, classifications, and contents,” and it requires critical self-reflection and situating your own experiences, struggles, and ignorance with your larger environment (p. 541). Anzaldúa says that our ignorance, or what we don’t know, belongs to one’s “shadow self” and can make us complicit with “values that the striving self might not endorse” (p. 553). In other, more colloquial words, when we know better, we do better. When we examine ourselves and commit to learning and growing in new ways, we are better for it, and our pedagogy can improve and expand as a result. Intellectual humility and intellectual inquiry expand our academic journeys (p. 541) and situates us “in relation to different social groups and social locations,” some of which are familiar and others with are unfamiliar but should be part of our general awareness. I have gone through several rounds of *conocimiento*, without even knowing there was a word for it; as Anzaldúa describes, I have gone through a “process of stretching out, hurting, and healing” and have come out the other side as a stronger researcher and educator (González-Lopez, 2011, p. 92).

With this particular scenario, I spent two semesters deeply contemplating my teaching and trying to discover solutions to the now extremely noticeable gap between critical thought and action that I was seeing in the classroom. I eventually began to change some of my content and definitely dimensions of my pedagogy. A content reboot of sorts, I put more #critlib and controversial topics on the table in an effort get students used to the idea that such topics are indeed a part of librarianship and to give us all practice with having challenged and discussions. We talked about intersectionality, critical self-reflection, stereotype threat, feminist pedagogy, ethics of care, microaggressions, privilege, and marginalization. Such topics are not always a part of the “canon” and are often relegated to the hidden curriculum<sup>1</sup>. In order to normalize and naturalize the taboo topics we had

conversations about the origins of overly trendy words like intersectionality and privilege. These conversations were always followed by a personal reflection, personal stories, anecdotes, and current events, and then we devoted time to talk about practical application, e.g., how will you deal with your own privileges when dealing with marginalized community members who feel unwelcome in your space? This is particularly important to me, as an African American woman, who works in a predominantly white profession in predominantly white institutions, and who teaches predominantly white students. I need my students to consciously and consistently think about how they interact with me, their diverse and marginalized colleagues, and their underrepresented patrons and students. How will they gain and *maintain* cultural competence and empathy? I am reminded of this quote by James Baldwin (1979), which is equally applicable to libraries:

A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essential, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way. (p. 5)

LIS is a predominantly white profession serving communities that are anything but; when we talk about equity, diversity, and inclusion, we have to do more than just understand the words. We have to *feel* the words and have empathy, and not just sympathy, for our communities. For example, a library cannot (or should not) have a goal to serve those experiencing homelessness with respect and still require them to produce a proof of address to get a library card or use a computer. Similarly, we have to actually *believe* in the communities we serve in order to serve them compassionately and effectively. To Baldwin's point, we lose many people of color and those who belong to our communities when the library says all are welcome but doesn't, in fact, actually welcome all who come through the doors.

Our white profession of librarianship does not reflect the communities we serve, and library professionals need to be aware of this and proactive in rectifying this longstanding problem. This is why we have to have these conversations, in the classroom, at our conferences, on our listservs, and in our journals. In order for me to facilitate these discussions, and the subsequent learning that will hopefully occur, I have to remove the transactional nature of education in which the teacher delivers knowledge to the students. Learning has to be a reciprocal and co-created process where human beings, with all their opinions, ignorance,

and foibles, relate to one another. This can be a difficult and demanding process, but this approach has absolutely improved my pedagogy. I will go as far as to argue that all librarians and library educators should purposefully engage in a *conocimiento* journey. It is a vital process that changes how we teach and learn with our students.

My scholarship has explored #critlib and pedagogical issues and merged them with JEDI topics such as cultural competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and anti-racist pedagogy, and my work has broken the fourth wall by sharing biographical and autobiographical accounts of aggressions and abuses experienced by marginalized LIS professionals and faculty (Cooke, 2014; Cooke, 2019a). Our critical conversations require us to be present, personal, and vulnerable, and they challenge us to question the very core of ourselves and our profession. By modeling critical self-reflection in my own critical practice, I hope to encourage others to do the same. Now it's time to extend these conversations into equitable and critical action.

## Critical Action

In addition to removing the transactional nature from teaching, how else can critical action be a significant part of library and LIS education? How do I get the students who espouse #critlib and JEDI values to actually live and enact these values in their practice as librarians? As I ponder these questions and engage in another *conocimiento*, I am working towards being more explicit and precise in my language (Collins, 2018; Peterson, 1996), and I am working to decolonize, or diversify, LIS curricula.

In a 2018 *LA Times* article, scholar Yvette DeChavez described her thoughts on decolonizing academic syllabi. She stated:

The fact is, if academia continues to uphold white men as the pinnacle of literature, they're also continuing to uphold white supremacy. And when you teach mostly white men, you perpetuate the falsehood that only their voices matter, that only their voices shape America. So far, this kind of thinking has led us to the current mess we're in. ...

I envision a future where we can list the names of indigenous and person of color writers just as fast, if not faster, than white men. Sure, Emerson had some great things to say—"Nature" blew my mind as a teenager. But have you read Leslie Marmon Silko or LeeAnne Howe? How about Jesmyn Ward or Gloria Anzaldúa or



Erika Wurth or Kiese Laymon or Tarfia Faizullah? They didn't just blow my mind—they changed my life.

DeChavez's words are equally applicable to LIS, and as a LIS graduate educator, I am particularly sensitive to the diversity in my syllabi. For example, I am also an information behavior scholar, and when I took over a class from a colleague several years ago, their syllabus consisted almost exclusively of white men. I am an ardent admirer of the late Dr. Elfreda Chatman, an African American LIS scholar who pioneered diversity within the information behavior genre. When I asked why Chatman wasn't on their syllabus, they replied, "She's not part of the canon." Well, she's a part of *my* canon. As we've all heard, representation matters. While the word decolonizing refers to the reinstatement of indigenous peoples to their land and to history, DeChavez and others make the point that educators should not be relying on the canon—the European American (white), cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, affluent, and able-bodied canon—in our teaching. This canon does not reflect the world we live in or the world or the students in our classrooms. Decolonizing the curricula also necessitates that we examine power structures, which can be challenging in a majority white profession. Sleeter (2010) posits that colonialism is a part of the fabric of the United States; it's embedded in government policies and promotes the West's emphasis on material wealth. These values are also embedded in the educational system thereby continuing to socialize children in the principles of colonization (Brayboy, 2005). In order to decolonize the curriculum, core values and knowledge must be shifted and power recentered in order to make room for the voices, histories, and perspectives of indigenous and other people of color (Grande, 2004).

In my estimation, decolonizing the LIS canon and curricula requires critical self-reflection, empathy, cultural competence and cultural humility, and racial literacy. These are all JEDI topics that are now a regular part of LIS classrooms, in part because of CLI and #critlib and the expanded thinking and discussions that emerged as readers enjoyed and processed this publication. In this way, LIS education examines and decolonizes mainstream education and research practices to increase the amount and types of opinions and materials that are considered valuable and worthy of study. By diversifying our canon and curricula, we create a space for students to meaningfully engage with each other and prepare them for meaningful engagement with the diverse populations they will ultimately serve in their libraries.

The idea of decolonizing, as well as the labor needed to accomplish it, is overwhelming, but this critical action can be accomplished at several levels (Cooke, 2017). At the micro level, we can participate in critical self-reflection and education, the work that prepares us to do further work with others. Micro level work improves our overall understanding and interactions with those who are different from us. At the meso level, we can work to decolonize our organizations and the work that we do within those organizations. Meso level work asks that we engage with our communities to see what they need and want, and then work to co-create initiatives and services that benefit the entire community. At the macro level, we strive to eliminate the marginalization, subjugation, and systemic inequities in our larger society. And where better to start thinking about macro work than in the classroom?

When we begin thinking about decolonizing our LIS curricula and spaces, not only are we thinking about addressing the underlying power structures, policies, and practices that isolate and disenfranchise, we enrich our current understanding and experiences. The inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives benefits us all. Decolonizing the LIS curricula and profession will not be an easy or quick fix, but in the meantime, deep and meaningful conversations and changes are occurring. These changes and conversations further provide us with the opportunity to become new storytellers (Cooke, 2016) and change the narratives and stereotypes that hinder and underestimate the work LIS professionals accomplish every day in their communities.

As I have described my processes of critical self-reflection and critical action, I return to Morrison and Anzaldúa who have inspired me and taught me about the power of self-work; it's ok for us to exercise intellectual and cultural humility and admit that we have more to learn. We should be doing the same things we ask our students to do. Additionally, I am reminded of how much work still needs to be done, but I am grateful for the strides that have been made in the last decade. We must continue the work facilitated by the publication of *CLI* in 2010. We must continue to address the disconnects that exist between theory and practice—the gap between academic espousing and genuine action—and we must continue to have brave and bold conversations that will propel the critical social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion work our profession is currently trying so hard to achieve.

## EndNotes

<sup>1</sup> “The curriculum is more than “a collection of study plans, syllabi, and teaching subjects. Instead, the curriculum becomes the outcome of a process reflecting a political and societal agreement about the what, why, and how of education for the desired society of the future”(Tedesco, Opertii, & Amadio, 2014, p. 528), and, because policies and other subjective forces are at play, there are inevitable things that are left out of a curriculum. For every established, overt, and implemented curriculum, there is a hidden or null curriculum (Cooke, 2018, p. 31).

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