



The Information Literacy Handbook

Charting the
Discipline

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6.2

Critical information literacy

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Introduction

Critical information literacy (CIL) seeks to understand and act upon how libraries and adjacent systems, such as higher education and scholarly communications, contribute to and can oppose systemic oppression. CIL shares the aims of critical librarianship, which recognizes how power and privilege operate across all types of library functions. CIL applies the same principles of non-neutrality and understanding oppression to teaching and learning in libraries, and urges library workers and students to recognize and resist dominant modes of information production, dissemination, and use. This is most often conducted through educational efforts of library workers, such as librarians teaching students about the oppressive structures represented by controlled vocabularies in the library catalogue, or in databases and search engines controlled by corporate interests. CIL also serves as a means of considering and critiquing information literacy (IL) as a whole. CIL has many sources of inspiration but especially any theories that consider power, such as postcolonial theory, critical race theory, queer theory, or political economy (Drabinski & Tewell, 2019). The field of critical pedagogy is most often applied to CIL and critical library pedagogy efforts.

CIL offers a wide range of ideas for recognizing libraries and information systems as sites where knowledge and meaning are constructed and contested. This shift towards understanding libraries as reflecting and perpetuating dominant ideologies, and never being neutral in the information they provide or ways that they operate, is significant because it asks us how oppression functions in ways that often go unacknowledged. For instance, a white heteronormative male perspective represents a large portion of North American libraries' collections, and racial and gender biases shape how library users are provided reference services (Hamer, 2021; Shotick, 2024).

CIL seeks to create meaningful and actionable learning in library settings. This is most often done by destabilizing and challenging hierarchies, as well as creating opportunities for dialogue, participation, and reflection. One commonly held goal is to demonstrate to learners that their voices matter, and that they have the power to grapple with and take action on social issues that impact them. The underlying premise is that when learners are actively engaged in their own education and see how what they are learning relates to everyday life, it has the potential for them to acknowledge their agency as active contributors to social and political processes.

Description

CIL has accumulated a considerable presence in library and information science literature and at conferences, especially in North America. As such, the literature and particularly early works in CIL are North America-centric. Foundations of the CIL literature include articles by Kapitzke (2003), Elmborg (2006), and Jacobs (2008), all of whom argue for the importance of an IL theory and practice that accounts

for political and ethical issues in information environments. Kapitzke applies poststructuralism to critique the concept of IL, while Elmborg and Jacobs draw upon critical literacy theory and composition studies to consider the roles of teaching librarians. Critical theory as well as composition studies continue to be used to analyse IL and the educational work of libraries, but as early as the cornerstone volume edited by Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier, *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods* (Accardi et al., 2010), inspiration for reimagining IL took many forms that included queer, hip-hop, feminist, and critical race pedagogies.

Foregrounding the links between IL and social justice, Higgins and Gregory's edited volume *Information literacy and social justice: Radical professional praxis* (2013) extended the conversation with further inspiration from Paulo Freire and the field of critical pedagogy. A major step in practical applications of CIL came with the publication of Pagowsky and McElroy's two-volume *Critical library pedagogy handbook* (2016), which contains a collection of essays, workbook activities, and lesson plans that are readily applied to one's classes. Also contributing to theoretical and practical advancements at this time was the edited volume *Critical literacy for information professionals* (McNicol, 2016). Simultaneously, research into CIL concepts and practices was conducted by Downey (2016) in *Critical information literacy: Foundations, inspirations, and ideas*, as well as articles by Tewell (2016a, 2017). Shortly afterwards considerable work was expanding CIL's theoretical inspirations, from Greek theories of time to critical geography to media studies (Drabinski, 2017; Nicholson, 2018; Tewell, 2016b).

Fifteen years after CIL's initial appearances in the literature, it has been the subject of further works theorizing, translating it into classroom practice, and providing long overdue critique. Brookbank and Haigh's (2021) edited collection *Critical library pedagogy in practice* provides examples of CIL-oriented library instruction, while Bezerra and Schneider's (2022) *Competência crítica em informação: Teoria, consciência e práxis* highlights perspectives on CIL from Brazilian researchers. Recent articles have considered information capitalism (Ellenwood, 2020), laying the groundwork for a critical theory of information (Bezerra, 2021), identifying overlap between critical literacies to inform data literacy efforts (Chiewphasa & Sisk, 2022), and CIL as information activism (Cuevas-Cerveró et al., 2023).

CIL has remained a largely white and North American endeavour. Leung and López-McKnight (2020) have critiqued CIL's inattention to race and white supremacy, which have been remarkably underexplored in its theory and practice. Questioning the purpose of IL instruction more broadly, Leung (2022) considers the ways that IL one-shot instruction sessions function to perpetuate white supremacy. Other critiques oriented towards critical librarianship and CIL were published in the same special journal issue reflecting on the volume *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods* as Leung and López-McKnight (2020), including Feretti's (2020) consideration of critical library work's failings when extended past the classroom into the workplace and one's relationships with colleagues, and Seale's (2020) identification of the institutionalization of critical librarianship and the management of critique that comes with widespread acceptance, leading to depoliticization. A recent special issue devoted to CIL in the *Journal of Information Literacy* (Smith & Hicks, 2023) and further examinations of labor, power, and critical library pedagogy (Mirza et al., 2023) point to an enduring interest in CIL and the meaningful recognition of library labor as a key component of any purposeful pedagogy.

Relationship to the discipline of information literacy

The theory and practice of CIL continues to expand and flourish, with the pace of interest showing no sign of slowing. CIL has sought to intervene in the dominant IL discourse, which can be perceived as inattentive to or ignorant of the sociopolitical dimensions of information's production and use. Much of this work takes place through classroom practice and scholarship, making it difficult to discern what impact CIL has on IL more broadly. While CIL is often defined in opposition to mainstream IL concepts and practices, it could be argued that CIL has in some ways become part of that mainstream.

As one indication of how CIL ideas are reflected in IL more broadly, the adoption of the *Framework for information literacy for higher education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015) serves as an example. Early North American CIL work often critiqued the *Information literacy competency standards for higher education* adopted by the Association of College and Research Libraries in 2000, arguing that the *Competency standards* were reductive and restrictive (Foasberg, 2015). In 2016, the *Competency standards* were replaced with the *Framework*, which incorporates ideas from the CIL

literature (Beilin, 2015; Branch, 2019). The *Framework* has been the site of significant professional engagement since its adoption, and CIL has in this way shaped the practice of mainstream academic IL as a result.

As in IL, many CIL researchers and practitioners are based in higher education. CIL has a more academic orientation than some other subfields of IL, which are in general more likely to consider information practices outside of academe and as it occurs in informal learning settings. As such, CIL would benefit from taking a broader view of where and how it can be applied with particular attention towards its aims of social justice. Within the discipline of IL, CIL has matured in important ways over a relatively brief span of time. Its relationship to the larger field is one that follows a similar overall trajectory, especially as it relates to postsecondary education, but it seeks to challenge assumptions, problematic modes of thinking, and dominant practices that are present in IL as well as CIL itself.

Conclusion

CIL seeks to understand oppression as it occurs within and is perpetuated by libraries and information systems, and ultimately for library workers and learners to intervene in these systems to change them. Such aims are enormous, especially considering the limited scope of IL instruction as it is taught and practiced in library settings. As one example, can CIL pose a challenge to disinformation? Certainly not alone. Disinformation requires societal and legal interventions to address the core problems of power and accountability, and to somehow come to terms with the underlying issue of trust. However, CIL can play an important role within the educational field, which libraries are part of. While CIL is not a solution to sociopolitical issues in itself, it has characteristics that remain useful. It is important to learn how to question systems and verify information while being open to other perspectives and not giving in to cynicism, and that is where this approach shines.

What are the next steps for CIL? First, drawing upon other relevant movements and contemporary theories, to supplement the bedrock of critical pedagogy, will be important. To actively work towards causes such as antiracism and anti-sexism, CIL and those who practice it can learn from activist and social justice movements. It is an important first step to surface CIL-related issues through teaching, but another to chip away at deeply-entrenched power structures. In this respect, learning the strategies of activists and what it takes to build movements can only benefit library workers and teachers. To effectively challenge that which is exploitative and unjust, there is no alternative but to organize collectively and build shared power. Establishing analyses of power closer to home, within our workplaces, is key to realizing CIL's aims. CIL is one way that librarians can work with others to identify and resist forms of oppression, and it is imperative that this work continues.

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