

Information Literacy and Social Justice
Radical Professional Praxis

Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, Editors

Foreword by Toni Samek

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Foreword

This unmatched monograph about information literacy and social justice, with its activist imperative, is inspired by two world-class educators: Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. That fact in itself is a recipe for admirable intention. Most importantly, though, the editors deliver an excellent book. This is a victory volume, a text I have been waiting to read for a very long time. In other words, *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* is long overdue. Co-editors and practitioners Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins are most modest in their introduction. Because they have actually produced a genius four-part orientation to how information literacy that significantly improves upon the way it has been defined and even confined by the many normative information literacy model makers, functionalists and minders to date.

Our deliberate instruction in this work comes in four challenging lessons: (1) Information Literacy in the Service of Neoliberalism, (2) Challenging Authority, (3) Liberatory Praxis, and (4) Community Engagement. These are cumbersome and contested topics. However, Gregory and Higgins successfully attracted and recruited a stellar set of contributors to skillfully address them – not an easy task. We should not underestimate the collective will of projects like this one. Each contributor should be thanked for the risk they take on the page. I have, on a number of occasions, said publicly that information literacy is far too often realized in service of the state. This is rarely a popular observation. (And so I have been told.) But for almost twenty full years I have worked under the protection of my right and responsibility of academic freedom. The same cannot be said for all of the seventeen chapter contributors to this work. I admire them for their conviction. They also stand for compassion. And they are notably

serious students of their own craft. If you look closely at their references (whom they cite), another level of understanding unfolds. These writers are readers and they have read well. The influential authors and activists cited are some of the very best commentators on information society today, including Noam Chomsky, James Elmborg, Kathleen de la Peña McCook, Christine Pawley, Peter McLaren, and Sam Trosow.

This book is a new staple for people who are interested in persuasion and consensus building with respect to literacy in all of its forms and its relationships with freedom, access, capital, and power. In an era of austerity, this is ever more important to unpack, tell and retell. Keywords used in the chapter titles are just one indicator of what is addressed in this book. For example: violence, neoliberal library, citizenship, crusade, tyranny, liberatory, hip-hop, and teflon. This is not your average information literacy text; thank goodness for that. It is high time we acknowledged openly how information literacy has been co-opted by corporatist efficiencies and risk management. What are we going to do about it? Look to this book for starters.

Information Literacy and Social Justice opens with an introduction that grounds us in core library values, such as intellectual freedom and lifelong learning, questions the possibility of library neutrality, and argues for an activist library labor orientation blended with social justice. In the context of this project, this simply means information literacy librarians' conscious acknowledgment of the human condition (which inherently brings with it tensions between individual and community values) in their work, both inside and outside of the classroom. As Henry Giroux would phrase it, we are asked to connect classroom to public life. This is a simple condition, but one not often found. Indeed, the editors pose a gut question: how does the "concept of information literacy and the work of instruction librarians come to be treated as ahistorical, as well as atomistic and mechanistic?" It is a good question, indeed one worth editing a book about. In so doing Gregory and Higgins intentionally introduce a new generation of critical literacy intellectuals who serve up a winning critique of the traditional "static construction of information literacy." As the editors explain, the chapters serve to illustrate how "critical information literacy differs from

standard definitions of information literacy (ex: the ability to find, use, and analyze information) in that it takes into consideration the social, political, economic and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption.”

The first chapter, *The Violence of Information Literacy: Neoliberalism and the Human as Capital*, by Nathaniel F. Enright, clearly mints the intellectual rigor found in this book. Those authors that follow uphold the gold standard. This work immerses the reader in ideology and theory and then brings it to street-level literacy application, including struggle. None of the authors let librarians off the hook, as they force us into the circle of complicity. But they also show us how to re-open this closed circuit and re-route our energies into resistance to complacency, as well as how to work alongside our fellow lifelong learners, not teach to them or for them. We are also guided to think about the importance of the broader education that sits underneath information literacy instruction. We can imagine the long-term value to the citizen that goes hand-in-hand with the short-term lesson in library language. This uncovers veiled vocation as education; it adds culture and context to the concrete.

The co-editors suggest the following four purposes of this book: to apply critical librarianship to classroom practice “in a concerted effort to further critical information literacy praxis,” to provide concrete examples of our labor as social justice work, to expose “library/librarian neutrality in relation to the context of information production, dissemination, and manipulation and to recognize the social, economic, political and corporate forces and ideologies at play in information flows,” and to recognize our *being* in our *doing*. The latter purpose is the meta message that has the potential to impact the reader at the personal-professional level. If we read this book flatly, we won’t see how we are in it, as the “information literate,” constructed neoliberal subject that Enright describes. If we read this book inside out and upside down, we can see how carefully it crafts a picture of the true price of that loss. Those who engage with this text won’t get smarter (most of us don’t). But they just might see information literacy more clearly for what it has been, what it has the potential to be, and how and what they, as people, might be while performing it. Perhaps

the next project for Gregory and Higgins to tackle, in a critical series, is decision theory. Acknowledging the place and influence of certainty and uncertainty in information work is a connecting piece in the information society puzzle.

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1 December 2012

Acknowledgments

Many hands helped to shape this book. We would like to thank those who made this project possible. You would not be holding this book in your hands today if it weren't for the contributors to this book, who worked hard to write, revise, and generate new ways of thinking about information literacy and social justice in their chapters. It has been a pleasure working with all of them this year, and without them, this project would still be a dream. We are indebted to Toni Samek, both for inspiring us and for her foreword to this volume. Additionally, we must thank Rory Litwin for accepting this project for Library Juice Press, a step that allowed many ideas to come to fruition. Alison Lewis deserves praise for her guidance through the somewhat hectic editing process. We are grateful for the interactions with Joanne Doucette, Sarah McCord, and Gabriela Sonntag, whose willingness to listen and valuable insights were refreshing when alternative perspectives were needed. And finally, we must thank our students, for sharing who they are and engaging in the process of learning and teaching, teaching and learning.

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“...one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which critique and possibility—in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality—function to alter the grounds upon which life is lived.”

Henry Giroux (2010) on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire
in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, volume 57, issue 9.

Introduction

Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins

Imagine a world where everything you see, hear, and touch has passed through a filter. Music, literature, art, motion pictures, and news media have all been stripped of ideas, images, or words that are objectionable or offensive to the status quo. This is your world.

Thus begins the course description for “Bleep! Censorship and Free Speech in the U. S.,” a first-year seminar that we, Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, taught in the Fall Term of 2010 at the University of Redlands. Our goal was for students in our class to begin to reflect on their interaction with various modes of communication in daily life, on their understanding of the ideals of democracy and “freedom” circulating in the culture in which they are immersed, and on the ways in which the limits of free speech are reached in the name of national security, protection of youth, trademark, profanity, corporate sovereignty, and market value. Our traditional-age students (18-19 years of age) were experiencing the freedom of exceeding the boundaries of their parents’ worldviews, yet were surprisingly adherent and uncritical of mainstream cultural norms in relation to information and media consumption and production.

In preparation for, in the teaching of, and in reflecting afterwards on this freshman seminar we found ourselves thinking more deeply about the values of librarianship as developed in the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (2008) and the *ALA Policy Manual* as well as in the goals and outcomes of ACRL’s *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000). We found correspondence with our own understandings of the theory and practice of critical librarianship in the work of Sanford Berman, James Elmborg, Barbara Fister, Heidi L.M. Jacobs, Cushla Kapitzke and Toni Samek among others. Berman and Samek examine concepts of neutrality, intellectual freedom, and social responsibility as articulated and practiced by librarians and by our flagship professional organization the American Library Association. Like them we consider librarianship a fundamentally activist profession, thus rendering the notion of *neutrality* an “impossible

construct” (Samek, 2001, p. 1). Indeed, we think the work of Berman, Samek, and others before them have led to a generation—not a generation based on age—of librarians that see their profession as not neutral but as politically charged and activist in nature.

The Values of Librarianship

For Michael Gorman (2005) most of our professional “values and ideas are democratic values and ideas—intellectual freedom, the common good, service to all, the transmission of the human record to future generations, free access to knowledge and information non-discrimination” (p. 61). We believe that “[t]hose aspects of librarianship that commit librarians to serve democracy and human rights are what make the discipline essential to the survival of the human spirit. We assert that this commitment does not permit the librarian to be neutral” (McCook & Phenix, 2008, p. 25). Therefore, as Samek (2007) suggests, “core library values such as intellectual freedom need to be continuously revisited by individuals, institutions, and societies as a whole” (p. 10). Likewise, as Jacobs and Berg (2011) assert, “librarians can use the ALA Core Values as a way to reengage with the possibilities and potentials within information literacy to meet larger social goals” (p. 385) and that informed critical information literacy in practice exists, “especially between the connections with democracy, diversity, education, lifelong learning, the public good, and social responsibility” (p. 391). These voices help to illustrate the nature of the conversations we had in conceiving this project: the values of our professional organizations articulate an activist perspective inclined toward social justice. How then has the concept of information literacy and the work of instruction librarians come to be treated as ahistorical, as well as atomistic and mechanistic?

Critical Information Literacy

It is exactly this static construction of information literacy that a new generation of librarians from whom we’ve found inspiration specifically speak. They have adopted various critical theories to create a nascent

practice of *critical information literacy*. Critical information literacy draws from *critical theory*, which “refers to a specific scholarly approach that explores the historical, cultural, and ideological lines of authority that underlie social conditions” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, p. 3, 2012) and also developing from *critical literacy*, the four dimensions of which include, “(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice” (Lewison, Flint, & Sluys, p. 382, 2002). Therefore, when we apply critical theoretical approaches to our work as librarians, we consider the historical, cultural, social, economic, political and other forces that affect information¹ so that we may explore ways to critique our understandings of reality and disrupt the commonplace; interrogate multiple viewpoints to identify the status quo and marginalized voices; and focus on sociopolitical issues that shape and suppress information in order to take informed action in the world. Furthermore when we apply critical theory to our teaching practices, we are working to create a critical pedagogy that “helps the learner become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness” (Aronowitz, p. ix, 2009).

According to Henry Giroux (2009), critical pedagogy

works to shift how students think about the issues affecting their lives and the world at large, potentially energizing them to seize such moments as possibilities for acting on the world and for engaging it as a matter of politics, power, and social justice. The appeal here is not merely to an individuals’ sense of ethics; it is also an appeal to collectively address material inequities involving resources, accessibility, and power in both education and the broader global society while viewing the struggle for power as generative and crucial to any viable notion of individual and social agency. (p. 14)

Many educators have built their critical pedagogical perspectives on the theory of Paulo Freire. His *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* pivots on a com-

¹ We do not wish to reify “information” and yet we cannot help doing so. For a recent and very thoughtful study of the manner in which “information” has been and is constructed read Ronald Day’s *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power* (2008).

munal praxis, in which reflection coupled with action (theory + practice) transforms the world. Definitions and descriptions of the practice of critical information literacy echo Freire's theoretical perspective of teaching and learning in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: teaching and learning require reflexivity, a shared experience such that we learn from and with each other, and a focus on process toward transformative understanding. Furthermore, Freire urged for a problem-posing pedagogy as an alternative to the "banking" model of education and its resultant student passivity in order to lead learners and teachers to consciousness-raising (transformative) experiences. For Freire the content, or program, of instruction must be developed in dialog with "the people," rather than be predetermined.

Critical information literacy differs from standard definitions of information literacy (ex: the ability to find, use, and analyze information) in that it takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption. The authors in this edited volume understand that when we limit the potential of information "to outcomes and standards, we run the risk of minimizing the complex situatedness of information literacy and diminishing – if not negating – its inherent political nature" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 258). Thus, critical information literacy embraces analyses of "sociopolitical ideologies embedded within economies of ideas and information" (Kapitzke, 2003, p. 7), a "collective questioning of how information is constructed, disseminated, and understood" (Cope, 2010, p. 25), and involves the development of a critical consciousness about information through which learning "becomes the essentially humanistic process of engaging and solving significant problems in the world" (Elmborg, 2006, p. 198).

Why Social Justice?

Social justice is a contested term, but in its simplest sense, it "is commonly understood as the principles of "fairness" and "equality" for all people and respect for their basic human rights" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xvii). Social justice in political and economic thought is often aligned with

“distributive justice” as in the “equal distribution of basic liberties and political rights” (Merkel, 2009, p. 42). However one of the fundamental areas of contestation is that “the demands of social justice might require that people are treated differently according to the diversity of human needs and capabilities” (Cramme & Diamond, 2009, p. 8). Equality may not be achieved merely by equal distribution. The concept of social justice in educational scholarship centers on race, class, and gender. Sonia Nieto (2010) argues “that it is impossible to be a teacher without taking into account such issues as gender, sexuality, language, race, social class, ability, and other individual and group differences” (p. x). When we consider these definitions of social justice in light of core principles and inherent democratizing values of librarianship and the aims of information literacy, we see the undercurrents of social justice that lie at the heart of the library profession.

Recent scholarship reflects a search for social justice in information literacy, for example the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ (IFLA) “Beacons of the Information Society: The Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning,” as Heidi L. M. Jacobs (2008) limns, “underscores information literacy’s connections with broader social justice ideas and initiatives” (p. 258). The Alexandria Proclamation claims that information literacy “lies at the core of lifelong learning,” and it “enables individuals, communities and nations to attain their goals and to take advantage of emerging opportunities in the evolving global environment for shared benefit...to meet technological, economic and social challenges, to redress disadvantage and to advance the well being of all” (UNESCO & IFLA, 2005). More recently IFLA (2011) endorsed a statement in which they declared media and information literacy

a basic human right in an increasingly digital, interdependent, and global world, and promotes greater social inclusion. It can bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor. Media and Information Literacy empowers and endows individuals with knowledge of the functions of the media and information systems and the conditions under which these functions are performed.

Indeed the impulse to connect social justice with librarianship isn't a new phenomenon. A concern for the human condition and human rights has been an international movement for information and library workers for decades. Toni Samek has defined this progressive movement as *critical librarianship* (Robertson, 2007).

Social justice is also the aim of critical pedagogy, including Freire's conception of critical pedagogy. The chapters in this book explore what social justice means to information literacy and in particular, to librarians experimenting with critical information literacy inside and outside of the classroom. How can we as a profession engage students with the material inequities in information access, production, and dissemination? How do librarians present power structures within information economies and the effect this has on an informed citizenry and democracy? How might we highlight how information has shaped our consciousness, and on the other hand, how information is constructed by societal, cultural, political and other forces? What can we do to empower students to raise their critical consciousness of information and how can we inspire them to apply this outlook for fairness and the equality of all people? That we are concerned with these kinds of questions in our research and practice means that critical information literacy instruction begins to look very much like social justice pedagogy, despite its narrower focus. In Chapman and Hobbel's (2010) *Social Justice Pedagogy Across the Curriculum: The Practice of Freedom* they reference the work of Nieto and Bode (2008) who outline four outcomes of social justice education, which we have borrowed to shape this edited volume. Social justice education should:

1. Challenge, confront, and disrupt 'misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences,'
2. Provide 'all students with the resources necessary to learn to their full potential,'
3. Draw on the 'talents and strengths that students bring to their education,' and
4. Create a 'learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change' (p. 2)

This edited volume is divided into several sections that reflect some of

the shared goals of critical information literacy and social justice pedagogy. Many of the contributions consider various democratizing values of the profession such as intellectual freedom, information access, and democracy, issues clearly linked to social justice initiatives.

In the first section, *Information Literacy in the Service of Neoliberalism*, authors discuss dominant political and economic ideologies that frame our personal, social, and work life. By confronting our own complicity in the workings of neoliberalism, the contributions in this section will inspire reflexivity in relation to our information literacy instruction and programs. Nathaniel Enright unpacks the discourse of information literacy to reveal the “information literate” as the ideal type of neoliberal subject, and implores us, as educators and librarians, to study the complex social and political construction of information literacy; otherwise we have no hope of aligning such a notion with social justice. Likewise Maura Seale argues that the current framing of information literacy reinforces and reproduces a neoliberal ideology that is fundamentally anti-democratic and antithetical to social justice imperatives; critical theory may be the intervention to find an authentically critical information literacy practice. And Jeff Lilburn illustrates the intertwined discourses on information literacy, 21st Century or global citizenship, and the neoliberal subject through the lens of the fictional work of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*.

The second section, *Challenging Authority*, offers a space for contributors to confront “misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes” (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 11) apparent in the teaching of authoritative information sources in the classroom and the resultant inequitable consumption and/or discrimination of marginalized voices and information products. Andrew Battista suggests that engaging students in the act of curation via social media platforms, and enabling the instruction librarian to destabilize reified notions of academic authority, encourages the acquisition of critical evaluative habits of mind. Carrie Donovan and Sara O’Donnell ask us to empower students to embody scholarship as equal and active participants in ongoing conversations in their disciplines, thus challenging instruction librarians to subvert the status quo in relation to teaching scholarly communication practices and processes. And Andrea Baer presents the burgeoning field

of Digital Humanities as a space in which to engage students in debates regarding current, and perhaps reified scholarly practices.

In section three, *Liberatory Praxis: Students and Teachers as Co-Learners* contributors draw on the “talents and strengths that students bring” (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 12) to the classroom in order to collectively dialogue on transforming the social order, or the status quo. Anne Leonard and Maura Smale describe a semester-long course in which they engage in what Elmborg called “a critical practice of librarianship” (Elmborg, 2006, p. 198) by examining and interrogating the lifecycle of information alongside their students. By drawing out the conceptual connections between hip-hop and information literacy skills, Dave Ellenwood engages students in critical dialogs centered on cultural knowledge, social justice and critical perspectives. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins discuss how capitalism and neoliberalism reinforce inequalities and therefore endanger student welfare and forestall liberation. Assignments and dialogue in their first year seminar encouraged students to identify power structures in the U.S. media in order to develop awareness and critical consciousness in relation to information production and dissemination. Comparing critical information literacy to legal information literacy, Yasmin Sokkar Harker suggests the former will inform the latter in order for law students to begin to understand information as a social construct and to examine power structures that shape the creation, organization and dissemination of legal information. Demonstrating the use of problem-posing pedagogy to expand students’ understanding of the role librarians play in social justice and democratizing efforts Amanda Swygart-Hobaugh provides an informative content analysis of students’ usage of critical theories to analyze intellectual freedom issues in their lives.

The last section, *Community Engagement as Radical Professional Praxis* offers examples of critical information literacy beyond the classroom. Christopher Sweet offers a model for linking information literacy to service learning courses, highlighting how such collaborations can lead to students becoming “agents of change” to address authentic social justice issues in their local communities. And finally, Patti Ryan and Lisa Sloniowski describe library outreach and programming that make critical sociopolitical interventions

and act as radical pedagogical praxis, prioritizing democratic values and social responsibility, while providing a template for academic libraries as members of their communities.

We are in intellectual debt to scholars who have created a solid foundation on which discussions on critical pedagogies and critical information literacy may flourish. For example, James Elmborg, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Heidi L. M. Jacobs, Peter McLaren, Toni Samek, Ira Shor and the editors and authors, Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, whose remarkable book, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (2010), has ignited a wider dialogue of critical information literacy in the profession. The contributions in this current volume continue discussions on critical information literacy by considering elements of librarianship that support social justice initiatives within the framework of library values and the landscape of information flows. We hope this book is a step toward “building librarianship in a solid foundation of human dignity, freedom, social justice and cultural diversity” by grappling with “social, political, cultural, legal, economic, technological and ideological issues” (Samek, 2007, p. 43) and by providing a space for librarians to “talk about actual classroom practices and activities” for which others can engage and reflect upon (Jacobs, 2008, p. 260) in order to “find ways of being in the world and in our profession that are more rewarding and more humanizing” (Elmborg, 2012, p. 23).

As with any book, there are limitations to what can be achieved. Important perspectives are missing from this volume focused primarily on higher education. The intersection of information literacy and social justice in the K-12 setting and from the public library viewpoint would provide a broader dialog. We see this book as part of a discussion for librarians that is barely beginning, and look forward to future reflections on social justice, critical information literacy, and the ways in which teaching is a political act that can be a catalyst for progressive change in our communities and the world.

The purpose of this book, then, is:

To apply the lenses of democracy, social justice, and human rights dis-

cussed in library literature and policies to classroom practice in a concerted effort to further critical information literacy praxis.

To provide practical examples of librarians currently teaching the context of information production, dissemination, and consumption from a democratizing and social justice stance.

To dismantle the concept of library/librarian neutrality in relation to the context of information production, dissemination, and manipulation and to recognize the social, economic, political and corporate forces and ideologies at play in information flows.

To “find ways of being in the world and in our profession that are more rewarding and more humanizing” (Elmborg, 2012, p. 23).

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