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Empowering the Intentional Learner: A Critical Theory for Information Literacy Instruction

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In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations. [1]

Introduction

Why is intellectual freedom so important, and why do librarians have a special obligation to it? Brazilian educator and critical/conflict theorist Paulo Freire would probably reply that information is at the core of education, and that it has a democratic, liberatory power that will give all members of society the equality of access to society's power [2]. In other words, Freire's goal of social transformation through education is implicit in the above statement. While this is an important concept, it tends to mask another, more critical aspect of information literacy; that due to this "special obligation" librarians have been guilty of a patriarchal and privileged positioning of their expertise in relation to the users they serve.

Freire's critical form of educational theory suggests that educators (and we include librarians here) need to first engage their students in the contexts of the students' experiences. In his practice in remote areas of Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, he developed literacy programs for indigenous populations that did not initially impose the dominant culture's idea of literacy on the students. Only through engaging students in the terms of students' own experiences can an educator then build in concepts of learning that dialogues with those experiences to create a more dynamic, empowered, liberatory educational experience [2]. In such practice, power is with the student, not the educator. Since there is a strongly privileged, patriarchal power relationship in much of a library's interactions with users, including in the area of information literacy instruction, this paper, therefore, takes a critical theory view of libraries, information, and library users (critical theory is a sociological view that looks at the world through a lens that embodies issues of power and privilege in social relationships).

The paper is an example of a reflective dialogue done with the intent of developing a more critically grounded theory of information literacy instruction. First, we will examine the concepts of progressive liberal education as presented in the recent Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU)'s National Panel Report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* [3]; and the theory of information literacy instruction implicit in the Association of College and Research Libraries Institute for Information Literacy Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education [4, hereinafter, the ACRL Standards]. From this we will suggest a new theory of information literacy instruction, that of the empowered intentional learner. Then, this theory is tested in practice through a case study of a freshmen class developed and taught by the authors. Freire suggests that theory must engage with practice in a reflective dialogue where one informs the other and vice versa to develop more meaningful, critical theories and practices (what Freire and others refer to as praxis, or reflection- and doing-in-action). Therefore, we finally reflect on both the theory and practice, discussing how one informs the other, and through this model how reflective dialogue between the two develops a new grounded theory of information literacy instruction for empowered, intentional learning.

Information Literacy and Greater Expectations

Information literacy is not just a library issue, especially if one looks at it as a tool for empowerment and liberation. It has been suggested that it is the critical issue for the twenty-first century, that it is “of keen importance to all educational stakeholders, including faculty, librarians and administrators” [5]. With the explosion of information resources and sources available to learners today with the concomitant political, social, and global trend at attempting to control information, information literacy is a much more important concept and a greater requirement in life and in the workplace.

The ACRL Standards define information literacy for higher education as the ability to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” [6]. A key theory implicit in this document and in library practice as a whole is that of the lifelong learner, one who should be able to evaluate and interpret information retrieved from various sources and resources. [7]

Such a concept has been a part of progressive educational theory since at least John Dewey, who, while discussing science education in 1916, suggested:

Since the mass of pupils are never going to become scientific specialists, it is much more important that they should get some insight into what scientific method means than that they should copy at long range and second hand the results which scientific men have reached [8].

If one replaces science here with information literacy, one can see the importance of such learning to continued success beyond school and college; in other words, life long learning.

The Greater Expectations panel recently reframed this idea to discuss the Intentional Learner. Their document, intended to be “an analysis of the challenges facing higher education and an honest appraisal of our successes and failures in meeting them,” [9] says:

Students will continue to pursue different specializations in college. But across all fields, the panel calls for higher education to help college students become INTENTIONAL LEARNERS who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from different sources, and continue learning throughout their lives. [10]

It emphasizes that in order to “thrive” in the 21st Century, the intentional learner should be: empowered “through a mastery of intellectual and practical skills;” informed “by knowledge about the natural and social worlds and about forms of inquiry basic to those studies;” and, responsible “for their personal actions and civic values” [11].

In the current political/educational climate this is a highly attractive model as it meets faculty needs for research and student needs for good teaching and learning. As librarians know well, however, research is a much more difficult process, due mainly to the exponential proliferation of information that characterizes the 21st Century academic library. Greater Expectations addresses such concerns by urging “an invigorated and practical liberal education as the most empowering form of learning for the twenty-first century” [12]. The intellectual and practical skills that students need for this are extensive, sophisticated, and expanding with the explosion of new technologies. This extends beyond core concepts as articulated in the ACRL Standards to include ways of investigating human society and the natural world. Acceptance of Greater Expectations acknowledges that education is not about short term knowledge, but about a progressive, disciplined, long-term approach to the student becoming an intentional learner, who is “purposeful and self-directed in multiple ways ... integrative thinkers ... succeed[s] even when instability is the only constant” [13]. After all, is not the aim of education, in the words of John Dewey, “to enable individuals to continue their education—or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth?” [14].

Freire argues that education can be used to foster critical reflection and action: “Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it” [15]. Implied here is intentional learning, further qualified by self-empowerment. He indicts the “banking” concept of education as one that seeks to maintain the status quo; banking occurs when the teacher insists on “owning” the knowledge that she is imparting to her students. The students are not encouraged to own their learning. Cushla Kapitzke echoes Freire in critique of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) document *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, the American Association of School Librarians equivalent to the ACRL Standards; she argues that information literacy is not as empowering as the library profession would like to think: “[f]ar from contributing to equitable education outcomes, this [information literacy] framework for school library research masks an exclusionary ideology” [16]. (2003, p. 38). In other words, librarians are guilty of practicing banking. She goes on:

[This document] presuppose[s] that information literacy bestows power on those who understand and apply its precepts and standards. [It] assert[s] that information literacy in and of itself is a key to prosperity for both the individual and the nation in the new information economy. [17]

Kapitzke is arguing for a “critical information literacy” that “would analyze the social and political ideologies embedded within the economies of ideas and information” [18].

We would rather suggest that tying the development of information literacy to a progressive, Greater Expectations-based liberal studies program would, in the words of John Dewey “take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation,” [19] as opposed to, as Kapitzke says “privileg[ing] the role of information in learning and teaching” [20]. We see this as a challenge for academic librarians: to develop real partnerships with users that are communicating using the same terms. In other words, equitable power: all are not coming to the table with our privileged ideas and efforts. Such efforts could be based on the progressive premise of Greater Expectations, and, for librarians, especially on the idea of the intentional learner. As Dewey says: “To organize education so that natural active tendencies shall be fully enlisted in doing something, while seeing to it that the doing requires observation, the acquisition of information, and the use of a constructive imagination, is what most needs to be done to improve social conditions” [21]. Approached from this perspective, the intentional learner is empowered to be the one in control of her education—in other words, she would own her learning. It is a truism to say that we teach as we were taught; the further challenge is to release control of learning to the learner. Freire terms this “authentic education” [22]. Such authentic, empowered, intentional learning ought to form a grounded theory of information literacy that would inform our practice. Indeed, we would argue that it needs to come first, before information literacy per se. For example, a critical engagement with library theory and practice might force us to consider why our literature tends to reject outright the library tour or the “treasure hunt” for freshmen students. For one, we need to be asking why we are consistently being asked for such services, even when we endeavor to re-educate our faculty, staff, and students to consider our point of view. If tours and such are the experiences these constituent user groups bring to their initial library experiences at our institutions, would it not be better to engage with them on these terms, their terms?

We acknowledge that to be empowered, informed and responsible learners implies one also needs to be “information literate.” However, librarians need to move beyond discussing Information Literacy per se: the “new educational mission” of Greater Expectations is focused on the issue of the intentional learner, and therefore on the issue of student empowerment. If this grounds a new theory of information literacy, librarians must be dialoging with their constituents in a way that does not privilege the librarian. Learning-centered, a term bandied about in the academy, means that the focus should be on the learning of the student; further, we suggest that the student should feel in complete control of his own learning. Indeed, Arizona State University’s definition of “learner centered education” is not too far from the Freirian concept of empowerment:

Learner-centered education places the student at the center of education. It begins with understanding the educational contexts from which a student comes. It

continues with the instructor evaluating the student's progress towards learning objectives. By helping the student acquire the basic skills to learn, it ultimately provides a basis for learning throughout life. [23]

Theory into Practice

As an example to support our argument, we would like to draw on the case of a course in which we were the faculty of record. From Fall 1999 through the Spring of 2004 we taught versions of the Northern Arizona University's University Colloquium class, UC 101. The intent of UC 101 was to provide a first year seminar that would introduce students to academic community, discourse, and rigor. As part of the initial group of faculty developing courses, our added goal from a library perspective was to embody the characteristics of the empowered intentional learner, even before we were aware of the definition in Greater Expectations. While much of the characteristics of this empowered intentional learner requires the support and nourishing of a dynamic academic and educational environment, in the Information Age it also requires concepts and skill sets to be able to independently access and use information in all its forms. Greater Expectations equates this with the empowered learner, who "should interpret and evaluate information from a variety of sources" [24].

In these courses we have worked through some of the theory that we have previously presented in this paper. The learning outcomes we developed and which evolved between 1999 and 2004 are influenced in part by the conversations that preceded the final development of both the ACRL Standards and Greater Expectations. In our course, through class readings, discussion, and personal reflection, students were expected to take a closer look at intellectual inquiry and what it means to be critical. We tell them that their ability to think and read critically represents one of the most important skill sets they will apply throughout their entire college experience. Therefore, what follows is a brief case study of the experiences of these students in this class. This is not intended to be a report on the success or failure of a for-credit class built around information literacy concepts. Rather, while this was an important aspect of the class, the following should be viewed instead as an attempt to critically apply the theory of the empowered, intentional learner developed above.

While the class was developed by the authors together each taught separate face-to-face sections; in one case the class was delivered solely online via the WebCT Campus Edition course management system. As each of the classes progressed we sought active dialogue from the students that engaged them in responsibility for their learning. This included working with us to actively develop their individual learning experiences. In other words, we sought to empower intentional learners. Included here are direct quotes from students in the class, drawn from a variety of documents they prepared (for example, email to the instructors; papers; journal pieces; and, formative evaluations). Finally, it should be noted that we did not teach in a vacuum—we were also involved in programmatic issues, such as the development of the overall curriculum; student learning outcomes; assessment of a broad cross-section student portfolio work; writing of the faculty/instructor training handbook and training sessions; and, evaluation of the program in general.

The course allowed for flexibility in content, giving us the opportunity to teach to our areas of expertise: informed and critical consumption of information. We initially focused elsewhere, but found this to be an issue of importance; as one student noted:

I always try to analyze cause and effect because that is how the world works. newtons law states there is an equal and opposite reaction for every action. thus cause and effect are everywhere we look, even down to a molecular level. i try to integrate this into my daily life. think about consequences before i take action on something.

This flexibility made for a very fluid classroom, as it demanded an in-depth awareness of current events that directly impacted the academic and social lives of the students. Also, this approach modeled quite well the idea of the empowered intentional learner. For example, the content of the class was made very explicitly valuable to students contemplating the social and political upheavals after the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks. Students were not only aware of the controversy surrounding the event and its aftermath, but the political, social, and economic impact on issues directly affecting their own lives. As one mentioned:

In order to have meaningful discussions within our community we must be able to articulate our thoughts to others We are bombarded with information from the internet, magazines, books, news and T.V. and it is essential to learn how to decide what is credible and what is not.

During Fall 2001 the students were coincidentally assigned to read Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* [25], a novel about two friends on opposite sides of the political divide in Northern Ireland during the events leading up to the first IRA ceasefire of 1995. The novel was clearly in two parts, separated by a graphically described terrorist act, made much more real for the students by the events of 9/11. The novel, however, encouraged the reader to move beyond their preconceptions of the Irish conflict, to read between the lines of propaganda presented by all sides, and get to the human side of the story. It was a serendipitous choice, allowing us to work towards the empowered intentional learner in a much more emotionally charged classroom than we had expected.

Together with the students, we radically changed the course content after 9/11, building on the success of using *Eureka Street* while no longer actually using the novel.[26] Instead, the class focused on content that was more dynamic, based on the current events that students daily had to cope with. Examples included the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, budgetary woes due to the recession that impacted their financial situation, and new controls imposed by the likes of the USA Patriot Act.

As empowered intentional learners, students were still expected to critically interpret and evaluate information from more than just the latest television broadcast:
What I have learned thus far is to think clearly and question what you see. Not everything in this world can be taken for face value. I have to read and think clearly, gather facts, try to figure out what the author is trying to get across to the reader, actively search and many others to be able to synthesize my own philosophy and integrate it into my life.

It is our contention that if students are engaged by an issue, they will inform themselves on the issue; empowered learners also rethink the inherent biases that come with all forms of information.

We admit that there are limitations to our pedagogy, especially as it relates to the student audience we were working with. For one, many college freshmen are not prepared by their schooling for the control we gave to them. Intellectually, however, they were very stimulated, and appreciated their learning all the more when value was placed on their own experiences. As one student later commented via email:

Many of the people I meet and the classes that I take all have contradicting points of view. But with a higher education and the understanding that I have to be able to synthesize those facts and decipher what I believe to be true is a great power.

In this class we were able to redirect our focus based on the control we gave to the students to their concepts of forms of information and all forms of information sources. It may be somewhat heretical to say it, but when we say all forms of information, we do mean all forms, up to and including the usenet, web, blogs, and emerging information resources. The students forced us to ask ourselves some very hard questions, and these began to inform the theory of the empowered intentional learner we had been working from. And these questions began to inform our classroom and library practice. For example: we wondered why librarians should limit students to only library-sponsored resources? Even in our own day-to-day, personal information activities, do we limit ourselves to just Academic Search Premier? Or do we also use Google? Librarians, we hope, are literate information consumers—we know how to effectively get the quality information we need from the many and diverse resources available to us. If our intentional learner is empowered to do the same, why stand in her way?

For the traditional librarian, this is much more difficult to “teach,” as the teacher-librarian becomes less a leader of learning than an active participant in the learning. In the words of Paulo Freire: “I cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for me. Even if the people’s thinking is superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action that they can change” [27]. Librarians, we suggest, need to relinquish control of their student’s learning to the student herself.

Dialoguing with Theory

As we reflected on our classroom experience, it was very easy to see how our theory of the empowered intentional learner, complete with its potential limitations, impacted our library-based practice as well as our classroom practice. An issue we had to confront was the socialization schools impose on children: as so few of them are ever given significant responsibility, they develop little to no sense of their own power. However, as we learned in our classrooms, the power to learn is not a power remotely under the control of the teacher. It is a student-centered power and one we would do well to recognize in our library practice.

The academic library of the 21st century is a much different information environment than the majority of the academy has been used to. Librarians are bringing the library, and

information literacy, into the academic curriculum—where the 21st century library is an integral part of the academic experience, and where students are asked to use it at the most appropriate moments to their research process, not during the third week library tour. As can be seen from even the most cursory perusal of library literature, this is nothing new. Yet it does beg the questions mentioned earlier: why we disparage the tour or the treasure hunt when these are experiences identified as useful by the students?

We admit that such a sense of usefulness can come from a previously socialized experience; rewording our previous cliché of teaching in the way we have been taught, it is also safe to suggest we learn best in how we have been taught to learn. Yet, as we see all too often, the library, indulging in its positions of privilege and power, seems to forget this point in an attempt to have students meet our agendas (and information literacy is certainly qualified here). The empowered intentional learner is not prepared to work with us by schools; nor, for that matter, could they be, considering the current political stakes schools have to meet. Rather, as we reflect on our theory and practice, we suggest the library's agenda ought to refocus slightly, to helping in the development of the empowered intentional learner. Only through engaging students in this way can we successfully develop an information literate learner too.

It is a major limitation of our (the authors') practice is that it is focused on freshmen students. Yet it should also be noted that the online section we taught comprised non-freshmen. Many of the same issues arose in this section as arose in the others. We also acknowledge that, to an extent, a for-credit course is apples compared to bibliographic instruction's oranges. In saying this, however, as we reflect on our theory and practice, and as each informs the other, there is much to be said for empowering intentional learners even in the case of library-based practice.

Conclusion: Implications, Recommendations

Authentic teaching is an important concept for librarians to be aware of. It dismisses the concept of banking, of depositing information in the student. Rather, the student is an active participant in learning; indeed, the student would be in control of her learning. For librarians working with patrons, this means a surrendering of authority. To empower someone means to relinquish control, to pass along a level of trust and responsibility for learning to the learner. We would argue that this is part of the definition of learner-centered education: teaching and learning in equal partnership, implying that the teacher and the learner also are in partnership. When it comes to the library and our contributions to the learning experience, we would further suggest that libraries approach the learner on the learner's terms.

Too many of our practices, from the reference interview to bibliographic instruction forces students to come to us on our terms, to meet our goals and our agendas. Instead, we should value and build on the experiences of students. For example, how can we leverage a student's experience with Google to teach a research concept? This may strike many as heretical; until a few years ago we would have been among the first to suggest this as antithetical to information literacy instruction. Yet we would now argue that in order to remain facilitators of access to information with the laudable goal of enabling the empowered intentional learner, it is essential we dispense with the power and privilege implicit in our roles that has made us information gatekeepers.

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26. The decision to no longer use the novel was not due to the graphic terrorism depicted, but more due to the realistic social and sexual mores that made the novel so true to life. However, with the age group and political conservatism of the class, and the fact that for many this novel was the first time they were exposed to sexually explicit scenes and language, the novel ultimately was a distraction to the pedagogical intent of the instructors. In later iterations of the class the instructors used other pieces that were less sexually charged to meet the same learning outcomes.
27. Freire, 108.