

Going Against the Current of Hegemonic “White-Ism” Discourse: Global Implications of a Doctoral Program Journey from Critical Student+Guide Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critique of systemic LIS education and its hegemonic “White-Ism” discourse prevalent across the conceptualization and implementation of doctoral programs. The text illuminates the structural aspects of the doctoral experience beyond a singular narrative, to present implications for a global educational practice. The paper extends an auto-ethnographic approach to personal narrative and storytelling from the critical perspectives of a student+guide. It identifies challenges to overcome barriers in achieving milestones in the Ph. D. journey while exposing programmatic deficiencies in the process.

TOPICS

education; education programs/schools; curriculum; students; administration; social justice

HEGEMONIC ‘WHIT-ISM’ AND THE STUDENT+GUIDE

This paper presents a critique of systemic LIS education and its hegemonic “White-Ism” discourse prevalent across the conceptualization and implementation of doctoral programs. The text illuminates the structural aspects of the doctoral experience beyond a singular narrative, to present implications for a global educational practice. The text extends an auto-ethnographic approach to personal narrative and storytelling from the critical perspectives of a student+guide. It identifies challenges to overcome barriers in achieving milestones in the Ph. D. journey while exposing programmatic deficiencies in the process. The work adopts a discursive approach steeped in critical narratology (Fairclough, 2001; Gee & Handford, 2012) to discuss strategies that were adopted in navigating and circumventing a “White-Ism” hegemonic discourse (Fehn, Hoesterey, and Tatar, 2014; Mehra, forthcoming). It defines “White-Ism” in terms of a hegemonic immersion in an Anglo/Euro-centric LIS discourse and practice and its “closed-box”

knowledge permeating and dominating all areas of academic experience and reality (Mehra, 2016). Examples include obliteration of indigenous oral histories, integration of critical race theory and scholarship, and marginalization of action research, among others. The meaning of the word “hegemonic” is related to imbalanced power and suppression of everything outside established Anglo/Euro knowledge domains discounting other philosophical and methodological pathways (Flank, 2009). The paper uses “student+guide” to represent a collaborative partnership and intentionally avoids use of terms like “advisor” and “chair”, which often occur in LIS doctoral program policies, because it signifies top-down relationship promoting condescension and ignoring a mutual and shared vision.

SHARED JOURNEY

The journey in scholarly development for doctoral students in Ph. D. programs is a global phenomenon, grounded in the united expedition of student+guide. The lessons learned/applied in student+guide narrative(s) impact across disciplines. The joint endeavor articulated here reveals opportunities and successes in achieving significant milestones. It offers clarity in the experiences which are often misguided through traditional approaches. These approaches often stunt the philosophical growth necessary for significant contributions and disciplinary expansion. Insights into how this student+guide collaboration worked effectively while challenging “White-Isms” will be relevant to faculty members and doctoral students. The partnership featured a reciprocity of mutual growth in the student+guide journey that was marked by the finality of achievement in the crafting of a unique dissertation, the culminating product of doctoral education. The intellectual work represented a strong and much-needed innovative Black feminist voice and critical perspective to the study of LIS. Entitled “In a Collective Voice: Uncovering the Black Feminist Information Community of Activist-Mothers in Chicago Public Housing, 1955-1970” the dissertation is a one-of-a-kind exceptional gem of an example that applies critical race theory and social justice framework to push the boundaries of what we consider theory, methods, and knowledge domains in the limited conceptualization and practice of our professions (Gray, 2018, 2015). The model of a Black Feminist Information Community developed from a rigorous grounded theory application in archival research and discourse analysis is ground-breaking. It will serve as a foundation and paradigm for qualitative-historical research in LIS for years to come (Gray, 2018).

Generally speaking, structural milestones in a Ph. D. journey include completion of coursework (theory, methods, specialization, cognate), qualifying examination, development of dissertation proposal (problem statement, literature review, research methods, potential pilot, timeline), data collection and data analysis, and dissertation defense. Usually this journey begins in an immersive coursework experience where the philosophy of discipline is framed in a way to encourage reproduction of knowledge through theory and method. This is problematic because higher-level philosophical thinking as an aspect of personal voice in scholarly development is de-emphasized and completely marginalized. Discouragement through limiting the practice of research is often reflected through language, communication, signals, and behaviors of faculty, course instructors, and administrators. The personal voice value is, thus, not acceptable because it is considered outside the realms of traditional academic discourse within Anglo/Euro-centric

frameworks. Such behavior perpetuates violence against students' basic humanity and human dignity and personal voice which is intrinsic to who they are as human beings.

During the journey, the onus on the doctoral student is to contribute to the field with a complete understanding of disciplinary scholarship and how former successful students established their niche within the professional collegiate (Sugimoto, Russell, and Grant, 2009). In that way, the philosophical task becomes an exercise of fitting into preceding works, rather than the elevation and critique of their own systems of knowledge and research practices. The guide is supposed to provide affirmation and support as well challenge and elevate, countering the limitations found in the Anglo/Euro-centric deified curriculum and the "White-Isms" in specific cultural environments socialized within the toxic collegiate academy (Sugimoto, 2012). Further, their actions can assist in resisting stigmatization of notions of success by encouraging philosophical and intellectual rigor to develop scholarly thought.

CRITICAL-RESISTANCE NARRATIVE

Grounded in the philosophy of Michel Foucault's (1983, 1986) philosophy of knowledge and power, this work critically examines the hegemonic propositions of scholarly knowledge of theoretical and methodological paradigmatic constraints that foster a culture of philosophical duplication of effort (Habermas, 1991). The authors address this in the telling of their story of the journey exploring the themes of countering hegemonic knowledge representation in both the course-based learning space and the preparation of the dissertation. The partnership of resistance represented by student+guide demonstrates the necessity of challenging the environmental constraints and the limitations of so-called acceptable forms of knowledge acquisition and philosophical boundaries that bind scholarly development in LIS and communication professions. The account of that journey, reflectively and critically draws on the following themes:

- Paternalism in student development and guidance;
- Marginalization of any deviance from the "traditional" path;
- Knowledge limitations of canon LIS theoretical and methodological approaches;
- Hierarchy of knowledge at the exclusion of critical and humanistic/interpretive thought;
- Resistance to hegemony encompassing structural milestones and disciplinary theory and methods;
- Process-based performance based on discrete steps discounting the lived experiences.

The critical narratives of student+guide highlighted draw attention to an urgent need for LIS education to re-examine their rigidity of relevance to current and emerging issues in the 21st century, including their implementation of doctoral training and education processes, policies, and practices. This will help the professions develop resilience and further integrate diversity of discourse and social justice to stay relevant in the contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic landscape (Mehra, 2018). The text presents a frank and honest critique of select elements in LIS doctoral education. More such narratives need to come out of the closet for real and meaningful growth of the LIS professions.

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