Diversify Your Lesson Plans: De-Centering Whiteness in Library Instruction

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Academic libraries often work within systems that rely on European and Western ways of thinking, organizing, and knowing. Our spaces, collections, and workers are predominantly white despite the increasingly diverse communities we serve. This impacts how we present and teach information to our students and ultimately whose voices we privilege. Teaching librarians should create lesson plans that highlight the knowledge and stories of marginalized people in order to encourage students to interrogate the notion of "traditional academic research." Examining research with students and acknowledging the power that certain voices have over others promotes a classroom environment where critical conversations about different types of knowledge can occur, and traditionally underrepresented students are encouraged to think of research from a strengths-based perspective starting from what they already know from their own heritage. By centering these diverse ways of knowing in our lesson plans, we show our students that whiteness is not a default for scholarship. When preparing for instruction sessions, there should be a purposeful method to illustrate different types of knowledge from diverse communities when teaching students how to research and whose voices they privilege.

This article will outline how whiteness manifests in the research process and how librarians can incorporate scholarship, media, and art by and about Black, Indigenous, and people of color into library instruction sessions in order to decenter whiteness as traditional academic knowledge for any class type.

Background: What Types of Knowledge Do We Privilege in the Classroom?

Librarians often try to codify and analyze what students learn in our classrooms. We are told to teach to the syllabus or assignment, and create checklists that fail to teach students a nuanced understanding of "authority" or how power and capital influence the type of sources that are published and deemed scholarly. These checklists and analytics do not address systemic inequities and do more to privilege a certain type of success in the classroom while inherently teaching Black, Indigenous, and students of color that their own traditional ways of knowing are less valid. As Ferretti says in her 2020 keynote presentation for the Triangle Research Libraries Network annual meeting, "Few artists and authors of color actually have books dedicated to their work. What other ways of knowing outside of books or archives are there? Seeking and using 'scholarly' works means other works are sacrificed or even devalued." Ferretti says that librarianship depends on systems that work within traditional disciplines originating from European and Western ideas of what constitutes knowledge. She then goes on to quote Linda Tuhiwai Smith from *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2013), "Most of the 'traditional' disciplines are grounded in cultural worldviews which are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems" (p. 129). When our profession and what we teach our students is based in traditionally white disciplines, we are in essence teaching students to devalue other ways of knowing. As Saathoff (2017) says:

> Too often the educational system disregards and dismisses the reality of students' lived experiences. As a result students learn that their experiences, languages, and histories hold little or no value in the educational setting. The dismissal of students' backgrounds by the educational system has a deep effect on communities of color, perpetuating a system that sets them up for academic failure. (p. 2)

One thing librarians can do in instruction sessions to work against this institutionalized dismissal is incorporating a crowdsourcing activity in the classroom asking students what they view as knowledge and research, what sources they personally turn to ground or inform them in their research practice, which helps to validate and honor different ways of knowing. Answers from students in my classrooms have included cultural folklore, poetry, oral traditions, and herbalism, to name a few. Cyganik (2017) provides an overview of implementing theoretical and methodological approaches to privilege indigenous worldviews in scholarship. Cyganik quotes Meyer (2003):

> Indigenizing research means supporting theories, sources, and functions of cultural knowledge as the main navigating system for the community, alternative to the Western education. Some scholars suggest that indigenous knowledge systems have always been focused on providing people with guidance relevant to their ways of living. (p. 148)

By promoting our students' own cultural knowledge and worldviews that exist outside of what is considered traditional Western scholarly research with supportive lesson plans, we can de-center whiteness as the "default" for how our students navigate the research process and empower them through a strengths-based teaching philosophy. For students to flourish in our classrooms, we need to practice equity pedagogy as conceived by Banks and Banks (1995), where instructors adapt their teaching styles and lesson plans in order to include students' exploration and growth toward using multiple perspectives to examine the world. The following section will provide a few examples of how I have actively diversified my own lesson plans.

Putting it into Practice

Smith College is one of the largest women's colleges in the U.S., located in western Massachusetts with 2,400 undergraduates. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 36% of the undergraduate student body identified as students of color. Library instruction is primarily addressed through one-shot classes at the request of professors and taught by corresponding liaison librarians. As Visual Arts Librarian, I am liaison to the Arts, Film and Media Studies, and Landscape Studies classes at Smith and mainly teach library instruction sessions in those disciplines. While the arts hold a unique position in the academy that allows for a wider breadth of scholarly research—artists often require a great deal of information that has no epistemic relationship to art itself—it is a discipline in academia that is often predominantly white in faculty staffing and curricular material.

As a librarian of color, I often find myself negotiating between interrogating issues of representation and power structures in visual culture with students and meeting the expectations of my liaison faculty, which often perpetuate traditional scholarship and therefore uphold harmful or outdated structures of learning. Despite this, I have been able to successfully diversify lesson plans within classrooms that privilege depictions, knowledge, stories, and media of traditionally underrepresented communities.

An American Studies Class

I was asked to teach an instruction session in the past that was for a course in the American Studies department cross-listed with Art History that taught the art and architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It explored the cultural legacy of the Civil War, the arts of the Gilded Age, and the development of early modernism. Students in the class were tasked to do an extensive research project on the artists or architects covered in the class syllabus, who were predominantly well-known white men. Students needed to analyze one major work from this list of artists, one of whom was 19th century American painter Winslow Homer. I opened up my class with an image of Homer's painting "Dressing for the Carnival."

The work depicts a Black community at the end of Reconstruction getting ready for Jonkonnu, a Christmas holiday celebration with origins in the Bahamas that was commonly observed by enslaved Black people in Virginia and North Carolina. I asked students to call out what they saw in the painting, regardless of what they may or may not originally know about the work or Homer's oeuvre. Many made observations about the use of color and lighting, pointing out the U.S. flags held by the children and guessing this had something to do with the concept of independence (the original name for this work was "Sketch—4th of July in Virginia"). But not many knew much about Reconstruction. This was an opportunity to have an expanded conversation on this period of American history and the context of the painting. The professor and students all remarked that this was different from a lot of what they were looking at in class thus far. From there we started to take parts of the painting and research using the library's art reference resources; we sought answers to questions such as: What can we learn about the relationship between Reconstruction and emancipated Black people from this painting? What can we learn about the positionality of Homer as a white observer rendering scenes of Black life during the Civil War and Reconstruction? We may assume that this should be a joyous scene based on the thematic element, but why does it not feel this way? In a class of twenty, I had individual appointments with eleven of the students prior to my instruction session. Eight of those students met with me again post-session to change their research topic to focus on a work of art that depicted Black and/or Indigenous subjects.

I note this particular instruction section as a valuable one and an example of how focusing on a work of art or image that highlights Black life and history in a class that otherwise would have handled this subject matter on the periphery (if at all) is important when we create our lesson plans. It has an impact on students and widens the breadth of their research skills and abilities while actively de-centering whiteness.

Figure 1: Winslow Homer's Dressing for the Carnival

Winslow Homer, 1836-1910. (1877). Dressing for the Carnival. Retrieved from Artstor

A Landscape Studies Class

I regularly work with our Introduction to Landscape Studies class that explores the complex and multifaceted relationship between human beings and the physical environment. Students learn to critically analyze a wide variety of landscape types from the scale of a small garden to an entire region, as well as to practice different methods of landscape investigation. Ultimately, the course is designed to change the way students see the world. Instead of starting my instruction sessions at the library homepage, I try to find a recent article not behind a paywall that covers an issue concerning a community affected by the built environment. This is often how students first consume information, after all—not from aimlessly plugging keywords into a database but from something they read online or something they have first-hand experience with. One semester I chose to have students look at an article about a plan to demolish part of Interstate 81 in Syracuse, New York—a highway that displaced working class Black citizens in order to make it easier for white citizens to leave the city to the suburbs in the name of "urban renewal." I asked students to underline terms they hadn't heard of before or didn't know, circle concepts they knew about, and star themes they thought were important to the conversation. One of the terms that the majority of students did not know about was redlining. This gave me an opportunity to find reference materials both on the Internet and through the library that defined the concept. We were then able to have a larger conversation about the ways in which city planning and transportation departments have driven out or segregated communities in the United States, and students were able to provide examples of how this had happened in their own hometowns. We then used the library's resources to delve further into scholarship on these issues.

After demonstrating how to do research on redlining using library and Internet resources, I then had students do a mind mapping exercise in preparation for their mid-semester papers, where they were tasked to explore a landscape studies issue that interested them. I encouraged them to use our in-class discussion as a jumping off point to think about how their own personal experiences or the environments of their hometowns brought particular issues to mind. The results of this were rich and interesting—urban community gardens run by Black, Indigenous, and people of color in Boston; racial covenants on houses in Massachusetts; bike lanes and the increase of gentrification in Portland, Oregon. These examples show the research opportunities that librarians can encourage students to pursue by starting from what they know, or introducing them to concepts that affect traditionally underrepresented people. We can de-center whiteness as default in theory, knowledge, and research practice in the classroom by putting the work into whose stories and histories we highlight to teach our students how to navigate the research process.

Conclusion

This article outlines just a few ways librarians can diversify lesson plans to de-center whiteness in instruction. Regardless of the class or research subject we are assigned to teach, in what ways can we incorporate examples of database and resource exploration that highlight the voices, content, and issues related to traditionally underrepresented or marginalized communities? How can we push back against what is traditionally considered "scholarly" sources of knowledge? Whatever subject we teach in, it is our responsibility, as Banks and Banks (1995) describe, to help students understand, investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and baises within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed within it. Paraphrasing Honma (2005), we must bring social context to the information systems we teach to students and promote nontraditional ways of knowing that encompass populations who have historically been silenced, marginalized, and overlooked.

It takes work to learn about all of the knowledge systems that exist outside of traditional Western understanding and it doesn't happen all at once nor is it ever a finite process, but it is something librarians need to dedicate their time to cultivating. When our library holdings fail to provide "scholarly" sources to help a student researching Indigenous casino architectural design, we should point them in the direction of tribal preservation officers instead of telling them their research scope is too narrow. When a student can't find any primary resources to support their exploration of the busing programs in 1970s Boston and the influence of the built environment, we can suggest they turn to oral histories instead of encouraging them to change their thesis. De-centering whiteness in our library instruction ultimately means treating our Western knowledge systems in LIS as *a* way of knowing and not *the* way of knowing, and not relying on what our databases bring us as the only scholarship that matters. To close with Honma (2005):

> In other words, asking the necessary questions of 'Whose s cience? Whose knowledge?' (Harding, 1991) is key to transforming the ethnocentrism, or the privilege of whiteness, in LIS, and redirecting it towar ds one that locates privilege and discrimination, works towards identifying social situatedness (racial, gender, class, etc.), and examines both the production and the reception of knowledge in the field. (pg. 17)

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