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### Cultural Inquiry: A Framework for Engaging Youth of Color in the Library

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#### Abstract

This article describes the conceptual underpinnings of a learning approach described as *cultural inquiry*. This learning approach grew from the author's work with a diverse group of African American youth in an after school book club, named *Circle of Voices*. The purpose of describing this learning approach is to help youth services librarians develop strategies for engaging youth of color in the library. An equally important goal of this work is to provide a theoretical framework for explaining some of the cultural disconnects that youth of color experience while learning in mainstream schools and libraries. Some of the theoretical influences of this learning approach, which are described in this article include: social constructivist theory, critical pedagogy, and the Afrocentric idea in education. Contrasts are drawn between the conceptual underpinnings of information inquiry and cultural inquiry. Lastly, Callison's four phases of inquiry are used to contextualize real world examples of cultural inquiry from the Circle of Voices book club.

#### Introduction

It became apparent to me while working with a group of African American youth in an after school literacy program that building on these youths' rich funds of knowledge was key to their literacy engagement.<sup>1</sup> The young scholars in this after school program expressed a disconnectedness from their school libraries, which prompted me to probe further.

#### “No, Not my Librarian!”

During one conversation in fall 2006, as the youth were preparing to work on their student literary magazine, the program's director began asking about their library usage and reading habits. With regard to library usage, they were asked if they thought their school or public librarian implemented or would implement a culturally relevant program such as the African American Read-In. The African American Read-In is a program that recognizes and celebrates African American literature. The event is often hosted in churches, libraries, and schools across the country.<sup>2</sup> Many of the youth were already familiar with the African American Read-In though their participation in the program in years prior.

As a former school librarian, I found the youths' responses to be quite revealing. Comments included, “No, not my librarian! She's not open-minded,” and “The library's like her house,” or “Librarian[s] see their role basically as to tell where the books are at, tell what it's used for—and that's it.” However, one student did state optimistically, “Maybe, if [the library] had somebody to direct [a culturally responsive program] who was good.”<sup>3</sup>

Hearing the CLIP youth talk about their perceptions of and experiences in libraries reminded me that there is still much work to do in terms of providing youth, particularly African American youth, with opportunities to engage in culturally responsive learning activities in the library. It also made clear that a one-dimensional focus on information literacy instruction leaves little room for librarians, particularly youth services librarians, to tap into the learner's social and cultural information questions and concerns as a place to begin inquiry.

Prompted by the youth's remarks, I secured a book club grant through the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) to help facilitate a culturally responsive book club, which I later named Circle of Voices. This article outlines some of the theoretical influences of the cultural inquiry model that was implemented during the COV book club.

### **Why Not Librarians? Expanding Library Discourses on Inquiry**

One approach to develop more culturally responsive library practices is to build on a pedagogical base of knowledge already familiar to most librarians, such as inquiry-based learning. School and youth services librarians have recognized that inquiry-based instruction complements the plethora of resources contained in the library where learners can explore a range of topics. Moreover, inquiry-based learning aligns with the natural role librarians assume as facilitators who help learners locate and retrieve information. In this sense, inquiry-based instruction positions librarians as cognitive apprentices who guide learners through different learning activities. These activities occur with varying levels of librarian support ranging from tightly controlled to free inquiry.

Although library scholars have developed over a dozen inquiry models in recent years, these models offer a more general approach to learning that may not be useful in reaching young learners from historically underrepresented backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> Given the achievement disparities between black and white students, it is clear that traditional methods of teaching and reaching youth could stand to be improved.<sup>5</sup>

One way youth services and school librarians might reach disengaged youth of color would be to build a repertoire of instructional practices that includes culturally-based inquiry. With a few exceptions,<sup>6</sup> there is a paucity of scholarship that deals with culturally-based instructional approaches in the library. The cultural inquiry approach outlined in this article may begin to help fill this void.

### **What is Cultural Inquiry? Toward a Conceptual Framework**

The cultural inquiry approach described in this article has several distinct, yet complementary, theoretical influences. These influences range broader learning theories and approaches such as social constructivist theory and inquiry-based learning, to the more critical and culturally-specific learning theories such as Afrocentric education and critical pedagogy. This section describes each of these theoretical influences in greater detail and discusses their relationship to developing a cultural inquiry approach for librarians.

#### **Social Constructivism**

When referencing inquiry-based learning in school library discourses, the most commonly cited theory is social constructivism. Carol Kulthau was at the forefront of making connections between social constructivist theory and the teaching of information skills in the school library context. In summarizing Kulthau's contributions to the field, Callison notes:

She attempted to move beyond simple introduction of resources and tools for information location, to teaching skills, which help students seek meaning from the information they use. The task therefore, is to build on the students' experiences and knowledge so that information encounters can be either discerned as useful or discarded as quickly as possible if it has no relevance.<sup>7</sup>

Yet by itself, social constructivist theory does not fully help librarians understand how to tap into students' social and cultural environments as a place for them to develop personal meaning and tackle larger structural issues affecting their communities. This is of concern because youth of color often lack official spaces, such as school, to probe into their racialized experiences or their experiences with being marginalized or oppressed. One reason teachers and other educators do not adopt a more critical approach toward their teaching is that they are not able to assume a neutral, distant stance toward the subject matter. Instead they need to take a more activist role in student learning. While there are numerous documented examples of classroom teachers who *have* created learning spaces where youth can openly challenge and explore structural inequalities, similar examples are noticeably absent in library literature.<sup>8</sup>

### **Inquiry-Based Learning**

Rooted in social constructivist theory, inquiry-based learning provides a pedagogical base from which a cultural inquiry model can be developed. Inquiry-based instruction teaches students *how* to think rather than *what* to think. In general, inquiry-based learning is described as:

A process where students are involved in their learning, formulate questions, investigate widely and then build new understandings, meanings and knowledge. That knowledge may be used to answer a question, to develop a solution or to support a position or point of view. The knowledge is usually presented to others and may result in some sort of action.<sup>9</sup>

The difference between traditional inquiry models and cultural inquiry is that the latter emphasizes helping learners develop questions stemming from their social and cultural environments. By contrast, Callison's information inquiry model states that most questions tend to derive from one of three information environments: personal, academic, and workplace.

Nonetheless, Callison's work on information inquiry provides a useful framework for explaining what a cultural approach to inquiry might look like in practice. According to Callison, the five basic elements of information inquiry include questioning, exploration, assimilation, inference, and reflection.<sup>10</sup>

There are some important differences between Callison's more popular information inquiry model and the cultural inquiry approach being put forth here. Some of these differences are delineated in [Table 1](#). Essentially, information inquiry and information literacy divorces information problems from their social context and sees knowledge construction as discrete or autonomous facts. By contrast, cultural inquiry is rooted in sociocultural notions of knowledge which recognize learning as a communal act that is deeply intertwined with social, historical, and political forces.<sup>11</sup>

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy is another theoretical influence that informed the development of the cultural inquiry approach. From a critical theoretical standpoint, the knowledge construction process is value-laden and

fraught with issues of power and privilege. Critical educators, according to Darder, are those who “perceive their primary purpose as commitment to creating the conditions for students to learn skills, knowledge and modes of inquiry that will allow them to critically examine the role that society has played in their self-formation.”<sup>12</sup> One way this sort of critical education can be achieved by librarians is by providing learners with opportunities to read and discuss books that incorporate multiple perspectives on a variety of topics or themes (e.g. immigration) and allow participants to openly grapple with the complexities of race and the human experience.<sup>13</sup>

## **Afrocentricity**

The Afrocentric approach to education was another guiding influence in the construction of the cultural inquiry approach. The Afrocentric idea of education situates African American students as the *subject* rather than an object of the learning experience.<sup>14</sup> Although it may seem like this approach replaces one form of separatism or elitism (e.g. Eurocentricity) with another, Afrocentric curriculum theorists argue that any curriculum that presents Africans and Africa in a true light will benefit *all* students, not just black students. Moreover, Afrocentric curricular theorists contend that the traditional curriculum, which is both implicitly and explicitly Eurocentric, is potentially harmful for all students because in order for them to be able to put larger world history events in their proper context, they must have a thorough understanding the history of Africa and African people throughout the Diaspora.

Critics of the mainstream colorblind approach to teaching and learning argue that it simply masks the fact that whiteness is the primary cultural frame of reference from which most learning begins. In other words, the cultural knowledge and history of whites is the normative or default reference point from which knowledge is often constructed.<sup>15</sup> As a result, students of color often find themselves lost, disengaged, or having to reinsert their cultural background into the learning situation in order to connect with the material and create personal meaning.

Many of the struggles and tensions that African American youth and other youth of color experience in and out of school stems from learning how to articulate their racial identity against the backdrop of Eurocentric cultural and linguistic norms.<sup>16</sup> An Afrocentric approach to education helps make this contestation process visible to students so that they can begin to dismantle, negotiate, and cope with the hegemonic influences of whiteness.

## **Research into Practice: Implementing the Cultural Inquiry Approach**

The next section describes how Callison’s five elements of inquiry were adopted and expanded upon to develop a cultural inquiry approach that infuses some of the critical and cultural theoretical considerations mentioned previously. This approach was implemented during the Circle of Voices book club in fall 2006.

### **Stage 1: Questioning—Identifying Problems**

During this phase, the driving question learners should be asking themselves is: *What do I want to educate my community about?* As learners hone in on larger cultural issues affecting their community, the librarians’ role is to guide them and help them ask more focused, relevant, and insightful questions. During the refining stage, it is imperative that librarians not limit learners to the safe topics, or topics that do not require learners to consider issues of race, power, and privilege. Instead, learners must be challenged to consider whose

interests and perspectives might be omitted from mainstream representations of knowledge on a particular subject. Getting learners to refine their questions in ways that help the inquiry process become more manageable is a key element of this phase.

## **Stage 2: Exploration—Seeking Answers**

One of the questions young scholars should be asking themselves at this stage is: *What does my community know about my topic and what do they want to know in general that I may have overlooked or not considered?* Librarians should remind the youth with whom they are working that they are scholars. As scholars, the youth should assume the posture of an authority on their chosen topic, or one who synthesizes the feedback from their community to ultimately put forth an original analysis and set of conclusions. Too often, youth of color believe that conducting research about themselves or their cultural histories is not “real” research. This is an unfortunate message frequently reinforced in schools, when the study of black history and the history of other non-white cultures is relegated to only a portion of the school year.

As cultural themes begin to emerge from the book discussions, young learners can begin exploring the library’s resources as seeking input from various community stakeholders about their topic. As youth synthesize community input, they can begin to narrow their inquiry focus. At this stage, affinity groups can be formed among the participants based on their shared interests.

## **Stage 3: Assimilation—Confirming or Refuting Common Knowledge**

In this stage, learners are beginning to absorb and/or reject their preconceived understandings of their topic based on the information they gather. The critical question youth should be asking at this stage is: *What is the popular understanding most people have about my topic and how might such understandings be problematic for certain cultural groups or segments of the population?* While some learners will reinforce what they already know during this stage of inquiry, a cultural inquiry stance will encourage learners to push back against mainstream representations of a particular subject and consider marginalized viewpoints. For example, an inquiry topic on gangs might flip it from being described solely in relation to the negative activities of urban youth of color to expanding its meaning to include any social network of people who come with a common set of interests to meet common goals. In this way, gangs can be seen anywhere from the corporate boardroom to Greek fraternities, and can channel their efforts in a positive or negative direction.

## **Stage 4: Inference—Deriving Conclusions**

Perhaps the most important stage of the cultural inquiry process is where inferences are made. This is when evidence is gathered to help support a claim that eventually leads to a conclusion being drawn. While this evidence may come from expert reports, literature reviews, or other scholarly sources, a cultural inquiry approach would ask: *What would people my community say about my topic and would they agree with the conclusions I’ve drawn? What might be the consequences of sharing the conclusions I’ve drawn for different audiences?* During the inference stage, learners should have the opportunity to test their new knowledge on their community stakeholders through oral presentations and other community-wide events.

## **Stage 5: Reflection—Seeking Clarity and Assessing Outcomes**

Throughout the cultural inquiry process, learners should be constantly reflecting on the direction of their

chosen topic and deciding what the larger implications for communicating their research to others might be. Some of the essential questions youth might ask at this stage are: *Do the conclusions I have drawn make sense and do they matter? How can other people in my community directly benefit from this knowledge?*

## Discussion

This article sought to describe an instructional approach that librarians could use to engage youth of color in meaningful, culturally-enriching learning activities. Not all youth services librarians or school librarians will have the time or the inclination to integrate this approach into their repertoire of practices. However, for those inclined to try their hand at developing a library program rooted in cultural inquiry, the potential benefits to youth in the community are clear.

A question that might be lingering in the minds of many librarians reading this article is whether and how white librarians (who make up the majority of the library workforce) should implement this approach, particularly if they work in predominately white communities. The answer is deceptively simple. The first question that should be asked is: *Can the youth in my community benefit from learning how to ask and answer questions that have to do with creating social consciousness and social justice for marginalized people?* If you answer “yes” to this question, you cannot absolve yourself from the responsibility of attempting to create a library learning environment or program where cultural inquiry is fostered. If you are in a community with significant youth of color, designing a program or pedagogical posture guided by the principles of cultural inquiry is even more needed. If youth services librarians are willing to step from behind the proverbial reference desk to engage in the messy and political work that cultural inquiry requires, we may begin to see youth respond to questions about their library usage and say, “Yes, that’s my librarian!”

## Endnotes

1. See, for example, the groundbreaking body of work on out-of-school literacies in Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz, *School's Out! Bridging Out-of-School Literacies With Classroom Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
2. National Council of Teachers of English, “National African American Read-In,” <http://www.ncte.org/action/aari> (accessed September 3, 2010).
3. Kafi D. Kumasi, “Seeing White in Black: Examining Racial Identity Among African American Youth in a Culturally Responsive Book Club” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2008).
4. See, for example, the presentation of various information search and use models in Daniel Callison and Leslie Preddy, *The Blue Book on Information Age Inquiry, Instruction, and Literacy* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2006).
5. National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Achievement Gaps: Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups* (Washington, D.C.: NCES 2010015, 2010).
6. See, for example, a rare treatment of school library scholars writing on infusing culture into learning in Lynda Miller, Theresa Steinlage, and Mike Printz, *Cultural Cobblestones: Teaching Cultural Diversity* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994).
7. Callison and Preddy, *The Blue Book on Information*.
8. David Stovall, “Where the Rubber Hits the Road: CRT Goes to High School,” in *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got a Song*, eds. Adrienne Dixson and Celia Rousseau (New York: Routledge, 2007), 231-240.

9. Callison and Preddy, *The Blue Book on Information*.
10. Table I. Information Inquiry vs. Cultural Inquiry
11. Cushla Kapitzke, "(In)formation Literacy: A Positivist Epistemology and a Politics of (Out)formation," *Educational Theory*, 53, no. 1 (2003): 37-53.
12. Antonia Darder, *Culture and Power in the Classroom: A Critical Foundation for Bicultural Education* (New York: Bergin Garvey Press, 1991).
13. Glenn, DeVogd, "Question Authority: Kids Need to be Skeptical of the Curriculum. It's the Only Way to Develop a Balanced View of the World," *School Library Journal*, 52, no. 4 (2006), 48-53.
14. Molefi Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea in Education," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60, no. 2 (1991), 170-180.
15. Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault, "Learning in the Dark: How Assumptions of Whiteness Shape Classroom Knowledge," *Harvard Educational Review*, 6, no. 2 (1997), 321- 349.
16. Olga Welch and Carolyn Hodges. *Standing Outside on the Inside: Black Adolescents and the Construction of Academic Identity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

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