CHAPTER 13[*]

Empowering, Enlightening, and Energizing:

Research as Inquiry in Women's and Gender Studies

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As practitioners of feminist pedagogy, women's and gender studies scholars facilitate a participatory and cooperative environment for teaching and learning. This empowers students to raise substantive questions about texts they read and to relate classroom concepts about gender roles and norms to their own experiences. Together, librarians and women's and gender studies scholars promote lifelong learning and inquiry beyond academia by placing high value on students' lived experiences.

The Research as Inquiry frame in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which describes the research process as "iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions," aligns with the women's and gender studies classroom environment, where students are encouraged to continuously raise critical questions.[1] This chapter explores how Research as Inquiry intersects with feminist pedagogy and applies within women's and gender studies. In this examination, the authors integrate women's and gender studies threshold concepts, including the social construction of gender, intersectionality, privilege and oppression, and feminist praxis into a disciplinary analysis of this information literacy concept.[2]

The authors (two librarians) embrace authentic feminist practice that values the lived experience and use their own voices to reflect on how the Research as Inquiry frame shapes their work with women's and gender studies students and faculty. Suggestions for how to implement and assess the frame in women's and gender studies classes are discussed, including specific activities for raising critical questions as part of the iterative research process.

Theoretical foundation

Threshold concepts, Research as Inquiry, and women's and gender studies. The creation of the Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education (Framework) marked a transition from a standards-based skills focus to an adaptable and flexible conceptual approach.[3] The Framework puts forth six core concepts to serve as a foundation for how librarians teach, interact with students and faculty, and design curriculum. These core ideas were developed using a variety of educational approaches, most notably, threshold concept theory. This theory was developed by Meyer and Land, who established five characteristics of threshold concepts: transformative, troublesome, irreversible, integrative, and bounded to a specific field.[4] While this is an extensive theory that could be discussed in greater detail, we will instead focus on the Framework as signaling a significant pedagogical shift for librarians that has the greatest impact when situated within a discipline. In an essay examining the impact of the Framework, Pagowsky notes that regardless of educational theory, the document represents a shift toward "designing instruction with big ideas rather than skills-based curriculum."[5]

The Research as Inquiry frame describes experts as those who explore multiple perspectives, investigate gaps in previous research, and overall raise critical questions around lines of inquiry.[6] Key dispositions and knowledge practices outlined in the frame are particularly significant for the learning process in women's and gender studies, most notably valuing and developing intellectual curiosity, openly engaging with information, and becoming more comfortable with ambiguity. The application of these knowledge practices and dispositions beyond the classroom context is central to the Research as Inquiry frame.[7] Examining the Research as Inquiry frame in a disciplinary context requires further exploration of women's and gender studies programs and threshold concepts.

In a report for the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), Levin explores teaching strategies, learning outcomes, and assessment plans that comprise women's studies programs across the United States.[8] In discussing distinctive learning processes for women's studies courses, it is noted that students are expected to link the intellectual with their personal experiences and

are challenged to incorporate new knowledge. Additionally, characteristics of women's studies curricula include "teaching students a critical approach to knowledge rather than a common set of facts" while fostering a sense of social responsibility that extends beyond the academy. Consequently, classes themselves are "more participatory, experiential, diverse, and student-centered."[9]

Launius and Hassel used an extensive literature review, conversations with other faculty, their own research, and student learning assessment results to propose four threshold concepts for women's and gender studies: the social construction of gender, privilege and oppression, intersectionality, and feminist praxis.[10] Together, these transformative concepts provide the foundation needed to explore feminist scholarship. The social construction of gender is the premise that "gender and sex are distinct from each other, and that our gender identities are socially constructed and not immutable."[11] The concept of privilege and oppression examines interconnected structures of difference and inequality to illustrate how power operates in society. Intersectionality as a threshold concept explores how gender is just one aspect of feminist analysis. To fully examine the concepts of social construction and privilege and oppression, one must apply other categories of analysis including race, class, and age. Feminist praxis reinforces the connection women's and gender studies scholarship has with social justice by encouraging students to apply one's knowledge beyond the classroom to address inequities. While much of feminist scholarship places value in one's lived experiences, threshold concepts for women's and gender studies require a novice in the field to move from personal knowledge to examining larger structural issues. The process of situating one's lived experiences in the context of structural issues requires a paradigm shift that is often troublesome and transformative for learners.

Feminist pedagogy and critical inquiry. Encouraging students to actively shape their education by continuously raising critical questions is a key tenet of feminist pedagogy. Influenced by critical approaches to teaching and learning, feminist educators reject instructional approaches that encourage passive behavior.[12] Resisting educational practices that promote passivity, Freire shuns the "banking concept of education," in which "the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat."[13] Freire underscores the importance of developing a "critical consciousness," asserting that "knowledge emerges only through… the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."[14] Practitioners of feminist pedagogy reframe and expand upon Freire's notion of critical consciousness by raising awareness about gender inequality and encouraging students to question assumptions about gender norms. Feminist pedagogy has evolved from the second-wave feminist movement, which shaped social change in

part by facilitating widespread consciousness-raising about oppression and gender discrimination. As Accardi notes, second-wave feminist activism focused on "all realms of a woman's life—the domestic sphere, the arts, music… [and] education was one arena that also saw activist energy and transformation. The conceptualization of feminist pedagogy was an effort to bring the women's movement into higher education."[15]

While feminist instructors encourage students to raise critical questions about gender roles and inequality, they also resist the banking concept holistically by broadly facilitating inquiry. When describing key tenets of feminist pedagogy, Bondy, Light, and Nicholas discuss the importance of developing a safe space for students to have substantive dialogue and debate, to identify and challenge assumptions, to "ask critical questions about the world around them, and [to] make connections between and among their learning experiences, often with a view to generate social change."[16] As feminist educators, Bell, Morrow, and Tastsoglou also emphasize the inquiry process, noting the importance of helping students to "develop critical-thinking skills, partly by using material in the classroom that challenges the status quo and partly through teaching students to question and analyze."[17]

Feminist pedagogy, critical information literacy, and Research as Inquiry. The feminist emphasis on inquiry aligns with critical approaches to teaching and learning in libraries. When discussing theory and practice of critical information literacy, Elmborg underscores the importance of consciousness-raising, which empowers students to "learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and the world around them."[18] While librarians have traditionally focused on helping with finding answers, the process of developing questions is central to critical information literacy. Simmons discusses how raising critical questions is a key area of the research process, noting the importance of asking questions about information and engaging with ideas in order to develop new knowledge.[19] Exploring the relationship between critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and information literacy, Jacobs underscores how the process of posing complex questions empowers students to play active and transformative roles, which ultimately extends learning beyond the classroom.[20] Hence, critical approaches to information literacy teaching and learning place a strong emphasis on developing and articulating substantive questions, and encouraging students to play active roles in their education and beyond by engaging in the ongoing process, as described by Freire, of restless, yet hopeful, inquiry.[21] As described in the Research as Inquiry frame, facilitating this process involves challenging students to appreciate and participate in complex dialogue and debate surrounding the creation of knowledge, in part by becoming intellectually curious and being open to seeking sources of information from diverse perspectives.

Reflections on facilitating the inquiry process

Sharon Ladenson. The Framework represents a shifting emphasis in teaching and learning in libraries. One of the key elements of the Framework involves encouraging students not only to be critical information consumers, but also active *producers* of information. The Research as Inquiry frame focuses on the iterative process of articulating thoughtful questions; encouraging students to continuously develop new and complex questions is a fundamental part of the process of developing knowledge.

Facilitating the process of developing critical questions is central to my teaching. Through researching and practicing feminist pedagogy, I also recognize that learning occurs collectively through open discussion and inquiry. Learning is an active, iterative, and continuous process, facilitated through practice and application of new concepts. Learning also occurs as a result of building on existing knowledge and experiences, and, consequently, the process is also personally meaningful.

I aim to cultivate a participatory and cooperative learning environment, building on the knowledge and questions shared by students about their research and information sources. When working with upper-level undergraduate and/or graduate women's and gender studies students, I often begin by asking them to write down and verbally share questions about their research, as well as their strategies for finding information. This activity not only facilitates the process of developing and articulating questions, but also frames information literacy sessions around student needs, which provides for a more targeted teaching and learning experience. For example, I have worked repeatedly with an upper-division undergraduate class at Michigan State focused broadly on gender and evolution; students are required to conduct semester-long group research projects. The faculty member brings her students to the library shortly after they have developed their research proposals, so the class has a good sense of the topics they are interested in exploring. During the 2015 fall semester, one group decided to focus on the evolution of diverse family structures, such as families with lesbian or gay parents, single-parent families, and adoptive families. When sharing their research questions, strategies, and sources, students from the group noted that they had managed to locate biographical and media sources, and were hoping to find empirical research articles as well. This led to questions and discussion about the value and use of diverse sources of knowledge. During this exercise, students demonstrated one of the key dispositions outlined in the Research as Inquiry frame: seeking and reflecting on multiple perspectives during the information-gathering process. I was also able to provide ad-

vice on locating empirical research articles on their topic, which addressed specific information-seeking needs.

I appreciate how the Framework shifts the conversation about teaching and learning in libraries from a skills-based approach to an emphasis on complex, sophisticated ideas surrounding research and information-seeking. For years prior to the development of the Framework, I have embraced feminist pedagogy and worked with faculty to facilitate the process of raising critical questions about research and information sources during information literacy sessions. The Research as Inquiry frame will provide a useful mechanism to continue to build and strengthen collaborative work with faculty to facilitate the process of exploring and engaging critically with information sources. Key dispositions outlined in the frame, such as valuing intellectual curiosity and being open to diverse perspectives, are aligned with a feminist pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, which is widely valued and practiced by women's and gender studies scholars.

Juliann Couture. When I began my career as an academic librarian with subject liaison information literacy instruction duties, I followed a general template of "things students should know about the library" instruction style. This approach was partially born out of a lack of teaching experience combined with finding my footing in an academic setting. While active learning components were integrated into my sessions, they did not foster the collaborative, problem-posing environment I aimed to cultivate and that I experienced as an undergraduate. How might I inspire that type of learning and inquiry in sessions I conducted?

In shifting my focus from a checklist of things to accomplish to facilitating the raising of critical questions, my interactions with instructors and students were altered. An integral part of my planning process has always included conversations with the instructor about goals and outcomes for a library instruction session. This discussion still occurs but no longer focuses on the performance of specific skills, such as locating two scholarly articles. Instead, the conversation centers around how to reinforce or build upon the concepts being addressed in the course, including how students are engaging in the inquiry process. These conversations ensure the success of the session by clarifying objectives and pedagogical approaches.

For an undergraduate women's and gender studies course focusing on women in the arts, my conversation with the instructor provided an opportunity to discuss the inquiry process and how it would lead to other concepts such as authority and information production. Our planning session led to a fruitful discussion about the aims of the course assignment, source type and number requirement, and how this related to feminist theory. Eventually, we decided to not prescribe a set number or type of sources but instead use the session to reinforce and expand on concepts addressed in earlier in the se-

mester, such as synthesizing information from numerous disciplines. When the session occurred, the instructor and I worked collaboratively to facilitate students' inquiry on the production of literary and art criticism, gathering multiple perspectives, and determining the scope of their analysis. The Research as Inquiry frame provides a foundation for these discussions with instructors since it often leads into other concepts contained in the Framework.

Activities for facilitating the inquiry process

As practitioners of feminist pedagogy, the authors facilitate the process of raising critical questions during information literacy sessions. The Research as Inquiry frame provides a concrete mechanism for identifying specific behaviors and competencies acquired as a result of formulating such questions. The authors design and implement activities for developing and reinforcing knowledge practices and dispositions outlined in the Research as Inquiry frame, including valuing intellectual curiosity, maintaining a critical stance, and seeking multiple perspectives during the process of discovering and engaging with information sources.

Sharon Ladenson. Librarians can use activities for facilitating the inquiry process for women's and gender studies students at various levels in higher education. Working with first-year writing programs focused on inquiry provides an important opportunity to initially engage students in the process of raising questions as part of research and information seeking.

Students enrolled in Michigan State University's first-year writing program have had the opportunity to take introductory composition courses in various thematic tracks, such as American Radical Thought, Law and Justice in the United States, or Women in America. As the librarian for gender studies, I have collaborated with faculty members who teach the Women in America track. Inquiry ("a recursive process of posing, following, and answering questions") and discovery ("making new knowledge through [the] inquiry process") are key components of the first-year writing program at Michigan State.[22]

One of the exercises I have developed to support inquiry for first-year writing is a discussion-based activity and worksheet designed to facilitate the process of articulating critical questions about a specific information source. The activity involves distributing copies of a very short, provocative article on a topic relevant to the class.[23] One of the readings I have often used for this exercise is a *New York Times* opinion piece written by Judith Warner on "The Choice Myth."[24] The piece debunks myths and dispels stereotypes of stay-at-

home-moms and explores various challenges that women continuously face when juggling paid work and family responsibilities. Warner also references several outside sources, such as a United States Census Bureau report, a research report by sociologists, and news media sources. After reading Warner's piece, students work in pairs to answer and raise critical questions about the article. Students identify questions that Warner raises about women's lack of support for balancing motherhood and paid work, and they also develop their own critical questions about challenges that mothers face in the paid workforce. Discussing Warner's article leads students to raise questions about social issues: for example, why various organizations lack sufficient resources to support families (such as child-care facilities on-site and flexible hours for staff). Students also explore how Warner frames the issues. For example, some students have raised questions about the author's narrow focus on heterosexual families. In addition, students identify outside sources referenced in Warner's piece and share examples of keywords for finding additional information on the topic explored in her article; this helps to underscore how a single source can be used as a launching point for finding additional information on a topic. During this exercise, students have demonstrated key knowledge practices and dispositions outlined in the Research as Inquiry frame, including maintaining a critical stance, valuing intellectual curiosity, assessing information sources for gaps and weaknesses, and seeking multiple perspectives as part of the research process. The activity also facilitates exploration of the concept of privilege and oppression, as students identify and discuss power structures that shape obstacles and challenges women face when lacking resources to balance paid work and family responsibilities. Students also explore the concept of intersectionality while discussing how racial identity and class status further limit women's options.

What are strategies for reinforcing the inquiry process for upper-division undergraduate students in women's and gender studies classes? Working with undergraduates at Michigan State in a third-year English class focused on women and literature provided another opportunity to facilitate the process of developing critical questions. Students were required to do analyses of specific texts by female authors and to incorporate outside sources of literary criticism into their work. In anticipation of the information literacy session, I spoke with the instructor, who expressed concerns about the work that her students had submitted previously. She explained that rather than engaging in critical analysis, students had been writing plot summaries. Reviewing the list of required texts for the class, I noted that students had read *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. This novel presents a dystopian society in which fertile women are physically forced to bear children for the state. As the text has powerful and provocative themes, I decided to use it for the initial activity for the session with the English class. I asked students to reflect and

raise questions about *The Handmaid's Tale*; for example, if they had the opportunity to talk with Margaret Atwood, what questions would they ask her about the plot, characters, and/or specific themes of the book? After generating and discussing critical questions, we explored resources for finding related literary criticism. Later in the semester, the instructor told me that the work of her students had improved, and indicated that the process of raising questions about *The Handmaid's Tale* helped her students to become more comfortable with critical analysis.

Juliann Couture. In the Women, Literature and the Arts course, students investigate a woman artist of their choosing, drawn from many art forms, including visual art, literature, and music. This lower-level undergraduate course examines women in literature and the performing arts and aims to emphasize cross-cultural and historical perspectives. The course counts as both a lower division elective course for the major and as a core-curriculum course for general education requirements, which results in a mix of women's and gender studies majors and students without prior exposure to disciplinary content.

In the course, students are exposed to the foundations of art and literary criticism as well as a few core feminist readings. Students' cumulative project is a research paper analyzing the work and life of a female artist from multiple perspectives. In conversations with the instructor, we identified the students' primary challenges as determining the appropriate scope for a thesis and synthesizing multiple perspectives. Students often resorted to summarizing the artists' life and work while struggling to analyze the work from different angles, such as class, race, ableism, or culture. Since the class was a mix of majors and non-majors, some students were more prepared to integrate women's and gender studies concepts into their work, specifically those of intersectionality and understanding structural issues around privilege and oppression.

To begin addressing these challenges, I designed a session aimed to encourage students to raise critical questions that led to deeper analysis of the artist's life and work. We began by discussing Frida Kahlo, an artist the students are familiar with and who is often used in class discussions throughout the semester. Taking an intersectional approach, we create questions as a class about different lenses with which to analyze Kahlo's life and work. How does Kahlo's Mexican heritage influence her work? Why is her work often analyzed in relation to her husband's? How does the meaning of her work shift if viewed through the lens of disability or her communist views? Through this collaborative exploration, different ways of examining the life and work of one artist arise and we discuss how multiple students could investigate the same artist but approach the project with different areas of inquiry and criticism. This portion of the session guides students through exploring multiple lenses of inquiry that can ultimately navigate the process of determining scope and

articulating a clearly defined thesis. Additionally, this process reinforces the need to examine the artist on both a micro and macro level. After discussing this one example as a whole class, students pair up to explore their selected artists. Most students arrive at the session with an artist in mind but have not developed a specific line of inquiry. After sharing their selected artist with their partners, students are asked to respond to a few targeted prompts: What perspectives might you use to investigate this artist and her work including, but not limited to, historical, cultural, relational, ableism, economic, racial? What do you already know about the artist? How do you know it? What gaps might there be in this information? Where would you gather more information about this artist? While I provide these questions as a way to overcome the initial discussion barrier, most students readily engage with the process. When we come back together as a class to discuss the questions, what gaps of information exist, and the perspectives discussed, students drive the next phase of the session, which touches on information production, access, and authority.

Feminist Assessment

Many educators struggle to meaningfully examine learning in feminist classrooms while not reinforcing power structures inherent within assessment mechanisms. In *Students at the Center: Feminist Assessment*, Shapiro lays out guiding principles, starting with the core principle of questioning established evaluation practices.[25] The other principles include a student-centered, participatory approach, which is heavily shaped by feminist pedagogy and compatible with feminist activist beliefs. Finally, feminist assessment is not standardized but instead based on local context and needs.[26]

Keeping these principles in mind, how might one assess these inquiry-based activities from a feminist perspective? This is particularly challenging when information literacy instruction sessions are often limited to a one-shot interaction with a fifty- or seventy-five-minute time frame. As Accardi notes, "feminist assessment acknowledges the uniqueness of each learner and… traditional classroom assessment techniques are modified in ways that are explicitly feminist."[27] Since feminist pedagogy and women's and gender studies as a discipline value students' lived experiences, reflection is a key component of assessing a feminist classroom. One approach is to modify a traditional assessment practice, the one-minute paper. The one-minute paper often asks what the student learned and what is still unclear. In allocating a bit longer than one minute, the students could be asked to reflect on the class session and to describe their learning experience that day. The questions can be tailored to align with the knowledge practices in the frame. The students

might be asked to reflect on how the scope of their research shifted based on the questions raised during the session or information located. This reflection practice aims to give students agency in the learning process.

Another way to assess student learning is to observe and examine how students compose and generate critical questions as well as how they negotiate those questions. Do they participate in the discussion? Are the students raising questions beyond the prompts given? Where were the barriers to the students raising critical questions? Were students seeking multiple perspectives? Are students struggling with uncertainty or not locating a straightforward answer? Observing the students' interactions could lead the librarian to identify more meaningful reflective questions throughout the session.

Conclusion

Taking a feminist pedagogical approach and critical stance when guiding the inquiry process does pose challenges for the planning and facilitation of information literacy instruction sessions. One of the biggest challenges the authors have encountered is student resistance to this type of learning. As hooks notes, "this type of learning process is very hard; it's painful and troubling" and that it may take a while for students to recognize the importance of what they've learned.[28] One strategy to ease students into this uncomfortable territory is to demystify the session. Discuss at the start of the session why it is being approached a certain way and clarify the benefits of the exercises. Engage in conversation with the class regarding how the process of raising critical questions can lead you to different directions that may create a more focused area of inquiry.

Approaching information literacy sessions with this stance also requires a shift in how one approaches instruction and how one negotiates the process with the course instructor. Some instructors will prefer an instruction session that provides students with a specific list of facts about the library and locating information. While this might occur, it is important to focus on a shifting emphasis toward a more engaged, critical session. For both authors, this has meant rethinking what needs to be included in a limited time frame. Is that database demonstration necessary in a fifty-minute session? What portions of a traditional one-shot could cut or covered by other formats, such as an online guide or tutorial? By rethinking our own approach to the sessions, we are able to shift our emphasis to facilitating the inquiry process and encouraging students as critical consumers and active producers of information.

The shift from a skills-based, standards approach to a focus on concepts and big ideas provides space to reimagine the librarian role as educator and examine our pedagogical approach. For the authors, this includes incorporat-

ing critical information literacy and feminist pedagogy in their practice and striving to integrate the Research as Inquiry frame and other information literacy concepts into the disciplinary curriculum. These approaches aim to guide learners through the process of raising critical questions and more fully engage in the inquiry process in all aspects of their lives.

Notes

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