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Critical Information Literacy for the Development of Political Agency

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the educational role of libraries in the form of information literacy instruction, and considers the ways in which critical theoretical approaches to information can help citizens to develop political agency – the abilities that empower them to engage in the political world around them. It considers the political position that libraries take when they engage with educational issues.

The presentation discusses initial findings from fieldwork conducted in a school in the United Kingdom, which researched young people's conceptions of political information, how they interact with information sources and how this relates to their sense of political agency. The research sought a deep understanding of the topic and took a phenomenographic approach. A combination of questionnaires, repertory grid interviews and focus groups, were used to explore how the participants conceive of political information, how they interact with the information to which they are exposed and with one another when discussing political issues and how they position themselves within their political world.

The research is working towards recommendations to contribute to the development of a critical approach to information literacy instruction, which will make recommendations as to how educators supporting young people's information literacy can engage with the cultural and contextual needs of their learners through the methodological and theoretical approaches taken in this research.

The paper concludes that critical information literacy would be of benefit the development of young people's political agency. Participants' experiences and conceptions varied, but a commonality between them is an apparent gap between their concerns about their own futures and that of the world around them, and their understanding of their potential to play an active role as informed citizens. Initial findings indicate that there are a number of ways in which information literacy could apply specific critical theories in practice.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, critical information literacy, phenomenography, political agency, young people.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the how a critical theoretical approach to information literacy can support the development of political agency. It considers how taking a cultural and contextual approach to information literacy education can be of benefit to individuals, to help them apply information literacy skills to their lives outside of educational contexts, specifically in relation to the ways in which they form political opinions, attitudes and a sense of political agency and ability to participate, which are shaped by their encounters with various formal and informal information sources.

Initial findings from fieldwork which researched participants' conceptions of political information, how they relate to information sources and how this relates to their political agency, are presented.

2. Rationale for the Research

The research stems from a perceived problem of young people's disengagement with politics and a general national decline in participation in formal political activities such as voting. There is also a pervasive sense that young people do not know enough about the world around them to make informed choices. Suggestions are made in the literature of library and information science that as well as having a deficit in terms of knowledge, young people are in a position of deficit in terms of information seeking skills and critical literacy (Rieh and Hilligoss, 2008; Whitworth, 2009). The goal of this research is to explore these issues – to identify whether these concerns are valid, and then to explore what contribution librarianship can make to political participation through information literacy instruction.

The purpose of the research is to investigate young people's levels of critical information literacy, to find out how they perceive sources of political information, how they interact with these sources and the extent to which their interaction with these information sources is critical and influences their attitudes and decisions when it comes to making political decisions and participating in public life.

There is a perceived "crisis of democracy" or "democratic deficit" in which political participation is low and in decline (Hill, 2009; Hansard Society, 2013). This research focuses on young people, a demographic in whom participation is considered to be in crisis (Harris and Younes, 2010). Although political trust, interest and participation in politics is relatively low in younger people than in older generations (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000, p.43), some research suggests that young people's engagement with politics does not take normative forms, but is more often based around non-normative modes of engagement, and that young people understand the concept of 'politics' in a different way to older people (Manning, 2013). It is difficult to define political participation (Seligson et al., 1988) and information, particularly when individuals have different understanding of the terms. This research therefore takes a broad approach to the concepts of politics, information and participation.

An axiom of the research is that progressive education is a key way for a rapidly evolving society to retain the possibility of democratic participation by an engaged citizenry (Dewey, 1997, pp.87-88). Libraries are central to the provision of education to support a participatory democracy, through critical approaches to information literacy, which encourage citizens to become knowledgeable, engaged and active participants in democracy, and help the to

develop political agency. The goals of information literacy practices are closely related to and complementary with those of the liberatory education practices of critical pedagogy (Keer, 2010, p.157).

3. Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is an educational movement which seeks to help students to develop critical consciousness and recognize problems within educational structures, the relationship between systems and structures of knowledge and power, and to take constructive action (Giroux, 2010). Critical theorists have written widely about the causes of disengagement, which include the ideas that declining participation is the result of structural inequality, a decline in public space, the increasing influence of the market on private lives, the declining presence of substantial content in democracy, and the demonization of youth (Giroux, 2002; 2012).

3.1.1 Critical pedagogy to support political agency

Giroux (2013) theorises that it is possible to increase citizens' political agency using critical pedagogy. Citizens with political agency "have the capacity to make decisions and to govern, not just to be governed" (ibid) and are able to make informed and meaningful decisions. A number of LIS theorists have written about libraries can and should support the development of critical and engaged citizens through critical pedagogy (Kapitzke, 2003; Swanson, 2004; Elmborg, 2006; Whitworth, 2011). This research explores the application of critical pedagogy specifically to information literacy.

3.2 Critical Information Literacy

Critical information literacy is the application of critical pedagogy to information literacy (Swanson, 2014). There is no fixed definition (Kapitzke, 2003, p.40) but information literacy can be described as "a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association, 2000). Critical information literacy applies a critical lens to information literacy, which is not a widely researched area of LIS (Cope, 2010, p.24). This research contributes to identifying how critical theory can support the democratic and social justice goals of LIS (Accardi et al., 2010; Elmborg, 2006; Eryaman, 2010; Whitworth, 2011). An axiom of this research is that critical information literacy can be used to explain biases, foster critical thinking, interrogate assumptions, and question validity. These abilities contribute to the development of political agency. Concepts such as manufactured cynicism, the culture of fear and youth panic (Giroux, 2006) can help information literacy practitioners support the development of political agency by strengthening critical abilities, awareness and understanding of structures of power, including media representation of sociopolitical issues.

3.2.1 Benefits of critical information literacy

The benefits of engaging with critical understandings of information literacy relate to social justice and democratic goals. Whitworth (2009) argues that a critical form of information literacy could address issues of dehumanisation, which he believes lead people to believe that they have little or no power to effect change in society to make it more fair and equal; a critical form of information literacy would arm people with the thinking and information abilities to effect change. This belief in one's ability to change society and unfair conditions,

as an outcome of education, relates to critical pedagogical assertions that critical pedagogy can support the development of political agency. Similarities have been drawn between information literacy and the theories of Paulo Freire, including the understanding of information literacy as “the set of skills, values and critiques that individuals and communities need to create their own channels for information” (Hamelink, 1976).

Critical theory has not yet been widely applied in library and information science, which may be reflective of an overall absence of critical theory in LIS more generally. Critical information literacy research and writing is emerging on a small scale from the United States and Australia, but with the exception of the National Information Literacy Framework Scotland (Irving and Crawford, 2007) which does refer to critical information literacy, there has not yet been significant engagement with the concept in the United Kingdom. This research contributes to filling this empirical gap by offering a methodology through which to explore the potential for the application of critical information literacy in practice on a case-by-case basis, and recommendations for ways in which critical theories could be used to meet specific information needs of young people.

3.2.2 Drawbacks and limitations of critical information literacy

The focus of this research is the implementation of critical information literacy within the context of school libraries, but is also relevant to public libraries. A number of problems have been identified which have been found to or may cause difficulties in implementing the ideals of critical information literacy in practice within school and public libraries. Problems include:

- Learner willingness to engage with a novel approach to information literacy (Doherty and Ketchner, 2005)
- Limited school resources and amenability to engage with a novel approach to information literacy when already over-stretched and limited in their ability to approach education as a moral and political practice due to neoliberal and market-driven approaches to education (Giroux, 2012a)
- Expertise and confidence of librarians to engage with a currently under-theorised and under-utilised concept, that they have not necessarily been taught the critical thinking and evaluative skills to engage with (Andretta, 2005, p.108)
- Ideological conflict between educators, governors and parents when seeking to take an explicitly political (although not party-political) approach to education (Shor 1992, p.131)
- Lack of power of librarians to protect and enforce their jurisdiction (O’Connor 2009, p.282)
- Neoliberal dominance of education systems and focus on students as workers-in-training rather than citizens (Miller, 2010; Enright, 2013)

These practical and theoretical issues can make the gap between the over-reaching ideals of critical information literacy and the daily reality of the work in practice seem like a chasm (Jacobs and Berg, 2011). However, they could potentially be addressed to enable the implementation of critical information literacy.

Another issue that makes it potentially difficult for critical approaches to be taken to information literacy is the conflict between critical pedagogical rejection of frameworks (Giroux 2011, p.162) and the reliance of traditional approaches to information literacy on an outcomes-based definition and frameworks for assessment in order to justify their place in educational settings and as a form of professional legitimization (O'Connor, 2009).

Information literacy is an area of LIS in a constant state of flux and development, both as part of efforts to best support learners and to support itself as a relevant aspect of education (O'Connor 2009). Recent suggestions about the future of information literacy include the need to widen its scope, to be more relevant to the digital age, and to encompass other literacy frameworks. The concept of metaliteracy has emerged in response to these suggestions. Metaliteracy should engage with critical approaches, both in order to reflect on LIS practice including information literacy, and to ensure that metaliteracy education includes content to encourage the development of critical citizens with the capacity to understand information in the various electronic and physical formats it takes in the digital age.

However, as identified in section 3.2.2, critical engagement is not without its challenges. Critical information literacy is a relatively new concept and there is a lack of empirical research about how the approach can be applied, which makes it difficult to know exactly how critical approaches could be usefully applied. The rest of the paper explores a research project which seeks to identify potential points of intervention in information literacy instruction to support a particular aspect of critical awareness relating to citizens' political agency.

4. Methodological Approach

The research took a phenomenographic approach, which is discussed below.

4.1 Phenomenography

The research sought a deep understanding of the phenomena and took a mixed methods approach. A combination of questionnaires, repertory grid interviews, focus groups, class activities and observations explored how the participants conceive of political information, how they interact with the information to which they are exposed and with one another when discussing political issues and how they position themselves within their political world.

Phenomenography is a qualitative theoretical framework within the interpretivist research paradigm, with its roots in an empirical rather than theoretical foundation. It was developed in Sweden by Ference Marton, with particular focus on answering questions about thinking and learning within educational research (Marton, 1986). It is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world through an on-going process of interaction. Marton (1981, p.180) describes phenomenography as "research which aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experiential description". An emphasis is placed on the understanding of the qualitatively different ways in which individuals experience and interpret the same phenomena (Marton, 1986).

Phenomenographic methods aim to allow the researcher an insight into the sense-making undertaken by the research participants in relation to a specific phenomenon. This focus on ways of experiencing can be used to uncover variations within a participant group, for example, the different ways in which young people perceive, conceptualise or understand of

particular sources of information. Andretta (2007, p.155) defines the terms ‘perceive, conceptualise and understand’ within the context of phenomenographic research as meaning “a way of being aware of something” and suggests they can be used interchangeably.

Phenomenographic research tends to focus on what Merton (1968) describes as “middle-range theories”; theories which are concrete enough to be clearly relevant to library and information science, but which are abstract enough to be applicable beyond their original scope (Wildemuth, 2009, p.42). This research develops middle-range theories in specific relation to critical information literacy, but which may also inform educational praxis more generally, outside of and in partnership with those working LIS theory and/or practice.

4.1.1 Outcomes of phenomenographic research

The focus in phenomenographic research is not on an understanding of the experience of single individuals, but on the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon is experienced by a group of people. The outcome of phenomenographic research is a representation of the findings in a diagrammatic format referred to as an outcome space. An outcome space is a set of categories of description which present the different ways a phenomenon is experienced by a community. The outcome space and the relationships between the categories within it provide an explanation of the different ways individuals experience the phenomenon being explored.

4.2 Critical theory

Critical theory provides a lens through which to understand complex phenomena such as political information, political agency and education for critical citizenship, as well as providing suggestions for challenging the problems within the systems and structures being explored. Theory is used “as a way of critically engaging and mapping the crucial relations among language, texts, everyday life, and structures of power as part of a broader effort to understand the conditions, contexts, and strategies of struggle that will lead to social transformation” (Giroux, 2002, p.98). The application of critical theory to the research approach and analysis provides an insight into the structural issues that phenomenography cannot and does not address (Ashwin and McLean, 2005, p.4). This research focuses most heavily on the work of critical theorist Henry Giroux.

4.3 Research Questions

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What sources of information influence young people’s political opinions and worldviews?
2. In what qualitatively different ways do young people conceive of ‘political’ information?
3. Do young people think about political information critically?
4. What aspects of critical pedagogy may be of most use to those seeking to support political agency through critical approaches to information literacy?

4.4 Methods

The following methods were used:

4.4.1 Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was completed by participants as an introductory exercise. 11 questions formed a political quiz, with questions about local, national and international politics, and civic rights, which provided an insight into their levels of political knowledge. Participants were asked to report their level of political interest and whether they thought the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16, which provided an insight into their varying attitudes.

4.4.2 Repertory Grid Interviews

The repertory grid is a technique used as part of personal construct theory, based on the premise that people “seek to predict and control the course of events in their environment by constructing mental models of the world” (Latta and Swigger 1992). It is used to elicit mental models of concepts and the relationships between them, to gain insight into perceived interpretations of phenomena (Birdi 2011, p.277). Participants were asked to provide ten sources from which they get information about politics, current events or the world around them (referred to as ‘elements’). They were asked to talk about the differences between the elements (referred to as ‘constructs’). They then ranked the extent to which each of the elements could be considered as being each of the constructs. The interview structure provided a useful format through which to explore a relatively complex concept. The interviews transcripts are being analysed phenomenographically to create a construct space through which it will be possible to understand the qualitatively different ways participants conceive political information. The grids will be analysed quantitatively to explore clustering of constructs.

4.4.3 Focus Groups

Emerging themes from the interviews were used as topics of conversation in focus groups. Topics included: local and national problems; political views; feelings about participation; where participants learn about politics; feelings about whether school provides enough education about political participation; relationships with family and friends relating to talking about politics; awareness of bias in the media; and use of social media. Transcripts will be analysed using the method applied to the interview transcripts.

5. Initial Findings

Although the research is still in the process of analysis and the development of findings, tentative findings are discussed below.

5.1 Political attitudes

These questions were used to provide an insight into the political attitudes of the participants prior to interviewing them.

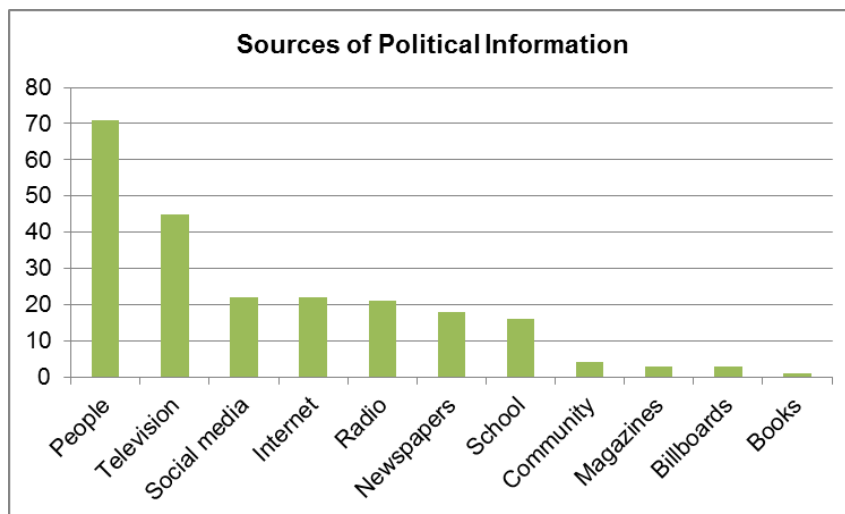
How interested in politics would you say you are?	
Very	1
Somewhat	10
Neither interested nor uninterested	9
Not very	9
Not at all	6
No response	1
Total	36

Do you think the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16?	
Yes	15
No	16
I don't know	0
I don't care	4
No response	1
Total	36

5.2 Political knowledge

Based on the performance in the quiz, participants demonstrated varying degrees of political knowledge, ranging from 1 out of 11 questions correct to 9 out of 11 questions correct. This allowed time to prepare a range of levels of questions and vocabularies to use when interviewing participants.

5.3 What sources of information influence young people's political opinions and worldviews?



Participants reported that they encounter a wide range of sources of ‘political’ information, at school, at home, and online. Their relationships with these sources will be analysed to identify ways in which IL can contribute to supporting their critical understanding of these sources, based on the participants’ descriptions of their understanding of them and the differences between them.

5.4 In what qualitatively different ways do young people conceive of ‘political’ information?

Participants provided between 10 and 46 constructs (most participants provided between 14 and 17) to describe their understanding of the information sources. These have been coded into initial groups which will be refined.

Code	Examples
Ways of assessing value	Amount of information, truth, bias, reliability, currency, knowledge of source, accuracy
Relationship	Interest, agreement, speaker gives opinions
Judgements about purpose	Age demographic, level of intelligence of audience, inform/entertain, formality
Emotional engagement	Makes angry/happy/sad, comfortable to ask questions
‘Practical’ issues	Geography, time of day, location when engaging, frequency, length of time engaging
Reasons for engagement	Own choice, on in background, parents have it, conversation started by other people
Format	Audio, visual, spoken, written, print, electronic, billboard
Politics	Awareness of political stance of speaker/source

The codes will be used to understand relationships between participants’ conceptions of the information sources and how the sources influence their understanding of sociopolitical issues.

5.5 Do young people think about political information critically?

The qualitative data from the research is still being analysed, but initial findings suggest that the ways in which the participants think about political information is superficial rather than critical. Some techniques for assessing the content of information were discussed by participants, such as considering the purpose for which the content was created (i.e. to inform or to entertain), but participants rarely expressed any critical analysis of the sources. Comparisons between information sources were often limited to considering practical aspects such as format, location, geographical coverage and the time of day the participant engaged with the source. Choices to engage with and trust information sources were often based on whether the source was deemed entertaining, with participants reporting that they were less likely to engage with information if they found the content or source “depressing” or “sad”. However, some participants reported that they were less likely to trust information if it was too comedic. This emotional engagement with sources warrants further exploration.

When assessing whether they believed a source was accurate, reliable or valid, participants used the amount of information provided as a method of measurement. When comparing news information, participants did not express understanding of the differences between types of news media, such as broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, or public and commercial broadcasting. However, participants did have opinions and preferences about the types of information they engaged with and expressed awareness about the topics and subjects covered by the different information sources. A number of participants reported that they prefer sources where the political position of the speaker is clear, so that they can form their own political opinion based on whether or not they agree with the speaker. This suggests the potential for encouraging the participants to critically assess not only the speaker, but the information source and structures of knowledge and information as a whole.

5.6 What aspects of critical pedagogy may be of most use to those seeking to support political agency through critical approaches to information literacy?

The table below indicates some initial critical pedagogical theories which may be relevant to approaches to critical information literacy, based on themes emerging from the phenomenographic analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups:

Emerging themes and issues	Critical pedagogical theory/theories
Understanding of media bias (omission, selection, placement, labelling, spin)	Media literacy (Giroux, 2007, pp.229-241)
View of schooling as preparation for work, not learning how to be a citizen. Lack of interest in education if not for clear outcome	Marketisation of education, hidden curriculum, schools as democratic public spheres (Giroux, 2012, pp.36-37)
View of young people as not knowledgeable or responsible enough to participate in politics	Manufactured cynicism (Giroux, 2006, p.83)
Sense of agency, understanding of potential participation and activism, views of feminism	Political agency, zombie politics (Giroux 2010)
Trust in media to report all 'important' news, faith that media will tell truth	Media literacy (Giroux, 2007, pp.229-241), critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011)
Influence of images in the media on how participants feel about current events and world conflict	Culture of fear (Giroux, 2006, pp.200-201)
Interpretation of murder of Lee Rigby (soldier in Woolwich) and representations in media	Intersection of consumerism, masculinity, violence, politics and gender relations (Giroux, 2006, pp.205-225)
Skills in debating and understanding structure of arguments – but not applying this to own lives	Politics of possibility (Giroux, 2006, pp.229-236)
Concerns about welfare, benefits and immigration. Knowledge or understanding of economic situation	Ideological hegemony (Giroux, 2011, p.22)
Awareness and understanding of local, national and international history and how this relates to current events (e.g. reaction to Margaret Thatcher's death)	Historical consciousness, death of history (Giroux, 2011, pp.20-21)
View of young people as a group influenced by media portrayals	Youth panic (Giroux, 2011, p.91)

6. Conclusions

Efforts to reframe information literacy as a metaliteracy must ensure a critical exploration of how online collaborative communities and social media are influenced by systems of power. Information literacy educators should understand how young people use online resources, how they understand them, how they influence their engagement as learners and citizens, in order to provide information literacy instruction that helps individuals to understand the benefits and risks of online sources of information and methods of communication.

Although the concept of critical information literacy is novel and offers an interesting potential development to information literacy theory, there are few examples of how it could be used, particularly in the context of education in the United Kingdom, and little understanding about what young people actually have and need in terms of critical literacy abilities. The research methodology, both in epistemological foundation and the methods chosen, was developed bearing these questions in mind.

Tentative findings suggest that critical information literacy would be of benefit the development of young people's political agency. Participants' experiences and conceptions varied, but a commonality between them is an apparent gap between their concerns about their own futures and that of the world around them, and their understanding of their potential to play an active role as informed citizens. Initial findings indicate that there are a number of ways in which information literacy could apply specific critical theories in practice.

The research does not aim to be generalizable and the production of a framework for practice would contradict the ethos of critical pedagogy. However, the methods used to explore the sources of information young people encounter and the qualitatively different ways they understand these information sources, provide a means by which practitioners could develop their own instructional programs tailored to meet the needs of their learners.

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