Enabling Gender-inclusivity in LIS Education through Epistemology, Ethics, and Essential Questions

Melodie J. Fox

School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Email: msjoblad@uwm.edu

Epistemology, or the study of knowledge and knowing, is foundational for Library and Information Science (LIS) programs, as the recognition of different conceptions of how people "know" can help LIS professions handle diversity, especially gender diversity. The incorporation of epistemology can provide LIS students with more sophisticated sense of how knowledge and information are generated, but can be intimidating to students and instructors alike. Epistemology can be more smoothly incorporated into the LIS classroom using essential questions—overarching, debatable questions that provide context and consequences in learning specific concepts. Brown (2012) recommends essential questions, along with focused conversations, as components of inquiry-based learning in LIS. This article builds on Brown's approach by focusing specifically on how essential questions can be effectively used to teach relevant epistemological concepts that inform gender-related ethical dilemmas students will encounter in professional practice.

Introduction

Philosophical concepts can be intimidating or seem irrelevant for library practitioners and for students studying to become practitioners. However, as Budd argues (2001), "philosophical investigation of practice is not an abstract exercise, but is intrinsically connected to the nature of practice and is aimed at discovering how we act within our profession" (p. 80). Epistemology, or the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge and knowing, not only has relevance to LIS, but is foundational to the conceptual grounding of its practices (Budd, 2001). Epistemology underpins a wide range of LIS practices, but here the emphasis will be on using it as a starting point for discussions of gender and sexuality diversity, issues that LIS students should be prepared for when they enter the field, given the well-known role of libraries in providing information about diversity of gender and sexuality. Additionally, an increased focus on ethics in LIS education requires more foundational philosophical considerations across the entire curriculum (Britz & Buchanan, 2010).

Despite its value, the perceived difficulty of epistemology, or ignorance or fear of discussing gender and sexuality concerns, can limit widespread use in the classroom. Mangrini (2009) writes that "philosophy contributes in a direct and positive manner" to education, but in order to be effective, must be "communicable," citing McCutcheon's view that scholars write "in jargon that renders the work inaccessible to practitioners" (p. 46). Thus, essential questions (EQs) are proposed as a method of bringing the difficult but necessary concepts of epistemology, ethics, and gender diversity to LIS education in an accessible but rigorous manner.

EQs are not entirely new to LIS. Brown (2012) advocates for inquiry-based learning in LIS based on the framework of Karl Popper's rationalism. She describes the strategies of focused conversations and

EQs and how they relate to LIS, offering four reasons why inquiry-based models are particularly suited for LIS education:

1. Questions foster intellectual freedom
2. Questions are central to vetting information
3. Questions develop the capacity to anticipate and manage change
4. Questions promote reflection about practice (Brown, 2012, pp. 192–193).

Since epistemology concerns the natures of reality, truth, authority, agency, category-formation, and the representation and reliability of knowledge, all of the reasons above justify epistemically-derived EQs to discuss gender in an LIS context.

Budd (2003), in the context of the critical theory of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and of Jurgen Habermas's theory of praxis, contends that library and information science as a field is not particularly inclined toward theory, with many practicing librarianship in a state of what Bourdieu calls "epistemic doxa" or "unthought" (p. 30), which can contribute to a social ignorance to the impact of policies and actions (or inaction). For example, Greenblatt (2003) identifies several assumptions held by library staff about LGBTQ library users, such as assumptions that no LGBTQ users live in the community or use the library, and furthermore, that offering services "promotes their 'lifestyle'" (p. 22). The consequent invisibility or condemnation rendered to the LGBTQ people who do live in those communities violate the ALA's *Core Values* (2004) and *Code of Ethics* (2008), and assumptions such as these must be unearthed in the MLIS classrooms.

In a survey of LIS educators, several reasons stated in favor of educating toward an awareness of a diversity of perspectives are to "accurately reflect the diversity experienced in people's lived realities," "meet the needs of diverse communities," "develop empathy to view other people's assumptions," and "educate and provide a global perspective to parochial and narrow-minded cultural viewpoints" (Mehra, Olson, & Ahmad, 2011, p. 42). Information on gender diversity and sexual orientation, in particular, are topics often sought in the library because of the sensitivity of the topics (de la tierra, 2008). Using epistemology to expose students to this diversity of perspectives can prepare students for both personal encounters (such as through public services) and abstract encounters (such as through collection development or cataloging) with gender diversity in professional practice without unwittingly marginalizing those patrons.

Applying Brown's (2012) recommendations to the context of gender considerations in LIS practices and services, I will first discuss how epistemology relates to LIS and gender and why an understanding of the relationship is necessary. Next, the relationship between epistemology and education is discussed, as instructors' individual epistemic approaches affect pedagogical methods. Then, I address how knowledge of the epistemic spectrum can assist students in understanding their own epistemic beliefs as they relate to the formulation of knowledge to eventually apply in the field. Finally, I describe how essential questions can be used to explore students' own epistemic understandings using the context of gender representation to demonstrate how essential questions in the classroom can inform ethical and inclusive decision-making in LIS.

Epistemology, Gender, and Ethics

Epistemology is foundational to the study of gender because the stance one takes relates to how one considers the construction of categories: who constructs the categories, the necessary and sufficient conditions for belonging to that category, and how much agency the objects in the category have in defining themselves. The dilemma of epistemology is that because it is philosophical, it is inherently speculative. Whether a "correct" epistemology

exists or does not exist is irrelevant, since it cannot be known. Returning to Budd's (2001) notion of "doxa," the most important consideration is what *consequences* occur as a result of the epistemic stance taken in a given situation. Many LIS students and faculty may not understand issues of gender, sexuality, or gender diversity if it is not within their own experience. Thus, recognizing first the variety of stances and also the consequences of their use as they relate to gender and sexuality can help students develop empathy and eventually further the social justice mission of libraries. As often occurs in the classroom, faculty may also experience the same journey.

Epistemology reveals the degree of agency invested in both the knowing subject and the known object, which is crucial for marginalized groups that have been historically denied self-definition. For example, a universalist epistemic stance might suggest that no matter what gender or sex identity a person desires or performs, the authority on that person's (object) gender is the perceiver. In the case of women, for example, historically-assigned gender characteristics include being maternal, emotional, talkative, physically fragile, inherently bad at math and science, sexually heteronormative, noncompetitive, etc. More postmodern stances, for instance, reject stable gender categories and give the subjectivity to the individual. Therefore, the "object" (self) has the authority to either accept or reject gendered traits or roles, or even reject biological sex. Generally, gender is assigned based on the outward appearance of sex at birth. Most normative gender or sex classifications include "male" or "man," "female" or "woman," and on occasion, "transgender" or (dismayingly) "other." Most of the world follows this structure, but a wider variety of gender identities are being recognized more openly than in the past. The social networking website Facebook, for example, recently added over 50 gender identities for users to select from when creating their profiles.

To illustrate this epistemic contrast in libraries, in a needs assessment survey in Portland, researchers collaborated with representatives of the trans communities to ensure accurate, community-driven terminology for gender and sex identity. The result was 61 unique gender and sex options, and respondents chose each option at least once and assigned themselves an average of seven descriptors (Beiriger & Jackson, 2007, p. 51). Understanding the importance of self-authoring and agency for patrons is an epistemic necessity in a library setting, particularly since the library is where many people questioning their own genders or sexuality find information (de la tierra, 2008). Pinar (1992) writes that "The study of identity enables us to portray how the politics we had thought were located 'out there,' in society, are lived through 'in here,' in our bodies, our minds, our everyday speech and conduct" (p. 232). This rings true for LIS professionals whose ethical dilemmas may be situations previously considered "out there" in society rather than a material issue that they can impact, and it is the task of LIS educators to bring those "out there" situations into the classroom.

Along with recognizing the epistemic starting point, it is also crucial to recognize the ethical framework within which the field operates (Fox & Reece, 2012). Britz and Buchanan (2010) suggest "immersive" ethics across the LIS curriculum, arguing, "It is not enough to teach without an awareness of the broader implications of our work, our profession. Indeed, it is our duty to call constant attention to these, with a critical eye to our future, informed by our past, informed by others and those outside the 'norms'" (p. 17). Managing ethical dilemmas requires knowledge of the institution, the community and library patrons and understanding the epistemic positions of each, including communities that may be "hidden," such as gender-questioning or coming-out populations.

To this end, Mehra and Braquet (2011) call for a more progressive, social-justice

oriented role for reference professionals in terms of gender. Three of their recommendations implicitly refer to epistemic understandings of gender and LGBTQ concerns that should be incorporated at the MLIS level:

- critical and reflective action that challenges existing outdated and decadent mindsets, values, approaches, policies, and behaviors;
- recognition of varied stakeholders (including patrons) as equals who are experts in knowing their own experiences and circumstances; and
- change agency and empowerment to facilitate people's own efforts to change their marginalizing situations. (p. 417)

"Experts in knowing their own experiences and circumstances" is precisely the epistemic agency that should be acknowledged, rather than telling the users what they need. Mehra, Olson and Ahmad (2011) cite an LIS educator who describes how speaking directly to stakeholders was "eye opening" for students when writing a collection development policy (p. 48).

Assumptions about gender have ethical impacts on all areas of librarianship, but specifically, considerations of what constitutes gender can inform management practices (hiring, discrimination, unisex restrooms, etc.), information organization practices (catalogers' judgment; classificatory structure), and programming and public services. Incorporating these dilemmas into the classroom prepares students to thoughtfully consider the decisions rather than be surprised by them in the field. The undertaking, then, for LIS educators, is to identify such dilemmas for use as case studies in the classroom and to ensure they too understand the epistemic consequences to gender that occur as a result of the decision-making process.

Epistemic Approaches of the Instructor

Before addressing how students can gain philosophical insight through epistemology, it is important to view epistemology from another angle: the instructor's personal epistemic approach, which ultimately manifests itself through classroom methodology. Mangrini (2009) writes, "There is a complex relationship between the establishment of educational aims and goals and their enactment in the practical activities of the classroom," and points out the epistemological bearing on this relationship (para. 4). Classroom delivery must mimic the epistemic values of the educational field in order to instill those desired values. The iSchools' focus on social and cultural contexts creates an easy justification for the inclusion of epistemology and gender as topics, and the ALA's *Code of Ethics* (2008) regards the profession "explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information," and asks for information professionals to "distinguish between personal convictions and professional duties" and "equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests." Faculty should be prepared both to trouble such ethical concepts as "equitable," "freedom," "personal convictions," and "unbiased" particularly in terms of their relationships to gender and sexuality. These concepts can be explored through epistemology and may not be as clear cut as students and practitioners assume.

LIS educators must also be prepared to interrogate sacred cows of practitioners. Mehra and Braquet (2011) question the esteemed value of "neutrality" that librarians revere, with one example citing a coming-out patron who found the librarian "helpful and not discriminatory or anything, but over half the resources she gave me were . . . off the wall and conservative" (p. 409). Mehra, Olson, and Ahmad (2011) cite another LIS educator who writes that LIS is "unable to detect its own ideology" because the field is "busy patting itself on the back for defending intellectual freedom" (p. 47). Epistemic

reflections can also help unearth hetero-normative and binary assumptions about gender embedded in everyday thought and practices, thus allowing LIS students to work through these assumptions prior to reaching the field.

Along with examining library practice, LIS educators must interrogate their own classroom practices. Mangrini (2009) divides the methodological epistemic spectrum into two broader categories: (1) "essentialist" views, which include rationalism, empiricism, and other objective approaches that endorse a knowledge-as-truth message; and (2) "instrumentalist" views that encompass the pragmatic approaches of William James and John Dewey that value meaning-making and knowledge construction in education rather than knowledge transfer. Essentialist methodologies consider the instructor as the authority, the student as an "empty vessel," and may include rote memorization, lecture, and objective measures. This method has long been vigorously criticized for being an exercise in memorization (Fata-Hartley, 2011), oppressive for setting up the student as a subordinate (Friere, 2006), and for ignoring any contextual factors in the generation of knowledge (Pinar, 1994).

Ultimately, the essentialist views demand certainty, and more importantly, epistemically privilege a particular point of view, which is positioned as the "only" or "correct" knowledge or "definitive truth," which discourages any challenge to the status quo or personal connection to the knowledge being presented. Hjørland (2008) notes, "Any work on any subject is always made from a point of view" (p. 335), whether it is evident or not to the perceivers, and essentialist views only acknowledge certain viewpoints. Smiraglia (2006) writes, "when a gay adolescent searches for literature to help understand and finds that it all falls under 'perversion' then we have oppressed yet another youth" (p. 186), but at one point, "perversion" was considered the "correct" classification from a particular perspective.

Offensive essentialist classroom practices might include intentional or unintentional omission, dismissal or disparagement of gender or sexual diversity, or creation of an environment with no opportunity for other viewpoints to be heard or questioned. Though the essentialist model has been long discounted, it can be convenient for both instructor and student to lapse into, as the instructor can didactically "hold forth" on a topic, sometimes without preparation, while students can remain passive and unchallenged.

Instrumentalist approaches, on the other hand, follow pragmatism in that the "truth" of any situation is contingent upon how it solves real-life problems (Mangrini, 2009). Knowledge is continually constructed as new information is incorporated into existing knowledge structures, which means that students are not empty vessels, but rather have experience and existing knowledge from which to draw. Knowledge is transformed rather than accumulated. Siegel (2004) asks, "Should students accept the testimonial pronouncements of their teachers? Should they trust, and accept without further justification, those pronouncements?" (p. 130). The instructor then, rather than "filling" the student with objective and discrete knowledge, creates opportunities for students to think through broad epistemological issues, apply it first to their own understandings and experiences, and then apply it to situations in the field. Students create the justifications and generate the knowledge by relating it to what they already know. Gender (something people have experience with) is an obvious area where LIS educators can draw on students' prior knowledge to develop a more sophisticated understanding for applications in practice. It mimics the approach needed in a field such as LIS that requires judgment calls, compassion, empathy, context, and creativity.

Epistemology of the Student

Rudimentary knowledge of the epis-

temic spectrum can also assist students in understanding their own epistemic outlook when it comes to the formulation and building of knowledge. Epistemic stances are numerous; however, a simple understanding of the major stops on the epistemic spectrum can provide a valuable summary of the multitude of options and provoke thought on the assumptions underpinning library practice. Epistemology encompasses a variety of subsets and stances that a few works merely track the multitude of offshoots and interpretations, such as Hjørland and Nicolaisen's *Epistemological Lifeboat* website (http://www.iva.dk/jni/lifeboat/) or Budd (2001). See also Fox and Olson (2012) for a survey of feminist epistemology and the relationship to organization of information. These works can be used as resources, as they consider different epistemic stances in the context of LIS. LIS programs may consider formally introducing epistemology into foundational courses, but even minimally understanding the differences between universal, social and postmodern approaches and their influence on concepts of gender can open students' eyes to different conceptualizations of knowledge and their real consequences on the lives of others.

Students may not be aware of their own epistemic beliefs or the variety of knowledge models that exist. A diagnostic or other activity can help them identify their own notions of knowledge-generation. The introduction of different epistemic stances can be disruptive to students' conceptions of knowledge and consequently to personal beliefs, including those about gender and sexuality. Differing epistemic outlooks could potentially cause conflict in class, although these differences are instructive if harnessed properly. Though students may not be familiar with the epistemic spectrum, exploration of big issues using EQs can introduce them to the variety of epistemic outlooks relating to a specific problem or dilemma, rather than starting from a context-less definition.

Essential Questions

The use of EQs is a type of inquiry-based learning that can be used at any level of education from elementary to graduate school. EQs are debatable, provocative, open-ended questions with no right or wrong answers that can be used to frame the discussion of an entire semester, unit or class period. The right essential questions encourage students to explore larger ideas and then transfer and apply the principles to their disciplinary context. EQs are meant to be broad enough that a student need not have specific experience in that realm (say, cataloging) in order to explore the question, but then eventually are able to apply it as their in-field knowledge expands. They are meant to "stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions . . . not just pat answers" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 106). Furthermore, they promote the higher levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy, such as evaluation and synthesis, requisites for graduate education.

Wilhelm (2012) distills the characteristics of effective essential questions as needing to:

1. Be interesting and compelling to your students right now;
2. Invite them into the ongoing disciplinary debates and conversations that create knowledge in the first place; and
3. Require students to learn—and to use—the same understandings and strategies as the real experts in the field.

Generally, what makes essential questions "interesting and compelling" is that they should associate the students' lived experience with the theory being introduced and vice versa. Because LIS attracts students from a variety of disciplines, essential questions are broad enough to challenge and interest students of any discipline, and prior knowledge can be drawn from a variety of fields or everyday life. They should address issues that are

timeless, fundamental, and help students "make sense out of isolated facts and skills or important but abstract ideas and strategies" (Wiggins &McTighe, 2005, pp. 5–6). Most students have preconceived notions of gender, or perhaps have not given it any thought. Discussing gender broadly through EQs can tease out their assumptions and lead toward diagnosing their own epistemic stance.

It is important to note that difference between using broad, rhetorical questions in the classroom versus essential questions is with intention. A specific learning goal should be in mind when using them. EQs are not spontaneous, but rather part of the course design, and can and should be mapped back to objectives or standards. Wiggins & McTighe (2005) write, "questions related to strategy and value have to arise from the kinds of problems or challenges in which such strategic decisions must be made" (p. 37). The mapping is essential to ensure the questions are not just "interesting," but lead forward toward a decision made in the field, such as those mentioned above relating to gender.

Creating Essential Questions

McTighe and Wiggins (2013) distinguish between two types of EQs: "overarching" or broad essential questions, such as those above and "topical" essential questions that are more specific and directly relate to the course content and the desired skills. The broad questions are those that are applicable in many contexts, whereas the topical questions connect and drill down to the justification for a technical or management decision. Brown (2012), following Elder and Paul, identifies eight fundamental questions that serve as a starting point for devising discipline-specific essential questions, and relates each of them broadly to LIS. These questions can specifically be considered in terms of gender and sexuality in LIS:

- What are the purposes, goals, or objectives of the discipline?
- What concepts are fundamental?
- What questions or problems are central to the discipline?
- What information is essential?
- What point(s) of view or frame(s) of reference need to be learned to reason within the discipline?
- What kinds of inferences or conclusions are made by experts in the discipline?
- What assumptions define the discipline?
- What are the pay-offs or implications of reasoning well within the discipline? (pp. 195–196)

Guidance for the questions above can be found generally in ALA's *Code of Ethics* (2008) and ALA's *Core Values of Librarianship* (2004). The most specific needs are found in course objectives. For example, the first principle of the ALA *Code of Ethics* can be unpacked to find concepts that need to be understood relevant to gender:

> We provide the highest level of service to all library users through *appropriate* and *usefully organized* resources; *equitable* service policies; *equitable access*; and *accurate*, *unbiased*, and *courteous responses* to all requests (2008, emphasis mine).

All of the italicized terms are ripe for epistemic interrogation both generally and in terms of gender. What ambiguity do the phrases invoke? What gender-related ethical dilemmas potentially arise? The sample questions below, formulated based on the principle above, are broad enough that they could be the backdrop question for an entire course.

> Does "usefully organized" mean the same thing to all library users? In other words, is it more "useful" to organize all women's topics together or in their accompanying discipline? (i.e. should "women and accounting" be classed/shelved with "women" or "accounting?"

What does "equitable access" mean?

How is it possible to be unbiased? In what occasions should one be biased?

How do we know things are accurate?

If students have been rudimentarily introduced to the epistemic spectrum, some sample "overarching" essential questions relating to epistemology, such as those below, could be discussed to warm them up to differing epistemic stances. Though some are formatted as yes/no questions, the expectation would be a specific justification of answers:

If "universal knowledge" exists, how do we know what it is?

How does "reality" figure into bibliographic organization of information? Whose "reality"?

Where do categories come from? How are groups of people a category?

Does it matter how people feel when they see themselves represented in a library catalog?

How do we know what women or men want in terms of library programming?

The reflections on the questions above should include discussion of how the question could be answered differently, given a different epistemic view of knowledge. Additionally, they are relevant, at a broad level, to all areas of the field. They can be used as a starting point for thinking about gender categories, but can trickle down into topical questions related to a particular area such as management or reference. Below are questions relating to gender that directly address gender.

How do you or don't you fit into your gender category?

Are groups of people a bibliographic class?

How are gender categories "information"?

Why do we need gender categories? Should gender categories exist?

How are the genders a social group?

What is the difference between gender and sex?

If classifying is separating sameness and difference, what is essentially the "same" about gender categories?

Should social characteristics or biology underlie bibliographic categories?

Does warrant establish usage or should information agencies be responsible for "fixing" offensive terminology? How do we know when something is offensive?

How could naming and placing people in groups unethical?

Do "groups" either social or demographic have a collective way of thinking, searching or using language?

Implementation

Once developed, EQs should be listed in syllabi or other class materials and revisited frequently. McTighe and Wiggins (2013) write that "the exploration is designed to be spiral-like or flow back and forth between the question and new sources of information, experience, or perspective . . . to probe further, think more deeply, and arrive at more insightful understandings" (p. 44). The educators in Mehra, Olson, and Ahmad's (2011) study identified readings and discussion as the best ways to incorporate diversity into the curriculum. To that end, a number of readings exists in LIS literature that offer case studies addressing gender and sexuality-related ethical dilemmas that can provide a context for discussion of the EQ. Students can have a pre-discussion or a written response to the EQ prior to the reading, and then reflect on any changes in thought after they have done the reading. Given the sensitivity of gender, an effective method of encouraging discussion of EQs is allowing students to work out their thoughts in writing before blurting out ill-considered answers. The questions should

dredge up further epistemological notions of perspective, authority, and notions of reality, which then can be springboards to different methods of problem-solving gender-related case studies. Devising several epistemically-considered concrete solutions for the ethical dilemma mimics John Dewey's pragmatic approach described in Fox and Reece (2012, p. 381).

McTighe and Wiggins (2013) list potential pitfalls with the implementation of essential questions from the perspectives of both faculty and students and provides a guide for overcoming such difficulties. For example, faculty may have difficulty formulating questions properly, may be uncomfortable with silence, or may fight the urge to push students to arrive at a preferred answer. Students may rely on the instructor for approval, a small number may dominate the discussion, or they may only respond with quick answers for fear of looking foolish (pp. 70–74). They also offer diagnostic tips to determine what potentially could be causing problems, as well as specific activities to alleviate challenges. Managing discussion is a skill and art, and with topics as sensitive as gender, preparation for such situations is crucial. Posing controversial questions without consideration of the types of responses that may return could cause discomfort for students and faculty alike.

Conclusion

As more schools that offer MLIS's transition to iSchools, the study of the social and cultural aspects of information has become more common, but can deepen the divide between traditional library schools and iSchools. Dillon (2012), in differentiating iSchools from "library" schools, observes that iSchools have "move[d] away from an agency-focused model of information [which] has led to coursework treating information in more contextual terms e.g., through the social, cultural or individual dynamics of creation and use" (p. 269). Using epistemically-based es-

sential questions in the LIS classroom can help bridge this gap by supporting praxis by connecting theories of knowledge to concrete decision-making.

The use of essential questions in the LIS classroom will not provide definitive answers for gender-related ethical dilemmas in the field. Rather, working knowledge of the philosophical foundations of information and information practices can help inform professionals of the implications of their actions. It can provide more depth to understanding the inclusive practices set forth by ALA *Code of Ethics*. Gender and sexuality-related concerns in library contexts will not go away, and it is crucial that assumptions in this area are explored by students prior to working in the field.

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