Education for the Common Good: A Student Perspective on Including Social Justice in LIS Education

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This paper was produced as a collaborative project by a Progressive Librarianship class at an ALA-accredited Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program located in Canada. Recent research in LIS has identified a need for issues of social justice to be discussed more prominently in LIS education. From a uniquely student perspective, the authors suggest how MLIS programs can incorporate social justice as a key component in LIS education. Specifically, they encourage pedagogy that supports critical thinking on issues of social justice and provides scaffolding for progressive change for the common good within a library context. This includes where social justice should appear in the LIS curriculum, who should teach about social justice, what topics are currently of relevance, and suggestions on key strategies for progressive change that can be taught in LIS education.

This paper was produced as a collaborative project by a Progressive Librarianship class at an ALA-accredited Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program located in Canada. We are a group of predominantly white, university educated women who are passionate about social justice issues and have a strong interest in making progressive change. We assume, as Kevin Rioux (2010, p. 13) has written, that "[a]ll human beings have an inherent worth and deserve information services that help address their information needs." We also recognize that principles of social justice are embedded within librarianship through our core principles of democracy, intellectual freedom, equity, social responsibility, and a commitment to positive change for the common good (American Library Association, 2004). However, outside of student-led social justice initiatives, such as our institution's chapters of Librarians Without Borders and the Progressive Librarians' Guild, the majority of our class perceived that social justice issues were only moderately discussed across the MLIS curriculum. This is consistent with a growing trend in Library and Information Science (LIS) scholarship that has identified a need for more prominent discussions of social justice issues within LIS education in order to prepare future librarians for their intellectual and practical roles (see, e.g., Mathuews, 2016; Pyati, 2010; Rioux; Roberts & Noble, 2016). From a uniquely student perspective, our goal for this paper is to suggest how MLIS programs can incorporate social justice as a key component in LIS education. Specifically, we encourage pedagogy that supports critical thinking on issues of social justice and provides scaffolding for progressive change for the common good within a library context.

Our collaborative project

To gather the thoughts of the class as a whole, our views on social justice in LIS education were collected by answering survey questions based on the major sections outlined in this paper. The survey responses were then analyzed for common or unique themes, summarized in each section of

the paper, and discussed in context with relevant research or theory. As a paper produced for a class, this project includes the instructor, who is both a PhD student and adjunct faculty in the LIS program. Her role consisted of creating the concept for the paper as an in-class assignment, writing survey questions in consultation with the class to organize the class's collective thoughts, writing supplementary content, and acting as the primary editor alongside student authors.

Social justice in LIS programs

How should social justice be included in the MLIS curriculum? Currently, issues of social justice seem to be covered sporadically across required courses, addressed in electives such as Information Equity, or focused on directly in one-off courses such as the one in which we were enrolled. We strongly feel that social justice should be required content in all MLIS programs, as only a small, self-selected part of the student population receives this education when it is primarily offered as an elective. We suggest that social justice content may be included in two ways: (1) be explicitly addressed across all required MLIS courses, or (2) become a separate required course instead of an elective option.

In both cases, we believe the most important consideration is *who* would be teaching this content. If social justice content is incorporated as a component in all of the required courses, it may not be addressed in appropriate depth or breadth to provide a meaningful learning experience. Instructors would have to approach the content of each required course carefully with social justice issues in mind to avoid treating social justice content as an "add-on" to the course. This can be problematic, as LIS is typically a very interdisciplinary field and not all faculty have the same theoretical background, practical experience, or personal experience that makes them attuned to a wide variety of social issues. Furthermore, as Noble, Austin, Sweeney, McKeever, and Sullivan (2014) remark, faculty who do research on social issues in LIS are often underrepresented and undervalued within library schools. Due to this, there is the potential risk of fragmented/inconsistent coverage due to these possible limitations. This issue becomes even more pronounced when considering social justice as a separate required course. To overcome this issue in both scenarios, we suggest that for social justice topics the primary instructor take the role of guide and facilitator, providing learning opportunities but also sharing teaching responsibilities with other faculty members or experts. These faculty members or experts can be:

1. other LIS faculty or PhD students who conduct research relating to social justice or have strong records of activism;
2. faculty from departments on campus with long-standing histories of social critique (e.g., women and gender studies, social work, and Indigenous studies) who are familiar with bodies of literature such as critical feminist, queer, and race theory;

   3. practicing LIS professionals who may speak to current best prac-
      tices in community organizing, systemic advocacy, policy change,
      and services benefiting marginalized peoples; or
   4. members of organizations supporting human rights, social justice,
      or equity, which often partner with libraries, such as Amnesty
      International.

Social justice topics

The following list of topics suggests social justice issues that we feel are
important to include within the LIS curriculum. From a myriad of topics,
these six were the most frequently identified by our class across the written
surveys as being especially relevant in our current historical moment:

   1. diversity/multiculturalism;
   2. whiteness in LIS;
   3. indigenization and decolonization;
   4. the digital divide;
   5. privilege/the Ivory Tower; and
   6. gender inequality/feminism.

Other topics include (in descending order) environmentalism and sustain-
ability, accessibility, mental health, privacy and surveillance, the commod-
ification of information, homelessness, colonialism, immigration needs,
censorship and biases, child rights, Indigenous youth needs, and safe spaces.

   This list reflects the need for more focus on cultural hegemonies
existing both within greater society and within our profession, in particu-
lar how LIS is dominated by white workers and Eurocentric perspectives
(Schlesselman-Tarango, 2016). Why are these topics so important to future
LIS professionals? Having an in-depth understanding of cultural hegemo-
nies directly supports the self-reflexive practices that are critical to fostering
the genuine empathy and compassion required to work meaningfully with
marginalized groups such as immigrants, children and teens, and those of
low socioeconomic status, and to promote change within the LIS field itself.

Key strategies for creating progressive change
for the common good

Together we have also identified the best ways in which librarians can
contribute to progressive change for the common good in their commu-
nities and provide suggestions as to how to support these skills within the
curriculum:

   1. Librarians must know their community and understand the needs
      of their community. This includes knowing where to find commu-
      nity demographics, understanding them, and being able to manip-
      ulate the data (Mathuews, 2016). In addition, librarians must know
      how to conduct primary research, such as running focus groups,
      conducting surveys, and interviewing community members.

2. Librarians must advocate for inclusive and accessible services and collections. Accessibility must be understood broadly, which includes low-income families, immigrants, and the homeless. Services and collections must be representative of community needs. They must also understand and promote multiculturalism and diversity, in addition to embracing non-Eurocentric perspectives.

3. Librarians must know how to inform the community about social justice issues. Whether this relates to the librarian as an agent of change, or as an educator for the purpose of change, the librarian must be an advocate for change within the community. This includes supporting colleagues' education and knowing how to implement or provide training sessions, toolkits, and take-away resources so that the library and community can begin to resolve the discussed issues.

Curriculum recommendations

1. LIS programs must retain strong foundations in theory and policy. To start, introducing basic theories of "justice" provides a foundation for understanding issues of social justice. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2006, p. 7), social justice "may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth," but justice itself is defined differently depending on the theoretical approach. For instance, utilitarians see justice as part of morality, meaning they often advocate for social welfare because everyone's well-being is of moral interest (Gray, 2011), whereas libertarians seek to maximize political freedom and autonomy, emphasizing freedom of choice, voluntary association, and individual judgment (Institute for Humane Studies, 2015). Readings should also be steeped in theories that address social justice issues, such as critical theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, and Marxist theory. LIS students should have a close familiarity with major publications that apply these theories, such as *Critical Theory of Library and Information Science* (Leckie, Given, & Buschman, 2010), and the work of LIS scholars such as Emily Knox, Safiya Umoja Noble, David Hudson, John Budd, and Paulette Rothbauer (just to name a few). In addition to scholarly literature, as Ajit Pyati (2010) asserts, a familiarity with and a critical understanding of policy, especially relating to important political and social issues, should also receive emphasis.

2. Practical, non-theoretical learning and experiences must also be provided, including the following:
   • guest lecturers from library practitioners and experts providing real-world experiences;
   • activities and assignments that promote student-driven critical thinking on issues important to library work; and

- assignments that facilitate connections with libraries and community organizations that focus on human rights, poverty, violence, mental health, addictions, and sustainability, in addition to encouraging the application of skills and knowledge learned within the broader LIS program.

3. Finally, in Canada especially, we collectively felt a strong need to diversify and indigenize the curriculum. This can be done by engaging with diverse perspectives, authors, faculty members, guest speakers, and, more specifically, the tenets of the *Truth and Reconciliation Report* as supported by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations' Truth and Reconciliation Committee recommendations.

Overall, we see a need for a strong presentation of *praxis* that highlights progressive librarianship that addresses social justice issues. If future librarians are to embrace the political components of their practice, theory and practice must meet within student learning before students enter the workforce, or they will founder when in a position to make change.

Conclusion

The LIS classroom is where the values of LIS that are associated with social responsibility are introduced to future librarians, and by extension where the ability to create positive change begins. We would like to end this paper by emphasizing the need for solidarity and support for librarians who take up social justice issues in their scholarship and community action. As Sarah Roberts and Sofia Noble (2016) remind us, neoliberalist ideology places social causes as the responsibility of the individual. It is important that LIS professionals are able to be critical of practices within our own institutions, and others, without fear of consequence. Support of one another is essential in creating a work environment that is conducive to social justice. Through collaboration and encouragement, seemingly insurmountable problems become more digestible. Very often, small changes can create positive repercussions. Wherever possible, future LIS professionals should be provided a safe space to practice active listening, embrace opportunities that challenge their biases, and have conversations that might make them uncomfortable. As fundamentally progressive social institutions committed to social responsibility, libraries have a duty to participate in rectifying the many social justice issues that persist both internally and externally to the field. With informed support, fostered by LIS programs that address how social justice intersects with LIS practice, emerging LIS professionals will be better able to provide services to their communities, especially when it requires brave, radical acts.

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