

Social Justice Design and Implementation: Innovative Pedagogies to Transform LIS Education

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The article discusses an instructor's critical pedagogies and reflective practices in three graduate library and information science (LIS)-related courses on topics of social justice and inclusion advocacy, diversity leadership in information organizations, and community-engaged scholarship that were taught at the University of Alabama since spring 2019. Until recently, mainstream American LIS education has resisted adopting social justice vocabularies and implementation in its teaching, learning, and research owing to a professional cultural inertia of discarding outdated concepts (e.g., academic or library neutrality and passivity, solely Anglo-/Eurocentric research roots, privileged position assigned to post-positivistic paradigms, etc.). The article contextualizes three applications of innovative pedagogies in the LIS classroom that centralized social justice, diversity and inclusion, and community engagement by providing a glimpse of student learning outcomes, assignment requirements, tangible deliverables, student evaluations, and course opportunities and challenges. The courses explore a new theory-practice-impact discourse that is deliberate, systematic, rigorous, impact-driven, and action-oriented. Students' "community-immersive" course projects integrated social justice contexts of learning, scholarship, engagement, and action. Responding to urgencies of moving beyond diversity lip-service and tokenism in LIS education, they disrupt traditional pedagogies and embrace critical information-applied activism in the white-privileged LIS academy. This is relevant, especially as we learn to aggressively confront racism in our ranks, re-establish cultural credibility situated in the recent epistemic waves protesting racially motivated police hostilities (e.g., Black Lives Matter movement), and confront political lethargy in redressing past wrongs.

Keywords: American LIS academy, design and implementation, innovative pedagogies, LIS education, social justice

This article discusses my critical pedagogies and reflective practices as an instructor of three graduate library and information science (LIS)-related courses taught at the University of Alabama (UA):¹

- CIS 668 (Social Justice and Inclusion Advocacy) [fall 2019]: An on-campus course for doctoral and Master's students in communication-information disciplines.
- LS 590 (Diversity Leadership in Information Organizations)² [spring 2020]: An online course for LIS Master's students and others.
- CIS 650 (Community-Engaged Scholarship) [fall 2020]: A course delivered in a hybrid format for both on-campus and online students (doctoral and Master's) in communication-information disciplines.

A glimpse of student learning outcomes, assignment requirements, tangible deliverables, student evaluations, and course opportunities and challenges contextualizes the application of innovative pedagogies in the LIS classroom to centralize practices of social justice, diversity and inclusion, and community engagement (Jaeger et al., 2015). The courses explore a new theory-practice-impact discourse that is deliberate, systematic, rigorous,

impact-driven, and action-oriented (Jaeger, Shilton, & Koepfler, 2016; Mehra, Elmborg, & Sweeney, 2019). Student enrollment from across a multidisciplinary collegiate that included advertising and public relations, communication sciences, journalism and creative media, and library and information studies established interdisciplinary interconnections of relevance (Weech & Pluzhenskaia, 2005). Required course readings reflected content across local, state, regional, national, and global contexts. Similarly, students' "community-immersive" (or community-embedded) projects in all three courses represented social justice contexts of learning, scholarship, engagement, and action (Most, 2011). These varied in their degree of impact across boundaries tailored and individualized based on each student's interests, contexts of study, unique opportunities of project development, and inclination.

The purpose of reporting an instructor's critical pedagogies and reflective practices in the three graduate courses has emerged in response to the following contemporary circumstances and cultural conditions in American LIS education: (1) LIS and other disciplines have been struggling with integrating the "how-to's" of conducting impact-driven, community-engaged teaching of information work that further principles and actions related to social justice and inclusion (i.e., fairness, justice, equity, equality, change agency, and empowerment of underserved populations) (Castells, 2015; Elmborg, 2008; Jaeger et al., 2016); (2) Facilitating community-embedded and experiential learning opportunities for students in LIS has been difficult while partnering with minority and disenfranchised stakeholders to make meaningful changes in their everyday lives (Kazmer, 2005; Naidoo & Sweeney, 2015; Phillips & Anderson, 2018); (3) LIS instructors have resisted adopting social justice-related vocabularies and implementation in their teaching, learning, and research practices owing to a professional cultural inertia of discarding outdated concepts (e.g., academic or library neutrality and passivity, solely Anglo-/Eurocentric research roots, privileged position assigned to post-positivistic paradigms, etc.) (Jaeger et al., 2014; Mehra & Gray, 2020); (4) LIS has provided a poor bridging of appropriate theory-practice divides embedded in community context to integrate impact within its majority networks "to extend existing entrenched canons of knowledge domains" (Mehra et al., 2019); (6) There is limited availability and marginal documentation of social justice teaching-centered scholarship that relates to the profession's core values, functionalities, and ethical leadership (Cooke & Sweeney, 2017;

KEY POINTS:

- Innovative pedagogies in three graduate LIS-related courses explore a new theory-practice-impact discourse that is deliberate, systematic, rigorous, impact-driven, and action-oriented.
- A glimpse of student learning outcomes, assignment requirements, tangible deliverables, student evaluations, and course opportunities and challenges illustrates a designed approach that is implemented in the LIS classroom to centralize social justice, diversity and inclusion, and community engagement.
- Students' "community-immersive" course projects integrated social justice contexts of learning, scholarship, engagement, and action while disrupting traditional pedagogies and embracing critical information-applied activism in the white-privileged LIS academy.

Roberts & Noble, 2016); (5) The importance of moving beyond diversity lip-service and tokenism to disrupt traditional pedagogies and embrace critical information-applied activism is key in the white-privileged LIS academy. This is especially relevant as we figure out ways to aggressively confront racism in our ranks, re-establish cultural credibility situated in the recent epistemic waves of protests against racially motivated police hostilities (e.g., Black Lives Matter movement), and challenge the political lethargy to redress past wrongs (Barron & Preater, 2018; Strand, 2019).

Theoretical inspirations

The Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire propounded critical pedagogy as a political act in teaching and learning to bridge realms of education and social action for student advocates to resist oppression, operationalize social justice, and promote empowerment (Freire, 1970). Reflective practice involves an ability to critically reflect on everyday actions and praxis toward reflexivity, insights, and change (Bolton, 2010; Golden, 2020; Schon, 1983). The pedagogical thread of a designed strategy to implement social justice and social equity agendas in the LIS curriculum connected the content, objectives, form, structure, and delivery of the three courses discussed in this article (Clarke, 2020; Forest & Kimmel, 2016). Social justice and social equity conceptualized through an information and communication lens of analysis and action promotes fairness, justice, equality, equity, change agency, and empowerment of all people, including those on the margins of society (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016). The courses explored a new theory-practice-impact discourse in LIS education via student involvement in experiential learning and “community-immersive” projects. Such transformative strategies in LIS education centralize issues and concerns related to diversity, equity and inclusion, social justice, and community engagement in a holistic manner beyond lip-service and tokenism (Kumasi & Manlove, 2015; Mehra & Gray, 2020). Providing a structure of organization in LIS courses to facilitate students’ involvement in projects created by them in collaboration with their community stakeholders provided a practical way to implement these agendas.

Conceptual framework

The underlying logic rationalizing the relationships between constructs of social justice, community engagement, and diversity and inclusion scholarship in the LIS curriculum is part of a “bigger picture” visualized in Figure 1. Specific instances of existing information worlds (“small” or not) selectively represent some aspects of these relationships and details that are conceptualized as possible information-centered scenarios for needed social action in terms of an underserved population and a lack of social justice they experience (e.g., recent police brutality and anti-racist library practices) (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Pendleton & Chatman, 1998). These potential opportunities serve as information grounds for activism and inclusivity of disenfranchised communities to generate impact via LIS-related work (Fisher & Naumer, 2006). The LIS educator and the broader American academy are part of this reality, embedded in external community environments, that they cannot continue to ignore or overlook as they did in their limited roles of the past (Campus Connect, 2021). LIS academics, librarians, and others are now under greater

pressures of accountability in the contemporary neoliberal climate as public institutions that must provide evidence of their pursuits to external communities and justify their financial and political support (Brown, 2015; Mehra, Bishop, & Partee, 2018; Smith, 2009). In response, they need to intentionally address, integrate, and provide solutions of change in a proactive manner to help overcome entrenched marginalizing circumstances. They can do so practically and strategically via drawing intersections and generating impact of their information-related research-teaching-service obligations (i.e., the three cornerstones in the American academy) to various degrees of engagement with external communities. Examples of information work in different domains (e.g., information management, information literacy, information technology use, library service design, etc.) is orchestrated via community engagement (i.e., collaborating with diverse community stakeholders) to result in positive social justice outcomes (e.g., increased community capacities, community solving problems, etc.) in a changed information world that they help develop.

The conceptualization and application of the above rationale (in Figure 1), reflected in much of my scholarship and academic activities, is also implemented in the design and development of the three courses described in this article. In all three courses, students

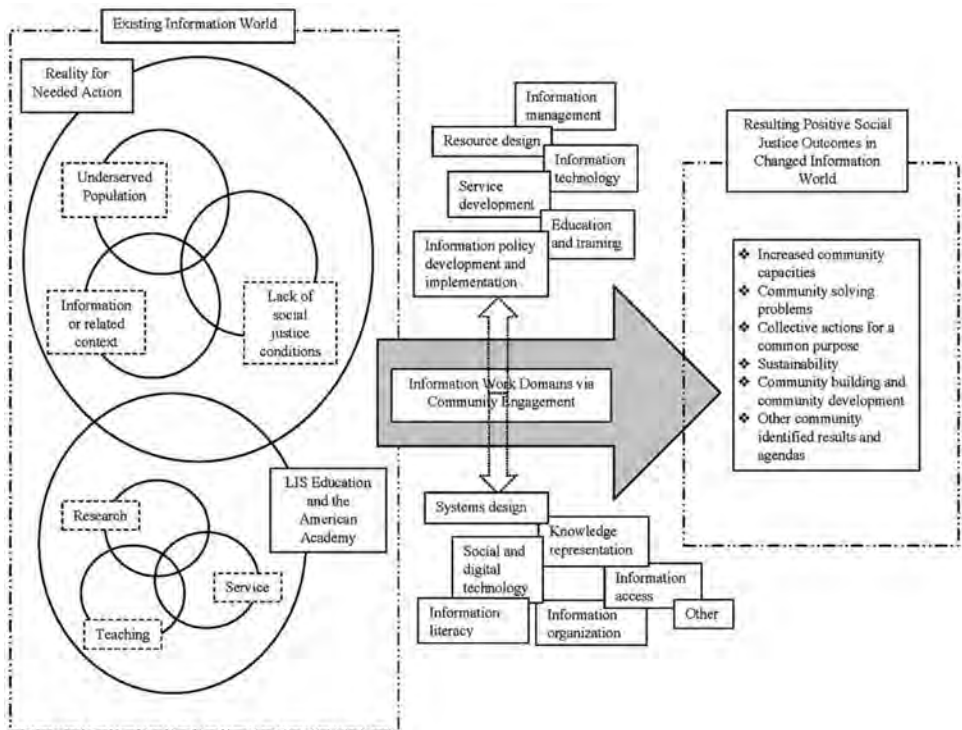


Figure 1: Visualization of the underlying logic rationalizing the implementation of innovative pedagogies in the author's classroom.

were provided opportunities through the designed structure of the course to learn relevant content about social justice and inclusion, integrate co-created community projects for/with external stakeholders, and propose (and/or achieve) action-oriented progressive changes of improvement in external settings beyond the academy.

Figure 2 visualizes the three courses connected in a holistic framework. It represents the “why” (i.e., to promote the learning and application of social justice and social equity) in CIS 668, the “who” (i.e., learning and integration of diverse underserved populations and intercultural components) in LS 590, and the “how” (learning and application of community engagement and action research via communication and information work) in CIS 650. Select student projects illustrate collaborating agencies and strategic descriptions. All three elements (the “why,” the “who,” and the “how”) were integrated in each of the three courses; however, the delivery of the content of one element emerged to the forefront in each course to provide a selectively distinct lens of analysis that tailored student experience according to the topic associated with the course title. The “towards what” element in Figure 2 highlights the vision of a greater role of LIS students in community building and community development via their involvement in all three courses and highlights benefits for them and their collaborating agencies (McCook, 2000).

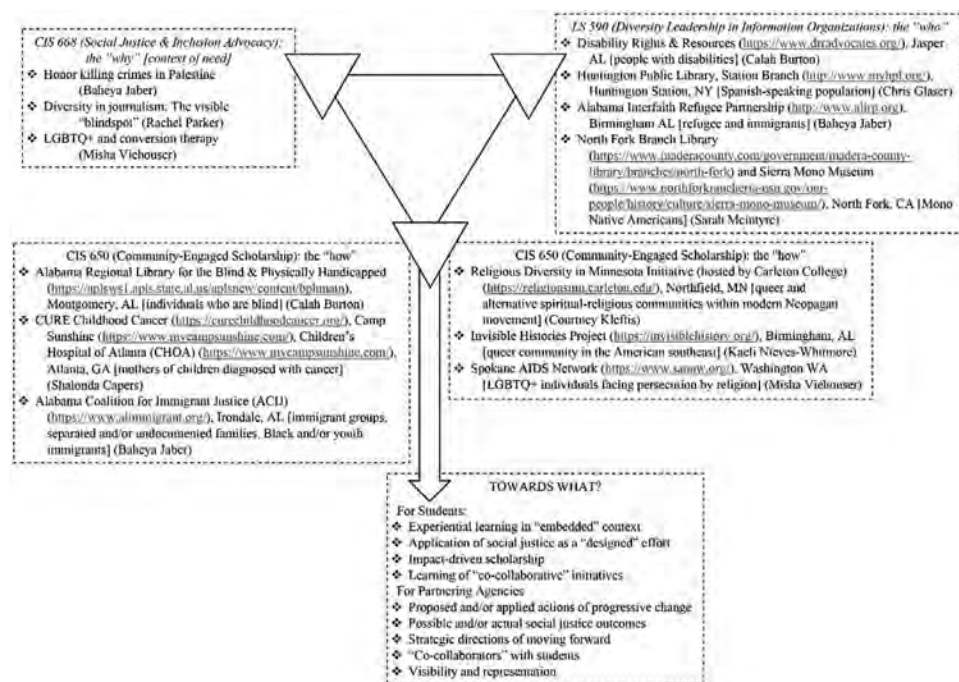


Figure 2: Courses visualization in a holistic framework operationalized and implemented by the author.

In [Figure 2](#), the big upside-down white triangle and the three triangles on its corners are intentioned to evoke the Nazi black triangle of concentration camps used to target “anti-social” elements (i.e., Romani, homosexuals, prostitutes, homeless, alcoholics, nonconformists, others). The “whiteness” of the triangles is an acknowledgment of student training in all three courses to recognize and resist hegemonic white superiority and other forms of oppression in LIS, as well as the profession’s slow progress to dismantle toxic privileges ([Honma, 2005](#); [Hudson, 2017](#); [Wheeler, 2005](#)). Its use here also spotlights the privileged positionality of the white race as a mark of protest, articulated in the delivery of the three courses, against the horrific mistreatment of Black Americans and other racial minorities over centuries by law protection agencies, and the tepid response in LIS to further actions to confront these injustices (as in a concentration camp) or to change or re-address the wrongs even today ([Butler, 2018](#)).

The tweaking of disenfranchising symbols and their use in [Figure 2](#) is symbolic of the appropriation by many disadvantaged individuals and groups (e.g., “queer”) of their marginalized experiences. Historically, such words and symbols were culturally misused to subjugate minority and nonconforming people, though today they are often a form of empowerment, resistance, and activism of the non-normative “voices” from the margins ([Shaw, 2015](#); [Swart, 2017](#)). Further, as a male person of color in a female-dominated white profession, I have deliberately integrated strong language and symbolism in recent works, this one included, in order to be heard from under the stifling cloak of “invisibility” in the face of white LIS complacencies ([Espinal, Sutherland, & Roh, 2019](#); [Mehra, 2019](#)). Strategic expressions of such efforts to destabilize the privileged knowledge systems of discourse are coupled with my situated positionality in reflective critical narratives that are often reinforced, as in this article, via authoritative interdisciplinary sources, current progressive literature, illustrative examples of resistance, and semi-autobiographical evidence-based groundings ([Duncan, 1996](#); [Giametta, 2018](#)). They embody a freedom of intellectual expression and defiance that the [American Library Association’s \(1996\)](#) Bill of Rights recognizes as representing “all points of view on current and historical issues,” challenge of censorship, and opposition to “abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas,” especially as they try to subvert mainstream intellectual patterns of the “normative” that are often dictated by an elitist majority ([Mehra & Gray, 2020](#); [St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000](#)). Only through such “disruptive” modes of language, symbols, behavior, and action are people of color able to highlight the white hypocrisies that are entrenched deep in every fiber of our cultural fabric in LIS and beyond ([Cooke, 2020](#); [Cooke & Sánchez, 2019](#)). The Black Lives Matter movement is an exceptional illustration of such a confrontation ([Richardson & Ragland, 2018](#)).

Some readers might consider or label the symbolism in [Figure 2](#) as provocative. My intentional use of suggestive symbolism is a deliberate strategy to push the comfort level and offend the internalized “righteous” values that have emerged from the predominantly white middle-class and elitist roots of the LIS professions ([Kumasi & Hill, 2013](#); [Stauffer, 2020](#)). Among others, these include the neutral stance of LIS practitioners and a passivity among LIS educators of the past ([Gibson et al., 2017](#)). A predominant recognition of Anglo-/Eurocentric scholarship, Western dominance of knowledge systems, resistance to multiple ways of knowing, marginalization of the Global South, and the solely privileged position

given to post-positivistic research paradigms are additional systemic and entrenched institutional structures that need to get disrupted in LIS higher education (Ameen, Chu, Lilley, Ndumu, & Raju, 2020; Chakraborty & Das, 2014).

Responding to this limited context and problematic exigencies in LIS, the three courses described in the article serve as alternatives that embraced a more inclusive, equitable, and social justice–driven active agenda of student-motivated actions to generate potential community-relevant impacts to challenge marginalizing realities. Further, the learning of course content focused directly on topics of social justice, diversity and inclusion, and community engagement. This was in stark comparison to their peripheral integration in the past, where LIS-related functionalities (e.g., collection development, library management, etc.) were essentially the core course foci, with a limited integration of social justice–related content (Jones, 2020).

Course contexts

I implemented the conceptual framework (described above) in the three courses via integration of content related to the learning of interpretive, constructive, and humanistic approaches with mixed methods in LIS research (e.g., interviews, focus groups, action research, and participant observation, with select quantitative statistical analysis). Strategies included coverage of critical research, participatory action research, situated user-centered evaluation/assessment, grounded theory practice, service learning, needs assessment and community analysis, content analysis, narratology/storytelling, and scenario building, to name a few. Student-developed information and communication-based outcomes were directly responsive to the contextual realities at their collaborating agencies. Some outcomes included critical research applications and proposed changes in information system delivery and library service design. Others involved communication and social media actions, institutional policy development, knowledge representation of marginalized domains of experience, development of cultural competence and culturally responsive information resources, equitable access and inclusive use of print and electronic collections, and design and development of community-based social and digital technologies, amongst others. The following course descriptions, student learning outcomes, assignment requirements, and tangible deliverables identify social justice contexts of learning, scholarship, engagement, and action.

CIS 668 (Social Justice and Inclusion Advocacy)

This course highlighted theoretical and empirical perspectives in action-oriented social justice and advocacy in information studies and related disciplines. It explored information infrastructures, contexts, technologies, institutions, and policies as sites of power that shape (and perpetuate) inequalities. In a chosen area of research and context of study, students investigated a broad array of scholarly literature and popular sources to explore what socially just outcomes and interventions might look like for disenfranchised communities, organizations, and individuals.

The assumption underlying the course was that social justice and inclusion advocacy through an information lens of analysis and communication action can strongly promote

fairness, justice, equality, and equity for all people, including those on the margins of society (Adams et al., 2018). It was a diagnostic response to the limited ways in which the LIS and communication professions had previously conceptualized and implemented the constructs of social justice and impact in a cursory and superficial manner (Mathiesen, 2015). Students explored and developed opportunities to critically investigate the role of information and communication agencies/organizations (e.g., libraries, museums, archives, schools, universities, government, businesses, news media, health institutions, non-profits, activist groups, etc.) in social justice scholarship (research, engagement, and inclusion advocacy) via theoretical and action-oriented discourse surrounding information, communication, and emerging technologies. The course attracted passionate movers-and-shakers seeking to make the world a better place for all, via information and communication-related scholarship actions across disciplines in their organization or community setting of choice. Prominent philosophical and pedagogical concepts related to social justice and inclusion advocacy were studied from interdisciplinary approaches (e.g., critical theory, feminist and cross-cultural studies, postcolonial literature, race and gender research, etc.). The course also revisited the conceptual foundations of the information and communication professions to scrutinize current practice and identify how we can better develop equitable, democratic, and meaningful information and communication services for traditionally underserved populations.

Students created a tangible community-responsive project for a selected information and/or communication setting that lacked social justice attributes (variously conceptualized). The deliverables included analysis of a context of need, interdisciplinary perspective, research paradigm, methods/methodologies, results evaluation and assessment, social justice presentations, and action plans for addressing the needs in an organizational or community setting. For example, doctoral student Baheya Jaber's proposal focused on the problem of honor killing of women in Palestine, an archaic patriarchal custom, based on a critical discourse analysis of public posts related to the #We Are All Israa Ghayeb on Twitter soon after a 21-year Palestinian woman was beaten to death in August 2019 by three kin brethren in the name of family honor. Jaber analyzed feedback of community stakeholders, including families, educators, healthcare service providers, librarians, government officials, and others, to propose strategic actions at legal, political, religious, and educational levels to stop such barbaric acts in the future.

All students developed their draft manuscripts during the class for possible future publication. Three students decided to translate their class work into published journal articles, adding to the body of valuable scholarship addressing historically imbalanced social, cultural, political, and economic inequities in our global networked information society. Their submissions went through rigorous peer review for possible publication in a special issue of the *International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* entitled "Intersecting Theories and Methods to Research Social Justice in LIS Scholarship," which I guest edited (Mehra, 2021). Three students shared their course experiences in a panel entitled "Diverse Voices of Doctoral Students in Social Justice and Inclusion Advocacy" that was included in the program of the 11th Annual Discerning Diverse Voices Symposium at the University of Alabama, March 10–11, 2020.

LS 590 (Diversity Leadership in Information Organizations)

This course focused on developing effective diversity leadership skills in students to provide inclusive services to underserved populations in varied information organizations. The instructor's pedagogical approach helped focus on training students in the assessment and analysis of organizational management and responsive strategies to develop cultural competence and effective leadership skills in a diverse workforce information environment. Students critically evaluated a variety of information responses to ensure equality and equity of representation, inclusion, access, and information use of diverse stakeholders in a community-centered organizational setting of choice. They proposed a strategic diversity action plan to identify directions of progressive growth and professional practice in a self-selected organization.

This course recognized that diversity and inclusion are an integral reality of the twenty-first-century life experience, threading the very fabric of the world we live in, including all aspects of a diverse workforce and the communities we serve. Collectively as a class we explored how we can develop cultural competence, lead our information organizations to become more inclusive, and respond effectively to the diverse challenges and opportunities that are available to us in the contemporary political and economic climate. The course was designed to prepare future information professionals to develop inclusive services to underrepresented populations based on race, ethnicity, color, national origins, gender, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, veteran status, education, income, age, geography, and religion, among other variables. Students created a Diversity & Inclusion ePortfolio (D&I-eP)³ based on analyzing existing responses to diversity in an organization and proposed a range of responsive strategies that furthered cultural competence, inclusion, and effective leadership in that work environment. D&I-eP webpages included welcome and reflection, context (environment and setting, local resources, agency profile), best practices (readings, resources, case study), existing agency diversity responses, community analysis, moving forward (proposed strategic action plan, future projections), and diversity presentations. For example, in consultation with the local Sierra Mono Museum, community needs analysis, and evaluation of existing information offerings for the Mono Native Americans in the North Fork Branch Library of the Madera County Library, California, where she was a manager, Master's student Sarah McIntyre proposed specific activities related to ongoing community data collection, creation of a diversity committee, policy and inclusion statement improvements, partnerships with external diversity organizations, cultural programming implementation, and provision of cultural competence staff training.

CIS 650 (Community-Engaged Scholarship)

This seminar introduced students to theoretical and applied community-based frameworks and approaches from the social sciences and allied disciplines to transform the predominant "ivory tower" image of an isolated academy (Mahtani, 2006). The course provided opportunities for students to apply the philosophy and practice of community-engaged scholarship in their community-based projects and develop experience in collaborating with external constituencies within their specific educational or workforce settings. A significant course dimension included students addressing the existing communication and information

responses in self-selected institutions and organizations to engage with external communities in their local and regional contexts to provide concrete strategies integrating relevant and appropriate solutions.

An underlying premise of the course was that community engagement is an activity applicable to any communication or information agency within and beyond academic and non-academic settings in various forms of our professional work experiences. In the twenty-first century, all core and marginal areas of communication and information-related activities in their creation-organization-management-dissemination-use processes expect community engagement in some form or another. As a new and uncharted territory, it still stays undervalued and implemented on the peripheries of our activities scattered in an isolated and ad hoc manner. In order to overcome these gaps, the course provided an opportunity for students to experience community-engaged scholarship in its historical and contemporary applications of study, and in its “doing” aspects via communication and information work within self-selected community-based settings.

Students built an individualized community-engaged ePortfolio (CE-eP)⁴ on the web. They evaluated existing communication and information strategies and proposed workable equitable strategies for an organization of choice. In their CE-eP, students developed and delivered a community-engaged project from initial conceptualization, planning, design, development, implementation, and operationalization in various degrees of intensities based on individual circumstances. The web product provided students skills to design a 360-degree scan of a community organization from their own and community stakeholders’ perspectives. Students’ web product included welcome, scope and plan of community project, their disciplinary-theoretical/conceptual-methodological lens of analysis, best practices (readings, resources, case study), community organization’s profile, organization’s community and user profile, assessment of community organization’s offerings, moving forward (strategic action plan, projections), and community-engaged presentations. For example, as a mother of a child diagnosed with cancer and founder of Golden Moms, an advocacy and support organization for mother-caretakers, Black communication scholar and doctoral student Shalonda Capers operationalized her positionality as a boundary spanner in her course collaborations with three non-profit agencies serving the pediatric cancer community located in Atlanta, Georgia (namely, CURE Childhood Cancer, Camp Sunshine, and Children’s Hospital of Atlanta). Capers collected and disseminated information in her project to flow both ways between the community and the academy to generate awareness among allies, educate the pediatric cancer networks about mother-caretakers of color, mobilize advocacy resources, promote inclusive decision making, and develop promising practices in community development for this disadvantaged population.

Discussion

Both the LIS instructor and the students adopted critical pedagogies and reflective practices in all three courses in every aspect of our interactions with each other and with the external community collaborators. In my role as course instructor, as a potential agent of action and change, I conceptualized “community-immersive” projects in the course design to operationalize students’ role in social action via information (or communication) work (Becnel

& Moeller, 2017). The degree of community collaboration or “embeddedness” varied across the three courses. For example, in CIS 650 the community collaboration was central and the focus of students’ critical reflection and analysis process. In LS 590, engaging with the external community agency was organized around an assessment of diversity and inclusion offerings in that setting. CIS 668 integrated student–community partnering via proposal development and implementation through the lens of social justice and inclusion advocacy. In this manner, all three courses provided students an opportunity to connect with external community stakeholders with some shared dimensions of experience (see syllabi for details), yet in different ways and for varied reasons. For all three courses, the underlying pedagogical process and development were in response to a limited inward-looking academy and a resistance in predominant LIS teaching and learning that has become “obstacles to convergence between library science theory and practice in an information disciplines context” to adopt social justice more assertively (Sabelli, 2010, para. 1). Also common across the courses was the fact that students developed decisive and reflective critiques of varied communication and information offerings in their self-selected workplace and community settings of interest.

Across the three courses, another shared feature was related to the students producing tangible community-contextualized deliverables of social justice as represented in their proposed and/or implemented solutions (e.g., strategic action plan, web resource, etc.), designed and constructed during the teaching and learning process in the LIS classroom. The experience allowed us to integrate external agencies and their representatives into the LIS classroom via co-creating information products *with* them, instead of *for* them. It helped us extend the impact of traditional entrenched organizations (e.g., the American academy, communication specialists, LIS education, libraries, etc.) to discard our elitist roles as passive, neutral bystanders of the past (Mehra & Gray, 2020). Establishing partnerships and collaborations with external stakeholders at different degrees of involvement and communication and information sharing across institutional boundaries beyond our places of privilege and middle-class complacencies gave students opportunities to make a difference in real-world circumstances (as much as possible) through generating actual items of value.

This was social justice in action in the LIS world. It also allowed select partnering communication and information agencies to integrate community practices, user/patron constituencies, and people-centered dynamics, in their resource design and development, technology infrastructure applications, information policy and planning, marketing and outreach initiatives, and ongoing service evaluation and assessment, to name a few areas. These were some opportunities and value parameters that students identified as important to them in their formal assessments collected via the online course evaluation system at the end of each semester, and during informal feedback collected throughout the semester. Tangible and intangible benefits included developing bridges between the theoretical and practical aspects as embedded in community-based contexts and generating impact via communication-information work owing to collaborative initiatives. However, challenges students shared included deconditioning traditional academic course expectations, building trust and relationship with external community stakeholders, and identifying value they could deliver with/for their collaborating agencies.

In the conventional LIS classroom of the past and present it has been difficult to include community-based research, impact-driven interventions, and social justice outcomes owing to the challenges of finding and coordinating the appropriate organizations with which students can partner, even within the mainstream LIS stakeholder organizational categories (e.g., in libraries, museums, and archives). In addition, problems of scheduling based on semester deadlines, staff's time and involvement expected in the collaboration, and difficulty in scoping mutually agreeable objectives are other major hurdles (Ball & Schilling, 2006; Bloomquist, 2015; Overall, 2010). In all three courses reported in this article, the starting point for the external collaboration development process was the student themselves, be it in tapping their personal drive and motivations (e.g., mother-caretaker), building on interests and past experiences (e.g., ongoing work with differently abled users), or shaping desired career pathways and functional skills they felt they needed (e.g., minority reference services in an academic library). Integrating a student-centered course pedagogy meant pushing the students to take ownership of their freedom to make effective choices in tailoring the course to their context-driven realities, including selection of community partners. In the process, the responsibility to take actions and make the course meaningful to them fell on the students themselves. As the course instructor, I created a semi-structured mechanism delivered through the various components of the syllabus (e.g., course objectives, assignment descriptions) that simultaneously incorporated flexibility in letting the students "tweak" the guidelines to integrate their uniquely situated and emerging community-connected experiences. The approach went beyond the rigidity of most traditional LIS curriculum and the "spoon-feeding" approach of many instructors and got the students to "drive their own cars," so to speak. Based on informal and formal feedback, students appreciated the strategy since it gave them a chance to develop efficacy, change agency, confidence, and empowerment for operationalizing social justice outcomes in their specific settings of choice.

In some instances, students had ongoing non-employee ties with the agency they decided to work with for the course, while others were working as full- or part-time employees in the collaborating agency. In both scenarios, student course work helped them extend the impact of their partnering organization in areas of development that were much needed or lacking at the time. In other cases, thanks to the course expectations, some students established communication with the agency for the first time and agreed to volunteer with them, leading to an expanded repertoire of skills in résumé development and fruitful future career experiences (e.g., internship, job placement). My role in all these situations included facilitating these potential opportunities in student–community collaborations via the course design at both pedagogical and structural levels (e.g., required readings, assignment design) as well advising, mentoring, and engaging the organization in some cases. As one CIS 650 student wrote in their formal feedback collected via the UA's Student Opinion of Instruction, "[the instructor] engages his students in deep education that calls them beyond the regurgitation of already said things. He is invested in a pedagogy that trains scholars to articulate an epistemology rooted in truth and not imagination."

Assignments in all three courses required students to own their situated positionality in the community collaborations. They were also required to document their journey via narratives throughout the semester as an integral part of the course expectations. For example,

the CIS 668 Context of Need (“Problem Statement”) assignment started students right from the beginning of the semester in identifying, describing, and analyzing a specific communication-information context from a social justice imperative within a particular organization of choice. They were expected to plan, propose, and consider applying strategic actions that furthered social justice and inclusion advocacy in that setting. Students operationalized this activity during the entire course of the semester in responding to the community context as vital to the process. In LS 590, students conducted a community analysis for their select information service evaluation in an information agency from a unique diversity perspective that they were interested in pursuing from a user-centered and organizational point of view. For CIS 650, the collaboration with a community organization was the central focus of students’ community-engaged scholarship, implemented in nine assignments during the semester to address specific social justice issues and concerns. In all three courses, the emergence of the “interventions” pursued by the students appeared gradually via a mutual engagement and interactions with the community stakeholders. Through negotiation of the student’s self-defined interest with the partner’s expectations and their self-defined problem/need, a workable arrangement in collaborations emerged owing to the semi-structured course requirements that were flexible enough to get tailored to individualized circumstances.

Administratively pursuing open enrollment for Master’s and doctoral students in the three courses sometimes required multiple sections. Including students across the graduate programs was very effective in enhanced learning, since it contributed toward greater student engagement and deep discussion owing to a coming together of different points of view, perspectives, and knowledge backgrounds (e.g., bridging theory-focused and practice-embedded experiences). It called for a flexibility in the tailored-assignment expectations and has provided emerging criteria of evaluation in quality, quantity, in-depth degree of analysis, richness, and use of authoritative sources, for example, that will develop into a rigorous rubric to be tested in future course interactions. Similarly, the inclusion of onsite and online students in the synchronous classroom in LS 590 and CIS 650 brought a diversity of student-embedded experiences and contexts into the class that enriched its overall value for all of us from a teaching and learning point of view.

The limitation of low course enrollment did not allow for fully utilizing the potential strength of a multidisciplinary student body, something that must be overcome in future course iterations. Better efforts in course scheduling to avoid conflict with well-established courses is one direction for improvement. Streamlining some assignments, sharpening descriptions, and providing examples of possible local and non-local community agencies for students to partner with are others. Though I pursued cross-disciplinary marketing of the courses (e.g., nursing, social work, race and gender studies), because of my newness as a faculty member at the UA, the efforts did not yield significant positive results. Further, better “selling” of the course topics across multidisciplinary units might be needed within the college itself to establish building course value and relevance for students across the boundaries. Confronting entrenched university infrastructures, institutional policies, people politics, and sheer lethargy to change are ongoing battles moving forward. One student expressed their frustration in the formal course evaluations about the inability to meet face-to-face in CIS 650 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions

Developing courses that integrated the creation of tangible concrete products while having students engage with external community stakeholders beyond the LIS classroom to achieve social justice agendas presented unique problems and challenges. In addition to attracting greater student enrollment, it also included training students to learn new modes of community-engaged scholarship in venturing outside their comfort zones. It involved identifying application of information-communication work to serve community partners via nudging students to “immerse” themselves in embedded contexts to identify possible concrete solutions with/for external stakeholders (Kazmer, 2005). Having students self-select the nature, content, and delivery of their action-oriented course projects was an effective strategy to address the challenge. The goal is to support students to develop critical analysis of existing realities and challenges, and propose initiatives that their collaborating agencies can adopt, to make things better and change the status quo, especially regarding the “unequal legacies” of race/ethnicity in the LIS professions (Pawley, 2006). It might require further rectifying imbalanced power differentials for underserved constituencies via proposing communication and information-related actions. In conceptualizing and operationalizing such efforts in the classroom, LIS educators and other academics do not have much choice under the neoliberal pressures to show the value, productivity, and economic returns of their pursuits (Cope, 2014). Therefore, they need to open their minds to the possibilities of developing innovative strategies in their classrooms surrounding these realities. Such efforts can also provide exciting opening-up of doors and new opportunities (e.g., LIS-community grant partnerships, LIS involvement in community decision making, LIS emerging as a significant community and political power broker, etc.). Achieving social justice outcomes through student involvement in the LIS classroom and beyond is also key for the survival and effectiveness of the LIS professions in the face of contemporary challenges within a turbulent and politically charged cultural fabric (e.g., global pandemic, social unrest against racial injustices, competing stakeholders and competitors, changing demographics, administrative restructuring in the academy, etc.) (Rioux, 2010). Focusing the LIS course activities and the LIS curriculum on action-oriented discourse and practice in student self-selected community organizations of choice to develop tangible social justice and inclusion advocacy can serve as a valuable strategy in this regard.

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Notes

1. For those instructors attempting to replicate or develop a similar course, the syllabi (with course readings) are available for appropriate use, with acknowledgment, via the author’s homepage at <https://bmehra.people.ua.edu>.
2. The author initially taught the course during spring 2018 in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville (UTK).
3. For select UA students’ D&I-eP, see <https://slis590diversityleadership.ua.edu>. For select UTK students’ D&I-eP, see [?https://insc-diversity.cci.utk.edu](https://insc-diversity.cci.utk.edu).
4. For select CIS 650 students’ CE-eP, see <http://cis650communityengagedscholarship.ua.edu>.