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The warp and weft of Information Literacy: Changing contexts, enduring challenges

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Abstract

In this personal exploration of information literacy (IL) instruction at one institution, I look back at three decades of my involvement with pedagogy and how our local practices have reflected national conversations about the field. Anxiety about the identity and purpose of academic libraries in higher education has shaped the ways we have conceptualised and argued for the value of IL, yet in spite of spirited efforts to reformulate our purpose, many of the challenges we face have consistently resisted solutions.

Keywords

autoethnography; bibliographic instruction; information literacy; standards; critical information literacy

1. Introduction

Not long ago, I was nonplussed when I came across a planning document from the early 1990s in which I had spelled out where I thought our instruction efforts needed to go. It was eerily identical to our current Things to Do list. It was dispiriting. They were good ideas. They were just much harder to implement than I ever expected. It does not help that every year new students show up, baffled and anxious, and new faculty arrive, needing to be coaxed to think intentionally about the potential of our small library as a site of learning when they are busy with new courses and their own research (I am using 'faculty' in the American sense to refer to academics who teach courses). Our plans inevitably have required work from staff in the disciplines. It is work they own as one of their teaching responsibilities, and they embrace it, but they are not always as keen to schedule meetings to coordinate efforts.

I can sympathise with these faculty, knowing how difficult it is to focus when beset by stress and distractions. As I write this it is hard to concentrate because events keep intruding with new shocks and daily emergencies. We are living in an era of resurgent white nativist hostility to the world I thought I lived in. While I have been committed to information literacy (IL) as an essential learning outcome for most of my life, it suddenly seems ever more urgent that we get this right. We need to help our students learn what they need to know so that when they go out into the world they will be prepared to change it for the better. Judging by the rise in student activism and their involvement in grassroots resistance they seem to be up for the challenge. But am I?

I am using this opportunity – the happy celebration of a decade of open access IL publishing – to practise some self-reflection. Looking back at my three decades in the field, a time marked by enormous changes in our information systems and practices, it is surprising how persistent the challenges we have faced are. We have always wanted new students to feel comfortable and able to navigate their library so that they can feel at home in the academic community. As Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005) has put it, we can serve as disciplinary discourse mediators for students who migrate among different disciplines and do not always speak the language. This is important work, but it is not nearly enough. We also want students who are moving into their major fields of study to be able to join the scholarly conversations of their chosen discipline. By having

significant research experiences, they can grasp the role of individuals in creating knowledge. At its best, this experience can provide them with a sense of personal agency and can help them find their own voice. Ultimately, with that identity and confidence established, we hope they can go out into the world when they graduate prepared to act on it as free human beings in a society that badly needs healing.

I have always felt IL should be integral to each student's education, not just so that they can succeed as students but so they will have the capacity to influence the world and the confidence to try. Those were our goals back when our instruction involved helping them flip through a card catalogue to find books or work systematically through annual volumes of abstracts to find citations to articles which would then have to be located on the shelf. We still have those goals, though the ways information is created, circulated, and built upon has altered what this work looks like. What has remained constant is the kind of deep learning students need to experience, which is independent of the form information takes. Developing a successful IL program is a matter of overcoming the structural, institutional, and entirely human difficulties we have in creating and sustaining meaningful learning experiences that involve students in exploration, inquiry, and creation.

I am going to frame these personal reflections in the form of autoethnography, a methodology that I explored last year with an innovative learning community established by AnneMarie Dietering, Robert Schroeder, and Rick Stoddart to support contributors to a book on the method and its application to library and information science, forthcoming from ACRL Publications. Though ethnographic methods have been applied successfully in academic libraries (for example, Foster and Gibbons, 2007; Duke and Asher, 2012), autoethnography is less well known. This reflective method is an attempt to use one's lived experience as a site of study, applying the same sort of analytical process we might use in other forms of scholarship. It is also an effort to open up scholarship to a more personal voice and to offer a wider range of narrative forms than those usually available to scholars.

What follows is a narrative about one librarian's experience working with students in a single institution across three decades. I will use my personal experience and map it to what seems to me to be three distinct periods: the bibliographic instruction (BI) era, the age of standardised IL, and the relatively recent age of critical IL. There is some overlap in these periods, some blending at the boundaries, but the language we have used to describe what we do went through distinct changes – while leaving behind, as happens with language, strange remnants of the past. I am pretty sure we are not the only librarians who absentmindedly still refer to classes held in the library as 'BI sessions'.

In each of these three periods, IL has been argued for and shaped by widespread social anxiety about education and technology that has political, social, and economic dimensions. Over the years, we felt these perturbations in my library and responded to the official documents that the librarian community has developed to guide our efforts, adjusting our practice in various ways. Yet when I held that old document in my hands and realised the institutional goals we have today were on our agenda decades ago, I recognised that some things have not changed at all.

2. Locating my practice in my past

In 1987 I started work at the library of Gustavus Adolphus College, a small undergraduate institution in rural Minnesota that was founded, like many American colleges, in the nineteenth century. The residential liberal arts college is as iconic an American institution as large public research universities, but since I had never attended such a college I asked a great many questions about it during my job interview. Now this environment is so familiar to me, I cannot even remember what those questions were.

The college, founded by Scandinavian immigrants, retains traces of its Swedish cultural roots and an affiliation with the Lutheran church, but its students currently represent both the descendants of European immigrants and more recently arrived Minnesotans from Mexico and Central America, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. (Though the land the college occupies belonged to the Dakota until the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, indigenous students have never been well-represented on campus.) Students have traditional liberal arts majors to choose from (in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences) as well as several pre-professional majors, including nursing, education, and business management. All of the students experience a liberal arts general education along with courses in their major concentration. The relatively small size of the student body (2,300) and small class sizes, combined with the fact that nearly all of the students live on campus, makes it a tightly knit community. 'Community' is, in fact, one of the institution's core values, and in interviews I conducted with students last year the word was invoked most often as something that they valued about the college, frequently citing the relationships they develop with faculty both in class and through external research and mentoring opportunities as an example.

Though this college, situated on a hill overlooking a small town, looks like a set for a nostalgic film about college life, our students face the same challenges as those at larger institutions: difficulty adjusting to the rigors of college classrooms after schooling geared toward standardised testing, a rising incidence of diagnosed disabilities and mental illness, high levels of financial debt upon graduation, and so on. Nearly all of our students receive some sort of financial aid, and most of them are employed on campus and, in some cases, in the local town as well. They are busy, overscheduled people who often suffer from stress and distraction. That said, this residential college community has many advantages for IL efforts. At our college, librarians are members of the teaching faculty and are seen as educational peers. Students have convenient access to the library compared to large commuter campuses, and our mission is entirely focused on student learning, which means IL programming does not have to fight for resources within the library. It is the foundation of everything we do.

3. The Bibliographic Instruction Librarian arrives

When I started my new job as a fulltime instruction librarian, I was warned that I would be responsible for educating the campus about our new electronic catalogue. On my first day at work, I saw that several new terminals had been set up on narrow tables designed to hold card catalogue drawers, their yellow cursors blinking expectantly, awaiting our commands. In my new office, I browsed through a box of floppy disks and a file cabinet full of handouts and workbooks created by the librarian who had started the instruction program five years earlier. She had moved on, but had left behind ample evidence of her missionary zeal. Bibliographic instruction had planted its flag, just slightly ahead of the Information Age.

I soon realised that using the new catalogue was not a great learning challenge for our students or faculty (with only a few refuseniks who wanted someone else to do their typing). Nor was it all that difficult for our psychology students to learn how to navigate *Psychological Abstracts* and interpret the tiny print on the tissue paper pages of *Social Sciences Citation Index* or for history students to use the index to the *New York Times* on microfilm. It was not convenient to find sources this way – but it was not deep learning, either. What mattered more, I quickly realised, was understanding how to gain enough familiarity with a new topic to frame a meaningful question, how to learn enough of the coded language that scholars used to crack open a search, and how to unlearn the idea that research was simply a matter of finding other people's answers.

In the early days, I was the only librarian tasked with instruction. It was a bit lonely, and my only contact with other librarians doing the same work was at conferences I could not afford and through the published literature. In some ways it was good, because when I wanted to talk about teaching I turned to local colleagues in other departments. I learned a lot from the first director of our writing program, a new hire like me. She introduced me to the conversations among the community of writing instructors that were immensely helpful to me and deeply influenced how I

diagnosed the problems students were having with research. These had little to do with knowing how libraries work but rather with arguments and audiences and arriving at questions that were worth asking. My first peer reviewed research published in 1992 drew heavily on what I was learning from the field of composition, and my first presentation at a national librarian conference examined the parallels between our two fields. (All these years later, it still astonishes me how rare are conversations across those disciplinary boundaries.)

In those days, what we then called the 'bibliographic instruction' movement was more firmly embedded in liberal arts colleges than in larger universities, primarily for reasons of scale and our institutional focus on teaching. We followed what was then called 'the Earlham model', named for a school similar to ours (though it was Quaker rather than Lutheran). The idea was for librarians to partner with faculty to bring librarian expertise into a disciplinary context, while also bringing students into the library to be introduced to the tools of research. Being able to pursue information independently, we believed, was a valuable and empowering experience that needed to be more prominently part of undergraduate education.

I did not perceive it at the time, but libraries were scrabbling for a public identity and sense of purpose at a time when the Reagan administration had declared our education system disastrously flawed. A 1983 report from the US National Commission on Excellence in Education titled *A Nation at Risk* described the crisis in apocalyptic terms: 'the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people' (p.5). The report made the twin claims that educating the populace was of enormous importance (a claim teachers welcomed – their work was finally being recognised!) and that the school system, from Kindergarten through college, was failing in a way that put the country at a strategic disadvantage with other countries, Japan most prominently among them. The authors of the report used militaristic language to describe the crisis. 'If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament' (p.5).

Though the report succeeded in bringing national attention to the value of education, it rang the opening bell for a 'school reform' movement that has tended to fault schools and teachers for what are actually wider social problems. Its demands for accountability have led to federally mandated testing programs that have tied student scores to school funding and teacher evaluation and has stripped the curriculum of programs that are not on the test. Though the 1983 report makes some surprisingly strong statements in favour of public schools as a democratic institution, the reforms it heralded laid the foundation for 'school choice' (often defined as the provision of tax dollars to fund attendance at religious schools), the establishment of charter schools, and an infatuation with educational technology unmatched by funding for basics like paper and pencils. Some critics of public schools have even taken to calling them 'government schools' – because to these critics everything the state touches is a sinister threat to personal liberty. Though advocates for privatising our school system and giving parents consumer choice make the claim that competition brings out the best in us, it should be noted that some of the desire to privatise education comes from resistance to desegregation. School choice in practice has often meant choosing not to be in classrooms with students of colour.

I do not remember whether I knew about the report when it came out. However, I did read an education reform book published in 1989 at the request of the library director. He had been hearing about it and wanted to know what I thought before he went to a meeting where it was sure to be discussed. Librarian Patricia Senn Breivik and university president E. Gordon Gee used a new moniker for bibliographic instruction and their own militaristic metaphor in their title: *Information Literacy: Revolution in the Library*. While I was all in favour of advocating for the value of libraries and independent student learning, I came away frustrated and annoyed. The authors described a failed educational system full of faculty who refused to let go of passive lecture and textbook methods. The authors argued that change would have to come from above, from high level administrators. At my college, faculty were (and still are) in charge of the curriculum and would

resist any top down directives. That would be a strategy doomed from the start. More importantly, I knew our faculty cared deeply about student learning and were endlessly experimenting, searching for better ways to help students learn. They believed the library was important. They wanted to give students authentic research experiences. They did not need persuading. They needed more hours in the day and some means within their departments to negotiate how this kind of learning could be built into the program.

This book and reports from an American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy published in the same year used similar strategies to raise anxiety about technological change and situate libraries as a solution to those fears. The crisis was framed around the claim that educational institutions' were ill prepared to enter the 'info – and nations – that mastered information would be winners. IL was a matter of national security. It would prepare people for new jobs and would help the US economy compete against foreign countries threatening our dominance. Librarians could seize the moment and become leaders in educational reform.

It is a common rhetorical strategy, one sociologist Joel Best (1999) has described. Firstly, create a name for something that is causing widespread social anxiety. In this case 'information age ' was a label that encompassed sociotechnical changes that afflicted workers with anxiety about their future as well as policy level concerns that our industrial economy was faltering in the face of nimbler competition from Japan. Secondly, use dramatic storytelling and melodrama to describe the situation as a significant threat. Here, the problem is that our educational system is hopelessly inadequate and that inadequacy threatens our national security. Then step in to offer a solution to the problem. All three factors were in at the birth of the IL era: a named threat (the growth of information and the new machines that would disrupt our lives), a narrative that builds up the threat as a significant one, and (once we are well rattled), a program to address the threat. As political scientist Corey Robin (2004) sees it, fear has become a defining feature of American political life, and the dramatic focus on risks distracts us from the less exciting work of building a better society – and, in fact, is a useful tool for accumulating wealth and power at the expense of equality and freedom. Even good causes suffer, he argues, when they rely on an appeal to fear.

Breivik and Gee open the final chapter of their book by describing the importance of developing systems for managing information in intelligence work during World War II. 'While the educational crisis the United States faces today lacks the life and death urgency of World War II, the success (or failure) of academic leaders in confronting this crisis will have serious long term effects on the future of our country and its place in international affairs' (p.191). The book's final chapter switches from an information processing systems metaphor to a different one: houses of worship.

While the image works well for an academic institution, it fails at the individual level. Many people do not and will not have access to a computer, but none can escape the ongoing effects of the information society on their lives, on their ability to survive if not succeed at their jobs, and on their success in living a meaningful life. (p.199)

The authors argue that the rise of computers is an inescapable threat to people's survival, but libraries are institutions that, like places of worship, have symbolic value and are more than buildings but are rather places that 'provide pathways for seeking truth and gaining hold of a greater reality that transcends their isolated lives' (p.199). Like the church, the library has a higher mission to empower those to whom computers pose an existential threat. The concluding paragraph opens with an aphorism about the difficulty of living up to a Christian ideal, followed by an exhortation.

This is our challenge to academe and to college and university presidents in particular – to take up the difficult task of reform, to find a center that holds in the fragmented world of scholarship and education. Do not allow the difficulties involved in envisioning, promoting, and implementing a new vision for academic libraries to discourage you. Be resolute in using your leadership skills to free your library personnel and resources from outmoded

images and unrealistic expectations until they can become powerful allies in the work of reforming your campus. Then the goal of fully preparing young people for the challenges of the information society will become a reality. (p.199)

While there was much in this book that aligned with my vision of what role my library could play in our students' education, I recall being quite annoyed by the doomsday rhetoric and felt the blame for educational failure was being unfairly placed on instructors who, in my experience, were committed to making their classrooms sites of active and engaged learning. Now, seeing where educational reform has led – punitive defunding of public institutions at the expense of students and their soaring tuition costs, a growing reliance on grossly underpaid adjunct instructors, and the substitution of expensive and unproven educational technologies for permanent staff – I am even more convinced that we have been misled.

4. Hurrah for Standards! Oh, wait . . .

I remember clearly when the Standards came out. (I will call them 'the Standards' because 'Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education' is so awkward. I've never been very happy with the phrase 'information literacy' and I frankly loath the word 'competency'.) But on first glance I was quite pleased. For the first time, it seemed we were acknowledging that the work involved in IL did not belong to librarians, that we would have to partner with faculty in the disciplines to help students learn these complicated things. I kept the issue of *College & Research Library News* in which they were first published on my desk, folded open, ready to hand. I responded enthusiastically when one of the creators of the Standards asked librarians whether we used them. (Most likely this question was posed as an email message posted to BIL, an email Listserv that gathered thousands of instruction librarians together from 1990 until its replacement in 2002 by an official American Library Association (ALA) sponsored list, ILIL, but I cannot verify this memory because the archives for this list are not available anymore.) In any case, my zeal landed me a seat on a panel at the biannual Association of College and Research Libraries conference in March 2001.

Something happened between that invitation and the actual panel presentation. In June of 2000, I proudly presented the document to faculty who had spent a week in a grant funded summer workshop on enhancing developmental research skills in the undergraduate curriculum. It was the last day of an intensive workshop, and people were both tired and excited about the courses they had designed, fully invested in IL. The room grew quiet as they read through the Standards. And then they began to speak.

They hated them. They really, really hated them.

It was not that they did not believe in the importance of being able to find, evaluate, and use information ethically. They clearly did. Their complaint was that the Standards did not adequately describe what that means in practice. The language of the document seemed to evade the idea that students might have original, creative thoughts, that they did not merely produce products or performances but learned and shared what they had learned by making new things. Faculty were clearly dismayed at the way performance indicators and outcomes were defined in long lists of specific measurable bits. One faculty member, a fine teacher and a well published scholar, confessed she would fail some of the listed outcomes and wondered how we would know whether students who learned all those fiddly bits could put them together in a meaningful way. A professor of management said they read like instructions for a Tayloristic time and motion study, a mechanistic breaking apart of something intuitive and complex into simple, repetitive steps that could be performed at industrial scale.

On the one hand, I was a bit crushed. I had such high hopes that this document would bring us together. But it did not take long to cheer up. We did not actually need that document to find common ground. In fact, the common ground was all around us. We did not need to sell the faculty

on the importance of IL. They already cared about it. What we could give them as librarians was the gift of time to come together, share notes, and develop new strategies for teaching something complicated and challenging – not because we are in an information age that threatens the status quo, but because we can help students move from being an outsider, looking for knowledge that is born through a mysterious process, trailing clouds of authority, to being someone who participates in making knowledge, who has practiced the habits of inquiry long enough to feel at home in a world where knowledge is negotiated, tested, and built upon, not merely received.

I reported our faculty's response to the Standards at the conference, and the organisers were generous in their response. The Standards, they insisted, were adaptable to local cultures. They should be negotiated with faculty. It was perfectly okay if the faculty preferred a different language. The important thing was to work together so that all students were able to become information literate, however we defined and measured it.

In subsequent years, I sensed that focus on shared ownership was being eroded by librarians who embraced the standardisation of IL, who responded to the very fact it was a set of approved rules that they could follow and would not have to invent themselves. By 2005, when a colleague and I presented a poster session on how we used homegrown outcomes and measures to assess student learning at another ACRL meeting, I remember feeling distinctly alienated. Librarians were citing the numbers of particular outcomes in the same way police officers cite offenses in the criminal code. It had become a set of library rules, not a flexible shared practice, and it seemed to encourage something that was beginning to trouble me as our library collections moved online and became leased, temporary access to material controlled by corporate interests.

I cannot pinpoint when I first became uncomfortably aware of this problem: our systems, originally designed to mimic card catalogues and indexes, were increasingly being compared to the ease and attractiveness of new and ubiquitous advertising platforms. There were good lessons to learn from Amazon and Google, reminders that 'save the time of the user' is just as important now as it was when Ranganathan included it among his five famous rules of librarianship. I was in favour of making our catalogues more user friendly and enticing with cover art and publisher descriptions. But assumptions underlying database design were too often rooted in the idea that searching for information was a consumer activity. It implied our job was to help students shop efficiently for sources to put together in a paper just as they might shop for clothing to put together an outfit. The linear layout of the Standards encouraged this consumerist view of research: it starts with a need to acquire stuff and ends with a coda about ethics, which too often was satisfied by invoking the rules for correctly labeling intellectual property.

This was far from the transformative experience I wanted for our students: that moment when they would suddenly realise they had the agency to ask genuine questions that mattered to them and were allowed to come up with answers of their own. What I wanted was for all of my students to experience a moment in their academic lives when they started referring to their sources by the names of authors because they realised there were people involved, and that they themselves were part of an ongoing social enterprise. I winced when assessment focused on how well students could use our clunky shopping platforms. Learning how to perform tasks too often took up the foreground when what we wanted was for students to enter into conversations. Our technology was not improving student learning or preparing them for independent, critical thought. The challenge of creating transformative learning opportunities were no different than when sources were on shelves rather than online. The widespread and often uncritical adoption of the standards as library-owned rules for efficient consumerism troubled me.

5. Across the threshold and into the woods

In 2013, I was invited to speak at LOEX, a popular instruction focused conference. This was terrifying. I had not been to the conference in years, and the thought of facing a room full of

librarians who lived and breathed instruction was intimidating. I worried my thinking was out of date or simply inadequate, particularly since we had totally changed our library organisation years earlier in a way that distributed instruction labour among all librarians (as described in Fister and Martin, 2005). I had not been a sole practitioner for years, and my job now involved collection development and collective management of the library. I was afraid I had lost my IL edge.

It turned out to be a wonderful experience, and I enjoyed all the sessions I attended. One, in particular, was eye-opening. Lori Townsend and Amy Hofer presented their research in progress on a Delphi study of threshold concepts for IL instruction. *This!* I thought. This is what I have been trying to get at, those mysterious transformational moments in students' lives. When I returned home, I recommended that we read an article by the presenters for our library journal club (Hofer et al., 2012). My colleagues were as intrigued by the idea of threshold concepts as I was, but we had one quibble. Why ask librarians and LIS scholars what those thresholds are when it is faculty in the disciplines who witness them most often? What thresholds do our faculty perceive, we wondered, and what can they do to encourage students to cross them?

My colleague Michelle Twait and I wrote a grant proposal to test the idea. We brought together ten faculty members from across the curriculum to discuss threshold concepts for IL from their perspectives (Twait and Fister, 2015). Between submitting the proposal and convening our discussions, the first draft of the new Framework for Information Literacy appeared. This document was created after a committee convened to review the Standards (something that happens routinely every five years) concluded it was time to revise them significantly. The draft document, which departed largely from the Standards, drew heavily on the idea of threshold concepts. Suddenly, this intriguing idea we had embraced was all the rage.

We proceeded with our project, feeling a bit chuffed that we were so cutting edge. In the course of discussions with faculty we wrestled with terminology (what exactly is a threshold concept? What do we actually mean by 'IL'?) and compared expectations for student research practices in different disciplines before creating a shared list of threshold concepts for IL that pertained to all disciplines. They turned out to be not too different from the six 'frames' that ultimately were chosen for the Framework, but there were interesting differences. 'Information has value' was a claim that our faculty found particularly problematic. While understanding the ways economic value often conflicts with academic interests is worthwhile, we learned we would not want to use that wording because it suggested to our faculty cultural informants that we were promoting information as an expensive commodity rather than helping students understand the economic conditions that influence information access. Our faculty put value on citation practices as a way of knitting people's ideas together and ensuring individuals' contributions are recognised, but they did not connect that practice to market value but rather associated it with the idea that scholarship is conversation. Their views may be naïve – they often fail to connect their publication choices to information privilege – but it made us realise how much perspective and word choice matters when naming ideas.

A broader difference between our locally generated concepts and those in the Framework is that our faculty centered students in their statements more than they did information itself. Rather than 'Authority is constructed and contextual' they said things like 'You will encounter things that change your view of the world and call into question things you believed to be true, which can be uncomfortable' and 'Everyone's view is partial. Sometimes those limits are invisible to us.' Rather than naming 'Information creation as a process' they described it as a personal experience: 'Research is a recursive process. What you learn will lead you to ask new questions.' They also insisted on including the emotional aspects of this kind of learning. 'Vulnerability is required. It takes courage to go "out where the buses don't run".'

I realise now that I had internalised a lesson back in 2000, when I proudly shared the newly minted Standards with our faculty. If IL is truly to be a joint venture, we cannot leave faculty out of the conversation in which we name what our students should learn. We cannot carry important concepts, like tablets inscribed with 'thou shalt', down to the people to guide them. But we can, as

librarians, be intentional about encouraging the act of naming. Without our small grant, faculty would not have compared notes and found language that works across disciplines. Librarians are in a unique position on campus. Our libraries are common ground for discussions like these, and it is our job to remind our colleagues across the disciplines of something they already know, that this kind of learning is important.

Yet, what I see developing in the librarian community is very similar to what happened when the Standards were developed: the hasty development of lesson plans and modules to teach the frames as a library-centric form of learning, along with concern about developing assessment measures that will satisfy the accountability gods. How do you measure students' understanding of deep concepts? If that's too fuzzy, too hard, you turn them into shallow, testable fragments. The heated debates about whether adopting the Framework and rescinding the Standards was a mistake hinged largely on how to make these new expectations work in a world driven by austerity regimes and institutionalised suspicion about whether money is being well spent.

The rise of a critical sensibility in thinking about IL has come at a time when late capitalism is crumbling around us. The shock of the 2008 financial crisis showed how brittle the foundations were. The unfairness of an economic and political system that claimed to be regulated through the invisible but cosmically beneficent hand of market forces has become glaringly obvious. One successful political response has been to strategically direct inchoate anger to focus on 'elites' and encourage distrust of 'experts' which extends to hostility toward institutions of higher learning and to entire systems of producing knowledge, including scholarship, science and journalism. White supremacists have been able to seize the moment and focus this anger not on the captains of capitalism but on immigrants, Muslims, women, people who do not conform to a rigid gender binary, and racial minorities.

It was only after the 2016 election in the US that the algorithms that shape our view of the world – the trade-secret sorting and sifting that Facebook and Google have engineered to tempt consumers to respond to advertising – have been called to account. These companies have consistently denied any responsibility for the often dubious content they promote while designing their systems to profit on its spread. As I write this, the U.S. president, whose campaign benefited enormously from the hidden expertise of those whose power comes through manipulation, is declaring war on the press. Postelection concern about 'fake news' – an amalgam of propaganda, satire, fraud, clickbait, and disinformation – has been coopted by Trump to discredit news organisations that question his mendacious claims.

This is a serious crisis of legitimacy. Institutions that failed to stem growing inequality and did not successfully oppose the destabilising effects of global capitalism have been designated enemies of the people (with 'the people' redefined to exclude anyone who questions populist white supremacy as well as its numerous designated foes).

Librarians have, quite understandably, positioned themselves as a solution to the crisis, rushing in with CRAAP tests and LibGuides and lesson plans on how to spot fake news. We do not have the solution. The problem is not spotting falsehoods, it is that a large percentage of our population has lost faith in the very idea that there is a shared reality and a common set of tested methods we can use to understand it. The deeper lessons of a critical approach to IL offer far more potential to address this crisis, but they are not an easy, ready to hand solution.

Though it would be a mistake to promote libraries as arbiters of facts, it is a good opportunity for us to invite our colleagues teaching in the disciplines to discuss exactly how these things we ask students to do – keep lab notebooks, write literature reviews, compose fifty- page senior theses – prepare them for life after college. It is not obvious. Rather than fall back on talking points about education as preparation for the workforce, it is time to reflect in concrete ways on how these learning experiences prepare our students for a fulling life as citizens in a troubled world. And if these things do not provide that preparation, we need to ask – what should we be doing?

6. Plus C'est la Même Chose

Every fall hundreds of new students arrive on our campus needing to figure out what is expected of them and what 'scholarly' means and where the bathrooms are. Every semester a student who takes a methods course has to become fluent in the unfamiliar language of a discipline while trying to discern the tacit values of this new community she is joining. Every spring, professors who embraced IL and designed courses that embedded librarians in an effective teaching collaboration retire and take their knowledge and conviction with them. Every year, librarians make plans to have conversations, to be systematic about where instruction can do the most good, to embed IL more firmly into courses. Sometimes we dig around our files and find an old plan, printed on a dot matrix printer, that whispers the same promises: we will have conversations, we will be systematic, we will make this work.

When I held that old planning document in my hand, I had mixed feelings. I felt sad for the young librarian who had such ambitions, who did not know that 30 years on, during a crisis of faith in truth seeking institutions, these plans would still be works in progress. I felt affirmed that the things we believe are important are things we have cared about for a very long time. I felt frustrated that this work is so easily defeated by tight schedules and the distraction of multiple demands and too many emails to answer. I wondered, as I thought about my own retirement only a few years away, whether I had accomplished anything at all.

This is what our work is: human, messy, incomplete. I remind myself of master teachers who seem to accept this openendedness. The syllabus is never perfect. Students stumble over the same obstacles. The urge to find a new way to tackle that old problem never goes away. Curriculum reform is always on next month's agenda. To everything there is a season. It is not too late, but it is never quite there.

Perhaps there's a kind of grace in that incompleteness. We have been too often bullied to show evidence we are worthwhile, that we measure up, that we deserve to keep our library's doors open. We have spent endless hours in drawing up plans and niggling over the wording of the latest national standards. We count things and file reports. We may be so occupied that we forget to practise that part of our profession that is rooted in an ethic of care (Accardi, 2013). We may be so occupied with national pronouncements and campus strategy that we forget we are in the present moment at a specific location where the people we are with are right this moment doing the messy work of learning (Drabinski, 2014). We run the risk of being too busy to notice that student, standing over there, hesitating at the library entrance.

She may be feeling stressed about an assignment she does not understand, or wondering how to respond to a dubious news report her aunt just posted to Facebook, or feeling out of place in a library and on a campus where people like her do not seem to belong. She has stood there before, on our threshold. She will be there again, next year and the year after. And if we are not too busy perfecting our standards and plans, we will go over to welcome her. We will give her a smile of recognition next time she comes in, and in time she will begin to feel this place is truly hers, that she is at home in the world of ideas, nurturing her newly discovered voice, asserting her right to ask questions that matter to her. And when we no longer see her in the library, we may imagine she has taken that confidence and skill out into the world to confront lies and fight for a better world.

This is our work. It is made of fleeting moments. It is never quite right. It matters.

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