INFORMATION LITERATES OR ENGAGED, CRITICAL CITIZENS?: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON LIBRARIES, LITERACIES AND ADULT LEARNING

By

KAY JOHNSON

Integrated Studies Project

Submitted to Dr. Elizabeth Lange
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta
June, 2009
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals for the encouragement, support and inspiration they have provided:

My husband, Neil, for everything and always, and my son, Tristan, for the many questions about life and learning he has led me to ponder.

The faculty in the MAIS program with whom I had the good fortune to work. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and experience and always being supportive. I would especially like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Lange for her work as my faculty supervisor and for the inspiration she provided in her transformative learning course and Dr. Mike Gismondi for suggesting avenues for further inquiry and recommending that I look into the literacy work of Harvey Graff.

My fellow classmates. Our interactions were invaluable in informing my learning and thinking on adult learning.

The MAIS staff for the excellent support they provide and AU Library staff for the fabulous service in sending research materials.

Frank Doble for sharing his 100 Great Quotes, which provided the spark that led me to commence this learning journey. And thank you, Frank, for so graciously resuming a conversation that we began some years ago.

The critical librarians and educators who have informed and inspired this re-envisioning of information literacy. I would especially like to thank the contributing authors to a forthcoming monograph from Library Juice Press who were able to share their drafts with me.
Abstract

This reflective and self-reflexive work offers my re-envisioning of information literacy framed within the overarching question, *How might bringing to the surface the discursive traps around Library and Information Science (LIS) and information literacy enable a reformulation of information literacy as a critical and emancipatory project dedicated to educating adult learners as engaged citizens capable of critically questioning, challenging and acting to change their world?* This project probes discourse around LIS and information literacy. I propose that information literacy work is ethical and political work and that information literacy educators need to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection about our purpose in doing information literacy and about our pedagogical choices. I look to critical theory and critical education, further informed by postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist critiques, as having rich potential to inform the library’s educational mission, while at the same time acknowledging the need to constantly question the limitations, assumptions and applications of even critical approaches. The project offers an overview of pedagogical enactments of this re-envisioning of information literacy, in the form of two Athabasca University courses I have written. Emphasizing inquiry-based and problem-posing approaches, these courses encourage learners to attend to the sociopolitical dynamics in the production, dissemination and consumption of information, to seek out missing voices, and to critically examine their own relationships to information and knowledge.

Understanding the practice of librarianship as cultural work has significant implications for information literacy education. I find critical, emancipatory pedagogy to be valuable in moving away from a dominant functionalist paradigm that emphasizes effective citizenship and towards conceptualizing adult learners as engaged, critical citizens. There are, however, no easy answers for the pedagogical enactment of liberatory education and I expect I will need to critically question my own work many times as I continue my learning journey with the students who take my courses.
Information Literates Or Engaged, Critical Citizens?:

Critical Reflections on Libraries, Literacies and Adult Learning

What would happen if the whole world became literate? Answer: not so very much, for the world is by and large structured in such a way that it is capable of absorbing the impact. But if the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively—the world would change. (Johan Galtung, 1976, p. 93)

What I offer here is a reflective and self-reflexive work. It is tentative, partial and cognizant of the need for humility whenever one ventures into the land of “education for emancipation.” It is also an exploration of my own critical and transformative journey as a learner—a journey which has led me to probe theoretical discourse, re-examine familiar practices, and question assumptions around my work as a librarian and adult educator in the higher education environment of North America. More specifically, this work of reflection is my re-envisioning of information literacy, framed within the overarching question, How might bringing to the surface the discursive traps around Library and Information Science and information literacy enable a reformulation of information literacy as a critical and emancipatory project dedicated to educating adult learners as engaged citizens capable of critically questioning, challenging and acting to change their world?

This re-envisioning is, of course, not solely mine, but draws upon critical theory perspectives as well as critical librarianship. The project suggests that there is something not quite right with the current dominant vision, a position which I take up in response to the mainstream conceptualization of the purpose and pedagogy of information literacy. What I propose is that we: have an ethical responsibility to ask not only how questions but why questions about information literacy; must explore relationships between power and knowledge as part of any educational initiative; and need to critically reflect on the discourse and assumptions of information literacy. I also suggest that our efforts must be rooted in local contexts, that we cast our critical gaze on even our most emancipatory intentions, and that we not lose sight of the human sense of wonder and imagination that set alight the act of inquiry and the search for meaning.
My theoretical reflection begins by identifying the context in which the information literacy concept developed and examining how information literacy has articulated with the human rights discourse surrounding literacy. Next, I situate information literacy within the broader framework of Library and Information Science (LIS), its dominant discourse and epistemology. Having laid this groundwork, I move to an argument advocating critical reflection for information literacy educators, particularly in relation to the need for developing a working philosophy. This is followed by an analysis of the potential for critical theory perspectives to inform discourse regarding both the development of a critique of mainstream information literacy and the formulation of alternatives, including emerging conversations in librarianship aimed at developing “critical information literacy.” Finally, I reflect on how I have applied my re-envisioning of information literacy, particularly in relation to course authoring I have done for Athabasca University and to information literacy instruction in general. Before moving on, perhaps I should begin at the beginning, with that sense of unease that stirred this need for learning, reflection and critique.

_Situating myself:_

Like many library school graduates I became an “accidental educator,” finding myself in library positions that required me to do teaching, with no formal preparation. My thinking on education, informed largely by my peers, revolved around best practices such as incorporating student-centred and resource-based learning. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) _Information Literacy Competency Standards_ loomed large—all five standards, 22 performance indicators, 87 outcomes, and 138 objectives! With my institution, Athabasca University, being evaluated for accreditation through the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) (2006), which includes information literacy as part of its accreditation standards, there was increased pressure to do more about information literacy. As head of the unit in the library responsible for information literacy at the time, I was sent to a workshop offered by MSCHE. I am not sure that I learned what I was expected to learn, because a surprise awaited me there.
After some initial presentations that I assumed reflected a general consensus in the room about the primary place of information literacy in the library’s educational mission, I heard someone speak up. This librarian gently reminded us that we ought to take care in placing all our hopes in the information literacy concept and that there might be different and perhaps better ways to work with our students. I expressed some curiosity about his work and he promised he would e-mail his essay to me, which he did (Doble, 2004). I read it and it resonated, but I was not yet ready to leave the steady foundation that the information literacy movement promises and I continued with business as usual. What changed was that I had a starting point for dealing with doubts that I had not yet fully articulated, particularly about the disconnections between information literacy and the interests and experiences of students and faculty. It was not until several years later when I took up full-time graduate studies once again that I began to formulate my own response to this sense of unease.

The Information Literacy Revolution

...information literacy and lifelong learning are the beacons of the Information Society, illuminating the courses to development, prosperity and freedom.

Information Literacy lies at the core of lifelong learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion of all nations.

(International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2006)

In 1989 the American Library Association (ALA) issued, in the final report of its Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, what has become one of the most frequently-cited definitions of information literacy: “To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.” Formed in 1987 and

---

1 Frank Doble’s (2004) unpublished manuscript critiques the information literacy movement as “an extraordinary popular delusion.” Doble presents the view that the library’s educational mission ought not to be based in teaching the efficient information gathering skills espoused by the information literacy movement, but instead in engaging people in “a relaxation of investigative focus” in which we are “on the road,” open to the “gifts and surprises” that might otherwise escape our notice. He describes “poetic inquiry” as being at the heart of library activity and scholarship.
comprised of a small group of national leaders from the fields of education and librarianship, the Committee had a key role in the promotion of information literacy as the educational agenda for libraries. Their work needs to be understood within the context of the movement for education reform and concerns about the information explosion.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education’s 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* scathingly criticized schooling in the United States for its failure to prepare Americans for participation in democratic life and contribution to the country’s economic competitiveness in the “information age.” This tactic of blaming schools needs to be understood within the context of a “conservative assault on education” beginning in the 1970s and the Reagan administration’s initiation of a legacy of spending cuts to education (Giroux, 2006, p. 67).

The absence of recommendations in *A Nation at Risk*, and most other education reform reports, about the role of libraries in fostering quality education led to responses at both the K-12 and higher education levels aimed at a vision for libraries as key participants in supporting learning. Patricia Senn Breivik, a librarian, along with E. Gordon Gee, then President of University of Colorado, organized a symposium at Columbia University on “Libraries and the Search for Academic Excellence.” They describe their 1989 book *Information Literacy: Revolution in the Library* as a response to “a clarion call for major improvement in learning at both the K-12 and higher education levels” (Breivik & Gee, 2006, p. xi). Their chapter on “reforming instruction” supported a move away from the passive learning of an educational model highly dependent on lectures, textbooks and reserve materials. They described a “library-based learning” that would infuse the curriculum with teaching and learning that is resource-based, active, individualized, responsive to diverse learning styles, and prepares people for lifelong learning and self-directed learning (Breivik & Gee, 1989, pp. 37-39).

Their book was also a response to the information age: “What the information explosion has done is turn an old problem—functional illiteracy—into a new crisis. To address this crisis, we need a new educational philosophy based on a fuller understanding of the information explosion and a redefinition of literacy that includes information skills” (Breivik & Gee, 1989, p. 13). *Time Magazine*’s declaration of
the computer as 1982’s “Machine of the Year” heralded the increasing penetration of personal computers into everyday life. Schools and colleges were filling up with computers, but here too was potential for libraries to be neglected.

The information literacy movement emerged out of earlier library instructional programs known as bibliographic instruction or library instruction, initiatives that tended to focus on teaching students how to use library collections in specific situations. Information literacy reorients the focus to the student’s learning and envisions a broader approach to information in the life of the individual.² Paul Zurkowski, president of the American Information Industry Association, is credited with introducing the term information literacy in a 1974 proposal concerned with deficient workforce skills in locating and using information. Another early use of the term came in 1976 when Congressman Major Owens linked information literacy to the survival of democracy. The choice of the term literacy is not surprising given the emergence of a “language of literacy” in the 1970s when an illiteracy “epidemic” was discovered in the Western world, leading to policies, funding, programs and the “literacy business” (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. xv).

When the ALA’s Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, chaired by Breivik, issued their report it contained not only an often-cited definition, but also rhetoric that persists in information literacy discourse today in which information literacy is positioned as: “a survival skill” in the information age; tied to economic well-being for individuals, business and the nation; a “means of personal empowerment’ necessary for democracy and effective citizenship; and preparation for lifelong learning (ALA, 1989). As democracy bumps up against commerce and as liberatory goals collide with functionalist aims, deep tensions in information literacy reveal themselves. We can ignore these tensions and go about our business or we can begin asking questions about whose interests are served by the information literacy education we provide.

Information literacy’s rhetoric of empowerment is intensified by the identification of information literacy as, in the words of The Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning,

² Gibson (2008) offers a concise history of information literacy, including milestones and contemporary issues.
“a basic human right in a digital world” (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2006). In 2003, a UNESCO-supported Information Literacy Meeting of Experts representing twenty-three countries, and organized by the US National Commission on Library and Information Science and the National Forum on Information Literacy, met in Prague. This group issued the *Prague Declaration*, stating that “The creation of an Information Society is key to social, cultural and economic development of nations and communities, institutions and individuals in the 21st century and beyond” (Thompson, 2005, p. 1). Information literacy is linked to reducing inequities, promoting tolerance and, through *Education for All*, achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Expert submissions identified the role of information literacy in “transforming communities worldwide” (p. 3). Their reports offer much food for thought about the purpose of information literacy and for questioning who benefits from information literacy. The “People, Cultures, and Health” group opted for framing information literacy “not as an individual skill, but as a powerful community tool that facilitates access to information and has real impact on its health, wealth, and well-being” (p. 3). For the “Economic Development” group, information literacy is necessary for business to manage and exploit knowledge; is essential for countries “just beginning to compete on the global stage”; and can help reduce barriers to citizen participation in government and the national economy (p. 4).

The most powerful stimulant to critical reflection came from Joan Challinor, chairperson of the US National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, who delivered a paper addressing a subject she felt “may have been slighted” by the conference—“women in the developing world and information literacy” (p. 23). Challinor advocated exploring “the ways in which the information revolution and the empowerment of women may be brought together” with a focus on the need for women of the developing world to have “full and unrestricted access to information”; for them to have a role in “gathering and disseminating information”; and for data on women in the developing world to be complete and widely available in forms that all women can access (pp. 24-25). Information literacy thus articulates with the broader concept of literacy as part of the interconnected human rights and educational agendas. UNESCO (2005) defines literacy broadly as “about more than reading and writing - it is about
how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture.” As leader of the global *Education for All* movement, UNESCO advocates major reform in education worldwide to achieve the dream of "Literacy as Freedom” and the General Assembly of the United Nations has proclaimed the period 2003-2012 the *United Nations Literacy Decade*.

A look at how information literacy is enacted in the context of higher learning in the Western world raises serious concerns about its potential for realizing the rhetoric promising freedom, empowerment, social justice and full democratic participation. What emerges instead is a focus on developing skeptical and savvy information literates who exhibit a set of measurable competencies. Much information literacy work has focused on the development of normative standards that provide a guideline to the information literacy competencies an individual should possess as well as benchmarks for measuring abilities and progress. In the United States, the Association of College and Research Libraries’ *Information Literacy Competency Standards* provides a framework for information literate students (ACRL, 2000):

1. “The information literate student determines the nature and extent of the information needed” (p. 8).
2. “The information literate student accesses needed information effectively and efficiently” (p. 9).
3. “The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system” (p. 11).
4. “The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose” (p. 13).
5. “The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally” (p. 14).

For each of the five standards there are a number of performance indicators that specify what a student is expected to learn, and within each performance indicator there are several learning outcomes that can be used to assess that the student has indeed learned. In addition, ACRL (2001) has issued a list of *Objectives* that break down the outcomes into more specific measurable units.
ACRL emphasizes the importance of integrating information literacy into the curriculum and securing the involvement and collaboration of librarians, faculty and administrators, reflecting a concern expressed in the library literature that information literacy should not be seen as just a library issue and that partnerships with teaching staff are essential, although often elusive. Information literacy instruction is typically delivered formally via Web tutorials and other online instructional aids, face-to-face or virtual classroom instruction, library orientations and tours, and for-credit information literacy courses, or informally as part of assisting individuals with library research.

The wide influence of ACRL can be seen in the *Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework* derived from the ACRL Standards (Bundy, 2004). Canada does not have its own standards, but ACRL has had a significant influence on Canadian academic libraries. The Canadian Association of Research Libraries’ *Information Literacy Policy Statement* (2005) emphasizes the need to communicate an understanding of information literacy to government and stresses the importance of information literacy for “participation in the information society and the knowledge economy.” The Government of Canada’s *Innovation Strategy*, announced in 2002, does not specifically reference information literacy in its reports, but it embraces improving the skills and learning of Canadians as essential to the country’s success in a knowledge-based economy.

In addition to standards there are a number of popular information literacy models. In these process models, the real-life messiness of research is reduced to a series of steps that can supposedly be easily replicated for all information problems. Eisenberg and Berkowitz’s (2009) *Big6* information problem-solving model, developed in the 1980s and still used widely, is comprised of task definition, information seeking strategies, location and access, use of information, synthesis and evaluation. Other researchers have sought more complex models that consider affective and cognitive dimensions of information seeking (Kuhlthau, 1987) or a phenomenological understanding of how people experience

---

4 See, for example, the robust information literacy program of the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta (http://www.augustana.ca/services/library/infolit/).
information literacy (Bruce, 1997), but such approaches fail to account for the role of asymmetric power relations in framing how we understand, experience and use information.

While information literacy is clearly a well-established concept, it should not be viewed as a monolithic structure within library discourse. There have been debates over the term, its meaning, its trendiness, its measurability, and even as to whether information literacy has any value at all in the library’s educational mission (Snavely & Cooper, 1997). Before moving on to an analysis of some especially problematic assumptions in information literacy, I think it is important to consider the concept within the framework of the broader discourse of Library and Information Science.

**Discursive Formations in the Library**

> The librarian apparently stands alone in the simplicity of his pragmatism: a rationalization of each immediate technical process by itself seems to satisfy his intellectual interest.\(^5\)
> 
> (Pierce Butler, 1933, as cited in Budd, 2008, p. vii)

> So while you may have come here today thinking of librarianship as a quiet feminized profession, I hope you leave knowing that it is an outspoken vehicle for principled engagement—and at times, positive trouble-making. (Toni Samek, 2005, p. 46)

An information literacy that focuses on standards, measurable skills and problem solving models, fits snugly within the broader, dominant LIS discourse which has a history of technical rationality, positivism, and presumed neutrality. This discourse has increasingly come under scrutiny and, as the above quote from Samek indicates, there is a whole other side to librarianship, a critical, at times even radical, side that has much to offer a re-conceptualization of information literacy as a critical and liberatory project.

Wiegand (1999) identifies the “tunnel vision” and “blind spots” in contemporary LIS discourse and calls for librarians to escape the traps of the profession’s own discursive formations. He describes a profession dominated by notions of professional expertise, the weight of the literary canon, the pull of

---

\(^5\) I have retained Butler’s non-inclusive language, as I think it is historically and contextually important. Juxtaposed with Samek’s reference to the perception of librarianship as feminized, I hope the masculine pronoun will serve as a reminder of persistent gender stereotypes and inequities in what has generally been considered a “women’s profession.”
technology, a tendency to ignore power/knowledge relationships, and a general failure to go beyond mainstream LIS literature to take up the ideas of critical theorists that have informed other disciplines.

Explicating Wiegand’s understanding of “a profession trapped in its own discursive formations” (Wiegand, 1999, p. 24), Radford (2003) uses the image of the arrangement of a collection of books on the shelves in an academic library. The books are physically organized in particular ways in relation to each other based on academic discipline and subject. French intellectual Michel Foucault’s description “whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation” (1972a, p. 38) becomes, through Radford, a familiar image for librarians. As Radford describes it, to be trapped is to use the books in only one section, not venturing into other sections and not exploring subjects such as race, class, age or gender because they are not part of the section and therefore not visible in the discursive formation (p. 3).

Describing systems of control in the production of discourse, Foucault identifies “rules of exclusion”—what is prohibited, the opposition between reason and madness, and the opposition between true and false; “internal rules” consisting of the commentary, the author and the disciplines; and rules that relate to the conditions under which discourse may be employed (1972b, pp. 216-224). Within discursive formations there are limits on what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say it and in what context. For scholars there are very real risks and sanctions related to loss of funding, publishing venues, reputation and so on, in breaking the boundaries of discursive formations. Foucault saw discursive formations as something we need to analyze and question. Through the work of “archaeology” we can attend to the appearance of units of discourse, called “statements,” and to their place within the discursive formation in relation to other statements. Radford seeks in Foucault “the conceptual tools to transgress” the constraints of discursive formations in LIS (2003, p. 5). As Radford emphasizes, invoking Wiegand and Foucault, the point is not just to read in the sections outside LIS, but to read LIS discourse in new ways to disrupt the familiar.
Dominant LIS discourse.

We can read in LIS discourse, which typically concerns itself with the effective management of libraries and library systems, a technical rationality in which “professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (Schön, 1983, p. 21). Librarianship has been chasing science, and the status that science brings to a profession, for some time. Since the creation of a “library science” in the 1930s, which has in the last few decades become a more impressive sounding “library and information science,” there has been a deliberate distancing from purely humanistic and technical-administrative conceptions of librarianship. “Library science” signaled the formation of an alliance with the social scientific method that had taken hold in the Western world by the 1930s. Rooted in a positivist epistemology and the empirical-analytic tradition, this method separates the knower from what can be known, understands knowledge as the correct representation of reality, pursports to be neutral and disinterested, and favours quantitative methods. By the 1960s the social sciences had begun to turn to richer methods for understanding society but, as Harris (1986) and other LIS scholars such as Radford and Budd (1997) have observed, positivist epistemology has a largely invisible, persistent hold on LIS.

Day (2000), using a term developed by linguist Michael J. Reddy, identifies the “conduit metaphor” as a dominant model in information theory, shaping how LIS thinks about information, communication and language. The conduit metaphor focuses on a “sender-receiver, data-user model of communications and information” (p. 806). With its positivist and quantitative assumptions, the conduit metaphor reduces language to transmission, transmission with as little noise and interference as possible, as opposed to understanding language “as an agency for social, cultural, and political change” (p. 811). We see the conduit metaphor at work in information retrieval’s calculations of recall and precision and in its attempts to address uncertainty in language with controlled vocabularies and metadata. Tracing its development in the work of information theorists in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Day ties the conduit metaphor to a U.S. Cold War agenda of “controlling and idealizing linguistic and social normativity, and, relegating linguistic and social marginality and political contestation to minority or curiosity status, or
simply, to being social or linguistic ‘noise’” (p. 811). Day’s critique cautions us to consider what is at risk in an unthinking adoption of the conduit metaphor: For LIS, it constrains and limits what problems the field can engage; for society, it promotes “a limited social and political space” (p. 811).

What might the conduit metaphor mean for how ACRL conceptualizes information literates as being able to access “needed information effectively and efficiently”? How does it frame how information literacy educators determine what is an inefficient search strategy and what search results are “noise”? Since the late 1970s more user-centred alternatives to systems-focused approaches have developed in information science research as researchers have engaged with users as active constructors of information and meaning (Dervin & Nilan, 1986), but this cognitive approach, intent upon understanding what is going on inside a person’s mind, tends to ignore the social, economic, and political structures in which information, language and communication are embedded.

LIS discourse fails to acknowledge unequal power relations in society, incorporating a pluralism which stresses the ability of different groups to have a voice and to reach democratic consensus. According to Harris (1986), the development of pluralism in LIS may have paralleled librarianship’s advocacy of intellectual freedom in the 1930s and 40s and the emphasis on a neutral stance: “Librarians were seen as apolitical servants of the ‘people’ and were expected to be completely neutral on social, economic, and political questions—a passive ‘mirror’ of societal interests and values” (p. 215). The ALA’s *Library Bill of Rights* (1948; 1996) outlines the principles necessary to safeguard intellectual freedom, a concept which emerged out of opposition to censorship of books. Intellectual freedom is a core value of the profession in relation to its responsibility to protect free access to ideas and freedom of expression.  

---

*Critical librarianship.*

---

6 This value can be found in other library statements such as the Canadian Library Association’s *Position Statement on Intellectual Freedom* (1974; 1985).
An alternative discourse that seeks to resist and transgress the neutrality assumed in LIS can be found in critical librarianship, also known as progressive or radical librarianship. Critical librarianship has its roots in the 1930s, when young members lobbied ALA to support their involvement in intellectual freedom, peace and other broader social issues, and in the 1960s with the growth of a social responsibility movement in librarianship and the lobby to extend the rights of intellectual freedom to librarians (Samek, 2003). Samek (2005) describes this social activist understanding of librarianship, which has seen a revival since the 1990s, in which librarians “self-identify” as “activists, freedom fighters, agents of democracy, watch dogs of government, providers of space and place for public sphere . . . ” (p. 46). Her book Librarianship and Human Rights: A Twenty-first Century Guide (2007) extends the issues that the profession might legitimately take up far beyond the usual library advocacy issues, such as literacy or information ethics, to a broad role for librarians as social change agents and political actors in supporting democratic rights, in contesting intimidation and manipulation, and in engaging with social issues such as sustainability, war and peace, and poverty.

Critical self-reflection and praxis—“reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970; 2000, p. 51)— are needed to develop a critical stance to business as usual in the library, to hold up to close scrutiny all too-familiar practices, and to expand awareness of the ethical, political and social dimensions of library work. Budd (2008) encourages a “consciousness of purpose” as the basis for self examination in librarianship (p. viii). 7 Doherty (2005/2006) and Elmborg (2006) advocate critical self-reflection and theoretically informed praxis in developing information literacy pedagogy; and Jacobs (2008) identifies praxis as “the most urgent” question pertaining to information literacy (p. 260).

Julien’s study of the curricula of ninety-three library and information science schools worldwide revealed that “fewer than half of schools graduating librarians are providing preparation in instructional skills” (2005, p. 214). In arguing for the need to prepare library school graduates for instructional work Julien stresses the means and neglects the ends: “we need to develop our graduates’ skills in pedagogy,

7 Budd (2008) builds on the work of other LIS scholars such as Jesse Shera and Michael Gorman who have reflected on the purpose and meaning of librarianship.
instructional planning, understanding learning theories and assessing learning outcomes” (p. 211). While this training can certainly enhance the ability of librarians to assume an instructional role, I question the overall value of such training if it does not also include a critical and reflective dimension aimed at engaging librarians in the transformative process of reflecting on why they do what they do. The challenge for librarians is an LIS curriculum rooted in the practical, the technical, and a service orientation. Pawley’s (1998) analysis of the LIS curriculum’s traditional avoidance of class analysis and social theory raises serious questions about the theoretical frameworks immediately available to librarians as part of their education. The result may well be what Pawley refers to as “a politically naive profession” (p. 132).

Information literacy educators can gain important insights by looking to the field of adult education. Wilson (2001) articulates issues that have the potential to resonate with librarians reflecting on their professional practice as the two fields have much in common, including a claim to neutrality, a status as “knowledge-power brokers” and a professionalization ideology rooted in technical rationality. To reclaim adult education “as a social and cultural practice rather than a scientific one” Wilson advises adult educators to forge occupational alliances, to “move away from a blind adherence to technical forms of adult education to engage in a much more forthright reflective practice,” and to “make clear the political and ethical consequences that are too often shrouded by our focus on the technical aspects of our work” (pp. 73-74). Wilson also encourages us to ask who benefits from our work, to gain a political understanding, and to ask who should benefit from our work, to gain an ethical understanding (p. 81).

Librarians engaged in teaching adult learners need a working philosophy of adult education. Flannery and Wislock (1991) describe such a philosophy as “a collection of beliefs an individual acquires with regard to the role of adult education, the learner and the learning process, and the teacher and the teaching process” (p. 145). They offer the following rationale for developing a working philosophy: adult educators already have a philosophy but it may not fit the context or it may need updating, they may just be teaching as they were taught, and they need to have a basis for responding to new ideas about practice. Flannery and Wislock recommend the following process: become aware of your philosophy by examining
what you do and why you do it, evaluate your philosophy on an ongoing basis, and reflect on how you put your philosophy into practice.

From my own experience I understand that the activities of questioning and challenging the discourse of one’s profession and of re-examining one’s values and beliefs in developing a working philosophy are demanding, transformative work, intellectually and emotionally. This activity is never really complete and it takes time, and time for critical reflection can be hard to find when we are immersed in the everyday requirements of our jobs. In examining my own philosophy and exploring educational philosophies, I have gravitated to a critical orientation, drawn particularly to its recognition of the need to address asymmetric power relations in society, its commitment to social justice, and its emphasis on human agency. At the same time, I find myself needing to be cautious about adopting this orientation uncritically and look to poststructuralist thought and to postmodernisms of resistance as a means of recognizing contingency and difference, accepting ambiguity, and questioning modernist assumptions while retaining an emancipatory intent.8

Re-envisioning Information Literacy

Without oppositional values, pedagogies and epistemologies, librarianship stripped of the critical capacity to appraise itself, appears secure in defining its professional trajectory in accordance with the undemocratic dictates of those commercial values and social relations that obstruct rather than expand the right of library users and non-users to accentuate themselves as critical and engaged citizens capable of materializing the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life rather than as passive and consuming objects left to the dictates of commercial culture and its crass values. (Ryan Gage, 2004, p. 71)

Gage, drawing on the work of Henry Giroux and other critical theorists, advocates a reformulation of librarianship as a project of “hope, critique and resistance” (2004, p. 70). How might we re-envision information literacy as a project of “hope, critique and resistance”? Information literacy makes some very troubling assumptions about teaching and learning, knowledge and information, and literacy. Critical

---

8 Lange (2006) offers a helpful guide to reflecting on the liberal, progressive, behaviourist, humanist, critical/radical and postmodern orientations in adult education.
theory perspectives offer possibilities for critiquing the underlying assumptions of information literacy and re-orientating information literacy as an emancipatory project dedicated to educating adult learners as engaged, critical citizens.

**Libraries and hegemony.**

An information literacy that supports the status quo is as political as an information literacy that questions and challenges the status quo. One obstacle in moving information literacy away from its functionalist tendencies and towards a critical, emancipatory project is the deep hold of the principle of neutrality on the library profession. In order to overcome this hold it is essential to see the library and its projects, including information literacy, as already and always embedded in relations of power.

Early 19th-century Italian political theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci used the concept of hegemony in his prison notebooks to explain how the dominant classes can exert authority over the subordinate classes without resorting to force, by manufacturing consent in a manner that makes domination appear natural and that secures our willing compliance with an unjust social order (Brookfield, 2005; Allman, 2001). Ideology, in the form of a set of beliefs, values and explanations, provides a framework for how we make sense of the world. Hegemony ensures support for the dominant ideology, which appears to us as common sense, making us think that society is working in everyone’s best interests. Describing the ideological structure of the dominant class, Gramsci writes: “Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets” (1985, p. 389). This process shapes what we consider to be normal, minimizes opposition, and enables the exploitation of the many by the few.

Care needs to be taken with the concepts of hegemony and ideology lest we fail to acknowledge the skepticism that adult learners experience and express every day, or grasp the very real appeal of certain ideas associated with the dominant ideology. Care also needs to be taken with the concepts of domination and oppression as we need to acknowledge our contradictory subject positions as both
oppressed and oppressor. As bell hooks (1988) reminds us there are “interlocking systems of domination” and “we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized) . . . it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist—the potential victim within that we must rescue” (p. 21).

Hegemony is a struggle, not a permanent state—people can resist and contest hegemony, and make their own meanings. Through the concepts of hegemony and ideology we can begin to understand the hold of, for example, positivism on librarianship, and explore the development of critical librarianship as a counter-hegemonic force. We can begin to uncover the role of the library and librarians in producing and reproducing hegemony and the dominant ideology (Harris, 1986; Raber, 2003). Libraries play a hegemonic role in developing collections that privilege the Western canon and in using cataloguing and classification schemes that are implicated in an oppressive construction of the Other. We need to pose questions around the hegemonic role of the library’s educational projects. Information literacy links itself very broadly to the goal of bettering individuals and society, without asking tough questions about whose interests are served by information literacy agendas, and whose knowledge is legitimated and whose knowledge is ignored. Information literacy fails above all to recognize that education is never neutral, that it is always embedded in ideology and a political position.

*Teaching and learning.*

Information literacy often espouses as part of its educational agenda the benefits of critical thinking. According to ACRL Standard Three “The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically.” Digging down through ACRL indicators and outcomes, one can find some rich kernels such as “Recognizes the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information” (ACRL, 2000, Standard 3. 2d, p. 11). With so many skills to teach in so little time, however, there is a tendency in practice for

---

9 See the extensive work of Hope Olson and Sanford Berman in challenging library cataloguing and classification practices.
librarians to use a checklist approach to train students how to evaluate web sources to detect authority, accuracy, currency, bias, and so on. Moreover, mainstream information literacy fails to engage with criticality beyond the dominant critical thinking tradition, the approach we most often encounter in higher education courses on critical thinking and in critical thinking texts published for the educational market. Critical thinking relies on logic and rationality in critiquing arguments: Critical thinkers test assertions, weigh evidence, uncover assumptions, and recognize fallacies, biases and oversimplifications. But this is only one approach to being critical. As Brookfield (2005) observes, criticality “is a contested idea, one with a variety of meanings each claimed by different groups for very different purposes” (p. 11).

For educators within a very different critical tradition, based in critical social theory, “assessments of truth or conceptual slipperiness might come into the discussion . . . but they are in the service of demonstrating how certain power effects occur, not in the service of pursuing truth in some dispassioned sense” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 47). Critical educators are hyperaware of the need to assist learners in responding to a profoundly troubled world beset by challenges associated with human rights abuses, environmental destruction, the commodification of almost everything, a declining public sphere, increased militarism post 9/11, and the social injustices and economic instabilities of the global marketplace. That higher education as a democratic public sphere is in danger of increasing corporatization and influence by the military-industrial complex adds urgency to their arguments (Giroux, 2006 & 2007). Writing about the “cynicism and antidemocratic tendencies” in the United States in the 21st-century, Giroux (2006) observes

Many educators, if not the public itself, seem to have lost the language for linking schooling to democracy, convinced that education is now about job training and competitive market advantage. With democracy emptied of any substantial content, individuals are unable to translate their privately suffered misery into broadly shared public concerns and collective action. (p. 65)\(^1\)

\(^{10}\) An example of resistance to militarization in higher education can be found in the work of People Against Militarization of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (http://www.homesnotbombs.ca/OISEwar.htm).

\(^{11}\) Public intellectuals such as Giroux (2008) have echoed the widespread public hope that the presidency of Barack Obama will bring progressive social change, but this is tempered by deep concerns about Obama’s appointments
Linking schooling to democracy is at the heart of John Dewey’s educational philosophy. In the first half of the twentieth century, educational reformers such as Dewey and other educators associated with social reconstructionism advocated schooling as central to democracy. This was democracy understood in terms that “went far beyond the liberal view of democracy as the terrain of voting, elections, and government” (Giroux, 2005, p. 82). The social reconstructionists understood democracy as a way of life and as an ethical foundation for social change tied to realizing the principles of liberty, justice and equality. Within this understanding, “pedagogy was seen as part of a cultural politics steeped in an ethical and democratic concern for linking school knowledge, student subjectivities, and classroom experience with the wider imperatives and needs of the social order” (Giroux, 2005, p. 87). As Giroux observes, for social reconstructionists criticality is not a mere cognitive skill pursued for its own sake—it is part of “a general theory of social welfare”:

Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation. And it is a faith which must be nurtured and made articulate. (Dewey as cited in Giroux, 2005, p. 84)

Whereas information literacy, like mainstream neo-liberal education, tends to be education for effective and responsible citizenship, perspectives from critical education studies give primacy to engaged and critical citizenship. As Giroux puts it, “Democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, and independent” (2006, p. 73). Tracing the history of citizenship education, Giroux notes that the social reconstructionist concept of citizenship education as empowering learners to address and transform social injustices peaked during the Great Depression and then “virtually slipped into oblivion by the 1950s” (2005, p. 11). Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the space race with the Russians, the rise of the mass media industry, and other post-1945 sociopolitical forces such as suburbanization and the growth of bureaucratic structures of executive power, citizenship education was reduced to a focus on problem-solving, public debate and critical thinking. Giroux describes a view of schooling that by the
1980s was “reduced to the imperatives of corporate self-interest, industrial psychology, and cultural uniformity” (2005, p. 18).

A critical perspective sees education as inherently political, understands society in terms of power relations, strives to empower those who are marginalized on the basis of class, gender, race, sexual orientation and other minority positions, and seeks a non-exploitative and socially just world for all. Giroux and Freire (1987) identify the need for a “language of critique” that understands schools as producing and reproducing the dominant culture in shaping student consciousness linked to a “language of possibility” that understands schools “as sites of political struggle” (pp. xiii-xiv). Educators occupy and speak from political and social positions—they are “transformative intellectuals” and “cultural workers” (Giroux, 1991; Briton, 1996).

Critical studies in education, a reaction against the dominant liberal and conservative conceptions of education, can be understood as situated within a broader transformative learning discourse. The goals of “transformative” education range widely, from a neo-liberal focus on mastery of skills and knowledge needed to “get ahead” in life; personal transformation, perhaps to get more out of life; holistic, individual and collective transformation as found in the cosmological-ecological approach of Edmund O’Sullivan (1999) and in global education which seeks to educate for “peace, social, and environmental justice” (Goldstein and Selby, 2000);12 to social transformation as exemplified in critical studies in education, which often acknowledges the importance of individual transformation as a precursor to social change.

Critical studies in education emerged out of critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School, established in Germany in 1923. The development of critical theory, under the leadership of Max Horkheimer, was rooted in a continuing engagement with Marx, particularly with respect to critiquing the domination of human relations by commodity and exchange values and understanding the spheres of culture and everyday life as representing new sites of domination. Critical theory represents an interdisciplinary social theory directed at ideology critique and social transformation to end alienation and

---

12 Leading initiatives in Canada include the Transformative Learning Centre (http://tlc.oise.utoronto.ca/) and the International Institute for Global Education (http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/iige/), both based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.
oppression. Critical studies in education draw from the Frankfurt school to inform the fields of critical adult education and critical pedagogy, fields which exhibit a significant degree of overlap as they share many of the same critiques, hopes and theoretical influences.

In 1929 American adult educator Eduard Lindeman described the purpose of adult education as “not to teach people how to make a living but rather how to live” (as cited in Briton, 1996, p. 3). According to Lindeman, writing in the 1940s, adult education is “social education for purposes of social change,” and needs to be directed at the development of a socially just democratic society; it is crucial to bridging “the distance between our technological advances and our cultural values” (as cited in Briton, 1996, pp. 3-5). There is a long tradition of adult education as social education in Canadian projects such as the Women’s Institutes and the Antigonish movement. The work of German social theorist Jürgen Habermas has had a significant influence and is invoked by critical adult educators such as Collins (1991), Welton (1995), Mezirow (1995), and Brookfield (2005). A number of Habermasian projects and concepts have emerged as particularly prominent in critical adult education, including reversing the colonization of the “lifeworld,” the encroachment of capitalism on our personal lives and relationships; reclaiming reason from its instrumentalization so that we concern ourselves not only with technical, utilitarian questions but with moral and ethical ones about what sort of world we want to live in and how we should treat each other; recovering the public sphere from privatization, in order to regain places of association in which to converse with others about how to conduct our communal affairs; and grounding the development of a more participatory democracy in communicative actions rooted in a desire to reach understanding with others.

Critical adult education contests the primacy attached to mechanistic and instrumental practices in adult education. It is not that critical adult educators reject the teaching of technical competencies—it is a question of not divorcing adult education from concerns of power and empowerment. Collins (1991), for example, critiques the notion of lifelong learning (a concept often associated with information literacy initiatives) as a slogan to legitimize a prescriptive and technocratic emphasis on skills-based learning
developed “to teach us how to cope and how to live”: “Lifelong learning thus becomes lifelong training or lifelong schooling in line with technicist ideology” (pp. 6-7).

The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire informs both critical adult education and critical pedagogy. Working in the tradition of Marx and Gramsci, Freire introduced in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* a pedagogy born in revolutionary politics and directed at radical social transformation to end oppression, a struggle for “the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (1970; 2000, p. 47). This pedagogy seeks to develop critical consciousness, to move learners away from a willingness to be objects that are acted upon and towards a desire to act as subjects, as active agents, capable of intervening in and changing the world. Freire critiques “banking education” as oppressive education that drains students’ “creative power” and leaves them passively accepting of an unjust social order. The expert teacher is the “depositor” making deposits of knowledge which the unknowing students, as “depositories” or “containers” to be filled by the teacher, “patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (pp. 71-73). At the core of Freire’s pedagogy is dialogue as a process of knowing and learning in which teachers and students are both “simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72). Engaged in “problem-posing” the teacher is always “cognitive” and reflective as opposed to “narrative” in relation to the objects of study, always re-forming reflections “in the reflection of the students”: “The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (pp. 80-81).

Freire’s literacy teaching was among the poor and dispossessed of Latin America, but his pedagogy has influenced those educators worldwide who recognize that their work is not neutral, put education at the heart of an ethical and political struggle for democracy, and seek to provide students with “the opportunity to develop the critical capacity to challenge and transform existing social and political forms, rather than simply adapt to them” (Giroux, 1991, p. 47). Henry Giroux (2005) and Peter McLaren (2007) have played leading roles in developing theoretical underpinnings of critical pedagogy since the 1980s, and Ira Shor is a key figure in enacting critical pedagogy, including Freire’s problem-posing education, in the North American context. Using classroom examples, Shor (1992) discusses the importance of critiquing existing bodies of knowledge and balancing these with multicultural...
perspectives; “posing the subject matter itself as a problem” and examining it from the students’ perspectives; generating themes from students’ experiences in order to situate “critical inquiry in student culture”; and introducing topical themes and academic themes in ways that do not create a “teacher-centered experience” (pp. 31-84).

**Critical information literacy.**

Freire’s pedagogy is also being taken up within an emerging conversation in librarianship that reflects growing dissatisfaction with mainstream information literacy and an awareness of the dangers of the ACRL standards in providing an enticingly unambiguous practical framework for doing information literacy that tends to discourage praxis. In re-envisioning information literacy as an emancipatory project, this literature, which often identifies itself as “critical information literacy,” is provocative, enriching and represents a refreshing leap out of the positivism and technicism of the dominant LIS discourse. That critical information literacy is having some impact can be seen in the referencing of critical information literacy literature in the ACRL-approved *Information Literacy Standards for Anthropology and Sociology Students* which include key behaviours that involve questioning and understanding “for whose benefit the research was produced, and which data or viewpoint might be missing from the analysis” (ALA/ACRL/ANSS, 2008, Standard 3, 2e). However, critical information literacy, at least for the moment, represents the voices of a small number of librarians, voices that easily go unheard under the roar of the dominant movement. A forthcoming monograph from Library Juice Press, which specializes in critical studies in librarianship, offers hope that the conversation is only getting started.

Critical information literacy, generally speaking, tends to emphasize making tacit discursive practices visible to learners and problematizing these practices, engaging learners in a critical examination of how power relations inform the production of knowledge, providing opportunities for learners to interact with texts that represent diverse and conflicting versions of the “truth,” understanding learners as active agents as opposed to passive information consumers, abandoning the illusory stance of library
neutrality, and moving away from universalizing and behaviouristic models exemplified by lists of skills and step-by-step research frameworks.

From outside the field of LIS, critical literacy educators Luke and Kapitzke (1999) present a strong argument for rejecting information literacy as outmoded and incapable of meeting literacy needs given the impact of new technologies on language and textual practices and shifts in epistemological understandings largely associated with postmodernism. They advocate critical information literacy as a means to “encourage and enable learners to systematically reposition themselves in relation to dominant and non-dominant modes and sources of information” (p. 486).\footnote{Kapitzke has continued to develop her critique of, and suggestions for reconceptualizing, information literacy in, for example, Kapitzke, 2003a & 2003b.} Giles (2002) as someone in a social movement, the ANTaR coalition to support Indigenous interests in seeking native title and reconciliation in Australia, urges librarians to promote citizens’ critical information literacy in order to foster an active and engaged citizenry capable and committed to accessing Indigenous voices, cultures and histories against a climate of disinformation and misinformation generated by the dominant information channels.

From within LIS, Shapiro and Hughes (1996) advocate conceiving information literacy not as a mere technical art but “more broadly as a new liberal art” in order to help realize the 18th-century Enlightenment goals of humanity’s liberty and happiness. Although they do not position themselves within the tradition of critical theory, they acknowledge a “critical literacy” dimension that includes a “sociopolitical perspective.” Engagement with critical pedagogy can be found in the work of Fielder & Huston (1991) who seek to empower students by starting with student knowledge and natural curiosity as opposed to student deficit and teacher-led instruction as the basis of teaching inquiry and research. Strege (1996), who laments the extent to which librarians unquestioningly adopt a functionalist educational approach, offers a study of her implementation of critical pedagogy in a study skills class at a community college. Strege found a positive student response to her implementation of a dialogical approach emphasizing topics of personal interest to the students, but also found that student resistance to schooling persisted in forms such as absenteeism. Pawley (2003) encourages information literacy educators to look
beyond their technical, administrative discourse to see that there is a choice in information literacy, between a “procrustean” paradigm that attempts to fit all people onto a “terrible iron bed” that demands conformity and a “promethean” vision of empowerment and emancipatory transformation (p. 425).

Swanson (2004a) draws on critical pedagogy as a means to reorient information literacy from its potential to preserve the status quo and towards education that assists students in understanding they can act to change their world and he (2004b) describes the application of a critical information literacy model in teaching the research paper portion of a college freshman composition course. Simmons (2005) identifies a key role for librarians as disciplinary discourse mediators helping students to make sense of and enter the discursive communities of their disciplines, while understanding “how disciplinary discursive practices are not static and monolithic but are constantly being reproduced by the participants of the disciplinary community” (p. 300). Elmborg (2006) draws on critical literacy theory and critical pedagogy to define critical information literacy as involving “developing a critical consciousness about information, learning to ask questions about the library’s (and the academy’s) role in structuring and presenting a single, knowable reality” (p. 198). Doherty (2007) posits critical information literacy as “a form of activism that asks students to step outside their paradigms and look for other voices” but also asks this of faculty who create and maintain the dominant scholarly information paradigm (p. 6). Lilburn (2007/2008) critiques the ACRL Standards for their failure to acknowledge power imbalances, and the possibility of resisting and transforming such imbalances. He advocates a role for librarians in teaching about economic, legal, social and political relations at work in information production and in modeling an active citizenship that “refuses to accept unchallenged imposed conditions that limit diversity both inside and outside our libraries” (p. 11). Minneapolis Community and Technical College offers a course using a critical information literacy approach in which students learn not only how to find and evaluate information—they learn about information, its political, social and economic contexts (Eland, 2008).14

14 Information about the course, INFS 1000: Information Literacy & Research Skills, is available at http://www.minneapolis.edu/library/courses/infs1000/support.htm. The similarity in course numbering between this course and Athabasca University’s INFS 1200 is purely coincidental.
**Being critical about being critical.**

I initially felt I had found in critical information literacy the solution to my unease about information literacy. Although I remain convinced that critical information literacy provides a crucial entry point for re-envisioning information literacy, I have become more cautious in my celebration. A critical examination of the rich debates taking place among educators seeking emancipatory and transformative approaches to adult education is needed to inform attempts to reformulate the academic library’s educational role. Certainly, critical information literacy, as it grows and matures, will need to engage more deeply in these conversations.

It is important to be critical even when taking a “critical” approach and it is this self-critical, self-reflective stance that characterizes critical theory itself (Kellner, 1990; Brookfield, 2005). In the words of Frankfurt School critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, “Critical Theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis” (1937; 1989, p. 72). We must also keep in mind that Freire himself cautioned against universalizing his pedagogy: “The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (1970; 2000, p. 95). There are already some self-reflective critical perspectives emerging in the critical information literacy conversation. Swanson (in press) has identified that the real challenge may not be convincing librarians, faculty and administrators of the value of critical information literacy but of engaging student interest in moving away from the banking model, given the extent to which students are embedded in the dominant culture. He recommends focusing on helping students to explore their epistemological beliefs and how their personal beliefs and values influence their responses to information—a shift in emphasis from having students probe the external structures that shape information production and consumption. Such work might be understood as cultural work in which librarians and educators are mediators, helping those engaged in inquiry to explore the relationships between their own beliefs and information sources.

I am particularly drawn to the urging of librarian Dane Ward (2006) to consider the importance of connecting with students’ inner lives, with not only the rational, analytical mind but the imaginative
mind, in taking up information literacy for personal and social transformation. Marcuse (1978) presents an argument for the “radical political potential” of the “aesthetic dimension.” A work of art, even bourgeois art, as a “dissenting force” ruptures reality and provokes a questioning of the legitimacy of accepted reality. Engaged in this “estrangement” are the emotions, imagination and conscience of individual subjectivity:

This experience culminates in extreme situations (of love and death, guilt and failure, but also joy, happiness, and fulfillment) which explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard. The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions. (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 6-7)

Critical theory’s emphasis on rationality as a means to come to know and decide to end oppression needs to be problematized in light of postmodern, poststructural and poststructural feminist understandings of “truth” as multiple, partial, contextual and always embedded in a web of power relations. St. Clair (2004) recommends acknowledging “nonrational considerations” (p. 41) and urges critical educators to question rationalist assumptions such as Habermas’s notion of the potential for the truth to emerge from open and free human communication. Against the risk of becoming paralyzed by a critique of rationality which points to the impossibility of an educator being able to know learners’ objective interests, St. Clair suggests we “find a way to see multiple truths as an opportunity for critical teaching rather than a threat to it—a way to explore the nature of injustice without claiming that any one analysis is necessarily more truthful than another” (p. 40). Callahan (2004) acknowledges the role of emotions in the critical classroom as particularly important in fostering the individual change necessary for social change.

The difficulty of enacting critical perspectives in the classroom has been raised by a number of critical educators. Ellsworth (1992) offers a detailed critique of the “repressive myths” of critical pedagogy, including notions of empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, based on her experiences of how these “prescriptions” of critical pedagogy actually exacerbated relations of domination, involving
“Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and ‘banking education’” in her classroom. What worked best for her class were “context-specific” practices in tune with participants’ own perceptions of their “social identities and situations” (p. 91). Belzer (2004) offers an open appraisal of her own “blunders” in enacting critical practice which she relates to race differences and distrust, student expectations about school, and student ambivalence about the possibility of transforming social structures. Weiler (1994) also offers a powerful feminist critique of critical pedagogy. Seeking to enrich Freire with learnings from feminist educators, she problematizes the very notion of oppression, pointing to the need for educators to understand that there is no one experience of oppression: we read the world from different subject positions and this leads to different truths. There are tensions between teachers and learners, within groups of learners—and even within ourselves as we struggle with the contradictory positions we simultaneously hold as oppressed and oppressor (Weiler, 1994).

Another area of contention is the very notion of empowerment. The term *empowerment* is used to describe almost any educational agenda, as part of both conservative and liberal humanist rhetoric but, as Gore (1992) observes, the least likely discourse of empowerment to be critiqued by critical educators are the critical and feminist understandings of empowerment. Observing that typically critical and feminist pedagogy discourses understand the teacher as the agent of empowerment, Gore expresses concern about the “extraordinary abilities” attributed to such teachers (p. 57). Can we truly imagine an emancipated teacher? As Ellsworth (1992) writes: “I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism. No teacher is free of these learned and internalized oppressions” (p. 99). Writing from a poststructuralist feminist perspective, Gore (1992) points to the problematic understanding of power as property, as something the teacher can hand over to the students. Through a more complex Foucauldian analysis we can understand power as exercised and circulating rather than held or given, and as always operating for both learners and teachers:
Power...is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

As Gore (1992) observes, this does not mean that we must abandon altogether the notion of empowerment, but we ought to be “humble” in our claims: a teacher can exercise power in an attempt, which may or may not be successful, to help students to exercise power. Our attempts to empower can have unforeseen consequences and will be “partial and inconsistent” (pp. 59 & 62-63).

Foucault (1980) distinguishes between sovereign power, exercised from above and centralized, and disciplinary power, which is all pervasive and can be exercised from within, through self-surveillance and self-discipline. Such an understanding demands that we re-examine for their power effects familiar practices that teachers use to disrupt top-down learning and create a participatory classroom, activities such as reflective learning journals and learning circles (Brookfield, 2005). Students may comply by sharing more than they would like, may engage in self-surveillance, or may resist and subvert such exercises, openly or silently. As for the goal of transforming learners, English (2006) suggests that Foucauldian poststructuralism can help us recognize we are creating a “regime of truth.” She says that “not all people want to be transformed; nor are they transformed by engaging in critically reflective practice” (p. 110). Lange (2004) questions the assumption in transformative learning, linked to the Enlightenment’s faith in human progress, that change is always desirable and necessary and explores the value of restorative learning in which learners rediscover and recover suppressed ethics and relations as part of a “dialectic of transformative and restorative learning.”

The considerable diversity in how critical educational theory has taken up postmodernism and poststructuralism is reflected in a range of opinion including Giroux’s (1991) view that modernism, postmodernism and feminism, as mutually correcting discourses, are “three of the most important discourses for developing a cultural politics and pedagogical practice capable of extending and theoretically advancing a radical politics of democracy” (p. 5). Yet, Collins (2006) expresses concerns
about the depoliticizing tendencies of postmodernism and calls for a return to critical pedagogy’s roots in Freire and Gramsci for a “re-awakened politically oriented pedagogy” (p. 124).

Postmodernity, in the words of Eagleton (2008), “means the end of modernity, in the sense of those grand narratives of truth, reason, science, progress and universal emancipation which are taken to characterize modern thought from the Enlightenment onwards” (p. 200). But a distinction needs to be made between postmodernisms of reaction which blame modernist culture for social ills and seek to preserve the social order and postmodernisms of resistance which support the emancipatory intentions of the Enlightenment while seeking to provide a corrective to totalizing modernist assumptions about human progress. Briton (1996), in distinguishing between the two postmodernisms, encourages adult educators to reformulate their work as a type of postmodernism of resistance, which he calls a “postmodern pedagogy of engagement.” Briton bases this pedagogy on the program of resistance of Czech politician, dissident and literary figure Václav Havel. Havel advocates a meaningful social engagement for social justice in which adults, in their own way, “break through the exalted façade of the system and expose the real, base foundations of power” and show “everyone that it is possible to live within the truth” (as cited in Briton, 1996, p. 101). Briton, drawing on Havel’s analysis, points out that in the West, where capitalist ideology remains close to our lived experiences, the challenge of resisting dehumanizing forces is even greater. Briton advocates a pedagogy directed at restoring in adults the desire to participate in decision-making processes, alerting them to the “impersonal forces of modernity,” engaging them in democratic practices, and fostering their “communicative and critical competencies to resist the further systematization of culture” (p. 115). This broadly ethical and non-universalizing program is appealing, but Briton stops short of offering guidelines for a pedagogical enactment of this vision.

Re-examining the purpose and practice of information literacy education through the lens of critiques, visions and debates from critical theory perspectives, including what can be learned from postmodernism, poststructuralism and poststructural feminism as a corrective, offers rich ground for modestly re-envisioning information literacy as a critical and emancipatory project. These perspectives also open wide the doors to developing an enriched approach to conceptualizations of knowledge in LIS.
Information and knowledge in the library.

The information in information literacy tells us little other than that we want people to be literate about information. As Budd (2008) observes, “‘Information’ is at once a powerful and a powerless word in librarianship and in the world in general” (p. 73). Information as a term causes confusion, being used variously to refer to “information-as-process” (the act of informing), “information-as-knowledge” (the knowledge imparted through information-as-process), or information-as-thing (objects such as data or documents), according to Buckland’s framework (1991, p. 351). This framework is not without its problems. As Buckland admits, “information-as-thing” is a contentious notion among information scientists. It is the only way that information systems can deal with information as part of storage and retrieval. Yet, anything that is informative can be information, even the rings in trees. Buckland concludes that “we are unable to say confidently of anything that it could not be information” (p. 356). Buckland’s “information-as-knowledge” equates information and knowledge and these words are often used interchangeably, but not always.

Information is sometimes treated as something different from knowledge, as something that can be used in the development of knowledge. Certainly it is helpful to encourage students to distinguish between information and knowledge, to promote a view of research and inquiry as more than gathering and reporting information, to engage students in exploring and critically examining how people tell different kinds of stories with the same piece of information as they work with information to create knowledge. In this framework knowledge uses information in the telling of a story (Watts, 2007). At the same time, care needs to be taken against promoting a view that it is only knowledge that is politicized and that information is neutral. Students need to see that in even the most factual-looking information sources, choices are made and certain ideas are marginalized.

Information is often commodified, as exemplified in this statement from Rader (2003): “Information is a commodity and must be handled like a valuable product” (p. 35). In speaking of the desire to create efficient and effective “information consumers,” LIS discourse takes on the language of
capitalism. Being able to access, have and use information in the knowledge economy is tied to competitive advantage for individuals, business and nations and to economic development of the “information poor” countries so that they can play catch-up with the “developed” world.

Information, or knowledge (as the two are often conflated in discourse surrounding the information age), is power in terms of the benefits it brings to those who “have” it, but what is missing from LIS discourse is a more complex formulation of the relationship between power and knowledge. The inseparability of power and knowledge is expressed by Foucault as “power/knowledge”:

The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power . . . . Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power. . . . It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (Foucault, 1980, p. 52)

Knowledge in the library tends to be understood in positivistic terms as a collection of objects—texts (physical or digital) that contain information and that can be stored, organized and searched. ACRL Standards One and Two focus on identifying an information need and accessing information “effectively and efficiently” (2000) and according to ALA (1989) information literacy allows people to become “independent seekers of truth.” As Kapitzke (2003b) observes: “Within the traditional library paradigm, knowledge and ‘truth’ are deemed essential, static and retrievable with the ‘right’ method, namely, information literacy” (p. 58).

In assuming that knowledge is just there, waiting in the library (or cyberspace) to be discovered, mainstream information literacy ignores poststructuralist understandings of knowledge as partial, socially constructed and contested, and inseparable from the meaning-making process of the knower:

“The world to be known . . . cannot be hived off from the way humans want it to be, and explored through inert, objective, detached means. The world to be known is itself partly constituted by the interested theories, domain assumptions, and projects that human knowers necessarily bring with them to their acts of knowing. In this view, the act of knowing necessarily reflects and refracts the
world; it is always a situated practice . . . created in a particular context that has both material and interpretive dimensions. Different knowledges compete for legitimation. (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 39)

Using a Foucauldian perspective, in which knowledge and discursive practices are intertwined, Radford (1992) posits an alternative understanding of knowledge in the experience of the library. This approach reorients our attention from the knowledge contained within a text to the knowledge claims dispersed among texts organized in relation to each other: “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network” (Foucault, 1972a, p. 23).

Radford draws our attention to how, in a Foucauldian understanding, “the library institutionalizes the arrangement of texts that provides the appropriate spaces in which new knowledge claims can be located and given meaning” (1992, p. 418). Understanding the experience of the library user moves beyond the positivistic understanding of a search for truth in a particular text:

A library user engages with the library system, searching stacks and indexes for connections and patterns, and, ultimately the creation of new patterns. The library experience is much more than locating discrete pieces of information. The activity of conducting literature searches becomes the individual’s attempt to locate his knowledge claims within an existing order of knowledge claims. (Radford, 1992, p. 419)

Radford does not address information literacy directly, but the application of a poststructuralist epistemological perspective reorients information literacy’s emphasis on information gathering aimed at the collection and accumulation of information “about a topic” to a more intellectually complex and satisfying activity. The learner engages in seeking connections among texts, exploring the structure, foundations, deviations and boundaries of a particular conversation, locating and perhaps revising his or her own position within the conversation, and participating in the conversation. Luke and Kapitzke (1999), drawing on Mark Poster’s understanding of new technologies as disrupting traditional
relationships between figure and ground, truth and representation, signifier and signified, point to the need for librarians to move beyond a lingering print literacies model, to engage with the need for complex multiliteracies:

the internet is a medium that enables a great deal of agency and free play among its users. This agency entails both new capacities to juxtapose, to ignore, to elide, to silence and to critique information that doesn’t appear to be relevant or valuable or interesting—but as well new capacities to produce, change, alter, relocate and transform these messages. (p. 480)

Understanding these activities as embedded in the relations of power/knowledge illuminates the importance of engaging learners in asking questions about, Who has the power to say what counts as knowledge? Whose knowledge is privileged? Who benefits? Whose knowledge is marginalized? What does this mean for the society we live in?

**Critical literacies.**

Just as the *information* segment in the concept of information literacy requires problematizing, so too does the *literacy* segment. The use of the phrase *information literate*, frequently embedded in reference to the library’s educational mission, creates a troubling illiteracy/literacy dichotomy. The American Library Association (1989) even goes so far as to refer to the limited and less interesting experiences in the lives of “information illiterates,” lives that are “more likely than others to be narrowly focused on second-hand experiences of life through television.” Norgaard (2003) refers to this type of thinking, in which information literacy is seen as a “toggle switch,” as associated with an earlier “off/on paradigm” used to describe shifts from oral to literate practices (p. 126). We ought to exercise similar caution in conceptualizing adult learners as critically literate/critically illiterate, which might be implied in the adult learning goal of identifying and challenging hegemony. It is not a question of the “light” being on or off, but of heightening one’s political and ethical consciousness.

Information literacy discourse frames the librarian-educator as the expert, reflected in statements such as “Librarians and teachers must market themselves aggressively as information experts” (Rader,
The student is understood as in deficit, in need of the librarian’s expertise, but in reality students are often skeptical everyday users of the Internet who may have greater familiarity with hypermedia and culturally diverse, and countercultural, texts than some of their teachers or librarians. Within the behaviouristic ACRL model, which focuses on operationalizing learning in terms of discreet, standardized items of desirable behaviour, remediation is performed by teaching skills and measuring what students should be able to do. But, what if a researcher’s goal is not to access information “effectively and efficiently” but instead to ponder, rethink, revisit, revise, imagine, dream and perhaps even stumble across the unexpected? How can this activity be something that we need to measure?

Critical literacy studies focus on the social practices of encoding and decoding as opposed to reducing literacy practices to “skills, abilities or measurable items on a task list,” and recognize that these practices “vary from one context to another; that people themselves hold varying meanings, often contested, that may not coincide with those of academic researchers; and that the uses of meanings of literacy are always imbued with power relations” (Street, 1997, p. 11). An understanding of literacy as a situated practice helps us understand information literacy not as a universal and abstract skills-set but as contextual and occurring within communities engaged in constructing knowledge and meaning (Norgaard, 2003). How then can we presume to apply national standardized testing instruments, such as the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS)\(^\text{15}\) to a complex, situated social practice?

Critical literacy asserts that literacies are political and “reflect the differential structured power available to human agents through which to secure the promotion and serving of their interests, including the power to shape literacy in ways consonant with those interests” (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. xiii). An understanding of literacies as ideological requires that we ask questions such as, What kind of society do we want? Who decides what counts as being literate? What literacies are marginalized by the dominant understanding of literacy? How might those at whom literacy initiatives are aimed use literacy to achieve

---

\(^\text{15}\) Developed by Kent State University with test items based on the ACRL Standards, which themselves caution about the need for local assessment, SAILS (https://www.projectsails.org/) has been used widely in the US and Canada.
their own ends? Harvey Graff’s concept of the “literacy myth” helps illuminate problematic assumptions in literacy campaigns, expressed differently throughout history, related to “the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility” (Arnove & Graff, 2008, pp. xiii-xiv). There is a tendency today, for example, to believe that mass literacy will solve mass unemployment without questioning problems inherent in capitalism. Applying a critical literacy agenda to information literacy campaigns enables a refocusing from identifying, teaching and assessing measurable technical skills to a consideration of to what extent and how information literacy concepts and practices, in the words of Lankshear and McLaren, “enable human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life in the quest for a more truly democratic social order” (1993, p. xviii).

A critical perspective can assist librarians in examining their own roles within literacy’s web of power. Information literacy is one among many literacies that have emerged, along with cultural literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, visual literacy and so on. Different literacies serve their interest groups who have functional, but also “powerful social reasons” for wanting “to maintain the distinctiveness and independence of ‘their’ literacy” (Martin, 2006, p. 17). Librarianship has much at stake as a profession at a time when digital information and communication technologies are having a dramatic impact on how people use, or do not use, libraries. In critically examining information literacy discourse, we can find more than a hint of the “exercise in public relations” that Foster identifies in his critique of the information literacy concept, which he sees as “an effort to deny the ancillary status of librarianship by inventing a social malady with which librarians as ‘information professionals’ are uniquely qualified to deal” (as cited in Snavely & Cooper, 1997, p. 10).

LIS discourse tends to ignore the issue of professional power—the power of the librarian, who is often white and typically in a privileged position, to define what it means to be information literate, what counts as research and what is the right kind of information. Haider and Bawden (2007) explore how librarianship has taken up saving the “information poor” (a concept which we can extend to include the
“information illiterate”) as a moral duty. Using Foucault’s notion of pastoral power, they offer an understanding of the library as assuming the role of “an agent of salvation,” a power technique that Foucault traces to the emergence of organized Christianity (Haider & Bawden, 2007, pp. 550-551). Through such a critique comes the awareness that even when we adopt an agenda of “empowering” others there is a web of power at work in which strong professional interests to enhance our own status are present and part of how we construct information literacy.

**Transforming Moments**

*The teacher works in favor of something and against something. Because of that, she or he will have another great question, How to be consistent in my teaching practice with my political choice? (Paulo Freire, in Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 46).*

One of my most difficult, but also my most exciting, challenges as a learner has been the immediacy of the need to put theorizing and reflection into pedagogical practice. As I was in the process of re-thinking information literacy as part of my studies, it happened that I was contracted to write two courses, one an information systems course requiring major revision (*INFS 1200: Information Seeking and Society in the Information Age*) and the other a more general student success course with an information literacy component (*COMM 0100: Introduction to Research and Study Skills*).¹⁶

Both *INFS 1200* and *COMM 0100* are 3-credit undergraduate courses developed for Athabasca University’s individualized study model in which students work through the course at their own pace. They access their course online through a learning management system, receive a package of course materials, and have access to the support of a tutor or an academic expert. A key issue that has arisen for

¹⁶ At the time of writing, *COMM 0100*, a new course, is in production. I tutor the current version of *INFS* (currently named *INFS 200: Accessing Information*) which I co-authored in 2004. The renumbering does not represent a change in level. It is part of the University’s move to a 4-digit course numbering system. The current *INFS 200* is delivered using a print-based study guide with some online materials. The revision involves moving the course to the Moodle learning management system and the inclusion of opportunities for learner knowledge contribution and learner-to-learner interaction.
me is the extent to which such teaching and learning can support critical and emancipatory educational approaches. In arguing that online learning can be a forum for adult education as social education, Conrad and Spencer (2006) consider the extent to which there are opportunities for dialogue, community building, knowledge construction and group-oriented processes.

At Athabasca University online learning using a grouped synchronous study model is available mostly at the graduate level. Learners generally study together as a cohort with ample opportunity for learner-to-learner and instructor-learner interaction, albeit in a written as opposed to an oral mode. In contrast, undergraduate courses are offered primarily through an individualized study model that has the advantage of allowing learners to work at their own pace, but which imposes significant constraints on their ability to interact with one another given that they are typically at different points in the course and might even be absent from a course for weeks or even months. As more individualized study courses move online there is greater opportunity to take advantage of technology to open up spaces for communication. Yet, the unpaced nature of this undergraduate model restricts the amount of social learning.

In both INFS 1200 and COMM 0100 I have created learning activities around online postings. Through these activities students engaging in the same course will have an opportunity to develop and share knowledge in the course, but I do not anticipate intense learner-to-learner interaction because there may be months between one student creating a posting and another student responding to it. At least the knowledge of the course author, and other cited experts, will not be the only knowledge in the course as learners engage in their own meaning-making process of the materials. I do not want to suggest here, however, that individualized study is devoid of the potential for stimulating critical, transformative learning. My own experience as a learner has taught me the difficulty of assigning greater transformative potential to learning within a cohort compared to the offline times when I engaged in deep reflection and imagining. Critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1978), deviating sharply from the social learning that critical theorists hold dear, saw a revolutionary potential, the development of “rebellious subjectivity,” in temporary withdrawal from society by the individual: “With the affirmation of the inwardness of
subjectivity, the individual steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence” (p. 4). The individual breaks with the reality of “the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience” (p. 5). Marcuse’s work has caused Stephen Brookfield (2005) to rethink uncritical advocacy of cohort learning programs and to see the potential in self-paced, individualized, and online learning to create spaces for the development of rebellious subjectivity. In INFS 1200 and COMM 0100 I seek a balance between social spaces, through discussion boards, with private spaces, through journals that are not viewed by peers or the instructor, but that inform assignment work.

When I look back at my agonizing over “getting it right” in writing these courses, I realize the impossibility of my own expectations. Once a distance learning course is written, edited, and locked down at the end of the course production process (until the next revision), there is a sense of finality that is not experienced in the give and take of a face-to-face classroom experience. I cannot walk into the classroom next week, or even next semester, and change things up. I have come to accept that the courses will never really be “written” because the courses need the students to help write them, given that knowledge is created and circulates within communities. Although the individualized study model makes dialogue difficult, my hope is that by problematizing course concepts and incorporating online discussion there will be openings for reflection in which the educator also “re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (Freire, 1970; 2000, p. 81).

So, how then does someone who has serious misgivings about information literacy, write information literacy? The information literacy movement has contributed to moving teaching and learning away from passive learning and towards active, student-centred learning, rooted in information discovery. I would suggest that a more expansive pedagogical starting point for an educational project offered by the library is not a focus on the resources of resource-based learning, or the information of information literacy, but a reorientation to the act of inquiry. Branch and Oberg in the 2004 Alberta Learning
publication *Focus on Inquiry: A Teacher’s Guide to Implementing Inquiry-Based Learning* define inquiry-based learning as

a process where students are involved in their learning, formulate questions, investigate widely and then build new understandings, meanings and knowledge. That knowledge is new to the students and may be used to answer a question, to develop a solution or to support a position or point-of-view. The knowledge is usually presented to others and may result in some sort of action (as cited in Samek, 2005, pp. 43-44).

I think much care needs to be taken in avoiding an uncritical adoption of inquiry-based learning without attending to power relations as well as to the nature of inquiry as an activity that involves not only reasoning skills but imagination, emotions, receptivity, exploration and creativity. However, the growing acknowledgement of the importance of inquiry is a hopeful pedagogical move. It is through inquiry more than information skills that learners have the opportunity to develop their critical capacities.

In re-envisioning information literacy, we must consider the value of continuing to refer to the library’s educational mission as *information literacy*. Is the term *critical information literacy* any better? I do not think adding the word *critical* to *information literacy* can assist librarians in partnering with faculty or in engaging students as it does little to inspire interest or illuminate the type of learning intended— the phrase has a trendy ring, is loaded with confusing connotations, and says very little to anyone not immersed in the discourse of librarianship. I am reminded of a comment made about information literacy by Frank Doble, the librarian at the MSCHE workshop who shared his essay on poetic inquiry with me: “Where is the heart, where is the passion and where are the feelings?” I believe attaching words such as *inquiry* or *scholarship* to the library’s instructional offerings would be more appropriate and have greater appeal.

The activities of inquiry and scholarship support the broader learning that students are engaged in as part of participating in academic culture and as part of their everyday thinking and writing inside and
outside of school. In seeking to build the academic literacies of students and enhance the undergraduate experience, information literacy shares ground with rhetoric and composition and could learn much from engaging with that field’s rich theoretical foundations and informed pedagogical practices. Writing and rhetoric instructor Rolf Norgaard (2004) outlines how information literacy can develop a more meaningful pedagogical practice by developing a process-oriented approach, much in the manner of the “new rhetorics” in its reaction against the product-oriented focus of “current-traditional rhetoric.” Information literacy is often taught within the context of the research writing assignment, which traditionally focuses on “format and final product, on sources and citations” more than on intellectual inquiry (Norgaard, 2004, p. 222). A process-oriented approach cares more for the intellectual journey and less for the product. Students are engaged in intellectual inquiry as scholars and writers, as opposed to merely gathering and summarizing. Information literacy becomes part of a recursive meaning-making process, “an intellectual process driven by engaged inquiry,” and “an inventional resource for the writing student, not merely a resource for supporting what has already been invented” (Norgaard, 2003, pp. 127-129).

In using an inquiry-based model in which students are encouraged to understand themselves as participating in scholarship, INFS 1200 and COMM 0100 teach information skills within the context of exploring and contributing to conversations, scholarly and otherwise. Assignments emphasize meaning-making as a journey through the processes of journaling, discussions, the reaction paper, and exploratory and reflective writing, although I have made a final formal research paper part of the requirements of COMM 0100 as part of preparing students for university studies.

I am aware of the need to avoid what can easily become a process of domestication. In being contracted to write these courses, I have been tasked with preparing students for a successful university studies.

17 Libraries, Scholarship, & Technology, a first-year undergraduate course at University of Hawaii at Manoa offers a particularly fine example of an inquiry-based and writing intensive approach stressing the entry of students into the activity of scholarship. The course uses a “teacher-as-learner” learning communities approach (http://libweb.hawaii.edu/uohmlib/learnlib/lis100.html).
experience. It is also my obligation to meet student expectations pertaining to preparation for academic and workplace success. For students to be heard within the academic community they must learn to speak its language, but in teaching students to speak as scholars my challenge has been to move beyond what Lankshear & McLaren describe as an academic, liberal/conservative intellectual process that is rooted in judging, reading and writing in the manner of privileged texts and that is “consciously detached from the world of social relations and practices” (1993, p. 27).

I use problem-posing as a means to encourage students to engage critically with course content, seek to foster the critical capacities of students in making visible connections between power and knowledge, and expose students not only to academic products and mainstream media but also to alternative media and neglected voices. I try to avoid an approach that focuses entirely on reasoning to the exclusion of other ways of knowing. For critical reflection and inquiry to be meaningful to students they must be able to find ways to connect it to their own stories and ways of experiencing and caring about the world.

Shor’s (1992) model of beginning “in a participatory and critical way by posing the subject matter itself as a problem” offers an invitation for students to question assumptions about consensus surrounding the subject of study and to share their own knowledge (p. 37). Problem-posing “offers all subject matter as historical products to be questioned rather than as universal wisdom to be accepted” (p. 32), an approach that I have found invaluable given my own teacher discomfort with the subject of study—in this case information literacy and its associated concepts. In INFS 1200, information literacy, critical thinking, the information revolution, and the information age are not terms for which students are expected to memorize and repeat definitions, but are instead treated as concepts that we need to critically examine as socially constructed and contested, as not disinterested but tied to different visions of society that are related to preserving the social order or changing it. Students can begin to see critical thinking and information literacy as ways to participate in critical inquiry and to act upon their world. Students are encouraged to explore their own understandings and relationships to these concepts, examine their own assumptions, and make their own meanings.
In its current version *INFS* teaches students, using a “silo” approach to information access, how to search library catalogues in the first unit, journal databases in the second unit, and the Internet in the third unit. Students record search strategies and perform bibliography work. This compartmentalized, tools-based approach is not linked to meaning-making. A fourth and final unit covering historical and sociological perspectives on technological change feels somewhat tacked-on at the end and fails to offer an opportunity for students to use the skills they have learned. My experience is that students tend not to see connections between this unit and the previous units on searching. I sense that some students, eager to complete the course, rush through the unit four materials. In a significant departure from this skills-focus, the first two units of the revised course focus on encouraging students to critically reflect on social, economic and political contexts for the creation, distribution and use of knowledge and information in the information age and to apply a broad understanding of what it means to be critical to the processes of research and evaluation. The revised historical and sociological unit now sits mid-course as the core of *INFS 1200*. This unit introduces themes pertaining to the broader impact of ICTs on our everyday lives and on society at local and global levels as a jumping off point for students to identify a research interest, develop a research question and engage in research. The unit introduces students to a range of influential thinkers on the “information age” and encourages students to consider the non-neutral and political nature of technologies, tensions between oppressive and liberatory potentials in the network society, and the relationship between technology and active citizenship.

Student inquiry is directed at exploration of an information technology and society issue that students identify as being of interest. Students are expected to reflect on how their thinking on the issue or problem evolves as they engage with diverse perspectives. Students use information skills they bring with them to the course as they engage in some initial inquiry-based activities, a process which I feel acknowledges them as not in deficit and which I hope will help them identify what they want to improve about their searching. Information retrieval is offered as the fourth and final unit as a means for students to improve their search capabilities as part of undertaking their major research assignment in the course.
In the first unit of INFS 1200 students track a “newsworthy” event through the information cycle, but do not merely learn how to distinguish the different types of information and knowledge products. Their information cycle activity is framed within an examination of the construction of what is considered newsworthy, issues of media concentration and freedom of the press, the oppressive marginalization of voices by mainstream media, how to access alternative media, the knowledge-gatekeeping functions of publishers, scholarly communities and libraries, and the liberatory potentials of what Castells (2007) refers to as “mass self-communication”. Students examine their own roles within the information cycle and have an opportunity to critique or contribute to citizen journalism. By engaging students with not only scholarly sources but mass media INFS 1200 acknowledges the role of mass media in the lives of students, denying the possibility of a purely academic reading of a text, something that information literacy approaches tend to assume in focusing on scholarly and peer-reviewed sources. Whatever students read or view or listen to, they do so within a dynamic, diverse, multimedia information landscape.

INFS 1200 teaches peer-review as a social practice within an academic community, a practice that works to ensure a level of quality but also serves as a control over who gets to speak, how, and in what context. This understanding can help students know what is expected of them in participating in scholarly conversations, but also encourages them to think critically about the system and to look for openings to engage with non-peer reviewed sources and alternative models such as e-prints. ACRL Standard Five, “The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally” is typically reduced in information literacy instruction to why and how to avoid plagiarism. Teaching correct referencing and citation provides an opportunity in INFS 1200 to discuss citation in relation to its social construction in academia, as part of a communicative practice in which knowledge is confirmed, negotiated and contested.

In shaking up students’ preconceptions about knowledge, I cannot escape concerns that I may be asking too much, but am not quite sure how to resolve this other than to take care in respecting students’
boundaries. In the words of Kegan (1994) “What is it, really, that we are asking of our students here? Are these expectations sensible, fair, or appropriate?” (p. 3). Kegan, a constructive-developmental psychologist, acknowledges that modern life places a substantial burden of mental complexity on us in all areas of our lives and that when it comes to the claims of postmodernity, these are “claims that, for nearly all of us, are over our heads” (p. 304).

The current version of INFS teaches evaluation skills using the standard checklist approach that asks students to consider authority, bias, currency, and so on. The revision offers a much more nuanced look at what it means to be critical. The emphasis is not on surface characteristics of the information such as a URL ending in .edu or .gov, but on the content of information and how the student intends to use it. In evaluating information, students are encouraged to consider worldviews, their own and others. Using the idea of “story,” research is presented as a delicate balance between telling our own stories, finding connections with the stories of others, taking care not to unquestioningly accept a story just because it corresponds with our own, and listening to the possibilities in the stories that others tell, even when we do not agree with those stories.19 Students are encouraged to consider the personal dimensions of their responses to information; to explore the value of different ways of knowing (not just reasoning, but imagination, intuition, and emotions such as caring20 and sensory ways of knowing such as sounds, visuals, and kinesics21); and to seek out alternative media and neglected voices as part of investigating different versions of the “truth.”

COMM 0100 takes a similar approach in that being critical is not simply a matter of looking for author qualifications or considering the reasonableness of an argument. A learning activity has students examine two opposing views of logging of old growth forests in the Temagami area of Northern Ontario from one of their course texts (Fowler, Aaron, & McArthur, 2008). I then introduce a third perspective, a First Nations’ perspective, and ask some guiding questions around how might accessing neglected voices

---

19 I have adapted this approach from Watts (2007).
20 Barbara Thayer-Bacon (1998) advocates a re-envisioning of critical thinking as “constructive thinking” which denies the separation between knowers and what is known and acknowledges the importance not only of reasoning but other ways of knowing such as emotions, intuition, and imagination.
21Kapitzke, 2003a, p. 50
inform the conversation and enhance our ability to understand what is at stake in debates over land claims.

COMM 0100 also uses an inquiry- and writing-based approach. Students develop their scholarship around a theme chosen from one of the strands of global education (development, environment, human rights, and global conflict and peace). I chose global education as the launching point for student inquiry and research activity in the course as it offers rich territory in which to explore links between our own lived experiences and local and global conditions. I see this as an opportunity to foster a “sociological imagination,” an idea developed in 1959 by American sociologist C. Wright Mills, in which thinking sociologically can help us to understand the relations between “biography” and “history” and between “the personal troubles of milieu” and “the public issues of social structure” so that we might overcome feelings of powerlessness (Mills, 1959):

It is not only information they need—in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy. What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination. (p. 5)

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have pointed to tensions in mainstream information literacy discourse, tensions between functionalist aims, in which information literacy has the potential to serve the needs of the social order by focusing on the information competencies needed to succeed in a global knowledge-based economy, and emancipatory aims that articulate with a rhetoric of empowerment and literacy for human
rights. In practice, mainstream information literacy, positioned within the broader discourse of LIS, a discourse dominated by positivism, technical rationality and the illusion of neutrality, offers little potential for emancipation and certainly falls far short of educating adult learners as engaged citizens capable of critically questioning, challenging and acting to change their world. In agreeing with Briton (1996) that adult education is “a cultural practice with moral and political consequences that reach far beyond the walls of the classroom” (p. 33), I believe that information literacy educators carry a much greater responsibility than ensuring students are successful in their studies, in their workplaces, or as effective citizens. In their everyday professional lives how might librarians hold onto lofty, liberatory envisioning and meet the immediate needs and demands of their local learner populations? Jacobs (2008) offers hope that information literacy educators can “find a balance in the daily and the visionary, the local and the global, the practices and the theories, the ideal and the possible” and suggests that one way of achieving this is by working “toward creating habits of mind that prioritize reflective discussions about what it is that we are doing when we ‘do’ information literacy” (p. 258).

I believe there is a need for ongoing critical self-reflection about our purpose in doing information literacy and about our pedagogical choices. We need to take care in grabbing onto any single information literacy approach that promises to solve all our problems. There are considerable losses in both an unquestioning deployment of the ACRL Standards and in a blind loyalty to enacting critical pedagogy. We need to consider the extent to which our educational efforts connect with the hopes, dreams and imaginations of learners. As Ward (2006) asks

Can we be information literate if we possess the technical ability to find and evaluate information, but not the human capacity to experience and value it? Can we be committed to an issue if it fails to resonate with anything within us? (p. 397)

It can be daunting to take up the task of education for emancipation and transformation. There is a risk of educator disillusionment when students exercise their right to resist even our best intentions. Shor speaks of “a gradation of transforming moments,” a concept that can be helpful in managing our expectations and in teaching in a spirit of hope:
As a writing, mass media, and literature teacher, I say to myself I will discover the transition possible in any particular class, given the situation I and the students are in. . . . I have a goal of social change, but I am working to provoke the transformations possible in each discreet class. . . . Sometimes I can’t make a dent in the hold of mass culture on the student’s expectations. If students do engage each other in critical dialogue, I see that as an act of empowerment because they chose to become human beings investigating their reality together . . . . In thinking about what a classroom can accomplish, I see a gradation of transforming moments. (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 34)

I look to critical and transformative learning approaches, further informed by postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist critiques, as having rich potential to inform the educational mission of the library and the reformulation of information literacy, while at the same time acknowledging the need to constantly question the limitations, assumptions and applications of such approaches. I believe that we can learn much from the classroom experience and that my thinking in this paper has yet to be informed by how students will respond to the courses I have written.

I began this paper with a quote from Johan Galtung, a Norwegian academic and activist and a founder of peace studies, and will conclude with more of his words, as an expression of what literacy can be and ought to be: “literacy should be experienced as a magnificent instrument to express and understand important things, not as a goal in itself” (1976, p. 105).
References


54


