Critical information literacy: Adult learning and community perspectives

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Abstract

This article considers the evolution of information literacy as a distinct area of inquiry and instruction in libraries. The influence of critical and feminist pedagogies is paramount for the development of critical approaches to understanding an information landscape that is highly politicized. The definition and practice of information literacy will be described, followed by an exploration of critical approaches that help interrogate how information access and control affect these literacy goals and people's democratic right to information. Information literacy that is grounded in social justice goals can be strengthened through the collaboration of librarians with other adult educators, community development practitioners, social service providers and activists.

Introduction

This century is often referred to the *information age* to highlight the transformation of information access brought about by technological changes in the past few decades, as well as the implications for the role of information in development and people's social and economic inclusion in their countries (OECD, 2000). Information literacy enables people to seek and make use of this information to perform tasks or to create new knowledge (Behrens, 1994; Webber & Johnston, 2000). However, there are numerous concerns and tensions at play. This transformation has alternately been celebrated by the proclamation that the world's knowledge can be accessed through a mobile phone, and critiqued regarding corporate control of people's personal data and erosion of trust of the credibility of what appears on daily newsfeeds and social media platforms (Zuboff, 2019).

Within community development practice, the transformation is variously framed with catchphrases such as K4D (knowledge for development), knowledge translation or mobilization—terms that often appear to represent knowledge as a commodity that can be transferred to marginalized communities in need (Narayanaswamy, 2017). This needs-based approach very much resembles the concerns raised by new literacies scholars who argue that such deficit mindsets disempower learners (Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012).

Librarians have a central role to play in developing and promoting information literacy as people learn how to navigate the complex information landscape (Lankes, 2016). Libraries exist within most formal education institutions providing training and individual assistance to students, educators and researchers. Public libraries, community libraries and resource centres have much to contribute to supporting multiple literacies at the community level. They are well situated to be key partners in the creation of literate environments - as articulated by UNESCO - because they are located within communities to support people in their daily lives (Shrestha & Krolak, 2015).

There is some ambiguity regarding librarians' roles as educators explicitly within their profession, or a tendency to focus on interaction with technology (Sanford & Clover, 2016). Yet, the pedagogical processes librarians engage in as part of information literacy instruction has become more clearly articulated and theorized in recent years. Amidst library critiques that standard instruction is too caught up in technology and basic skill development, critical library studies—informed by Freirean and feminist theorists—have evolved to create space for a more radical questioning of knowledge and power (Accardi, 2013; Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016). In my mind, it is precisely this questioning of power that makes critical information literacy a part of the multiple literacies and new literacies discussion (Duckworth & Tett, 2019).

This article considers the evolution of information literacy as a distinct area of inquiry and instruction with an emphasis on the influence of critical and feminist pedagogies. My focus here is to draw upon the literature in critical library studies to survey the changing trends in information access and literacy, as well as reflect on my own work in a library specializing in adult education and community development. From 2016-2018, I conducted a small research project to examine the changing role of libraries and the information issues faced by community development practitioners primarily from the Global South, through a series of five group discussions (Wadsworth, 2011) with participants attending education programs at the Coady Institute (Irving, 2018). That research has deepened my interest and understanding of information literacy and the importance of critical approaches. Therefore, this article examines how restrictions on information access and control affect (undermine) literacy goals and people's democratic right to information, and considers the opportunities for collaboration in strengthening critical literacy, citizen participation, politicized learning and new knowledge creation. I see this as an area of shared interest among adult educators, community practitioners and library workers.

Background

My own interest in this topic has evolved over the past few decades through my work at the Marie Michael Library, a small specialized library supporting the educational activities of the Coady International Institute in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. Most of the participants in the education programs are community development practitioners from countries of the Global South and Indigenous communities in Canada. The participants come from a wide range of educational backgrounds and library experiences. Many have described first-hand experience of libraries reflecting colonialist values and

procedures that appear exclusionist through such actions as tightly controlled access and devaluing local knowledge (Adams, 2019; see also Blair & Wong, 2017; Durrani, 2014). We have worked over the years to develop services grounded in the philosophy of emancipatory adult education that is also in keeping with the historical roots of our library and institution (Adams, 2019; Irving & Adams, 2012). We have also been involved directly in offering courses on information literacy, information activism, independent research support, as well as working with participants interested in creating their own libraries and resource centres.

When information literacy as a term gained more common usage in the 1990s, I was encouraged that this would mean adult education theories were coming to the forefront. I was soon to be disappointed, as this was also the time of burgeoning technological developments which overtook the field, reasserting a pressure to transfer specific technical skills in short time frames that thwarted questioning, experiential knowing, criticality and creativity (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016). The growth of critical library studies in the past two decades has, for me, finally brought together the insights from critical and feminist pedagogies and theories of power and knowledge that I understood from my other activities in adult education (English & Irving, 2015). In recent years, I have also been revisiting the evolving role of libraries and resource centres in community practice. This article draws from the literature review I conducted for that research (Irving, 2017; 2018).

Information Literacy: Definitions and Issues

Information literacy describes the ability of people to find, assess and utilize the information they need to achieve their goals, whether that may be to write a research paper, solve a problem at work, learn a new hobby, or organize a protest (see Behrens, 1994; IFLA, 2019). Further, it can include a person's ability to comprehend when new information is needed (Behrens, 1994). While the term has existed in library literature since the 1970s, the recognition of information literacy as a competency with measurable skills grew more widespread as library professionals strove to position themselves within the broader evolution of education in the late twentieth century (Behrens, 1994).

There are numerous standards and evaluative criteria developed by library associations around the world for determining a learner's information literacy attainment. Most share core elements of the information seeking journey of a learner, as noted above, starting from recognizing the need for new information, developing the ability to search for and assess the source and reliability of the material, and the capacity to comprehend and utilize that information in the creation of new knowledge. For example, in the United Kingdom, The Society of College, National and University Libraries' "Seven Pillars of Information Literacy" is one such model that itemizes these steps that encompasses both searching skill attainment and understanding (SCONUL, 2011). The SCONUL model, and similar measurement tools from other countries bring with them debates regarding the objectives of information literacy instruction, which points to the importance of examining the pedagogical processes involved as a distinct field of research (Webber & Johnston, 2000).

The instrumentalist ways that information literacy training is often conducted and assessed in this context raises concerns of prioritizing surface level skill development that assesses specific, measurable skills (Harris, 2010; Webber & Johnston, 2000). This has effects not only on the literacy learner, but on the instructor as well as this pressure for standardization can making the library profession itself overly standardized (Elmborg,

2016). Campbell (2008) notes that the goals and instruction methods for information literacy are primarily articulated in academic settings, while in the broader world information is highly contextual to cultures who may integrate local or indigenous knowledges. I think those who are grappling with the ripple effects of the standardization push can learn from the work of the literacy researchers, grounded in community contexts, who have critiqued the impact of literacy frameworks. Their calls to resist their disempowering effects are important for understanding how literacies should reflect and support people's lives rather than dictating to them what they need to know (Duckworth & Tett, 2019; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012).

Knowledge and Power

Access to information alone is insufficient to foster engaged, active citizenship, and there is a growing awareness of the importance of examining the sources of information and issues of power in knowledge creation and dissemination that go far beyond standard academic criteria of determining credible sources. This examination probes the deeper biases that privilege some forms of knowledge over others.

Freire's (1970) theories grapple directly with knowledge - how it is created, whose knowledge is validated, and who is excluded. Freire challenges the monopolizing power of "intellectuals" calling upon them to share that power (Arnowitz, 1993). This critique continues to be expressed in community development practice. Eversole (2015) states: 'The narrow definition of knowledge as *professional expertise* puts the emphasis on the type of knowledge that poor communities are likely to lack while overlooking the kinds of knowledge that these communities are likely to have' (p. 90). Eversole also notes that the ways valid knowledge is created reflects western methods that fails to recognize local knowledge as real knowledge. The work of Indigenous researchers (see Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012) has an important role to play in further developing our understanding of the cultural influences of how we see and share knowledge, and the implications for information literacy work. This is an opportunity for further contextualizing and renewing the decolonizing potential of Freirean approaches (Giroux, 1993). Duckworth and Tett's (2019) application of Freirean culture circles is also helpful for identifying the ways creativity can be used by learners to examine their lives and experiences.

Critical Information Literacy

Freire's (1970) liberating praxis proposes breaking the dichotomy of expert knowledge and people's knowledge by engaging people 'in the dialectical and political act of knowing' (McLaren & da Silva, 1993, p. 54) to challenge the banking methods of education that impose a one-way flow of information from the oppressors to the oppressed. Sharing the theoretical framing of critical pedagogy, critical information literacy (see Elmborg, 2006) engages in critiques of mainstream knowledge production and provision, looking at power and control over information. Elmborg calls upon librarians to reflect on their roles as educators, noting the parallel between Freire's critique of top-down banking education and treating a library as an "information bank" (p. 193). Both reflect uncritical practices of information dissemination that do not engage people actively.

Librarians can do more to act 'as facilitators in human knowledge construction' (Lor & Britz, 2010, p. 664) that counteracts the one-way flow of information. This awareness is heightened by issues, particularly in the context of the Internet, that include:

Proliferation of propaganda and fake news in online platforms; restrictions or financial barriers to access information (paywalls, digital rights management); and overwhelming amounts of information that can be hard to sift through for relevance (see also Narayanaswamy, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Such challenges are concerns for those engaged in the related field of "civic literacy" (Morden, Prest, Hilderman & Anderson, 2019) since political awareness and democratic participation require analysis of news media in a variety of forms that exists in 'a challenging information environment which includes a wealth of unvetted information and potentially malevolent forces online deliberately sowing confusion and even anger' (p. 8).

The Reflective Librarian

The learning process should be significant not only for the participants, but also for librarians in terms of self-reflection in their own bias and positioning in exercising power through knowledge; as well as gaining the skill and confidence as educators interested in promoting the information literacy skills in others (Elmborg, 2006). Critical and post-structural theories are useful to understand the political nature of librarianship and confront stereotypical views that librarians are unbiased providers of information. This self-reflection can then strengthen librarians' potential to participate more fully in collective learning and community building (Riedler & Eryaman, 2010). In the experience of my colleagues and myself, we have further noted the potential of creating friendly, alternative, nonhierarchical spaces within educational settings where students can express uncertainties and ask questions they may be fearful to raise in classrooms.

Applying a critical lens extends beyond the daily practices within the library, as Harris (2010) encourages us to re-examine the assessment standards for information literacy competency, to look for openings to resist the restrictive nature of those standards. One such "loophole" in the ACRL standards refers to issue of values, meaning how information may influence a person's values or beliefs. Harris adds, however, there has been little documented evidence that library instructors have taken on the issue of a learner's values. In response, Harris considers the role of critical pedagogical methods of dialogue and critical reflection for both the student and instructor. A feminist reframing of the standards similarly can provide openings to examine the social context to challenge multiple forms of oppression that may be hidden (Accardi, 2013).

Knowledge translation

"Knowledge translation" is a term commonly heard in academic and policy-level arenas describing the process of making information more easily understandable, accessible and usable in the general population (Bennett & Jessani, 2011). I think this is an area that could be explored further to support knowledge mobilization within community organizations and groups, beyond the disempowering one-way flow from experts to communities (Narayansaswamy, 2017).

Activities that intentionally track the flow of information in community practice can help identify the many unlikely places where information may reside, or that could be built upon. One useful model from an academic context that I have used is adapted from Gustafson's (2017) work describing information in terms of ecosystems and lifecycles. The process Gustafson describes helps researchers understand their own participation in creation through a hierarchical scholarly publishing framework. This approach can foster discussions through which people gain an understanding of the myriad contexts (political,

historical, social, economic) that affect the creation of information and the ways they themselves understand and use it. I see this process can useful particularly in contexts where people do not necessarily see their work directly in terms of knowledge creation and sharing.

In my group discussions with community development practitioners (Irving, 2018), many spoke of the frustrations of not having access to current, locally relevant information. They described the informal channels through networks and friends they relied on to share reports, and reflected on the information that resided in their organizations' file cabinets or hard drives when project evaluation reports were shared with donors but went no further. Deeper discussions among groups revealed numerous challenges in accessing public information, and strategies employed to share scarce information resources or translate research into formats useful for people in their communities.

Information literacy is affected by what information is accessible to the person who is seeking it. Advocacy for free and equitable access to information is an integrally related issue of concern to socially engaged librarians (Lankes, 2016). High profile news stories of state-level propaganda, spin, news media manipulation, or surveillance of people's online activities (Zuboff, 2019) are now creating growing challenges to keeping the understanding and practice of information literacy current. In the public sphere, examples abound of systematized exclusion, such as Smythe's (2016) research demonstrating the practices of exclusion evidenced in government websites whereby optimistic proclamations of open government are undermined by bureaucratic literacies that obfuscate information. Given the evolving, convoluted information character of information systems, literacy instruction can benefit from renewal as a way to support learners to navigate these systems.

Amidst the challenges, it is worth remembering that digital spaces remain vital spaces for learning and participation. Crowther and Mackie's (2015) study of citizens' information seeking patterns during the Scottish independence referendum note the importance of Internet sources to assist in political decision-making and democratic participation. When barriers to accessing information for public participation are unacknowledged, this becomes a human rights issue, as Neuman (2016) identifies numerous persistent barriers (such as literacy, mobility, time burdens) that women, particularly in the Global South, are facing.

Finding spaces for co-learning

Within the field of information studies, as noted earlier, most of the research and writing on critical information literacy instruction is situated within formal higher education settings focused on the information skill development of university students. In this context, librarians speak to a range of methods used in classroom instruction to help students develop the critical awareness of power issues and biases embedded within the wide range of sources available to them. These library-based educators also speak to the frustrations they face within the academy that appears not to value the importance of this skill development process. Instruction is often short-changed through brief in-class demonstrations or "one-off" workshops. It is often out of such frustrations that creative alternatives have emerged (see Accardi, Drabinski & Kumbier, 2010; Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016). Several cases in Pagowsky & McElroy's (2016) collection describe the use of methods adopted from critical and feminist pedagogy for group learning settings, and may play with standard library instruction methods, including integrating popular culture and other strategies tailored to the learners' interests. Community-based

information literacy programs may find useful inspirations from other literacy projects employing such locally grounded activities such as drawing upon learners' knowledge and culture of football (Player, 2013), or using creative expression through art and story writing (Duckworth & Tett, 2019).

Community adult educators would also recognize the challenges faced by critical information literacy educators who complain of institutional contexts that passively or actively undermine these critical learning spaces. This situation calls for a rethinking of the relationships between librarians and students in group and individual learning activities, confronting hierarchies of knowledge, using lived experiences as starting standpoints, and fostering co-operative learning environments (Accardi, Drabinski & Kumbier, 2010).

Assumptions that information literacy is primarily a matter of helping people learn to become comfortable with new technology is also a limiting factor, and requires reflection on the part of library-based educators to understand people's contexts, priorities and resistances to learning in order to avoid replicating the very instructional methods that subordinate people's own knowledge and experience. Instructive lessons can be learned from other areas of technology-based adult education experiences. Eubanks (2011) reflects on her own evolution in thinking and teaching with regards to computer instruction with marginalized women. She realized the women's resistances to learning came not from ignorance—as is often assumed—but from the daily injustices they faced in a society that appears to be controlled by technology. Such controls were visible through their experiences working in tedious data entry jobs, or sitting in a government office where their case workers appeared to let the computer decide whether or not they were eligible for assistance. Shifting the classroom experience from technical training to a dialogical process enabled the women to understand the power relationships behind the forces that seemed to be controlling their lives.

I have observed at times that writings on critical pedagogy embody a directly oppositional tone of traditional (passive) versus critical (active). From my own experience, the standard library practice of the "reference interview" (Veal, 2000) can be reframed as a dialogic process of engaging a person into discussion and deeper questioning, thereby making use of and expanding upon the tools already at our disposal. These dialogic exchanges have not only helped me work with participants to identify useful sources of information, but have also provided a space for them to articulate and validate their own experiential knowledge of the topic, and to dig deeper to explore the root causes of the issues they want to address.

Whose Information? Issues in Access and New Knowledge Creation

Inclusive education and community participation requires inclusive information access. Information literacy is closely linked with the right to information, and whose knowledge is represented or excluded. Literacy is undermined when the information people need for learning and social action is not available to them. As noted earlier, critical information literacy helps to expose the privileging of dominant perspectives and silencing of marginalized voices, and supports learners to draw upon and theorize their own knowledge and experience. This critique then highlights the gaps where learners and communities can mobilize to ensure their own knowledge is documented and shared.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has an advocacy branch, Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) that promotes the roles of libraries in supporting citizen engagement by campaigning against

threats to this freedom such as censorship and state surveillance. IFLA's Internet Manifesto acknowledges that information is now available to remote communities but those communities need support in accessing and making use of it. IFLA (2013) describes opportunities for libraries to assist people to create and share information. Increased transparency and openness of public information has the potential to increase civic participation. This access also requires the role of organizations and facilitators to assist people navigating the public information chains. IFLA has also produced a policy toolkit to assist librarians to lobby government to reduce barriers to public internet access.

At times there is a reticence among librarians to be politically active in policy discussions on these issues, due to a prevailing assumption of the profession's neutrality and "risk aversion" (Trosow, 2014, p. 24). Vocally claiming libraries as important players in democracy is not a neutral stance (Trosow, 2014). This is an area where collaboration with other community actors is important for solidarity building. Civic literacy educators have relevant experiences working with communities in critiquing misinformation, scrutinizing government statistics and supporting the creation of locally grounded and culturally relevant information as a counter-narrative to the dominant neoliberal discourse.

While it is an important skill for citizens to be able to seek and assess information to participate in society, western education systems that prioritize education goals that focus on employment preparation can undermine citizen education goals (Battista, 2012). Even employment focused instruction that relies on academic database search skills are only relevant within a university context that people will not have access to when they graduate (Battista, 2012).

Another threat to access is a result of the increased pressures of underfunding in the face of increasing costs. This situation is contributing to the rise of "shadow libraries" particularly in middle and low income countries who are facing harsh funding restrictions as state funding fails to meet the increasing demands in the education sector (Karaganis, 2018). Shadow libraries refer to the creative (often illegal) solutions students and faculty are compelled to devise to circumvent the barriers faced from high costs and copyright laws in order to obtain the literature they need to pursue their academic work (Karaganis, 2018). Trosow (2014) describes the growing "commodification" (p. 17) and enclosure of information, arguing that we should 'frame information services as an essential component of the public sphere' (p. 22). The cutbacks faced by libraries in many sectors threaten the preservation of the free, community learning spaces that are so valued by proponents of civic participation. The somewhat understated role of a librarian as an educator in the community, may contribute to the vulnerability libraries face against neoliberal economic agendas that see libraries as recreational spaces that can be cut in austere economic times (Sanford & Clover, 2016). At the same time, libraries are informally filling the gap for other areas of social care provision when social services are reduced or eliminated (Finch, 2019).

Two examples of persistent marginalization

I will briefly touch upon two library-led initiatives that are raising awareness on peoples whose are underrepresented, and the efforts that are being taken to address them.

Increasing access to information relates to form as well as content. According to statistics cited by the World Blind Union, under 10% of written material is reproduced in formats that are accessible to people with visual disabilities (Accessible Books Consortium, 2019). The implications for literacy are profound when people are denied access to information in ways they can be used. The Marrakesh Treaty declares that

copyright laws should not form an impediment to efforts to produce audio books, Braille transcriptions and other accessible formats (WIPO, 2016).

In Canada, many sectors, including libraries, are examining the implications of the Truth and Reconciliation process to redress generations of exploitation and abuse of Indigenous peoples. initial steps are underway to reconceptualize the structure and practices of libraries that integrate Indigenous peoples' knowledges and interests. This process of decolonizing library practice includes examining the content, description and arrangement of library collections, training library staff and increasing Indigenous representation, ensuring the preservation and promotion of Indigenous knowledge, and creating a mechanism by which libraries can learn from each other in achieving these shared goals (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2017).

Community research

Source authority (see Hoyer & MacDonald, 2014) is the process of determining the relevance and reliability of an information source. However, much of the information created in development practice does not always reflect the standard measures of authority, where people are more interested in the relevance and usefulness for their purposes (Hoyer & MacDonald, 2014). This is an example of the gap I have observed between the academic focus of most information literacy instruction and the lived reality of community practitioners and activists for whom academic, peer-reviewed research is either inaccessible or seen to be irrelevant for their local context and clientele. In order to shift the focus from translation of expert knowledge to communities, more work is needed to support active community-led translation of relevant research, and more engaged co-creation. One model I have found useful from the development sector is the work of the Barefoot Collective in South Africa. They bring together participants representing a range of experiences from different development organizations to write collectively in writeshops to produce guides for civil society practitioners (see barefootguide.org). Their interest is to provide useful, readable guides that frame analysis and methods in a story-based format (Reeler, 2017).

Co-creation is an area where I see that adult educators have a valuable contribution to make. In their *Community Engagement* guide Shaw and Crowther (2017) refer to the specific act of providing "counter-information" and the role of the educator in supporting community activists. A useful method they describe is critical discourse analysis, noting:

> In the current communication age, the significance of 'textual' messages which we are continually bombarded with, has multiplied. Yet our capacity to decode these messages is often assumed rather than explored educationally. The power of these forms of communication is that they can influence our outlook precisely because we give them little thought (p. 42).

As I have noted throughout this article, the contributions of critical and poststructural social theories have helped deepen the understanding of the political power of information, and the roles and responsibilities of different players working in the information ecosystem (Gustafson, 2017). It is not enough to critique other sources of information. At the community-level, I see how thinking of information as an ecosystem can help citizens understand their own various positions as creators, translators and users of information in work and life since people often do not recognize this process of inquiry they may already be engaged in as research (Stoecker, 2012). Understanding research as something we all can do can help us demystify the process and develop methods that are practical and reliable for our own goals.

Discussion

What ways can adult educators collaborate with librarians for critical literacy, citizen participation, politicized learning and new knowledge creation? Librarians who are committed to social justice are continually inspired by the critical educational practices and theories that has transformed adult education. Information literacy is a shared endeavour, and needs to evolve and keep pace with the evolution/revolution in the creation and use of information we are now experiencing. However, as I noted earlier, much of the theory and methods of information literacy in the literature are predominantly focused on academic settings, as the concepts are not as well articulated in community settings (Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, those academic spaces are often, frustratingly, reproducing the neoliberal dynamics of economics, technocratic measurements and shrinking space that progressive and radical educators are attempting to resist. Public and community libraries are active places of co-learning though they may not use the same language as their university-based counterparts. There is much more work to be done to raise awareness of learning and new knowledge creation that occurs with the support of public and community libraries, as well as the potential for strengthening collaboration with educators and activists.

I echo Webber and Johnston's (2000) call for more awareness raising and active research on information literacy as a pedagogical process. Librarians are encouraged to study the assessment standards they must work with to find spaces for criticality, as in the example Harris (2010) provides in probing more deeply the meaning of values when librarians and learners critically explore new information together, as well as Accardi's (2013) feminist framing. These are useful starting points to find spaces for resistance within existing frameworks. There could be more ongoing learning from the community-grounded approaches in new literacy studies who have relevant experiences in scrutinizing and re-envisioning literacy frameworks. In the face of restricting spaces for learning and critical inquiry, librarians and adult educators could do more to work together to preserve critical learning spaces and to document the innovative practices that have been created.

Information literacy, beyond improving a person's ability to access and utilize existing information, also helps learners critique misinformation, identify gaps and act on opportunities to create locally grounded and culturally relevant information. Libraries working with development organizations have a key role to play in promoting community-based knowledge to challenge the control of research by experts driven by "evidence-based" agendas, and to create knowledge that is useful and accessible for people. Community groups, educators and librarians can explore new ways to document and theorize voices that are currently missing, including the expansion and deepening of decolonizing approaches. Where this new knowledge is created and shared also raises the issue of openly and freely accessible platforms so that community-based knowledge is available to all. Librarians, adult educators, community development workers and activists all have roles to play in information literacy learning, research and practice.

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