



CHAPTER 26*

Carrots in the Brownies

Incorporating Critical Librarianship in Unlikely Places

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Introduction

This workbook activity is inspired by my eleventh grade American history teacher. Although I attended high school prior to No Child Left Behind, the class focused on preparing for the Advanced Placement test. We were learning to think critically, but this was also a Detroit public school, even then an underfunded system and in many cases interested more in discipline than learning. Despite this context, my teacher continually critiqued the textbook in class, asking us to consider, for example, why the author continually used the phrase “virgin land” to describe North America prior to European colonization. Why was the land feminized and rendered empty? What does this reveal about gender, race, and American history? My friends and I were somewhat taken aback; our teachers had generally treated textbooks as objective authorities. They did not take positions—they were simply true. Twenty years later, this continues to resonate as an exemplary instance of critical pedagogy in less-than-ideal circumstances.

For many, if not most academic librarians, library instruction sessions also take place in less-than-ideal conditions such as the much-maligned one-shot. Sometimes instruction takes place well before the students have even

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received the assignment or in lecture halls of sixty or more students. Faculty might want students to just learn what they need for the research paper and not necessarily anything else. Institutional contexts may vary from disinterest in to open hostility toward critical pedagogy and librarianship.

This workbook activity will help you think through and identify strategies for incorporating critical information literacy in these sorts of situations that are frequently out of our control, much as my eleventh grade American history teacher worked to instill critical thinking in a context that worked against it. When reflecting on my own library instruction sessions and specifically those sessions in which I have to subtly bring in critical librarianship, I realized that my strategies echoed those of my high school teacher; like her, I emphasize context, constructedness, and choices. In drawing attention to these aspects of the textbook, she created a critical distance between the textbook and notions of authority and truth, which allowed us to question the textbook and, ultimately, other aspects of the social world. This, to my mind, is the endgame of critical pedagogy—not to inculcate a specific set of views within students, but to empower them to ask questions and construct their own viewpoints and meanings.

What might this look like in a library instruction session? One professor I work with every semester asks me to emphasize that *Wikipedia* is “bad” so that her students don’t use it in their papers. Rather than saying that, I stress the context. They are students at a university and, while *Wikipedia* is completely appropriate for understanding regional pizza variations, it is not the best resource for writing papers for this course. The larger lesson for students here is that they need to understand the context and the rules of that context. This does not mean they always have to follow the rules, but they can articulate them, question them rather than simply accept their authority, and follow or challenge them strategically.

Another example from my own teaching foregrounds constructedness and choice. I am frequently asked by a variety of professors to “show the library catalog” so that their students can locate books. The library catalog can be frustrating to search, due to the limited amount of metadata about each book and due to the fact that most subject headings do not remotely resemble the way we speak or write. In teaching students how to use the catalog, I emphasize its constructedness; the catalog uses its own language, and if we use that language to search, we will get better results. Its language is not authoritative, and students aren’t wrong in using natural language to search. People chose to use these words to describe these concepts. They are not the only or even the best way to describe concepts, but they are what we currently have to work with. Again, students become aware of and able to effectively use subject headings but are allowed to question and challenge them.

Outcomes

This workbook activity will help academic librarians develop strategies for bringing critical information literacy into instructional sessions that do not focus on or emphasize it.

Questions

Table 26.1 lists some of the common topics academic librarians are asked to cover in instructional sessions. For each topic, try to identify how focusing on the context, constructedness, or choices embedded in the topic might allow you to incorporate critical information literacy.

	Context	Constructedness	Choices
Developing search terms			
Boolean logic			
Keyword searching			
Controlled vocabulary			
Controlled vocabulary searching			
Library catalog			
Article databases			
Wikipedia/Google/"the Internet" is bad/wrong			
What is citation?			
Plagiarism			
What is a primary source?			
Finding primary sources			
Finding an item with a citation			
Citation styles—APA, MLA, etc.			
Scholarly vs. popular			
You have to use scholarly sources			

Conclusions

This might seem like a silly and perhaps inconsequential activity, but slightly modifying your instructional approach doesn't take a lot of effort and can have a large impact. This strategy allows you to do the work that is asked of you while still informing that work with your commitment to critical librarianship. Ultimately, it may even influence faculty viewpoints and requests; the professor who once asked me to talk about how *Wikipedia* is "bad" is completely happy with my explanation that it's just not appropriate for this specific context and even jumps in to emphasize that point. You will never reach all faculty, and this strategy does not demand that you concede defeat and not try for richer critical information literacy classroom experiences. Students, though, sometimes just want to know what they need for this paper, and professors sometimes just want their students to use the library catalog and not *Wikipedia*. This tactic lets you throw some carrots of critical information literacy into the brownie batter.