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**How to Be a #critlib:
Reflections on Implementing Critical Theory in Practice**

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Abstract

In recent years groups of librarians have increasingly become interested in the use and implementation of critical theories in librarianship. As a result of these discourses, there has been a growth in engagement with topics such as social justice, race, gender and sexuality which previously had been perceived as taboo or outside of the scope of the field. Social media, such as Twitter, has been integral in mobilizing knowledge and transnational heurism associated with this scholarly movement. One problem with this movement is that many librarians feel that they do not have the foreknowledge necessary to properly engage in these scholarly and professional dialogues. The purpose of this paper is to serve as an introduction to these spaces. Our hope is that through exposure to these spaces, librarians and library students will be more likely to engage in these spaces and discussion.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing interest among groups of librarians in the use and implementation of critical theories in librarianship, reflective of similar trends in archival studies and other disciplines. As a result of these discourses, there has been a growth in engagement with topics such as social justice, race, gender, and sexuality that had previously been perceived as taboo or outside the scope of the field. Social media, such as Twitter, have been integral in mobilizing knowledge and transnational heurism associated with this scholarly movement. For instance, there is an extremely active Twitter hashtag, #critlib, under which weekly discussions occur regarding different topics of critical librarianship. We are excited for this embracing of

critical theories within librarianship, but are troubled that many librarians feel that they do not have the foreknowledge necessary to properly engage in these scholarly and professional dialogues. In our personal and professional experiences we have been privy to anecdotal stories regarding librarians unfamiliar with critical theory finding this scholarly subgroup intimidating and unwelcoming.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce critical librarianship to those who are unfamiliar with its origins. Our hope is that by exposing more librarians and library students to the world of critical librarianship, we can encourage current and future professionals to be, in differing extents, critical in information workplace practices. In order to do this, we have presented our answers to a variety of questions that can serve as an introduction to critical librarianship. We begin with the straightforward question: “What is critical librarianship?” in order to give a brief description of the discipline. Next, we ask: “Where does critical librarianship take place?” which leads to a discussion of spaces which have been integral to the development of critical librarianship. Our third question asks “Who practices critical librarianship and how can it be implemented?” which allows us to examine a number of spaces in which critical librarianship is already taking place.

What is Critical Librarianship?

Critical librarianship, or critlib, is “a movement of library workers dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries” (“about / join the discussion | critlib,” n.d.). According to Elaine Harger, this is a movement engaged in exposing the systems of oppression which the library consciously or unconsciously supports; a movement which promotes the library as a “means of liberation for individuals, communities and society at large” (Hudson, 2012). This definition does not provide the clearest picture of what constitutes critlib. Critical librarianship is a rather homogenous term without a specific definition because critlib moves into so many different scholarly areas. It might be easier to grasp critlib in terms of how it is practiced. Critlib is associated with making the library more inclusive for all community members, including burgeoning readers, those who do not understand the library or don't like books (DeFaveri, n.d.), people facing homelessness (Brian Louie, 2013), and people living with disabilities (Hitselberger, 2016). Critlib is also critical of the hegemony of whiteness in LIS (Angela, 2015) and the role that gender plays in the library environment (Millet, 2015).

Where does critlib take place?

Like any burgeoning scholarly field, critlib is dependent on its community of scholars and practitioners. That community has grown through the use of social media – particularly Twitter – and through discourse at conferences. Here we present a brief overview of those venues.

Twitter

The largest (in terms of participants) forum associated with critlib exists on Twitter. The hashtag #Critlib has a numerous and active following, with biweekly discussions on alternating Mondays and Tuesdays. The first of these discussions looked at critical pedagogy, and the methods in which librarians could incorporate critical pedagogy into the various aspects of librarianship (Pagowsky, 2014). Since then, these discussions have evolved to cover a number of diverse topics, including maker spaces, serving users who are experiencing homelessness, cataloguing, and interrogating whiteness in library and information studies. Summaries of these discussions are available on the critlib website¹. As Pawagowsky (2014) states, these are not topics that are easy to talk about professionally, especially for those without job security in the neo-liberalized academy. The Twitter discussions open up a space for librarians to support others with similar convictions.

Conferences

In addition to its online presence, critlib has made itself known through discussion at conferences and the in the course of colloquia and symposiums. The conferences have included the Unconferences². The first critlib Unconference took place before the Association of College & Research Librarians meetings in Portland, Oregon, in March 2015. “What happens will be determined by who shows up and everyone is expected to participate. So it should be relevant and fun” (“Critlib Unconference 2015,” 2015). A second Unconference took place before the American Library Association conference in San Francisco in June 2015. In addition to these Unconferences, critlib has been the focus of such events as The Critical Libraries and Pedagogy Symposium, which examined critical pedagogy in academic libraries and teaching faculty (“Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium,” n.d.); The Social Justice and Libraries Open Conference, which looked at ways that library students and staff can work to dismantle structural oppression through the use of critique and engagement with community (Libraries, 2016); and the Critical Librarianship Workshop, which promised “two days of intensive reading and discussion of critical theory and librarianship” (Drabinski, Hudson, McElroy, Nicholson, & Sloniowski, 2016).

Litwin Books is hosting its second Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies Colloquium in April 2016 (“Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies Colloquium,” 2016). The first of these events took place in 2014 at the University of Toronto. These colloquia are attempts to interrogate how information studies can respond to the “challenges posed by critical perspectives on gender and sexuality” (Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies Colloquium, 2014). Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) hosted a conference on Academic Librarians and Critical Practice in May/June 2015 (“CAPAL Conference 2015,” 2015). These events suggest a growing trend towards looking at where critical theory and library science interact. As people

¹The conversations questions are available here: <http://critlib.org/twitter-chats/previous-twitter-chats/>

²The Unconference website describes an Unconference as having “No predetermined schedule, presentations or panels.”

move towards more critical discourses and dialogues, the subject matter becomes less taboo, and allows for more discussion and growth to take place.

Who practices Critical Librarianship and how can it be implemented?

Critlib can take place in any library, and can be initiated by any librarian or staff member. In this section, we analyze some of the ways that critlib has influenced and is influenced by critical pedagogy, public libraries, academic libraries, and special libraries. This analysis is by no means comprehensive,³ but it is an attempt to look at some of the ways critical librarianship can be practiced.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy informs the work of critlib in various library institutions. A critical pedagogy for libraries relies on an understanding of the library as a space of community empowerment and transformation (Riedler & Eryaman, 2010). This supports the practice of lifelong learning in conjunction with community-based learning approaches. Critical pedagogy requires that positivistic theories of objectivity and neutrality be discarded in favour of discursive spaces that allow for the library to better serve its patrons' needs by working collaboratively with them (Riedler & Eryaman, 2010). What we hope to stress throughout this section is the potential for the library to be a space of empowerment and transformation within the community.

There are, of course, some more specific examples of how critical pedagogy can be embraced within various institutions. Many librarians in academic institutions also teach, and in the teaching roles critical pedagogy can be of significant importance. Critical pedagogy can be emphasized in MLIS and MIS degree programs. Furthermore, critical pedagogy can be seen in the teaching that takes place in public libraries at events like computer workshops (American Library Association, n.d.). In each of these spaces, the ability to empower and transform is present.

Public Libraries

Of the various types of library systems, the public library is perhaps the one where critlib is most easily seen. The public library serves diverse communities, such as people facing homelessness, LGBTQ youth and families, people with disabilities, and immigrant families. Libraries in the public realm are able to serve those who feel excluded through the development of community-led library services (Somers & Williment, 2011). If the library truly wants to embrace everyone, it must make sure that everyone feels included (DeFaveri, n.d.). In this section we present just a

³Such an attempt would likely result in a fully fleshed-out book. (C.F. Leckie, Given, & Buschman, 2010; Accardi, Drabinski, & Kumbier, 2010)

few of the underserved communities that critlib strives to serve, and examine the intersectional nature of these groups.

DeFaveri (n.d.) makes the case that a major barrier for many potential library users is their belief that they are welcome in the library. She suggests that there are numerous groups for whom this holds true. Among these groups are people facing homelessness. With the reality of higher housing costs and a lack of affordable options in many urban areas, more and more people fall into this group. This reality, coupled with neo-liberal austerity measures which cut funding to shelters, has turned the library into a de facto day shelter for many homeless patrons (Siemer, 2009). Unfortunately, some libraries have instituted policies which turn these patrons away (Siemer, 2009), but those within the critlib movement are fighting back against this by exploring better ways to serve homeless patrons (c.f. Brian Louie, 2013).

People who are homeless are by no means a homogenous group; they are often members of other populations that are structurally discriminated against. According to a study done by the Williams Institute in 2012, approximately 40% of youth who experience homelessness are also LGBTQ individuals (“America’s Shame,” 2012). Critlib strives to determine the ways in which we can better serve these populations. While not directly involved in the critlib movement, Woelfer and Hendry (2009; 2012) present the library as a place that can work as a stabilizing force in the lives of younger people who are experiencing homelessness.

With both of these groups⁴, the critical librarian in the public library has the ability to make the library a space where empowerment and transformation are fostered. Whether by providing a space for people to stay inside and out of the harsh weather or by providing a more stable foundation for someone in unstable circumstances (Woelfer and Hendry, 2009), the critical librarian attempts to turn the library into a space that better serves its community.

Academic Libraries

Critlib can serve a number of functions in academic libraries. Among these are an embrace of critical theory, information literacy, academic freedom, human rights, and critiques of neo-liberalism (Garcia, n.d.). The academic library, possibly more than any other, contains the potential for creation and discovery (Radford 1992). In order to build a foundation for creation and discovery, critlib can help those working in the academic sphere with challenging institutional gender and race norms (Bourg, 2014; Hathcock, 2015; Honma, 2005; Sadler & Bourg, 2015). Critlib can help confront the institutional and personal biases which are present in academia in order to create more inclusive spaces.

⁴We want to acknowledge that these are by no means the only two groups that the library serves. Immigrant and refugee communities, people with disabilities, First Nations communities, and others are all underserved. The example we used simply presents a foray into one potential of critlib.

One way that academic libraries have progressed is by making information more accessible. UBC's Crane Library is an example of this. The Crane Library provides audio books and other resources for people with visual impairment (Montgomery, 2014). Another example of progress at UBC can be found in the X̣wi7̣x̣wa Library and the creation of the Brian Deer classification system. The Brian Deer classification system serves as a better representation of Indigenous epistemologies, which allows for better access to Indigenous collections (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015). While neither of these examples represents a perfect solution to the difficulties faced by the groups they represent, both represent a positive movement within libraries that has been influenced by the values of empowerment and transformation that are central to critical pedagogy.

Special libraries

Health librarianship is one type of special librarianship that has a paradoxical history with regard to critlib. In the early 2000s, two groundbreaking articles (Flemming & Sullivant, 2000; Perry, 2001) set out to define a subfield of critical health librarianship regarding LGBT health. Two articles discussed different information services available in the early 2000s, along with methods of engaging the LGBT community; furthermore, the scholarship discussed the uniqueness of queer health. However, this cutting edge and timely scholarship reached a standstill until recently.

Currently, health librarianship is experiencing a revival with regard to critlib-associated LGBTQ discourses. Morris & Riberto (Accepted) and Fikar & Keith (2004) produced scholarship concerning the role of queerness in information seeking. Prior to this scholarship, there had not been much recognition that LGBTQ people might have unique information-seeking needs due to sociocultural stigmatizations. Concurrently, Canadian health librarians have been pushing for recognition that LGBTQ health information needs constitute a topic area needing further attention (Morris & Hawkins, 2016).

Conclusions

Critical Librarianship provides exciting prospects for librarianship in general. Our hope is that, through this paper, more current and future librarians will engage with critlib in any of the spaces where it is taking place. In this paper we answered a couple of very broad questions: 1. What is Critical Librarianship?; 2. Where does critlib take place?; and 3. Who practices Critical Librarianship and how can it be implemented?. Through these questions we examined the spaces – online and at conferences – where discussions of critlib take place. Furthermore, we examined a few of the ways in which critlib intersects with critical pedagogy, and in public, academic, and special libraries. Through this discussion, we hope that we can make people more comfortable with critlib.

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