

Public Praxis: A Vision for Critical Information Literacy in Public Libraries

On January 10, 1989, the American Library Association unveiled a new mission for libraries in its *Final Report from the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy*. The report begins:

Producing [an information literate] citizenry will require that schools and colleges appreciate and integrate the concept of information literacy into their learning programs and that they play a leadership role in equipping individuals and institutions to take advantage of the opportunities inherent within the information society. (ALA, n.p.)

Indeed, both the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)—the “school” and “college” divisions of ALA—have spent a great deal of time and money on information literacy within the last two decades, producing scholarship, developing competency standards and vigorously promoting the concept. The AASL and ACRL websites yield myriad information literacy toolkits, tutorials, and resources for the curious practitioner. Moreover, ACRL has recently established an accreditation program to formally evaluate the information literacy programs offered by schools and universities.

Yet the Public Library Association (PLA) is eerily quiet on the subject. The phrase “information literacy” can be found only twice on its website—once in a 2008 PowerPoint presentation about partnerships between school and public libraries (PLA, 2008), and again in a thirty-year strategic plan from 2005 in which information literacy is glossed within the “Literate Nation” goal, wherein PLA seeks to “be a valued partner of public libraries’ initiatives to create a nation of readers” (PLA, 2005, 14). Likewise, PLA’s professional journal, *Public Libraries Quarterly*, has published only five articles that contain the phrase “information literacy.” A handful of writers, among them Harding, Hart, Jackson, Lewis, Walter and Virkus, have chronicled this dearth of literature and research on the subject of public libraries and information literacy (Harding).

But why have public libraries chosen to be silent while other kinds of libraries are making an information literacy ruckus? Perhaps there is too much confusion surrounding the concept itself, leading public libraries to believe that information literacy is only relevant to institutions where the processes of information consumption and production are

formalized. In this paper, I will argue that information literacy is actually beautifully relevant to the mission of public libraries; it is a goal that can sharply focus public libraries' efforts to serve their communities at a time when focus is sorely needed. Then, in the second section of this paper, I will engage new literacy studies and critical literacy theory to suggest a model of critical information literacy that will be especially meaningful to public libraries. Finally, in the last section, I will look at some challenges public libraries might face when trying to integrate this model of critical information literacy into their overall mission.

Before I go any further, however, I want to clarify what I mean when I say "information literacy." Twenty years ago, ALA wrote the by now canonical library definition 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" (ALA, n.p.). This definition has evolved within the ACRL literature to its present condensed incarnation: "Information Literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information" (ACRL, n.p.)

While this definition provides a useful starting point for understanding information literacy, a number of writers have pointed out its shortcomings. Michelle Holschuh Simmons writes that it "lacks a critical element in which assumptions about information are called into question. When information literacy is explained in terms of a set of skills, it can easily be reduced to 'a neutral, technological skill that is seen as merely functional or performative'" (Simmons, p. 299). Alan Luke and Cushla Kapitzke argue that "the learner is conceptualized as the passive recipient of information. No mention is made of students as active agents in the production of knowledge" (Luke & Kapitzke, p. 11). And Troy Swanson comments that: "before we train students to use search tools, before we send them to books, periodicals, or Web sites, we need to teach them *about* information. What is it? How is it created? Where is it stored?" (Swanson, p. 1). Having duly noted the confusion and lack of clarity about the meaning of "information literacy," James Elmborg offers an alternative definition with richer critical possibilities. To paraphrase slightly, Elmborg writes that "... information literacy is the ability to read, interpret, and produce information appropriate and valued within [a given community]" (Elmborg, p. 195). It is this last definition of information literacy that foregrounds my thinking on the subject.

Why Information Literacy Should Be the Heart of the Public Library

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey wrote passionately about lifelong education. He argued that the point of education was not to fill up students' heads with names and numbers, but rather to teach students *how* to learn so that their intellectual growth could continue throughout their lives:

Our net conclusion is that life is development, and that developing, growing, is life. Translated into its educational equivalents, that means (i) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and (ii) that the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming. (Dewey, n.p.)

Dewey viewed society as mobile, rapidly evolving, constantly in flux. In this sort of dynamic environment, it is impossible to predict what a student might need to know in ten, twenty or thirty-five years' time. The best an educator can do is to teach students how to remain curious and think for themselves as independent lifelong learners. This is what Dewey called "progressive education," and he thought this was the key to engaging the citizenry in democratic participation. In fact, these goals are not so very far from the aims of information literacy instruction, which seeks to teach elementary, secondary and college students how to read, interpret and create information in its many forms. In her article "Information Literacy Experts or Expats?" from the 2007 SLANZA conference, Pru Mitchell writes that, "Our role is to develop learners who can adapt their existing knowledge to a new situation—which is what they will be doing for the rest of their lives" (Mitchell, p. 6). Unlike traditional history or math lessons, which teach the outcome of the Napoleonic wars and the sum of 4 and 7, information literacy instruction can teach students how to engage with information in a society where information—and its formats—are constantly in flux.

Yet what happens to students when they are no longer affiliated with an institution of higher learning? And what about those who never went to college in the first place, either by choice or by circumstance? Elmborg boldly asserts that, "School literacies are special. Schools confer social power..." (Elmborg, p. 195). While I agree that this is true, I do want to challenge the social structures that make this true. When Dewey envisioned an engaged citizenry, I don't believe he was thinking only about college graduates. But we see this educational divide play out all too often in U.S. elections, in which a privileged, college-educated elite is regularly at odds with a popular voting base. I posit that this schism will only worsen unless we, as a society, make a commitment to connecting all citizens with the opportunity to be information literate. In order for a democratic society to function in the

way that Dewey imagined, the entire voting public needs to be actively engaged with intellectual growth and information—not just an institutionally educated elite.

Dewey believed that once students left the educational system and all the supports that this system entails—including instructors, technologies, student organizations and libraries—students would simply need to take initiative for their own learning. But without support from her secondary school or college, it can be difficult for the former student to fully continue her intellectual growth. She might not have access to the computers, software applications, internet connection, books, articles, databases and mentors that could help her nurture this goal. Furthermore, as new technologies continually change the ways that information is stored, retrieved and created, she might be unsure how to fully engage with information in its new forms. Jane Harding, one of a few writers who address the subject of public libraries and information literacy, argues that,

Schools and universities can provide information literacy support and instruction during years of formal education but do not serve individuals in the subsequent years of informal or self-directed study or life. As information literacy is a lifelong skill, public libraries are perfectly positioned to be a 'constant presence throughout people's lives,' and able to provide ongoing support to individuals in developing information literacy skills. (Harding, n.p.)

Luckily for the former student, the public library is uniquely positioned to help her connect with information and continue her intellectual growth beyond elementary school, high school and college.

Part of this important role is that public libraries absolutely must introduce citizens to new technologies for storing, retrieving and creating information. James Gee has written about literacy and semiotic domains in his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*: “By a semiotic domain I mean any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meaning.” He gives some examples: “cellular biology, postmodern literary criticism, first-person-shooter video games, high-fashion advertisements, Roman Catholic theology...” (Gee, p. 18). Gee argues that the most useful kind of learning teaches students how to understand the logic of various semiotic domains so that they may “read” and “write”—or consume and produce—content within these domains. Likewise, as modes of information storage, retrieval and creation evolve, the public library can address information literacy by initiating citizens into these changing semiotic domains. As a starting point, public libraries can provide access to technologies that might not be affordable to some citizens on their own, and libraries can

also offer instruction in how to use these technologies. Two hundred years ago, these tools were books, newspapers, maps and government documents. Now they are computers, word processors, internet browsers, search engines, video and sound editing software, blogs, wikis and other Web 2.0 applications. Who knows what they will be in another two hundred years? When public libraries give citizens the means to learn the basic grammar of these information technologies, the doors to new semiotic domains will be opened to them, including those that are the most highly valued within a society. In the following section, however, I explore some of the limitations of technology instruction.

Making It Critical

Anne Wysocki and Johndon Johnson-Eilola challenge some basic assumptions about literacy in general and “technological literacy” in particular in their article, “Blinded by the Letter: Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?” They quote Glenda Hull: “We think of reading and writing as generic, the intellectual equivalent of all-purpose flour, and we assume that, once mastered, these skills can and will be used in any context for any purpose, and that they are ideologically neutral and value-free.” Continuing in their own words, they write:

When we speak of ‘technological literacy,’ then, or of ‘computer literacy’ or of ‘[fill-in-the-blank] literacy,’ we probably mean that we wish to give others some basic, neutral, context-less set of skills whose acquisition will bring the bearer economic and social goods and privileges. (Wysocki & Johnson-Eilola, p. 352)

Writers such as Mary Louise Pratt, Renee Hobbs, Brian Street, and other members of the New London Group have also contested the idea that neutral, value-free literacy is possible. Noting the need for “bold theoretical models that recognise the central role of power relations in literacy practices” (Street, p. 430), Street contrasts an autonomous model of literacy with an ideological model. The autonomous model is “independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character” (Ibid., p. 431). In other words, if a public library were to teach information literacy skills to job-seekers such as reading, word processing, e-mailing, web browsing and resume posting, the autonomous model of literacy would predict that the consequences will be the same for every person—for example, each will increase his knowledge, write an effective resume, network with local businesses, locate job postings, and eventually secure employment. However, the ideological model acknowledges that literacy is inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society.

In recognition of the ideological model of literacy, the public library might ask *why* the job-seeking process alienates some members of the community and then work to unravel these structures in order to find more meaningful ways to raise the employment rate. In other words, the new literacy studies warn us that we cannot assume that public library users will become fully engaged and empowered members of a society, or that they will enjoy economic and social goods and privileges, just because they have been given access to the latest *tools* for storing, retrieving and producing information. Libraries that simply offer classes on how to use new technologies aren't doing enough.

This idea has its origins in the work of Paolo Freire, who wrote that educators who “deposit” knowledge and skills into their students are reinforcing oppressive social paradigms, extinguishing their students’ creative powers and causing anguish due to inaction. Freire believed that true education and liberation happen only through action and reflection, or what he called *praxis*: “Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis; the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, p. 73). He envisioned teachers and students as mutual partners, or “teacher-students,” with neither claiming authority over the other. The role of the “teacher” in this relationship is not to deposit information, but to pose problems of human beings in their relations with the world. If public libraries recognize that information literacy is not a neutral skill that can be “deposited” into library patrons, they must take up this challenge as information literacy educators—to become partners with the members of their communities, pose problems, and act upon the world in order to change it. Problem-posing public libraries will actively seek out issues of concern within the community and create spaces for these conversations to happen. They will address controversial topics and ask challenging questions. These conversations can include library-sponsored events, panels, conferences, speakers, even blogs and wikis—any forum that will include community members in the exchange of ideas and give them the opportunity to pose questions and problems, too.

John Doherty and Kevin Ketchner have written about the potential of critical information literacy to empower the “intentional learner.” Influenced by Freire’s conception of “teacher-students,” Doherty and Ketchner claim that, “Librarians are guilty of a patriarchal and privileged positioning of their expertise in relation to the users they serve” (Doherty & Ketchner, p. 1). Libraries have traditionally seen themselves as the “gatekeepers” of

information, much like the librarian in the medieval monastery of Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose*. Imagining that they have special abilities to judge the quality of information, libraries pass this judgment onto their users, selecting primarily resources that are peer-reviewed, accredited, authoritative, scholarly, structured, commercial and copyrighted. Doherty and Ketchner argue that libraries must give up their position of bibliographic privilege and approach users on their own terms, instead. In some communities, this might mean using Google, Wikipedia and Facebook as instruments to pose problems and uncover hidden voices. In his example about a library that is exploring tensions between land development and sacred sites, Doherty writes in another article that, "Critical information literacy uncovers [the oppressive] voice and asks the student where she would find the Other voices. Thus, websites, oral histories, student interviews, personal stories, homemade videos, ceremonial 'texts' and other resources could enter the dialogue the student is now conducting between herself and society's assumptions" (Doherty, p. 6). Although this particular example is about a student in an academic library, Doherty's model rings true for public libraries, too. If they are willing to come to their community members on their own terms, public libraries will empower intentional learners to be critically engaged with technology, knowledge and power.

To more clearly illustrate what public libraries can do to engage their communities in critical information literacy and praxis, I offer the example of Mpumalanga Provincial Library Services in rural South Africa (de Jager & Nassimbeni). When the province of Mpumalanga was established in South Africa in 1996, public library services in the rural regions were "either very limited or nonexistent," and funding for such projects was scarce. In 2006, UNESCO's *Information for All Programme* provided funding for a project that would "raise awareness of information literacy in the public library service and achieve this by working with some 30 public library workers in Mpumalanga to improve their information service delivery and raise the profile of the public library" (Ibid., p. 316).

With two information literacy researchers and practitioners—Karin de Jager and Mary Nassimbeni—at the helm, select public library workers in Mpumalanga participated in a series of workshops that introduced them to the theoretical concept of information literacy and provided them with the opportunity to design and implement a practical information literacy campaign for their library. In the beginning, the library workers' overwhelming

conception of their role in information literacy was “to show people ‘how this library works,’ and teaching people how to find or fetch information” (Ibid., p. 317).

At the onset of the program, the library workers identified areas of intervention in serious socio-economic problems such as adult illiteracy, adolescent drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, food security and the AIDS pandemic. Throughout the course of the workshops, these are some of the information literacy campaigns they developed:

- HIV/AIDS information and sources of assistance
- Computer skills training to enhance employability
- Career information and advice for school leavers and unemployed youth
- Literacy training for illiterate caregivers and other adults
- Substance abuse awareness among juvenile offenders in prison
- Public library and farm school partnerships
- Growing vegetables in the public library grounds in partnership with local schools and NGOs
- Claiming cultural identity by celebrating Africa

During their campaigns, some of the groups noticed immediate changes within the community due to “active involvement in real and energizing activities.” For instance, the groups providing HIV/AIDS information said that they could now refer people with actual health problems to appropriate caregivers and clinics, and the group that showed people how to grow their own vegetables on the library grounds remarked that participating community members now knew how to prepare seed beds and ‘got tomatoes for free.’ Every group found that their campaigns had made a difference in themselves and the way in which they were doing their jobs.

At the conclusion of the project, the two researchers who had facilitated the workshops questioned whether these campaigns really counted as “Information Literacy,” or whether they had “moved well away from information literacy into what may loosely be termed the realm of social upliftment” (Ibid., p. 320). After all, the library workers had been introduced to traditionally accepted views of information literacy, including Eisenberg’s *Big Six* model, yet they had still deviated in significant ways. Ultimately, de Jager and Nassimbeni concluded that

By doing so, they created their own frameworks which were more rooted in the socio-economic condition of their libraries. They foregrounded the social contexts of their interventions by portraying their understanding of the power of information literacy to impact on their own social problems, such as drug abuse, food security and the AIDS pandemic. In our presentation, we had privileged a particular conception of information literacy which was resisted by the participants who generated alternative conceptions which were socially situated in their communities rather than an idealized and normative vision of the library as classroom. (Ibid.)

Troy Swanson has written that if we truly practice critical literacy, or critical *information* literacy in this case study of Mpumalanga, “we must be prepared to hear what students are saying and not what we would prefer them to be saying” (Swanson, p. 264). Although the project participants strayed from the researchers’ initial agenda, the Mpumalanga project was successful because it engaged public library workers with what they perceived as the most important information needs in their communities and encouraged them to deal with these needs by using the library as a focus. Indeed, in pursuing information literacy, public libraries should aim to *be information-rich environments* that act as a *forum to discuss the nature of information* and a *focus for public praxis*. In the words of de Jager and Nassimbeni, “If the ultimate objective of information literacy is the informed citizen who is able to access appropriate information and engage with it meaningfully, there is no doubt that these public library workers [in Mpumalanga] have indeed made a difference in the information literacy of their communities” (de Jager & Nassimbeni, p. 321).

There Will Be Challenges

If public libraries are to embrace critical information literacy, they must first forfeit their identities as neutral information receptacles. Unfortunately, librarians often conflate the two ideas of intellectual freedom and neutrality, leading many of them to believe that passivity is inherent to their professional culture. They struggle to see themselves as teachers and advocates (Harding). But public librarians must become more assertive if they are going to empower members of their communities to become fully engaged participants in a democratic society. They must be willing to engage people, and to learn from them in return. However, in doing so librarians must be careful to distinguish between assertiveness and authoritativeness. Freire believed that authority destroys creativity, and that critical dialogue is only possible between teacher-students and their peers. An assertive yet non-authoritative teacher will initiate conversations and listen with a flexible mind. Indeed, public libraries may actually be better suited than school or college libraries to stimulate critical information literacy, because they have no formalized system of information production and consumption: there are no grades, no test scores, no credits, no degrees and no tenure. The key for public libraries is to remain non-authoritative while still taking action for social change.

Public libraries in the United States also face a “poorly-defined and obstacle-strewn path” to information literacy (Harding, n.p.). Whereas the AASL and ACRL have clear leadership in this area, the PLA has struggled to define a coherent strategy for promoting information literacy. In 2005, the PLA devised a Strategic Plan with the assistance of Tecker Consultants, L.L.C. Part of the strategy was to identify a 10-30 year “Big Audacious Goal”; the PLA settled on: “Make the library card the most valued card in every wallet” (PLA, 2005, p. 4). This reminds me of similar plans I’ve heard to “be the most popular player on the football team” or “have the most friends on Facebook.” The rest of the PLA’s Strategic Plan is about the same, with the emphasis on garnering fans and financial contributions. While I agree that economic health is essential to the prosperity of any public library, I also think that these goals lack a true core and focus. Perhaps a more visionary “Big Audacious Goal” that could unite public libraries would be to “Make the public library a central agent in empowering an informed and democratic society.”

The U.S. can also look to other countries that have more successfully integrated information literacy into the mission of their public libraries—Australia, Canada, and especially Finland, Norway and Sweden (IFLA; Aabø). The Finnish Library Act, for instance, has influenced other Scandinavian countries; it asserts that

The public library’s objective is to ensure the population has equal opportunity to access materials recorded in all ways, from the traditional to the post modern and for ‘personal cultivation, for literary and cultural pursuits, for continuous development of knowledge, personal skills and civic skills, for internationalization, and for lifelong learning’ (Aabø, p. 206).

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has also embraced an information literacy objective, and has published a wonderful and stirring manifesto of the role public libraries can play in the “continuous process of forming whole human beings—their knowledge and aptitudes, as well as the critical faculty and the ability to act” (IFLA, n.p.). A summary cannot do it justice; I encourage you to read the remarks in their entirety on the IFLA website (please see “References” for the URL).

Finally, the term “information literacy” itself may be problematic. Harding indicates that “information literacy” is often interchangeable with “lifelong learning” and “user education” in the public library literature, even though she argues that these three concepts are inherently distinct—although related. Could it be that public libraries are threatened by the term “information literacy” and all that it invokes? While many public libraries are

progressively embracing the internet, eBook readers, social networking technologies, graphic novels and gadgets, they have also simultaneously sown a mania for book-based literacy. As I mentioned in the introduction to this paper, one of PLA's major goals in its Strategic Plan is called "Literate Nation: ...to create a nation of readers" (PLA, 2005, p. 14); likewise, "Every Child Ready to Read" is a major PLA advocacy issue. In their community outreach programs, many public libraries emphasize book clubs, story time, summer reading programs, and remedies to cure "reluctant readers." While I applaud the PLA's efforts to stimulate book-based literacy, this may be interfering with public libraries' willingness to embrace information literacy. Whether or not the two concepts can be reconciled is a dense and complex question; Christine Pawley discusses this in her 2003 article, "Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling" (Pawley).

But Harding assures us that public libraries are also making progress towards information literacy. Many public libraries offer ICT / Technology access and training, they address information literacy ad hoc through reference interviews, and they are forming partnerships with other organizations that are interested in establishing information literacy programs. The seeds of critical information literacy have been planted for inspired public librarians who are willing to lead and advocate.

A Few More Thoughts

Public libraries are among the most important places for the members of a given community to connect with information, in order that they may read, interpret, and produce information that will be appropriate and valuable to the community. By making information literacy a core mission, public libraries can reach out to *all* who wish to be lifelong learners rather than just the institutionally educated elite, and in so doing nurture democracies. However, public libraries must recognize that literacy is neither neutral nor without context, and that they cannot simply "deposit" information literacy skills into the members of their communities. Once they have introduced their communities to new modes of information storage, retrieval and creation, public libraries must then pose problems and act upon the world in order to change it.

I have mentioned information "creation" several times throughout this paper, and I want to close by emphasizing its importance to critical information literacy. When the creation of

information is democratized, it challenges long-held assumptions about the authoritative nature of certain kinds of privileged information. An exciting place for public libraries to start is by introducing their communities to Web 2.0 technologies. Julie McLeod and Sheri Vasinda have made the case for why Web 2.0 technologies are so perfect for engaging in critical information literacy:

Web 1.0 was one-way communication, a lecture or a monologue... [but] Web 2.0 can be compared to a dialogue, an engaging class discussion or two-way communication... Viewing their own text as dynamic allows students to broadly conceive of text critically, as a dialogue rather than a monologue. (McLeod & Vasinda, pp. 260, 271)

Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola, too, discuss a spread-out, flattened info-scape, in which the thing that matters is not having perfect information, but rather juggling, arranging, and rearranging the data in a new way. And Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel have also written about creating information by blogging, e-zining, texting, chatting, mem-ing, hacking, podcasting, etc. (Lankshear & Knobel, pp. 26-49). I challenge public libraries to engage their communities with Web 2.0 technologies and ignite critical consciousness. If they are able to do this, libraries may at long last emerge as “content creators, rather than content hoarders” (Doherty, p. 7).

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