Critical information literacy and non-traditional research methods: a case study of practice-led research and music students

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Abstract

The literature on critical information literacy is a new and burgeoning field. However, there are intersections that are still underrepresented. This paper focuses on one of these areas: critical information literacy and non-traditional research.

After a discussion around critical information literacy and critical pedagogy, the paper then examines potential connections between critical information literacy and non-traditional research. These concepts will be explored using the critical pedagogical tool of praxis; the combination of theory, action, and reflection; and includes both theoretical discussion and a practical case study. The case study examines a critical information literacy session on practice-led research delivered to undergraduate music students. This paper hopes to spark a conversation around the possibilities that a critical approach can open for libraries; to advocate for more diverse and inclusive practices and to deepen the support we provide to our users.

Introduction

A librarian's work is constantly morphing to meet the diverse and shifting needs of our users. Information literacy emerged out of this shifting focus in librarianship and is

continuing to evolve. Part of this evolution is the move towards critical information literacy (Tewell, 2018, p. 10). There is a general consensus that critical skills are vital; not only in fostering lifelong learning and active citizenship but also in preparing our users and ourselves to meet future challenges. To meet these future challenges, both users and librarians need to examine and critique the often-oppressive systems and structures that surround libraries, and information in general, in order to identify inequities and move beyond them (Rapchak, 2021, p. 141).

Critical information literacy will look different in different contexts; our users have diverse needs and so should our approach be. This paper explores critical information literacy in an academic library setting. Fundamental aspects of critical pedagogy will also be examined as they have greatly influenced the development of critical information literacy, particularly for libraries embedded in educational institutions. The focus will then be on how and why critical information literacy can promote non-traditional research methods and outputs. Non-traditional research is a relatively new field. For many disciplines, non-traditional research methods provide a much needed and critical approach to knowledge creation; the critical approach demonstrates that methods and outputs outside traditional methods are equally valid and valued (Lyle Skains, 2018, p. 84). Whilst still a new field, libraries have been instrumental in this space. However, the literature connecting non-traditional research methods and critical information literacy is sparse. After a discussion on these various concepts, a case study of a critical information literacy session on practice-led research, a type of non-traditional research method, delivered to undergraduate music students will be examined.

To link back to the ALIA 2022 Conference theme, the concepts explored in this paper; critical information literacy, critical pedagogy, non-traditional research methods; are each vital in creating a diverse academic community. How can we embrace diversity when some of our users are disadvantaged or oppressed by the very systems we work within? As librarians it is our duty to question inequities and to advocate for change, and to do this we need to adopt a critical approach.

How does information literacy become critical?

At its core, critical information literacy connects information literacy with critical pedagogy. Finding a clear definition of information literacy can be a challenge, as many institutions and library associations have varied definitions and have changed these definitions over time to incorporate new ideas, such as critical theory. The lack of clarity in defining information literacy has been criticised by authors such as Elmborg (2006) who points to it hindering "the development of a practice that might give shape to librarianship in the academy" (p. 192). The term emerged in the US in the 1970s and was nominally formalised (despite unclear definitions) by the 1990s, particularly in academic libraries. A major factor in adopting the information literacy concept was around changing the perception and role of the librarian in a dynamic information landscape (Tewell, 2018, p. 10). Closer to home, ALIA's (2006) *Statement on information for all Australians* provides a broad definition: "to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals". From these broad definitions, we can surmise that information literacy is about enabling users to meaningfully engage with information to serve a

specific purpose or context. We will examine how the 'critical' in critical information literacy extends this concept, but before we do, let's explore critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy

Pagowsky and McElroy (2016) define critical pedagogy "as engaging in the theory and practice (or praxis) of inclusive and reflective teaching in order to broaden students' understanding of power structures within the education system and in society" (p. xvii). Critical pedagogy combines aspects of critical theory with education and sees the act of learning and teaching as being inextricably linked to the ideals of democracy and transformative social action (Darder et al., 2009, p. 2; Giroux, 2001). One of the central texts of critical pedagogy is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* published in 1970. It is particularly influential in that Freire examines concepts of liberation and transformation as they relate to adult education. Freire outlines three core ideas that continue throughout the work of other critical pedagogues:

The Banking Concept of Education

Freire (1996/1970) describes the banking concept of education as one where students are viewed as empty containers waiting to be filled by the teacher; where "students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 53). In this model of education, communication flows only in one direction. Students are passive consumers of a strict curriculum. This approach fails to take the students' prior experience and knowledge into account and will make it more difficult for students to apply and adapt this knowledge in different contexts.

Conscientization or critical consciousness

One method of overturning the banking concept is through dialogue: “only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (Freire, 1996/1970, p. 73/4). Through transformative dialogue, the power structure between the teacher and student can be understood and recalibrated so that both are learning from each other.

While critical thinking is a concept familiar to most librarians, Freire extends this by exploring conscientization or critical consciousness. Critical consciousness means that students are alive to the power structures and inequities that shape their world and see a way through to transforming these forces, rather than just adapting to them (Freire, 1996/1970, p. 47).

A dialogic approach is vital as “the banking approach to adult education...will never propose to students that they critically consider reality” (Freire, 1996/1970, p. 55)

Praxis

To be truly transformative, critical pedagogy requires both action and reflection, theory and practice. A teaching practice that is both reflective and inclusive, and relies on regular student collaboration, ensures that educators continue to adapt to students’ changing needs (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016, p. xx). Praxis is required from both the teachers and students; it is not enough to just have dialogue, both teachers and students must discuss, reflect, and act.

Before examining these concepts from a library perspective, it is worth noting two other critical pedagogues in this brief overview: bell hooks and Henry Giroux.

Author and educator bell hooks builds on Freire's work on critical pedagogy, particularly in their book *Teaching to Transgress.* Where Freire focuses on issues of class, hooks extends this by examining other intersections including race and sexism. Without considering and transgressing these other boundaries, hooks argues that education cannot be a liberatory force. hooks also writes from a more familiar, tertiary education setting, and many of their teachings are applicable to Australian library contexts. For example, hooks' focus on the use of dialogue as a tool that simultaneously builds community as well as highlighting individual voices whilst breaking down barriers and difference will be examined later on.

Finally, Henry Giroux (2001, 2002) also examines the democratic and transformative powers of education, particularly in higher education. Giroux argues that universities and libraries, as one of the few noncommodified public spheres, are spaces where individuals can become active citizens and engage with critical democracy as part of a community. They argue, however, that these spaces are continually challenged by corporate interests. Giroux (2001) also clearly aligns with the aims of critical information literacy, stating that educators have an important role to play as "transformative intellectuals [who] treat students as critical agents, question how knowledge is produced and distributed, utilize dialogue, and make knowledge meaningful, critical, and emancipatory" (p. 439). Taking this even further, Giroux (2001) questions whether educators and institutions are creating learning environments that serve to reproduce

the existing society, or if they are preparing students to be able to challenge social injustices thus creating a more democratic society (p. 445).

Can these concepts of transformative and liberatory education as elucidated by Freire, hooks, and Giroux be incorporated into our library-learner interactions?

Enter critical information literacy.

Critical information literacy

While critical pedagogy has a least a fifty-year academic history, its presence in library literature is relatively new (Keer, 2016, p. 68) and practical, “easy-to-implement instructional design” information is still lacking (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016, p. xviii). As mentioned earlier, information literacy emerged due to the shifting role of libraries and librarians. Librarians are not purely gatekeepers to a passive bank of information, indeed “Freire equates the common library functions of receiving, filing, collecting and cataloging with the banking concept” (Elmborg, 2006, p. 193). This doesn’t mean we should reject these library functions and conventions; they serve an important role. We should continue to instruct our users to navigate these. But this is where praxis comes into play; we need to be critical of these functions to ensure they serve all our users and encourage our users to be critical also. After all, education institutions and libraries are “agents of culture and shapers of student consciousness”, and with that comes significant responsibility (Elmborg, 2006, p. 193).

Librarians have often espoused neutrality and objectivity. This has made us blind to the power we possess in shaping cultural capital and is at odds with adopting a critical approach to our profession (Keer, 2016, p. 68). Libraries cannot be neutral when we,

and the larger institutions we are part of, exist within “intersecting systems of power that perpetuate policies, norms, and structures that keep some people from accessing, being represented by, and producing information” (Rapchak, 2021, p. 142). To be more inclusive, we need to recognise that neutrality is an impossibility.

Critical librarianship has made considerable strides in challenging inequities in every facet of librarianship, from collections, spaces, and services. Critical information literacy sits within this larger approach. For many librarians, their role has shifted to include a strong educator focus. Information literacy is no longer solely skills-based but needs to take context and how we construct meaning into account (Elmborg, 2006). Information literacy should empower students to understand the various systems that affect the way they access, use, value, and create information, and the social, cultural, political, and economic structures that shape that information (Rapchak, 2021, p. 143). This “critical and discursive approach to information” allows for greater engagement and agency for learners not only during their course but for lifelong learning as well (Tewell 2015, p. 25).

Perhaps there has always been a critical element to librarianship; to truly endorse lifelong learning, librarians need to encourage a level of personal agency, or critical consciousness, in our users. Critical information literacy is about being deliberate in this approach to create positive change, not only for our users, but within the profession and within the institutions in which we work. This is true now more than ever considering the commodification of information and education. Despite librarians’ best efforts and positive attitude, we work within an information landscape that poses challenges to providing equitable access to information, illustrating the “ongoing struggle to balance

the values of critical pedagogy and a neoliberal attitude toward intellectual property" (Clark, 2016, p.141). And of course, education institutions have felt these forces too (see Giroux, 2001, 2002).

The library is well positioned to counter these forces. While it may be that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks, 1994, p. 12), there is a case to made for the library being an even more radical space. Librarians are uniquely qualified in providing an important link between coursework and critical consciousness. The main reason is that we are often not marking students' work and are often not directly part of the curriculum. Often this is bemoaned by librarians; how can we prove our importance when we are not an academic requirement or hurdle? Without an assessment or grading schema how do we prove our worth? While this certainly has some drawbacks, librarians also need to embrace the positives of this unique position.

The first positive is that the power balance between librarians and students is different and perhaps less than that between teachers and students. As Keer (2016) so eloquently suggests, "librarians have an opportunity to use their contingency to accomplish critical pedagogical aims, in particular by leveraging their status as guest speakers to disrupt the classroom hierarchy" (p. 70). Being a guest in a classroom combined with not being tied to a strict curriculum allows librarians to go into more depth and to be more critical than perhaps a teacher can be. Librarians can be advocates for what is often called 'slow scholarship', an approach to the academic activities of teaching, learning and research that resists the "accelerated, fragmented time of the neoliberal university, along with its audit culture [and] intensified work order"

(Nicholson, 2016, p. 31). Slow scholarship resists the pitfalls of Freire's banking concept of education. It recognises Giroux's criticism of the creation of efficient workers for today's society and allows for a more transformative and democratic approach to education.

The good news is that librarians have been moving towards a critical information literacy approach for some time. Indeed "many of us incorporate critical praxis in our teaching whether we intend to or not simply because we urge students to be critical thinkers" (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016, p. xix). Lifelong learning and active citizenship are values that librarians have long championed, and are, if not explicitly critical, then at least complementary to a critical approach. As mentioned earlier, many library institutions have written a critical perspective into their information literacy definitions and visions and aims. One prominent example includes the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.* Many of the frames are clearly within the critical pedagogy philosophy (for example, "Authority Is Constructed and Contextual"). In many ways, this framework illustrates the trend towards describing the work we do as librarians in terms that are understood outside of the library profession. With the shift towards being educators, aligning librarianship to broader pedagogical philosophies may aid in proving our value to users beyond the traditional library functions.

What does a critical information literacy session look like? In an attempt to rectify the dearth of practical, "easy-to-implement instructional design" information (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016, p. xviii), I will outline a few points here, before moving on to the case study.

Dialectic approach

An approach that encourages dialogue between yourself and your students. A dialectic approach is central to Freire's and hooks' critical pedagogy philosophy:

> To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. (hooks, 1994, p. 130)

A dialectic approach breaks down the power imbalance between the librarian or teacher and their students by providing two-way communication, thus avoiding the banking concept of education. It doesn't completely dissolve the power imbalance, and hooks' (2003, p.187) argues it shouldn't completely erase the authority of the teacher, but it is aware that it exists.

Learner centred approach

Adopting a critical, dialectic approach highlights the students' voice and experience, allowing them to contextualise information based on what they already know and what they might wish to know or use in the future. Our students are diverse and bring their own unique blend of knowledge and experience; knowledge and experience that should be seen as an asset, not a deficit. It is not enough to simply tell students which information is good and which is bad. Jacobs (2016) criticises this false dichotomy as it fails to take into consideration "the very valid reasons why students use these resources" (p. 3). We need to understand the complex relationship 21st century students have with information and build on this. We cannot just tell students to avoid or dismiss

certain resources. Librarians need to create opportunities for engaging, critical conversations in order to give students a better understanding of the nature of information, especially the contextual nature of information. By reinforcing that there are "good" and "bad" types of information, we reinforce certain power structures that may hinder future critical conversations, for example, in opening horizons to non-traditional research methods.

Activity types that encourage a dialectic, learner-centered approach include group work, problem-based tasks, discussion, and reflection. Indeed, many trends in information literacy and education more broadly tackle this: including active learning, flipped classroom, and students as partners. Each of these, and more, can be adopted within a critical approach.

Praxis

Finally, a quick word on praxis and its importance to the work we do as librarians. It is important to engage in theory and reflection and put it into action, but I know that librarians often have many competing demands. While a lot of the literature can feel overwhelming, I would recommend a practical, library focused text such as the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* to get started. I would also encourage those new to a critical approach to start small. Small, constant changes to the way we run information literacy sessions can have large, cumulative effects. Take the time to reflect on how each session went, what worked well and what did not. And be brave and take the plunge!

Case study: Practice-led research and undergraduate music students

A lecturer approached me seeking to extend the information literacy sessions I had run for their class. It was for a second-year music subject that focused on meaning and aesthetics and usually included sessions on critical thinking, finding and evaluating information and referencing. This time round, the lecturer asked if I could cover practice-led research, a non-traditional research method, as well.

As a musician myself and having been a music student at both an undergraduate and postgraduate level, I had come across this type of research though mostly via the work of other creative practitioners who use these methodologies. From a library perspective, however, I had very little experience. This was perhaps not surprising as I work mostly with vocational and undergraduate students; a quick literature search revealed non-traditional research to be covered mostly in postgraduate studies. Despite some trepidation, I saw this new session as an opportunity to explore this fascinating and emerging area, and quickly saw the many connections to be drawn between non-traditional research and critical information literacy, and a critical approach in general. So, before I delve into the session, it is worth briefly defining non-traditional research and exploring some of the connections with critical information literacy.

Non-traditional research & practice-led research

Academic librarians understand the importance of research. In addition to the many powerful contributions research can provide to academic institutions, the community, and the state, research is one of the major sources of funding for most Australian universities (Universities Australia, n.d.). Libraries play an important role in providing

access to research outputs, but also in supporting and advocating new research amongst faculty and students. Research impacts every element of the library and its team, from those working in collections, in liaison roles like myself, to front service areas. A critical lens can be applied at level of the library and every stage of the information life cycle. Non-traditional research outputs and methodologies are an emerging research area that embraces this critical view.

The Australian Research Council (2019) defines non-traditional research outputs (NTROs) as “research outputs [that] do not take the form of published books, book chapters, journal articles or conference publications...” and can include “original creative works, live performance of creative works, recorded/rendered creative works, [and] curated or produced substantial public exhibitions and events”, amongst many other outputs.

Libraries have an important role to play in fostering non-traditional research. We can work with teaching faculty to arm users to firstly know about it, but also how to adopt these methodologies in creating new knowledge and then how to disseminate their findings. Non-traditional research gives a voice to work that had not been recognised by academia. It legimatises other ways of discovering new ideas, ways that are better suited the discipline they relate to (Lyle Skains, 2018, p. 84). This creates a more inclusive research landscape and opens the way for more diverse voices to be heard. The intersection between critical information literacy and NTROs seems a strong and complementary connection, yet the literature is still very sparse. However, libraries are doing some incredible work in this space and I have no doubt some valuable literature will follow. The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL, 2022), for instance, is

currently undertaking a project exploring how libraries support researchers in their goal to make “non-traditional research outputs findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable”.

Non-traditional research encompasses a large range of disciplines. The area that I was asked to discuss with students is a subset of this; practice-led research, sometimes also called artistic research. Practice-led research has been defined as research that “focuses on the nature of creative practice, *leading* to new knowledge of operational significance for that practice, in order to advance knowledge about or within practice” (Lyle Skains, 2018, p. 85). In music, this means the focus and driving force of the research is on the “living object, [the] performance, sound, action and embodiment” (Orning, 2017, p. 79). This brings a unique blend of methodological challenges. Tomlinson and Wren (2017) explain this in an inciteful way:

> New knowledge…in the case of much Artistic Research generally, is twice constructed: embodied in performances, recordings, or scores; and deconstructed, or reconstructed, through text. This requires a particular kind of interdisciplinary expertise of the artistic researcher: a mastery of creative practice, of critical reflexivity, and of text. (pp. 8-9)

With these brief definitions in mind, how does one introduce undergraduate students to this complex research methodology in a single critical information literacy session?

The session: background & structure

The session on practice-led research formed the third in a series of embedded information literacy sessions. The first two sessions focused on critical thinking,

evaluating information, and referencing, and were important in setting the scholarly scene for the third session. The first year I delivered the practice-led research session was in 2020, where the whole subject was delivered remotely.

I set up a Moodle page (the Learning Management System) for students to read before the scheduled session, essentially creating a flipped classroom. The information on Moodle provided students with some background readings on practice-led research and throughout the page there were a few broad questions, aimed at stimulating discussion. The Moodle page also included some sample projects to show the range of approaches, for example, the program and abstracts for the 2015 Perspectives on Artistic Research in Music conference at Monash University. Students were then required to choose an article from the NiTRO website, a publication of The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative Arts.

The actual class was completely discussion based, with myself and the lecturer in the role of mediators. The questions I posed on the Moodle page were discussed, along with the articles and readings. At every opportunity we tried to get students to relate their ideas back to their various creative practices.

I found this to be quite an interesting format and unlike most information literacy sessions I have delivered. It was highly discursive and free-form and its success depended on students being engaged. However, I think this worked quite well in the online delivery space, particularly as this was the third in a series of sessions, so students were quite used to me by this stage in the subject.

In 2021 students were back on campus so the session took a slightly different form. I took this opportunity to tweak the session and decided to ease them into practice-led research by talking about research in general, about how researchers might produce new findings, and knowledge. We discussed qualitative approaches such as grounded theory and action research and that flowed into practice-led research. From there, the content was much the same as the 2020 session.

While students weren't required to immediately undertake a practice-led research project, the session dovetailed nicely with their final assessment item, where they presented a short self-directed creative work based on subject matter covered in the lectures. I found this assessment type fascinating and unique in my experience of undergraduate music courses. I believe it reinforced the connection between students' performance practices and their academic work and provided a taste of what opportunities practice-led research might unlock the future.

Reflections: challenges, benefits, opportunities

I still have a lot to learn in delivering critical information literacy sessions and I think I will continue to adapt this session with every iteration. I think this approach is consistent with the lecturer's approach too as I believe the assessment items have been tweaked each year the subject has been delivered.

There are a couple of challenges I need to work through and a few that may be beyond my control. I found the flipped classroom model more difficult to implement in 2021 when all classes were delivered on campus, when compared to 2020 where all classes were online. Perhaps one way to tackle this is to set up the readings in my previous

sessions, since I am fortunate enough to have three embedded sessions. Rather than view each session as a discrete topic, I may be able to find a way to weave all three together, allowing for a more organic introduction to practice-led research.

This ties into one of the issues librarians often face when entering the classroom: the one-shot information literacy session. Although that is not the precise issue in this case study, perhaps I had held onto the one-shot session mindset. Negotiating with faculty as to the purpose, length, and a variety of other pressures and expectations relating to the session can be challenging (Beilin, 2016, p. 20). In many ways the one-shot information literacy undermines a critical approach. Perhaps one way librarians can counter this is to think larger scale; how can we develop information literacy (and critical information literacy) sessions over the course of a student's journey? This of course poses its own challenges, but it potentially lessens the load or class time for any one teacher or year level, avoids duplication of content, and also develops students' critical information skills in a more deliberate and curriculum-relevant manner. This would involve long term planning with heads of programs and curriculum advisor; undoubtedly tricky, but a worthy long-term goal.

Thankfully I was lucky to have a strong working relationship with the lecturer; something that is an absolute must when employing a critical, dialogic approach. Using this approach takes time and trust. I had a strong sense that I was collaborating with the lecturer to find answers in delivering the practice-led session. In many ways, this reflected the practice-led research process; being part of a flexible, responsive approach, where practice leads the way. I believe that librarians belong in this space; as natural facilitators, we aid in navigating power structures that exist in the classroom,

thus encouraging deep, collective learning; the antithesis of Freire's banking concept of education.

A final reflection on this session was around the benefit of exposing undergraduates to NTROs, something I had not encountered in the literature. Exposure to this kind of research, research that is intrinsically linked to their practice, may lead to more students seeing themselves as researchers. I think there's value in letting these ideas percolate – rather than only discovering NTROs once they've enrolled as postgraduate students and needing to learn about it all at once. This knowledge could also inform their approach throughout their undergraduate degree, by bridging the gap between practice and academic work. There could be a case to be made around retention too; if students see themselves as researchers, perhaps more music students, and students in creative disciplines in general, may consider postgraduate study.

Conclusion

The information landscape is constantly changing and the role of libraries and librarians is changing along with it. The need to adopt a critical approach in the profession is gathering momentum. Using a critical lens, whether that is in critical information literacy or critical librarianship or even in gathering inspiration from critical pedagogy, opens more opportunities for librarians to become even more relevant to our users.

My advice to those wanting to employ a critical information literacy approach would be to gradually incorporate critical elements into your existing information literacy sessions, particularly alongside faculty members where you already have a strong relationship.

And then of course, to critically reflect on these experiences. There is also an overwhelming amount of literature out there. Start small, ideally with something that is approachable; my recommendation for librarians would be the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* edited by Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy. The Handbook is an approachable collection of case studies and is full of practical examples, alongside theory.

In academic library settings, librarians hold a unique position as educators and facilitators in promoting diverse and relevant research methods and outputs. While the literature on critical librarianship and critical information literacy is in its infancy, I look forward to seeing more in the literature around how these approaches can promote more diverse and inclusive research approaches, particularly NTROs. The purpose of this paper was to draw these theories together along with my experience in delivering a critical information literacy session.

Libraries, like many institutions, reflect the type of society we live in. While inequalities exist, we owe it to our diverse users to question and challenge these and to reflect back the type of society we wish to live in. Libraries have the power to be a transformative force and using a critical approach is vital in moving forward towards a more democratic society.

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