Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice

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This article uses critical literacy theory to define information literacy. It argues that to be educators, librarians must focus less on information transfer and more on developing critical consciousness in students. Using concepts from literacy theory, the author suggests ways library practice would change if librarians redefined themselves as literacy educators.

Information literacy has become a core concept in libraries and librarianship, but the term remains problematic. Much of the confusion results from complexities introduced by the word “literacy.”1 Disagreements about what information literacy means are not merely a matter of semantics or technicalities: the lack of clarity has confused the development of a practice that might give shape to librarianship in the academy.2 Information literacy appears regularly on conference agendas and has been featured prominently in sessions dealing with public services at recent Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) meetings.3 Statistics from the Association of Research Libraries indicate one reason for this growing interest: a major shift in the demand for academic library services away from reference services and toward library instruction. From 1991–2002, ARL libraries report reference transactions down 26 percent and group presentations up 55 percent.4 Michael Ray notes an accompanying shift in attitude among academic public service librarians, reporting that they increasingly see instructional design and curriculum consultation as a significantly better way to work with the campus community than reference.5

This shift, driven by demand, implies an evolution in what librarians do, and moving from service provider to active educator challenges librarians and library educators to develop new guiding philosophies. On many campuses, librarians have faculty status and participate in curriculum revision and instructional initiatives, but librarians continue to express concern about their lack of preparation for these roles. Fowler and Walter argue, for example, that “instruction programs are becoming increasingly complex, and ever more closely tied to initiatives of import across the campus because of broader trends both in the profession and in higher education.” They claim that as a result “issues facing the [instruction] coordinator today are very different from those described in much of the work we read while preparing for our careers.”6 They conclude that education for librarians needs to more directly prepare them to fill these evolving instructional roles.

The primary challenge to addressing these changes lies in the vision librarians and Library and Information Science (LIS) educators have of themselves and of the profession. Librarians in the academy increasingly see themselves as educators, an evolution in the profession that challenges established definitions of librarianship and of how we generate knowledge about professional values and practices. In this essay, I will argue that

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librarians and library educators can better engage the educational climate on campuses by defining academic librarianship through the scholarship of teaching and learning in general, and the scholarship of literacy in particular. I will explore the central concepts underlying literacy theory, and I will apply these concepts to information literacy. In the process, I wish to foreground the underlying conflicts that emerge when teaching literacy becomes the primary role for librarians. Ultimately, I will argue that adopting a literacy agenda in the library might transform librarianship by challenging current assumptions and providing guiding principles to shape an emerging practice. This will only happen to the extent that library practice evolves by continuing to focus on its educational mission.

**Education Through A Critical Lens**

The lack of precision about what information literacy means has prevented critical judgment about its importance. Pawley argues that we can see information literacy as either a dynamic form of education aimed at transforming lives or as a “‘procrustean bed’” of skills and standards generated by the library’s need to hold onto the status quo. Much is at stake in the choice. While the academic library community spends a great deal of energy devising, implementing, and testing the Information Literacy Competency Standards, literacy researchers from outside the libraries have grown increasingly critical of the effort to define literacy through standards, and of the research community in Library and Information Science (LIS) for its inability to engage the literacy language. Luke and Kapitzke argue, for example, that “the information sciences have yet to engage with critical literacies and with the larger epistemological questions raised by new technologies and postmodern reconstructions of discipline, knowledge and identity.” They conclude that current definitions of information literacy as espoused by ACRL and in the library literature are “at best anachronistic, and at worst counter-productive in their avoidance of the central questions facing students, teachers, and libraries.” Seeking a broadening of campus partnerships, Rolf Norgaard (Director of Composition Studies at University of Colorado at Boulder) asks that libraries engage the literacy movement by moving away from instrumental, skill-based definitions of literacy and toward an understanding of literacy as a culturally situated phenomenon based in the way communities construct meaning and belonging.

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Critical theory brings new dimensions to academic thinking about education and literacy, and these theories have made teaching and learning more interesting, complex, and, in some ways, problematic processes than past educational models have implied. Swanson notes that these new dimensions – critical literacy and critical pedagogy – show potential for shaping information literacy in practice. Viewed through the lens of critical theory, educational problems are no longer defined as “information transfer” problems—that is, a problem of getting the right knowledge into students’ heads. Critical literacy and critical pedagogy have led us to a different discussion of the means and ends of education. Its most influential theorists, including Paolo Freire, Peter McLaren, and Henry Giroux, argue that schools enact the dominant ideology of their societies—either consciously or unconsciously. Viewed this way, education is a profoundly political activity. Educators must either accept the dominant ideology of their society or intentionally resist it and posit alternative models. Neutrality is not an option.

Freire argues that Western education (especially American education) is guided by the ideology of capitalism, and that consequently, schools have developed a “banking concept” of education in which knowledge is treated as cultural and economic capital, and accruing knowledge equates to accruing wealth. Teachers make daily deposits of knowledge in students’ heads which they bank for future use. Classrooms from the primary grades onward are constructed as workplaces. Teachers are bosses. Students who bank enough knowledge (often quantified numerically through standardized tests) are deemed educated. This education trains students in the capitalist ethic, and they subsequently approach their education as consumers and passive receivers of knowledge rather than active agents shaping their own lives. Freire posits an alternative pedagogy, one designed to create “critical consciousness” in students. Rather than focus on knowledge acquisition, students identify and engage significant problems in the world. By developing critical consciousness, students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and to the world around them.

Freire notes that in banking education, “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.” Their only real initiative can be exercised by “the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store.” Perhaps not accidentally, Freire equates the common library functions of receiving, filing, collecting, and cataloging with the banking concept. In doing so, he poses important challenges to librarians. What is the role of the library in the Freirean vision of critical literacy? Is the library a passive information bank where students and faculty make knowledge deposits and withdrawals, or is it a place where students actively engage existing knowledge and shape it to their own current and future uses? And what is the librarian’s role as an educator in this process? Gage persuasively argues that “librarianship stripped of the critical capacity to appraise itself, appears secure in defining its professional trajectory in accordance with the undemocratic dictates of those commercial values and social relations that obstruct rather than expand the rights of library users. . .as critical and engaged citizens capable of materializing the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life.” Critical literacy provides a way for libraries to change this trajectory and more honestly align themselves with the democratic values they often invoke.

As Luke and Kapitzke note, the library literature has been slow to embrace critical approaches to literacy or to integrate critical perspectives into research or practice. Critical literacy focuses on the links between the educational process and the politics of literacy. Approaching education in this way accentuates its role in enacting political and cultural agendas. Rather than focus on schools as tools for transmitting knowledge, critical theory examines schools as agents of culture and shapers of student consciousness. This perspective has been largely missing from the information literacy debates, a fact related in part to the ways that LIS researchers have defined
and carried out their educational research. By objectifying and decontextualizing phenomena in the search for broad structural patterns, information literacy researchers have separated students from social and economic contexts, thereby detaching them from school, teacher, and society in an effort to isolate variables to create more pure “scientific” studies.

This approach to creating knowledge has prevented an analysis of how individual students in specific contexts and communities encounter information generally and the library specifically. Kuhlthau’s formulation of the “Information Search Process” identifies six stages students go through in preparing academic research, and Eisenberg and Berkowitz have identified the “Big Six” information seeking process. Other process models for seeking information include Pitts/Stripling, Pappas/Tepe, and Irving. These process models work by standardizing the complexities of research into “stages,” which generally include: defining a topic or question, narrowing the topic and identifying sources, synthesizing the sources, and finally presenting the results. With minor disclaimers, the process is presented as linear, from task initiation to completed project. ACRL has disseminated a highly influential set of competency standards and best practices that describe what educational programming looks like and what skills competent students can demonstrate. All these projects attempt to identify deep underlying universal structures which can be named, described, and, perhaps most importantly, replicated in all contexts for all students.

Prior provides a useful summary of the strategy employed in such research. First of all, the researcher adopts an “observational perspective” that places him or her outside and above the thing under study. Then, the researcher performs “several acts of decontextualization and abstraction.” Finally, out of the abstractions created, the researcher identifies a series of privileged categories that create order or causality, creating a “closed and unified system of discrete and ordered elements” which are “brought under the control of a set of rules that allow prediction and description.” Using this method, students’ research processes can be sequenced into discrete stages, and universal standards and best practices can be defined. To be clear, none of this critique makes the results of these studies less credible. In fact, these standards and models have been profoundly important in guiding librarianship toward a student-centered educational philosophy, but without complementary theoretical perspectives, none of these approaches can generate important critical questions about its own conclusions, assumptions, or methods.

Building on the foundation of the process models and other relevant learning theory, critical literacy represents the next evolutionary stage in the development of a theory of educational librarianship. This next stage provides a necessary complement to existing research because so many significant issues for information literacy cannot be explored using the above described research paradigm. Most importantly, these universal models abstract and generalize the work of achievers, those who are committed and successful students and for whom school works. In doing so, they suggest that if less successful students can be taught to emulate achievers, they will succeed. In fact, students’ struggles with school almost always derive from more fundamental problems than such an approach suggests. Schools and students make up a complex social network that structures literacy, and the research models and best practices described above are largely irrelevant to the real work of literacy education in practice.

Schools are hierarchical social systems generating multiple variables that account for student success. In general, students succeed in school because their sociocultural identity merges seamlessly into this social system. As Gee notes, “...certain sorts of homes, usually middle-class homes, socialize their children early in life through practices that ‘resonate’ with the practice of schools. At the same time, schools honor these practices as if they were ‘natural,’ universal, and ‘normal,’ while ignoring the practices and values of other sorts of homes.” Students who could contribute to their schools or communities either choose not to or cannot merge into this idealized student body. Schools reject many such students as unprepared or uncooperative. Rather than define these students as “deficient,” we might ask whether schools and curriculums themselves are a large part of the problem, especially when they become conservative protectors of traditional, authoritative knowledge and cease to respect students as people capable of agency and meaning-making in their own right. Indeed, one of the primary challenges for contemporary education is to find ways to make it possible for all students to succeed, not just those socially preselected for academic success.

A growing body of scholarship deals with the problems encountered by alienated students and reluctant learners. Mike Rose has recounted his own journey from marginal student to literacy educator by focusing on the influence of caring, engaged teachers. Lisa Delpit argues that students who come from the margins can actually teach schools “what it feels like to move between cultures ... and thus perhaps better learn how to become citizens of the global community.” Herbert Kohl incisively summarizes the problem of the reluctant learner in his book, *I Won’t Learn from You: The Role of Assent in Learning*. Kohl describes students he has taught over the years who refuse to learn, even though they are perfectly capable. According to Kohl, this response “tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity. ... To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the stranger’s world.” Kohl sees the refusal to learn as a political statement, a form of civil disobedience to a dominant educational system that wields power without conscience. These authors follow Freire in seeing American education as an industrial assembly line, with ideal students emerging with standardized knowledge. Non-conforming students are “rejects,” expelled from the system for nonconformity. Rose, Delpit, Kohl, and others argue that subjecting students to an educational process whose effect is to erase their individual and cultural identities is immoral. They share a perspective of literacy as a social and political phenomenon, and they challenge the educational system to...
acknowledge this reality and to deal honestly with the resulting complexities.

**Evolving Definitions of Literacy**

According to the New London Group (an interdisciplinary group of scholars engaged in defining and developing new literacy practices), social changes currently underway provide compelling reasons to broaden our conceptions of literacy. First, the global, transnational economy has collapsed space and time, bringing into working relationships vastly different groups of people with very different languages, lifestyles, and values. Second, technology continues to reshape the learning process and the ways people acquire information and communicate. These forces compel a contemporary reconsideration of literacy. First of all, we can no longer conceive of “literacy” as a homogeneous ideal. National identity – in the sense of a common language and common customs – no longer exists. In the past, traditional literacy “has meant teaching and learning to read and write in page-bound, official, standard forms of the national language. Literacy pedagogy, in other words, has been a carefully restricted project—restricted to formalised, monolingual, mono-cultural, and rule-governed forms of language.”

In the emerging environment, literacy can no longer be approached in this way. We need to talk instead about multiple literacies, both in terms of diversity in human cultures and diversity in message formats.

New technologies increase the speed of information flow and the diversity of formats in which we receive information. In this environment, definitions based on traditional monolingual, monocultural literacies can become defensive and reactionary. The New London Group suggests we adopt a concept of “multiliteracies.” In their work in media literacy, for example, Kress and van Leeuwen have argued that literacy is “multimodal,” comprised of multiple media operating simultaneously to transmit complex messages to specific cultural groups. Hamilton has explored the semiotics of photographs to test visual literacy theory.

On a more fundamental level, Howard Gardner has argued that the very definition of intelligence needs to be reconceptualized. His theory of “multiple intelligences” accounts for the diverse abilities that people bring to learning. Gardner argues that “traditional schools” have privileged verbal and analytical thinking while discounting other kinds of intelligence. While print was the primary medium for intellectual content, such verbal and analytic definitions of intelligence made sense, but in an environment in which networked information systems deliver new media in increasing proportion to text, this narrow definition of intelligence is increasingly inadequate to describe how people think and learn.

Recent expansions of literacy theory provide the concepts to develop new definitions of literacy flexible enough to cope with these boundary-stretching times. As a working definition, we may start with the following: **Literacy is the ability to read, interpret, and produce “texts” appropriate and valued within a given community.** Such texts can be in print formats, but texts take other forms as well. They include any objects that are intentionally inscribed with meaning and subsequently “read” and “interpreted” by members of communities. A “text” can occur in any medium (visual, aural, tactile), as long as it is produced to speak to a community that engages in collective reading and interpretation. “Reading” and “writing” involve printed texts, but also other texts in multiple genres of communication as implied in multiliteracies.

Kress and van Leeuwen, for example, claim that we “read images” as we do text, and they propose a “grammar of visual design” to explain the underlying principles of communicating with images. Most importantly, people produce, read, and interpret texts in communities, not in isolation. Communities reach consensus about interpretation, sometimes easily and sometimes contentiously. Literacy cannot be described, therefore, in broad terms as a set of universal skills and abstractable processes. Rather, literacy is in constant flux and embedded in cultural situations, each situation nuanced and different from others.

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Communities negotiate literacy through “literacy events.” Identifying literacy events allows us to locate and foreground literacy practices in specific communities. A literacy event is “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretations of meaning.” In literacy events, the text provides an occasion for shared reading and interpretation. Literacy events allow community members to develop regular, recurring interpretive patterns over time. Being an insider to a community means recognizing and participating in literacy events—knowing the codes used by the community and the customs and conventions in play. These conventions involve both grammatical and interpretive skills. Gee notes that “each social language has its own distinctive grammar… That is, we speakers and writers design our oral or written utterances to have patterns in them by virtue of which interpreters can attribute situated identities and specific activities to us and our utterances.”

This definition differs from the traditional banking model of grammar in which teachers deposit grammatical rules in students’ heads to teach them to produce grammatical sentences from these rules. Viewed socially, grammar involves seeing language structures in context as a set of communal conventions; a social view of grammar describes practice rather than prescribing “correct” usage.

The goal of this exercise in definition has been to create a usable definition of literacy, one which looks at literacy in pluralistic, nonjudgmental ways. Literacy has long involved value judgments, invested in part in differentiating who is literate from those who are illiterate. The definition constructed here endeavors to avoid this approach, acknowledging multiple literacies, thereby foregrounding the arbitrariness of privileging school literacies. In saying this, we have arrived at an important point that bears emphasis—while there are multiple literacies in any given culture, all literacies are not equal. School literacies are special. Schools confer social power, in that education opens doors and creates opportunities. Bourdieu argues that students accrue cultural capital through education, and indeed, parents make long-term investments in education for precisely this purpose. Educated people have mastered school literacies at considerable effort, and while every community produces texts of value, not every community’s texts are valued equally in the wider culture.

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Therefore, while school literacy might be just one literacy among many, its importance in creating pathways to social and economic success is unique, which is at least in part why school literacy is such a contested terrain. John Dewey argued that, in a democratic society, schools need to create and teach a progressive democracy. This approach stands in contrast to educational approaches that create cultural standards as gateways to lifelong success. In defining progressive education, Dewey emphasized the importance of managing change while protecting participatory democracy, arguing that “a society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they do not perceive.” In times defined by rapid change, much is at stake for education in how literacy is defined, taught, and measured. Dewey saw progressive education as a key way for a rapidly evolving society to retain the possibility of democratic participation by an engaged citizenry, and, indeed, Dewey’s vision of democracy harmonizes with issues of critical pedagogy as professed by the New London Group. “Democracy” is a contested term, however, one just as easily taken up by the proponents of global capitalism and the spread of American economic values as those following Dewey. Much of the conflict inherent in information literacy as a critical project can be traced to contested definitions of “democracy.”

CONSTRUCTING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Students begin their college careers already possessing a number of well-developed literacies, most of them related to their home literacy, which Gee calls their “Primary Discourse”. This discourse “constitutes our original and home-based sense of identity… We acquire this primary Discourse, not by overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group.” From this primary “home” discourse, college students must move to a form of “secondary discourse” through overt instruction in the academy. This academic discourse is unnatural for everyone, but it is less natural for some than for others. Bruffee refers to this academic discourse acquisition as the process of “reacclimatization,” a process of learning the conventions of discourse that pertain first to acceptance within the academy in general and second to disciplinary identity as it is practiced in academic departments.37 Gee argues that true academic fluency may well be out of reach for many students, especially when learning this discourse involves “active complicity with values that conflict with one’s home- and community-based Discourses.”38 In effect, Gee concludes that contemporary education excludes many students on the basis of their home literacy—a fact at odds with utopian constructions of the academy as a level playing field where all students face the same challenges and success results from hard work and personal merit. Gee and others continue to struggle with the implications of this conclusion.39

If literacy is the ability to read, interpret, and produce texts valued in a community, then academic information literacy is the ability to read, interpret, and produce information valued in academia...”

Becher and Trowler argue that the “professional language and literature of a disciplinary group play a key role in establishing a cultural identity.” All disciplines employ distinct styles of communication, “a particular set of favoured terms, sentence structures and logical syntax—which it is not easy for an outsider to imitate.” They conclude that, alongside the structural features of disciplinary communities...are their more explicitly cultural elements; their traditions, customs and practices, transmitted knowledge, beliefs, morals and rules of conduct as well as their linguistic and symbolic forms of communication and the meanings they share. To be admitted to membership of a particular sector of the academic profession involves not only a sufficient level of technical proficiency in one’s intellectual trade but also a proper measure of loyalty to one’s collegial group and of adherence to its norms. An appreciation of how an individual is inducted into the disciplinary culture is important to the understanding of that culture.40

Far from arbitrary, academic “style” manifests a way of thinking and a set of shared values. Students who aspire to membership in academic communities must master both the external style and the way of thinking to be initiated into a discipline. Librarianship as a profession should develop strategies for helping students master these styles and patterns of thinking.

Literacy events in higher education occur in many venues (classrooms, coffee shops, auditoriums, faculty offices, etc.) and they involve many academic “genres” (lecture, Socratic questioning, debate, research essay, oral examination, defense, etc.). These literacy events and academic genres range from informal to formal and low pressure to high pressure. They allow for the negotiation of community standards and the measuring of individual progress. Academia generates these literacy events intentionally and self-consciously, and the ability to succeed in college depends in large part on mastering their social codes and customs. Berkenstetter and Huckin first formulated the dimensions of academic literacy events by defining them as academic genres and identifying five principles they embody. First, academic genres are
dynamic forms that “develop from responses to recurrent situations and serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning.” These genres derive from “our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life.” Genre knowledge embraces both “form and content,” and has a “duality of structure” which means that even “as we draw on genre rules to engage in professional activities, we constitute social structures...and simultaneously reproduce those structures.” Finally, “genres are owned by communities, and genre conventions signal a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology.” Indeed, without academic genres it would be impossible to engage in scholarship. Genres provide us with explicit patterns for creating academic work—the ways we construct our identities as writers and researchers, the ways we construct and interpret our major statements and use evidence, and the ways we conceive of the communities we address with our scholarship.

While all communities rank literacy performance to some extent, academia is relatively unique in its formal and ritualized assessments, with the result that in academia “nearly everything is graded in more or less subtle ways.” Through institutionalized processes – such as assigning grades to students, granting tenure and promotion, conducting peer review of books and articles, establishing institutional rankings, and the ranking of publications for prestige – judgments about quality permeate higher education. All these ranking and grading reflect the negotiation of community standards as determined by performance in increasingly sophisticated literacy events. Literacy events in higher education have, as a result, two sometimes contradictory functions. One is to place community standards on display to help students and faculty measure their own growth and achievement. The other is to determine who ultimately belongs in college and who does not. Literacy events therefore take on a high-stakes performance quality in academia. Literacy events determine who succeeds and also who fails. These competing conceptions of literacy create tension within academic literacy librarianship. Should librarians “serve” the academy by teaching its literacy skills unquestioningly, or should librarians participate in the critical reflection undertaken by “educators,” a reflection that leads us to challenge, if necessary, the politics of academic exclusion, and to participate in the creation of new and better academic models?

**A Grammar of Information**

Information has a grammatical dimension that information literate academics must master and students must be taught. As Gee notes, we create structures “to have patterns in them by virtue of which interpreters can attribute situated identities and specific activities to us and our utterances.” These structures and patterns constitute a grammatical system for facilitating communication. Libraries have traditionally created and managed the structures that organize information, and the historical meaning of “grammar” naturally suits it to the study of underlying logical structures like MARC and the Library of Congress Subject Headings. The ability to parse a journal citation or to read a catalog record results from an understanding of its deep structures and derives from a disciplined and grammatical approach to information. The citation functions to distill the elements of publication into concise code. We can treat this citation either prescriptively (there is a “right way” to cite and a universal truth reflected in its structure) or as a social construct (by focusing on why citation matters in the academy and what conversations are implied in networks of citation).

To make judgments about citations – the kind of work cited, the value of the work in the academic discipline, and the creation of citations to support arguments or prove facts – involves understanding disciplinary conversations and why citations are so important in academia. Jon Olson argues that “grammar class has long been a site for displaying power,” usually the teacher’s power. In the banking concept of education, teachers know grammar and they teach it to students who “bank” it. The motive for learning grammar often involves establishing rules for belonging, and correct grammar, as Mitchell notes, has long been used by the middle class “in generating its own identity” apart from the “lower” classes. As an alternative, Olson proposes “a broad view of grammar which focuses on the ends of language rather than the particulars.” Olson notes that grammar can “help transfer power from teachers to students. The power will not be freedom from rules of usage; rather the rules will be contextualized, subordinated to the ends of political arete.” To apply this contextualized perspective to the grammar of information, students must understand that the library’s “grammars of information” are reflections of a particular world view—Anglo, Western, Christian, and predominantly male. Should librarians be content to teach “the grammar of information,” or should they emphasize its role in creating privileged discourse? Again, it depends on whether we see librarianship as a profession which serves the dominant ideology of the academy, or whether librarians see themselves as critical educators in pursuit of more “democratic” models.

**“Should librarians be content to teach “the grammar of information,” or should they emphasize its role in creating privileged discourse?”**

Hope Olson argues, that “Melvil Dewey and [the Dewey Decimal System] both accept a concept of knowledge based in Cartesian epistemology. They accept that a single knowable reality exists and that we come to know it by discovering universal truth.... The notational universal language of classification maps the topography of recorded knowledge structuring a space to reflect the single knowable reality and universal truth.” Elsewhere, Olson argues that the “roots of the classes in the Dewey Decimal System classification...go deep into Western philosophy.” She concludes, “it is no surprise then that Dewey’s approach is reflective of both the epistemological and ontological presumptions” of that philosophy. For information literacy to have a critical dimension, it must involve both an understanding of how various classification systems work, and also an exploration of how they create and perpetuate such powerful categories for representing “knowable reality and universal truth.” These systems can be learned (indeed, they must be learned for students to gain a full measure of control over their work),
but learning them need not involve an unquestioning acceptance of the accompanying world view.

Indeed, Luke and Kapitzke locate much of their criticism of library research in this region, noting that, in Breivik and Gee’s definition of information literacy, “knowledge is external to the knower, existing as a thing-in-itself, independent of mediation and interpretation. Seekers of ‘Truth’ can track it down and capture it either in the confines of the library or in limitless cyberspace.” In order to address these concerns, librarians in the academy need to define information itself as the product of socially negotiated epistemological processes and the raw material for the further making of new knowledge. Information literate academics understand that the peer review process tends to replicate authorized knowledge and resists alternative thinking, and that collections structured by classification systems derived from disciplinary ontologies explicitly function to channel thinking into disciplinary categories. Ultimately, critical information literacy involves developing a critical consciousness about information, learning to ask questions about the library’s (and the academy’s) role in structuring and presenting a single, knowable reality.

**Conclusion**

For librarians to work in literacy education, they will need a different kind of philosophy than librarians of the past. As Ray notes, instructional librarianship requires extensive knowledge of pedagogies and of the cultures and discourse communities of higher education. Such an approach implies that the library profession must evolve accordingly, a fact which a growing number of librarians realize. Librarians (and those who teach them) must revise the notion that learning to be a librarian means acquiring and storing knowledge about libraries—whether that knowledge pertains to learning the “best sources” for reference, learning the Library of Congress rules for cataloging and classifying, or learning models for efficient management. Librarians need to develop a critical consciousness about libraries, by learning to “problematize” the library. Education for librarians must become what Friere calls a “problem posing education.” With this shift, librarians will cease to study the “library-as-subject,” and will instead become specialists in coaching intellectual growth and critical development. Learning becomes the essentially humanistic process of engaging and solving significant problems in the world, a process central to both teaching and learning. Information can then be redefined as the raw material students use to solve these problems and to create their own understandings and identities, rather than as something “out there” to be accessed efficiently, either in the library or in the world. This educational process cannot be conveyed as “content.” It is, rather, a “path” or “journey” of intellectual growth and understanding. Learners and teachers need to negotiate the journey together and for themselves. The education of librarians needs to prepare them to help others negotiate it, which they cannot do until they have learned to negotiate it themselves.

The real task for libraries in treating information literacy seriously lies not in defining it or describing it, but in developing a critical practice of librarianship—a theoretically informed praxis. With this philosophical evolution, libraries can no longer be seen as value-neutral cultural space, and librarians cannot be defined as value-neutral information providers. Librarians will be involved with the daily struggle of translation between the organized conceptions of knowledge and the efforts of all students to engage that knowledge. This struggling with meaning is crucial to literacy education, and for librarians and libraries to realize the full potential inherent in information literacy, libraries need to engage this struggle, thereby aligning the values of critical literacy with the day-to-day work of librarians. This development will likely require ongoing questioning and challenging of cherished library values. If librarians wish to take their place among the progressive educators in the academy, it is vital that this process takes place.

**Notes and References**

1. For a cogent discussion of the implications of “information literacy” as a phrase, see Christine Pawley, “Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling,” *The Library Quarterly* 73, 4 (October 2003).
12. Ibid., p. 73.
13. Ibid., p. 72.
39. In fact, Gee argues for a complex solution, one that involves changing the culture of higher education (admittedly a slow and unclear project), developing in students a kind of “meta-discourse” to frame literacy problems, and finally teaching students to “fake” the discourses of school. Delpit counters Gee’s contention that secondary discourse fluency is impossible by noting that, in many cases, students accomplish it.
42. Ibid., p. 4.
43. Becher and Trowler, Academic Tribes and Territories. p. 81.
53. Freire, Pedagogy of the Occupied, p. 79.

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