PaLA | College & Research
Division (CRD)

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Overcoming Challenges to Critical Information Literacy

Primary Source Analysis as Consciousness-Raising

Julie M. Porterfield

Julie M. Porterfield is Instruction and Outreach Archivist at Penn State University, jmp48@psu.edu

Critical information literacy can be described as the application of critical pedagogy, or a theory of learning that endeavors to impact social change, to information literacy. The use of critical pedagogy in information literacy instruction is simultaneously on-trend in theory and also criticized for the obstacles to its practical implementation. Due to historic collecting practices in archives and special collections libraries, teaching with archival collections presents an advantageous way to integrate critical information literacy. This case study describes the use of primary source analysis as a critical information literacy tool in a one-shot instruction session for a cross-listed communications and women's studies course, focusing on gender roles and communication.

Introduction

Critical information literacy can be described as the application of critical pedagogy, or a theory of learning that endeavors to impact social change, to information literacy. The use of critical pedagogy in information literacy instruction is simultaneously on-trend in theory and also criticized for the obstacles to its practical implementation. Academic librarians recognize the importance and benefits of raising the consciousness of their students; however, elements of the cultures found in these institutions, such as prevalence of the one-shot instruction model as well as faculty and student expectations, complicate the execution of critical information literacy. Moreover, teaching critical information literacy necessitates taking a certain amount of personal risk in order to execute the consciousness-raising prescribed by critical pedagogy. As the profession examines ways to minimize these hurdles and maximize impact, the role of archives and special collection libraries might be considered. Due to historic collecting practices, teaching with archival collections presents an advantageous way to integrate critical information literacy. The experiences and voices found in primary sources can be leveraged in classroom consciousness-raising activities that also teach information literacy skills. In particular, primary source analysis can support critical information literacy learning objectives by

guiding learners through the process of analyzing the authority and context of a source, while also using the experience of the source's creator to reach critical and socially-conscious conclusions.

This case study describes the use of primary source analysis as a critical information literacy tool in a one-shot instruction session for a cross-listed communications and women's studies course, focusing on gender roles and communication. The activity executed in the session used foundational archival principles to guide learners through their analysis of political pamphlets. It serves as an example of leveraging the power of primary sources found in special collections libraries and archives to teach critical information literacy; however, it is not the only context in which this pedagogical approach can be executed. Primary source analysis, such as the activity detailed here, can be scaled to suit a variety of disciplines, levels of learning, and institutional sizes. In any case, primary source analysis as a method of teaching critical information literacy serves as a new and innovative approach to both primary source literacy and critical pedagogy. It represents a new, socially conscious approach to teaching primary source literacy, which moves away from traditional show-and-tell models; and, it provides a fresh resource for critical information literacy instruction that helps to mitigate some of the challenges present in implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom.

Critical Information Literacy & Its Challenges

Critical information literacy is the application of critical pedagogical techniques to information literacy instruction. Critical pedagogy developed from the work of Paolo Freire (1970), who urged educators to "abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world" (p. 66). In other words, educators ought to provide space for their students to be critical of social problems and inequities, not present them with an already prescribed truth. Critical pedagogy in the information literacy context, "maintains that the development of students' capacity to pose thoughtful questions (as opposed to clear answers) is as important as their ability to locate, access, organize, evaluate, and apply information in the research process" (Cope, 2010, p. 13). As a theoretical construct, it is difficult to be disparaging of this approach to teaching information literacy. For most, teaching students to harness the power of information for social change seems like an important and worthwhile endeavor, and it is. However, like any pedagogical method, it does not come without its challenges, particularly for academic librarians practicing in institutions of higher education. In fact, Tewell (2018) notes that despite targeting library professionals with an interest in teaching critical information literacy, 15% of survey respondents still indicated that they do not incorporate critical information literacy into their teaching.

Many of the challenges that face academic librarians wanting to incorporate critical information literacy into their repertoire are related to the larger atmosphere of information literacy instruction in higher education. Commonly cited hurdles to critical information literacy include preparation time, frequency of the one-shot model, student and course instructor expectations, and assessment (Tewell, 2016). It can take, even an experienced instructor, significantly more time to plan a lesson using critical techniques. Critical pedagogy privileges the inquiry of learners. This means that opportunities for analyzing information and formulating and posing questions must be built into the lesson plan, which takes more time than planning for a lecture-based session, particularly if one is new to critical pedagogy and/or active learning techniques (Tewell, 2016). In the end, it takes more time to do anything new for the first time. It is much easier to default to a previously executed template. The time it takes to plan for a critical information literacy session is complicated further by the all too often short amount of time that librarians are able to spend with learners. Fitting all of the necessary learning outcomes into a 50-minute class session can be overwhelming without the goal of having students ask thought-provoking and socially-conscious questions about the information that they are consuming. Add this additional objective into the mix, and planning for a class is even further complicated. For some librarians, it becomes a question of privileging generic and situated skills, which seem to meet learners more immediate needs, over transformational skills (Lupton & Bruce, 2010). In some cases, students and course instructors also doubt the inclusion

of competencies beyond what is needed to complete an assignment. As colleges and universities compete with for-profit higher education institutions on the enrollment front, efficiency is increasingly a priority for all involved, particularly consumers or learners (Coughlin, Hoey, & Hirano-Nakanishi, 2009). As a result, assessment of student learning is more relevant than ever before. Unfortunately, critical information literacy learning outcomes are more difficult to assess, because critical inquiry is much more difficult to quantify. Moreover, assessment in and of itself is contrary to critical pedagogy's mandate to eliminate hierarchy. For academic librarians seeking to meet certain institutional or promotion and tenure teaching and learning goals, this can make critical methods of teaching unappealing.

Outside of the institutional context, critical approaches to teaching can present educators with personal challenges as well. Critical pedagogy requires the confidence and assurance to publicly discuss social issues in a critical way. Freire (1998) himself said, "I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am. Without revealing, either reluctantly or with simplicity, the way I relate to the world, how I think politically" (pp. 87-88). The keystone of critical pedagogy is consciousness-raising, or *conscientização*, which is an effort to achieve a critical awareness of social situations (Freire, 1970, p. 35). Typically, consciousness-raising activities include three major elements: sharing of experiences, identifying instances of shared oppression, and then collective action against oppression. As a technique, it has been used by both social activism groups and critical educators alike. However, in the realm of education, consciousness-raising presents a particular challenge. Activism is predicated on a desire for social change, but, for many, a critical approach to education is a departure from traditional understandings and definitions of education. As a result, educators wishing to incorporate a critical approach to their teaching might fear negative reactions from learners. Likewise, learners who are interested in participating in a critical classroom might worry about the reactions of fellow learners, who do not wish to participate. In short, a critical educator is successful only when they are willing to reveal their thoughts, values, and experiences in the classroom in the same way in which they expect their students to share these reflections, and this means taking a risk. Ann Manicom (1992) identifies the silences that occur in critical classrooms as a result of these fears as personal safety silences. Additionally, Manicom notes that even in a safe environment, minority experiences in a group are often silenced, and that is when they are present. Some educators are faced with implementing critical approaches in largely homogenous classrooms, which inhibits students' ability to learn from experiences that are different from their own.

Given these challenges at both the institutional and personal levels, it is not surprising that some academic librarians are hesitant to experiment with critical information literacy in their classrooms. Nevertheless, critical information literacy is increasingly important in the current political climate and information marketplace. Thus, the question seems not to be should academic librarians integrate critical pedagogical techniques, but rather, can the profession identify classroom activities and tools that mitigate the challenges of critical information literacy, while still maintaining its integral components and objectives? Special collections libraries and archives provide one such solution.

Why Archives & Special Collections?

When compared with teaching and learning in other library contexts, information literacy within archives and special collections libraries is a growing, but relatively young area of expertise in archival theory and practice. Although interest in incorporating archival primary sources into history curricula has vacillated based on pedagogical trends for nearly a century, the rise in assessment culture in higher education in the 2010s brought with it a need to tie archival holdings to interdisciplinary, strategic goals, such as student learning (Yakel & Malkmus, 2016). Once considered the "handmaidens of historians," archivists are asserting their expertise, not just in the curatorial content or collections, but also use, which includes teaching others how to properly navigate repositories and incorporate primary sources into their research (Cook, 2011, p. 608). As a result, there is growing interest in pedagogical approaches and standards

for teaching and learning in archives, which has resulted in the Society of American Archivists and Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Library's Joint Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy. The Guidelines (2017) call for learners to "critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source," which certainly serves as an example of critical information literacy in the archival context (p. 5).

Despite the recentness of calls for critical learning outcomes in primary source and archival literacies, this does not mean that archives have not historically been active in matters of social justice. In fact, archival professionals have long acknowledged their role in shaping collective memory, and either legitimizing or delegitimizing experiences by collecting or not collecting them. As a result, in matters related to social justice, archivists have placed emphasis on appraisal, or the process of identifying materials offered to an archives that have sufficient value to be accessioned (Pearce-Moses, 2005). Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, archives slowly began efforts to diversify their holdings in an effort to support researchers of the New Social History, who aimed to write historical narratives that included all perspectives in a given society. In the 50 years that have followed, repositories have continued this trend through a variety of appraisal theories, which endeavor to document the broadest array of experiences as possible. Though still not fully representative, archival collections are more diverse now than they have been previously. However, despite the similarities between critical pedagogy and diversity-focused methods of appraisal, critical approaches to archival practice have far less frequently been extended to teaching and learning in archives (Hooper, 2010). Punzalan and Caswell (2016) identify five social justice related elements of archival theory and practice, which include the education of archival professionals but not archival users. So, it is not surprising that archival material does not immediately come to mind as the first choice for librarians hoping to teach critical information literacy. Nevertheless, teaching with archives can be a tool for minimizing the challenges present in critical information literacy.

As mentioned previously, challenges to critical information literacy take place at both the institutional and personal levels. Integrating archival material, or more specifically, primary source analysis activities, can be a tool for limiting the effects of the challenges found in both contexts. In terms of institutional expectations, learners and instructors often arrive at information literacy instruction sessions with very practical learning outcomes in mind. They want to be able to make a clear connection between topics covered and the skills necessary to complete their assignment. When it comes to archival material, this typically means that instructors are most interested in primary source literacy, or the ability to identify, analyze, and use primary sources in their assignment. Fortunately, analyzing primary sources is an avenue for practicing primary source literacy skills as well as a way to provide testimony of experience for consciousness-raising. By definition, a primary source is "material that contains firsthand accounts of events and that was created contemporaneous to those events or later recalled by an eyewitness" (Pearce-Moses, 2005, p. 309). As a result, primary sources are a perfect substitute for personal testimony in consciousness-raising. Learners can discuss the shared oppression that they identify between the sources and reach critical conclusions. To meet their more practical needs, they can also practice their primary source analysis skills and use the lesson's analysis guide to help them digest future sources for their assignment. Other institutional challenges, such as time and assessment are also addressed with primary source analysis. While it does take a notable amount of time to select and prepare the primary sources to be used in the analysis activity, learners achieve multiple outcomes with one activity. Moreover, the rising popularity of online primary source sets, such as those provided by the Digital Public Library of America and their partners, significantly cut down the amount of preparation time needed. Also, a written worksheet guide to the analysis easily serves as a qualitative assessment of learning at the end of the session.

Primary source analysis makes the most significant impact on personal challenges to critical information literacy, because it permits both teachers and leaners to participate in the critical analysis of consciousness-raising while exposing less of their personal experience than would be necessary without the primary source. Primary sources as a substitute for personal experience testimony limits all three of the typical silences found in consciousness-raising. Personal safety silences are less likely to occur, because the experiences being discussed do not belong to any one

person from the class. They are abstract. For those teachers and learners who still might want to contribute pieces of their own experience to supplement the primary sources, minority experiences are less likely to be silenced when primary source examples support and legitimize those experiences. Finally, the silences that occur when a class is homogenous can be eradicated completely by selecting primary sources whose creators are demographically different from the learners in the class.

The benefits of using primary source analysis to teach critical information literacy are clear. Not only do these activities help to alleviate some of the inherent challenges to using critical pedagogy to teach information literacy skills, but contemporary archival collecting theory supports critical pedagogical efforts by aiming to represent the widest array of experience possible within collections. With this theoretical foundation in mind, the following case study details how critical primary source analysis was implemented and assesses its impact on student learning and the challenges of critical pedagogy.

A Critical Primary Source Analysis Case Study

Critical primary source analysis was implemented in primary source literacy instruction for a Gender Roles in Communication course at the Pennsylvania State University during two consecutive spring terms. In both cases, the course was cross-listed as both a communications and a women's studies course and was intended for upper-division undergraduate students. The course's faculty instructor contacted the Instruction & Outreach Archivist to request that the students obtain access to the women's liberation series of the New Left pamphlet collection, which contains international, published political pamphlets related to women's liberation causes, spanning from the 1910s to the 1980s. One of the course's stated objectives was to differentiate between gender norms in different eras and settings, and the instructor hoped to utilize the collection to help meet this outcome. After consulting with the faculty instructor and the syllabus, the Instruction & Outreach Archivist determined that critical primary source analysis was an ideal activity for reaching the course goals. Learning outcomes for the course's visit each term included:

- Learners will define the content, context, and structure of an archival record, so that they can utilize these elements to analyze primary sources.

- Learners will identify the role of archives in shaping collective memory, so that they can reach critical conclusions about the archival arrangement and description of primary sources.

- Learners will analyze primary sources, so that they can reach critical conclusions about the social context of those sources.

The sessions began with a brief lecture on the three parts of an archival record and the role of archives in shaping collective memory. The content of the lecture included defining the three parts of an archival record: content, context, and structure. Content is the actual facts or opinions contained in the record. Context is the circumstance under which a record was created, or the who, what, when, where, and why. Structure is the format of a record. The lecture also utilized an advertisement for *The Feminine Mystique* from a 1963 edition of the *New York Times* to demonstrate examples of part of a record. Finally, the Instruction & Outreach Archivist used literature on archival appraisal to demonstrate the role of archives in shaping collective memory.

The next element of the session was the primary source analysis itself. Learners were seated in small groups of four to five students. Each group was given a folder from the women's liberation series of the New Left pamphlets, and each student was given a primary source analysis worksheet. These worksheets asked the learners to, as a group, select one of the items from their folder and identify the content, context, and structure of their chosen item. It also included a reminder definition of each part of a record. The final question on the worksheet asked the learners to draw final conclusions by tying together their responses for each part of the record. Each group was given 15 to 20 minutes to work together to complete the worksheet questions. During this time, both the archivist and the faculty instructor

were available to field questions from the groups. Each group was also given an iPad to view their folder's description from the collection's finding aid and were encouraged to search for secondary contextual information when they had unanswered questions. Lastly, each group was asked to write their final responses to the worksheet questions on an oversized post-it note and report out their findings to the class. By identifying the content, context, and structure of their items, learners pieced together the experiences of their item's creators. In their reports to their fellow groups, students responded to the experiences identified in other selected items, and discussion was generated around how the experiences found in each item were similar and different. Some learners shared pieces from their own experiences that they related to the experiences found in the primary sources. In the end, learners had completed a consciousness-raising exercise using primary sources as testimony.

The sessions confirmed that using primary sources to substitute for personal testimony in consciousness-raising is successful in eliminating personal hurdles and fears to participating in critical pedagogy. Both instructors and learners were forthcoming in their responses to the experiences found in the sources as well as willing to connect some of their own experiences to those found within the sources. In one session of the course, a student, who participated in a group that reviewed a published response by black women to a published request from Black Panther men for black women to discontinue their use of birth control, shared that he was raised by a single, African American mother and closely identified with the critical response found in the women's publication. He freely shared this experience in largely homogenously Caucasian class and used both his experience and the source's experience to support each other as evidence of the oppression of African American women through reproductive rights.

In terms of institutional challenges, such as faculty and student expectations, the sessions did not face the challenges typically cited as obstacles to critical information literacy instruction. Both the faculty instructor and students in this course were pleased with the session and its relevance to the course goals, despite the inclusion of critical pedagogy. There was no indication that the critical elements were contrary to the course goals and assignments. In fact, the faculty instructor returned with the course for the same session and activity a year later, when she offered the course again. In addition, when the instructor polled students for a response on their experience, an international student from New Zealand remarked that, "this experience is why I came to Penn State."

Less progress was made in eliminating hurdles related to the assessment of critical information literacy. Indicators of whether students met the sessions' learning outcomes remained largely qualitative and anecdotal. The primary source analysis worksheet served as an assessment tool. Additionally, reflections on anecdotal evidence from the group discussion was gathered. For example, one group analyzed a National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) newsletter, and during their report to the other groups, they included that they determined through additional, secondary contextual research that NAWSA was taking credit for an event that was actually organized by the National Woman's Party (NWP). This was an indication of the learners in that group meeting the third outcome for the session: learners will analyze primary sources, so that they can reach critical conclusions about the social context of those sources.

Conclusion

As noted above, this case study indicates that the social justice link between archival theory and critical pedagogy can be practically executed through critical primary source analysis. Moreover, several of the obstacles to implementing critical information literacy were addressed through the use of primary sources. This represents only a beginning to the use of primary sources to teach critical information literacy. It serves as an example of a new and innovative way to practice critical information literacy instruction. It is an indication of the ways that primary sources can help successfully mitigate challenges to critical pedagogy. However, it is not meant to be comprehensive. Instead, it is a call to academic librarians to continue to implement critical primary source analysis, so that additional reflection

and assessment can be completed. Most of all, it is intended to be an example of the great information literacy partnerships to be found in archives and special collections libraries, as what makes this work truly innovative is their inclusion.

References

Cook, T. (2011). The archive(s) is a foreign country: historians, archivists, and the changing archival landscape. *The American Archivist*, *74*(2), 600-632. doi:10.17723/aarc.74.2.xm04573740262424

Cope, J. (2010). Information literacy and social power. In Accardi, M. T., Drabinski, E., & Kumbier, K. (Eds.), *Critical library instruction: Theories & methods* (pp. 13-27). Duluth, Minnesota: Library Juice Press.

Coughlin, M. A., Hoey, J., & Hirano-Nakanishi, M. (2009). Sector differences in the role of institutional research in informing decision making and governance in higher education. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, *10*(1), 69-81. doi:10.1007/s12564-009-9003-6

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Seabury Press.

Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Hooper, L. (2010). Breaking the ontological mold: Bringing postmodernism and critical pedagogy into archival educational programming. In Accardi, M. T., Drabinski, E., & Kumbier, K. (Eds.), *Critical library instruction: Theories & methods* (pp. 29-42). Duluth, Minnesota: Library Juice Press.

Lupton, M., & Bruce, C. (2010). Windows on information literacy worlds: Generic, situated, and transformative perspectives. In Lloyd, A., & Talja, S. (Eds.), *Practising information literacy: Bringing theories of learning, practice and information literacy together* (pp. 3-27). Elsevier Science & Technology. Retrieved from ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/reader.action?ppg=1&docID=1584736&tm=1521146532614

Manicom, A. (1992). Feminist pedagogy transformations, standpoints, and politics. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *17*(3), 365-389. doi:10.2307/1495301

Pearce-Moses, R. (2005). *A glossary of archival and records terminology*. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists.

Punzalan, R. L., & Caswell, M. (2016). Critical directions for archival approaches to social justice. *The Library Quarterly 86*(1), 25-42. doi:10.1086/684145

Association of College and Research Library, Society of American Archivists & Rare Books and Manuscripts. (2017). Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy. Retrieved from www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Guidelines%20for%20Primary%20Souce%20Literacy%20%20FinalVersion%20%20Summer2017_0.pdf

Tewell, E. C. (2016, May 12). Putting critical information literacy into context: How and why librarians adopt practices in their teaching. Retrieved from www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/putting-critical-information-literacy-into-context-how-and-why-librarians-adopt-critical-practices-in-their-teaching

Tewell, E. C. (2018). The practice and promise of critical information literacy: Academic librarians' involvement in critical library instruction. *College & Research Libraries*, *79*(1), 10-34. doi:10.5860/crl.79.1.10

Yakel, E. & Malkmus, D. (2016). Contextualizing archival literacy. In Prom, C. J. & Hinchliffe, L. J. (Eds.), *Teaching with primary sources* (pp. 5-67). Chicago, Illinois: Society of American Archivists.