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# Acting "As If": Critical Pedagogy, Empowerment, and Labor

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# Acting "As If"

## *Critical Pedagogy, Empowerment, and Labor*

Rafia Mirza, Karen P. Nicholson, and Maura Seale

## Introduction

In 2010, Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier published *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, effectively centering both critical information literacy and critical library pedagogy within academic librarianship.[1] Critical information literacy seeks to interrogate assumptions about information literacy and "adopt an approach to teaching that recognizes that education is not itself apolitical."[2] Critical pedagogy, well established within the discipline of education, attempts to reimagine educational systems, institutions, and methods; it attends to both global and local contexts—to "institutions and ideologies" and to the needs and experiences of "particular students in a particular classroom."[3] Through the use of dialogue, reflection, and problem-posing, and relying on care work, it emphasizes empathy and relationships and seeks to increase agency and empowerment. Critical library pedagogy brings these practices to the library classroom. As a framework that requires us to reflect on and reimagine what we teach (content or curriculum) as well as how we teach (methods), critical library pedagogy has been immensely valuable in helping librarians move away from "conceptions of information literacy rooted in mechanistic notions of access and use" toward

engaging students in larger conversations about the social, economic, and political contexts in which libraries and information function.[4] As Drabinski writes, "The promise of critical pedagogy lies in its capacity to change lives as librarians try new ways of thinking and teaching that challenge systems of power that privilege some and not others."[5] Critical library pedagogy, then, has both liberatory and subversive aims. It affords opportunities for developing "an information literacy praxis" capable of resisting neoliberal imperatives and for reimagining libraries as "conceptual spaces of resistance,"[6] and also allows librarians to "question and resist the damaging effects of capital-centered education on learners, teachers, and society."[7]

The mainstreaming of critical library pedagogy, which has rendered it readily accessible in professional handbooks, guides, and programming, also means that it has become institutionalized—"managed, absorbed, and incorporated by higher education into its own logics."[8] In a recent critique, Ferretti contends that while critical library pedagogy has effectively changed our approach to teaching, it has done little to "change power relations between library colleagues."[9] Similarly, Leung and López-McKnight argue that critical librarianship has made "only incremental steps towards the necessary, vital, structural change that would fulfill the promise of social justice that we see inherent in libraries."[10] Institutionalization alone cannot account for critical librarianship's failure to challenge power and privilege beyond the library classroom, however. Building on Leung and López-McKnight's argument that critical information literacy has failed to challenge white supremacy as "a structure of domination"[11] within the profession, we contend that discourses of agency, power, and empowerment inherent in critical library pedagogy may also contribute to these shortcomings. We suggest that critical library pedagogy's emphasis on the initiative and agency of individual teachers and students risks reinscribing neoliberal subjectivities of performance and merit and exacerbating labor issues endemic to the neoliberal university, such as doing more with less, understaffing, competition, and burnout, thereby working against collective action, solidarity, and equity.

In this chapter, we explore the labor of information literacy and its devaluation in professional discourse, which lends appeal to critical library pedagogy as means to reclaim agency in the classroom.[12] We consider how discourses of agency and empowerment in critical library pedagogy fail to account for positionality, power, and context, with the result that critical pedagogy tends to center individual (heroic) efforts rather than collective action. Because critical library pedagogy emphasizes *individual* agency, it enhances, rather than diminishes, the role of the instructor; teachers "empower students both as individuals and as potential agents of social change."[13] In so doing, it positions instructors as

individual actors outside of social groups, thereby sidestepping engagement with systemic oppressive structures such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Critical pedagogy thus becomes a decontextualized and disempowering fiction, a practice of "acting as if" the classroom were a safe space.[14] It becomes what Hudson refers to as "a pedagogy of the practical,"[15] a practice that reinscribes white supremacy in the library. Reframing critical library pedagogy as labor undertaken in solidarity with other workers offers another possibility for reclaiming its liberatory potential.

# Information Literacy Teaching as Affective, Immaterial Labor or Care Work

Like other forms of teaching, information literacy instruction is the affective, immaterial labor of social reproduction, "the work of feeding, nurturing, soothing, educating, and ensuring that basic needs are met."[16] This intangible, often invisible work "creates and replenishes labor power," thereby "produc[ing] value under capitalism."[17] In facilitating the development of students as scholars and future knowledge workers and by smoothing information flows in the university,[18] instruction librarians not only enable knowledge production in the academy, but also serve to reproduce the academy itself.[19] Despite the value of such work in supporting "institutional goals and retention,"[20] it is often devalued as pink collar labor, a form of gendered care work associated with women and the domestic sphere.[21] In the library, "digital immaterial labor" such as coding or systems librarianship is privileged and validated as mind work largely performed by men, while the affective immaterial labor of teaching is devalued.[22] As Sloniowski and others underscore, "such valorizations have their roots in gendered divisions of labor."[23] Moreover, as is the case in higher education more broadly,[24] the burden of care work in the academic library falls disproportionately on Black and Indigenous women, and women of color.[25]

In an article that explores teaching as care work, Ismael, Lazzaro, and Ishihara identify the following "skilled dimensions" of caring education work: cultural responsiveness; acknowledging racism and other forms of discrimination; building relationships; attending to students' social, emotional, and physiological needs; and a focus on instruction and skilled pedagogy.[26] These strategies can be found throughout the critical information literacy literature. Feminist library pedagogy, which informs much critical library instruction, centers women's "experiences, voices, feelings, and ideas in educational settings" in order to raise

awareness of and dismantle oppression.[27] Reflection, dialogue, problem-posing, and active learning are key methods employed by critical library teachers.[28] Douglas and Gadsby use relational-cultural theory as a lens through which to foreground "the connection and relationships between people, such as mutuality, empathy, and sensitivity to emotional contexts" that information literacy work requires.[29] Loyer describes Indigenous information literacy as a practice informed by accountability, reciprocity, relationships, and a need for awareness of students' "emotional, spiritual, and physical health" as they engage in research.[30]

At the same time, Ismael, Lazzaro, and Ishihara emphasize that the "actions and orientations" of caring teachers "represent an overwhelming individual duty."[31] In the austerity-based neoliberal university, which requires us to do more with less and prioritize efficiency in a never-ending race to the bottom, such work can be detrimental to the health of workers, pitting students' well-being against that of educators.[32] Gregg further argues that because being "emotionally invested"[33] creates a willingness to accept work intensification as the norm, it is an expectation in higher education.[34] These conditions also exist in the academic library. Like faculty, academic librarians experience work intensification (expanded responsibilities) and work acceleration (a requirement to do more work in less time).[35] Instruction librarians, already perceived as marginal educators, are further required to "modify the tempo of their own labor" to remain "'in time' with the dominant temporalities of faculty and students"[36] by providing just-in-time information literacy supports such as classes, guides, videos, and chat reference. Emotional labor undergirds this instructional work,[37] and, as Ismael, Lazzaro, and Ishihara demonstrate, "feminization, racialization, and connection to emotion make care work and care workers uniquely vulnerable to exploitation."[38]

Further exacerbating librarians' susceptibility to burnout and labor exploitation is our professional service ethic and vocational awe. Vocational awe is the "expectation that the fulfillment of job duties requires sacrifice" as a means to accomplish a "higher purpose."[39] Warner extends Ettarh's analysis of vocational awe in librarianship to the neoliberal university, identifying what he calls "institutional awe," the "belief that the institution itself is *more important* than the people it serves."[40] Institutional awe demands that we "hurl" ourselves "into the breach of austerity," sacrificing ourselves in the name of the institution lest our students be "irreparably harmed."[41] Vocational and institutional awe demand extraordinary individual efforts to sustain underfunded systems and services. When we invest in our work as critical library instructors to the detriment of our well-being by accepting last-minute requests for classes, teaching more classes than we can handle, or spending countless hours tweaking content, we reproduce

vocational and institutional awe, subjecting ourselves to "relentless care without replenishment."[42]

Critical approaches to information literacy emerge in conjunction with conventional perspectives.[43] In the next section, then, we draw upon work by Hicks and Lloyd that reveals that the turn to critical library pedagogy can be understood, at least in part, as an effort by librarians to push back against professional discourses that position them as peripheral to knowledge production, powerless, and deficient.[44]

# The Discourses of Information Literacy: Agency, Power, and Deficits

In an ongoing study, Hicks and Lloyd examine professional texts, including information literacy models and guidelines produced by associations such as the ACRL and ANCIL and books about information literacy itself, in order to analyze higher education discourses about information literacy, students, and librarians.[45] These texts and the stories they tell are central in shaping information literacy in higher education—what it is and how it should be taught, by whom, and under what conditions.[46]

Hicks and Lloyd's analysis reveals two mutually constitutive yet conflicting narratives about students and librarians respectively. With regard to students, an outward-facing narrative intended for external stakeholders positions information literacy within a broader category of "empowerment narratives," including critical pedagogy: "Information literacy will 'empower' learners with the skills, attitudes, behaviors and understandings that they will need to make appropriate and informed choices within both current and future endeavors."[47] At the same time, an inward-facing narrative directed at librarians themselves depicts students as "uncritical," "overwhelmed," "overloaded," "passive," "overly dependent on others," and "lacking the experience and motivation to learn and fulfil the rules of academic practice."[48] Within this narrative, nontraditional students are singled out as "problems to be solved."[49] Because this narrative positions students as deficient, and self-determination as something to be "achieved through the correction of behavior," it understands information literacy as empowering and information literacy instruction as beneficial. The result is that empowerment becomes "an individual rather than a structural problem."[50] As Hicks and Lloyd emphasize, empowerment narratives that begin with the assumption of "human inadequacy" cannot be understood as "liberatory [or] anti-oppressive."[51] Instead, liberation occurs top-down, through the "bestowal

of power by benevolent authority figures rather than ideas of self-organization and social action."[52] Information literacy becomes a form of acculturation into authorized ways of knowing rather than a form of exploration or inquiry.

These texts also downplay librarians' expertise by positioning them and their labor as absent from or peripheral to information literacy teaching in higher education. In the outward-facing narrative, librarians are "othered"—marginalized, disempowered, and stigmatized—and portrayed as incapable of contributing to discussions around information literacy.[53] They are instead repeatedly blamed for the failure of the information literacy project while structural issues that might impede its success, such as status, faculty engagement, time, and understaffing, remain unacknowledged. In contrast, the inward-facing narrative centers librarians' work but simultaneously depicts librarians themselves as lacking the proficiency and capability to be effective in their role. Librarians are characterized as underprepared, unassertive, and powerless; librarians, like their students, are deficient.

Given this context, it is not difficult to see why critical library pedagogy and its focus on agency and empowerment might appeal to library educators. For example, Tewell suggests that "as an educational approach that acknowledges and emboldens learners' agency, critical information literacy has much to offer librarians"[54] And yet, since the late 1980s, feminist and antiracist educators such as Ellsworth and Gore have argued that contrary to its promise, critical pedagogy "perpetuate[s] relations of domination"[55] in the classroom. Similar critiques have recently emerged within the LIS literature.[56] In the next section, we turn our attention to these critiques. Our analysis reveals that while the allure of critical library pedagogy lies in the possibility of political engagement, its overemphasis on the agency and ability of an abstract charismatic teacher works instead to reinscribe neoliberal logics and white savior narratives in libraries, working against solidarity and collaboration.[57]

# Critical Pedagogy, Agency, and Empowerment

In an influential article, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," Ellsworth recounts her engagement with critical pedagogy as a deliberate "political intervention," intended "to clarify the structures of institutional racism underlying university practices and culture."[58] Ellsworth interrogates critical pedagogy's central "myths" as they are outlined in the literature, namely empowerment, student voice, dialogue, and critical reflection.[59] Based on her experience of trying to put critical pedagogy

into practice, Ellsworth claims that one reason critical pedagogy doesn't feel empowering is because it remains abstract and utopian. While critical educators may take on concrete issues in their classrooms, "educational researchers who invoke concepts of critical pedagogy consistently strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position."[60] Teachers and their students are cast as generic actors outside the space and time of specific subject formations and political struggles. Ellsworth describes this decontextualized and disempowering fiction as follows:

> Acting as if our classroom were a safe space in which democratic dialogue was possible and happening did not make it so. If we were to respond to our context and the social identities of the people in our classroom in ways that did not reproduce the oppressive formations we were trying to work against, we needed classroom practices that confronted the power dynamics inside and outside of our classroom.[61]

Ultimately, Ellsworth and her students moved away from utopian abstraction to context-specific classroom practices that acknowledged the complex interplay of "knowledge, power, and desire."[62]

Building on the work of Ellsworth, Gore examines the relationship between empowerment and pedagogy in discourses and practices of critical and feminist pedagogy.[63] Gore sees a distinction between two "strands" of critical pedagogy: the first, represented in the work of Giroux and McLaren, operates at the macro level and emphasizes "a particular (if shifting) social vision."[64] The second, represented in the work of Freire and Shor, operates at the micro level and emphasizes empowerment through instructional practices specific to their contexts.[65] Like Ellsworth, Gore contends that discourses of empowerment within critical pedagogy "attribute extraordinary abilities to the teacher, and hold a view of agency which risks ignoring the context of the teacher's work,"[66] specifically education as a patriarchal institution and site of social regulation. In positioning educators as "already empowered" agents, distinct from the not-yet-empowered student,[67] critical pedagogy oversimplifies agency, context, and power.

Critical pedagogy can also impede instructors from reflecting on their own role in perpetuating oppressive classroom practices. Gore instead argues for an intersectional understanding of empowerment that pays greater attention to context and positionality:

> More attention to contexts would help shift the problem of empowerment from dualisms of power/powerlessness, and dominant/

subordinate, that is, from purely oppositional stances, to a problem of multiplicity and contradiction…. Context must be conceived as filled with social actors whose personal and group histories position them as subjects immersed in social patterns.[68]

The same uneasy tension around empowerment and authority exists in critical library pedagogy and for library instructors; the same complex contexts frame and constrain our work. These tensions are further complicated by librarians' marginal status on campus and continuous pursuit of higher standing through credentialing in the prestige hierarchy of higher education.[69] It is not surprising, then, that related critiques of critical library pedagogy's narratives of librarians' agency and empowerment have recently surfaced within the LIS literature as well, although the fact that these critiques have come primarily, if not exclusively, from BIPOC librarians is significant. For example, Loyer suggests that relationality (how we are related to each other) and reciprocity (who we are accountable to and responsible for), concepts "informed by our relationships to the land" that "animate the work of information as Indigenous resurgence,"[70] are largely absent from discussions of critical librarianship and pedagogy. Loyer goes on to ask:

> Is there space in critical librarianship for Indigenous kinship, for wâhkôhtowin? The space is overwhelmingly white in many cases…. Though critical librarianship prompts us to ask who is missing from these conversations, I still don't see my people's voices being amplified. Where are the Indigenous people in critical librarianship?[71]

Leung and López-McKnight assert that critical library pedagogy fails to "engage …with race, power, and [w]hite [s]upremacy,"[72] rendering it "inadequate" as a liberatory framework for dismantling white supremacy within the profession and within higher education. This failure can create a profound sense of alienation for librarians from marginalized groups, resulting in "a destructive separation of our identities and positionalities from our teaching selves."[73] These authors further elaborate:

> How can we share authority we never had? What does it mean for us to share power we had to fight for with students? What do we do when we're mistaken for the student rather than the librarian there to teach a library workshop? What does it mean for a librarian of Color, rather than a white librarian, to be "authentic" in the classroom, when we aren't allowed to be anywhere else?[74]

Building on these ideas, Douglas observes that "assumptions made in critical information literacy," including the notions that "people need liberating" and "[l]ibrarians teaching information literacy hold power," make assumptions about who is doing the teaching. She goes on to note that, like many other BIPOC librarians, she finds herself at odds with critical librarianship's "loose collective."[75]

These critiques of critical library pedagogy reveal the ways that narratives of librarians' deficiency, agency, and empowerment in the classroom reinforce white savior narratives and white supremacy in librarianship.[76] Narratives that position patrons (or students) as "deficient, inherently needy, or in need of saving"[77] can also be associated with vocational awe and the archetype of the benevolent white woman in the library.[78] Like Gore before us, we conclude that advocates of critical library pedagogy should direct our energies toward "seeking ways to exercise power" that align with "our espoused aims, ways that include humility, skepticism, and self-criticism."[79] Ferretti and Leung and López-McKnight similarly call upon us to engage in critical self-reflection.[80] An important first step in this process is moving away from narratives of agency and empowerment toward narratives centered in labor and solidarity.

# Conclusion

In our view, critical library pedagogy can work to advance social justice only when it is understood as a collective practice grounded in specific social and institutional contexts, namely, "the racist, misogynistic, capitalist, colonialist history and legacy of libraries."[81] Conceiving of critical library pedagogy as care work and as collaborative and contextual labor practices might provide a way forward. As Ismael, Lazzaro, and Ishihara argue, "understanding the care work of education as labor is a step toward mitigating its potential exploitation by helping workers understand what working conditions will sustain the kind of care work that our students deserve."[82] Likewise, Chaput contends that one way to live through the complex subjectivity of "oppositional thinkers [such as critical librarians] in the university" is "to reappropriate our professional embodiedness" through a "working-class professionalism"[83] in which professionals identify as laborers. Similarly, reframing critical library pedagogy as an ongoing process of higher education reform undertaken collaboratively and in solidarity with other workers offers another possibility for reclaiming its liberatory potential, as Elmborg argues.

> Being a literacy worker involves something other than imparting skills. It involves connecting daily work with students, colleagues,

and institutions to larger ideological questions about who belongs in higher education and how to make higher education as accessible as possible to everyone.[84]

In this chapter, we have considered how we might reenvision critical library pedagogy as caring work undertaken in solidarity with our colleagues. Such reframing requires us to interrogate the assumptions of the content and methods of library instruction. It requires us to acknowledge teaching as caring work, as immaterial affective labor, and to critically examine discourses of critical pedagogy and critical library pedagogy, particularly their understandings of agency and empowerment. It requires us to attend to the structures and conditions that shape contemporary higher education and academic libraries and to establish boundaries, expectations, and policies that push back against vocational and institutional awe, creating a more equitable workload for library instructors.[85] It requires us to "explore our teaching and learning experiences against, and through, white supremacy—while interrogating, and responding to critical library instruction."[86] This chapter represents a partial effort forward, in the framing of Sara Ahmed, and we hope other librarians will help make the path clearer.[87]

# Notes

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51.  Hicks and Lloyd, "Deconstructing Information Literacy Discourse." 565.
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53.  Hicks and Lloyd, "Relegating Expertise." 421.
54.  Tewell, "Practice and Promise." 10.
55.  Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" 289.
56.  Leung and López-McKnight, "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures"; Douglas, "WILU Closing Plenary Session."
57.  Lauren Gail Berlant, "Feminism and the Institutions of Intimacy," in *The Politics of Research*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 143.
58.  Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" 299.
59.  Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" 289.
60.  Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" 300.
61.  Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" 315.

62.  Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" 316.
63.  Gore, "What Can We Do for You!"
64.  Gore, "What Can We Do for You!" 7.
65.  Gore, "What Can We Do for You!" 7.
66.  Gore, "What Can We Do for You!" 9.
67.  Gore, "What Can We Do for You!" 14.
68.  Gore, "What Can We Do for You!" 13.
69.  Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith, "The Library as 'Stuck Place': Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University," in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 305–17; Maura Seale and Rafia Mirza, "Empty Presence: Library Labor, Prestige, and the MLS," *Library Trends* 68, no. 2 (2019): 252–68, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0038.
70.  Loyer, "Indigenous Information Literacy," 154.
71.  Loyer describes wâhkôhtowin as "a life philosophy, worldview and way of life" that foregrounds "the kinship connections …to all of creation" in Michif culture. Loyer, "Indigenous Information Literacy," 151, 154.
72.  Leung and López-McKnight, "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures," 15.
73.  Leung and López-McKnight, "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures," 17.
74.  Leung and López-McKnight, "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures," 19.
75.  Veronica Arellano Douglas, "WILU Closing Plenary Session," *Libraries + Inquiry* (blog), June 25, 2021. https://veronicaarellanodouglas.com/information-literacy-2/wilu-closing-plenary-session/.
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79.  Gore, "What Can We Do for You!" 21.
80.  Ferretti, "Building a Critical Culture," 134; Leung and López-McKnight, "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures," 22.
81.  Leung and López-McKnight, "Dreaming Revolutionary Futures," 22.
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