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# 3

## **Critical Information Literacy: Definitions and Challenges**

James Elmborg

After twenty years teaching English and composition, I became a librarian. I naturally brought many of the perspectives and issues of the English classroom to my work as a librarian, and I found my first position as a librarian working in “user education” as a liaison to composition and English. In this role, I faced immediate communication issues. Librarians I worked with rejected overly theoretical perspectives to their work. They saw tasks and jobs and looked for the most direct and efficient ways to do them. The professional literature modeled a problem-solving approach reflecting that mindset. Such research involved isolating variables around a problem and testing outcomes for the best solution, a solution we could replicate and apply broadly to library practice. In my own academic background and in my liaison work with English and composition, I found a dramatically different approach. There, instructors problematize incessantly and seek theoretical complexity as a way to continually re-frame their concerns. Each approach had its frustrations. Constant problematizing and theorizing can be paralyzing, since the problems never become stable enough to completely solve. On the other hand, the push to stabilize problems in order to solve them and to move immediately to practical solutions can mean over-simplifying underlying problems or seeking solutions to poorly understood problems. The tension between “problem setting” and “problem solving” made communication between the library and the academic unit difficult. In some ways, this tension seemed to reflect differences between working in a service role (distinctly

defined problems and goal-driven solutions) and working in an instructional role (constantly shifting problems in murky contexts with competing agendas). As one charged with developing a teaching faculty in the library, I began to advocate that librarians become more engaged in theoretical questions of teaching and learning, and to bring those issues to the library and the classroom.

Upon becoming a faculty member in Library and Information Science, I became responsible for a research agenda, and my challenge has been to try to bridge this epistemological gap between two very different versions of knowledge-making. I have tried to be aggressive about problematizing academic library work, but I have tried to do so without veering entirely into the theoretical (and seemingly irrelevant). I was heavily influenced by the critical pedagogy movement in education and with how problematic teaching and learning can be if we take into account the social and cultural conflicts that shape our sense of what school should do. As a writing instructor, I found myself working with many students whose language was not Standard American English, and I found teaching writing to be a sometimes coercive activity that involved almost literally forcing students into linguistic constructions (and by extension, ways of thinking) that would make them sound “normal,” which is to say “white” and “middle-class.” While English and composition were acutely and painfully aware of the problems in this pedagogical position, the library literature rarely reflected any anxiety over the issue. My work as a scholar has largely been devoted to finding ways to initiate this discussion or to find others in the field to share the discussion with. In work like “Teaching at the Desk” (Elmborg, 2002), “Information Literacy and ‘Real’ Literacy” (Elmborg, 2004), and “Critical Information Literacy” (Elmborg, 2006) I aimed to bring critical perspectives to the field as both a practical and theoretical concern. As I continue to push forward with this work, my thinking has become increasingly challenging to (and critical of) the ways libraries and librarians tend to work. Some of us working in this field have come to call this approach “critical information literacy.” This essay will explore “critical information literacy” as a concept that can inform the day-to-day practices of librarians. It will also extend this critical tradition established elsewhere in my work.

The tension between critical theory and social science methodologies outlined above manifests itself in a consistent question I get from librarians in practice. I am most often asked if I can provide clearer defi-

nitions or to provide examples of how we might practice critical information literacy. Because of the problems I have described already, I am wary of this effort to standardize and generalize theory. We are noun-driven in our discussions about research, easily turning ideas into concrete things so we can define, explore, and describe them. Michel Foucault described this process as the very essence of academia, the identification or creation of intellectual “objects” of study, whether those “objects” are literally physical objects or not (Foucault, 1982). Rather than seeing information literacy as a “thing” we can locate and define, I see it as a complicated set of interwoven practices. These practices are mobile, flexible, and malleable, residing in various places and in constant flux. In addition, these practices are not located in one place or person, but rather are shared across various sites and institutions, including information users (like students, and faculty) and those whose professional practices claim information literacy as their domain (librarians and IT staff) and among information producers (like authors, database vendors and publishers). Each of these roles involves people, values, and institutional cultures that shape practices. In order to understand information literacy, we must therefore ask a number of initial questions, including: Who is becoming information literate? What does becoming information literate mean? What can librarians do to help people become information literate? Who has a stake in what information literacy means? Information literacy thus bundles numerous dimensions into its central one.

This description of information literacy differs from the way we often see it depicted in official documents or practitioner literature. In these discussions of information literacy, we have aimed to stabilize the concepts as much as possible, that is, to make information literacy an abstract noun. When we begin to talk about critical information literacy, then, we find that all the various locations of literacy—the who, the what, and the how—become even more mobile and difficult to locate. Critical information literacy exists in relationships between people and information rather than as an identifiable thing in its own right. As we begin to engage the question of critical information literacy, it helps if we are careful with our language, to make sure we avoid reducing complex processes into overly simple concepts. The dynamism of critical information literacy needs to be reflected in our language. Christine Pawley has examined the ways that information literacy as a concept couples two “feel good” terms (information and literacy) in an attempt to gain traction for

professional practice (Pawley, 2003). I agree with Pawley that our use of both “information” and “literacy” has tended to reify these concepts (to make them into unrealistically rigid and stable categories). I also think that by taking a critical approach to the language we use, we can open up these categories to move toward less mechanical and more rich and more human-centered understandings.

In adding the word “critical” to information literacy, I have two major intentions. The first is to recognize how “critical” it is for us to embrace and develop these new practices. In this sense, I intend the word to mean important and significant. It is “critical” that we do this and that we get it right. Secondly, I intend to be “critical,” that is, to “criticize” our current practices. I intend to be critical as a way to improve our understanding, not out of meanness of spirit. I am critical of our tendency to treat information literacy as a “noun,” for example, because focusing our attention on information literacy as an “thing” blinds us to the ways it must exist in people, practices, and process. I am critical of the Information Literacy Competency Standards, for example. I think they played a major role in turning information literacy into a “thing” we own, but which we aren’t sure what to do with. This problem has defined our thinking and kept us from seeing other possibilities. In what follows, I intend to explore the central concepts involved in critical information literacy in order to open up the discussion of what it means to “do” critical information literacy. I will take each major term in turn—“critical,” and “information,” and “literacy”—hoping to build as I go toward a useful conception of this admittedly difficult phrase.

## **WHAT IS LITERACY?**

Historically, literacy has meant the ability to read and write. Etymologically related to “letters,” literacy originally meant literally to “know one’s letters.” A general history of literacy reveals its relationship to power. In medieval times, the ability to read a text proved one’s educational level, and consequently allowed one special treatment as a “gentleman” (the gendering of literacy is intentional since—except in only the rarest of circumstances—only males were allowed to be literate). Literacy levels have long been attached to Bible reading, and so literacy levels have been connected to piousness and right living. More recently functional literacy has been defined as the ability to use reading and writing to participate in the activities of the general society, especially the ability to sign finan-

cial instruments. In all these senses, reading and writing perform various social functions connected to power and class. Once they recognized the connection between power and literacy, societies found they could manipulate literacy levels to distribute power. Laws passed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century forbade the teaching of literacy skills to slaves, and women were long educated to read but not to write. Through such regulation, levels of power were distributed intentionally. Literacy has always been connected to power and to social class, and it has been intentionally deployed by societies to manage these categories and functions.

In the late 1990s, the concept of literacy began to expand and evolve as it became a catch-all metaphor for the skills that lead to success. Various words were coupled with literacy, including computer literacy, technological literacy, quantitative literacy, media literacy, financial literacy, and of course, information literacy. How can we account for this proliferation of literacies? Why literacy? In “Blinded by the Letter: Why are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?” the questions of contemporary literacy are unpacked with an eye toward exploring the unspoken cultural work that the word “literacy” does today. Through analysis of old cowboy films and contemporary political rhetoric, Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola trace the ways reading and writing have been connected to the settling of the American West and to the vision of America’s place in the unfolding future century. They cite President Clinton’s creation of the National Institute for Literacy, which “was created to assist in upgrading the workforce, reducing welfare dependency, raising the standard of literacy, and creating safer communities” (Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola 1999, 350–351). We often talk about literacy as a discrete set of skills that can be taught in relatively neutral ways. In Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola’s analysis, the distribution of this set of skills pushes forward a national agenda of self-reliance and workforce ready citizens.

In many of these discussions, literacy is treated as a universal and relatively unproblematic good, one we can impart to people to give them a better life, and in the process, make them productive citizens rather than drags on society and the economy. In this vein, literacy levels are often cited as key for developing Third World countries into productive modern societies. Information literacy originated in this context as a form of literacy intended to connect to other literacies that make for productive citizens living productive lives. The origin of the phrase “information literacy” is generally credited to Paul Zurkowski, who was president of

the Information Industry Association. According to Zurkowski, "People trained in the application of information resources to their work can be called information literates. They have learned techniques and skills for using the wide range of information tools as well as primary sources in molding information solutions to their problems" (Zurkowski 1974). The situating of information literacy in the workplace and the emphasis on skills and techniques to define information literacy connect it to other literacies designed to further the national economic and social good.

As we have come to see literacy as a "metaphor for everything else," the proliferation of literacies poses problems on two distinct levels. As Brian Street has persuasively argued, our past conceptions of literacy have been based on an "autonomous model" of literacy. In this model, the literate person is presumed to be an autonomous agent responsible for the accumulation of a certain set of skills that make him or her productive and useful. The failure to acquire such skills marks a person as inadequate, and we see illiteracy described in a number of ways that essentially blame illiterate people for their illiteracy. Street argues that contemporary social sciences have made a recent shift in how they see literacy, moving to what he calls the "ideological model" of literacy (Street 2001). The ideological model involves understanding all the social goods that have become attached to literacy. We also then must acknowledge that many of us have inherited these social goods as birthright, while others of us have not.

As we create new literacies by attaching various modifiers to the terms "literacy," we need to recognize the tensions set up by Street's dichotomy. If we see literacy as autonomous, then we assume that the skills that lead to literacy can be taught unproblematically. Like reading and writing, which we can teach phonetically as the relationship between sounds and written letters, other kinds of literacies can also be described as particular kinds of codes that lead to the ability to "read" other kinds of texts. Financial literacy becomes the ability to read and write checkbooks, mortgages, and tax documents. Quantitative literacy becomes the ability to read statistical data and to understand and explain what it demonstrates. Media literacy becomes the ability to read the television or computer screen to understand the message of the media. Fundamentally, the underlying metaphor of literacy involves "reading" and "writing." To read something skillfully is to be literate. To be able to write something is to master the literacy.

As we have already noted, the ability to read and write opens opportunities and constitutes a form of power. Marshall McLuhan argued that the phonetic alphabet allowed English speaking people to expand their global reach in that English “colonizes” all other languages by representing sounds rather than images (as do pictographic languages, for example). McLuhan connected the linear and logical structure of the written word with the militaristic logic of the Western mind (McLuhan 1999). McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* was initially met with confusion and even scorn, but as English spreads to dominate online discourse (and by extension, all 21<sup>st</sup> century discourse), we can easily correlate the adoption of the English language with the communication channels of commerce that form the leading edge that spreads Western culture. In doing so, we must recognize that by adopting Western conceptions of literacy, a culture also tends to adopt Western values of capitalism with its patterns of production, consumption and worklife regimentation.

### **WHAT “CRITICAL” MEANS**

In discussing literacy with my students, I am often challenged at this point to explain why this way of defining literacy is a problem. After all, capitalism (along with the rising middle class it has made possible) has made life infinitely better for those cultures that have adopted it. In introducing the concept of the critical, we risk positioning ourselves as outsiders who resist all the good things about the dominant culture rather than acknowledging all the great gains produced by literacy and its by-product, the Western middle class. In one recent discussion, students and I were exploring literacy’s role in creating middle class values and the role of schools in linking these two concepts together. One student asked me sincerely, “Isn’t that what we’re supposed to be doing?” Indeed, we have come to accept the naturalness of literacy and its centrality for schools in creating Western prosperity and the Western worldview, so that anything critical of this process seems almost treasonous.

However, I want to take that risk because I think we have to acknowledge some basic problems with how we link literacy to cultural values. The first and most obvious problem is our assumption that the playing field in literacy education is equal. If we acknowledge that literacy significantly reproduces middle class identity, we must also acknowledge that lack of literacy excludes one from the middle class. In the autonomous model of literacy, the challenge for the autonomous individual



(the non-literate student) is to gain the literacy skills required to enter the middle class. If we adopt the autonomous model, we frame this as a question of desire or will power. If students want to become literate, our schools stand ready to empower them. If not, they will be rejected from the system in favor of other students who want to succeed. James Gee has written about the ways that family literacy provides a framework for building future literacy skills. In essence, Gee argues that certain home literacies (notably middle-class literacies formed in English speaking homes with plenty of reading and writing) blend effortlessly into school, while the absence of such home literacies creates huge challenges for other students, challenges many of them never overcome (Gee 2001).

From a skills point of view, the challenges are formidable, but the challenges extend beyond just skills. If we consider the ideological model of literacy, we recognize that entangled with the Western middle-class performance of literacy are the cultural values McLuhan attaches to print literacy. These include the high value placed on autonomy (after all, reading mastery is achieved when one can completely internalize the reading process), competitiveness, and an acceptance of the justice of American capitalism's rise to global dominance. In essence, the story of literacy is the story of the Western rise to global domination. In *I Won't Learn from You: The Role of Assent in Learning*, Herbert Kohl describes a phenomenon he calls "learning refusal." He traces this "refusal" through various scenarios that represent students' intentional refusal to internalize the dominant culture around them because that culture devalues their lived experience by insisting that they accept the values embodied in the traditional literacy narrative (the story of the West, the story of the striving individual, the story of print literacy). He describes groups of Latino students in Texas who refuse to read history because their textbook starts the story of Texas with the coming of the white man. He describes students in New York who refuse to read and write without challenging the ways that language frames and reproduces gender, class, and ethnic techniques of domination (Kohl 1994). Kohl insists that we see these students as highly intelligent and extremely perceptive about how we use language. They intentionally refuse to adopt middle class literacy practices because those literacy practices come with a social and political "reality" that these students perceive and reject.

I have begun to assign a short story to my class in the course I teach on literacy: "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula Le Guin.

This brief science fiction tale describes a utopian society where everyone has everything they could want. They are happy and beautiful, intelligent and wise. At a certain point in their lives, in the middle teenage years, the young people go through a rite of passage. They are taken to a dungeon where a child lives in despair and squalor. This child is wretched and has no hopes for escaping the dungeon, and indeed, the child would not know what to do if liberated. The young people of Omelas then go on with their lives understanding that with all their happiness, wisdom, and beauty, a child exists in squalor in a dungeon. The child's condition is nobody's fault. However, the knowledge that the child exists creates such discomfort in some that they "walk away" from Omelas, unable to participate in a system with such a situation at its center (Le Guin 1975). The story is a parable, and as such it is simplistic and stark in its theme and message. Among many other things, it represents to me the origins of a critical consciousness, an awareness that material comforts and happiness depend on those in different circumstances who have yet to "make it" and who perhaps never will. The existence of such discrepancies poses a fundamental problem for us as educators. Once we are awake to the question, we can not "un-ask" it.

## **WHAT IS INFORMATION?**

Of all the abstractions that we represent with nouns, perhaps the most problematic is the word "information." In *The Problem of Information*, Douglas Raber goes so far as to suggest that we should just give up on establishing a stable meaning for the term information "and embrace instead the idea that at least there will be times when it can be unambiguously identified (Raber 2007, 8). " "Information" does not exist in any tangible sense, of course, a fact we all know on some level. Derived from the verb "inform," information is literally any material thing that informs us. For something to be information, there must be a person who is informed. Information is therefore, literally, that substance which the informing material transmits to the person informed. At this point, we are veering close to pure metaphysical abstraction, interesting in its own right, but not terribly useful in moving our discussion forward. For our purposes, then, we can call the idea of "information" a useful fiction. While information is entirely abstract as a concept, we can very fruitfully treat it as a material reality in some cases. Indeed, information science as an intellectual field does precisely that. By applying scientific methodology to

study information as if it were real and material, information science has been able to generate very useful observations about how information behaves and how it responds to those seeking to be informed.

Having conceded the usefulness of the fiction of information, I want to raise a concern about what happens if we treat information as if it were real, I do not aim to call all of information science (or its related fields of information retrieval and/or classification, etc.) into question. Rather, I want to draw reasonable parameters around what we can actually achieve by this move. Information science itself gestured toward this problem early in its formation as a field of study. Information scientists began to substitute the word “aboutness” for the more common library word “subject” (Raber 2003, 131–140). Information scientists were uncomfortable with the philosophical baggage that came along with the word “subject,” in that by naming “subjects,” we reinforced the illusion that information exists “out there” and apart from any person who is seeking to be informed. While we might debate whether a shift in terminology from “subject” to “aboutness” gains us philosophical ground, it does draw attention to a primary point worth emphasizing. Only a person seeking information can tell us whether a document or a statement provides information that he or she desires. In other words, the only judge of “aboutness” is the person who seeks to be informed “about” something.

Hope Olson has articulated the problems with our various versions of “subject” or “aboutness” by recognizing that our library tools, in identifying subjects, depend entirely on Western categories of meaning (Olson 2001). Rather than sliding easily over this observation, I want to pause to examine its significance. The power of classification to define legitimate subjects of inquiry is immense. Historically, libraries and librarians have constructed collections and tools treating the idea of “subject” as completely unproblematic. Indeed, in library rhetoric, “subjects” are real. They are also extremely powerful in that they reflect the authorized “subjects” in academic curricula. Like academic disciplines, library subjects are a natural part of how schools teach us to think. As useful fictions, “subjects” as ways of organizing “information” have served us well. Useful fictions present tricky challenges in that their usefulness can easily justify increased belief in their reality. To handle useful fictions we need to consciously suspend our disbelief. Ultimately, however, we can easily end up believing in useful fictions as if they are true. In such cases, we fail to recognize when the fictions take on a life of their own, and we allow these fictions to separate from their own stories.

In his impressive history of education as a colonial enterprise, John Willinsky argues that in “learning to divide the world” Western colonizers undertook a project that involved understanding cultural others as inferior objects of study. Following this ultimate classification (us=civilized, them=uncivilized), education began a program that involved dividing the world in ways that explained this “otherness” to the colonizers and the colonized. Willinsky claims that modern education grew out of the “ways in which imperialism was bent on taking a knowing possession of the world, on setting that world on public display for the edification of the West, and on developing the principal forms of schooling that might serve both colonial state and colonized native” (Willinsky 1998, 19) He argues that academic “subjects” were created to provide a seemingly neutral system for the imperialist mind to take “knowing possession” of the colonized. According to this analysis, “the five academic disciplines that have become staples of the school curriculum: history, geography, science, language and literature” reflect “traces of the colonial imagination that form part of how we have learned to divide the world.” (Willinsky 1998, 19) Each subject in turn serves as a method for dividing the civilized “us” from the uncivilized “them.”

When we allow the idea of “subjects,” derived from school curriculum, to assume the status of reality in our minds, we separate the history of their evolution—indeed, the very reasons they exist—from their existence in our conception of professional practice. Controlled language, Library of Congress Subject Headings, and collections arranged by call numbers—all these represent significant ways that “subjects” have assumed the status of material reality in libraries, but they also carry the very obvious markings of their colonialist history. In relying on these subject categories to structure knowledge—and by extension to structure the ways that students learn—we in effect make judgments about legitimate and illegitimate questions based on whether the questions are represented as acceptable subjects. Subject categories impose a form of reality, but they do so in such passive and neutral ways that we can present them as “helpful” to students and researchers.

For this reason (at least in part) many people working in libraries continue to find the transformation of abstract classification into subjects unproblematic. In conversations with librarians-in-training about the classifying of information, I often reach the same point of impasse as in discussions of literacy: They ask “Isn’t this what we are supposed to be doing?” While acknowledging useful fictions and their value, we also need

to recognize the limits of these fictions and what gets hidden when we pretend that subject categories that we have invented for particular historic reasons are real. As one remedy for such simplifying of “information” into material category, Siva Vaidhyanathan proposes “critical information studies,” which he says “interrogates the structures, functions, habits, norms, and practices that guide global flows of information” (Vaidhyanathan 2006, 303). This vision of Critical Information Studies “asks questions about access, costs, and chilling effects on, within, and among audiences” (Vaidhyanathan 2006, 303). Vaidhyanathan suggests that critical information studies should promote “the idea of ‘semiotic democracy’, or the ability of citizens to employ the signs and symbols ubiquitous in their environments in manners that they determine” (Vaidhyanathan 2006, 305).

While different in many ways from critical information literacy, Vaidhyanathan’s critical information studies derives from the same need to get beyond surface descriptions of information to ask more fundamental question about “global flows of information.” Doing so moves us away from defining information as a “thing” and toward understanding information as a repertoire of historically based social practices involving production, dissemination and reception. Such a discussion naturally leads us to ask more problematic questions about access, about who has access to information and who does not. Finally, and significantly, critical information studies connects access to information to “semiotic democracy,” a wonderful phrase that concisely points to our inherent interests in a democratic society in making and expressing our own symbols and signs, rather than depending on externally generated concepts of “subject” or “aboutness.”

In theory, all the impulses of critical information studies seem congruent with library philosophy, and indeed, in an era of where libraries advocate for open access publications to challenge publishers to open up their economic systems to bring down the walls between people and information, critical information studies would seem to provide a philosophical rationale and a way of conceptualizing information that might lead toward a liberating conception of libraries. However, we have much work to do in thinking about how this philosophy actually plays out in the roles librarians assume in educating students. One way of framing this question is to ask what would librarianship look like if it were viewed as a form of living and practicing critical information studies.

In some form, the question can be answered with critical information literacy.

### **WHAT IS CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY?**

First of all, as one of the expanded concepts of literacy, information literacy has inherited assumptions about how literacy might be function in service of the national mission to maximize productivity and create a competitive workforce in the twenty-first century. Much of the rhetoric surrounding information literacy resonates with the language of productivity, and the Information Literacy Competency Standards have been rightly called to task for turning the research process into a formulaic and production-oriented concept. The Standards emphasize efficiency and their existence has made information literacy into a goal-driven, product-driven activity. Perhaps most damaging is the way the Standards have framed the student researcher. Though many readers will have intimate familiarity with the Standards, I reproduce them here for discussion:

An information literate individual is able to:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally

As I have noted elsewhere, these Standards roughly emulate a process model (Elmborg 2006). The process is linear, moving from the determination of a need through access, evaluation and use. "Information" must be seen here as a fully reified concept, which means we must fully accept the "reality" of information as unproblematic. The Standards focus on efficiency and utility. Information literacy here emerges as a tool of the skilled knowledge worker, who becomes more information literate as she or he becomes a more efficient handler of information. At this point, we may well ask, "Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing?"

As suggested above, Information (and by extension information literacy) is a concept spread across multiple sites of meaning (including

sites like the classroom, the reference desk, the lecture hall, and the dorm room) and with multiple participants (including the faculty member, the librarian, the IT staff, and the student) and various stakeholders (including the faculty, the library, the publishers, and future employers). However, the Standards ignore all aspects of information literacy except the student. In effect, by choosing to focus on defining the “information literate student,” the Standards have adopted the autonomous model of literacy and put the entire responsibility for information literacy on the student. They do not call into question the ways all the other important players in the system might have competing or incompatible agendas in relation to that student. The student has become the “object” of information literacy, and by extension, the place where information literacy happens. The academic librarian (like all other stakeholders) can maintain a safe objective distance from this student and assess his or her progress toward information literacy using the measuring stick of the Standards.

Our first challenge in conceiving a critical information literacy is in rethinking this positioning of the student. Paulo Freire’s work has been rightly invoked as a powerful alternative model for thinking about how this relationship might be conceived (Jacobs 2008). Freire argues that we need to break down the dichotomous relationship of students and teachers to conceive of a new way of thinking about students with teachers. Freire argues that “education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.” (Freire 2002, 72). Freire describes the educational model represented by the Information Literacy Competency Standards as the “banking concept.” In focusing on information as a tangible “thing,” and information literacy as the set of skills for acquiring that “thing,” we (perhaps unconsciously) have focused on teaching students to more efficiently “bank” knowledge. The logic of capitalism thus underlies the literacy narrative once again.

Freire argues that to combat this “banking” education, we need to develop “critical consciousness” in students and teachers. Freire argues that we “must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent on the world.” (Freire 2002, 79) We must focus on “acts of cognition, not transfers of information.” (Freire 2002, 79) Ultimately, according to Freire, a critical education “entails at the out-

set that the teacher-student contradiction be resolved.” (Freire 2002, 79) Heidi Jacobs has perceptively argued that information literacy instruction needs to develop a critical praxis precisely to reposition the student in relation to what Freire calls “critical consciousness.” Jacobs argues that “in terms of information literacy pedagogy, one of the best ways for us to encourage students to be engaged learners is for us to become engaged learners, delve deeply into our own problem posing, and embody the kind of engagement we want to see in our students.” (Jacobs 2008, 261) Such “problem posing” is offered by Freire as an alternative to the banking concept. He describes a process of transforming banking education into problem posing education which means we stop seeing students as “objects” and repositories for information and begin seeing them as “historical beings necessarily engaged with other people in a movement of inquiry.” He concludes that “any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.” (Freire 2002, 85)

Jacobs has provided a full analysis of the implications of bringing Freireian praxis into service as information literacy pedagogy (Jacobs 2008). Kopp and Olson-Kopp have written persuasively about the implications of conceiving information literacy work as developing Freireian critical consciousness (Kopp and Olson-Kopp 2010). I have argued that we have traditionally seen the library as an “information bank” in banking education (Elmborg 2004). In linking critical information literacy to Freireian pedagogy, a major question has remained somewhat unanswered. I think addressing this question directly might further push our understanding and perhaps open new lines of thinking. This question relates to the inherent problem of importing a pedagogy (and indeed an entire world view) from another time and place into twenty-first century education in Western developed nations. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator. He grew up among the poor in Brazil, and though he became highly educated, earning a law degree and spending his life as an educator, he maintained his identification with Brazilian peasants. His “pedagogy of the oppressed,” which the banking concept and problem posing education exemplify, grew from his understanding of the way political power and education were deployed to oppress the peasant class in Brazil. Freire’s pedagogy also derives from his Christian perspective, which drove his concern for the poor and which he coupled with a Marxist philosophy of class and power.



Any understanding of Freire's philosophy and praxis must on some level account for the translation of his work—deeply connected as it is to local historical and philosophical contexts—into modern (and postmodern) practices.

The first way to address this problem is to acknowledge it exists, to avoid reifying the banking concept as a concept and to treat it instead as a statement from a different time and place that can help us understand our own. Freire's commitment to a Christian concern for the poor and oppressed seems relatively unproblematic to me. Secular humanism (for lack of a better phrase) draws most of its moral framework from Judeo-Christian ethics, relying on questions of social justice and the responsibility of humans to take care of each other to guide its ethical positions. Concern with these issues is consistently raised in all major religions, making the ethic virtually universal in spite of specific dogmatic or ritual differences these religions might hold. I can certainly understand and respect resistance to any professional philosophy rooted in religious faith. However, it seems unwise to insist that education not have an ethical dimension of caring and responsibility at its core.

The concept of "oppression," however, presents more complicated problems. Freire developed his pedagogy in his work with oppressed working peasants in Brazil. For Freire, imparting reading and writing skills to these learners did not solve the central problems of literacy. In order to learn to read and write, these learners needed to develop a consciousness, a literate awareness of the power of having a mind, of having thoughts of one's own. They needed to move beyond thinking of the world as existing in a reified reality that they could experience but not change. They needed to develop agency, a sense of having a self that shapes and takes meaningful action in the world. For Freire, consciousness is central to literacy. In articulating a concept like the "banking concept," Freire wants to challenge the idea that we can deposit knowledge in people's minds while leaving them relatively unchanged in terms of how they see themselves in the world. For Freire, this "depositing" represents the ultimate fraud, a sort of parlor trick that separates real human growth from the accumulation of knowledge as thing. This trick is necessary to keep learners from asking fundamental questions about where they stand in this world and how it might be different. Viewed this way, "banking education" (rather than religion) is the opiate of the people.

In order to bring Freireian pedagogy into twenty-first century learning, we must ask questions about today's learners. Is "oppressed" the

right word to describe students in contemporary Western societies? I can make no claim for privileged understanding of these learners. Having spent almost forty years in American schools working with various levels of learners, I reflect on the problems I have experienced trying to encourage students to own their consciousness and to see themselves as active agents in the world. I certainly recognize the “banking concept” with its technique of distilling powerful, highly political and ideological ideas into nicely teachable subjects, and I have seen the power of pretending that banking knowledge is neutral and unproblematic acquisition of information. I have felt the tension between educating students toward financial success rather than growth and actualization in the world. In retrospect, I have primarily experienced students as in some kind of suspended state, waiting for their moment to become “active” in the world (Lyotard 1984). I suspect that for many, this moment never comes, and they move from passive learners to passive employees almost seamlessly. Advertisements from financial management firms now promise that we will finally own our lives in retirement, when (as one current commercial ironically notes) we will travel the world, start a vineyard, or in some other way pursue the life we have been deferring since kindergarten.

But is this kind of education in contemporary society a form of “oppression” in the Freireian sense? One way to answer this question is to note the similar condition of the Brazilian peasant and the modern American student. Both are encouraged to see the world as static and unchangeable. Economic “realities” for both involve finding a place within a powerful system, a place where agency is limited and “critical consciousness” will only get you in trouble. We might easily see the American school system as a highly sophisticated technology that promises economic success (even extreme wealth) to students, if only they learn to play the game well enough. In response, some students see school as providing a secure and positive future, a path toward adulthood with some measure of guaranteed success. Other students see school as oppressive and detrimental to their identity, whether that identity is rooted in family, neighborhood, or some other group they identify with. And some students seem to see school as a game, easy enough to play but not meaningful in any important way.

At this point, we seem to have departed from Freire’s “peasant narrative” toward a complex new “American student” narrative. The American student sees school through many different eyes. Most students understand school as primarily about power, power they can submit to, resist,

or exploit. The game of school involves learning abstract and sometimes useless-seeming information, and learning to put that information into a framework with other information. The point of this game is not to make sense of the world, but rather to prove to teachers and future teachers and future employers that one can play this game. For many of the most sophisticated students, the game-within-the-game of school involves not being duped by the first game, not thinking the mental exercises of school really matter. The point of the game-within-the-game is to become an entrepreneur, to learn to make moves that upend the system and to become “above the rules” of the game. This response allows the student to stay in the game while not taking it too seriously. All around us today, we see these entrepreneurs glorified as the winners of this game. Many such entrepreneurs dismiss traditional education while deploying new and disruptive technologies, thereby accruing new levels of wealth and making a new game.

So to some extent, Freire provides us a way to see these students and their relationship to power, but at some point, this narrative ceases to really explain the position of today’s learners in twentieth century Western schools. I have never been able to see twenty-first century students as “oppressed” in the Freireian sense. They generally do not accept their powerlessness in the world. They might walk away from school in protest, or they might submit to school because they see it as necessary to launch into the world of the active. As influential as Freire’s “banking concept” has been, it has perhaps been overly reified as another “deposit” that schools of education put in the heads of future educators. If we read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with fresh eyes, we see that Freire anticipated this question. Indeed, Freire suggests that to avoid the stagnation of the banking concept, we need to turn to “problem-posing education” (Freire 2002).

Only by posing real problems in the world can we encourage students to see themselves as actors in the world. Freire creates a pedagogy of the “oppressed” because he sees oppression as the primary problem of the working peasant in Brazil. Whether we want to see the Western student as oppressed or not, I would contend that most of us see today’s students as caught in a problematic educational system. Education is compulsory, but nearly all students struggle to reconcile the practices of school with their own evolving selves. The problem of being a student involves finding a meaningful self, finding one’s right relationship with the institu-

tions that shape our lives, and finding the right relationship with our fellow humans. These goals are not explicitly part of what we traditionally define as “school.” However, to practice a problem-posing pedagogy, we need to find ways to name this new kind of student’s dilemma and to pose the problem of their condition to the students themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Three problematic terms—critical, information, and literacy. Each term resists easy definition, and each term plays off the other two to create dynamism and avoid stasis. Having explored where these terms take us, perhaps we can return to the question most often posed about critical information literacy: what does it look like in practice? Perhaps at some unique institutions, critical information literacy might become a programmatic “thing,” but I think in most cases, critical information literacy becomes an individual choice on the part of a librarian, a personal philosophy of librarianship. This person, the practicing critical information literacy librarian, seeks a way of engaging students as more than repositories of information. This critical information literacy librarian sees students as fragile human beings negotiating an unforgiving and highly competitive landscape. This librarian recognizes the need for young people to be more than consumers in a holding pattern waiting for an adulthood that will look very much like school. This librarian will have become “critical” of the ways that Western capitalism has restricted the meaning of our lives to getting and spending. This librarian will think it is “critical” that we find ways of being in the world and in our profession that are more rewarding and more humanizing.

This librarian will see “information” as one of the problems of our time, and will be troubled that information seems too easily treated “as if” it exists in some concrete form. This librarian will find important things missing from the Standards. The way that research is portrayed in the Standards will seem not so much wrong as one-dimensional and inadequate. The idea that we “recognize the need for information” will seem mechanical. The idea that we should aim to “access the needed information effectively and efficiently” will seem contrary to the slow and patient way that knowledge builds in the person. This librarian will be uncomfortable with the role of teaching students how to “evaluate information and its sources critically,” especially if that evaluation involves formulaic value judgments about “good” and “bad” information. This librarian

will be intrigued by the Standard that encourages us to “understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information,” but will also be discouraged by how little of our professional discourse engages this question.

Finally, this librarian will recognize that 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. It involves putting ourselves on the level of students as co-questioners, co-doubters, even co-dreamers. In short, it involves an entire rethinking of the relationship between librarian and student. As radical as it might seem, the critical information literacy librarian may come to believe that we have no “thing” to teach to students. The critical information librarian will instead participate in Freire’s ongoing questioning and struggling for meaning. To be a critical information librarian is to recognize that even with all our material success, there are those who have yet to “make it” in a world that is subtly but powerfully stacked against them. The critical information literacy librarian chooses not to walk away from the challenge posed by that problem, which seems to me the central educational and social problem of our time.

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