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## The Reconquista Student: Critical Information Literacy, Civics, and Confronting Student Intolerance

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# The Reconquista Student: Critical Information Literacy, Civics, and Confronting Student Intolerance

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## Abstract

Given the increasing power and prominence of political figures in the United States who openly espouse xenophobic, misogynistic, white nationalist positions, it is only natural to anticipate encountering students who express these views in our libraries and classrooms. This essay uses a classroom encounter with a student expressing xenophobic sentiments as a way to explore the following questions: As someone heavily influenced by a great deal of Critical Information Literacy (CIL) literature, why was I so flummoxed upon encountering this student's perspective? Why did I find the intellectual resources that I had drawn from to shape my classroom pedagogy inadequate? Using the methods of normative political theory, the essay draws from CIL literature emphasizing intuitional questioning and resistance, and civic education literature emphasizing institutional participation. The essay concludes by arguing that the political theorist Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic pluralism provides librarians with a theoretical framework that can accommodate both insurgency and institutional participation when encountering intolerance.

*Keywords:* Information literacy; critical information literacy; civic education; democratic theory; Chantal Mouffe

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## The Reconquista Student: Critical Information Literacy, Civics, and Confronting Student Intolerance

It is a typical evening in my academic library at a public university, and I am leading students in a one-shot library instruction session for a freshman English composition class. This evening I know right away that I am going to have a difficult time when a student begins to dominate the discussion by demanding that we examine the “Reconquista Movement” as an example topic. As an instructor, I always try to elicit participation from students, so they become more involved in the process of creating and finding new ideas and knowledge. As I discovered after class because of this incident, concern about the existence of this “movement” is mostly confined to far rightwing websites and groups that have an explicitly xenophobic, white nationalist ideology. In these quarters, there persists a belief that immigration from Mexico is part of a literal plan to “reconquer” substantial portions of the Southwestern United States (Denvir, 2016; Loller & Prengaman, 2007). What became clear as the class session progressed was that this student (henceforth referred to as the *Reconquista Student*) wanted to spend the entire session focusing the class’s attention on information that confirmed and supported the increasingly xenophobic (and to me personally, troubling) statements he started making to the class. It was not simply that this student believed in information that was empirically dubious; this student wanted to promote an ideology of exclusion to the rest of the class. When the Reconquista Student was unable to find information in the databases, he became more agitated and began to search online on conspiracy theory websites. Rather than confronting him, the rest of the class became increasingly quiet, and I took control of the rest of session. As a librarian who has found a great deal of value in the Critical Information Literacy (CIL) literature about resisting injustice and breaking down hierarchies, I found myself at a loss when thinking about how to best approach this student and the class.

For the purposes of this essay, I want to ignore issues of classroom management; instead, I wish to use this incident as a place to begin a larger discussion of philosophical questions related to CIL and civic education in libraries. The 2016 election of Donald Trump has increased the power and prominence of political figures in the United States who openly espouse xenophobic, misogynistic, white nationalist positions. It is only natural to anticipate encountering students who express these views in our libraries and classrooms. In this essay,

I use the methods of normative political theory to explore the following question: As someone who has been heavily influenced by CIL literature, why was I so flummoxed upon encountering this student's perspective? Why did I find the intellectual resources that I had drawn from to shape my classroom pedagogy inadequate? The Reconquista Student treated a group of people as "others" unworthy of respect. This student saw "the others"—in this case, immigrants of Mexican heritage—as illegitimate enemies to be barred from equal participation in classroom discussions of politics as adversarial equals. In this essay, I argue that librarians and educators must assert our institutional authority to create specific educational spaces in which dialogue across difference can occur, while recognizing the important and persistent role that conflict—what the political theorist Chantal Mouffe calls agonism—plays in political life and how that might manifest in our classrooms.

For librarians confronting intolerance in the classroom, the literature of CIL can serve as a valuable resource for thinking about how to resist social injustice and how to move away from the mechanistic conceptions of learning that have dominated the information literacy literature (Downey, 2016). Yet, CIL is not always a particularly useful resource for librarians thinking about how to exercise their institutional authority. When looking for theoretical tools outside of library and information studies (LIS) that might be of use for encouraging communication across difference, it is difficult to ignore the large body of literature on civic education (or citizenship education) that exists emphasizing the role of educational institutions in encouraging mutual understanding across difference, tolerance, and respect for democratic institutions. I argue that both literatures—while providing important insights—have insufficiently examined the role that irresolvable conflict plays in political life, and that several of Chantal Mouffe's key concepts provide critical librarians with a more fully developed framework for thinking about confronting student intolerance in the classroom. I proceed with the proviso that I am identifying prominent themes in the CIL and civic education literature with the goal of creating a schematic picture for thinking about these issues—specific writers in specific cases have been more nuanced than I might seem to allow. Yet, I believe that the themes I identify in this essay are significant enough to merit generalization. My goal is to provide CIL practitioners who work within specific institutional frameworks with new ways to think about what the openly expressed political goals of CIL should be when confronting intolerant speech, action, and behavior that is protected by traditional library conceptions of intellectual freedom. More specifically, when teaching librarians encounter a student whose political views and ideology they find abhorrent, how should they think about confronting them?

## Institutional Resistance: Critical Information Literacy

CIL began to develop as a coherent strand of literature in the mid-2000s as a response to the perceived limitations of the mainstream information literacy writing and research that began appearing in the 1970s. What follows is not intended as a thorough literature review of CIL, but rather an examination of some of the key CIL literature that specifically explores the political questions associated with confronting intolerance in the classroom. Traditional information literacy and LIS writing about the relationship between libraries and political action has focused on libraries' role in informing the public; the presumption being that a well-informed public will make wise decisions and engage in civil public debate and that an information-literate citizen will be able to adjudicate empirical claims (Kranich, 2001). The most prominent recently debated document that addresses information literacy in the U.S. is the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (henceforth, "the Framework"). That the words "politics," "political," or "democracy" do not appear in the Framework at all is a telling omission. Maura Seale finds that a contradictory liberalism pervades the Framework, and that in the document "learning is understood as an individual act and is the same for each learner, who acquires knowledge practices and dispositions and moves from information illiterate to information literate" (p. 85).

CIL is a valuable resource for thinking about student intolerance in the classroom (i.e., politics) because it shifts the focus away from a narrow empirical evaluation of information itself. Political argumentation cannot be simply classified as authoritative or non-authoritative. In recent years the popular media and sub-disciplines like political psychology have been debating and researching the role that ideology and deeply held moral beliefs can play in making even the most highly educated refuse to acknowledge empirical evidence that conflicts with deeply held beliefs (Cohen 2010; Haidt 2012). CIL argues that libraries are not immune to existing societal forms of injustice, and that libraries as institutions actively participate in the creation and maintenance of hegemony—even if they simultaneously contain practices that may also counter that hegemony (Raber, 2003; Pawley, 1998). CIL has offered an important corrective to the existing information literacy literature, yet when I turned to it to consider how to best use my institutional authority with the Reconquista Student, it proved a less sure guide.

CIL draws heavily from critical pedagogy and the work of educational theorists such as Paulo Freire. It emphasizes the importance of moving away from a "banking model" of

education in which information is “deposited” by a teacher into students’ minds; instead, it emphasizes the importance of students becoming generative social subjects—creators rather than absorbers. Moreover, this critical approach argues that an instructor who decides to be politically “neutral” in a society plagued by structural inequalities is acquiescing to these inequalities. In many ways, it is an injunction to students and librarians alike to resist social injustice (Accardi, Drabinski, & Kumbier, 2010). Ian Beilin (2014) believes that this entails “resistance to the stated goals of higher education as they are commonly promoted, especially by administrators, politicians, bureaucrats and educational reformers. Failing to resist all too easily provides reinforcement to the existing system, and helps reproduce it.” (para. 22). In short: resist!

One of the first commentators to attempt an unmasking of the politics of existing information literacy literature was Christine Pawley (1998), who observed a class perspective embedded in information literacy discourse that views technological skills as especially suited to meet the needs of capital. Following in Pawley’s footsteps, several writers have examined the relationship between neoliberalism and “mainstream” information literacy research and commentary (e.g., the ACRL Standards) (Seale 2013, 2015) and how most information literacy “embraces a skills agenda” that views students as “entrepreneurs of the self” who must adapt to a precarious work life after university (Nicholson 2015). The term critical information literacy gained prominence with James Elmborg’s (2006) *Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice*, and was followed by works such as Jacobs (2008) and the publication of the edited book collection *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Accardi, Drabinski, & Kumbier, 2010). Since 2010, a number of works, conferences, meetings, and web chats have advocated a more critical approach to librarianship (e.g., works such as *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, the use of #critlib on Twitter). A body of literature now exists that engages with CIL on both “theoretical and practical levels” to the extent that “the Framework” indicates a familiarity with this literature (Tewell, 2015).

One of the few attempts to link CIL with specific forms of political participation can be found in Lauren Smith’s examination of young people’s attitude towards politics in the United Kingdom (2013). Smith suggests that CIL will be “beneficial to citizens whose political agency will be strengthened by the introduction of a coherent, direct method of addressing the challenges associated with becoming informed and knowledgeable participants in a democratic society, which would support wider society through more

meaningful engagement with democracy” (p. 27). Smith argues that librarians can participate in this project by confronting “the frameworks and processes that prevent young people from imagining alternate perspectives” (p. 19). But what about inside the classroom?

One CIL commentator who has addressed the institutional position of librarians is Joshua Beatty (2015), who reminds us that Freire’s works that appeared after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were specifically focused on educators in the first world. Freire felt many of his North American readers had misinterpreted his text and had extricated it from the context in which it was written (Freire worked with Brazilian peasants resisting a military junta in the 1960s). In Beatty’s reading of Freire:

A facilitative teacher... denies having their own authority, preferring instead to insist on a democratic classroom, in which the students are equal partners. But this is a false equivalence, because the teacher-turned-facilitator is backed by the power of the institution. By veiling their rightful authority — that authority that derives from their subject knowledge — the facilitator inadvertently allows their classroom to be governed by the authoritarian power of the educational system. (p. 10)

I argue that in thinking about authoritarian power, we should also include the anti-democratic forces that exist in the society in which the educational system is embedded (e.g., white supremacy, the power of capital) and how that power manifests itself in the classroom. Beatty calls on librarians to reclaim the idea of rigor as intellectual discipline that arises from dialogic teaching. When librarians and educators simply abdicate their institutional authority with the goal of empowering students, their power does not disappear, it simply changes forms and remains unspoken. When we teach or interact with a student at the reference desk, we are modeling specific forms of communication. Advocating specific forms of action and condemning exclusionary behavior and rhetoric in formal institutional settings is different from, say, monitoring the internet or excluding specific books from a collection. As institutions, libraries should openly promote pluralism and debate across difference. To take this position is to abandon neutrality in a manner that actively seeks to use the institution to provide space for normative democratic goals.

I recognize that I have just painted the CIL literature with an overly broad brush—there is more nuance in much of this literature than I have indicated in this brief exploration. Yet, when I consider the case of the Reconquista Student, CIL’s critique of standard information



literacy left me ill prepared to engage him in a way that would further CIL's antiracist goals. One could credibly argue that this student is resisting institutional authority and that he is questioning the current modes of academic knowledge production (e.g., there are no scholarly sources that confirm his assertion about the Reconquista movement, so he could credibly argue that the corporate mainstream media deliberately marginalizes his perspective). In seeking to empower students, CIL has not focused on reckoning with what happens when students decide to confront pluralism and directly challenge the values held by the teacher. In CIL's calls for the development of theoretically informed praxis, it must recognize that the Reconquista Student is speaking on behalf of an ideology that seeks to exclude others from the polity that must be confronted if its anti-oppressive commitments are to have substantive meaning. When thinking about how to confront these forms of intolerance in the classroom, the focus then turns to questions of deliberation and how to use librarians' institutional authority to facilitate student participation in contentious discussion.

### **Institutional Participation: Civic Education**

The vast literature on civic education provides librarians with a framework from outside of LIS for thinking about developing student tolerance and mutual respect across difference. Civic education is more sanguine than CIL about the capacity of existing democratic institutions to respond to the interests of "the public;" it is far more concerned with fostering participation in existing democratic institutions than it is in insurgencies to change them. The nature and character of the politicization that civic education advocates is far more interested in questions related to the deliberative processes through which citizens reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The majority of the empirical literature on civic education in the 20th century has focused on demonstrating the correlation between formal education and knowledge about politics (Niemi & Junn, 1998). A substantial portion of the public conversation that focuses on civics is about primary and secondary schools; by the time students have reached college, it is often assumed that more discipline-specific forms of inquiry will take precedence. In postsecondary education, the majority of civic education literature has focused more on service learning and volunteerism than on more partisan political participation or in facilitating discussions across difference (Finley, 2011). American conservatives often complain that the political left has diminished civic education by subjecting the founding



documents and political figures to critical scrutiny (Jamison, 2010). In such a polarized environment, what are the values that should guide us in the classroom and in our libraries?

The majority of the theoretical literature on civic education is based on liberal precepts drawing from the philosophical work of John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Michael Sandel (among others) about deliberative democracy and pluralism (Crittenden & Levine, 2016). While this discussion of civic education and political philosophy may seem specialized, it is important that the normative commitments that motivate a great deal of the civic education literature be made clear. We must understand the underlying assumptions of civic education if we are to assess its suitability as a guide for thinking about the questions that the Reconquista Student poses. Advocates of civic education make claims in favor of values such as reasonableness, mutual respect, and fairness—particularly those influenced by Rawls for whom “only public, political reasons count in attempting to justify content” (Fives, 2013, p. 578), while non-coercively (what is specifically coercive is left undefined) promoting the values of pluralistic tolerance and autonomy in students. Rawlsian liberals mean something very specific when using the word *political* that is somewhat different from common usage. For them, politics is made up of arguments based on reasonable public values (e.g., constitutional rights, formal equality before the law of all persons). Because different citizens may hold incommensurable private values, it is vital that citizens use public values to make arguments rather than personal, nonpublic ones (e.g., religion, bigotry). This means that robust civic education should encourage the development of citizens who can set aside personal values to publicly express their reasonable beliefs, and that “people should develop the aptitude, desire, knowledge, and skills that lead them to read and discuss the news and current events with diverse fellow citizens and influence the government with the views that they develop and refine by deliberation” (Crittenden & Levine, 2016, para 65).

What if the deliberative goal of mutual understanding across difference facilitated by institutional participation in the classroom flounders in practice? The solution to “incommensurable conceptions of the good,” devised by Rawls and endorsed by many of his followers in civic education (Ruitenbergh, 2009), is to emphasize a conception of political community that contains some kind of reasonable unity combined with a pluralism that can overcome particularistic private affinities (e.g., the theorist of citizen education Eamonn Callan calls for a “patriotic solidarity”). It is this commitment to reasonable communication across difference and mutual understanding developed through democratic institutions that, while helpful in setting ground rules for dialog across difference in the classroom, makes the

civic education literature feel inadequate to satisfyingly address the issues that the Reconquista Student raises. Discourse participants who see others as “illegitimate” are enacting one of the great historical weaknesses of liberal democracy—the all too often exclusion of many (e.g., women, people of color, the un-propertied) considered unworthy of citizenship from the public realm.

If one accepts the CIL arguments about how value neutrality is actually a decision to acquiesce to existing inequalities, then what is required is a theoretical framework that can reckon with political conflict not only between students, but between students and teachers as well. In asking teachers and students to bracket off deeply held moral beliefs into the private realm, civic education tries “to create an ideal model” and runs the risk of becoming what Freire called a “naively conceived humanism,” because it ignores “the concrete, existential, present situation of real people” (as cited in Crittenden & Levine, 2016, para. 126). Likewise, if students and teachers are incapable of moving towards some kind of mutual understanding and pluralism through dialog, then what hope is there that the polarized public political conversation will ever improve? While CIL provides a good framework for thinking about how to resist institutional injustice in libraries, and civic education provides a way to theorize institutional participation, how should the teaching librarian navigate the tension between these two poles? The ideas of Chantal Mouffe provide an interesting path forward.

### **Mouffe’s Radical and Plural Democracy: Squaring the Circle?**

Chantal Mouffe (1993) can serve as a useful starting point for exploring the persistence of conflict when discussing political issues in our libraries and classrooms. Mouffe’s problem with the philosophy that informs much of the work on civic education is its inability to reckon with the “irreducible character of antagonism” that defines the political. By “the political,” Mouffe means something very specific and something very different from Rawls and his followers. The Mouffian *political* is a horizon characterized by conflictual speech and action. This is what Mouffe means when she goes so far as to say that Rawls’ (one of the most discussed political philosophers of the 20th century) ideal society is one in which politics have ceased to exist. For Mouffe, conflict is not a problem to be overcome, but is instead a political force to be channeled (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 3). Instead of eliminating conflict, Mouffe seeks to direct antagonism (what she sometimes calls *agon*) into pluralistic and democratic forms. For Mouffe

Once we accept the necessity of the political and the impossibility of a world without antagonism, what needs to be envisaged is how it is possible *under those conditions* to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order. Such an order is based on a distinction between ‘enemy’ and ‘adversary.’ It requires that, within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. (p. 4)

The goal of democratic community should not be to erase difference or to confine the political to a circumscribed realm; it is to maintain a discursive space in which subjects do not become enemies to be destroyed, but merely adversaries to be debated. Mouffe borrows from the psychoanalytic concept of repression in arguing that when debate participants are commanded to abandon collective identifications, it only defers the political manifestations of these identifications making them more antidemocratic and anti-pluralist when they do emerge (Ruitenbergh, 2009, p. 3).

Considering the Reconquista Student’s speech and action as being political in the Mouffeian sense opens new horizons for thinking about how to approach intolerance in the classroom. As David James Hudson (2017) details in his examination of the uses of diversity as an anti-racist approach in LIS, the overarching emphasis placed on inclusion and cultural competence as anti-racist practice has meant that LIS has not sufficiently examined racism as historically contingent ideological practices or as a set of power relations embedded within institutions and day-to-day life. For Hudson, this focus on inclusion avoids larger structural questions. For example, if racism is viewed as a lack of information, indecorous behavior, or individual emotions, then institutional and behavioral guidelines that promote inclusion should be sufficient as antiracist practice. If, instead, racism is viewed as a larger systemic ideological practice, then addressing it will involve conflict because differing ideologies are often irreconcilable and conflict laden. Karen and Barbara Fields (2012) argue that ideology can be “understood as the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day” (p. 134). Civic education in the library classroom must recognize that broader power relations shape everyday discourse. Confronting racist ideological practices in the classroom will necessarily produce conflict because confronting habitual patterns of thought is not a neutral project. The pedagogical question is how do teaching librarians use that conflict to create greater understanding across differences and to further the goals of CIL and/or civic education?

The actions and statements of the Reconquista Student came from an ideological practice that is irreconcilable with my personal beliefs. What made the Reconquista Student's speech and behavior so upsetting to me was that the content challenged my beliefs—it was not that he was rude, or that he interrupted class, it was that he was pushing a xenophobic narrative that excluded others from the public realm. When this student expressed these views, he took a position in conflict with other students and me as the teacher. His statements and behavior emerged from nonpublic values that conflicted with my values and (for the sake of argument because I cannot be certain that what I observed as discomfort was disagreement) other students. I had the power of the institution behind me as a librarian teacher. How should I have used it?

### **Radical Democratic Pluralism in Practice**

Mouffe's paradoxical conception of the political can help teaching librarians to think about their power within the classroom. Because the political horizon involves a "we" and a "them," a radical democratic pluralism accepts this fractiousness, but recognizes that when a "we" eliminates a "them," that very pluralism ceases to exist. Mouffe is not without her critics—some see the potential for a neo-Nietzschean nihilism with regards to values like solidarity, because for Mouffe "there is no way we can fully understand other people, other groups and their claims" (Karppinen, Moe, & Svensson, 2008, p. 7). On the one hand, CIL has pointed out that strict value neutrality is impossible and that injustice must be confronted. The process of problem posing can be a useful starting point and may be able to elicit from students an awareness of how their own preexisting moral frameworks inform how they assess information and how, through dialogue, they enter into political debate with those who hold different perspectives. The Reconquista Student should be confronted and forced to consider that his position might reasonably be seen as eliminating some of his fellow students as equal adversaries to be debated. On the other hand, educational institutions have an obligation to use their power to foster democratic debate across difference, to encourage greater participation, and to inculcate a respect for a pluralism of values. To speak of civics is to speak of the public realm. When a person steps into the role of teacher, some personal values must be bracketed off and not promoted in order to pursue the educational and civic goals of the institution. The American university exists in a society that is riven by inequality and conflict; therefore, what librarians who support the goals of CIL require is a theory of the political that can navigate the tension between standing with

social movements and insurgencies for justice on the one hand, and exercising institutional authority to create a pluralist classroom or library on the other.

I argue that librarians must challenge intolerance, and that the best way to do this (in a way that is consistent with general democratic/institutional principles) is to focus on the procedural/behavioral issues (i.e., giving space to a plurality of perspectives) rather than focusing on the interior life of the student (i.e., telling them they are racist and trying to change their mind). While librarians may hope to change minds, institutional norms are within librarians' locus of control—the interior views and perspectives of our students are not. As any educator with experience in the classroom knows, deciding when and how to intervene and shape discussion is a practice that comes through experience. I have had students say things that I find deeply upsetting; however, I find it important to be judicious about when and how I stop, or change, lines of discussion. While I may not be able to change the Reconquista Student's views, I can use my institutional authority to try to convince him to engage others as adversarial equals. I need not be neutral when confronting the Reconquista Student's intolerance. Since civic education is already politicized, I believe that the goals of this type of education will be better served by being openly articulated and argued for. The goal of this essay is to propose a normative framework for approaching these issues—specific classroom interventions, curricula, and practices (e.g., lines that should not be crossed) need to be developed by librarians working within specific contexts.

The work of Critten (2015) is a good example of how to operationalize some of these ideas in the classroom and how to complicate this enemy/adversary distinction. It explicitly asks students to reflect upon how their worldviews shape the ways that they evaluate information. Maura Seale (2015) finds a great deal of value in Gayatri Spivak's idea that students in the global north must be encouraged to develop "a responsibility to the other" that can both analyze historical difference (i.e., oppression) and interrogate the limits of liberal universalism while simultaneously defending concepts such as human rights and democracy. Importantly, Seale maintains that the concept of responsibility to the other is a "begged question..." or not "the truth" (p. 88). This is an example of a normative perspective that enjoins the teaching librarian to encourage respect for the other as an openly held value that can structure pedagogy. Putting these ideas into practice will necessitate advocating for pluralist values, thereby abandoning a neutral position while understanding that classroom management will mean maintaining a space of respectful conflict that also has clearly demarcated lines that the teaching librarian will not allow students to cross.

## Potential Objections

You are imposing your ideology on students and this is a violation of intellectual freedom.

A commitment to pluralism is an ideological commitment. Librarians should use their power in the classroom and in their libraries to confront speech and ideas that frame others as illegitimate enemies to be destroyed rather than as antagonists to be debated. This might conflict with understandings of library intellectual freedom that views all expression as the same. CIL, while acknowledging the important legal right to free speech, should openly condemn speech and actions that exclude specific communities and peoples from political debate. While critical librarians understand the importance of intellectual freedom, they also understand that they cannot be neutral when they encounter speech and action that threatens a pluralistic democratic polity and that to use their institutional position to promote this kind of dialogue is consistent with these values. Moreover, there is an important difference between promoting a particular form or type of discussion and debate within an institutional setting and the censoring of speech.

Educators and librarians must avoid controversy to protect our institutions.

If it is feared that this makes civic education vulnerable to partisan attack, I argue that it is already subject to such attacks and that its agenda should be pursued openly as a part of the larger public debate. The goal of civic education should not be the taming of political passions, but of transforming political antagonists from “enemies”—who are illegitimate and must be destroyed—to “adversaries” to be debated. CIL should strive to create pluralistic institutions and spaces in which difference is valued. CIL should espouse egalitarian values as ground rules, yet contain a sufficient level of pluralism in order to facilitate communication across difference. This pluralism should not be apolitical with respect to intolerance and it should actively create diverse spaces and institutions in which this communication may take place.

Partisanship has gotten so bad; we need to cultivate mutual respect instead of emphasizing conflict.

The argument for a Mouffeian approach is that by exploring and acknowledging conflict, and the very real differences and worldviews that undergird it, educators will be better able to interest students in civic and political questions (Ruitenber, 2009, p.9). This echoes the recommendations of Niemi and Junn, who note that when someone says that students have “a ‘textbook’ knowledge of how government operates... it means that they have a naive view of it that glosses over the fact that democratic politics is all about disagreement” (p. 150).

Moreover, perhaps this sterile view creates more cynicism when students compare these idealized conceptions with reality.

Who decides what is worthy of condemnation?

Since library educators have been given an instructional role by institutions, they must make decisions about how to proceed in specific instances. If librarians are serious about advancing the values of CIL, then they need to reckon with their institutional position. Most libraries, schools, and universities do have a public mission of some kind, and librarians must work within the context of those missions (whatever their individual view of those missions might be). Individually, when designing curricula or pedagogy, teaching librarians are making decisions about what behaviors and dispositions they wish to promote and what they want to condemn. Developing a framework in which the normative prescription is one that encourages students to view each other as adversaries to be debated rather than as enemies to be destroyed still requires individual librarians and institutions to make decisions about when the line between adversarial debate and exclusion has been crossed. Moreover, if librarians accept CIL's rejection of neutrality, then they must be self-aware of their own values and how those may conflict the values of some students. Importantly, when condemning a student's speech or behavior, it is important that a pluralistic rationale be developed beforehand that can be applied to a classroom setting over which teaching librarians have authority (i.e., the aforementioned behavioral/communicative issues).

## Conclusion

In retrospect, when the Reconquista Student began his tirade, I should have articulated the parameters of respectful dialogue to the whole the class, and I should have directly tried to model respectful dialogue across difference. Although I could have challenged his dubious empirical statements that lacked evidence, I could have used my power in the classroom and asked him to consider how a person from Mexico might respond to his assertion; how the Reconquista Student's claims might be considered as casting a group as enemies to be destroyed rather than as adversaries to be debated. In order to do this, I would have needed a more fully formed understanding of what my goals as a librarian were and how I intended to use my institutional authority to achieve them. Criticizing hierarchy and enjoining students to resist without a cohesive and articulated agenda that specifically considers the pluralistic and democratic role of libraries and educational institutions leaves critical



librarians unprepared to deal with intolerance and conflict when it arises. Librarians must think about how they navigate the tension between sympathy, or opposition to, social movements and institutional insurgencies and their commitment to encouraging participation in pluralistic democratic institutions. In this essay, I have argued that there is always a tension between these two poles and that Mouffe's radical democratic pluralism provides a useful framework for thinking about them.

The tension between individual expression and collective identification is always present in political discourse; libraries and educational institutions must be seen as vehicles for both if they are to continue to serve the public good as a part of a pluralist democratic project. A library may have a very diverse collection of individualized and contradictory—even antagonistic—expression, yet the collective project of building, maintaining and making that collection available is a shared effort that requires a vision and a certain amount of collective will. Similarly, libraries can encourage a range of conflictual expression while promoting a general vision of pluralistic democratic participation. When engaging students like the Reconquista Student, CIL needs to interact with them in ways that encourage them to participate in politics in a problem-posing and dialogic manner. CIL must also recognize that while as individuals we might feel more or less sympathy to particular social movements and institutional insurgencies, interventions in the classroom and libraries should be based on pluralism and the idea that respectful disagreement and conflict are a fundamental part of addressing social and political questions.

If both the inevitability of conflict and a pluralistic respect for difference are a part of the same framework, specific decisions about how to manage conflict in the classroom will need to be made on a case-by-case basis. This is a thorny issue. In many classrooms there will be a range of diverse experiences and perspectives to draw from; however, in the U.S., a highly selective private liberal arts college will tend to draw a very different range of students than, say, a public two-year community college. By the time they reach college, many students (particularly those most interested in politics) are likely to have a fairly entrenched set of attitudes and established moral and discursive frameworks for understanding issues of public concern. A number of these worldviews will be shaped by a highly stratified educational and economic system—students are likely to have attended schools mostly with people who share their class and racial backgrounds (Rothwell, 2015). A radical democratic pluralist framework can, for instance, accommodate the presence of educative private spaces of withdrawal and regroupment and public spaces of debate and conflict. A Mouffeian

framework in the classroom means seeing conflict and debate as constitutive of politics meaning that a kind of “feel good” consensus might be impossible to achieve when debating heated issues. The specific practices need to be developed by teaching librarians working within specific contexts, but it would entail setting limits while fostering contentious, and sometimes difficult, debate.

In this essay I have proceeded with the assumption that institutional power has been given to the teaching librarian. Of course, any individual librarian’s relationship to their given institution is far more complicated. Some institutions have no public mission whatsoever (e.g., for-profit colleges), and librarians are workers who may have little power in shaping institutional priorities or feel that they lack the autonomy to practice professionally as they wish. Yet, when a teacher enters a classroom, he or she does have some power, and it is important to consider how that individual plans to use power if intolerance is encountered. In order to defend the best aspects of education and libraries for normative public purposes, it is important to situate libraries as complicated and ambiguous institutions that exist in a complex web of power relations. It is my argument that librarians should be engaged in a struggle to realize the best aspects of our institutions so that they can use their power to pursue normative democratic goals. I now know that I was unprepared to deal with the Reconquista Student because I had not thought carefully about how to use my power in the classroom. As we confront an unknown future in a polity increasingly shaped by openly expressed conflict, intolerance, inequality, and attacks on public institutions, it is vital that critical librarians in particular, be more clear and explicit about the world that we want to see and how we see ourselves positioned in the struggle to achieve it.

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