That Was Then, This Is Wow: A Case for Critical Information Literacy Across the Curriculum

Margaret Rose Torrell
SUNY Old Westbury, torrellm@oldwestbury.edu

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Margaret Rose Torrell, SUNY Old Westbury

Abstract

This article applies a writing across the curriculum approach to critical library instruction. The information landscape has drastically shifted over the past ten years, altering the ways we perform, interact with, access, and understand research. These changes call for critical library instruction programs that are more robust and sustained than the one- or two-shot critical library instruction lesson I had described in 2010. However, college classroom practices, due to a variety of challenges, have been slow to adapt to this need. In this article written from my perspective as an English teacher, I identify the central place of critical information literacy (CIL) in higher education, aligning it with calls for a new educational approach for the 21st century. As one possible way forward, I draw on insights from writing across the curriculum to recommend a collaborative critical information literacy across the curriculum model that would provide students with sustained and increasingly advanced exposure to CIL throughout their undergraduate years.

Keywords: writing across the curriculum, critical information literacy, one-shot library lesson, *Critical Library Instruction*

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I am a college English teacher working at one of the most diverse comprehensive colleges in the State University of New York system. Hoping to reflect my college's long-cherished mission of cultivating social justice, I embrace critical pedagogy as I teach my composition and literature students. In my 2010 chapter, I outlined ways to use contact zone theory to adopt a critical library pedagogy in teaching the research paper. Over the past ten years, I have continued to work with my students on decoding and using research sources, but writing this retrospective has made me realize that a disconnect has formed between the increasingly insulated space of my classroom and the seemingly ever-growing and turbulent seas of information just beyond it.

Frankly, it seems to me that me and my kind (college professors) are one of the biggest impediments to librarians who practice critical library instruction. We often won't let librarians into our classes. And if we do, we want the one-shot lesson, maybe because that's all we have time for, or perhaps because some of us don't believe a librarian can offer much beyond the standard search techniques we trust that our students mastered in their first year at college. Many of us still cling tightly to our role as gatekeepers of the appropriate research source, even as our students turn to Google to locate some of the most juicy and pertinent ideas to fuel our in-class discussions.

Possibly, we have not looked up from our day-to-day responsibilities long enough to see a changed and still shifting information landscape, or to realize that the internet is no longer a discrete zone we can choose to enter, but instead it is now part of our everyday lives. Or perhaps we have glimpsed these changes, but we have quickly averted our gaze… because if we really look, we'd recognize that we're going to need something significantly more far-reaching than making arrangements for a librarian to teach our students research skills during one day of our class. We are going to have to figure out how to make room for teaching not just an additional skill, not just a body of knowledge, but a way of critical thinking and interfacing with information.

Such wide-spread and on-going changes in information access point to a crucial need for critical library instruction, not just in the occasional one-shot all-purpose library instruction session, but a type of critical library instruction that promotes deep and sustained learning

for students—one which requires practice, experimentation, multiple exposure, and guidance. To make such deep learning possible, colleges might consider a comprehensive and cohesive program which supports student development from beginning to advanced critical researchers and which takes into account that research skills require further development within the context of disciplinary research conventions.

To address these needs, I advocate for a critical information literacy across the curriculum approach that develops independent and critical research skills from first year to senior year and that depends on collaboration between librarians and instructors—not just from English, but from across the disciplines. I begin by showing the need for such a shift in the friction between some of the most significant changes in information access that occurred over the past ten years and my confessed reluctance to adjust to them. I identify the crucial need for critical information literacy (CIL) in higher education, aligning it with calls for a new educational approach for the 21st century. As a possible way forward, I suggest a critical information literacy across the curriculum model that draws on a writing across the curriculum (WAC) approach with one significant difference: Whereas WAC often relies on professors to teach writing in the disciplines, the critical information literacy across the curriculum approach depends upon the work of librarians who hold disciplinary expertise in the subject working in partnership with academic departments and classroom instructors.

Confessions of a Slowly-Adapting English Teacher

When I wrote my chapter ten years ago, I viewed the internet as a virtual contact zone that both allows a greater number of voices to be heard and is influenced by those who have the financial and educational resources to make their voices more accessible and appear more trustworthy than others. I described a critical library instruction workshop that provides students tools to navigate the different powers and forces that come into play on the internet, to empower them to be "aware researchers, active evaluators, and invested respondents" (Torrell, 2010, p. 100). The approach to research I described was informed by Maxine Greene's (1988) argument in *The Dialectic of Freedom*:

> If situations cannot be created that enable the young to deal with feelings of being manipulated by outside forces, there will be far too little sense of agency among them. Without a sense of agency, young people are unlikely to pose significant questions, the existentially rooted questions in which learning begins. (p. 3)

Based on Greene's argument, the research workshop had to give students an awareness of power structures that govern information creation and access; this would encourage their becoming active, critical, and independent researchers. I admitted that amidst the time crunch to complete a research project at the end of a very full semester in my English Composition II course, I tended to miss opportunities for important discussions about power systems and source choice, inadvertently sending disempowering messages to my students. My 2010 self was hopeful that I could find a way to incorporate more critical library instruction principles in my courses going forward.

We are now in 2020 and here is my confession, plain and simple: In response to the information and technological explosion particularly over the past decade, and despite my advocacy for student empowerment and belief in critical pedagogy, I have become more—not less—of a gatekeeper when it comes to research sources in my classes. While we need approaches such as contact zone pedagogy that foster informed, independent thinking about the research process now more than ever, I have confined students to using books and journal articles from databases, rejected internet sources as unacceptable for formal research, made decisions *for* students about appropriate sources with very little explanation for my decisions, steered reluctant students toward the non-full text and somewhat clunky premier database in my field, didn't always make time for even a one-shot library lesson, and have sometimes eschewed teaching the research process altogether. My "no internet sources" decrees have placed students in no-win situations where they had to decide between revealing that they used the forbidden internet and plagiarizing. My insistence that students access information using only scholarly databases risked limiting their findings to more mainstream opinions, writers, and world views.

In one of my upper level literature classes, I stopped requiring students to do independent research altogether. Instead, I select journal articles for the class to read as a whole and include in their assigned "research" papers. This move is partially in response to a shift in English toward the peer-reviewed critical essay in the scholarly journal (which presumes a highly educated readership) and away from the monograph or edited collection of book chapters (which tends to include a wider audience). Peer-reviewed essays, theory-based and steeped in scholarly language, are often off-putting and alienating for students. Undergraduates working at all levels benefit from lessons in how to comprehend and make sense of these pieces.

In response, I have shifted my instructional focus regarding sources: Teaching how to comprehend the research text is primary, not how to locate it. In the context of CIL, this move is limiting at best: True, I am giving students experience in decoding the scholarly essay and they can thereby become more active respondents to such texts (which is very necessary) and, possibly, they may also become more confident as authors working in the genre (which is ideal). However, in the absence of requiring them to perform additional research, the students are exposed only to the scholarly views that I select; they aren't given the freedom to explore other issues that may be pertinent to them. My pre-selection of research also implies the source is credible. As a result, students don't get any experience in locating sources or in determining the authenticity and validity of a source; I may also inadvertently send a message that only certain people with certain levels of education can select sources and contribute to scholarly conversations. Further, in the insulated research bubble I've fabricated for my classes, there is little room to give students experience in identifying and navigating power structures that govern information access, something I pointed to as central for engaged learning and agency in my 2010 chapter. Since one of my goals is to have my students recognize their roles as participants (evaluators, respondents, and writers themselves) in critical conversations in English, these are quite ironic consequences and counter to my aims.

In trying to serve as a gatekeeper of appropriate sources for students, I have, no doubt, contributed to the stereotype of the research paper as mechanical chore. And I know what I'm describing isn't an isolated experience. Detmering and Johnson's (2012) discussion of student narratives about the research process find, as I do, that students see research as tedious, feel boxed in by instructor's requirements, and have trouble understanding sources. Further, since research policy varies from professor to professor, students get mixed messages about appropriate sources. The even bigger problem is that rarely are the reasons for the decisions that professors make about sources communicated to students in a detailed and consistent way, so the rules appear quite arbitrary and another opportunity for critical and engaged pedagogy is lost.

The Case for Critical Information Literacy across the Curriculum (CILAC)

Increasingly and especially over the past five years, the ground surrounding our gateposts is eroding. We are riding the wave of "disintermediated access to information," as Elmborg writes (2016, p. x) or, as Yancey (2017) describes it:

> We have gone from a formalized information literacy system with human interpreters to an ecology constituted of the valuable and incredible—facts, data, personal narrative, rumors, information, and misinformation, all inhabiting the same sphere, each info bit circulating as though it carried the same value as all the others, each info bit connected to other info bits and disconnected from others in a seemingly random way. (p. 77)

Information is all around us, not "over there," in the library, already vetted by the predispositions of several circles of power: In the academic setting, professors, librarians, college administration, college mission, and college budget along with the database, search technology, and publishing industries determine who gets published, what opinions and approaches get circulated or can be easily located, who can access the information, and who gets to understand it once it is located.

Today the students in my classroom are active day-to-day researchers—I am too. "Research" and "information" are no longer available only in books and journal articles residing in a physical library or accessible through an electronic library portal. Information is at our fingertips 24/7 as we swipe the screens of "smartphones more powerful than the IBM 360 mainframe computers that NASA used to put men on the moon," as Davidson (2017, p. 77) so aptly puts it. Each day we perform research acts as we run terms through Google, brush up on something on Wikipedia, follow the links our friends sent to us, watch videos recommended to us based on algorithms constructed from our viewing history on YouTube. Increasingly, open educational resources, open access books and journals, self-published books, blogs, websites, videos, and audio files shift the definition of "appropriate scholarly source" as well as our sense of who might create it, how it might be authenticated, in what modality it might appear, and where it might be found.

Still, while the internet allows for a more democratic and multi-modal distribution of information, those with more financial and educational resources continue to govern whose voices and opinions are more easily accessible and may appear to be more reliable. As we ride that wave of disintermediated access to information, we could drown in information overload, crash upon the rocks of fake news, suffer bites by the jaws of scammers, find we are swimming in exclusive waters where only certain kinds of people are permitted, or be pulled out to sea by rip currents driven by those with the most resources and power.

[PERSPECTIVES]

Torrell
Critical Information Literacy Across the
Curriculum

I thought my role as a gatekeeper of appropriate sources could keep my students "safe" from such perils (as I confess above), but that is simply a grandiose delusion informed by a past era of instruction. My students don't need me to make decisions for them. Instead, they need knowledge of and experience with making informed and independent decisions about the sources they think are appropriate for their research papers and for their day-to-day researching. They need to justify their choices with reasons, show an awareness that the information technology field is not neutral, and reflect on the benefits and drawbacks of various research genres and modalities (scholarly article vs. blog vs. video, for example). I want them to be aware of how accessible information is or isn't, how it is cataloged, and how easy or difficult it is to locate alternate voices and opinions on a topic, and why. In my upper-level courses, I want students to be the best and most up-to-date researchers possible, utilizing cutting-edge search techniques on both the open web and subscription databases, to understand the predispositions of the industries governing the field, to notice who and what ideas get the most airtime on various research outlets. I want them to select sources they can defensibly say are the best for their topic, no matter where they are located. I want them to understand their roles as seekers, evaluators, and producers of information in our field.

In short, I want my students to become experts in CIL. As Tewell (2016a) defines it, "At its core, critical information literacy is an attempt to render visible the complex workings of information so that we may identify and act upon the power structures that shape our lives" (Introduction section, para. 4). CIL, Simmons (2005) explains, involves increasing student independence and agency, both "[h]elping students to examine and question the social, economic, and political context for the production and consumption of information" and "facilitating students' understanding that they can be participants in scholarly conversations" so that they "think of research not as a task of collecting information but instead as a task of constructing meaning" (p. 299). CIL provides students with a 360° view of information access and production, including methods of locating the best information and ways to evaluate the agenda and usefulness of a source. CIL depends upon a foundational research skill set (basic research methods, for example), but it is most significantly both a type of critical thinking requiring the evaluation and synthesis of sources and a body of knowledge or way of knowing focusing on how information is produced and circulated. It is often taught through instructional methods reflective of critical pedagogy in which students are active participants in library lessons, gaining experience and agency in navigating various

sources of information (Accardi, 2013; Simmons, 2005). In this way, the contact zone pedagogy I describe in my 2010 chapter continues to be a useful approach in CIL.

Over the past ten years, knowledge of and support for CIL seems to have reached a critical mass among librarians (Elmborg, 2016; Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016; Tewell, 2018) and is trickling into other disciplines. This expansion is evident in recent publications such as *Critical Information Literacy* (Downey, 2016) and *Information Literacy: Research and Collaboration across the Disciplines* (D'Angelo, Jamieson, Maid & Walker, 2017) which discuss ways CIL has been or might be implemented across the curriculum. In addition, as recently as March 2019, the National Council of Teachers of English has also identified a need to teach "critical literacy," particularly in media and politics. Critical literacy incorporates both informed methods of accessing information and the ability to evaluate information, including recognizing "sophisticated persuasive techniques in all texts, genres, and types of media, current and yet to be imagined" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2019, Resolution section, 1st bullet).

The need for CIL is also apparent in Davidson's (2017) call for a significant transformation in university education that she argues is crucial for 21st century learning. She makes a compelling case to switch the focus of education from giving students knowledge (since information is now at our fingertips) to "learning how to learn" (p. 15). As she explains, "Learning how to learn equips students to become independent and demanding researchers who can use an array of creative, critical, and computational methods to solve problems, wherever they face them" (p. 15). Included in Davidson's "learning how to learn" skill set is "digital literacy" which calls for students to "understand, gain insight into, and maybe even exert more control over the technologies that have changed and sometimes dominated our lives and will do so even more in the future" (p. 80). Davidson's vision for education transformation thus dovetails with such tenets of CIL as the need to foster agency, engagement, and independence in learning, particularly in working with information technology.

While the need for CIL has been identified for over a decade in librarianship and is beginning to be glimpsed outside of the field, moving from theory to practice has been a bit slower and necessitates developing strategies to overcome a number of challenges. The research has pointed to several barriers to CIL including the time it takes to learn theory, reflect upon it, and restructure lessons (Nicholson, 2016; Tewell, 2016a); the need to have

the support of colleagues and the general college environment (Tewell, 2016a); and the expectations of students who are reluctant to engage during a library lesson (Fritch, 2018).

Among these barriers, a significant one is the course instructors' predisposition to the one-shot library lesson (Fritch, 2018; Garcia, 2016; Nicholson, 2016; Tewell, 2016a). And here I return to the statements at the start of this essay: One main pragmatic challenge to librarians who teach CIL is that the need for critical library instruction is not on the radar of many instructors and academic departments yet. While classroom instructors are probably acutely aware that the wave of disintermediated access to information is upon us, many of us have not yet shifted our pedagogical approach to account for it, still focusing on the traditional scholarly source and database search methods as opposed to yielding instructional time to internet searching and information production and circulation. A second associated challenge when working with course instructors is time—to teach CIL in sufficient depth, something more than the one-shot library lesson is called for. Instructors (and those planning curriculum for their majors) need to clear a spot in course and degree curriculum for it, and librarians need sufficient time to develop lessons and offer multiple classes in many courses. A third challenge is planning—CIL needs to be developed through multiple and increasingly advanced exposures that build higher proficiency levels throughout a student's college years and include more advanced and disciplinary-specific training as students complete their majors. Planning—through coordination between librarians and departments, learning outcomes, and curricular mapping—is necessary to ensure a sustained, cohesive approach. A final challenge is resources (and how to make the case for resources), particularly in terms of library staffing sufficient to meet the needs of the library as well as to design and offer critical library instruction in a sustained way for every major. In addition, a significant staffing resource challenge on the department level is how to include contingent faculty such as adjuncts in the conversations and training necessary for promoting CIL.

Insights from the theory and practice of writing across the curriculum (WAC) are useful in addressing these challenges. WAC takes many shapes and forms, but the basic premise is that writing is both a way of learning and a skill; therefore, practice and instruction in writing should not be confined to English composition courses in the first year of a student's undergraduate coursework, but instead should be infused throughout the student's academic trajectory. CIL advocates have drawn connections between WAC and CIL. Elmborg (2003) provides an excellent overview of WAC in relationship to research skills. Elmborg (2003),

Elmborg and Hook (2005), and Owusu-Ansah (2007) among others identify similarities between the programs established to ensure that writing skills are taught throughout the curriculum and the ways CIL might be taught, making the argument that information skills are as important as writing skills. Employing a genre theory perspective, Simmons (2005) finds that WAC and CIL programs might be implemented in tandem with each other to teach discipline-specific writing conventions (p. 303). Others have found useful and compelling links between CIL and the theories of composition and rhetoric and writing pedagogy (Baer, 2016; Elmborg, 2003; Elmborg & Hook, 2005; Jacobs, 2013).

In what follows, I apply a WAC lens to CIL to make the case for CIL across the curriculum (CILAC). My aim is to bolster the argument that CIL needs to be taught across the curriculum by drawing parallels between writing and CIL. In doing so, I don't mean to equate writing with researching. Instead, I am suggesting that there are significant commonalities between the ways to build writing and CIL abilities; these commonalities may be useful in considering how to advocate for a CIL program. I also believe the WAC model will help to address the barrier between librarians who have recognized the dire need for CIL and faculty (and administration) who have not.

The following six beliefs about writing help to make the case for why writing needs to be taught across the curriculum, both horizontally (that is, across all majors) and vertically (from introductory to advanced courses). These same beliefs are applicable to CIL and help to make the case for CIL across degree offerings and throughout course levels. Several of the parallels I draw between writing and CIL beliefs have already been suggested individually in previous CIL articles; I assemble them together below in the hopes that collectively they make an even more compelling case for CILAC.

First, just as writing is, CIL is not a single skill that is learned in one's first year and applicable to all situations; instead, it is a complex and evolving knowledge base that must be adaptable to new situations and audiences. Russell's (2001) assertion about the need for on-going practice and development of writing proves true for CIL as well:

> Writing [and let's add CIL] is not a single generalizable skill . . . learned once and for all at an early age, but a complex range of accomplishments, variously tied to myriad human practices, which may develop over a lifetime as the desire or need to do new things with new genres of writing [and here let's insert researching] arises. (p. 260)

The recognition that research is much more than a skill and is instead a set of continually expanding practices based on ever-evolving information needs is a central argument for a comprehensive across-the-curriculum approach to CIL. It is especially helpful in correcting the myth that research skills can be learned in a single class during a student's first year and in gesturing at the wide-ranging abilities needed to be proficient researchers.

Second, just as writing is, CIL is sustained and developed when in use and in decline when not in use. Elmborg (2003) has emphasized that research ability is recursive and needs to be sustained by providing frequent and varied research opportunities. It makes sense, therefore, to sustain and build critical library instruction throughout a student's college years, moving from basics of general searching for first year students, to continued and developing exposure in intermediate years, to more discipline-specific and advanced research skills for seniors who are on the verge of entering graduate school or career.

Third, just as writing is, CIL is not just a set of skills but a way of critical thinking and processing information and therefore a particularly valuable piece of the college learning experience. Elmborg (2003) has also made this case: like writing, research is both a skill and a way of thinking (p. 70). Tewell (2015) explains CIL "is a teaching perspective that does not focus on student acquisition of skills . . . and instead encourages a critical and discursive approach to information" (p. 25). Because of its ability to develop critical thinking and independent, engaged learning in students, CIL, like WAC, is an opportunity to provide students with abilities that are translatable to other academic work and life situations in general.

Fourth, just as writing is, CIL is subject to the conventions and contexts of particular disciplines, especially as students move into upper-level courses for their majors. Elmborg (2003) and Simmons (2005) point to both WAC and CIL as a means to encourage students to find a voice and participate in discourse communities. Additionally, I would also argue that there are research methods, conventions, and questions that are particular to each discourse community, making the case even stronger for teaching critical library instruction within disciplines.

Fifth, just as with writing, research decisions and processes are culturally and individually determined. Tewell (2016b) applies Stuart Hall's theory of resistant spectatorship to CIL: "information is not experienced on a one-size-fits-all basis. Resistant spectatorship encourages us to acknowledge that information-seeking and evaluation are inherently

situated within raced, gendered, and classed environments, and the groups with which one identifies influence one's engagement with information" (p. 300). That social, political, and cultural factors influence a student's evaluation of a source calls attention to the fact that research is never a neutral activity, and there is no "good source/bad source" binary—individuals determine the quality of the source. Students must be supported as they develop their own methods of evaluating sources, informed by an awareness of how factors such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability affect the circulation and accessibility of information. These methods cannot be taught in a one-shot library lesson, but instead need to be developed by practice throughout a student's academic trajectory.

Sixth, just as writing cannot be the sole responsibility of English composition instructors, CIL is not just the domain of librarians, but instead the responsibility of the whole campus. There is a significant operational difference between critical library instruction and WAC to emphasize here. In WAC, a prevailing model is for course instructors (who usually have access to training and resources) to assume the responsibility of building student writing skills to more discipline-specific and advanced levels. This method makes sense for the teaching of writing since the aim would be to train undergraduates in the written conventions of the field, and the course instructors would be experts in the genres of their discipline. However, the disciplinary knowledge base and training required for CIL at present (and likely in the future) belong to the library information science field; therefore, librarians are the people on campus who can best offer expertise in CIL. It's true that many faculty members routinely practice the research methods they have learned through writing and researching in their discipline. However, many of us don't routinely study the larger contexts of the information field (for example, how information is selected, cataloged, archived, circulated, and made accessible or not). Librarians would therefore take an active role in CIL instruction, whether through a series of course-embedded or free-standing library instruction sessions or through offering CIL training workshops to faculty.

Having served as both a department chair and a coordinator of WAC (also since I wrote my initial article for the CIL collection), I would suggest that working with departments to build a CILAC program might be a way to move forward. In the age of assessment, a focus at my college has been to ask departments to create learning objectives and outcomes for each degree they offer. The learning objectives and outcomes are then matched with courses—that is, departments draw up a curriculum map that identifies in which course(s)

each objective will be met. Some objectives that require multiple exposure, such as moving students from general writing skills to writing English scholarship, might be infused and built up in specific courses throughout the degree. Other objectives, such as providing students with knowledge of a particular literary tradition, might be accomplished in a single course dedicated to that topic. Faculty members include the learning objectives for their courses on the syllabus and design courses to meet them. Periodic assessment provides feedback on how effectively the outcomes are met and departments engage in curriculum review to ensure improvement in fulfilling course outcomes.

As librarians make departments aware of the importance of CIL in general and in disciplines, departments would likely be prompted to include CIL in their goals and objectives and identify the courses that would be responsible for developing CIL on curriculum maps. Librarians would be able to offer a program of CIL in those courses, or to collaborate with instructors to promote student practice of CIL. Such a "goal-down" approach is discussed by Baker and Gladis (2017) who explain that the CIL program at their college began with curriculum revision to meet general education learning outcomes. Once a department has designated a place for CIL in their degree requirements, the blended and embedded model of library instruction in which librarians are co-facilitators with instructors described by Schulte, Tiffen, Edwards, Abbot, and Luca (2018) provides a sample method for implementing critical library instruction in targeted courses. Additional across-the-curriculum models are described in *Information Literacy: Research and Collaboration across the Disciplines* (D'Angelo et. al, 2017).

Of course there is no one-size-fits-all way of bringing CIL to a college. The path forward must be determined by what works for an institution's mission, librarians, faculty, students, learning outcomes, budget, and administration. A large measure of the change rests squarely on the shoulders of the faculty who need to, as I have suggested, take a good look at their beliefs about the necessity of and methodology of CIL as it fits in their vision of the 2020 classroom and beyond. As we consider how to best teach our students to navigate the churning waters of the wave of disintermediated access to information, we will need to work closely with library professionals to select and deliver the best ways to provide students with sustained and developed CIL throughout their college years. My essay outlines one possible way forward.

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