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Critical Library Instruction, Causing Trouble, and Institutionalization

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Abstract

This essay considers the institutionalization of critical library instruction in the decade since the publication of *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed and Rod Ferguson, I suggest that because library instruction is marginalized within librarianship, critical library instruction can and has become institutionalized within the profession. The institutionalization of critical library instruction represents the management of the wider-ranging and more troublesome critiques of critical librarianship. The marginality of critical library instruction, however, means that it continues to function as a site of troublemaking.

Keywords: information literacy, instruction, critical librarianship, institutionalization, critical theory, *Critical Library Instruction*

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Critical Library Instruction, Causing Trouble, and Institutionalization

I distinctly recall when I saw the call for proposals for *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*; I was in a one-year position as a liaison librarian at an academic library three hours from where I was born and grew up. I had been a credentialed academic librarian for less than a year and had very little library instruction experience. My library school did not offer a course in instruction, so I observed library instruction sessions when I could, did a few summer orientations, and when I started my first job, began asking more practiced librarians for lesson plans, slides, and advice. The call for proposals nonetheless caught my attention, as I had been both a teaching assistant and composition instructor in my Ph.D. program and library school. I was a teaching assistant for two American studies courses, which broadly focused on the politics of mass culture, and for a course on the sociology of information, which critically engaged with and historicized information systems and technology. My first-year composition classes similarly emphasized politics as well as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Despite the reputation of first-year composition (among both students and teachers), I very much enjoyed teaching these courses and helping students develop a critical stance towards texts by unpacking their assumptions and implicit ideologies.

Library instruction, in contrast, seemed kind of boring. The librarians I observed and sought out for advice were good teachers, just caught between conveying the information students needed to know to successfully complete their assignments and the confines of a fifty-minute one-shot instruction session - a situation many of us continue to negotiate. Much of my early instruction sessions focused on navigating the library website, helping students distinguish between scholarly and popular sources, and using Academic Search Premier to find three scholarly articles. I thought it could be different, but I didn't know how to bring a focus on critical thinking about information to my library instruction and didn't necessarily have the time to do so. The call for proposals for *Critical Library Instruction* offered the opportunity to do that, as did getting a permanent position as an academic librarian at a different institution. And I was thrilled to hear that others felt similarly about the potential of library instruction.

I had written a literature review on information literacy in library school (which was way too broad for a literature review) and so was somewhat familiar with the Association of

College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2000) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. I found them to be reductive in how they described learning and the research process, both of which were boiled down to a series of discrete steps. Nothing was messy or recursive or emotional or took several tries. Additionally, neither learning, nor research, nor the production and consumption of knowledge seemed to take place within any sort of context that might constrain or otherwise affect them. In researching my essay for *Critical Library Instruction*, I found that other library scholars and practitioners had critiqued the *Standards* as mechanistic, universalizing, and positivist; my essay built on this work by specifically foregrounding knowledge production in the *Standards*, arguing that they erased the social and political nature of information. They also reproduced neoliberal ideology (something I expanded on later in Seale, 2013), relied on notions of objectivity, unproblematically promoted traditional hierarchies of knowledge and authority that led to a dualistic vision of information as good or bad, and ultimately endorsed an uncritical and ahistorical approach to information, information systems, and technology. In order to counter this in the library classroom, I suggested working with user-generated information to help students understand information as always political and to expose the infrastructures of dominant forms of knowledge production. Although I wasn't aware of it at the time I was writing, my essay overlapped with those of Jonathan Cope (2010), who looked at social power in information literacy, Sara Franks (2010), who explored the implicit assumptions of the "information cycle," Benjamin Harris (2010), who also takes on the *Standards*, and Heidi Jacobs (2010), who described incorporating the user-generated content of Wikipedia in the library classroom. Despite the community of librarians embodied in *Critical Library Instruction* and the broader community of library practitioners and scholars revealed through our reference lists, approaching library instruction critically still felt somewhat lonely in 2010.

Critical library instruction and the broader, loosely aggregated movement of critical librarianship occupies a very different position within academic librarianship now. Recently, Karen P. Nicholson and I (2018) attempted to trace a genealogy of critical librarianship and identified the publication of *Critical Library Instruction* as central to critical approaches and methods entering mainstream library discourse, although critical, progressive, and social justice-oriented perspectives on librarianship had been around for decades. We also suggested that the replacement of the *Standards* by the ACRL (2016) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, editorials in *College & Research*

Libraries that emphasized humanistic and theoretical approaches to research, ACRL's publication of the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*, the presence of critical librarianship presentations at ACRL and ALA conferences, and ACRL's development of continuing education offerings focused on critical librarianship indicated that critical librarianship was becoming institutionalized. That is, despite its oppositional and critical stance, critical librarianship (or at least critical library instruction, given that many items in this list are connected to instruction) has become part of regular, generic, (mostly academic) librarianship.

In *On Being Included*, Sara Ahmed (2012) seeks to “think how institutions acquire the regularity and stability that allows them to be recognizable as institutions in the first place. Institutions can be thought of as verbs as well as nouns: to put the ‘doing’ back into the institution is to attend to how institutional realities become given, without assuming what is given by this given” (p. 21). Although Ahmed is primarily concerned with the role of diversity work within higher education, institutions such as academic librarianship function similarly. They might appear static and transparent, but they must be continually produced and reproduced. This process of production and reproduction of institutions — institutionalization—can be difficult to perceive, Ahmed notes: “When things become institutional, they recede. To institutionalize x is for x to become routine or ordinary such that x becomes part of the background for those who are part of an institution” (p. 21). Institutions and the practices and knowledge that comprise them eventually come to seem natural. Institutionalization, to Ahmed, is “‘becoming background,’ when being ‘in’ the institution is to ‘agree’ with what becomes background” (p. 25); it is when things stop “caus[ing] trouble” (p. 27). Given the list above, it seems that critical librarianship (or at least critical library instruction, or at least some forms of critical library instruction) has perhaps stopped causing trouble for our professional organizations.

I had been thinking that my interest in the institutionalization of critical librarianship and critical library instruction had emerged from being a somewhat observant academic librarian since 2007, but in rereading my *Critical Library Instruction* essay to prepare for writing this essay, I was more than a little surprised to find this in the last paragraph: “There is undoubtedly value in a clearly articulated and institutionalized conceptualization of information literacy - in terms of defining professional identity, offering clear, easy to explain and easy to promote instructional goals, and providing a way to think about library instruction in broader terms than just the ability to use the library catalog and databases” (Seale, 2010, p. 233). I don't really remember writing this, or even thinking it, and while I

don't entirely disagree with this sentiment now, I have been feeling more conflicted about the institutionalization of critical librarianship and critical library instruction. In *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, Rod Ferguson (2012) analyzes the institutionalization of the minority interdisciplines (e.g., ethnic studies, women's studies) within institutions of higher education. As the minority interdisciplines became part of the background in higher education through higher education's position of "adaptive hegemony" (p. 6), legitimacy and recognition become their goals rather than radical critique, to use Ahmed's framing of institutionalization. Their "insurgent possibilities" (Ferguson, 2012, p. 4), their oppositionality, is managed, absorbed, and incorporated by higher education into its own logics. These fields stop causing trouble for institutions of higher education but are simultaneously legitimized as part of higher education. Institutionalization can be productive but also seeks to foreclose possibilities and manage into nonexistence opposition the institution cannot absorb. The process of institutionalization entails the affirmation of some elements of that which is being institutionalized, and the corresponding marginalization of trouble-causing others. And yet, for critical librarians, the value of critical librarianship and critical library instruction lies precisely in their ability to cause trouble: to question, to promote reflection and rethinking, to critique discourses and practices, and to thereby open up space for changing our everyday work as well as our profession.

Critical library instruction has to some extent been recognized and legitimized by arbiters of academic librarianship; it has moved toward becoming background within this institution. Its oppositional nature is managed, although arguably it still causes trouble. Despite criticism of both the critically inflected *Framework* and the process that produced it, the *Framework* now functions as our "clearly articulated and institutionalized conceptualization of information literacy" (Seale, 2010, p. 233). The *Standards*, contrary to my prediction that they would not be discarded (p. 223), have instead emphatically been. The *Framework* has become our background. What I have been feeling more keenly recently is broader than library instruction and goes beyond the *Framework*, though. It is how the institutionalization of critical library instruction within librarianship represents the management of critical librarianship's wider-ranging and more troublesome critiques of the profession.

Like the editors of *Critical Library Instruction*, who described themselves in the introduction as "practicing instruction librarians" committed to praxis (Accardi, Drabinski, Kumbier, 2010, p. ix), I wrote the original chapter and am writing this follow-up essay as a liaison

librarian who works with students nearly every day, and the centrality of instruction to academic librarianship appears obvious. But instruction is affective and interpersonal work, and as such is perceived to be unskilled, feminized, and of little value (see, for example, Arellano Douglas & Gadsby, 2019; R. M. Harris 1992). Unlike other forms of library work, it is not centered in technology, and not seen as a site of innovation (Mirza & Seale, 2017). The 2018 Ithaka Faculty Survey, perhaps unintentionally, reproduces this marginalization by focusing primarily on collections, data, and publishing and only arriving at library instruction near the end:

Additionally, about half of respondents continue to indicate strong agreement since 2015 that librarians at their college or university library contribute significantly to their students by helping them find, access, and use secondary and primary resources in their coursework, as well as by helping them to develop their research skills. A new item was included in this survey cycle to capture faculty's perception of the library's contribution towards developing skills in identifying media manipulation and disinformation. About four in ten respondents agreed that the library contributes significantly to helping students develop these skills. (Blankstein & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2019, pp. 62-63)

These are healthy numbers, and given library staffing, it is probably unlikely that many of us could handle more instruction, but these sorts of reports are widely influential among library and university administrators, and these numbers are not impressive. Similarly, while ACRL did invest considerable time and effort in the development of the *Framework*, it is not at all comparable to the resources that have been given the Value of Academic Libraries project for the past ten years and continue to be given to it and related projects. This project primarily focuses on assessment in various forms, including learning analytics, and frequently relies on reductive understandings of value. I have been wondering, then, if library instruction is as central or important to academic librarianship writ broadly as instruction librarians want to think? Or is it somewhat marginal compared to more prestigious work dealing with collections, technology, and data? Given that instruction is generally marginalized within academic librarianship, and that this marginalization is related to both the gendered nature of the work and an understanding of this work as always already marginal within professional and policy organizations, the institutionalization of critical library instruction offers a low stakes means of managing the more expansive critiques offered by critical librarianship. That is, because library instruction

is itself marginal, the trouble caused by critical library instruction can (generally) be absorbed, legitimized, and affirmed by academic librarianship.

Although the ACRL publication *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, prepared by Megan Oakleaf, was issued in 2010, the same year as *Critical Library Instruction*, the Value project has seemed to proceed largely unaffected by critical librarianship. In my *Critical Library Instruction* essay, I wanted librarians to make questions of power and the politics of knowledge production central to their instruction sessions and indeed, thinking through the politics of library instruction is what brings together the disparate essays in the book. The *Framework* embraced critical library instruction in foregrounding the political and historical nature of information and research, the embeddedness of both in the social world with its concomitant inequities, and the messy, recursive, and affective nature of learning. But the insights of the *Framework*, and the critiques offered by critical librarianship that attempt to push librarianship to think about inequities, power, and politics more comprehensively, frequently begin and end with library instruction. Consider how ACRL promotes economically precarious diversity residencies, rather than seeking to address systemic racism within the profession (Hathcock, 2018). Academic librarianship's uncritical embrace of learning analytics and ever-narrowing definitions of student "success" stem from an inability to think politically about platform and surveillance capitalism and about what higher education could mean. Our discussions of student learning and success rely on and reproduce myths of meritocracy and deny the role of systemic inequalities and privilege (Fisher, 2018). The profession embraces management speak, or what Jane Schmidt (2018) has called "bullshit," in order to advance neoliberal ideology and policies, ignoring the insights of critical management studies (Leebaw, 2019). We reproduce hierarchies of prestige, continue to work with vendors who are bad or dishonest actors, devalue our own expertise, and uncritically parrot narratives about academic libraries in crisis in an era of constant change. Critical library instructors want to help students become critical and reflective researchers, information consumers, and information creators, but so often our profession can't manage the same. Academic librarianship desperately needs to be troubled, but instead legitimizes marginal forms of criticality while seeking to manage out of existence or deny the trouble posed by critical librarianship and the questions raised by the critical librarians cited here. The arbiters of academic librarianship, like ACRL, have chosen and continue to choose to invest in and promote practices like residencies, learning analytics, reductive forms of assessment, and

corporate models that are undergirded by neoliberalist and meritocratic ideology. Indeed, these arbiters may understand their continued existence as inextricable from these practices and ideologies; the troublemaking performed by critical librarianship might be an existential threat, or merely a nuisance, but either way, cannot be absorbed. The trouble posed by critical library instruction, in contrast, is more limited due to library instruction's tangential and devalued position; it can be institutionalized and made legitimate *because* it is marginal.

One of the essays in *Critical Library Instruction* that has stuck with me, so to speak, is Dolsy Smith and Cathy Eisenhower's (2010) "The Library as 'Stuck Place:' Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University." They argue that education, and more specifically information literacy instruction, produces the neoliberal worker. Although often constrained by the contexts we work within, critical information literacy has the potential to do more. At the same time, neoliberal rationality finds expression in criticality; at the same time, education is a site of emotion, affect, and feeling and contradicts neoliberal rationality. Our criticality suggests we are in opposition to the corporate library and university, but our instruction creates value for both. Academic librarianship is not seen as prestigious or important and is frequently invisible. As such, it can elude the logics of efficiency that currently drive higher education. Smith and Eisenhower suggest that "perhaps the most that we can hope for is to hit those 'stuck places' where thinking occurs" (pp. 316-317). Maria T. Accardi (2010) echoes this, contending that

At our place in the margins, where we contribute to general education but are not of general education, where we are forgotten or misunderstood, where we are subject to uninterrogated standards, there can be, paradoxically, great freedom... We can, however, in our own ways, however small, for thoughtful experimentation, and for subtle but satisfying interruptions of the structures that govern us. (p. 262)

Seeking out stuck places and interrupting the systems that govern us through our teaching, despite the institutionalization of some aspects of critical library instruction, also remain troublesome *because* teaching is marginal. The critiques and interruptions we enact in these spaces resist absorption by escaping the notice of the institution.

Library instruction has felt like a stuck or marginal place within academic librarianship to me since I entered the profession, which is probably why I felt comfortable with doing something different and then writing authoritatively about it as a new librarian. As a no longer new librarian, I continue to approach my own instruction sessions as a site for causing trouble and interrupting structures. In my sessions for new history majors, we talk

about the historicity of primary sources, how libraries and archives preserve what we value, in both an economic and moral sense, and how what we value changes over time. We talk about, as one faculty member I work with framed it, without prompting from me, “capitalism and libraries:” how books, journals, and databases come to be in the library, how scholarly knowledge is produced, how libraries are enmeshed in and also reproduce social, political, and economic inequities. We talk about how information systems are not natural or neutral but imbued with the biases and assumptions of their human creators. Informal feedback from students—namely that they remember these conversations several semesters later—seems to indicate that they are indeed thinking about these issues. The institutionalization of critical library instruction may have made library instruction seem less stuck, but we know it continues to occupy a marginal role within our professional organizations and higher education. As Smith and Eisenhower (2010) and especially Accardi (2010) note, and the experiences of critical library instructors with their students bears out, this doesn’t mean that library instruction is unimportant. Marginality may make critical library instruction open to institutionalization, but it is also the source of its troublemaking. Critical library instruction (and *Critical Library Instruction*) has and continues to serve as a place where thinking can occur and then diffuse outward into broader library discourse. Despite efforts to manage critique through the institutionalization of critical library instruction, academic librarianship’s inability to think politically is increasingly and forcefully challenged.

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