

Five Things You Should Read About Critical Librarianship



THE SERIES

The 5 Things we recommend are intended to be eclectic and thought-provoking. They may be journal articles, blog posts, podcasts, interviews, reports, or just about anything else that we think is important to read, watch or hear about this topic. For the general concept, this series is deeply indebted to the EDUCAUSE “7 Things You Should Know About...” reports.

THE TOPIC

Critical librarianship takes an ethical and political approach to library work, using critical theory to expose and question the historical, political, and social bases of our assumptions and practices. Often dated from Elmborg's 2006 article, critical librarianship has engaged many areas of library discourse; in particular, it has used critical pedagogy to rethink the expectations and goals commonly applied to library instruction in the academy. A pair of award-winning recent books, a review of the literature, a community website, and the inaugural issue of a journal indicate the current vitality and urgency of critical librarianship in the field of information literacy.

1. [Critlib.org](http://critlib.org)

Critlib.org is the central homepage for an informal movement of librarians dedicated to exploring the issues of critical librarianship and social justice issues. The site includes an archive of Twitter chats from #critlib discussions as well as a list of conferences and recommended readings on critical librarianship. While the majority of discussions happen in the Twitter-verse, librarians who are new to critical librarianship will find the archive of discussions helpful for review. The site also posts a calendar of upcoming Twitter discussions hosted by a variety of librarians. The #critlib community is very welcoming of new members and librarians interested in exploring these issues are encouraged to engage with the community by volunteering to host a Twitter chat or connecting with other librarians with similar interests through their research-interests matchmaking form. **Open access.**

2. Elmborg, James. 2006. “Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice.” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32 (2): 192-199. [doi: 10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004).

In this 2006 article, Elmborg challenges assumptions about teaching practices within librarianship and provides guiding principles for the emerging practice of critical librarianship. Elmborg argues that librarians should focus less on information transfer and more on developing critical awareness in students, asserting that “librarians need to develop a critical consciousness about libraries, by learning to ‘problematize’ the library” (198) and envision libraries and other educational institutions as agents of culture and shapers of student consciousness. In doing so, librarians are to apply central concepts of literacy theory to information literacy, creating “critical literacy” which focuses on the links between the educational process and the politics of literacy. As Elmborg sees it, the central task for libraries in developing information literacy lies not in simply defining it, but rather in developing a critical, theoretically informed practice of librarianship that is enacted in the day-to-day work of librarians--advice that has proved influential in the ongoing development of critical librarianship as well as the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy*.

3. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*. ISSN: 2572-1364

<http://libraryjuicepress.com/journals/index.php/jclis/index>

The *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies (JCLIS)*, launched in 2017, intends to support the development and accessibility of lively, questioning scholarship in library and information studies (LIS). The publishers envision *JCLIS* as a portal for examining and critiquing enduring paradigms of LIS. They seek to champion intellectual freedom and social justice via bold, bracing essays and reviews that might not otherwise be accepted in for-profit, highly-“ranked” journals because incisive discourse runs counter to the status quo. In the inaugural issue two articles exemplify the timeliness of *JCLIS* and its mission by looking at race and anti-racism through different lenses. David James Hudson’s “On ‘Diversity’ as Anti-Racism in Library and Information Studies: A Critique” questions if the LIS paradigm of diversity, encompassing demographics and cultural competence, precludes discussions and awareness of historical constructs that sustain racial subordination. Melissa Adler’s “Classification Along the Color Line: Excavating Racism in the Stacks” contends that racialized library classification underlines the systemic problem of racism in the United States today, by normalizing and perpetuating “certain racialized assumptions and associations” (5). The content of these two articles and others in the first issue demonstrate the commitment of *JCLIS*, a community of scholars and practitioners, to the critical review and re-imagining of the professional practices of libraries, archives, and other information institutions. **Open access.**

4. Pagowsky, Nicole and Kelly McElroy, eds. 2016. *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook, vols. 1 & 2*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.

Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook is a two-volume set designed to support teaching librarians who want to incorporate social justice in their work. The first volume includes essays outlining the hows and whys of critical library pedagogy alongside experiences, projects, and ideas. Workbook activities are included for personal reflection and understanding. The second volume contains thirty lesson plans to help librarians go from theory to practice with critical library pedagogy. The lesson plans include learning outcomes, materials, activities, and assessment strategies, and cover a wide range of instructional scenarios. The chapters in both volumes include bibliographies with purposefully inclusive resources. This set, which together won the Ilene F. Rockman Publication of the Year award for 2017, is a must read for any librarian seeking to implement critical practices into their teaching.

5. Tewell, Eamon. 2015. “A Decade of Critical Information Literacy.” *Communications in Information Literacy* 9 (1): 24-43. <http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=v9i1p24>.

“A Decade of Critical Information Literacy” reviews dozens of key critical information literacy articles and monographs written since Elmborg’s 2006 article. Tewell grounds today’s critical information literacy works within the context in which the theory was first conceived and has since grown. The works of critical pedagogues like Paulo Freire, who view education as a force for social justice, and of those who critique the narrow and mechanistic definition of traditional information literacy pave the way for practical and theoretical scholarship about critical information literacy that attempts to answer these concerns. This article has something for everyone, discussing critical information literacy issues that span the whole of librarianship from cataloging to teaching. It provides an excellent entry point for anyone looking to add to their critlib reading list. **Open access.**

This publication was compiled and created in spring 2017 by members of the 2016-2017 ACRL Instruction Section Research & Scholarship Committee: Joseph Goetz (chair), Samantha Godbey, Mohamed Berray, Courtney Baron, Liz Bellamy, Carrie Forbes, Chris Granatino, Penny Hecker, Elana Karshmer, Ryne Leuzinger, and Lindsay Roberts. If you have comments or questions about the “5 Things” publications, please contact the current IS Research and Scholarship Committee Chair, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/is/acr-insressch>