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# Information – Power to the People: Students and Librarians Dialoguing about Power, Social Justice, and Information

Amanda Swygart-Hobaugh

*The biggest and most generalized takeaway that I got from this course is that information is indeed power.*

– From a student's final course reflection

## Pushing the Boundaries of the ACRL Information Literacy Standards

When dialoguing about power, social justice, and information, Standard Five of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,* "The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally"(ACRL, 2000, Standard Five, para. 2), is especially compelling because of its potential for examining critical theory and social justice as it applies to information access. But, as Seale (2010, p. 229) attests, Standard Five's Performance Indicators and Outcomes largely focus on the "procedural" aspects of information literacy, thus obscuring relevant issues ripe for critical analyses. Namely, as Luke and Kapitzke (1999) observe, the language of the ACRL Standards neglects broader critiques steeped in critical theory, such as discussions of "social construction and cultural authority of knowledge; the political economies of knowledge ownership and control; [and] the development of local communities' and cultures' capacities to critique and construct knowledge" (p. 483-484). For example, Outcomes A, B, and C delineated under Standard Five, Performance Indicator One specify that the information literate student "identifies and discusses issues related to privacy and security in

both the print and electronic environments…to free vs. fee-based access to information…[and] to censorship and freedom of speech" (ACRL, 2000, Standard Five, para. 2). However, as written, a discussion of the listed "issues" could exclude critiques of the societal power structures that often play a key role in these arenas. For instance, would discussion of issues related to free vs. fee-based access to information be merely "the library's databases are not free like on the open web," or would it delve into critical dialogues regarding why some information is free and other information is not, who controls access to fee-based as well as so-called free information, and how ownership/control disempowers some while empowering others? Moreover, the language of Standard Five, Performance Indicator One, Outcome D is even more problematic: the information literate student "demonstrates an understanding of intellectual property, copyright, and fair use of copyrighted material" (ACRL, 2000, Standard Five, para. 2). "Demonstrating understanding" implies uncritical acceptance of the present laws governing intellectual property, copyright, and fair use—which does not bode well for critical information literacy. As illustrated by the recent court case *Cambridge University Press et al. v. Becker et al.* (2012), the academic community—including students—cannot afford to uncritically accept the present legal conditions regarding intellectual property, copyright, and fair use. Similarly, Standard Five, Performance Indicator Two—"The information literate student *follows* [emphasis added] laws, regulations, institutional policies, and etiquette related to the access and use of information resources" (ACRL, 2000, Standard Five, para. 2), implies that there is no space for critiquing the validity of the laws, regulations, and policies that surround information access/use and how these may act as agents of disempowerment.

Thus, while Standard Five is admirable in its attempt to address issues surrounding access and use of information, it falls short of challenging librarians to integrate critical-theoretical and social-justice frameworks into their approach to information literacy pedagogy. As Jacobs (2008) argues, librarians need to engage in a pedagogical praxis of information literacy, wherein we "emphasiz[e] the democratizing and social justice elements inherent in information literacy" and bring to the forefront of our teaching that "information literacy…also encompasses…empowering people, promoting social inclusion, redressing disadvantage, and advancing the well-being of all in a global context" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 257). However, as

Peterson (2010) notes, librarians' ability to engage in critical information literacy pedagogy is often stymied by the one-shot, "cram-it-all-in approach" (p. 71) to library instruction.

The semester-long honors freshman seminar discussed in this chapter offered a unique opportunity to take up the charge to integrate critical information literacy into my pedagogy. By exposing students to the various disparities of information access and how these are intertwined with racial, socioeconomic, age, and other power-laden statuses, the issues alluded to abstractly in Standard Five can be contextualized and therefore more readily critiqued as social-justice issues. And, just as "critical pedagogues and multicultural scholars [aim] to create educational environments that empower historically marginalized people, that challenge inequitable social arrangements and institutions, and that offer strategies and visions for creating a more just world" (Hytten & Bettez, 2011, p. 8), librarians, too, can strive to further social-justice aims via critical information literacy pedagogy. While the typical one-shot instruction session may prove challenging to integrate critical information literacy into the curriculum, a semester-long course provided an ideal situation to examine social justice and information access.

**Engaging Students in Dialogic, Problem-Posing Learning**

Products of No-Child-Left-Behind educational policies, today's incoming college students have been indoctrinated in what Freire (2000) coined the "banking concept" of education, wherein "teachers make daily deposits of knowledge in students' heads which they bank for future use…and [students] subsequently approach their education as consumers and passive receivers of knowledge rather than active agents shaping their own lives" (Elmborg, 2006, p. 193). In juxtaposition to the banking model is a problem-posing, dialogic learning process:

> Banking education…attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing. Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality.

> Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. (Freire, 2000, p. 83-84)

Embracing Freire's (2000) pedagogy, I structured my class to enable a problem-posing, dialogic learning process. As a seminar-style course, free of lecturing and rote exams, the students, the guest speakers, and I engaged in dialogues about the session topics. Each topic was a problem posed for dialogue and aimed at exposing why it was a problem. Students and teacher debated the nature of the problem, explored our own experiences in relation to the problem, and discussed possible solutions.

The following excerpts from a student's Final Course Reflection aptly illustrate the empowering nature and effectiveness of the problem-posing, dialogic process. He stated that, "In these class discussions I learned that not only do other people have dissenting opinions that I ought to respect, but I am not always right," thus recognizing that the dialogic learning process enabled him to see his fellow students as "respected sources of knowledge" (Takacs, 2002, p. 177). Similarly, his reflection resonates with McArthur's (2010) declaration that "critical pedagogy needs to be a movement that welcomes disagreement; in which people engage with the disagreement rather than rant or retreat" (p. 497). The same student also observed the following:

> In high school, I was not often asked to apply my knowledge. I would simply learn the material that the state required me [to] memorize and regurgitate for the exam. This course gave me a chance to learn about a topic, see examples of it in society, and then use what I had learned to discover something new. The process of applying the knowledge I had learned in a class to a situation in real life has been a very thought provoking experience and seems to be a very effective way to approach material in my other classes. This course taught me a lot about information imbalances, my interactions with other people, and how to approach learning more effectively through thought and discussion.

The student's reflection illustrates his growing understanding that the "banking" (Freire 2000) approach to education that he experienced in high school had stifled his learning, and that the dialogic, problem-posing process had empowered him to exercise more agency in his own learning and to apply new knowledge. His comments resonate with Takacs (2002) observation regarding the value of a dialogic learning process:

> When we ask students to learn to think for themselves and to understand themselves as thinkers—rather than telling them what to think and have them recite it back—we help foster habits of introspection, analysis, and open, joyous communication… (p. 169)

In addition to Freire's (2000) problem-posing, dialogic process of learning, his goals of liberating the oppressed fit the overarching critical-theoretical and social-justice themes of this course. As McArther (2010) in her discussion of social justice in higher education states, "critical pedagogy also needs to be reminded of Freire's essential point regarding the oppressed and oppressor: freedom does not involve swapping roles, but can only come when the oppressed help the oppressors to also be free" (p. 497). Accordingly, a goal of this course was to dialogue about whether existing power structures serve to disempower certain individuals (and, concomitantly, empower others) in terms of information access, and whether a duty to social justice necessarily compels those with power as well as the powerless to pursue efforts to ameliorate the inequalities of information access.

**Expanding Students' Perceptions of Librarians**

As noted in previous research (Seale, 2008; Fagan, 2003), the general public as well as undergraduate students have very little understanding of librarians' professional and knowledge backgrounds, let alone the ethical and professional principles that librarians commonly espouse regarding access to information. Moreover, because academic librarians are often solicited by faculty members to do instruction that is solely skill- and resource-focused, and are seldom (if ever) asked to lead critical discussions about the broader social issues of information literacy and access, students are exposed to a limited view of our

professional lives and principles. As Budd (2003) reflected, librarians' ability to engage in praxis that involves "action that carries social and ethical implications" is hindered by the typical reduction of our instruction to "technical performance of tasks" (p. 20).

Consequently, this seminar aimed to expand and challenge the students' perceptions of librarianship by elucidating the role librarians play in social justice and democratizing efforts related to information access. While some more clearly than others, all of the session topics for this course overlapped with many interests and principles found in librarianship. By dialoguing with librarians about these issues, students learn that librarians not only have unique knowledge to bring to the table, but that they are passionate, principle-driven agents for social justice pertaining to the use of and access to information.

**An Honors Freshman Seminar: What did students learn?**

This chapter provides a case study of teaching an Honors Freshman Seminar at Georgia State University. The pedagogical goals for this course were: (1) to push the boundaries of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*; (2) to engage students in applying critical-theoretical and social-justice frameworks to the course topics via dialogic, problem-posing learning; and (3) to expand and challenge the students' perceptions of librarianship by elucidating the role librarians play in social justice and democratizing efforts related to information access.

Topics for the seminar were chosen in order to: (1) examine various power structures influencing information access; (2) capitalize on the knowledge and interests of library colleagues; and (3) explore topics that students might be able to readily relate to personally, as well as challenge them to consider issues that they might be exempt from due to their own privileged statuses (i.e., race, socioeconomic status, ability, gender, etc.). For example health literacy, open access and scholarly communication, access to the legal system, etc. A full list of course topics is available in Appendix A, and the course syllabus is online (Swygart-Hobaugh, Fall 2011).

Readings for each session in the seminar typically included a combination of scholarly articles, popular press articles, statistical tables, organizational or governmental reports, and

video clips. With each topic, guiding questions provided a framework for students to glean information from the readings. For example, the readings for the session on information poverty and the digital divide included: (1) a scholarly article deconstructing the many moral and ethical issues of information poverty (Britz, 2004); (2) a media clip and brochure by the now-defunct *InternetForEveryone.org* (2009; n.d.) including statistics on disparities in Internet access; (3) statistics reporting Internet usage within the U.S., broken down by state and by various social demographics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011); and (4) statistics reporting Internet users worldwide by country (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009; World Bank Group, 2011). I provided the following to guide the students' reading/viewing of this session's materials:

1. How does Britz's (2004) social justice framework reinforce, expand, and sometimes contradict the critical theory/social justice frameworks we've been discussing?
2. How do you see the "contested territories" (e.g., race, age, income level, education, etc.) presented in Miller's (2008) social justice framework playing out in terms of information poverty and the digital divide?
3. What underlying factors do you see contributing to information poverty and the digital divide in the U.S. and worldwide?
4. When looking at the statistics re: differences of Internet access between different groups, states, and countries, was there anything that surprised you? Do you see similar or different trends as when we examined literacy?
5. How do the InternetForEveryone.org organization's goals resonate with the social justice frameworks?

Before each class session, students were required to post Discussion Points to the university's course management system, which they drew from their reactions to the readings and from the guiding questions provided. From these, specific points were selected to jumpstart dialogue in class; with teacher mediation and prompting, class discussion would evolve from there. After the course session, students were required to post Reflections to the

course management system, in which they offered further insights from engaging in dialogue with their classmates and teacher(s).

The Discussion Points and Reflections actively engaged students in steering the dialogic learning process and validated the students' personal experiences and opinions as they connected with the session topics. For example, for the information poverty and digital divide topic, rather than presenting students with the statistics and providing interpretations, I posed a question to them – thus necessitating their evaluation and interpretation of the statistics as well as their application of the critical frameworks we were learning in class. One student concluded the following from the statistics provided in the *InternetforEveryone.org* brochure:

> We see a disturbing correlation between race, particularly non-white races, and lack of access to information, in this case the World Wide Web. As well as race, there is a correlation between this lack of information and income levels, which can probably be linked very easily to the same correlation in literacy. This recurring theme in this course begs for a conversation regarding social justice.

Prompted by a guiding question asking how she saw the role of "contested territories" (Miller, 2008) playing out in the issues of information poverty and the digital divide, the student recognized the correlative disparity in Internet access that people of color and of lower-income levels experience and patterns of inequality evident in our previous week's examination of literacy, and deduced that these "disturbing" correlations revealed the situation as a social injustice in need of addressing.

The Final Project required students to organize a lesson plan on a topic related to the course theme.[1] Students proposed a topic, developed learning outcomes, selected and annotated reading and visual materials, provided guiding questions for the materials, and developed learning activities. Via the course management system, we brainstormed topic ideas, with guidance from the instructor, who also provided a framework by suggesting topics that intersected with their academic interests (e.g., computer science majors might have

[1] Students also had the option to do a mini Thesis Project plan; however, no student chose this option.

interest in human-computer interaction as an information-access issue). An example lesson plan was provided to aid the students (Swygart-Hobaugh, 2011).

The Final Project topics illustrated their interests and creativity in approaching the assignment. For example, a student majoring in computer science proposed a lesson plan entitled, "Human Computer Interaction: Increasing Access to Information," which explored "how physical impairments can reduce access to information" and "how we can increase that access to information through better human computer interfaces." A student whose parents were lawyers proposed a lesson plan entitled "Right to Information…For a Price—Copyright Law in the United States," which examined how U.S. copyright law "limits access to information and disadvantages certain groups of people." An African-American student, who had found "intriguing" the racial discrepancies in U.S. literacy rates, proposed a lesson plan entitled, "Race and Literacy: How do Literacy Rates Vary by Race?" Another student, inspired by Neil Postman's (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business,* critiqued how television "primarily concerned with entertainment…affects the information we have access to and how that has profound consequences on the world." Many students chose topics that resonated with current hot-button topics. One group of students explored the use of new technologies such as YouTube and Facebook as empowering "constituents to voice their opinions against politics," while another student explored the potential exploitation by Facebook of "user's shared information in order to provide better and more lucrative data for its advertisers." Another student, in his lesson plan entitled "Google, Number 1 Search Machine? Censorship in China, The Great Firewall," examined whether Chinese governmental control of the Internet was "necessary or just plain tyrannical." Conclusively, the chosen topics demonstrated the students' ability to creatively apply the critical-theoretical/social-justice frameworks to contemporary societal issues.

Lastly, the students submitted a Final Course Reflection, for which they articulated what they learned from the course and how they would take that knowledge forward in their continued studies, service learning opportunities, and personal life. Apparent in the Final Course Reflections was the concept of praxis—how the students intended to take what they learned forward in embodied actions. For example, the student majoring in computer science

declared, “Once I have my computer science degree, I also hope to help increase the availability of Internet with public computers in low-income areas, either by donating to public libraries or volunteering to help install them.” Another student similarly saw the connection between knowledge and action:

> A topic that truly affected me this semester included the low literacy levels that many Americans possess… This realization spurred me to further my research and look into potential volunteer programs. I stumbled upon the Literacy Volunteers of Atlanta (thanks to [the] reading you provided us with) and realized that offering my services could potentially help quite a few adults with this problem. I prospectively plan on volunteering there during the spring semester.

In addition to manifestations of praxis, the above reflections resonate with another underlying aim of social-justice education: a duty to social justice compels those with power to pursue efforts to ameliorate inequalities, in this case, inequalities in access to information. The above students recognized their ability to assist those disempowered by various societal factors, and identified practical ways of fulfilling a sense of duty to less-fortunate others.

Similarly, two other students reflected on how the course topics had enlightened them to their relative privileged status. For example, one student stated, “This class has taught me that access to information should not be taken for granted. It is a controversial issue that we in the United States have less trouble with, which makes it less obvious that we still have to be cautious because of censorship,” thus he recognized his place of relative global privilege by being a U.S. citizen. He continued, saying that he must “actively fight against any sort of privilege concerning the access of information,” and “be conscientious about [his] own personal access to information,” and that he also had a duty in this regard “for those who are less fortunate” than himself. Correspondingly, the following student described his illumination to his privileged status:

> I was enlightened to many information imbalances that I was not aware of before this course, such as literacy among adults in America and the navigation of legal documents. As a suburban-grown American, I am literate and by chance also have attorneys for parents, so neither of these issues ever crossed my mind.

This student's words closely resonate with a central aim of privilege theory pedagogy: to challenge those in socially-privileged statuses, who are "rarely explicitly self-conscious of the nature of their privilege" (Johnson, 2009, p. 798) and whose privilege "is granted, not earned or brought into being by one's individual effort or talent" (Black & Stone, 2005, p. 244), to examine their position of privilege in relation to social issues. While I did not overtly incorporate privilege theory into this course, witnessing its workings illustrates the entwined nature of social justice and privilege pedagogies.

**Analyses of Students' Assignment Texts**

Twelve students consented to content analyses of their assignment texts, which included the Discussion Points, Reflections, and the Final Course Reflection.[2] The content analyses were conducted using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory methodology primarily, but also drew from Krippendorff's (2010) content analysis framework. The analyses were facilitated by QSR International's (2011) *NVivo9* qualitative research software. The assignment texts were compiled separately for each student and then imported into *NVivo9* as discrete sources, using a naming convention of S1=Student 1, S2=Student 2, etc., to represent the 12 different student source texts. The source texts were coded according to several themes that emerged from reading the texts. Upon coding all the source texts, features of *NVivo9* were used as well as the instructor's analytical interpretation to infer discursive patterns in the texts. The content analyses were primarily focused on gauging: (1) students' affirmation and/or challenging of the critical-theoretical and social-justice frameworks; and (2) whether and how students discussed librarians and libraries as social justice and/or democratizing agents.

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[2] I excluded the Final Project assignment from my content analyses because I wished to focus on students' responses to the course readings and class discussion.

***Critical Theory and Social Justice Discourses in Student Texts***

*NVivo9*'s word frequency query feature extracted counts of the top 50 words in the texts. The top five occurring words in descending order were as follows: "information," 400 instances; "people," 313 instances; "access," 233 instances; "more," 193 instances; and "should," 167 instances. Fittingly, these words combine into sentences that capture the essence of the course: *People should [have] more access [to] information,* and *more people should [have] access [to] information.*

Of course, frequency of occurrence does not necessarily indicate these words were used in combination with each other; thus, I investigated further. Intrigued by "people" being the second most-frequently occurring word, individual occurrences were examined in the texts. Largely, it was used as a catch-all term to describe groups of people. However, there were various instances where it was paired as "the people" to refer to a populace or citizenship and to facilitate critical-theoretical/social-justice claims. For example, a student's statement that "it is a fundamental right of the people to be well informed" draws on the social-justice discourse of rights. Another student, in stating "the lack of transparency is ignoring the government's first duty to the people, which is to serve the people," and "the legal system is an extension of the government, whose duty is to serve the people. This cannot be done while the people are kept in ignorance," invokes a social-justice discourse by appealing to notions of social duty/responsibility. Moreover, one might interpret his statement about the government "ignoring" its "duty to the people" and keeping "the people…in ignorance" invokes a critical-theoretical discourse, as it implies that the government exercises power/control by withholding of information. Similarly, another student critiqued the U.S. government's control of government information, noting that "[T]he State is still censoring certain information before it becomes fully available to the public, thus putting the power of information in the hands of the government and not the people," again resonating with a central tenet of critical theory we discussed in class: "critique of domination" (McKinnon, 2009, p. 238).

A proximity text search query in *NVivo9* returned 90 instances of the terms "information" and "access" occurring within 5 words of each other. From these search results, *NVivo9* was used to generate a word tree that depicted when "access" and "information"

appeared in conjunction with each other, paired with the ten words preceding and following their use. These terms were often combined with critical-theoretical/social-justice discourses advocating access to information as a basic right, and calling for reforms to address the disparities in information access experienced by different groups. For example, after watching the SPARKY Award winners assigned for our discussion of the Open Access Movement, a student remarked that the winners "did a good job of showing how opening people's access to information could really have a positive effect on how that information is used to change the world"—aligning with social-justice discourse of affecting social change for the betterment of society. Another student similarly reflected that in the course "we learned how access to information is often a stepping stone for social change and restriction of information is a tool for social control," his words resonate not only with social-justice discourse but also incorporate critical-theoretical discourses in relation to information control as a device of social domination and thus disempowerment. A "most memorable" concept another student drew from the course was "that those economically disadvantaged are also at a disadvantage when it comes to their access to information. The two correlate in a shocking way," her words illustrated her awareness of the way social inequalities compound each other and perpetuate the disempowerment of "disadvantaged" groups, which again aligns with critical-theoretical discourses. Similarly, another student proclaimed the following:

> [S]ociety, as a whole, must agree that informational imbalances are unjust and that all possible efforts should be made to eliminate them. The illiterate must be taught to read, the uninformed must be given access to information, and the impoverished must seek out ways to become equal with their economic antithesis.

This student's words capture the spirit of social-justice discourse: he admonished "informational imbalances" as "unjust," and expounded on specific steps that should be taken to "eliminate them"—his repetition of the word "must" places imperative emphasis on the gravity of the situation but also appeals to a sense of duty to take action.

The word frequency and proximity analysis alone proved fruitful for teasing out the

students' use of critical-theoretical and social-justice discourses. Additionally, coding the texts allowed further exploration of how the students employed and/or challenged the critical-theoretical and social-justice discourses. In reading the texts, recurring themes were identified and constructed as codes (or "nodes" as labeled in *NVivo9*), which were then linked to various excerpts of texts (or "references" as labeled in *NVivo9*). Initially, 45 codes were constructed and applied to the texts. Multiple codes were attached to the same excerpt if that excerpt evoked the nuanced themes differentiated by the discrete codes. For example, an excerpt of text could be coded with the broader "social justice" code, but also with the "domination/disempowerment" code if it involved that rhetoric within the appeal, and with "access to information—no limits" if it declared as such in the text. After coding *NVivo9*'s cluster analysis was used to combine codes that had significant similarity in theme and in application, and codes that had not been applied across more than six student source texts were deleted. There were 439 total excerpts coded with the 10 finalized codes.

Of the 10 final codes, Table 1 below contains those that were applied when students affirmed various nuances of the social-justice and critical-theoretical discourses.

**Table 1: Thematic Codes, Affirming Critical-Theoretical/Social-Justice Discourses**

| Thematic Code | Coded Sources | Coded Excerpts (% of Total Coded Excerpts) |
|---|---|---|
| **social justice** | 12 | 117 (27.8%) |
| **access to information – no limits** | 11 | 75 (17.8%) |
| **domination/disempowerment** | 12 | 60 (14.3%) |
| **critiques of U.S./democracy** | 11 | 36 (8.6%) |
| **accessibility of information** | 10 | 26 (6.2%) |

As indicated by the number of coded excerpts listed in Table 1, the students largely affirmed critical-theoretical and social-justice discourses in their assignment texts. At 117 instances occurring across all 12 sources, "social justice" themes permeated the student texts. Similarly, the "domination/disempowerment" code, applied when students offered explicit

critiques of power and its resultant disempowerment, was applied in 60 instances across all 12 sources. Moreover, students frequently affirmed critical-theoretical discourses by specifically critiquing the failures of the United States to live up to democratic ideals, as is indicated by the 36 instances of my applying the code "critiques of U.S./democracy." And, applying the "access to information—no limits" code when students' words advocated as such, 75 instances emerged in all but one of the 12 sources. Lastly, the code of "accessibility to information," applied primarily when students discussed the understandability of legal information by laypersons, resonating with critical-theoretical and social-justice discourses, emerged in 26 instances across 10 of the 12 sources.

Students were particularly likely to affirm social-justice and critical-theoretical discourses when addressing Internet access and the digital divide. For example, one student declared that "the social justice theory applies here in a very fundamental manner, as I believe it is a basic human right for people to be able to access the Internet and all the knowledge that comes with it" and another stated "a common basic right is the right to information, and in this age that means having access to the Internet more than anything else"—both students specifically appealed to social-justice and rights discourse. Another similarly employed social-justice rhetoric, proclaiming loudly that "poorer people cannot access Internet thus THE JUSTICE OF SOCIETY IS NOT YET SERVED." While not explicitly using social-justice or rights rhetoric per se, other students recognized that lack of Internet access severely disadvantages groups and thus disempowers them in an information society. For example, in examining the statistics that indicate many countries have severely limited Internet access, one student observed that, "without it, it seems to keep them behind the rest of the world because everyone else in the world is always updated," thus he recognized the disempowering effect. Another student declared that "we live in the technology era, and anyone not connected to this movement will be left behind and socially degraded for years to come," similarly observing the disempowering effect of disparities in Internet access.

Students' reactions to our collective dialogues regarding open access to scholarly communication resonated with critical-theoretical discourses. In learning from our Dean of Libraries the relevance of the Open Access movement to Georgia State University's involvement

in *Cambridge University Press et al. v. Becker et al.* (2012), some students were outraged at the perceived abuse of power that publishers exercise over the academic community. The following statement by one student cut to the core of the critical-theoretical critique:

> The publishing industry is one of the most capitalistic entities [in] today's society…The academic publishers are the worst kind of criminals…Information should not be used as goods, with which one may raise the price due to demand, because information is not a good. Information is a vital part of intellectual growth, scientific discoveries, and societal growth.

This student's critique of the publishing industry as "one of the most capitalistic entities [in] today's society" and his equation of them with "the worst kind of criminals" strongly invokes a critical-theoretical critique of the political economy of capitalism. Likewise, his reproach that "information is not a good" to be bought and sold deftly resonates with Luke and Kapitzke's (1999) call for critical information literacy to critique "the political economies of knowledge ownership and control" (pp. 484).

In approaching the topics of youth rights, book challenges, access to LGBTQ information, transparency of government information, and legal literacy, students often critiqued traditional authority structures (parents, schools, government, legal system) by applying critical-theoretical concepts. Most students readily denounced the ACLU-alleged incidences of schools filtering positive LGBTQ information but allowing anti-gay websites through the filters. One student reflected:

> The act of censoring material in public schools, such as an informational LGBT website, effectively forces a child into a specific ideology if they encounter this censorship at an impressionable age. Children are taught that the school is a safe place full of authority figures who want to help them and will make the best decisions for them. If a child is browsing the Internet at school and sees that the LGBT Community Center website is blocked (especially after seeing that other websites are blocked for having violent or

> sexually explicit material) then the child may make the assumption that "LGBT" is something bad and will grow up with that prejudice because in their mind, why would the school censor it if it wasn't bad?

This student's comments illustrate a critique of the "social construction and cultural authority of knowledge" (Luke & Kapitzke, 1999, pp. 483-484). He recognized that the school "authority figures" wield particular influence over "impressionable" children, and that by filtering LGBTQ content they are abusing their "cultural authority" (Luke & Kapitzke, 1999) by, in effect, socially constructing the LGBTQ community as "something bad."

Likewise, other students were quick to challenge the government's practice of withholding information from the public and to challenge parents and schools exercising too much control over information access—their rhetoric often appealed to democratic ideals and empowerment. For example, one student stated that "it is amazing how the government can create a mirage of openness to the American eye" and that "this also makes me wonder who exactly determines whether something is classified and a threat to national security, and what are the standards to be called so." His nuanced critique revealed his understanding of how the government capitalizes on national security fears to limit information access while simultaneously creating a "mirage of openness." Another student argued that "democracy demands an informed public, and without accessible information the public cannot be informed," appealing to information as a democratizing agent for citizen empowerment. Regarding "youth access to information" as a "fundamental right," another student criticized the United States for its failure to ratify the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), saying it was "quite telling of how a child is seen in this country. Is the view of children as property a correct way to go in relation to empowering them in the future?" This quote invokes social-justice discourses of empowerment/rights to express dismay at the United States' eschewing of youth rights.

When discussing legal literacy, the students often critiqued accessibility of legal information as disempowering to laypersons and concomitantly reinforcing the power-laden structure of the legal system. For example, one student recognized the disempowering

function of "legalese" as "a major problem for the common person," as "lawyers are able to structure agreements in ways that could bring harm to one of the parties in the deal," thus "creating a power imbalance between the educated and the non-educated, or between the rich and the poor." Another student applied critical-theoretical discourses to argue that the legal system has a vested interested in disempowering laypeople by suggesting "the legal system is designed to keep the layman out of touch and the lawyer in a job," and "to preserve the informational advantage it enjoys over the general public."

While students predominantly affirmed the critical-theoretical and social-justice discourses within their assignment texts, there were instances in which they challenged or expressed conflicted beliefs about them, as the coded sources and excerpts in Table 2 below indicate.

**Table 2: Thematic Codes, Challenging or Conflicted about Critical-Theoretical/Social-Justice Discourses**

| Thematic Code | Coded Sources | Coded Excerpts (% of Total Coded Excerpts) |
|---|---|---|
| **parent vs. child rights** | 11 | 36 (8.6%) |
| **access to information – need for limits** | 12 | 29 (6.9%) |
| **access to information – conflicted re: limits** | 9 | 23 (5.5%) |

The codes contained in Table 2 were largely applied to texts in which students weighed youth rights to information against parental rights to control the information their children accessed, and citizens' rights to government information against the government's need to protect national security. Regarding these topics, some students seemed torn while others held fairly strong beliefs in opposition to a typical critical-theoretical stance. In the texts, this often emerged as a conflict between rhetoric of rights and freedoms versus protection and security as well as a respect for, or trust in, authority. For example, one student argued "censorship is often for good reasons. These reasons are usually age limits; this is not

violat[ing] any of the 1st amendment because children are not truly equal because of their status as minors," thus he illustrated a belief that censorship of materials in the name of protecting children was morally and legally justifiable. Another student stated that he believed that "children are not ready for many ideas being presented in books" and that he believed "that it is up to the discretion of the librarian to place appropriate books in children's libraries" and that parents as well must also "monitor what their children are reading." In contrast, another student revealed her conflicted feelings regarding youth rights and access to information, stating that "certainly parents have a say in what their child is exposed to…but when does that start becoming an infringement on the child's rights?" The same student was hesitant to take a strong critical-theoretical stance regarding government transparency; she understood that although "absolute transparency in the government would probably result in a paranoid country, allowing citizens to have access to government information is what makes a democratic society."

***Student Reflections about Libraries and Librarians***

The final code of "libraries/librarians" was applied when students explicitly used the word(s) in their texts, with 19 instances occurring across 10 of the 12 sources (see Table 3).

**Table 2: Sources and Excerpts mentioning Libraries/Librarians**

| Thematic Code | Coded Sources | Coded Excerpts (% of Total Coded Excerpts) |
|---|---|---|
| **libraries/librarians** | 10 | 19 (4.3%) |

Students primarily commented on libraries/librarians in their responses on book challenges and Internet filtering. A daring couple of students turned a critical eye toward libraries/librarians. For instance, one student offered the following critique:

> The assertion that all information should be presented in all points of view is a fundamental point of the ALA's Bill of Rights. Assuming that the standard is followed

> uniformly by librarians, is every effort made to collect literature on as many different viewpoints on a subject that exist? Banning a book from libraries is the most prominent form of censorship, but omission of information is a more subtle form of the same practice that must not be overlooked.

This student astutely employed a critical-theoretical stance toward the power librarians can wield regarding access to information. Likewise, he brought into question whether there exists a uniform commitment to the Library Bill of Rights (ALA, 2012) principle of neutrality, and whether, as Lewis (2008) decries, "the word 'all' in the Library Bill of Rights statement is an impossible goal, dooming librarians to failure in following its dictates" (p.1). "Since there is a Library Bill of Rights, why can the Library still ban books?" and "How can librarians in America 'inculcate values' if every parent may want to teach their children separate values?" asked another student who recognized possible discontinuities between professional principles and actions.

However most students expressed positive opinions about the role librarians play in social justice and democratizing efforts. For instance, one student discussed librarians' role in advocating against book banning and deemed them "champions of the 1st Amendment," and "major players in today's youth and the country's future." Another student, after reading the Library Bill of Rights (ALA, 2012) was pleased to learn that librarians strive to be "unbiased and neutral" in their collecting. Still another student reflected on the class discussion of "the mindset of librarians" and recognized their social justice efforts by noting that "most people working with libraries are striving to bring information to people who would otherwise not have access to it" and that "librarians are doing a good job of providing information to the people without censoring them." One student's reflections were particularly heartening:

> Even in high school, I didn't really comprehend the full purpose of libraries or librarians. Sadly, the extent of their usefulness to me was a way of getting the newest novel I wanted to read and help finding it. Since coming to college and going through this course, I have come to deeply appreciate and admire the devotion that libraries and

> their librarians have towards knowledge and the sharing of it. This devotion towards organizing information and making it accessible may seem boring, but I think I kind of understand why librarians do it. It is hard to explain but, for me, there is something very comforting about knowing that this diverse mass of information is there in case I or the rest of humanity ever need it.

**Conclusion**

Collectively the students, the guest teachers, and I pushed the boundaries of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. We delved beyond the "procedural" (Seale, 2010, p. 229) aspects of information literacy into the various social, legal, and ethical issues alluded to in the ACRL standards that rarely get addressed adequately in the one-shot library instruction sessions to which librarians are oft relegated. Moreover, the dialogic, problem-posing class structure successfully engaged students in applying critical-theoretical and social-justice frameworks to the course topics. As illustrated in the content analysis of the students' assignment texts, the students adeptly gleaned that critical information literacy indeed "encompasses…empowering people, promoting social inclusion, redressing disadvantage, and advancing the well-being of all in a global context" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 257). The students passionately declared that they and others had a duty to ameliorate inequalities stemming from access to information and began to understand the role librarians play in social justice and democratizing efforts related to information access. In our explorations of librarians' central involvement in anti-censorship and open-access movements as well as in our examination of the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights (2012) students learned of the everyday, principle-driven actions that librarians take to democratize access to information. Throughout this seminar, students and instructors alike experienced Freire's (2000) "liberating education," in which "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students…They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80).

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**Appendix A: Course Description and Topics**

***INFORMATON—POWER TO THE PEOPLE***

"Knowledge is power. Information is liberating…." Kofi Annan

Guided by this notion and the sociological frameworks of "critical theory" and "social justice," we will address specific situations in which access to, control of, and use of information is unequal, impeded, manipulated, and/or abused and thus can result in people's disempowerment. We will also explore efforts aimed at empowering those within these situations. Course session topics include the following:

***"Knowledge is Power; Information is Liberating" – An Analytical Framework*.** We'll discuss what this phrase means to us, and how it, and the sociological frameworks of "critical theory" and "social justice," will guide our examining the course topics.

***First Things First – Literacy in the U.S. and Worldwide.*** We'll look at literacy rates in the U.S. and beyond and examine what groups are disproportionately placed at a disadvantage due to low literacy.

***Internet a "Basic Human Right"? – Information Poverty and the Digital Divide*.** We'll examine the existence of "information poverty" and a "digital divide" within the U.S. and globally.

***You Can't Read That? - The 1st Amendment and Your Librarian*.** We'll explore the role librarians play in supporting the 1st Amendment Right of freedom of speech, focusing on challenges to books in library collections.

***The Kids are All Right? – Youth Rights and Access to Information*.** We will explore youth rights in relation to access to information, focusing on sexuality information. Amy Elliott, a GSU Librarian who researches Information Access & Services for LGBTQ people, will lead our discussion.

***In the Spirit of Thomas Jefferson – Access to Government Information.*** Joe Hurley, the GSU Government Information Librarian, will lead our discussion of the transparency movement to make government information accessible to the masses.

***No More Ivory Towers – Open Access to Scholarly Communication.*** Nan Seamans, the Dean of the University Library, will lead us in examining the movement to provide Open Access to scholarly information as challenging the power structures of traditional publishing.

***This Might Be Shocking – Research Ethics and the "Informed" Research Subject*.** Ida Martinez, the GSU Psychology Librarian, will lead us in examining landmark cases in which (among other transgressions) withholding or manipulating information given to research subjects resulted in shocking abuses, and subsequently paved the way for establishing research ethics guidelines.

***The Doctor's Always Right? – Health Literacy*.** Sharon Leslie, the GSU Public Health Librarian, will lead us in examining (1) factors that impede access to health information, and (2) patient advocacy for their health.

***Legalese and Attorney Fees – Access to the Justice System.*** We'll consider how legal language and economic inequalities hinder access to legal information and counsel and consequently to the judicial system. Attorneys Beth Stephens and Karen Moskowitz from the Atlanta Legal Aid Society will discuss how their organization addresses these issues.