

How do we advocate for underrepresented students?: A panel on how critical pedagogy and social justice value the student experience

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Presented at the California Academic & Research Libraries 2016 Conference

March 31 – April 2, 2016

Costa Mesa, California

Abstract: University or college libraries are often stereotypically perceived to be passive and neutral actors in academia or, worse, as budgetary burdens within the neoliberal paradigm of contemporary higher education. The role of librarians as educators, as well as their impact on students, is regularly undermined or ignored in favor of career and graduation pipeline initiatives that minimize students' autonomy to learn. Critical pedagogy, however, provides the necessary theoretical framework for disrupting this anti-intellectual and free-market worshipping hegemony within academics.

Librarians can utilize their unique status and pedagogical practices to advocate for underrepresented groups on college campuses. By existing on a middle ground within academia, librarians are best poised to act on behalf of students and subvert the power structures that may oppress them. As supported by the work of librarian Anne-Marie Deitering (2015) on reflective teaching, library practitioners exist between omnipresent binaries of academic institutions. Students absorb a never ending set of beliefs during college -- 'good' vs. 'bad' information, scholarly and authoritative vs. amateurish and ignorant -- that may inadvertently turn them away from their true pursuit of education.

Panelists representing diverse academic institutions and backgrounds will aim to present various experiences and perspectives on how critical pedagogy is intertwined with and affects issues of social justice, and in turn, values the student experience.

Proceedings: This panel was brought together by Southern California Instruction Librarians (SCIL), an interest group of CARL, whose mission is to provide professional development opportunities for library professionals related to information literacy. As such, panelists discussed how critical pedagogy can provide a framework for social justice, not only in the library classroom, but also within the library, its resources, and services. The way our communities and students will view librarians and libraries in the future depends on how we

reassert the value of student experiences in the learning process and how we advocate for safe spaces that support experimental thinking, creative learning, and open dialogue.

Melissa Cardenas-Dow (University of California, Riverside)

Cardenas-Dow began by discussing the hierarchies of power that exist within academic institutions and the dynamics of oppression and privilege therein contained in those spaces. She also mentioned the research and theory behind states of exhaustion related to the emotional work of librarians vested in subverting traditional models of hierarchy.

Conclusions offered were to question the static canon of information that is offered to students with Ethnic Studies acting as an example of one conduit to student engagement and recognition. Specifically, she encouraged librarians to recognize people's positionality and privilege (including one's own) as a possible solution to shift balances of power.

Mario Macias (Pierce College)

Macias brought up several issues related to instruction and reference work which focused on the transformative learning opportunities between librarian and student. By humanizing the transaction and focusing on empathetic values, Macias introduced a way of being accessible to students that transcends cultural competency and bureaucratic protocol to empower the students and ignite their desire for knowledge and ability to ask questions.

Additionally, Macias emphasized that it is often the bureaucratic processes put in place that may cause a hindrance to a student's ability to gain access to information and services. Contextualizing their needs and subverting or bending protocol can be seen as one way to value the student experience and advocate for their needs within the classroom or at the reference desk.

Stephanie Rosenblatt (Cerritos College)

Rosenblatt tied together the systemic failings of academic institutions and the abandonment of meeting student needs by critically assessing the California Master Plan for Higher Education of 1960. It is a disservice to community college students to skew their expectations for continuing education at the university level when it is typical for a student to graduate with an associate's degree within 4-8 years.

Students looking to achieve a higher education degree within a community college or university system are met with limited opportunities of success because of the lack of guidance or counseling. According to Rosenblatt, The Master Plan foils the efforts of California residents looking to become fully actualized human beings.

Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (California State University, San Bernardino)

Schlesselman-Tarango's discussion focused on critiques of the academy as well as turning critical pedagogy into public pedagogy as a way of transcending the classroom structure. She

discussed her first-year seminar which explored Stramondo's (2010) work on disability and the discourse of pity. Concerning the academy, she noted issues of oppression within the system of higher education, such as rape culture, exploitation of the labor force, rising tuition, and student debt. Schlesselman-Tarango urged librarians to "not be afraid to critique what we love."

Gayatri Singh (University of California, San Diego)

Singh expanded on the notion of love as being central to critical pedagogy and the reason for being a library professional. Singh referred to Morris's (2016) post "On love, critical pedagogy, and the work we must do" to orient conference attendees. Overall, she recommended making it as easy as possible for students to ask for help and specifically discussed ways to make the reference desk a more approachable space, such as sitting next to students at the desk and letting students lead the reference session.

Moreover, she discussed how services and spaces can act as gateways for both current and future students and their access to higher knowledge and power. Singh emphasized that it is essential for librarians to integrate themselves into campus community issues and activism, be aware of K-12 curriculum, and library user access issues.

Lastly, she discussed the importance of making the library not just a safe space for students and the community to work and do their research, but also as a space for expressions of civic discourse. This requires librarians and library administration to work collaboratively with student groups and campus safety officers.

References

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