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An Unfinished Journey Towards a Democratic Information Literacy Classroom

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Asking students to talk about their education is so simple that—whether we are teachers, parents, researchers, or policymakers—we inevitably forget to do it.¹

WE BOTH CAME TO critical information literacy around the same time, in early 2016, and bonded over reading Paolo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed² and Maria Accardi’s Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction.³ Critical information literacy was a popular topic in the field, and we eagerly reported to each other about the latest journal articles or Twitter discussions we had read. We quickly found ourselves moving beyond the library literature and into the work of authors like bell hooks, Henry Giroux, and Frank Tuitt. Our book club of sorts led us to realize that we shared a strong interest in embracing critical pedagogy.

While we have started using examples in class activities that may help students understand systemic oppression, such as teaching students to read a research study using articles about segregation and gated communities, we struggle with identifying as critical or feminist pedagogues because we are not focusing our classroom time on working with students to break down systemic power structures or to end sexism and sexual oppression. However, we do strive to break down the teacher/student hierarchy in our classrooms. We are inspired by tenets of feminist and inclusive pedagogies that work to deconstruct classroom hierarchies and center students’ voices, believing “that we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between student and teacher.”⁴ We are committed to fostering democrat-
ic learning communities that emphasize mutual participation. We value our students’ personal experiences and seek to share authority with our students as opposed to demonstrating authority over our students. Thus, we have worked over the past year to involve students more in curriculum development and student learning assessment.

This chapter presents the start of our journey to becoming critical educators, and we admit that our journey is not complete. We are still learning. What follows is a discussion of two assignments—the Day One Questionnaire and Collaborative Rubric Design—which we developed in an effort to achieve our goal of involving students in curriculum and assessment. We begin with a discussion of the foundations of our pedagogical practice. We then share our experiences of implementing the two activities and provide critical reflections about what we are learning early in our journey.

Foundations of our Pedagogical Practice

The literature of critical information literacy, feminist pedagogy, and inclusive pedagogy share similar views of classroom dynamics between teachers and students. Being new to critical pedagogy and critical information literacy, we have delved into both the library literature and literature from education. Currently, we are most drawn to the ideas of democratic classrooms and sharing power.

Fostering a Democratic Classroom

The classroom relationship between teacher and students is a rigorously covered topic in critically focused literature. The dynamic of this relationship is the foundation of the critical classroom. These relationships require a degree of mutual respect, open-mindedness, and understanding. In order to achieve these goals, dialogue between teacher and students must take place. For Tuitt, “the dialogical process seeks to create respectful, challenging, and collaborative learning environments and to ensure that there is mutual professor-student participation.” This meaningful dialogue is what allows teachers and students to confront barriers and start to form a collaborative community in the classroom. Inclusive pedagogies value democratic partnerships that form between students and teachers by sharing the responsibility of knowledge creation. This gets students participating in decisions that affect their learning so that they can resist the comfortable,
passive classroom environment.\textsuperscript{11} For pedagogy scholars such as Dewey\textsuperscript{12} and Shor,\textsuperscript{13} learners must be engaged in the formation of their learning in order for the classroom to be truly democratic.

\textit{Sharing Power}

Critical and inclusive pedagogues see students as partners in the learning process and work to share authority and power with students. By sharing power with our students, we work to combat the often blindly accepted hierarchies of higher education. A teacher incorporating these pedagogies “shares rather than demands authority and asks more questions than s/he answers.”\textsuperscript{14} Students are not always prepared for the responsibility of shared power in the classroom. Because no two classroom scenarios are identical, both teachers and students must negotiate their shared power through experimentation with collaborative activities.\textsuperscript{15}

Ira Shor uses student questionnaires on the first day of class to “establish the learning process as a cultural forum or public sphere for the negotiation of meanings” and to get his students’ learning needs and desires “into the open as soon as possible.”\textsuperscript{16} Reynolds and Trehan bring a critical perspective to assessment in their practice of participative assessment, “in which students …share, to some degree, the responsibility for making evaluations and judgments about students’ written work.”\textsuperscript{17} The Day One Questionnaire and Collaborative Rubric Design are two ways that our students participated in shaping their learning experiences and sharing responsibility in the classroom.

\textit{Our Courses}

Our department offers six different one-credit information literacy courses under the LIB prefix. These courses are graduation requirements for majors in academic programs including Criminology & Criminal Justice and Speech Language Pathology, as well as co-curricular programs including the Honors Program and our first-generation student program. The two courses we discuss in this chapter are LIB 160: Criminal Justice Library Research and LIB 151: Research Skills for Beginning Researchers. LIB 160 is required for Criminology & Criminal Justice majors and has been taught for the past seven years. Up until the fall 2017 semester, students could take the course at any time in their academic career, and the course has had a
mix of first-year students to seniors. Recently, the Criminology & Criminal Justice Department made LIB 160 a co-requisite for a 300-level course, meaning that students will take the course during their junior year. LIB 151 is the first course in a two-course sequence for the Honors Program and has been taught for the past five years. Students enrolled in LIB 151 are first-year students in their first semester. Both courses focus on information literacy concepts of finding, evaluating, and synthesizing information.

Rachel’s Experience with the Day One Questionnaire

Dewey notes that teachers must be “intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past-experiences” of students so that we can allow their suggestions to develop into a plan formed by contributions from the group as a whole. The Day One Questionnaire is a call for students to be involved in integral decisions about the course and to establish shared learning goals by contributing their opinions about what should be taught, how it should be taught, and when it should be taught. On the first day of class, I gave students a bare-bones version of the syllabus, which outlined the course learning outcomes and my classroom expectations, such as participation in class and respect for one another. Then, I introduced the Day One Questionnaire, a six-question survey (see Appendix A). The goal of the questionnaire was to determine what students want to take away from their time in LIB 160. With the information the students provided, I adapted my teaching to their learning needs and crafted a syllabus that is responsive to their learning goals.

Using the Questionnaire Responses

While I wanted the students to provide me with information about the course in their own words, I also knew that I needed to get data that I could quickly interpret to develop a full schedule by our next class session. I decided on a multiple-choice format but provided students with an open text box so they could share any ideas for the course that was not listed for them. The following section outlines each question of the survey with a description of how the answers were integrated into the syllabus and course planning.
What do you hope to take away from this course?

With this question, I wanted to know what the students wanted to actually get out of the class. I provided options for course content based on the previous semester’s syllabus. Each item listed on the questionnaire was associated with specific lesson plans. Based on the students’ answers, I could focus the course on particular concepts more than others. For instance, if students indicated that they were interested in learning more about evaluating sources, I could embed more in-class activities and discussions revolving around information evaluation.

While students were interested in exploring all of the content options listed, the most popular concepts were to develop more effective research habits and to be more knowledgeable about APA style and citations. To accommodate the students’ expressed learning goals, I added an extra day of discussion and practice with APA and made the APA exam a take-home exercise to alleviate the pressure of time constraints. I combined this with periodic “research check-ins,” which asked students to reflect on their personal research process (see Appendix B). Their writing helped me to gauge where individual students were in terms of reaching their learning goals.

When it comes to research for a writing assignment, when do you feel most confident?

This question helped to inform me of the information literacy concepts that we could potentially spend less time in class discussing. This information also helped me to craft a schedule that started with a review of the skills and concepts where students indicated confidence and then work toward building new knowledge for the remainder of the course.

When it comes to research for a writing assignment, when do you feel least confident?

With this information, I was able to design a syllabus and schedule with the flexibility to accommodate extra time on concepts in which students felt least confident. Many noted they were least confident in citing their sources. I addressed this with amendments to my APA lesson plans. However, in the open text box, multiple students commented that they were not confident in finding relevant or “good enough” sources. This reinforced the need for multiple class activities focused on finding and evaluating sources.
In what ways do you prefer to learn?

I wanted to ensure that my pedagogical approach was inclusive of the diverse learning styles present in our classroom. The answers to this question were less important to the development of the syllabus and schedule and more beneficial in designing my lesson plans for each class meeting. The diversity of the answers let me know that I needed to incorporate a variety of teaching techniques to address multiple learning styles. In practice, this meant that my classes generally featured a small amount of lecture, group activities, class discussions, and time for reflection.

In what ways do you prefer to receive feedback?

I took note of individual answers to ensure that my feedback was constructive for each student and not a deterrent for further inquiry and learning. Most students said that they preferred to receive feedback through written comments. Based on students’ answers from previous questions, I provided more in-depth and detailed feedback on activities involving difficult concepts.

Rachel’s Critical Reflection

I saw the Day One Questionnaire as a way to disrupt traditional classroom hierarchies by giving students an opportunity to share their opinions and actually listening to what they have to say. It is hard to say, however, if my students saw it that way. After our eight weeks together, I asked students if they thought that the Day One Questionnaire had an impact on how the class was conducted. I received one response: “I feel like it positively impacted the class. It enabled Prof. Dineen to see what we the students need help on the most.” While I am disappointed that the majority of students did not respond, I’m not particularly surprised. Although I often mentioned that our class activities were a direct result of their first-day feedback, students were not active participants in the design of the course syllabus and schedule. Perhaps they felt like the Day One Questionnaire was merely busy work, or when asked to recall their comments, day one was just too far in the past to remember anything meaningful.

I really love the idea of giving students the opportunity to share in the decision-making processes of course design. However, I think the Day One Questionnaire is only starting to scratch the surface of truly participatory
pedagogy. Asking students’ opinions is important, but how much are they really willing to share on the first day of class? Is it fair of me to ask students to write freely about their goals for the class at a time when they are simply figuring out how to get to class? This is where the teacher-student relationship is crucial. If a democratic classroom is based on mutual respect and listening to each other, I have to allow time for these things to occur. If instead of the Day One Questionnaire it became the Day Ten Questionnaire, I may garner more honest or constructive responses from my students.

Having implemented and reflected on the questionnaire for two consecutive semesters, I have noticed that, in an attempt to promote student voice, there is a distinct lack of actual voices in this exercise. Is the Day One Questionnaire really about sharing power and giving students an opportunity to make curricular decisions or is it about engaging in a dialogue with students about shared learning goals? Freire would argue that the relationship between teacher and student should be dialogical, but true dialogue cannot occur if I am not acting as a member of the group. If I am still ultimately the only one to make decisions, I am not actually engaging in a dialogical relationship with my students. As discussed earlier, Tuitt saw dialogue as a means to ensure reciprocal participation between everyone in the classroom. Collaboratively determining the structure of the course is really what this exercise is meant to be about. The next iteration of the questionnaire must involve much more time for conversation and much more critical self-reflection about my role within classroom-based dialogue.

Thinking beyond dialogue, how does my role as professor impact the way the students respond to my questions? Shor would say that, as the teacher, “I am already part of their experience before they even experience me.” Students are well aware of the concept of teacher as authority. Shor goes on to note that critical pedagogues “do not stop being authorities or academic experts, but they deploy their power and knowledge as democratic authorities who question the status quo and negotiate the curriculum rather than as authoritarian educators who unilaterally make rules and lecture on preset subject matter.” So how do I embrace my authority in the classroom while also demonstrating my desire to deconstruct traditional classroom hierarchy? I think that with a little tweaking of the timing and far more dialogue between me and the students, the Day One Questionnaire could be a step in that direction.
Lyda’s Experience with Collaborative Rubric Design

In their own experience with participative assessment, Reynolds and Trehan had students go through peer review of written work and assign grades on that work. Taking a different approach, I implemented Collaborative Rubric Design in LIB 151: Research Skills for Beginning Researchers, where students co-create the rubric for the final assignment, a mini-literature review. We collectively developed a rubric for the paper’s first draft, then we worked together to revise the rubric for the final draft (see Appendix C).

Designing the Rubric

I first showed students a rubric from the previous semester, which was not co-created. Using this as a jumping-off point, I gave students a blank rubric and asked them to consider which components of the paper they wanted feedback on and which paper components they wanted to be scored with the rubric (e.g., Introduction, Discussion). After they determined these components, they developed the rankings for the rubric (e.g., Excellent, Good), determined the number of rankings, and assigned points to the rankings. Students worked in pairs to make these decisions and then came back for a group discussion. After developing the components, rankings, and scores, the students developed the content of the rubric.

Students were very detailed about the parts of the paper they wanted to be scored and how many points the rankings should have. They designed a rubric with the following categories: Introduction, Literature Review, Discussion, Synthesis and Organization, APA Formatting, APA Reference Page, APA In-Text Citations. Synthesis and Organization did not exist on the sample rubric I provided. This group of students decided that they wanted feedback and a score on how well they were synthesizing their information and the overall organization of their paper. They also separated APA into three categories because they were not confident in their APA skills at that point. They decided not to have points assigned to APA References or In-Text Citations and asked me to give them feedback only for these two categories because they wanted more practice and were concerned scoring these two categories would impact their grade.

After we created the rubric components, we determined the rankings and points. Students created five rankings for their rubric (the sample had
three rankings) and settled on Excellent, Good, and Average for the top three ranking headings. The last rank, valued at one point, was labeled “Charity Points,” because they said that no one earning this rank really deserved points, but “we’re honors students and we don’t like zeros.” When I asked what to title the fourth rank, a student yelled out “you suck” and everyone laughed (I laughed too, it was funny). Then I put on my serious professor face and asked them if they really wanted me to write that in a rubric, and to think about how they might feel if they scored a “you suck.” One student calmly said that if she was getting such a low score on the paper, she wanted a blunt, in-your-face comment like “you suck” to motivate her to do better. All the other students agreed. Students assigned each rank points from 1–5 but were more stringent than my previous rubrics for APA. To earn an Excellent in APA formatting, a student could make zero errors (in previous rubrics a student could make up to two errors and still score an Excellent). After they created the rubric shell, they created the rubric content by determining what would constitute a certain score for each category. For example, students determined for themselves how many sources should appear in the paper to earn a certain score and they created language for what synthesis would look like to earn a certain score.

I used the rubric to score and comment on the first draft. When we updated the rubric for draft two of the paper, there was limited revision; students changed the points for Excellent and Good to seven and five respectively. They also included scores for APA Reference and APA In-Text, but only assigned this with three ranks (Excellent–3, Good–2, Charity Points–1). These changes substantially raised the total points possible from 25 to 40.

**Lyda’s Critical Reflection**

My perception during class was that students enjoyed collaboratively creating the paper rubric. They enthusiastically participated in both pair and group discussion, laughed during the process, and engaged in serious debate about the rubric content. It is also noted in student feedback that they appreciated being part of creating course content. One student noted, “One thing that I always enjoy in a class is when I am given some control over my grade and how I will be graded. I believe that being included in the course design as a student is essential in making a good class.” Another student commented, “I really appreciated being involved in course development.
through the rubric development process. As I was able to express my opinion throughout the semester, I felt more motivated in this course than any other course.”

I also wanted to make sure that the students had a good experience and that it was their rubric. In doing so, I forgot that it was actually our rubric and that we were creating it together. When students wanted to name a rank “you suck,” I was hesitant, but I let them do it. In the moment, I was concerned that not letting them use that phrase was taking away power from them in the process. I saw Collaborative Rubric Design as a way to break down some of the power structures that exist in the college classroom. I also wanted to demonstrate to students that I value their opinions about course content and want them to take an active role in their own learning. My hope was that the students found value in developing the rubric and were more motivated to succeed because of their involvement in how their work would be assessed. Therefore, I felt in that moment that I couldn’t say, “Hey, students, write this rubric,” and then when I don’t like it say, “Oh, but you can’t do that.” During the class, and even after, I felt that would defeat the entire purpose of the collaboration.

Writing this chapter has been a great experience because it has forced me to reflect further on the activity, my approach, and my interactions with the students. Feedback from the editors forced me to examine how this activity worked, and if it worked at all. Upon further reflection, I realize my desire to reject authoritarianism pushed me to reject my own authority, something Freire warned us about.25 I have authority in the classroom, which comes from my knowledge of the subject matter. This is different from the authoritarianism granted to me from the institution. Freire maintains that authority is not opposed to freedom, but necessary for freedom. What I did during Collaborative Rubric Design was to go against my instincts as the teacher and give limitless power to the students. I also failed to engage the students in dialogue about the rubric we were creating together. I failed to make my classroom a truly democratic space because I did not have an open dialogue about using the phrase “you suck.” By not sharing with the students my own concerns, I failed to bring my honest self into my classroom. We also missed a valuable discussion about information! We could have discussed the potential reactions of my colleagues or the Library Dean to this rubric if they had reviewed it. We could have had conversations about rights and privilege on social media and what happens
to some faculty who express certain opinions or try new methods that are scrutinized publicly. I was so concerned with sharing power that I gave it up completely and did not think about how I could be a teacher in that moment.

So, did the activity actually work? Partially. It is evident from student feedback that they appreciate this level of participation. Was it truly a critical approach? Less so than I hoped. Did I learn from the experience and gain a new perspective on my own authority and creating a democratic space? Absolutely! I have authority and I need to use it. To do otherwise hinders my students’ learning. It is simply my job to ensure that, as a democratic teacher, I “never, never transform authority into authoritarianism.”

**Final Thoughts**

As Tuitt states, “Critical and inclusive pedagogies offer multiple opportunities for creating affirming and equitable learning environments where all students, regardless of their prior lived experiences, can be the best that they can be.” Through the Day One Questionnaire and Collaborative Rubric Design, we believe we are working to create classroom environments that center student voice and value students as co-creators of class content. We are not arguing that by implementing one or both of these activities a collaborative classroom is born. But, we do think that exercises like these are a step toward breaking down barriers and hierarchies that are so often present in higher education.

Over the past year, we have discovered Saran Stewart’s Critical-Inclusive Pedagogical Framework (CIPF), which is based on the tenets of inclusive pedagogy outlined by Frank Tuitt: Faculty-Student Interaction, Sharing Power, Dialogical Professor-Student Interaction, Activation of Student Voice, and Utilization of Student Narrative. Stewart designed the CIPF in order to “develop a conceptual and theoretical base in which to engage students in higher education, as co-constructors in the teaching-learning process.” We are now using the CIPF as a guide for our teaching practice, and believe it is a good model for helping create more democratic and inclusive classrooms. Moving forward with the CIPF model, we plan to work with students to develop student learning outcomes for our credit courses, involve students more in teaching course content, and engage in continual critical reflection of our practice.
While we anticipate successes and failures in our practice, we know that “a learning community emerges from mutual communication, meaningful work, and empowering methods. This community can be built if [we] situate critical study inside student language and experience, listening carefully to students and drawing out their ideas, encouraging them to listen carefully and respond to each other, and then remembering what was said.”\textsuperscript{30} We continue to strive to keep students at the center of our practice and embrace them as partners in the classroom.
Appendix 6A: Day One Questionnaire: LIB 160

1. What do you hope to take away from the class? Choose all answers that apply.
   a. More effective research habits
   b. Ways to use the library and information resources more efficiently
   c. Strategies for tackling writing assignments
   d. Strategies for being a savvier information consumer/creator
   e. Knowledge of APA formatting and citation standards
   f. Greater understanding of information sources in the social sciences
   g. Strategies for evaluating multiple types of information
   h. Other? Please elaborate

2. When it comes to research for a writing assignment, when do you feel most confident? Choose all answers that apply.
   a. Developing a good topic
   b. Finding relevant sources
   c. Evaluating information sources
   d. Citing your sources
   e. Formatting and writing the paper
   f. Other? Please elaborate

3. When it comes to research for a writing assignment, when do you feel least confident? Choose all answers that apply.
   a. Developing a good topic
   b. Finding relevant sources
   c. Evaluating information sources
   d. Citing your sources
   e. Formatting and writing the paper
   f. Other? Please elaborate

4. In what ways do you think you learn best? Choose all answers that apply.
   a. Listening to lecture and taking notes
   b. Discussing topics with a partner
   c. Class conversations
   d. In-class activities
e. Preparing for and taking tests/quizzes
f. Reflecting on experiences
g. Other? Please elaborate

5. In what ways do you prefer to receive feedback? Choose all answers that apply.
   a. Face-to-face discussions
   b. Written comments
   c. Number/letter grades
   d. Other? Please elaborate

Appendix 6B: Research Check-In: LIB 160

1. How are you feeling about your research right now?

2. What did you learn from filling out the Summary Table?

3. What do you still need to know to start writing your paper?

4. What concerns do you have about starting your paper?

5. What concerns you most about APA?
## Appendix 6C: Rubrics: LIB 151

### Draft One Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent (5)</th>
<th>Good (4)</th>
<th>Average (3)</th>
<th>You Suck (2)</th>
<th>Charity Points (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>Discusses your research question and why it is important to know the answer to this question. Sets the scene and explains importance. Clearly provides background information.</td>
<td>Discuss research question but does not discuss importance. Provides minimal background information thus does not set the scene for the paper.</td>
<td>Minimal effort on the introduction. No discussion of the question or its importance. No background information.</td>
<td>No effort on the introduction is evident.</td>
<td>No effort on the introduction is evident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literature Review</strong></td>
<td>Discusses previous research relevant to your question/problem. Includes at least five reputable sources. At least two of these are be research studies. Presents research in either chronological or thematic order. Organization is clearly thematic or chronological.</td>
<td>Includes at least five sources but does not include research studies. Thematic/chronological order is not evident. Does not provide an in-depth discussion of the literature.</td>
<td>Minimal effort on the literature review. Less than four sources are cited and there is a limited discussion of past research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Provides and answer to the research question. Provides a solution/recommendation and discusses why you’ve made your choices, and why you think this is the best solution or recommendation. Discusses possible problems that may occur if your recommendations are followed. Discusses future research that you believe is needed on this topic.</td>
<td>Provides an answer to the question and a recommendation but neither seem to flow from the literature discussed. Thus, the answer is not connected to the literature. Discusses a solution/recommendation, but this does not flow from the literature. Discusses future research.</td>
<td>Provides an answer not connected to the literature. Does not provide a solution/recommendation. Does not discuss future research.</td>
<td>No effort on the discussion section is evident.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization/Synthesis</td>
<td>Flows well, themes well thought out. Well synthesized in lit review section. At least three articles per theme.</td>
<td>Some issues with organization causing the reader to misunderstand the literature review section. Themes are well thought out but only two articles per theme. Author attempts synthesis of the literature.</td>
<td>Themes do not make sense. Some sections have only one article per theme, thus can’t be synthesized.</td>
<td>No effort on the organization/synthesis is evident.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APA Paper Formatting</td>
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<td>1-2 errors</td>
<td>3-5 errors</td>
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<td>APA Reference</td>
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## Draft Two Rubric

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Endnotes

5. hooks, Teaching Critical Thinking.
9. hooks, Teaching to Transgress, 130.
10. Tuitt, “Afterword.”
15. Shor, When Students Have Power.
16. Ibid., 34.
18. Dewey, Experience and Education, 85.
19. A multiple-choice format is a decidedly un-critical way to present information. However, in this instance, I had certain learning objectives that I needed to fulfill in the course. By giving them options, I hoped to get an idea of what concepts students were more interested in learning over others.


22. Shor, When Students Have Power, 16.

23. Ibid., 56.


25. Beatty, “Reading Freire.”


30. Shor, When Students Have Power, 259.

Bibliography


