

Slowing Down Together: Reflections on Shared Practice in the Neoliberal University

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ABSTRACT: In this case study, library instruction workers at a four-year R1 university reflect on the timeline and process of creating an instruction working group and documenting a program centered on critical information literacy. The authors outline their initial approach and ensuing difficulty in incorporating elements of the ACRL Information Literacy Framework and Standards into the program. In reflecting on this process, the authors distinguish fundamental misalignments from critical information literacy within the instruction program. To help understand these misalignments in context, the study engages with literature on critical pedagogy and the impact of neoliberalism in higher education, illustrating the ways the authors struggled with entrenched ideals of individualism, the archetype of the “natural teacher,” and previously unexamined institutional practices and assumptions. This study concludes with actionable steps towards a more anti-racist, decolonial, and social justice-oriented instruction working group and program.

Keywords: critical information literacy, slow librarianship, neoliberalism, communities of practice, reflective practices, case studies



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Introduction

Information literacy (IL) instruction has been considered a central service of academic libraries for decades and has produced a growing body of practices and theories. Often, library instructors are guided by a policy document that specifies an institution's values and approaches to library instruction. Critical information literacy (CIL) and pedagogy are often prioritized in these documents, although the application of CIL can fall short in practice. Even experienced teachers, who employ a strong theoretical framework, sometimes fall into old habits, are misled by their biases, or struggle to find common points of reference with students (Tewell, 2018). The authors of this article experienced this common pitfall during our journey to create and implement a library instruction program. This article presents a case study in understanding and applying theory, namely CIL, critical librarianship, slow librarianship, and critiques of neoliberalism, in the process of creating a new library instruction working group and program document at a four-year, R1 campus in the United States.

Washington State University (WSU) Vancouver is part of a larger state university system and offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. In early 2021, a new Instruction Working Group (IWG) convened for the first time, composed of four faculty librarians interested in expanding discussions about library instruction and pedagogy. The first meetings centered on teaching rotations for a regularly offered library course, but as the IWG evolved, we discussed internal policies and our general approach to teaching. As staffing at the library changed, the IWG was eventually reduced to three faculty librarians. In this article, the word “we” refers to both the original four members and the remaining three. The IWG had a specific interest in prioritizing and applying CIL pedagogy in our instruction program, which we understood to mean, “changing the view of education as the transfer of information or ‘getting the right knowledge into students’ heads’ to an awareness of each person’s agency and ability to make meaning within the library setting” (Elmborg, 2006, p. 194; see also Appendix , “1.1.1 Critical Information Literacy Practice”).

While we found innovation through the ways we collaborated and explored teaching together, the innovative nature of our practice did not come to fruition until we began reflecting on the working group and instruction program. It became clear that the conditions of our work were heavily influenced by neoliberalism, both as a form of governance defining the modern university and a set of dominant concepts resulting from and naturalizing that form of governance.¹ Our reflection on the IWG and instruction program seeks to name, identify, and counteract both the influence of neoliberalism and misalignments from CIL. To understand these factors in context, we engage with literature on critical pedagogy and the impact of neoliberalism in higher education, elaborate on the roles of individualism and the archetype of the “natural teacher” in instructor identity, and attempt to examine institutional practices and assumptions that impeded the formation of a more anti-racist, decolonial, and social justice-oriented IWG and program.

This article first describes our process of creating a new working group and developing a new program document to guide instruction. This description is followed by reflective sections in which we look back on the process and evaluate it in relation to theoretical concepts and to our pedagogical values. Because our reading and discussion of literature was central to each part of

this project, and to our reflections afterwards, we summarize relevant publications and debates in each part of our account, rather than prefacing it with an overarching literature review. We were ultimately dissatisfied with the program document, and this dissatisfaction motivates further exploration. We conclude with considerations for next steps and practical suggestions for groups embarking on similar projects.

Developing the Instruction Working Group and Program

We first convened the IWG in early 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our campus had implemented a “hybrid” (i.e. partially online) teaching approach following a period of fully remote teaching. Most courses had been online from March 2020 until August 2021, when WSU Vancouver transitioned back to in-person teaching. Before the group’s formation, library workers had sporadically shared materials and ideas about one-shot instruction sessions and a credit-bearing IL course. While many engaged with CIL individually in their teaching, the library’s written policies, guiding documents, and existing groups did not mention it.

The group soon discovered a shared aspiration toward a more unified teaching practice in the library. In the first year, we planned an instruction retreat where all library faculty could collaborate on a new instruction program document (hereafter referred to as the Program). The Program can be viewed in its entirety in Appendix A. We intended to define the library’s approach to CIL and specify instructional offerings and IL learning outcomes. At the retreat, participants workshopped teaching activities, discussed applications of CIL, and collaborated to revise and annotate a draft of the Program.

The retreat raised many questions. While the IWG had conceived the Program as public-facing, colleagues initially read it as an internal document for our reference. We found we needed to define the audience, rewrite the document for that audience, and justify that choice to our colleagues. After the retreat, we commenced discussions and revisions, bringing the draft back to the larger group repeatedly over several months.

We intended to specify campus-specific learning goals. As part of a core undergraduate curriculum, “UCORE,” our institution had already established IL learning goals, largely based on the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (2000; hereafter referred to as the *Standards*). We wanted to include these in the Program since they appear in course syllabi. We also wanted to refer to the more recent ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015; hereafter referred to as the *Framework*). The *Standards* include a set of learning goals that were widely adopted in U.S. academic library instruction programs and curricula in the decade following their publication. The *Framework* represented a major revision, building on the concepts of the *Standards* but much more strongly emphasizing the wide diversity of information practices and skills, and especially the importance of social contexts, including norms of scholarly communication, unequal access to information resources, and cultural biases (Beilin, 2015; Lohmann, 2015). While neither the *Standards* nor the *Framework* were fully adequate to describe our instructional goals, we found the *Framework* more comprehensive, flexible, and relevant. We sought to compromise by including selected “dispositions” and “knowledge practices” from the *Framework* and connecting them with the WSU UCORE goals based on the *Standards*.

When we presented the draft Program at the retreat, we had not yet finalized our list of practices and dispositions. We focused on how to present elements of the *Framework* in the document. The distinction between knowledge practices and dispositions was useful. For clarity, we wanted to mirror the language of the *Framework*, but we also worried that this jargon would be opaque or uninviting.² These concerns around jargon led us to assume we might be in for drawn-out conversations about the language of the document, which we worried would detract from understanding. However, in the retreat and following discussions, we encountered less resistance than we had expected. We were able to define knowledge practices and dispositions in a way that made sense to all participants and used those definitions to discuss elements of the curriculum.

Since we intended a public-facing document, we needed to describe and organize the goals and outcomes in a way that would be meaningful to instructors outside the library, including many who were unfamiliar with IL concepts. We drew inspiration from curriculum statements from other academic libraries, particularly one from the University of Montana, which organized practices and dispositions from the *Framework* as a grid, keyed to 100, 200, 300, and 400-level coursework (University of Montana Libraries, 2020).³ We took a similar approach but chose to include both dispositions and knowledge practices from the *Framework* alongside the WSU UCORE goals. To emphasize the connection to courses—taught by librarians or where librarians visit as guest instructors—we identified knowledge practices most appropriate for lower and upper divisions. Although somewhat arbitrary, this scheme helped to show a progression of concepts and skills in undergraduate studies, while retaining flexibility and acknowledging that students’ specializations and proficiencies would vary. Two of us reviewed each disposition and knowledge practice, aligning our selections with the UCORE Goals and academic divisions. This breakdown of the curriculum began as an unwieldy spreadsheet, which we then formatted as a bulleted list (see Appendix A, section 5.6, “Information Literacy Goals”). For example, in Appendix A, Section 5.6.1, the Program lists knowledge practices and dispositions in connection with one of the UCORE learning goals, “Determine the extent and type of information needed.” The bullet points are outcomes adapted from the *Framework*. In this section, we primarily focused on communicating the schema in a way that would be readable and make sense to faculty outside the library. Although we valued the potential for critical and anti-deficit approaches found in some of the language of the *Framework*—such as the frame “Authority is constructed and contextual” (ACRL, 2015)—we did not explicitly refer to CIL concepts here.

We incorporated this scheme, made revisions, and brought the Program back to the larger group of library faculty. We also discussed a section on assessment and data privacy, two issues that we saw as intertwined. This discussion was not straightforward or conclusive, but it illuminated issues that remain relevant. In a climate of widespread data surveillance and data capitalism, accompanied by privacy and ethical concerns (Bignoli et al., 2021), we sought to document clear limits on the collection of student data in teaching. Very little data was routinely collected—only general counts of instruction sessions and consultations, with no personal data of any kind. However, since these counts are sometimes used for program assessment, the issue raised broader questions about our approach to assessment (see Appendix A, section 4.0, “Assessment”).

Although this library has never had an ongoing, formal practice of instruction assessment, there

have been more limited assessments of students' IL skills, drawing on instruction records and review of anonymized student work (see Luetkenhaus et al., 2017, and Lohmann et al., 2019). This was not required by any formal accreditation or review process; however, the results were published to document methodology and outcomes. Given this history, we discussed the idea of stating guidelines or values related to assessment—including the intentional avoidance of certain approaches—in the Program. No consensus emerged, except for an acknowledgment that we might not need such a statement and a decision to focus on the narrower question of data collection.

We brought the draft to library faculty meetings several times following the retreat to discuss revisions. Colleagues expressed concern that such a lengthy document would likely not be read by faculty outside the library. In response, the group created a one-paragraph summary to communicate basic information about the instruction program (Appendix B). This summary has since been distributed through newsletters to faculty and posted on the website. It allows us to send a simple, consistent message about library instruction and summarizes the intentions behind the longer Program. The longer document was finalized and shared with faculty attending a summer pedagogy workshop to help introduce the concept of library instruction and explain our approach and priorities. The Program effectively summarizes our approach, including specific examples of concepts and skills we teach. However, for reasons discussed below, we remain dissatisfied with it.

Following the workshop presentation, we have not publicized or revised the Program, and the IWG has been much less active. Taking time to reflect, we recognize the ways in which the group has lost energy due to staffing changes and competing priorities. We hope that by reflecting on our shared experience, we can begin to reorganize and re-energize our collective work.

Reflections on the Process

"Reflection and action are essential to the praxis of critical information literacy, and without them, I found myself teaching in ways I did not value." (Jacobs, 2016, p. 1)

Thinking back on the development of the IWG and the Program, we see successes in our creation of a teaching community centered around shared values and knowledge. However, we also want to reflect on our failures. Certain moments in the development of the IWG illuminate the ongoing need to overcome the pervasive influence of neoliberalism in our institutions and IL teaching.

The IWG began with shared feelings of isolation regarding teaching processes, materials, and goals. The existing culture was individualistic. Once responsibilities for subject areas were allocated, there was little discussion in faculty meetings and little shared vocabulary about teaching. There seemed to be a tacit assumption that each library faculty member had worked out an approach on their own and was solely responsible for their curriculum in the classroom.

In this context, we sought ways to support each other and share experiences and resources. Early on, one purpose of the IWG was to establish routines for collaboration and communication, a necessary step before setting a more ambitious agenda. We scheduled biweekly meetings and

began to brainstorm about parts of courses and teaching approaches that were not working, including practical challenges ranging from classrooms lacking computers to the expectation that we prepare one-shot sessions at short notice. While straightforward, these discussions also initiated the slow and sometimes awkward process of unlearning the norms of our workplace.

When we began working together on teaching, there was an important difference between this group and most of our other committees and working groups: the IWG did not start out driven by an assessment or value-centered goal or “deliverable.” Although we later developed specific goals, our initial motivation was primarily about exploring a topic and supporting one another, rather than accomplishing a task. Through these discussions, we noticed two primary areas in which our teaching practices began to develop: dismantling individualism and dispelling the myth of the natural teacher.

Overcoming a Culture of Individualism

We have to beware of the extent to which liberal individualism has actually been an assault on community. The notion that “real freedom” is about not being interdependent, when the genuine stuff of life is our interdependency, is our capacity to feel both with and for ourselves and other people. (bell hooks, interviewed in Brosi, 2012, p. 84)

In an effort to build a more collaborative culture, we considered the emotions that accompany teaching and the language used to describe it. Since these emotions can be unpleasant, uncomfortable, and difficult to articulate, we sought to develop habits of compassion and vulnerability. We also acknowledged when we were speaking in ways that put all the responsibility on individuals to solve issues that were rooted in group dynamics, institutional culture, or social conditions. For example, since we often taught as guests invited by course instructors, our teaching depended on the priorities and expectations of instructors in other departments. If there was a widespread expectation that we would deliver short lectures about the mechanics of database searching, it would be difficult for any of us to set a different expectation or try out new approaches to teaching.

From the beginning, members of the IWG had a shared interest in CIL. The four group members had different points of reference in the literature and did not always define shared terms in the same way. However, through discussing books and articles, we gained a better understanding of each other and incorporated perspectives from outside our workplace and experience. As our discussions progressed, we identified areas of ambiguity and disagreement that proved fruitful. For instance, we discussed the varying perceptions of CIL, recognizing that the term can refer to widely different practices and theories. We began sharing articles with each other through a Zotero folder and implemented a monthly “book club” meeting to discuss the literature.

Upon reflecting on the group's formation, we found connections with the literature that we did not discuss at the time. Several authors discuss the centrality of individualism to the dominant culture of neoliberalism and white supremacy, proposing practices of care, collaboration, and solidarity to counteract this tendency. These practices are rooted in labor organizing and anti-racist social movements but also connected to ideas of slow scholarship and slow librarianship (Mountz et al., 2015; Farkas, 2021b). For instance, writing on the importance of care ethics for geographers studying the impact of neoliberalism, Victoria Lawson (2007) stresses the need to

reframe responsibility for care as relational and political rather than personal and privatized. Alison Mountz et al. argue for “an explicitly *feminist* and collective model of slow scholarship” (2015, p. 1238, italics in original) that prioritizes care to resist the accelerating, isolating, competitive tendencies of the modern neoliberal university. In blog posts discussing the concept of “slow librarianship” Meredith Farkas (2021b) emphasizes its opposition to “neoliberal values” and individualism. Farkas writes:

It is only through relationships and collaboration, through caring about our fellow workers, through coming together to fight for change, that things will improve. But that requires us to focus less on ourselves and our desire to shine, rise, or receive external recognition, and to focus more on community care and efforts to see everyone in our community rise. (2021a)

Romel Espinel and Eamon Tewell (2023) argue that “working conditions are learning conditions” and that coalition building can empower library workers to set collective priorities for curriculum. They stress the importance of identifying common concerns and goals while acknowledging individual differences. Maura Seale observes that individualism is a central feature of curricular documents, including the *Framework*, that depict the learner as a “decontextualized liberal subject ... born free, into a world without constraints” (2016, p. 86).

In other words, the typical rhetoric of IL curriculum ignores or minimizes the importance of relationships, communities, socioeconomic conditions, and even the sociality of technology and language. It tends to frame information-seeking as a discrete and finite task undertaken by individual “subjects” who interact with information “objects” or “resources” to fulfill individual needs. This rhetoric undermines efforts toward communal knowledge creation, promoting the illusion that research and study occur in isolation. As Tema Okun (2021) has pointed out, liberal individualism is also a historically central value of white supremacy culture, upheld in contemporary neoliberal white supremacist capitalism.

In addition to distorting our understanding of teaching, learning, and information use, individualism tends to separate library workers from their colleagues who teach and exacerbates imposter syndrome. First coined by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes as “the imposter phenomenon,” imposter syndrome refers to “the internal experience of intellectual phoniness which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women.” (1978, p. 241). This phenomenon has been extensively explored and critiqued within library science recently, with considerable discourse unpacking the connections between gender, race, and politics within library institutions (Andrews, 2020; Maluski and Bruce, 2022). When we work separately without discussing our experiences, uncertainties, or successes, we tend to imagine that our colleagues have everything figured out and that problems are the result of our unique failings rather than systemic problems.

The Natural Teacher Myth

One concomitant of imposter syndrome is the “myth of the natural teacher” (Britzman, 1986, p. 451), also described as the “born not made bias” (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Scott and Dinham, 2008). The myth asserts that certain individuals are simply born with the ability and inclination to teach as inherent qualities, supposed to arise and persist regardless of background, teaching

experiences, feedback, theory, or training. While the IWG was primarily focused on creating a community in teaching that moved beyond sharing lesson plans, it inadvertently began work towards dismantling this set of assumptions.

The myth of the natural teacher has a long history and remains pervasive. In 1899, D.E. Phillips claimed to offer biological and historical explanations of what he called the “teaching instinct.” This dated reference highlights how long professionals have grappled with the expectation of being “natural” teachers. It crops up in more recent discussions, for example, when Deborah P. Britzman writes that the “cultural myth, that teachers are self-made, serves seemingly contradictory functions since it supports the conflicting views that teachers form themselves and are ‘born’ into the profession” (1986, p. 451). Decades later, Catherine Scott and Steve Dinham discuss how the “born not made bias” interferes with professional learning. They attribute this tendency to the “opaque nature” of teaching expertise, the western cultural bias towards dispositional rather than situational explanations of behavior, and the dominance of an “entity model of human ability” (2008, p. 116). Ingrained individualism and the essentialist myth of the natural teacher reinforce one another.

If teaching ability is seen as an inherent, unchanging quality, there is less reason to invest in training for teachers or understanding and development of pedagogical theory, to say nothing of anti-racist and decolonial approaches. The myth creates a false dichotomy: “born to teach” vs. “can’t learn to teach.” If we apply a false dichotomy to our teaching, surely, we are imposing one on our students as well (“born to learn” vs. “bad at learning”). The myth of the natural teacher disguises cultural bias and implies that teaching occurs in a vacuum, uninfluenced by systemic and institutional forces that shape how we show up in the classroom.

To remedy the effects of individualism and the natural teacher myth, we need to understand the systems and contexts in which we teach. Our institutions are still pervaded by the banking model of education, as described by Paulo Freire (2000). The banking model of education posits students as passive receivers of information that is “deposited” by teachers, much like a bank clerk would deposit funds. Learning is thus a passive process, where students are alienated and disenfranchised from participating in their learning. The model’s influence has a long history, but has been perpetuated by the neoliberal conditions of the past four decades. A reliance on the banking model may also exacerbate other forms of pedagogical harm, such as deficit thinking, which is “an unintentionally harmful mindset that aims to support students by attempting to ‘fix’ their perceived shortcomings” (Heinbach et al., 2021, p. 1). In both instances, there is an inherent assumption that there is a “normal” way to learn and any variance from that “norm” requires fixes that are focused on student shortfalls (such as requiring attendance). If we want to move beyond a deficit and banking model of library instruction, we must consider not only individual experience but also the systems and institutions that reproduce our profession. Many library workers complete graduate programs without formal education in pedagogy. They then move into teaching roles, but receive no additional training beyond occasional, informal mentorship (Brecher & Klipfel, 2014).

It can be difficult for early-career librarians to step into teaching without a supportive and compassionate community (Fisher & Buechler, 2021). Feelings of inadequacy or impostor syndrome often result from prescribed expectations in our systems and institutions (Clark et al.,

2014). To describe this institutional-individual power dynamic in a way that posits instructors themselves as solely responsible for creating their teaching community misconstrues what is in instructors' control. Depicting instructors as having no responsibility or agency would be equally misleading, since these problems cannot be solved by administrative fiat. Under present conditions, both individual and institutional efforts tend to reproduce the dominant ideologies of neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy because these ideologies are integrated into the day-to-day practices of our institutions (as described by authors such as Coleman & Pankl, 2020; Saunders, 2014; and Seale, 2016).

From personal observations, we have found that these pervasive ideologies create feelings of isolation, particularly among early-career library workers. Without spaces for discussion and connection, instructors are left to flounder on their own. The creation of the IWG was an attempt to remedy this by providing opportunities not only to collaborate on classes but also to debrief on instruction and to be vulnerable regarding our practices, fears, and experiences.

Vulnerability can be defined as the ability to openly and uninhibitedly share the variety of experiences we encounter in teaching. While some of our feelings may be rooted in frustration at the institutions and traditions of higher education, not all of our acts of vulnerability were based on negative feelings. The IWG also served as a space to celebrate the joy and connection that teaching brings. Discussions of teaching, both in reference to students' ways of learning and our skills as teachers, often emphasize deficit thinking rather than values and strengths. Such discussions then color how we view our teaching and our ability to support and encourage students. By expressing vulnerability as instructors, we can chip away at the notion that instructors (and librarians) are all-knowing keepers of knowledge, as posited by the banking model of education. We can also set the foundation for trusting relationships with each other, allowing us to broach more difficult conversations about personal and institutional change.

Acknowledging the Pervasiveness of Neoliberal Ideologies

One goal of the IWG and the Program document was to incorporate CIL pedagogy into our work. When reflecting on our experience, we saw the ways that we challenged individualism and supported one another in learning about teaching. However, we found that our end-product, the Program, does not adequately represent our practice and aspirations. We still saw the influences of neoliberalism, including the omission of "social justice and a systematic critique of the power relations within which our field operates" (Beilin, 2015).

We saw this omission early in our attempts to define CIL collectively in an instruction program (see Appendix A, section 1.1.1, "Critical Information Literacy Practice"), which we found difficult and time-consuming. We sometimes got stuck for interpersonal reasons. When a concept is flexible, differences in interpretation can become barriers to communication and action. Two people may do things very differently, and both see themselves as engaged with CIL, even citing the same sources (Tewell, 2018). In this situation, the question changes from "How do we define CIL?" to "What am I willing to sacrifice to create a shared definition?" Several authors elaborate on this dilemma, noting contradictions involved in attempting to make critical use of IL, when IL itself emerged in response to neoliberal crisis narratives in education (Beatty, 2014; Nicholson,

2016; Tewell, 2018). Ultimately, we found that our attempt to boil down a multi-faceted and interdisciplinary concept into a simple, marketable definition illustrates a neoliberal mindset present throughout the document.

This mindset is also illustrated by a self-assigned need to create simplified, marketable materials—for instance, a short paragraph to summarize the multi-page Program (see Appendix B). By prioritizing digestibility, we presented a diluted, less critical view of IL instruction. Time restrictions also constrained us in ways analogous to the restrictions of the “one-shot” instruction model (Nicholson, 2016; Nicholson et al., 2019; Tewell, 2018). We rushed to create a draft for the retreat and committed to tight deadlines. This focus on short timelines and marketable materials counteracts the values of slow librarianship that we introduced in other aspects of the IWG, such as the importance of allowing time for reflection and recognizing the specificity and complexity of each occasion of teaching. The resulting Program feels provisional and overly abstract and implicitly reflects the conditions of academic capitalism (Nicholson, 2016). We mainly described our existing practice, rather than envisioning what it might become (for example, see Appendix A, sections 5.1, “First-Year Curriculum” through 5.5, “Credit-bearing Information Literacy Courses”). Our conceptualization could have benefited from a more strategic review of existing literature, particularly regarding the influence of neoliberalism on library instruction (Coleman & Pankl, 2020).

One of the few places where we slowed down and allowed time for further understanding was in our discussion of assessment. We viewed assessment through two competing lenses, in a way that has been documented by other authors (Gregory & Higgins, 2017). We were torn between viewing assessment as a tool “tied to a return on investment or administrative goals,” versus a tool for “evaluating and reflecting on one’s teaching methods, and how well those methods match the needs of our students” (Gregory & Higgins, 2017, p. 48). Some of us used the former view to argue against including an assessment section in the Program, while others used the latter view to argue in favor of it. The disagreement did not stem from an inability to compromise, but rather from the difficulty in distinguishing between two views. If we could not delineate the kinds and purposes of assessment, our discussion would not lead to any meaningful change. Still, we agreed on the importance of expressing our values regarding data collection and privacy, which we chose to prioritize (see Appendix A, section 4.0, “Assessment”).

We were critical of the ways that the language of assessment can reinforce neoliberal values, but perhaps overly optimistic about the *Framework* (ACRL, 2015). We had read CIL perspectives that critiqued aspects of the *Standards* (ACRL, 2000) and the *Framework*, or critiqued the idea of IL standards in general. Several authors have noted how the *Framework* reproduces the problems of the *Standards* by prescribing end goals to learning and implying a single definition of the “literate” student (Cowan, 2013; Seale, 2016; Tewell, 2018). In an IWG meeting, one of us asked, “How can we implement a framework and still work towards critical pedagogy?” We attempted to balance this contradiction by putting elements of the Framework on a scale, showing that IL can be an iterative process and a form of lifelong learning (see Appendix A, section 5.6, “Information Literacy Learning Goals”). We developed this format with the understanding that while we needed to mention the prescribed UCORE learning outcomes (based on the *Standards*), we had some freedom in how we approached them (Gregory & Higgins, 2017; Seeber, 2015). With that freedom, we wanted to apply a critical lens whenever possible. At

the same time, we recognized that the *Framework* does not specifically address systemic oppression and marginalization in libraries, publishing, and information practices (Rapchak, 2019; Campbell & Sich, 2023; Moreno, 2023).

There is no question as to whether we, as library instructors, participate in various systems of oppression (Campbell & Sich, 2023; Edwards, 2019; Loyer, 2018; Leung 2022); we do participate, often actively. There is a need for self-criticism and change, but these goals conflict with the project of documenting a Program mainly based on established practices and entrenched habits. As a self-formed group creating a document that also applied to other colleagues, we were eager to emphasize the agency of library workers. In the process, we omitted essential aspects of CIL such as anti-racism, decolonization, and social justice, reproducing the neoliberal value of false neutrality. We wanted a document grounded in CIL, but we were not successful in envisioning and negotiating its creation. The resulting document is inadequate because it broadly defines CIL as a value but does not outline its specific relationship to library instruction at our institution or provide steps towards change. In recognizing and reflecting on this inadequacy, we want to start planning for change. We hope that both the Program and the IWG can take steps to address harm caused by the systems in which we remain complicit.

Taking Things Further

As we have taken time to reflect on the IWG and the Program, we find that they have become mired in the realities of staffing changes, busyness, and overwork. With this recognition, we can begin to adjust our group and Program to better align with CIL. This includes intentionally revising the Program, reinvesting time in the IWG, and establishing both as living entities that continue to grow with time and understanding. While these anticipated actions and changes are specific to our circumstance, we believe that it also provides a useful path for others embarking on creating new instruction practices in their institutions. Our advice for others beginning a new group of this kind is based on what we wish we had done differently. Instead of starting by describing our current approach and creating a guiding document, we could have begun by considering our shared values and utilizing literature to gain a deeper understanding of those values. With that in mind, we could then begin to imagine a program that would advance those values.

The Program

At this point, we value the existing document mainly for what we learned in its creation. To envision a future instruction program, we can consider the values that emerged from that experience and revise our document to prioritize them. Recognizing that there may be multiple iterations of the document, we want to set some long-term goals.

We can begin by reevaluating our relationship to time. Our plans must allow enough time to analyze the Program so we can apply CIL to each aspect. This is a departure from the previous emphasis on strict timelines, fast turnaround, and upholding existing practices. In planning to take time, we revisit the concept of slow librarianship.

We want to follow the example of Heather Campbell and Dan Sich's project to create new learning outcomes that do not rely on the *Framework* but still support a structured and

transparent curriculum (2023, p. 15-17). As part of the Teaching and Learning team at Western Libraries, Campbell and Sich embarked on “unlearning journeys” with the goal of decolonizing their instruction program and curriculum (2023, p. 2-3). This involved collaboration with various individuals and teams at their institution, centering epistemic justice and intensive reflection work (2023, p. 13-17). Following this example, specific, meaningful outcomes should address the real social context without attempting to describe every possible situation. While we have not yet defined these outcomes, we are committed to interrogating our place in cultures of neoliberalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. While learning from theory, we want to be vigilant about the ways “the pursuit of critical consciousness” can sometimes be a “settler move to innocence” obscuring the need for material change in our institutions, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang describe (2012, p. 21). Some practical ways to do this include centering our actual library spaces and teaching practices, as well as their impact, rather than foregrounding theoretical concepts.

In addition to changing our process to align with our values, we want to document our work. We aim to create a program document in which neoliberal constructions of IL are replaced by progressive visions of teaching. We also hope to build community with instructors on our campus without using a marketing approach to “sell” our instruction program. We can do this by setting up individual or small group meetings with instructors that center hearing about their experiences with teaching research to students and learning about how we can support the work they are already doing. Rather than assuming we always know the best approach to IL instruction, we want to collaborate and recognize that teachers across our institutions come with their own values and skills that can inform and supplement our teaching. By engaging instructors in meaningful ways, we can better describe our approach to teaching and discuss how it might more holistically integrate with courses.

Finally, we hope to create a process of review and accountability with two primary goals: to ensure that we are upholding anti-racist, decolonial, and social justice values; and to continually revise the program in alignment with these values and our continued growth and learning. Before we publicly distribute our program, we will want to engage with partners outside the library who can provide critical feedback to support both goals. These partners would include, the Accessibility Council and the Offices of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and of Native American Programs on our campus. We could also make use of an Equity Assessment Tool created as part of the WSU Vancouver’s Building a Culture of Equity professional development program. Again, we are drawing on slow librarianship with its emphasis on relationship-building and collaborative learning (Farkas, 2021a).

The Working Group

We hope that revising the Program will help reinvigorate the IWG, without allowing completion of a new iteration to stall the group as has happened in the past. As we have discussed, interdependence and collaboration are intrinsically valuable to us, so prioritizing a flourishing working group is key to our concept of critical pedagogy and praxis. We envision the working group as a community of practice and can draw inspiration from structured programs such as those documented by Sarah F. Sahn and Karleigh Riesen (2024). To avoid stagnation, we aim to reestablish practices of sharing, center other voices in the profession through readings and relationship-building, and connect with broader conversations about pedagogy and first-year

students within our institution. At the heart of these conversations should be a focus on dismantling deficit thinking in our instruction as described and informed by Heinbach et al. in *Dismantling Deficit Thinking in Academic Libraries*. This will include learning about various strengths-based pedagogies (for example, culturally relevant pedagogy), collaborating on ways to put those pedagogies into practice, and reflecting on the implementation of those practices together (2021, p.52-68). We want to emphasize values over output, recognizing that we are a smaller group than before, working in a smaller library team. This group's work remains important not only to our teaching but to our continued thriving in the workplace, and we want to plan carefully to prevent burnout and overcommitment (Espinel & Tewell, 2023).

Conclusion

The IWG was created to build community and learn together how to be teachers. Through this work, we created a Program document, hoping to embody that sense of community and establish a critical practice for our institution. However, our reflections, guided by CIL literature, highlighted that the Program is in its early stages, and will require more evolution and iterations before it can reach our goals. Once this present article is completed, we can prioritize meeting regularly as the IWG for continued learning and to re-envision the program.

When we began the Program, we saw it as a matter of communicating to external parties. As a result, the Program is laden with neoliberal ideology and does not challenge the current state of IL instruction. Moving forward, instead of viewing the Program as a finished product, we will plan for it to evolve over time, viewing the needed changes through a lens of slow librarianship. We can leverage the work done by Campbell and Sich (2023) to find methods of learning and unlearning through curriculum creation. We draw inspiration from Campbell and Sich's call to envision "a library curriculum that focuses on living beings, and a library instruction program designed to support those who create, care for, and share knowledge rather than 'worshipping the written word'" (2023, p. 14).

While valuing the process for its own sake, we want to write statements addressing some key topics. These include the neoliberal problem of false neutrality, systems of exclusion and oppression resulting from white supremacy, and the value and limitations of the *Framework* and of IL standards. These important topics will also need to be discussed outside of the IWG. We need to engage in dialogue with instructors in the library and in other departments as the program evolves, and work with them to define what CIL looks like in practice, rather than simply marketing library instruction as a tool for student success. Most importantly, throughout the process we must seek methods of feedback and accountability from experts on our campus and across the profession.

Ultimately, the IWG began as an exercise in building stronger instructional practices amongst a group of library workers, and we feel that we met that goal. Our work continues in bringing the group back together to build a program and a practice that are anti-racist, decolonial, and prioritize social justice.

¹ Many scholars have discussed the history of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006; Peck, 2010; Brown, 2015), its impact on higher education (Saunders, 2014), and its impact on information literacy instruction (Bourg, 2014; Tewell, 2015; Seale, 2016). In its global ascendancy since the 1970s, neoliberal

governance and ideology have taken diverse forms, but as Jamie Peck writes, “Neoliberalism, in its various guises, has always been about the capture and reuse of the state, in the interests of shaping a pro-corporate, freer-trading ‘market order’” (2010, p. 9). Neoliberal ideology presents itself in library instruction in multiple ways. This includes the tendencies to “sell” or “market” library instruction and programs, to simplify complex theories for digestibility, and to rely on standards to define an “information literate” student.

² The problem of unfamiliar pedagogical language has been widely discussed, for instance by Emily Drabinski and Meghan Sitar (2016) in connection with the *Framework*, and by Gr Keer (2016) in connection with CIL.

³ The 2020 Curriculum cited here is no longer available online but is preserved by Internet Archive. The more recent version (University of Montana Libraries, 2023) uses the terms *Emerging*, *Growing*, and *Continuing* to describe learning stages.

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Appendix A: WSU Vancouver Library Instruction Program

Note: Hyperlinks to resources such as the list of subject librarians and the library's YouTube channel have been removed throughout the document.

1.0 Overview

WSU Vancouver Library has an instruction program that is dedicated to helping students gain proficiency with skills and concepts related to information literacy, resource access, research and scholarly communication. Starting from a student's individual context, we use asynchronous, synchronous, and embedded instruction to engage them in the process of inquiry. Through information literacy instruction, we are teaching students the skills they need to seek information in academic and non-academic contexts and to make informed decisions, leading to success at WSU Vancouver and beyond.

We encourage faculty to consider how we can assist your students in completing research assignments, finding information on course topics, and navigating the potentially unfamiliar world of academic research.

1.1 Information Literacy

Information literacy, as defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), “is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.”ⁱ The WSU UCOREⁱⁱ program identifies Information Literacy as one of seven learning goals, and lists learning outcomes that apply to a wide variety of academic work. We incorporate definitions and outcomes from ACRL and UCORE learning goals, and throughout our teaching apply a critical lens to our instructional offerings and assessment to help students frame their research and information seeking in social contexts.

1.1.1 Critical Information Literacy Practice

We use James Elmborg's definition of *Critical Information Literacy*: “a critical approach to information literacy development means changing the view of education as the transfer of information or ‘getting the right knowledge into students’ heads’ to an awareness of each person’s agency and ability to make meaning within the library setting.”ⁱⁱⁱ This approach necessarily involves instructors and students in a co-investigation of information practices shaped by socioeconomic conditions, power structures, and systems of oppression. Under these conditions, we recognize that our information practices have consequences, and that approaches that claim to be value-neutral are never truly neutral. In teaching and discussing research practices, we strive to acknowledge and engage with our students’ values, experiences, and unique contexts of inquiry. This involves:

- Acknowledging that there is no one-size-fits-all method of information-seeking or library instruction;
- Continuous reflection on our own practices and experience as instructors, including our assumptions and biases;

- Seeking feedback from students at various stages in the teaching process;
- Recognizing the knowledge, skills, and expertise that students bring to the classroom;
- Drawing attention to the limitations of the tools and systems we use (including library databases, classification systems, search tools, and so on).

2.0 Topics and Modes of Instruction

The librarians at WSU Vancouver teach with a variety of synchronous or asynchronous methods. Below are some general examples of what we offer. You can also reach out to your subject librarian to discuss further ways to help your students with the process of finding the best sources to support their research and writing.

2.1 Instruction topics

We offer:

- Instruction customized to fit a specific project, assignment, or context.
- Instruction structured around a concept. Examples include: scholarship as conversation, academic integrity, citation analysis, citation management with Zotero, discipline appropriate resources, appropriately using free public sources such as Google Scholar and Wikipedia, and more (exemplified throughout this document).

2.2 Synchronous Instruction Modes

We can join class meetings for:

- In-person class visit(s).
- Instructions via videoconferencing with Zoom or similar tools.

2.3 Asynchronous Instruction Modes

We can present information outside of scheduled class time through:

- Linked modules in Canvas where we can facilitate discussions, answer questions, and work collaboratively with students.
- Creation of accessible videos that can be directly posted to your Canvas class or can be linked through our YouTube Channel.
- Creation of online class guides specific to your course that contains pertinent information about research and scholarship in your class's field.
- Ongoing “embedded” participation for the duration of a project or course (see Embedded Curriculum for more information).

3.0 Requesting Library Instruction

WSU Vancouver library faculty serve as liaisons, also known as subject librarians, for campus programs. For best results, please contact your subject librarian at least 14 days before the desired instruction date. Of course, we’ll always do our best to work within whatever timeframe presents itself.

- Contact your subject librarian directly -OR-
- Complete the Instruction Request form.

- If possible, we would love to meet with you to discuss your needs and plans for the course. Please suggest a few dates and times you would be available to chat further.

4.0 Assessment

We are always trying to improve our instruction program and practices. We routinely gather some basic information on instruction each semester and are currently working to develop an instruction assessment program.

4.1 What do we collect?

The library does not collect personal, individual, or identifying information as part of our instructional assessment. We may retain and share syllabi and assignments for internal use by library faculty and staff but will not share them with anyone else unless we have explicit permission to do so.

For internal annual review reporting, library faculty collect the following data:

- Semester, date, time, and length of a class visit
- Course Title and Instructor Name
- Number of students in the class
- Dates and duration of individual research consultations

For Association of Research Libraries (ARL) reporting, we tally the number of class visits and the number of students per session each semester.

5.0 General Curriculum and Learning Goals

When considering general library curriculum, we like to build out information literacy concepts, knowledge, and skills in a way that ensures curriculum is not duplicated. We have organized learning outcomes into stages to ensure cohesive scaffolding for long-term understanding and application.

5.1 First-Year Curriculum

Library instructors at WSU Vancouver support first-year curriculum by focusing on courses that incorporate information literacy, research, or library resources within their learning outcomes. Within first-year courses, we look to not only teach students information literacy (see Information Literacy Learning Goals) but to also inform them of library spaces, programs, and services.

The library focuses on high-enrollment writing and research courses in the first-year curriculum. These include:

- HIST 105: Roots of Contemporary Issues
- ENGL 101/102: College Composition/Writing Tutorial
- UNIV 104: First-Year Success Seminar
- Intro-level research methods classes within each discipline

5.1.1 Transfer Student Focus

For transfer student required courses we take a similar approach to our targeted first-year course instruction on library spaces, programs, and services. However, we place more

emphasis on upper division information literacy skills as described in the Information Literacy Learning Goals section later in this document.

The library has specific focus on the following transfer student required courses:

- HIST 305: Roots of Contemporary Issues
- UNIV 305: Transfer Student Seminar

5.2 Program-Specific Curriculum

Beyond first-year curriculum, subject librarians seek to ensure student success and understanding of Information Literacy Learning Goals as determined by program/course specific needs. Through synchronous and asynchronous offerings, we can collaborate with instructors and departments in a variety of ways to ensure student success. For more information on these offerings, please review the Topics and Modes of Instruction section of this document.

5.3 Embedded Curriculum

Embedded library instruction is integrated into a course throughout the duration of the semester and the librarian works with the course instructor to provide a deeper and more nuanced approach to information literacy than can be achieved with a one-time class visit.

5.4 Workshops and Research Curriculum

Workshops are non-classroom integrated information literacy instruction that center a specific topic, theme or skill related to research and library resources. Examples of workshop topics include:

Using Zotero citation management software in your research process

Writing and citation using MLA format (or another citation style)

Writing from sources: specific skills for academic writing that avoid the pitfalls surrounding citing sources and the proper use of paraphrase during secondary research.

For more topics and to schedule a workshop, please contact your subject librarian.

5.5 Credit-bearing Information Literacy Courses

Library faculty at WSU Vancouver teach two 1-credit information literacy courses, UNIV 198 (Foundations of Academic Research) and UNIV 300 (Accessing Information for Research). In contrast to class visits, these courses on research skills go into more depth and use a scaffolded learning experience to support students' research over the course of the semester. Both courses are intended to support students' research in other courses and create a space for reflection and discussion about that process.

UNIV 198 is an introductory information literacy course integrated with the First-Year Experience program and designed to complement core first-year courses such as ENGLISH 101, HISTORY 105, and UNIV 104. This course is taught in-person, relies on in-class discussion and emphasizes foundational concepts and habits of mind to help new students become confident researchers early on in their academic career.

UNIV 300 is a hybrid course consisting mostly of asynchronous online instruction, supplemented by in-person meetings throughout the semester. It is an upper-division course open

to students at all levels and in all majors but can be especially helpful for students completing capstone projects or other major research projects.

Both courses combine theoretical and practical approaches to information literacy, structured around the knowledge practices and dispositions described below.

5.6 Information Literacy Learning Goals

Using the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, the WSU Vancouver UCORE Learning Goals, and concepts from critical information literacy pedagogy, we have identified key concepts, knowledge, and skills that students should encounter and eventually understand as they pass through their WSU Vancouver coursework. These goals are crafted specifically for the WSU Vancouver student experience.

Using the distinctions made in the ACRL Framework, these concepts are split into “Knowledge Practices” and “Dispositions.” Knowledge Practices are skills and techniques that support effective research and use of information. Dispositions are a broad range of essential concepts, attitudes, learning experiences, and habits of mind that help students become effective and confident researchers. The sections that follow provide an outline of lower- and upper-division practices and dispositions (largely adapted from the ACRL Framework) for each of the six UCORE Information Literacy goals.

5.6.1 Determining the extent and type of information needed.

Information Literacy Knowledge Practices

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - determine an appropriate scope of investigation for a project.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - deal with complex research by breaking complex questions into simpler ones;
 - use understandings of information within one context to understand information in other contexts

Information Literacy Dispositions

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - motivate themselves to find authoritative sources, recognizing that authority may be conferred or manifested in unexpected ways;
 - understand that information, in its variety of formats and access, is available for their use.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - appreciate that a question may appear to be simple but still be disruptive and important to research.

5.6.2 Implementing well-designed search strategies

Information Literacy Knowledge Practices

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - utilize divergent (e.g., brainstorming) and convergent (e.g., selecting the best source) thinking when searching;

- o match information needs and search strategies to appropriate search tools;
 - o design and refine needs and search strategies as necessary, based on search results;
 - o use different types of searching language (e.g., controlled vocabulary, keywords, natural language) appropriately.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - o understand how information systems are organized in order to access relevant information

Information Literacy Dispositions

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - o recognize the value of browsing and other serendipitous methods of information gathering
 - o seek out scholarly conversations related to their research area;
 - o understand that first attempts at searching do not always produce adequate results;
 - o seek guidance from experts, such as librarians, researchers, and professionals;
 - o persist in the face of search challenges and know when they have enough information to complete the information task.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - o value persistence, adaptability, and flexibility, and recognize that ambiguity can benefit the research process;
 - o seek appropriate help when needed.

5.6.3 Accessing information effectively and efficiently from multiple sources

Information Literacy Knowledge Practices

- Students will be able to
 - o manage searching processes and results effectively;
 - o recognize that a given scholarly work may not represent the only or even the majority perspective on the issue.

Information Literacy Dispositions

- Students will be able to
 - o consider research as open-ended exploration and engagement with information;
 - o value intellectual curiosity in developing questions and learning new investigative methods;
 - o maintain an open mind and a critical stance.

5.6.4 Assessing credibility and applicability of information sources

Information Literacy Knowledge Practices

- Lower Division students will be able to

- o define different types of authority, such as subject expertise (e.g., scholarship), societal position (e.g., public office or title), or special experience (e.g., participating in a historic event);
- o understand that many disciplines have acknowledged authorities in the sense of well-known scholars and publications that are widely considered “standard,” and yet, even in those situations, some scholars would challenge the authority of those sources;
- o use research tools and indicators of authority to determine the credibility of sources, understanding the elements that might temper this credibility;
- o recognize that information may be perceived differently based on the format in which it is packaged.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - o articulate how information is created and shared within a particular discipline;
 - o identify the ways that particular works have contributed to knowledge in a subject area.

Information Literacy Dispositions

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - o realize that information sources vary greatly in content and format and have varying relevance and value, depending on the needs and nature of the search
 - o develop and maintain an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives;
 - o develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview;
 - o recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - o question traditional notions of granting authority;
 - o suspend judgment on the value of a particular piece of scholarship until the larger context for the scholarly conversation is better understood.

5.6.5 *Using information to accomplish a specific purpose*

Information Literacy Knowledge Practices

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - o formulate questions for research based on information gaps or on reexamination of existing, possibly conflicting, information;
 - o determine interested parties, such as scholars, organizations, governments, and industries, who might produce information about a topic and then determine how to access that information;
 - o synthesize ideas gathered from multiple sources.
- Upper Division students will be able to

- o develop, in their own creation processes, an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys;
- o use various research methods, based on need, circumstance, and type of inquiry;
- o develop their own authoritative voices in a particular area and recognize the responsibilities this entails;
- o understand the increasingly social nature of the information ecosystem where authorities actively connect with one another and sources develop over time;
- o summarize the changes in scholarly perspective over time on a particular topic within a specific discipline.

Information Literacy Dispositions

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - o practice self-evaluation and reflection in their approach to information seeking;
 - o recognize they are often entering into an ongoing scholarly conversation and not a finished conversation.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - o articulate how their own attitudes and practices as researchers have changed over time;
 - o recognize that systems privilege authorities and that not having a fluency in the language and process of a discipline disempowers their ability to participate and engage.

5.6.6 Accessing and using information ethically and legally

Information Literacy Knowledge Practices

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - o cite the contributing work of others in their own information production;
 - o contribute to scholarly conversation at an appropriate level, such as local online community, guided discussion, undergraduate research journal, conference presentation/poster session;
 - o understand that intellectual property is a legal and social construct that varies by culture;
 - o understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information;
 - o recognize issues of access or lack of access to information sources;
 - o understand that personal information and online interactions are commodified.
- Upper Division students will be able to
 - o understand how the commodification of their personal information and online interactions affects the information they receive and the information they produce or disseminate online;

- o make informed choices regarding their online actions in full awareness of issues related to privacy and the commodification of personal information;
- o articulate the purpose and distinguishing characteristics of copyright, fair use, open access, and the public domain.

Information Literacy Dispositions

- Lower Division students will be able to
 - o understand the responsibility that comes with entering the conversation through participatory channels;
 - o respect the original ideas of others;
 - o value the skills, time, and effort needed to produce knowledge;
 - o follow ethical and legal guidelines in gathering and using information.
- Upper Division will be able to
 - o see themselves as contributors to scholarship rather than only consumers of it;
 - o examine their own information privilege.

Sources

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2016). Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

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

Washington State University (n.d.) WSU Undergraduate Learning Goals. <https://daesa.wsu.edu/undergraduate-learning-goals/>

Appendix B: WSU Short Statement on Information Literacy Practices and Offerings for WSU Vancouver Library's Website

The library faculty offers you and your students a wide variety of resources and services. We would love to arrange a visit to your courses. We prioritize focusing on the skills and concepts that help students become better researchers by offering instruction on topics like developing a research question and conducting a literature search. These skills and concepts are rooted in critical information literacy and are closely associated with the WSU Vancouver's UCORE Learning Goals of critical and creative thinking and information literacy. We are happy to visit your classroom in person or via video conference, or to contribute asynchronous instruction by creating online guides, videos, tutorials, or by participating in Canvas forums as "embedded librarians" for a course.