Reconnecting Information Literacy Policy with the Core Values of Librarianship

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Abstract

In 2009, President Barack Obama declared October of that year to be National Information Literacy Awareness Month and issued a proclamation stating that "an informed and educated citizenry is essential to the functioning of our modern democratic society." The Obama proclamation's emphasis on information literacy's role in education and democracy makes it akin to the 2005 Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning. In both of these documents, information literacy is located at the core of lifelong learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use, and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational, and educational goals. These two documents are powerful and inspiring to many academic librarians because they are reminders of the broader social context and democratic initiatives within their work. Inspiring as these documents are, they can also be intimidating and overwhelming: how can we help create an informed and educated citizenry or help our students meet technological, economic, and social challenges, to redress disadvantage and to advance the well-being of all? This article is not an attempt to provide answers to these questions but a call to move these questions to the fore of our policy and pedagogical discussions. By revisiting seminal documents like the Alexandria Proclamation, the Association of College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, and the American Library Association's (ALA) Core Values of Librarianship, we argue that information literacy is full of possibilities to explore rather than problems to be solved. To this end, we summon discussions of Appreciative Inquiry and critical information literacy and foreground the ALA Core Values as ways

to reengage with the possibilities and potentials within information
literacy to meet larger social goals.

In 2009, President Barack Obama issued a proclamation declaring Octo-
ber of that year National Information Literacy Awareness Month: "This
month, we dedicate ourselves to increasing information literacy aware-
ness so that all citizens understand its vital importance. An informed
and educated citizenry," he writes "is essential to the functioning of our
modern democratic society, and I encourage educational and community
institutions across the country to help Americans find and evaluate the
information they seek, in all its forms" (§4). The emphasis in the Obama
proclamation on information literacy's role in education and democracy
makes it akin to the Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy
and Lifelong Learning, the 2005 document from the United Nations Edu-
cational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Interna-
tional Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). In both
of these documents, information literacy is located "at the core of lifelong
learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and
create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupa-
tional and educational goals" and is described as "a basic human right
in a digital world" and something that "promotes social inclusion of all
nations" (IFLA, 2005, §2). Lifelong learning, the authors write, "enables
individuals, communities and nations to attain their goals and to take ad-
vantage of emerging opportunities in the evolving global environment for
shared benefit. It assists them and their institutions to meet technological,
economic and social challenges, to redress disadvantage and to advance
the well being of all" (IFLA, §3). These two documents are powerful and
inspiring to many information literacy practitioners in academic libraries
because they ground the daily work librarians do in a broader social con-
text and remind us of the global imperatives and democratic initiatives
within our work.

Inspiring as these documents are, they can also be intimidating and
overwhelming to those working in information literacy programs: how can
we structure our daily work lives to help create an "informed and educated
citizenry" or help our students "meet technological, economic and social
challenges, to redress disadvantage and to advance the well being of all"?
This article is not an attempt to provide answers to these questions but
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plore rather than a problem to be solved. To this end, we summon Appre-

ciative Inquiry and critical information literacy. Appreciative Inquiry, as we will discuss below, focuses on "possibilities, not problems" (Sullivan, 2004, p. 219) while critical information literacy builds on critical literacy,[1] which "focuses on the links between the educational process and the politics of literacy" (Elmborg, 2006, p. 193). In this article, we argue that librarians can use the ALA Core Values as a way to reengage with the possibilities and potentials within information literacy to meet larger social goals.

REVISITING OUR GUIDING DOCUMENTS

These ambitious goals of empowering people and enabling citizens, communities, and nations may seem out of scope for librarians who are perceived to be gatekeepers, tutors, or helpers (Polger & Okamoto, 2010). The existence of the ALA Core Values statement however reminds us that part of our purview as professional librarians includes working toward values such as democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, the public good and social responsibility.[2] The Core Values statement describes "an essential set of core values that define, inform, and guide our professional practice" (ALA, 2004, §1). To date, however, there has been little literature published on how these core values influence and inspire our information literacy policies and practices. If these values are at the core of our profession, should they not also be purposefully embedded within our information literacy work? The Core Values statement is often overlooked as a foundational document to help us "define, inform, and guide" information literacy policy.

By using the ALA Core Values as a foundation for information literacy policy, librarians and educators will be encouraged to examine the broader social goals of information literacy. In colleges and universities, information literacy is often perceived as tool-based and technology-focused instruction. As Whitworth (2006) articulates, "the technical aspects have, in fact, damaged [information literacy's] ability to be seen as a subject whose tools may include technological ones but whose field of interest is social" (pp. 3-4). The integration of the Core Values into information literacy policy will remind librarians of the social and political dimensions of information literacy. This integration will also bring to light the ways in which librarians' work connects with larger educational goals of the institution.

Despite the primacy of foundational documents, the Alexandria Proclamation, and IFLA's articulation of the goals that information literacy programs should work toward, information literacy practitioners struggle to find ways to connect the larger goals with their daily information literacy work. The gap between the large, over-reaching goals and ideals of information literacy and the realities of daily practice within our libraries, classrooms, and workplaces can, at times, seem like a chasm. When looking at the Alexandria Proclamation and the ALA Core Values statement, it is important to remember that these documents are proclamations not

plans of action. How can we take what is powerful and inspiring about the proclamations and create workable plans for our libraries, our information literacy programs, and our students?

One of the ways that librarians have attempted to bridge the gap between the larger goals of information literacy and their daily work is through aligning their activities with the ACRL standards. The ACRL standards, however, present information literacy as a step-by-step process: determine the nature and extent of an information need, access the information effectively and efficiently, evaluate information and its sources, and use the information ethically and legally. Although this approach facilitates the mapping of information literacy onto current assignments and class curricula, focusing exclusively on skills reduces the complexity of learning and knowledge to limited and isolated units (Webber & Johnston, 2000, p. 384). The skills-oriented approach to information literacy has also been criticized for isolating information from its social, cultural, historical, and technological contexts. As Špiranec and Zorica (2010) point out, adopting this approach "is a limited perception of [information literacy] as a neutral process which is entirely unaffected by any kind of social, political or historical background" (pp. 142–143). Although there is growing movement supporting a more broadly conceived information literacy, many librarians have hesitated to move toward teaching these larger aspects of information, as evidenced by the corpus of literature focusing on "normative prescriptions of information skills needed in modern society" (Tuominen, Savolainen, & Talja, 2005, p. 300). Cushla Kapitzke (2003a) has taken librarians to task for avoiding crucial and urgent questions in their information literacy work: "Librarians need to acknowledge that literacies—including information literacy and hyperliteracy—are social practices that are contingent upon the contexts of their location, construction, distribution, and consumption" (p. 53). Further, she describes how "key questions for curricular activities of substantive worth to learners and library users should revolve around issues of who gets access to which texts, and who is able—socially, culturally, and politically—to contest, critique and rewrite those texts. These are ethical, pedagogical, and political issues that are yet to be addressed by the profession" (Kapitzke, 2003b, p. 9). As Michelle Holschuh Simmons (2005) has argued, "we need to communicate to students—both explicitly through explanation and implicitly through modeling—that research is not about finding information or facts, as most of the ACRL standards suggest, but instead that research is about constructing meaning through active engagement with the ideas and asking questions surrounding the information itself" (p. 308). Information literacy does indeed involve the teaching and learning of specific skills, however information literacy, as conceived by documents such as the Alexandria Proclamation, addresses information skills in ways more complex than the ACRL standards describe.

We must also consider whether the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education is the right sort of document to guide our thinking regarding information literacy. It often goes unnoted that the ACRL standards were developed as "a framework for *assessing* the information literate individual" (2000, p. 5, emphasis added). Our creative and critical thinking about information literacy becomes limited when we are guided by a document that outlines "the process by which faculty, librarians and others pinpoint specific indicators that identify a student as information literate" (ACRL, p. 5). In many cases, this document has drifted away (and perhaps inappropriately evolved) from its original purpose as an assessment tool and has become in many settings the vision for information literacy.

Information Literacy as a "Problem"

Quite often, librarians structure information literacy instruction around the idea that information literacy is a problem needing to be overcome and see the ACRL standards as a solution to resolve that issue.[3] Structuring information literacy instruction around the ACRL standards is rooted in a problematic assumption that students are in a deficit position in terms of information literacy: students lack the skills they need to complete assignments and so librarians provide them with those skills. In this way, the teaching of information literacy in academic contexts becomes, as Van E. Hillard (2009) describes, the teaching of an academic "survival tactic": "faced with the ever-growing, ever more confusing, omnipresent flood of information, how shall we train students responsibly and responsively to meet its power and its force" (p. 19). When we teach information literacy as a "survival tactic" we approach it as if it were a problem that needs solving and, often, a problem with only one solution.

Perhaps what is most problematic about using the ACRL standards as the impetus behind libraries' information literacy visions and policies is that it limits information literacy to a set of skills that work toward solving the "problem" of our students' supposed information illiteracy. Within this conception, the more ambitious goals of the Alexandria Proclamation might be seen as disconnected from or not as pressing as the skills students need to meet the ACRL definition of information literate. As Jacobs (2010) has argued elsewhere, the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that "a problem can either be 'a difficult or demanding question' or a 'matter or situation regarded as unwelcome, harmful or wrong and needing to be overcome'" (p. 179). Rather than seeing information literacy as problem that needs to be overcome, we posit that thinking of information literacy as "difficult or demanding question" is a more generative approach. Thinking about information literacy as a difficult or demanding question draws parallels with the writing and thinking about Appreciative Inquiry and also with critical information literacy. We must keep in mind that al-

though these approaches emerge from radically different contexts, both are useful for drawing attention to the ways in which our thinking and actions are limited when we approach our work from a deficit perspective that focuses on overcoming that which we consider unwelcome, harmful, or wrong.

Appreciative Inquiry and Information Literacy

Drawing on Cooperrider and Srivastava's (1987) work on organizational effectiveness and excellence, Maureen Sullivan's (2004) "The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations" applies Appreciative Inquiry to management issues within library organizations. The model she describes, however, works well for how we might approach information literacy in our libraries as we design and develop programs, policies, and classes. Sullivan notes that planned change efforts in libraries have traditionally "operated from the premise that the place to begin is with what is wrong, what is not working well, or what needs to change. This approach has been described by some as a 'deficit-based' approach, one that focuses on the negative. Some characteristics of this deficit-based thinking are an emphasis on problems" (pp. 218–219). "Appreciative Inquiry," she continues, "offers a compelling alternative—the quest for the best possible situation. In this quest the focus is on possibilities, not problems; meaningful involvement of people to enable them to contribute their best thinking, attention to learning and generative thinking, collaboration and building trusting relationships, and a focus on existing resources and how to make the best use of them" (Sullivan, p. 219). Using Sullivan's description of Appreciative Inquiry as a lens, we can see that when we approach students' information literacy as something that is wrong or not working well, we focus our attention on the deficit (i.e., the skills students lack) not on possibilities (i.e., the skills and strengths students bring).

The model of Appreciative Inquiry is useful to keep in mind when developing information literacy policies within libraries and within the profession because it reminds librarians to focus on possibilities, on strengths, and on what is working well. Appreciative Inquiry reminds us to value the act of asking questions as we consider our information literacy work: how do we arrive at the best possible situation? How do we focus on possibilities not problems? How do we get our librarians to "contribute their best thinking?" What are the "best" things we need to value and appreciate? What vision do we have of what "should be" for information literacy? Further, the ALA Core Values are reflective of librarians' professional strengths and librarianship's possibilities and thus are a generative place from which to start conversations. Thinking of this nature will help us imagine ways to work toward the possibilities described in the Alexandria Proclamation.

PROBLEM POSING AND CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY

One of the ways that information literacy theorists and practitioners have moved toward achieving the larger, more global ideals and possibilities of information literacy is through the articulation of critical information literacy.[4] Arguing that information literacy must move beyond finding and evaluating information and be more than an academic "survival tactic" (Hillard, 2009, p. 19), critical information literacy "involves developing a critical consciousness about information, learning to ask questions about the library's (and the academy's) role in structuring and presenting a single, knowable reality" (Elmborg, 2006, p. 198). Drawing on the work of Kapitzke, Simmons (2005) describes how "critical information literacy is a deliberate movement to extend information literacy further than the acquisition of the research skills of finding and evaluation information. Instead it is the 'refram[ing] [of] conventional notions of text, knowledge and authority' in order to ask more reflective questions about information: 'Who owns and sells knowledge?' 'Who has access to information?' 'What counts as information (or knowledge)?' Additional questions such as 'Whose voices get published?'—or more importantly—'Whose voices do not get published?' are the types of questions that can help students begin to see scholarly communication as a dialogic, political, and contested process" (p. 300). In its focus on engaging with questions about information, critical information literacy is an attempt to help students see that information questions are deeply embedded within cultural, social, political, and economic contexts.

Critical information literacy is deeply informed by the work of Brazilian educator and critical literacy theorist Paulo Freire (1970/2002) who argues cogently and passionately that education must not be a form of banking where students are turned "into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are" (p. 72). Freire further argues that education must be rooted in problem posing: "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 83). While banking education "treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers" (p. 83). When we see information literacy as a series of standards and guidelines that we need to "deposit" into our students or when we see information literacy only as academic survival training, we diminish the potential within our students and the possibilities within information literacy to work toward larger global goals such as the Alexandria Proclamation's goal of empowering people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use, and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational, and educational goals.[5]

If we agree about the relevance of critical information literacy, the question is as Elmborg (2006) articulates: "What is the role of the library in the Freireian vision of critical literacy? Is the library a passive information bank where students and faculty make deposits and withdrawals, or is it a place where students actively engage existing knowledge and shape it to their own current and future uses?" (p. 193). Elmborg's questions form, in our minds, the most pressing information literacy "problem" we currently face: how might we make our libraries and our information literacy work a space where students can actively engage with information literacy and the goals and ideals articulated within the Alexandria Proclamation? Because we view this pressing information literacy problem not as a something "unwelcome, harmful or wrong" that needs to be overcome" but as a "difficult or demanding question," we believe this is a question ripe for problem-posing approaches within our classrooms, our meeting rooms, our campuses, and our professional discussions.

Approaching information literacy from a problem-posing position has several repercussions to consider in terms of our pedagogical work. First, we need to consider how we define ourselves as teachers or educators. As librarians, we have been trained to provide policies that supply answers, offer solutions, and solve problems: this kind of training works well with banking models of education and problem-solving approaches to information literacy. Problem-posing education, on the other hand, disrupts our notions of our role as "information authorities." As Freire describes, problem-posing education "breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education. . . . Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80). Further, as Freire describes, when students (and those who teach them) are "increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, [they] will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (p. 81). Rather than viewing information literacy teaching as a kind of banking where librarians deposit knowledge about how to identify, evaluate, find, and use information, if we position ourselves and our students as critical coinvestigators in the problem-posing education of information literacy, we begin to move toward a critical information literacy praxis where we can work toward the ideals of critical literacy such as democracy, equity, shared decision making, empowerment, and transformative action in addition to the ideals articulated in the Alexandria Proclamation.

CONCLUSION

Questions undoubtedly will emerge about how precisely we might go about doing this kind of work. Where do we start? How do we bring problem posing into our policy work? How do we engage with problem posing in our classrooms? How can problem-posing education work with information literacy? How do we engage with our colleagues in problem-posing activities? By not providing answers, we are not trying to be evasive: we believe that these are precisely the kinds of questions we need to bring to our communities, colleagues, and students. Additional questions will also likely emerge about whether problem-posing education is the proper purview of librarians. Again we return to the ALA Core Values statement and note the significant connections between a Freirean-informed critical information literacy and the ALA Core Values, especially the connections with democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, the public good, and social responsibility. As Elmborg (2006) has described, "Freire posits an alternative pedagogy, one designed to create 'critical consciousness' in students. Rather than focus on knowledge acquisition, students identify and engage significant problems in the world. By developing critical consciousness, students learn to take control of their lives and their own learning to become active agents, asking and answering questions that matter to them and the world around them" (p. 193). Information literacy policies and programs that foreground the development of critical consciousness helps to develop the "informed and educated citizenry" that Obama (2009) declares "is essential to our modern democratic society" (§4). In spite of the fact that many of the core values are implicit in the larger goals of information literacy, the ALA Core Values are rarely summoned.

It is worth considering why the ALA Core Values seem to have lost their traction or relevance in the daily work librarians perform. There may be political, institutional, professional, or organizational reasons why this has happened and these factors would be well worth exploring in ways that exceed the scope of this paper. The relative invisibility of core values may relate to the primary focus of librarians' education being primarily upon the required skills, tools, and the technologies related to librarianship rather than the social aspects outlined in documents like the Alexandria Proclamation or the ALA Core Values. The teaching of information literacy, for example, is often divorced from pedagogical or social theories and is often taught as something inseparable from the ACRL standards. While the ACRL standards neatly compartmentalize information literacy work "into sets of competencies and measurable outcomes with boxes to check with a yes or no" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 258), we run the risk of losing sight of important social aspects of information literacy work and its connections to the core values when librarians focus only on that one vision of information literacy.

Including the core values of librarianship into our policies and practices is a reminder of the social component of information literacy and the ways in which information literacy is something that extends well beyond the walls and websites of libraries. Moreover, including the core values in public documents such as library and information literacy policies serves to remind our campuses, our students, and our communities of the values we hold in common with them. Including core values in our policies is a starting place for librarians to consider how they might connect with others on campus and in our communities to embark upon initiatives that work toward furthering collective work in areas such as democracy, diversity, education, lifelong learning, the public good, and social responsibility. By adopting a stance of Appreciative Inquiry, librarians are reminded that the task is not to solve problems but rather to embark upon a quest for the best possible situation (Sullivan, 2004, p. 219). By reminding ourselves, our campuses, and our communities that, as Elmborg (2010) describes, "critical information literacy involves a commitment to social justice within capitalist societies" we can refocus our work, forge new connections, and inspire new initiatives (p. 74) that work toward social ends. Here, the library is not the center of information literacy but rather one component.

As Elmborg insists, "Librarians need to be positioned with those who struggle, offering supportive and respectful help. This positioning places the librarian as educator alongside learners. For example, librarians can collaborate with other faculty in engaging students in service learning and civic engagement projects in the community, creating the opportunity for critical reflection about community challenges and fostering learning in and outside the classroom" (2010, p. 75). If librarians do not bring the Core Values to the fore of our work, we cannot expect others to see our role in the kind of ventures Elmborg describes. The Alexandria Proclamation, the ALA Core Values statement and President Obama's proclamation ground the daily work of information literacy in broader social contexts and remind us of the global imperatives and democratic initiatives within our work. They broaden information literacy's scope to beyond the walls of our libraries and suggest that librarians' roles are not to just fill students with a generic set of skills but rather that we engage with students to work toward a shared and active role in critical thinking and critical action related to information in broader social, political, cultural, and economic contexts.

Notes

1. A fuller discussion of critical literacy is beyond the scope of this article. In addition to Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Shor (1992), hooks (1994), and Cope and Kalantzis (2005) offer useful discussions of critical literacy. For discussions of critical information literacy, see the works of Elmborg (2006, 2010), and Accardi, Drabinski, & Kumbier (2010).

2. The ALA's eleven core values consist of access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, service, social responsibility.

3. The ACRL standards are not the only documents of this kind but it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine them all. See also, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals' (CILIP) document that defines information literacy and describes information literacy skills (2010) and the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) document that describes the Seven Pillars of Information Literacy (2010).

4. Because of critical information literacy's connections to critical literacy, it is important to acknowledge the underlying assumptions of critical literacy. Rebecca Powell, Susan Chambers Cantrell, and Sandra Adams have described three basic assumptions of critical literacy: "First, critical literacy assumes that the teaching of literacy is never neutral but always embraces a particular ideology or perspective. Second, critical literacy supports a strong democratic system grounded in equity and shared decision making. Third, critical literacy instruction can empower and lead to transformative action" (2001, pp. 773). When thinking about critical literacy's connections with information literacy, it is important to keep in mind the major concepts with those assumptions: it is never neutral and it focuses on ideas of democracy, equity, shared decision making, empowerment, and transformative action.

5. It is important to note that while Freire is summoned and cited in many discussions of critical information literacy and librarianship, we must be vigilant that we do not simply "import" his ideas into our disciplinary discussions. As Hepzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald observe: "As teachers struggle to connect world and word for ourselves, we need to remember and take heart from Freire's warning: 'To read is to rewrite, not memorize the content of what is being read'" (*Critical Consciousness* 100). Recognizing his popularity among educators in the United States, Freire cautioned 'It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please, tell your fellow Americans not to import me. Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas (*Politics of Education* xii–xix)" (1998, pp. 612). One of the ways in which we might "recreate and rewrite" Freire is to consider how his ideas can help us work toward the larger information literacy goals of democracy and social justice articulated in the Alexandria Proclamation and the ALA core values.

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