



# APPLYING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY TO A 3-CREDIT-BEARING LIBRARY RESEARCH COURSE:

## Enhancing Student Learning Through Reflection, Critical Engagement and Community Consensus

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The role of the faculty librarian as a teacher is difficult to define. While the majority of university faculty teach credit courses within their respective departments, librarians often serve in supporting roles. The teaching librarian appears, by default, as a supporting instructor or as a liaison, interacting with faculty and students asynchronously. Teaching a credit-bearing course is not a standard situation for most faculty librarians, and the expectations for librarian-taught credit bearing courses vary widely. The faculty librarians at Limestone University have among them about ten years of experience in coordinating and teaching a three-credit, upper-level course in academic research. This academic research course has become one of the defining features of Limestone's information literacy program. Recognizing the need for improvement, the faculty librarians sought to better understand ways to incorporate the concepts of inclusive pedagogy into this credit course, and as a result, into the library's information literacy program at large. In doing so, the course now has a better commitment to the concepts of inclusive pedagogy made possible by adopting a critical praxis, called Critical Information Literacy.

Critical Information Literacy (CIL) praxis is a natural theoretical counterbalance to the more practical aims of inclusive pedagogy. CIL is essentially a higher-level version of information literacy (IL) that more systematically scrutinizes individual sources and schools of thought with an eye toward understanding their underlying assumptions, influences, and biases, among others. Thus, in the context of the academic research course, traditional IL instruction will examine the relevance of individual sources to a project. CIL, however, will require a further level of inquiry that examines the authority of sources

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or a school of sources with an aim to understand how they reflect the best practices of their field, including a commitment to diversity and inclusion. The goal of this project is to make the academic research seminar better reflect the concepts of IL by including the CIL praxis as a fundamental component of the course, which in turn will give the course a better theoretical foundation and a stronger commitment to inclusive pedagogical practices. CIL praxis is applied to the course using the structural outline of the six ACRL Information Literacy Frames.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

CIL is a developing literature within academic librarianship that emphasizes the difference between the more widely used and accepted term “information literacy,” with its emphasis on the discovery and evaluation of sources, and the “theory” of information that emphasizes the contextual nature of the sources themselves. The literature on the topic applies CIL to both theoretical circumstances and to the practical outcomes of information literacy instruction. An important theoretical context is the ACRL’s “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.”<sup>1</sup> A third circumstance is the application of CIL to the credit bearing course.

Downey’s 2016 book, which is elaborated from an earlier dissertation, is an extended treatise on the subject that posits CIL as “praxis” based.<sup>2</sup> Considering CIL as a praxis has its origins in Elmborg, who argued that information literacy instruction needed to move away from “information transfer” to a theoretical praxis that considered the greater context of information.<sup>3</sup> Downey’s work is especially interested in the context and construction of authority. Her context was ACRL’s earlier “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education,” which dealt more with the information literacy standards of discovering and evaluating sources than it did with a critical assessment of the social construction of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier continue the praxis approach outlined by Downey, with the intention of applying CIL to library instruction.<sup>5</sup> Gregory and Higgins recognize Downey as foundational to CIL along with authors such as Swanson, whose 2004 article considered the shift away from print-based bibliographic instruction and some of the new challenges presented by the digital format.<sup>6</sup> Swanson’s work sought to apply IL to a wider section of the curriculum than traditional bibliographic instruction had, with a particular emphasis on CIL themes like context of information.<sup>7</sup> More recent articles, in line with Downey, emphasize the constructed and contextual nature of authority, including Grafstein, who criticizes both the “Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education” and the more recent “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.”<sup>8</sup>

Fritch takes CIL a step further by addressing the “constructed and contextual nature of authority” as a “political act,” and specifically, in Fritch’s mind, “feminist engaged pedagogy,” using “feminist” and “gender-based” themes.<sup>9</sup> As an example, she examines the application of CIL to teaching database searching. Fritch believes that “engaged pedagogy” lends itself naturally to library instruction in whatever form (credit-bearing or one-shot) because of its application in a variety of subject fields, which in turn allows for discussion of critical theories, including race and feminist. Therefore, Fritch’s idea of “engaged pedagogy” is, in actuality, inclusive pedagogy and the potential this approach could have on “empowering” students when evaluating information.<sup>10</sup> Baulder agrees that this “deeper, more contextual understanding of information” does break away from the traditional library instruction of the past.<sup>11</sup> Citing the new ACRL Framework as a step that hastened this departure but recognizing that more work needs to be done in “actual library practice,” Baulder’s article, nevertheless, highlights library instruction practices that apply the ACRL Framework successfully.<sup>12</sup>

Credit-bearing information literacy courses taught by librarians or library faculty are no longer a rarity. A 2016 survey conducted by Cohen, et al. found that 19% of institutions surveyed offer credit-bearing IL courses taught by librarians.<sup>13</sup> However, only 24% of these institutions offer IL courses that are three or four credit hours. A majority of IL credit-bearing courses are at the undergraduate level and are offered as one or two credit-hour courses. Badke, as early as 2008, provided a rationale for IL to be a credit-bearing discipline on its own.<sup>14</sup> He argued that the one or two-shot library instruction sessions are inadequate for teaching students IL applications and skills, particularly when many students are resorting to internet searching instead of conducting a search in the library databases. Since then, the literature has seen others sharing their own experiences in teaching credit-bearing IL courses including methods of assessment and curriculum design.<sup>15</sup> A new development is the ACRL’s “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.”<sup>16</sup> To date, the adoption of this framework

has mostly been for the one-shot IL session.<sup>17</sup> In 2017, Fisher writes of her experiences in designing an online two-credit IL course using the ACRL Framework.<sup>18</sup> She argues that the ACRL Framework can be adopted as a “required text” in a credit course.

## HISTORY AND SCOPE OF THE COURSE

The academic research course (ID 305) at Limestone is an upper-level class in the inter-disciplinary studies department (ID) that was initially developed to serve as the capstone for the liberal studies major. It is also a required component of a few other majors, including English, professional communications, and athletic training. Most students in the course complete it as a required component of their major program, although some students take the class as an elective.

During the summer of 2010, Limestone’s dean of the faculty requested that the librarians design an academic research course to give students a foundation in academic research methods and to prepare junior and senior level students for graduate school. The academic research course was first designed as an eight-week, online course. The librarians began teaching the online course in the 2011 fall term, and they adapted it into a sixteen-week, face-to-face day course in the fall of 2015. The course is currently taught four times an academic year, twice in day format and twice in online format. The librarians are still the sole course instructors.

The goal of the course is to acquaint students with the methods and purpose of academic research while also giving them practical tools for finding and evaluating information. The major projects in the course emphasize academic sources and academic research settings while some of the weekly content is designed to look beyond the information world of the academy, with the goal of increasing information literacy overall. The major coursework focuses on identifying and understanding an academic literature, which progresses through an annotated bibliography phase before culminating in a literature review. These major assignments are supplemented by lower-stakes, weekly assignments and two exams that focus on the mechanics of information literacy as it applies to finding and evaluating sources and to thinking about the implications of information in both academic and non-academic settings.

Inclusive pedagogy describes the attempt to make learning materials and methods accessible to as many students as possible. This course is a good exercise in inclusive pedagogy, thus defined, because it is offered in both face-to-face day and asynchronous online formats. The needs of the students vary widely across the two formats. Online students are often working adults who are “non-traditional” college students, while the face-to-face course is almost always composed of traditional students. This model has started to shift in 2020, with the online course being a more diverse mix of fully online students and day students who take some of their courses online.

In order to meet the needs of all the students, the course materials are fully contained in the university’s learning management software. There are no direct costs incurred by the students in the course because all the materials are available online or through library services. Ease of access is one component of inclusive pedagogy. Proper use of accessible document and website design are another. The online course involves spoken presentations from the instructor each with visual slides in addition to the written materials and instructions. While these policies check many boxes for course design, they do not much address the theoretical and intellectual goals of information literacy and academic research. To better meet these goals, the librarians sought to strengthen their theoretical understanding of IL and how it might better be used in concert with the ACRL Framework.

Since its inception, the course was rooted in the library’s information literacy program. This program uses the ACRL’s *Framework for Information Literacy* as its guide. Like many schools, Limestone’s IL program mostly involves the normal “one shot” library instruction for courses in addition to providing asynchronous reference services and learning materials. The opportunity to teach a credit bearing course, particularly a three-hour course, allows the faculty librarians to examine IL with students in more detail. On a practical level, it gives the librarians the ability to create their own assessments and to study students’ learning over the course of a semester or term.

The interdisciplinary nature of the course offers several advantages to developing broad IL skills and for the fostering of inclusive pedagogy. The main drawback to an interdisciplinary course is that the instructor will usually not be a content expert on a particular student’s topic. Indeed, several departments at Limestone have a dedicated research methods course for their specific disciplines. This drawback is balanced by the benefit of thinking and learning across disciplines and is beneficial for students who might not otherwise take a research

methods course. The curriculum of the course is thus aimed at the generalist environment in which most students will find themselves after graduation.

## DISCUSSION: THE ACRL FRAMES, CIL, AND INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

The ACRL Information Literacy frames provide a convenient metric to structure the course and by which to compare progress in CIL. In alphabetical order (with abbreviations), the frames are Authority Is Constructed and Contextual (Authority frame), Information Creation as a Process (Information Creation frame), Information Has Value (Value frame), Research as Inquiry (Inquiry frame), Scholarship as Conversation (Conversation frame), and Searching as Strategic Exploration (Strategic Exploration frame). Of the six ACRL Information literacy frames, the course best addressed Information Creation as a Process, Research as Inquiry, Scholarship as Conversation, and Searching as Strategic Exploration. Upon examination of the course, there were apparent deficiencies in treating the two remaining frames, Authority Is Constructed and Contextual and Information Has Value. The following section will outline how the course addresses the frames within the context of CIL, including new alterations resulting from the present project.

Considering the first four frames identified in the previous paragraph, the most significant to CIL is probably Scholarship as Conversation because it combines the practical and strategic goals of discovering and finding relevant sources in a search process with the theoretical goal of understanding the contextual nature of scholarly communications. The course, thus, emphasized scholarly schools of thought. Making use of the interdisciplinary nature of the course, students would work within different disciplines meaning that course discussions could highlight some of the differences and distinctions in the manner of scholarly communications among the scholarly disciplines. These distinctions give students some specialist experience within a particular discipline while also strengthening their generalist understanding of scholarly communications and the academic research process.

IL instruction defined as a combination of practical information retrieval education and critical interpretation of sources is the standard component of almost all library instruction. This IL approach forms the foundation of the first half of the class and covers the scope of the four frames mentioned in the preceding paragraph, particularly Research as Inquiry and Searching as Strategic Exploration. The course assessed student progress in these frames through assignments that culminate in an annotated bibliography. Along the way, there are shorter homework assignments that identify and analyze individual sources and academic journals germane to the student's chosen topic.

Information Creation as a Process is particularly addressed in the topic selection process itself. An early distinction in the course, one made from the very first week, is the understanding of a "general interest" someone might have in a topic and its transformation into an "intellectual interest" that might be studied in the academic environment. This frame is assessed by a topic proposal assignment, which often goes through multiple drafts. CIL has direct implications for the Information Creation as a Process frame because the choice of topics, what is scrutinized by scholars and what is under-studied or unstudied, is a matter of authority. By including direct instruction and discussion on the role of authority and context to the choice of topics themselves, the course deepened its theoretical commitment to CIL and to inclusive pedagogy. Each student's success in this frame is assessed by the final draft of the topic proposal, culminating in the literature review. Additionally, a weekly writing assignment in the course specifically asks students to reflect on their choice of a topic, and to analyze what they observed about the way academic papers write on topics and possibly exclude others. On an anecdotal level, students are sometimes surprised by what they do *not* find in their database searches, which has clear implications for the Inquiry and Strategic Exploration frames.

Scholarship as Communication serves as a bridge to the remaining two ACRL frames, Authority is Constructed and Contextual and Information Has Value. From the CIL standpoint, the course did not thoroughly address the implications of context and authority to scholarly communications, which meant that these two frames were not properly addressed by the course materials and assignments, particularly, as Downey describes, "the complex power relationships that undergird all of information."<sup>19</sup> When viewed from the perspective of IL, Scholarship as Conversation is probably the easiest to assess because the course's final literature review and presentation require students to prove that they understand the notion of "academic conversation" by first identify-

ing a body of literature and then assessing its coherence as a conversation. Addressing Scholarship as Conversation using the CIL praxis requires more thought on the part of the instructor.

Students are usually new to the style of thinking required to complete a literature review because the standard argument essay they complete in lower-level courses requires them to use sources to support an opinion or position rather than using their sources to as the basis of their augment and analysis. In response to this dynamic, the instructor must spend time fully fleshing out the practice and implications of search strategy, best represented by the Inquiry and Strategic Exploration frames. The risk incurred by this strategy is that the course will not move beyond those frames.

ACRL stresses that the six frames are not hierarchal, an approach that is not without criticism. Taking a non-hierarchal approach to the frames is certainly possible if they are treated holistically, which is impossible if any one of the six frames is ignored or undervalued. Thus, the CIL praxis became significant as a means to bridge the more pragmatically oriented frames to the more theoretical ones. Importantly, this “bridge” emphasizes lateral connections rather than hierarchal ones. The student might at once focus on Inquiry while considering Authority, Information Creation, and Information Has Value.

Viewing the course’s focus on the ACRL frames through the lens of CIL demonstrated a lack of attention to the frames Authority Is Constructed and Contextual and Information Has Value. As already discussed, the other frames were enriched by the CIL praxis. The course materials and assignments now encourage students to connect the learning outcomes of the Conversation frame with the Authority frame. Specifically to address Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, a diversity and inclusion lesson is now included with a new “journal authority” exercise as an assessment tool.

Due to the eight-week nature of the online course, we made the decision to add the journal exercise as a part of the midterm activities, replacing a conventional midterm essay. The assignment itself is placed in the middle of other search strategy and analysis assignments and before the completion of the annotated bibliography. After a course session on authority and diversity in academic research, the students are required to identify a significant journal to their chosen topic, an activity which directly invokes both the Conversation and Authority frames. They then investigate that journal to determine its commitment to diversity of perspectives and participants within the academic field it represents, being guided by a set of questions they must answer.

The remaining frame with significant CIL implications is Information Has Value. The need for more content in this frame existed before the pedagogical shift to CIL. Using CIL praxis and inclusive pedagogy, however, give the efforts to improve instruction to this frame a better theoretical foundation. A culminating activity that is a part of the final exam is for students to write about the way their topics impact the world beyond the academy. An initial assessment of this activity is a bibliography of non-peer reviewed sources related to the student’s topic. Having students think about the impact of research in the wider world adheres to the concepts of inclusive pedagogy, because students are required to reflect on their own experiences and how research impacts their world. To strengthen the inclusive pedagogy focus and Value frame further, the final exam contains a reflection essay alongside the research impact essay.

Further relating to Information Has Value, the course also includes multiple activities and reading materials about the way information is used, including its moral and profit implications. One such unit investigates the concept of the “filter bubble” introduced by Eli Pariser.<sup>20</sup> The course also investigates some of the contradictions in academia, like the non-profit nature of most of higher education institutions contrasted with a largely for-profit academic publishing model. Early in the course, students complete a writing assignment in which they demonstrate their understanding of the concept of an original contribution to knowledge. This course unit emphasizes the Authority and Conversation frames because it teaches students that part of the authority of an academic source is its “original” argument and the peer-review process itself. Thus, a focus on CIL in developing some assignments and course content almost always dovetails with traditional IL instruction while also demonstrating that the six ACRL frames can be invoked in a lateral way, with most units relying on more than one frame.

## RESULTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The initial results of the new activities focusing on the authority of information and the value of information

demonstrate that students need a firm conceptual framework within which to work. The journal exercise, in particular, requires them to think about information sources in an entirely new way. Our preliminary experience indicates that the journal exercise works well in a two-step process. Beginning with a shorter, discussion board activity improves the quality of a second, higher-stakes exercise that is submitted as a formal assignment. This journal exercise greatly improves the course's attention to some of the "behind the curtain" aspects of research that were entirely absent from the course before. It also serves some practical goals, like firmly cementing the concept of an academic journal as a publisher. On an anecdotal level, we notice that many students do not really understand what an academic journal is and often confuse the academic journal with an article's title well into the course, which hinders their progress. The journal authority activity forces students to fully learn this distinction, which then aids their research inquiry process and their focus on scholarly conversation. Future study in the course will seek to understand the extent to which the students who learn the significance of the journal publication to the concept of "scholarly conversation" make better connections when they prepare their initial bibliographies and eventual literature reviews.

CIL praxis and inclusive pedagogy will continue to direct the learning objectives of the academic research course. In addition to monitoring the recent changes to the class, the analysis of the class through CIL invites some other changes. The first suggestion for future iterations of the course is to directly invoke the ACRL frames in the course units on the schedule and outline. Currently, the syllabus states that the course will use the ACRL frames as a guide even though the course materials do not usually directly make the connection between course content for a given unit and the ACRL frames. Thus, the frames are more an internal pedagogical strategy for the instructor's use rather than material for open course discussion. Addressing the frames more directly, as described in the discussion of this paper, should better make use of them as a pedagogical tool. The aims of inclusive pedagogy would seem to benefit from this change.

Beginning in the fall of 2021, the course will be rearranged so that so that one week in the online version and two weeks in the in-person version will feature the title of one of the ACRL frames. Much of the material for that week (or two) will follow from the frame. The final weeks of the course are already devoid of new content because of the assignment focus, making the number six convenient. The risk of this strategy, as was discussed earlier, is that it may indicate a hierarchy to the frames. The instructor will need to carefully order the frames such that the more theoretical ones are balanced with the more practical ones. The order should follow the needs of the assignments due for the given week, which will help to make a frame's placement on the schedule as logical as possible.

Another area in which the course might benefit from future changes to the University's calendar is to propose an accelerated, eight-week version of the in-person class, either in tandem with the sixteen-week version or possibly as a replacement to it. This idea is dependent on the University's commitment to developing courses in this format. Currently, the policy is to call for proposed syllabi. The existing eight-week online format, which will be shifted to a seven-week schedule in the 2022 year, would easily translate to an in-person format. Evaluation data from the online course repeatedly indicates that students think the course would be easier to complete in the in-person format. An accelerated, in-person course might better meet the needs of students who are able to take an in-person class but want the eight-week format. Evaluation data suggests that such a population of students exists.

## CONCLUSION

The faculty librarians at Limestone University adapted their existing academic research course to better conform to the concepts of inclusive pedagogy. The course already attempted to be as inclusive as possible as defined by access to materials and the breadth and diversity of course topics. However, in evaluating the course at a more detailed level, the librarians realized that it needed a better theoretical framework to fully meet the potential of inclusive pedagogy. Using the course's existing invocation of the ACRL's six Information Literacy Frames, the librarians reevaluated a better way to engage the content of all six of the frames in the course. In searching through the scholarly literature, they discovered the praxis of Critical Information Literacy, and they applied CIL to the course in the form of new or reimagined learning modules and course assignments. This new focus on CIL praxis gives the course a better intellectual and theoretical framework while also giving the class a better commitment to inclusive pedagogy concepts like diversity and inclusion and self-reflection.

# APPENDIX I.

## PROPOSED COURSE OUTLINE USING THE SIX ACRL INFORMATION LITERACY FRAMES

### *(Eight Week Version)*

#### **Week 1: Research as Inquiry**

- Introductions and Course Overview
- Library Resources Tour and Database Workshop

##### **Due:**

- o Weekly Writing Assignment 1

#### **Week 2: Information Creation as a Process**

- Academic Publishing and Peer-Review
- Primary and Secondary Research Sources
- Topic Selection Workshop

##### **Due:**

- o Weekly Writing Assignment 2 (Preliminary Topic Proposal)
- o Library Pre-Test
- o Plagiarism Workshop

#### **Week 3: Searching as Strategic Exploration**

- Navigating the Scholarly Article
- Navigating the Online Information Environment

##### **Due:**

- o Abstract Exercise
- o Final Topic Proposal
- o Weekly Writing Assignment 3

#### **Week 4: Authority is Constructed and Contextual**

- Organizing Sources
- Critical Analysis of Academic Sources

##### **Due:**

- o Preliminary Bibliography
- o Weekly Writing Assignment 4 (Academic Journal Investigation)
- o Midterm Exam Available

#### **Week 5: Scholarship as Conversation**

- Summary of Information (Annotated Bibliography Preparation)

##### **Due:**

- o Annotated Bibliography (First Set)
- o Complete Midterm Exam
- o Journal Exercise (Final Version)
- o (No Weekly Writing Assignment)

#### **Week 6: Information Has Value**

- Value of Information and Research
- Research Ethics

##### **Due:**

- o Annotated Bibliography (Second Set)
- o Weekly Writing Assignment 5

#### **Week 7: Writing Week**

- Academic Writing Workshop

##### **Due:**

- o Literature Review Draft
- o Final Exam Available
- o Weekly Writing Assignment 6

**Week 8: Final Submissions**

- Presenting in the Academic Environment

**Due:**

- o Final Literature Review
- o Final Presentation
- o Complete Final Exam
- o (No Weekly Writing Assignment)

## APPENDIX II

### JOURNAL EXERCISE

ID 305

#### *Journal Exercise*

In this assignment, we will continue to draw on the six ACRL Information Literacy Frames, especially Authority is Constructed and Contextual.

Please review the definition of this frame: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

- 1) What are three significant academic journals to your topic? (List them)
- 2) How do you know that these three journals are related to one another? In a few sentences, describe your reasoning.
- 3) Select one journal to investigate further. Name it here.

Next, research the journal you selected. Use the course lecture and materials to guide you. Visit the journal's web page and search for other coverage of it online. Locate the journal in the library's "Journal Finder" to browse some of the recent or past editions. Use these investigative tools to help you answer the following questions:

- 4) How selective is the journal? Briefly discuss the selection and submission criteria for that journal.
- 5) In a paragraph, discuss how the journal describes its scholarly impact on its related discipline and beyond.
- 6) Look up the editorial board of the journal. How many people are on the board? In general, what are their main research interests and experience? What interesting information did you find about the people involved in editing the journal? (You may list the answers to this question.)
- 7) In a longer paragraph or two, describe what you can find out about the journal's commitment to diversity of people and scholarly ideas? How do you know?
- 8) In a short paragraph, describe how significant you expect this journal be to your project and why.

## NOTES

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