How Should Cultural Capital Theory Inform Library Practice?

Brendan Johnson and Emily Reed

*This paper will briefly review available library literature that discuss the intersection of libraries and cultural capital, as well as introduce participants to the presenters’ longitudinal study which sought to examine cultural capital in first year students and test their information literacy skills to identify any connections that may exist. Student cultural capital and information literacy were then retested at the end of their first year to see if either had changed. Findings from the literature as well as the presenters’ study will be used to make recommendations as to how cultural capital theory should inform library practices.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Many academic libraries work to demonstrate their value to their institutions via statistics, reports, and research into how their services and resources contribute to students’ academic success. However, libraries have largely ignored the role cultural capital plays regarding how students use their services and resources. Cultural Capital Theory, derived from the field of sociology, refers to “the symbols, ideas, tastes, and preferences that can be strategically used as resources in social action. [Bourdieu] sees this cultural capital as a ‘habitus’, an embodied socialized tendency or disposition to act, think, or feel in a particular way.”

There are three forms of cultural capital:
1. **Objectified** – physical materials such as books, art, music, etc.
2. **Institutionalized** – the conferring of degrees and other titles granted by an institution (educational degrees, familial titles such as parent, etc.)
3. **Embodied** – knowledge and skills that is socially learned (language spoken, manners, taste)

Bourdieu theorizes that cultural capital is situated with two other capitals, economic capital, and social capital. Cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital. For example, if one has large reserves of embodied cultural capital, this capital can help them during an interview process for either a job or entrance to college, and that job or eventual college degree can lead to income.

Many childhood factors can be associated with the amount of cultural capital students possess when they enter college as young adults: socioeconomic status, the rigor of the K-12 school attended, parent/guardian income, parent/guardian educational degrees, language spoken in the home, educational resources in the home, and attendance at cultural events, among others. These factors can also impact students’ ability to beneficially engage with libraries and, subse-
quently, develop their learning and literacy skills. When viewed through a cultural capital lens, library leaders can understand how cultural capital affects their student populations. Libraries should then seek solutions to allow all students to equitably use the library’s resources and services.

We are currently studying cultural capital’s connection to information literacy. We developed a questionnaire for first-year students which was distributed in the Fall of 2021, a second questionnaire in the Spring of 2022, and will distribute one more questionnaire at the end of the Spring 2023 semester. Data analysis from the first survey reveals correlations between incoming cultural capital and information literacy as it relates to knowledge practices identified by the Searching as Strategic Exploration Frame of ACRL’s Information Literacy Framework. Students’ information literacy is also being assessed longitudinally to see if there is any information literacy growth during their first two years in college.

This paper will briefly review available library literature that discuss the intersections of cultural capital and library services including collections, reference, instruction, and outreach. The authors will also note where results from their study also support delivering these services through a cultural capital lens.

COLLECTIONS

Libraries are perhaps most often thought of by the general public as warehouses of loanable materials. Indeed, libraries are places that safely store and make accessible items that may be valued for their utility or entertainment by its community members. Selecting, collecting, and making these cultural products discoverable is part of many libraries’ missions and ethos, and these libraries have become institutions valued for storing large amounts of cultural reserves. These items are representations of objectified cultural capital. While people may not have certain cultural items in their homes, having access to them via their library, or even services such as interlibrary loan, make objectified capital accessible. Some libraries even print out on the due date receipt how much economic capital that patron has saved by using their library card.

Several studies have argued that access to objectified capital in the form of books and parental cultural capital (observation of parents reading, parents encouraging their children to read) are correlated to indicators such as academic achievement (GPA or graduation rates), reading literacy, and career aspirations. Access to objectified capital is often tied to socioeconomic status. However, people who are part of a lower socioeconomic status bracket may increase their access to objectified capital by obtaining a library card. Libraries should be prepared to continue their mission of making popular reading materials available to encourage more reading and higher literacy rates in their community. Academic libraries should also endeavor to provide more than just academic materials, focusing also on popular reading and various nonfiction genres that may interest their community.

Our study showed a significant and positive correlation between students who read many different types of books and their information knowledge about how to match one’s information needs and search strategies to appropriate tools and understand how information systems are organized in order to access relevant information. Providing access to materials is laden with power that often goes unrecognized by library administrators. In 1999, Wiegand documented how throughout library history in the U.S., the library profession has developed tunnel vision and blind spots, not actively recognizing their symbolic power and how whiteness was centered throughout library processes and policies. Therefore, libraries have not fully examined how practices such as collection development and selection policies reinforce existing social inequalities in their communities. In a response to Wiegand’s work, Budd first specifies how U.S. libraries contribute to the cultural production process: through selection and collection development of materials as well as through library patrons using library materials. Budd further clarifies how libraries exert their symbolic power in their collections: librarians select certain materials, but not others, thereby limiting access to potential materials for the community. Second, the classification and cataloging systems of information in English privileges the English language above all others. Historically, subject headings and controlled vocabularies have been built centering the perspective of the white male, and subject headings were often sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic. Libraries should continue to advocate for inclusive and empowering subject headings and controlled vocabularies that make their users feel welcome and accepted. Libraries should also utilize multiple strategies for collection development rather than relying solely on publisher’s recommendations which often leads to homogenous collections that don’t ultimately represent the
diversity of the community and also serves to reinforce already dominant voices of authority.

Some libraries have the community and budgetary support for language collections. However, language collections should be representative of the many cultures that write and read in that language. Oliva et al. found that in a study of 88 U.S. university libraries, most Spanish books were published in Spain or Mexico.\(^9\) There was very little representation of other Spanish speaking countries. For some libraries, this is due to the convenience of ordering from certain vendors; for others, budgets are allotted to books published in a specific country. Libraries should seek to gain the trust of their patron population by providing a collection of books that feature many different cultures — language collections alone are not enough. If a patron feels represented in their collection, they are more likely to use the library. One recommendation is to formulate a consortial partnership to share in the collection costs, allowing more books to be purchased and shared from smaller publishers.\(^10\) Libraries should also seek to make sure that their collection includes language dictionaries and other tools that can help patrons learn the dominant language so that they can become fluent, increasing their cultural capital in the local community.

Another way to increase the trust of the patron population is by ensuring that the materials held in the collection are truly diverse. To that end, many libraries have explored or participated in diversity audits of their collections. While many diversity audits emphasize BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ authors, this scope can be expanded to include books published in other countries or written by international authors, featuring other cultures. Having a diverse collection featuring non-majority perspectives encourages an environment where all patrons feel like they belong. Generating an atmosphere that emphasizes belonging of all people will encourage patrons to use library resources and services more often and more fully.

Finally, libraries should ensure that they have policies in place for book challenges and commit to retaining final decision-making control as much as possible. As book challenges continue to afflict libraries threatening the authority of the collection development librarians, remaining committed to intellectual freedom must remain a priority to be able to provide the community with a rich collection of culturally diverse, accessible items. When book challenges succeed, the objectified capital of the library and the community are reduced, as is the symbolic power of the library.

REFERENCES

One core service that many libraries provide is reference support. Libraries strive to make reference services widely available to their patron populations and endeavor to reach many users through a variety of access methods. Staffed reference desks, scheduled consultations, email, phone, and chat reference provide a variety of methods for patrons to get assistance in the way that is most convenient for them. But providing services via many methods is not enough; information professionals with reference responsibilities need to go further and seek to understand the experiences of their patrons and tailor assistance based on knowledge of their diverse patron populations.

The reference interview is a popular structure for assisting patrons seeking help. Elmborg applies Mary Louise Pratt’s contact zone theory\(^{11}\) to Bopp and Smith’s\(^{12}\) formula for the reference interview.\(^{13}\) Their formula states that the librarian’s goals for the interview is to gain the trust of the user, ascertain an understanding of the user’s question, and then make sure that the user is satisfied with the provided answer. The reference interview is an intense contact zone, and users who don’t recognize the unstated goals of the librarian may grow frustrated with the interview process, thereafter being labeled as a “problem patron.”\(^{14}\)

One cultural hindrance Elmborg emphasizes that can often lead to frustration is when both parties do not speak the same language fluently and therefore cannot utilize their linguistic cultural capital to their advantage. When a patron cannot utilize their primary language, they may grow mentally weary of conversing in another language, be frustrated that they are not able to communicate their meaning without exerting significant effort, and may not understand the librarian’s meanings, processes, or goals for the interaction. For example, a librarian may make it a habit to start a reference interview with some small talk in order to gain the trust of the user. However, a patron whose primary language is not English may find small talk a waste of their time and energy, leading to a negative experience. Librarians should seek to continually assess if their services are being met with
satisfaction and be willing to adapt their strategies to account for patron preferences in order to best meet their needs. If a patron seems uninterested in small talk, then librarians should exhibit the flexibility to adapt in the moment and proceed to the next stage of the reference interview, working to understand the information need.

Libraries have grown increasingly interested in learning how the experiences of students of color differ from the experiences of their white peers. While Bourdieu doesn’t list race as a variable contributing to cultural capital, researchers have worked to draw connections to study bias, deficit thinking, and inequities in the education system for students of color. An entire issue of *The Journal of African American History* (volume 87, spring issue) is devoted to studying the relationship between cultural capital and the education system for African American students. Some studies have revealed that students of color are less likely to seek out reference assistance. Possible reasons given include that the majority of librarians are white and therefore not representative of a diverse student body, body language from reference employees that does not signal that students of color are welcome to approach, and a perceived bias against students who have accents. Library administrators should continue to recruit and retain librarians of color who are representative of their student body. Librarians should also seek out diversity trainings and other DEI professional development opportunities in order to understand how students of color may experience library services differently from white students.

Cultural capital is not always acquired, but sometimes passed down from parents. Parents’ own institutional capital differentiates first-generation college students from their peers. One study found that students who are not first-generation utilize more social strategies to be academically successful, while first-generation students rely on independent strategies. Both groups of students attended class, took notes, studied, and completed assignments. However, students whose parents had attended some college also interacted with their professors, TAs, tutors, and classmates. It stands to reason that these students are also more likely to utilize reference services by seeking out librarians for additional assistance. First-generation students are often unaware of academic support services. Libraries should increase and persist in their outreach to first-year students about available library services and its benefits. If first-generation students are targeted for special instruction and outreach by university units, the library should seek to promote reference and other services.

Training employees who are new to reference work can be problematic because significant best practices documents such as the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*, found in the RUSA reference toolkit, are largely focused on helping culturally traditional U.S. patron populations, patrons who already have cultural capital. Behaviors that are considered appropriate in the United States such as maintaining eye contact, for example, may not be considered approachable or welcoming by patrons from other cultures. RUSA’s plan for their Behavioral Performance document is at present unclear, but libraries should seek to ensure that training materials are inclusive of patrons from different cultures and identities who may not adhere to cultural norms or have low levels of cultural capital.

**INSTRUCTION**

The amount of acquired cultural capital an undergraduate student possesses can impact not only their understanding of effective research skills and dispositions but also their understanding of the basic functions of an academic library. The use of academic libraries is considered by some to be part of the hidden curriculum, or skills and knowledge acquired outside of the classroom. This is especially true for students who did not have an opportunity to acquire this form of cultural capital prior to attending college due to a lack of consistent exposure to libraries in their primary and secondary schools. One way this discrepancy in cultural capital among students, and the resulting effect on students’ use of the library, can be addressed is through an increase in the amount and type of library instruction.

One of the most common forms of library instruction is the first-year orientation session, which often takes the form of a simple tour or quick introduction of the library to students in their first-year seminar class. Utilizing this instruction session to focus on the basics of library functions can help students with low cultural capital acquire develop confidence in utilizing the library for their classwork. As students advance in their academic careers, Bedelia Richards suggests that library instructors should use instruction sessions to develop the “help-seeking dispositions” of students to encourage them to seek out assistance in the library when they need it.
Similarly, she recommends the establishment and use of “cultural guides” for campuses to help students learn how to make use of the many resources on college campuses, including the library. Even tweaking the jargon used during instruction sessions to something more approachable can make the lesson content more accessible for students.

Beyond simply helping students understand what the library is and what it does, approaching library instruction through a cultural capital lens can inform how librarians assist students in strengthening their information literacy competency. An important form of capital that is crucial to success in college is the ability to read and understand the often discipline-specific terminology and data-rich publications of scholarly researchers. By creating instruction opportunities both within and outside the classroom, such as through workshops that help students develop advanced reading skills, students will better be able to interpret and evaluate the information and data they are exposed to in class.

As mentioned above, students with high amounts of cultural capital typically have more success strategies in their toolbox compared to students with low levels of cultural capital. Librarians can help students develop their information literacy skills not by teaching those skills directly, but by offering lessons and programs to improve study skills, provide strategies for success, and develop students’ perseverance.

Librarians’ instructions sessions can also be structured to emphasize the students’ existing capital as opposed to focusing solely on the transmission of new knowledge to students. Utilizing asset-based approaches, such as Funds of Knowledge and Community Cultural Wealth, can help students develop their information literacy skills by applying those concepts using their pre-existing knowledge and lived experiences. Encouraging students, especially those with low cultural capital, to make their life experience the focal point of their learning provides developmental learning opportunities for those students specifically. Such a practice can enrich the classroom as a whole since students’ lived experiences often inform their sociopolitical consciousness which, in turn, impacts how students contribute to, and learn from, their coursework.

OUTREACH

Understanding the work of libraries through the lens of cultural capital impacts how academic libraries conduct their outreach and engagement activities to the campus. Susan Dumais found that, while there is a correlation between participation in cultural activities and socioeconomic status, students from low SES backgrounds, and therefore, students with a strong likelihood of low levels of cultural capital, actually benefit more from exposure to cultural activities than students from high-SES backgrounds. By developing and hosting various cultural activities for students, such as book groups, literary festivals, author talks, and others, libraries can expose students to forms of cultural capital they may not have had exposure to in the past. The exposure to new and varied ideas was supported by our study, which linked the reading of multiple genre types to higher competency in the Searching as Strategic Exploration frame in general, as well as the related knowledge practices of matching one’s information needs and search strategies to appropriate tools and understanding how information systems are organized in order to access relevant information.

Likewise, libraries that bring “community-created culture”, such as visual art, literature, poetry, etc., into the library can both create opportunities for students to be exposed to different forms of cultural capital but also highlight the cultural capital with which students can engage within their immediate communities. While this type of engagement is more common among public libraries, it can very easily be adopted by academic libraries.

It is important to consider that students will not be interested in acquiring cultural capital through the library if they do not feel they belong. When engaging with students, both through outreach initiatives and through our day-to-day interactions, library staff must consciously work to provide a positive customer service experience for students, especially students from outside the dominant culture. It may seem obvious but ensuring students’ needs are met and feel welcome in the library is crucial to ensuring students feel they belong and feel comfortable making use of the library’s resources and services.

Once students develop a sense of belonging in the library, they will most likely continue to come back and take advantage of the resources and services provided. That alone can have benefits for students, both with low and high levels of cultural capital. Borrelli et al. found that “spending time in the library was the most frequently noted
experience” impacting student awareness of library resources and services, even if pre-designed programs and activities to engage students with the library were not as effective. Increasing student use of the library could be accomplished through a variety of ways, such as students initially using the library strictly as a study space, engaging in groupwork in the library, or through being required to use a specific library resource through their classes. Exposure to the library, and the associated behaviors of its users over time, can promote students to adopt those dispositions and encourage increased library use. This was supported by our study which found that students who made use of the library’s resources were found to have higher scores in the Searching as Strategic Exploration frame. The process of gradual exposure is similar to the impact of parents with high education levels on their children’s education and information literacy competencies, which was also supported by our study. By bringing students into the library, librarians provide them an opportunity to explore what the library has to offer so that over time they can understand the various tools available and how to access them.

Understanding how library outreach can improve students’ cultural capital can also affect how the library can influence their other capitals. Several studies suggest that students’ connections have as much or more influence on their academic and professional success than what they know. Researchers have found strong connections between students’ level of social capital and educational attainment as well as their economic connectedness and economic mobility. Regarding economic connectedness, libraries can serve as a form of social infrastructure which provides the setting where individuals from different socioeconomic strata can connect and interact. By promoting academic libraries as a space to make connections with their peers, libraries can encourage connections between peers with high and low levels of both social and cultural capital.

CONCLUSION

Cultural Capital Theory dictates that there are shared unspoken community norms, values, behaviors, and expectations in our society. Systems that operate on these assumptions afford opportunities to individuals who are fluent in these areas. Libraries serve as a bridge for those individuals in their communities who are not fluent in those areas to acquire additional cultural capital, which can potentially elevate their status in the community. Libraries can provide forms of objectified cultural capital to their patrons through access to physical books, subscription periodicals, various technologies, and more. They can serve as hubs which promote additional forms of capital, such as social capital, as well as the economic connectedness of their patrons. Through purposeful outreach and instruction to students and patrons, libraries can help them overcome gaps in cultural capital that first-generation students or other patrons with low cultural capital may possess.

One important takeaway from this review of the literature is how important it is to examine how accessible academic libraries are to their student patrons, especially those with little to no experience with libraries. In the past, libraries tended to address this with a focus on teaching students the “appropriate” way to think about research and use the library’s resources. While that process is still important, academic libraries must also consider how they can allow students to see themselves in the library and how to apply their personal knowledge and skills to the academic research process. This should go beyond the minutiae of how to use a specific database or read a call number and emphasize students’ emotional well-being in the library’s space by ensuring they feel they belong and that their presence is valued. Through a reimagining of the library’s services using a cultural capital lens, the library can make a reputation for itself as a welcoming place on campus, reduce the library anxiety of students, and emphasize the importance and value of individuals who stand outside of the dominant culture.

It is worth exploring more deeply if Cultural Capital Theory, while touting the values of social mobility, reinforces systems of white supremacy and oppression, and if so, how libraries can respond by implementing antiracist solutions. The theory’s weight given to a singular dominant culture can be seen as devaluing the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals outside that culture, while its emphasis on learning that dominant culture to ensure political, social, and financial advancement threatens to erase the unique characteristics of those cultures. Some methods to counteract the deficit viewpoint that informs CCT, such as funds of knowledge and Community Cultural Wealth, are mentioned in this paper and warrant further study. Libraries should continue to seek to dismantle systems that continue to oppress minority populations and replace them with strengths-based approaches.

28. Summers and Buchanan, “Public Libraries as Cultural Hubs in Disadvantaged Communities,” 293.


30. Summers and Buchanan, 295.


38. Moll et al., “Funds of Knowledge”


REFERENCES


How Should Cultural Capital Theory Inform Library Practice


