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Leading Liberation in the Library

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Introduction

It may be prevalent in multiple library sectors, but certainly in academic libraries in both the United States and the United Kingdom there is increasing discussion and activity around library liberation. By this, I refer to the wealth of liberation and diversification initiatives and practices which have emerged over recent years, and whilst I do not claim to be an expert in this field, I do find myself in the position of being responsible for leadership in an academic library which is becoming more and more prolific in the liberation arena. Therefore, I thought it would be appropriate for me to contribute a chapter to this book and share my reflection on this emerging paradigm of leading liberation in and through the library.

This chapter will look at leadership through the lens of diversity, with a focus on UK academic libraries and how they are in a position to positively influence diversity work in their institutions, from both a curriculum and teaching and learning perspective, as well as addressing issues around the diversity of the university workforce. The chapter introduces the concept of critical library management, rather than critical librarianship, as a means to achieving leadership in liberation work. However, by way of some background, an overview of critical librarianship is required in order to provide a theoretical foundation.

Background - what do we mean by critical librarianship?

Defining and exploring critical librarianship could justify an entire chapter in itself, but for the purposes of this chapter a simple understanding will suffice. Much of the literature suggests that critical librarianship started out as a movement, before becoming a practice. Indeed, in 2007, Samek described critical librarianship as “an international movement of library and information workers that considers the human condition and human rights above other professional concerns.” (Samek, 2007). This positioning of critical librarianship suggests that such a movement has a significant social justice role. To this extent Almeida argues that “by embracing a critical stance against bureaucracy, social injustice, and homogenous ideological identity, critical librarianship also functions as an oppositional rhetorical and performative strategy” (Almeida, 2018). These are very bold and noble objectives and in a similar stance Garcia claims that “critical librarianship seeks to be transformative, empowering, and a direct challenge to power and privilege.” (Garcia, 2015).

As a movement, it is clear that critical librarianship is grounded in politics and justice, and infers that to be critical and to critique practice, ideology, organisational culture, etc. is its manifestation. However, at its core is the practice of librarianship, and the unsuspecting and unfamiliar onlooker (or library user) could be forgiven for asking ‘how can librarianship be so political and have such an impact?’ In this respect McElroy suggests that critical librarianship asks us, as librarians to “look at the socio-political world both inside and outside of our libraries” (McElroy, 2017) and Gregory and Higgins argue that “[practicing] librarians, when applying a critical perspective in their work, consider the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces that interact with information in order to critique, disrupt and interrogate these forces” (Gregory & Higgins, 2013).

It would appear therefore that critical librarianship as a movement, and subsequently as a practice, is multi-faceted and encompasses a blend of activism and social justice-oriented approaches towards library and information work alongside critically framing and theorising that work.

But what does critical librarianship look like in practice?

Garcia synthesises several examples of critical librarianship outcomes that he had recently discovered at the time of writing his Blog post, and suggests that "academic librarians are: challenging regressive conceptions of gender identity in cataloguing; excavating queer, of colour, AIDS activist and trans archives; researching the misrepresentations of women, girls, people of culture in commercial search engines; documenting micro-aggressions in librarianship; and developing a diversity standards toolkit for academic libraries and librarians." (Garcia, 2015). These examples of outcomes achieved through critical librarianship practices are all instances of social justice in respect of generating positive change for groups who can be considered to be minorities or marginalised. This is achieved through questioning and critiquing what is accepted as 'the norm'. Similarly, Dhamoon suggests that critique is a "praxis that refuses and thus disrupts a calcified and definitive way of understanding difference, subjects, and subjectivity" (Dhamoon, 2011, 239) and in a librarianship context, Preater qualifies this as using a confrontational approach in order to create change for a particular direction and purpose (Preater, 2018). Critical librarianship is the practice of questioning and reflecting what we do as librarians, but fundamentally it needs to lead to positive action. In this respect, critical librarianship can improve equity and equality in the library and in this regard contribute to the development and strategic direction of a library service. There are a growing number of practical examples of how academic libraries are using a critical approach to librarianship to positive effect:

The concept of decolonizing the university has been around for several years and is effectively the quest for non-Eurocentric paradigms in teaching, learning and research activity in higher education (Alvares & Faruqi, 2012). More recently the notion of decolonizing the curriculum has become prominent in higher education in the United Kingdom, and this was triggered and championed by the National Union of Students, in questioning the 'whiteness' of the majority of higher education curricula (Hussain, 2015). Subsequently many universities have introduced elements of decolonization (to varying degrees) into their teaching and learning strategies, but essentially this involves reviewing their curricula and using a decolonizing lens to do so. In her article about decolonizing the curriculum, Elizabeth Charles explains that "students who are other (BAME, LGBTQ, disabled, etc.) come to university to learn about a subject they are interested in and look to the academic to be the expert on this" (Charles, 2019, p. 2). Whilst 'decolonization' is originally a response to specifically counter whiteness and race discrimination in higher education, Charles has used it as a lens through which to address discrimination against the more holistic concept of 'otherness' ('otherness', or 'othering' being to view or to treat a person or group of people as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself). In this case, Charles suggests students expect a visibility of plural voices within their chosen subject area, and expect people like them to have contributed to the subject, or who might have a different narrative to the 'story' being told'. Where this does not happen, 'other' students can become disengaged and this is exacerbated where no action is taken and the situation is glossed over.

Through the practice of critical librarianship, librarians are playing an active role in decolonizing curricula through their collections work and advising and assisting academic staff in their selection and use of 'other' literary resources, as opposed to a historic, white, male, Eurocentric dominated reading list. Examples of this particular critical librarianship include the 'Broaden my Bookshelf' campaign at the University of Huddersfield, which aims to diversify the library collection through enabling students to request books by BAME and LGBTQ+ authors (Williams, 2019). Similarly, at Goldsmiths, University of London, the 'Liberate our Library' campaign seeks to "diversify our collections, to de-centre whiteness, to

challenge non-inclusive structures in knowledge management and their impact on library collections, users and services" (Clarke, 2019)

Through their role as gatekeepers and providers of the scholarly knowledge and information required for the fundamental teaching, learning and research that takes place in universities, academic libraries are in a prime position to contribute to decolonization and liberation work. As well as advising on resources and reading lists, critically challenging the taxonomies and the traditional ways in which institutions have made information available through cataloguing and classification schemes is another major way in which academic libraries can be pro-active.

For example, it is now well recognised that traditional library classification systems, whilst useful for effectively organising libraries are also part of the Western/Eurocentric paradigm that decolonization seeks to break down. In her paper *Along the color line: excavating racism in the stacks*, Adler exposes how key classification systems such as Library of Congress (LoC) and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) scheme, contribute to a legacy of racism and marginalisation of most of the world through a continuing preoccupation with white supremacy (Adler, 2017a). Similarly Adler exposes how the Library of Congress cataloguing and classification practices delimits expressions of gender and sexuality in a manner that mirrors psychiatric and sociological attempts to pathologize non-normative sexual practices and civil subjects (Adler, 2017b). In other words, the Library of Congress, as an authoritative organiser of knowledge is responsible for 'othering' LGBQT people through their cataloguing and classification practices. Sullivan explains how, like LoC, the Dewey Decimal Classification system is equally as homophobic in that until recently, DDC editions assigned LGBTQ topics to categories such as abnormal psychology, perversion, derangement and medical disorders (Sullivan, 2015)

In these instances the 'norm' that is being critiqued is the traditional library cataloguing and classification schemes, which have organised the world's knowledge in an entirely discriminatory, unequal and exclusive way. In the case of the examples about diversifying collections, it is the predominantly homogenous, white, western, Eurocentric corpus of the traditional academic library collection that is being questioned. To critique, or criticise these practices, with a view to making positive change is critical librarianship in action, and more and more librarians are asking questions of their own cataloguing and classification systems and intervening so that these inequalities gradually disappear.

The problem with critical librarianship is….

Critical librarianship has often been subject to criticism in that its scholarly focus can be regarded as removed from the practical concerns that confront library workers and the communities they serve (Preater, 2018). In other words, those that work in and those that use libraries often do not regard a critical standpoint as necessary in order to function and are happy to accept the cultural norms of their environment. This is further exacerbated in library environments where managers and leaders don not promote or value critical thinking. Where this is the case library managers often believe that the resources that they have available to them need to be used exclusively to keep the libraries running and operating as they always have done, rather than to buy out time for critical reflection and consequently to enable positive actions through projects or changes in practice. Even where critical praxis is present in librarianship (and indeed beyond), it is only actually fulfilling a liberation role if it is breaking down such norms for good. For example, the current 'diversification of curriculum and collections' movement as illustrated above is acknowledged as good practice within the academic library sector, but only if librarians are proactive and their work and actions actually have an impact and positive change occurs as a result. There is some apathy

amongst librarians and educational commentators alike about the actual impact that critical librarians can have on higher education curricula. Clark suggests that simply "there is a real danger that because we host a huge range of resources and facilitate access to those resources, we over-estimate the extent to which we can make change happen" (Clark, 2019). Clark goes on to explain that by simply having more book stock by people of colour does not mean we will magically transform the academy into a wholly decolonized place of learning. Similarly, by acquiring greater resources written by other marginalised groups does not necessarily mean lead to liberation of a degree or curriculum. There is a danger that such activity is seen as tokenistic, rather than genuinely diversifying the academic library collection.

This really means that the acceptance or non-acceptance of a critical librarianship approach by libraries and librarians therefore becomes a management issue. I make this point, in order that I may refer back to it later on in a leadership and management context. However, as a library manager and leader I consider critical librarianship to simply be good librarianship and therefore good practice in general. As librarians we should be critical of what we do and critique itself should be entrenched in our day-to-day (Almeida, 2018).

Beyond critical librarianship

Much of the critical librarianship discourse and subsequent good practice is in response to the wider environment in which the library is situated. The focus of this chapter is in the library liberation work of academic libraries and whilst all of the above examples of critical librarianship are relevant, it will be useful to provide some of the context in which academic libraries in the United Kingdom are working.

Inequality in higher education in the United Kingdom

Universities in the United Kingdom have come under significant criticism in recent years for their failure to effectively address inequality both as a place of teaching, learning, and research and as a place of work. Whilst the United Kingdom university sector prides itself on being inclusive in welcoming students and researchers of all nationalities and from all walks of life, the reality of successfully and genuinely widening participation in UK universities does not necessarily bear out this perception. The OFFA Access agreements and more recently the Access and Participation plans[1], used as planning and monitoring tools in British universities, are intended to ensure that universities are proactive in enabling access to marginalised groups and communities, and to those who would not previously have been attracted to higher education. Widening participation initiatives have been focused at bringing together a more diverse student community, including students of different religions and ethnicities, as well as student with different physical abilities, social circumstances and different socio-economic backgrounds. The driver behind such initiatives is to maximise student recruitment, but in the long term to also diversify student, academic and researcher populations as well as impacting on professional and academic workforces. By reaching out to as many potential students as possible, universities have hoped to address these issues and alter the demographic of universities away from them being predominantly places for white, middle-class, economically stable students. There have been some successes and intersectionality means that universities have seen significant increases of applications and enrolments by students with particular characteristics (e.g. disabled students, commuter students, mature students, LGBTQ students, students of different religions, etc.). However, there are still many communities who are not adequately represented in the student

[1] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-agreements/

populations of universities in the United Kingdom, namely black, Asian and minority ethnic students (BAME). This creates a real issue for universities when addressing diversity in the institution and brings into question the idea of the university as a liberal, inclusive and progressive institution.

The BAME attainment gap

Even universities who might have higher proportions of BAME students enrolling and studying with them, there is still a problem in effectively retaining BAME students and recent research demonstrates that those who do remain in their institutions and gain qualifications, achieve poorer results than their white contemporaries. The background and reasons for this BAME attainment gap are complex but ultimately symptomatic of the diversity challenges that UK higher education is facing. Universities are accused of and often proved to be institutionally racist (Batty, 2019), with curricula continuing to be grounded Imperial European pedagogic and research ideologies. Similarly, universities are criticised for a lack of diversity in their teaching, academic and support staff and that this in turn means that BAME students do not have appropriate academic role models. The Universities UK report into the BAME attainment gap focuses on the predominantly white, Eurocentric, and therefore antiquated approach to developing and delivering teaching and learning as being a fundamental problem for universities and a significant factor in the BAME attainment gap (Universities UK, 2019). Clark, writing as a librarian, argues that the issue of ‘whiteness’ in the curriculum (and indeed the academy, is one that cannot be ignored, as it has a clear negative impact on the experience of BAME students. It is an issue that cannot be ignored and Clark explains how “ultimately we must challenge the whiteness of library collections, the curriculum and the wider academy, and ensure that the academy is a place for all, not one that privileges whiteness.” (Clark, 2018)

Discrimination in higher education

The BAME attainment gap and the issues of institutional racism contributing to this is a specific, reasonably high-profile example of discrimination in higher education and one which universities in the United Kingdom are trying to address. However, several forms of discrimination, and conscious and unconscious bias have all been present in academic environments for many years.

For example, one of the greatest examples of this would be the gender discrimination of the academy in the United Kingdom. With regard to sexual or gender discrimination, universities in the United Kingdom had been closed to women for centuries and England’s two oldest universities did not fully admit female students until 1920 and 1947 respectively (Delamont, 2006). This situation has improved over the decades, but whilst the gender balance of students and staff in the United Kingdom universities is no longer in question (56.5% of the student body in the UK identifies as female and 53.8% of the whole HE workforce), the percentage of female academic staff is comparatively low at 45.3%. Their representation also declines dramatically at senior management levels, where only 27.5% of managers are women. Some argue that the reason for this is due to a lack of confidence to apply for senior positions, while others point more to institutional sexism, or inflexible structures and cultures which work against those with caring responsibilities, who are more often women (Advance HE, 2018). Whilst universities claim to be addressing this discrimination, recent research still suggests that women were less likely to progress into senior roles than men even after age, academic degrees, number of publications and main area of research were accounted for, among other factors (Webber, 2019).

Other examples include disability and religious discrimination. Hopkins describes the many barriers that disabled students faced in English universities in respect of accessing the academy in the first instance, and then being able to physically and intellectually navigate the environment (Hopkins, 2011). Universities are more aware than ever of discrimination and the impact it has on student experience, retention and attainment, as well as reputation, yet research into religious discrimination in universities suggest that it is actually on the increase. Jewish and Muslim students appear to be worst affected with about a fifth saying that they have experienced discrimination or harassment because of their religion (Aune, 2017).

Whilst the above examples are not necessarily all curriculum based, the fact is that the culture of higher education in the United Kingdom (which can be transferred to mean the culture of higher education in the Western world) is not inclusive. Inequalities continue to exist and discrimination and harassment are real problems and issues that universities must face.

Diversity in the workforce

The discussion so far has focused on inequalities and discrimination amongst students at university, although the disproportionate number of senior female academics has been alluded to as discrimination amongst those working at universities. Role modelling and having a representative staff base is something that all universities should strive to get right, but the truth is that they are still failing in these areas. Universities themselves might claim that they have no influence over the student and staff applications they receive and therefore cannot address representation and diversity issues effectively. However, universities are supposed to be places of inspiration and emancipation, and part of their responsibility is to proactively strategize their recruitment of staff and students, and do all that they can to retain them and develop them once they have entered the academy. Overall, universities in the United Kingdom have struggled and failed in these areas, and continue to do so, with no clear, joined up approach to tackling the problem. The Advance HE Equality Challenge Unit[2] has been established to address some of these issues, and in respect of gender equality the Athena Swann charter[3] can claim to be having a positive effect. However, the same cannot yet be said for the, more recently introduced, Race Equality Charter[4] and its impact on race equality in higher education. Bhopal explains that in reality the different initiatives and charters have ended up competing with each other to the detriment of making significant headway in racial equality and diversity in the higher education workforce (Bhopal, 2019)

Where the university fails in achieving a diverse staff base, the academic library, in UK universities is also likely to be a guilty contributor to this. The UK library workforce is 96.7% white according to a survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (Cilip) (Hall, Ryan & Irving, 2014). As a general rule this is true of the representation of BAME staff working in academic libraries, meaning that there is and always has been an under representation of BAME staff in the academic library workforce. A more recent report by SCONUL[5] reveals that 44% of BAME staff working in academic libraries in the United Kingdom say they had experienced racism at the hands of either a work colleagues or service user or both (Ishaq & Hussain, 2019). This damning evidence suggests that academic libraries are very much part of the equality and diversity problem that higher education in the United Kingdom is facing. In order that UK academic libraries

[2] https://www.ecu.ac.uk/

[3] https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/

[4] https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/

[5] https://www.sconul.ac.uk/

can be part of the solution to this problem, they need to develop strategies to diversify their own workforce and to enable an inclusive workplace and working culture.

Leading liberation from the library – critical library leadership

Alongside an explanation of critical librarianship, most of this chapter has focused on the problems and issues facing universities in the United Kingdom around diversity, discrimination and inequality. The chapter, however is about how libraries can lead liberation work and to be part of the solution to some of these issues. The remainder of the chapter therefore will consist of a discussion about how this can be achieved through effective leadership and management of academic libraries. In using the term 'liberation' in this context, I am referring to libraries being able to support and enable the breaking down of the exclusive barriers which exist in higher education. Such barriers take the form of the discrimination, inequality and lack of diversity that have been discussed above. Whilst liberation can be discussed with regard to any community or group who discriminated against within the academy, Clark's focus on racial discrimination, in his article *Tackling whiteness in the academy*, presents a useful overview to the holistic institutional problems and how libraries can play a role in addressing them. He explains how libraries are in a privileged and unique position within the academy in that we work in a service that the vast majority if academics and students connect with (Clark, 2018).

Academic libraries are indeed in a unique place within their respective institutions. There are not many services which have the same opportunities for internal outreach and engagement that they have. Therefore, academic libraries potentially have a very significant sphere of influence and there is also a real sense of them currently trying to find a proactive social justice role to play in enabling and ensuring equality and diversity in the university. The emergence of the critical librarianship movement in recent years is testament to this and there are now many examples of initiatives and practices that academic libraries are introducing that have equality and social justice at their heart. The examples already cited by Adler (2017b), Clarke (2019) and Williams (2019) are good examples of such initiatives and practices. However, in his discussions around racial inequality, Clark (2018) rightly points out that the library cannot work in isolation in trying to dismantle whiteness without going beyond the library and he argues that libraries need to ensure that library change is part of a wider structural and institutional change. However, it is still important that academic libraries are proactive in this area and adopting critical librarianship as standard practice is a good starting point.

Whilst having a greater diversity of texts on our library shelves and in our collections in general, and ensuring a greater mix of readings is available for academics to make use of on their reading lists could appear tokenistic, and themselves, as outcomes of critical practice, these actions will not necessarily liberate the university curriculum. However, this is a good first step, and one that must be encouraged through library leadership. Only through accepting, encouraging and enabling critical approaches to academic librarianship, can we be in a position to lead liberation work within and from the library. Many library and information workers feel that they do not have the time or space (let alone the permission or approval) to involve themselves in critical practice. Even if you embed a culture of critical practice and reflection (with consequent positive actions) into the library workplace, it will still be in isolation if it does not have an impact the wider institution. Whilst academic libraries in the United Kingdom still have a lot of things they need to put right (e.g. diversification of collections, classification schemes, diversity of the workforce, etc.) it is important that any positive actions in these arenas are exposed and made visible because of the position of the library within the academy, as a space and service which is used by and accessible to the

majority of staff and students. Academic library leaders need to be sharing such actions with other senior leaders within the institution, and at a more granular level, where reading lists have successfully been diversified, library staff should be promoting this to academics and supporting them in ways in which they can further diversity or decolonize their curricula. Similarly, if the academic library staff, through their critical reflection and practice are becoming adept and expert in inclusive teaching and learning practices, this too can be shared with the wider academy. This could be through collaborating with academic departments, or through influencing best practice in the teaching and learning or educational development spaces of the university. Library leaders need to be in a position to champion successful library liberation work, and encourage library staff to exploit the internal sphere of influence that the library has. In this instance, enabling an embedded approach to liberation becomes a fundamental element to critical library leadership.

For many library leaders, this might sound easier said than done. It is all far too easy for library managers and leaders to dismiss the notion of critical practices and critical librarianship and to focus themselves on aligning the library with the current institutional strategy or to consider efficiencies and effectiveness of operational planning. However, library leaders themselves need to be critical of their own practice and be prepared to take risks in respect of affecting change, both within the service and indeed within the institution. That means having the confidence to question the institutional norm and to try to change or shape it, where it needs liberating. For example, Khokhar, in reflecting on talent development and management of BAME staff in libraries, explains how BAME library staff in the United Kingdom are generally frustrated with: the lack of support they get; micro-aggressions that they encounter; inequalities in recruitment; lack of opportunity to gain relevant experience; lack of acknowledgement of potential (Khokhar, 2019). He argues that where institutions might not be signed up to the AdvanceHE race equality charter, then libraries and library leaders are unlikely to prioritise taking positive action towards addressing the exclusive library workplace. However, he then goes on to suggest that library leaders need to play an active role in this debate, regardless of the (lack of) institutional mandate, to take risks, challenge insecurities around ‘thing going wrong’ and set the direction of the teams that we are responsible for. Similarly, staff need to be empowered to take action and library leaders need to consistently highlighting the importance of diversity through our conversations, and that by continuing to have such conversations we are being critical of our own library leadership. As this chapter illustrates, we have real equality and diversity problems within higher education and within academic libraries. It is through taking steps at the local (library) level, and achieving success that we will be able to progress further within and on behalf of the institution. Change has to start somewhere, why should it not be in the library?

I am conscious when writing this that I am a white, able-bodied male manager, in the privileged position of leading an academic library service. Through writing about library liberation and in particular about decolonization and diversifying the workforce I am open to criticism of white (male) saviourism. However, I believe that through writing, and more importantly through discussions and engagement with all staff and students about the inequalities that exist in our systems, and the acknowledgement of them, more opportunities to put them right will emerge. Library leaders must listen and encourage discussion, awareness, understanding and reflection in order to be critical themselves, and also to develop and embed a culture of openness and critical reflection

Conclusion

Through an explanation and description of the existing documented inequalities within higher education in the United Kingdom, this chapter has been used to introduce concepts of critical librarianship and how managing and leading critical practices in this area can have a positive impact on equality and diversity in the academy. A theoretical notion of critical library leadership has been introduced by way of provoking discussion amongst library leaders as to how impact can be achieved through looking at (and changing) their leadership behaviours accordingly. A critical approach to one's own leadership is fundamental to developing and enabling an inclusive working culture, which in turn encourages critical librarianship as a norm. There is an increasing amount of literature and examples of good practice in academic libraries around liberation work. This brief narrative about how library leaders position themselves in this agenda adds to the important discussion in this area. In summary, in order to progress library liberation work and to have an impact on the institution, library leaders need to adopt a critical leadership approach. The three main elements of such an approach are:

1: To encourage critical librarianship as standard practice, and enable staff to adopt critical approaches. This can be achieved through letting staff know that such practice is not only permitted but expected. Having an internal library platform, through which library staff can discuss their critical librarianship practices and action plan together also assists this. Library leaders must also be open to listen to ideas and proposals around critical practice and consider how they might be implemented.

2: Listen to staff and to students and encourage discussion. If you are white, you are in a privileged position as a library leader. If you are white and male, this is further amplified. It is only through listening to other people that you will become aware of frustrations, micro-aggressions and discrimination taking place in your work place and space. You must be prepared to be uncomfortable in hearing this and to use that discomfort to take positive action in addressing the library's role in liberating the curriculum, in enabling an inclusive working culture and in achieving diversity.

3. Advise, champion and advocate for liberation. Change needs to happen, and there is no reason why it should not start in the library. The library has a significant sphere of influence within the academy and if used effectively, other areas will look to the library for leadership in places and spaces where it is regarded as being successful. Let our critical approach to our work and consequent liberating actions, be one of those places.

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