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Chapter 2.

Nice to Have, a Distraction from the Core Curriculum, or a Disruptive Element? A Teaching Journey through Three Common Perceptions of Social Justice in LIS Education

Briony Birdi

"If we fear mistakes, doing things wrongly, constantly evaluating ourselves, we will never make the academy a culturally diverse place where scholars and the curricula address every dimension of that difference." (bell hooks, 2020/1994, p.33)

This chapter is, in part, a reflection on two decades of teaching and research in Library and Information Science (LIS), and has been written in the first person. The third person has always provided a relative safety via which I can more tentatively share the views I know may be challenging or displeasing to others. For a piece of writing about an aspect of my teaching and my own positionality, however, it seemed more honest to use the first person, reflecting my growing confidence to challenge and disrupt my admittedly expansive comfort zone as a white, heterosexual, cisgendered female. It also feels appropriate as I am writing this only months after the death of Gloria Watkins, whose first-person writing as bell hooks has significantly shaped my thinking about the kind of educator and researcher I have tried (and sometimes failed) to be.

By way of introduction, two comments from the previous decade have informed the development of my teaching in relatively recent years. Firstly, Turner and Gorichanaz (2016) suggested that although "communication skills" are "frequently addressed in LIS [Library and Information Science] curricula" in the twenty-first century, in fact this is more "as a resource for business operations…not for extending public service" (pp. 244-245). Secondly,

LIS educators James and Reschke (2015) wrote that "Time and again, we hear that students coming from the [LIS Master's] program have excellent technical skills, but often lack a deeper understanding of their role within the context of social responsibility." (p. 25). Two comments, both of which relate to a perceived curricular omission that goes some way beyond "communication skills." Is it a cause for concern that although we may be providing students with a set of vital tools to function effectively within an information organization, we may equally be failing to fully equip them to operate within a broader public, societal context? Or is the "failure" here more complex than a simple gap that can be filled with a few additional elements in the curriculum, and one which actually relates to our failure as LIS educators to understand and acknowledge our own social responsibility to the students themselves? This chapter will reflect on both the challenge and the imperative of including social justice content and themes as core elements of LIS Master's education, on the mistakes we need to make in order to learn, and on ways in which our own positionality can both inform and shape the parameters of our teaching. By "social justice content" I am referring to material which focuses on equality and diversity, but also engages with and addresses the actions taken both for and with communities to provide a fair and equal society for all, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, or class. Social justice work necessarily involves not only discussion, but also critique, self-reflection and action, as will be explored below.

Introducing the Problem

Let us begin by making two assumptions about the vast majority of LIS practitioners and academics. Firstly, that both groups would acknowledge the centrality of social justice to a public-serving profession such as ours, and would not question the need identified in the IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto (2012) for "Professional education and continuing training focused on services to multicultural communities, cross-cultural

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communication and sensitivity, anti-discrimination, cultures and languages" (p. 6). Secondly, that they would not contradict (for example) the first principle of the CILIP Ethical Framework (2018) to uphold, promote and defend human rights, equalities and diversity, and the equitable treatment of users and colleagues," or the words from the ninth principle of the ALA Code of Ethics (2021) "to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations" (para. 7). So far, so good. Yet why do many of us still find that space is not always readily available for LIS material related to social justice within the core curriculum? I have previously described this apparent deprioritization as "mystifying" (Birdi, 2022, p. 92), given that social justice is surely central to a public-serving profession such as ours, and that "practically every LIS graduate will work in a diverse setting with diverse community members, regardless of the type of library or information technology setting" (Dali & Caidi, 2021, p.14). Reflecting on my own experiences and observing those of colleagues in my own and other institutions, I have noted three common "negative" perceptions of social justice education, and I will briefly consider each of these, and how they have shaped my own teaching journey, in relation to five themes which form the basic perspectives, methods and pedagogy of Critical Race Theory:

1. The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism;

2. The challenge to dominant ideology;

3. The commitment to social justice;

4. The centrality of experiential knowledge; and

5. The interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano, 1997, pp.6-7).

As I present my three perceptions, I am also mindful of Paulo Freire's seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2017/1970), particularly the concepts of "risk-taking" in the classroom, "banking" education and the move to dialogical action, as explained below.

First Negative Perception: That Social Justice [In the Curriculum] is "Nice to Have"

(*Low Risk*)

As stated above, the LIS profession has its manifestos and ethical frameworks which require us to engage with social justice in both professional practice and academic learning, acknowledging the homogenous profile of our profession and those who teach it. In 2015 a UK workforce mapping study commissioned by CILIP and the Archives and Records Association (Hall et al., 2015) found that 96.7% of the respondents to this large-scale and statistically significant study identified as "white," which was 9.2% more than the *UK Labour Market* profile in the same year (Office for National Statistics, 2015), and 78.1% of the LIS workforce identified as female, compared to 50.1% of the UK workforce as a whole. As Nicole Cooke observed, "Librarianship has long been a profession dominated by women, specifically white women" (Cooke, 2017, p. 3). We can add to Cooke's comment that despite the majority white, female workforce, the same UK study (Hall et al., 2015) confirms that in fact male LIS employees are more likely to occupy senior management roles than their female peers, with 10.2% of male employees in senior leadership, compared to 5.9% of female employees.

Given unequivocal data such as these, it is arguably "low risk" to include in LIS teaching a discussion of the impact of this staff profile on the profession. We need to consider what steps can be taken to redress the balance, and we can take an intersectional approach as a basis for the discussion. *Were any of the findings surprising to you? Make three recommendations to library managers to address the issues identified.* We can look at stereotypical images of librarians in the media, and in children's books, and we can consider the impact these have on staff recruitment and on our children. Guest speakers from a minority background can be brought in to discuss their experience as LIS practitioners or

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leaders, and to serve as role models. We check our reading lists, and make sure that we include "enough" examples of papers and chapters written by non-white academics and practitioners, making it clear that we should listen to other voices as well as the white Europeans.

These are good and helpful additions to our teaching and will raise student awareness and understanding of the importance of including social justice as a topic in the classroom. Looking at our Critical Race Theory themes, to some extent we are demonstrating the "intersectionality of race" (note the deliberate use of an extract of point 1), some evidence of a "commitment to social justice" and, if we bring in a guest speaker to our classroom, we are demonstrating the importance (if not "centrality") of experiential knowledge. For a number of years, I used this approach – I still fall back on it at times - and I have been satisfied with the outcome, seeing positive student feedback as evidence that I was doing "enough," and doing things *in the right way*. Yet earlier I used the word "additions" to describe this type of teaching activity, and this was deliberate. For Peggy McIntosh (2015), it is all too easy for teaching material focused on social justice and social responsibility to be regarded as "soft stuff" or "extras" (p.16), elements we are pleased to include as supplementary to our modules and programs. I convey some important information to you about social justice and the state of the LIS profession, and I hope that you will absorb it, perhaps asking me some questions when I am ready for you to do so, and you will become more effective and efficient practitioners as a result. In this form, am I one of the "many professors" bell hooks writes about, who "conveyed to me their feeling that the classroom should be a 'safe' place," and then described such a place as somewhere that "the professor lectures to a group of quiet students who respond only when they are called on" (bell hooks, 2020/1994, p. 39)? Low risk teaching is comfortable for me—and is the easiest option when my workload seems to be

increasing exponentially by the academic year—but is it comfortable for everyone? This, for me, is the point at the heart of this issue:

> The experience of professors who educate for critical consciousness indicates that many students, especially students of color, may not feel at all "safe" in what appears to be a neutral setting. It is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement. (bell hooks, 2020/1994, p. 39)

In time, and after making many mistakes, I can summarize this part of my learning in two points. Firstly, that in order to create a more effective and comfortable learning experience *for all,* I need to distance myself from what Freire describes as the "banking" teaching model, whereby "the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 2017/1970, p. 45), and to accept that I need to think differently about classroom safety and comfort. Secondly, I need to acknowledge that teaching activities which are "nice to have" and nothing more, may yield short-term positive results, but are unlikely to achieve lasting change.

Second Negative Perception: That Social Justice Is "A Distraction from the Core [Curriculum]" *(Medium Risk)*

Dali and Caidi (2021) help us to move from the first negative perception to the second, with their anecdote about a senior faculty colleague who stated that, while it would be *nice* [author's emphasis] to have a conversation about diversity in a classroom, the course was already so densely packed with "essential" stuff that they could hardly afford to have diversity discussions." In addition, she added, "the topic of diversity was addressed in another class" (Dali & Caidi, 2021, p.14). The perception here is that social justice may have its place in the LIS curriculum, but that it should remain to one side, an isolated topic in a core module or a small number of sessions in an elective, to avoid distracting our students from what they really need to become highly skilled professionals.

One argument used to defend this position has been the significant change to Western higher education systems in relatively recent years, with a growth in student numbers meaning that the university degree has become less of a guarantee of future employment than it may have been in the past. Competition for each *graduate post* can be fiercely competitive, and each applicant requires a positional advantage, to appear somehow more employable than others in the same field (Tomlinson, 2008). Furthermore, as stated in a UK Government Skills Strategy White Paper, "The global economy has made largely extinct the notion of a *job for life"* (DfES, 2003). The concept of "employability" is firmly established in all higher education institutions, which are now required to promote it to students registered in any of their academic programs, and to record post-graduation employment rates. Students pay substantial tuition and accommodation fees, and if we feel that something is a "distraction from the core," we naturally want to keep it carefully controlled.

A second argument relates to the interpretation of "distraction" as "enjoyment," something we do for pleasure. bell hooks (2020/1997) warns that when students are seen to enjoy themselves in the classroom, it can be perceived as a lesser quality teaching experience: "I've actually had colleagues say to me, 'Students seem to really enjoy your class. What are you doing wrong?'" In a discussion of how to build a teaching community, hooks is in conversation with fellow educator Ron Scapp, who agrees: "Pleasure in the classroom is feared… It is not assumed that your ideas can be entertaining, moving. To prove your academic seriousness, students should be almost dead, quiet, asleep, not up, excited and buzzing, lingering around the classroom." (bell hooks, 2020/1997, p. 145).

Although social justice teaching material is (and should be) challenging both to the student and teacher, students can also find it extremely interesting and engaging, even enjoyable, as illustrated by the following brief examples of student feedback on my own modules in the last academic year:

I've really enjoyed the diversity (in all senses) within this module.

Briony's passion for libraries and equality and diversity is really clear; it made this module really engaging and fun, even when talking about more serious topics.

The topics covered in the module were very interesting and very important. Some topics I would not have given thought to before but I now understand their significance.

Countering the notion that student enjoyment reduces their learning, or the "academic seriousness" of the teaching content, below are further student reflections on the perceived impact of a cultural awareness class on their own learning experience:

I found the workshop particularly useful in reflecting upon my own cultural background and life experiences.

The workshop had a very nice, open atmosphere that put me at ease and the informal nature made me feel I learned more about my peers.

It reminded me to keep an open mind, speak clearly without patronising[1], and be aware of the space I myself was occupying during the session.

While I hope I am culturally sensitive, I still think it's useful to stop and think about cultural awareness, particularly as a white person living in the country I was born in.

If social justice teaching is only regarded as a "distraction from the core," it will enjoy a lower status in the curriculum as a whole. A medium risk approach to raise its profile would be to introduce new topics within existing modules, perhaps even introducing a new *elective* module to the program. What should these be called? Where do they *fit*? Kurz argues that one success factor in obtaining institutional approval for social justice courses was "the use of language that university faculty (mostly white) would find less objectionable than the word "race": I was aware of the layers of required approval at higher levels throughout the university and unsure of the reception at those various levels." (Kurz, 2017, p.86). Whilst I

agree with Kurz's point and I am mindful of Dukelow and O'Donovan's (2010) observation that "Certain voices and certain words are today reduced to silence in the public sphere" (p.2), I have also noticed that as I have gained experience in LIS education, I have also become more confident with my teaching vocabulary. Whereas previously I would have been wary of using such terms in my teaching content as racism and anti-racism, colonialism and decolonization, whiteness and white privilege, I now regard it as essential to do so, to avoid misunderstanding and, importantly, to provide a more effective learning experience. Perhaps I am finally making progress in my journey to a place Dunbar (2021) describes, where "the subjects and terminology of equity, privilege, inclusion, whiteness, social justice, and yes, Critical Race Theory become less exotic, gradually more normative, and make their way into the LIS and archival nomenclature" (p.132). In terms of the "fit' of social justice teaching, I have certainly been guilty of marginalizing this content in the modules I design, of including one session at the end of the semester (when the "serious topics" of the module have been properly dealt with), or of grouping far too many topics together so that they do not take up the space of another, more important subject. The journey I am still making in this area has been informed by bell hooks' description of Women's Studies, a discipline in which "individuals will often focus on women of color at the very end of the semester or lump everything about race and difference together in one section" (p. 38). For hooks, this approach is merely "tokenism," and "familiar to us as the change individuals are most likely to make," but one which will never achieve "multicultural transformation" (bell hooks, 2020/1997, p. 38).

If we consider these actions in relation to the themes of Critical Race Theory, the introduction of new social justice topics to the curriculum—and of carefully chosen terms to label them—partly demonstrates a commitment to social justice. On their own, however, they

will not achieve the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism in the module, merely reinforcing that these are concepts we explore only at specific times.

Third (Negative) Perception: That Social Justice in the Curriculum Is "A Disruptive Element" *(High Risk)*

The third perception is the most complex to address. With the first and second, we can provide a counter argument: we can argue for social justice teaching content to be more than merely "nice to have," and we can argue that it does not need to be a negative distraction from the core curriculum. Our suggested actions may cause some discomfort and temporary disruption to the status quo, but we (and those around us) can essentially continue to work broadly as before. If I can demonstrate that I am delivering the learning outcomes, if my teaching is largely well-received, if the topics I teach can be mapped on to the core knowledge and skills of the professional accreditation framework, why would I need to change my approach?

With this third perception, however, there is no counter argument (hence the deliberate parentheses around the word "negative" in the subject heading): I am not questioning the disruptive nature of social justice teaching, but I am moving instead *towards* the disruption it creates, in other words towards the "challenge to dominant ideology" by Critical Race Theory. I have deliberately included this perception last, as it has taken me far longer both to work through the various arguments it represents, and to understand how to use it to inform my own teaching practice. It is also undoubtedly the one which yields the most tangible results.

To begin, we need to consider what the different stakeholders regard as "disruptive," and how they feel about the disruption. Given that my discipline is LIS, I am going to focus both on the higher education context in which our students learn, and the library and information services in which they work, or will work.

A recent study in which I played a minor role at the University of Sheffield (Williams et al., 2020) investigated decolonizing work in the Social Sciences faculty, with two linked phases. Phase one was a quantitative audit of selected core module reading lists, looking at the extent to which people of color are presented to students as the producers of knowledge. The research team felt that predominantly white-led reading lists were "central to the institutionalised message that people of colour are not knowledge producers" (Williams et al., 2020, p. 10). The second phase was informed by the first and involved collecting qualitative data from staff and students regarding their perceptions of decolonizing beyond reading lists. Topics covered included student experiences of the curriculum, classroom practices, flexibility of assessment and institution-level decolonization, and staff understanding of the decolonizing agenda, and how it related to or informed their academic work. Although academic staff participants were already interested in and receptive to the idea of "decolonizing" the curriculum, the comments below show how disruptive this work can be perceived to be:

> [I]f you don't know what it [decolonising the curriculum] involves and no-one is defining what it involves and it basically comes across as people ganging up on you, then that can be…that's not exactly a very pleasant experience. And of course what comes with that is, it's not just the idea that what you teach is wrong or like even harmful, or even violent, but that your entire career, your entire education and everything you stand for as an academic, is potentially invalid and illegitimate.

> I think there is resistance to this [decolonising the curriculum] because people start to get defensive and they start to think that you are accusing them of something, and then you get a kind of defensive response that then shuts down the argument.

The words of these academic staff reveal a defensiveness, a fear of getting it wrong, and a fear of having to undo one's previous work. Turning our attention to LIS practitioners, these feelings were also strongly reflected in a two-year national (English) study I led between 2006 and 2008, which investigated the impact of staff attitudes on the effectiveness of public

libraries" contribution to social inclusion policy and objectives. We wanted to determine the extent to which an inclusive organization facilitates an inclusive public service, and to which the ability to empathize through personal experience motivates the proactive and successful community librarian (Birdi, Wilson, & Tso, 2009). Our quantitative data indicated that many library staff perceived high levels of cognitive empathy to exist within an otherwise culturally homogenous workforce, but interestingly the qualitative data which explored the issue further found that a number of staff described a strong resistance to cultural change, to certain groups, and to the social inclusion agenda as a whole. Some of their comments reveal some of the same defensiveness and resistance to change as the academic staff quoted above:

> [I]t's easy to throw the charge against us that we're all middle-aged, middle class white women, but I'm sorry I can't help that…I do what I'm doing, and I try to do it as well as I can.

> It's also somewhat negatively assuming that white-British, middle-aged women are not capable of being socially inclusive, which isn't necessarily correct. It's the skills they have that matter.

> But even when we put out adverts for staff, there are very few alternative groups who apply for the jobs so what can you do? You can't make people apply because they fit the criteria and they're ticking the boxes… The danger is you get staff who aren't up to the job because they're there because they tick a box… (Wilson & Birdi, 2008, pp. 47-48, 50).

Fear of change is human, as is a degree of defensiveness when we feel that our way is being questioned. When we introduce elements of social justice work to our teaching or professional practice, reactions such as those shown above are a response to feeling threatened. Yet this concern is unfounded, as bell hooks neatly summarizes:

> Some folks think that everyone who supports cultural diversity wants to replace one dictatorship of knowing with another, changing one set way of thinking for another. This is perhaps the gravest misperception of cultural diversity. (bell hooks, 2020/1997, p. 32)

My own defensiveness—surely in part due to my *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018)—remains with me, but it has lessened over the years, as I have tried to listen to others, to work on my own empathy. I have begun to understand that I do not need to see my work—or the work of others—as "invalid and illegitimate," nor do I need to remove it all so that an entirely new body of work can be inserted into the old space. What I need to do, however, is to move away from what Dunbar describes as "the cowardliness of comfortable contentment" (Dunbar, 2021, p. 131), and to see disruption as something that can bring about positive change, remembering that my comfort does not necessarily equate to the comfort of others.

In order to achieve this, I am informed in part by Freire's dialogical approach, which provides an alternative to the "banking" model previously mentioned, and delivers a more "problem posing" form of education, whereby the students are "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 2017/1970, p. 54). This in itself is not novel, and LIS educators have arguably been using problem-based learning approaches for as long as Freire himself (Stevens &Tieman, 2017). However, for my teaching the vital element of Freire's "problem-posing education" model is that students can use it to "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" (Freire, 2017/1970, p. 56). And more importantly, where the interaction becomes truly "dialogic," Freire argues that the response of *both* teacher and student is, to a large extent, "a function of how they perceive themselves in the world," as they "reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action, and thus establish an authentic form of thought and action" (Freire, 2017/1970, p. 56). Earlier in the chapter I argued that isolated examples of social justice education can be effective in the short-term, but that they are unlikely to achieve lasting change. With this limitation in mind, I now use a simple, three-step framework for my own teaching, which facilitates a structured conversation about decolonizing, considering the colonial imprint of

our universities, their degree programs and their libraries (Steps 1-3) (see Birdi, 2022 for a full description). These can be worked through in sequence as presented or used as a source of stimulus for dialogic discussion. Our discussions are not restricted only to one session at the end of a module or course, but they can be continued and picked up at different points throughout a module, essentially as a consistent "thread." The broad content of each step is briefly summarized below, and it is important to note that as the framework was developed in the UK, readers may want to adapt these points to their own context, for example in relation to their country's colonial past.

Step 1 – Starting the conversation: the colonial legacy and whiteness of our university campuses. This enables us to find the space we need to talk through the context in which our universities and libraries are based, and to think about how others might experience the space quite differently. Three points are used as the basis for discussion: that the colonial past continues to affect today's university campus, that students from minority ethnic communities regularly experience microaggression (and aggression) on our campuses, and that there is a "degree awarding gap" between students from minority ethnic communities and white students in higher education.

Step 2 – Understanding the continued impact of colonialism and whiteness on our curricula. We start to move from the broader higher education context to the degree programs themselves. We discuss texts which acknowledge the reach of colonialism and Eurocentric epistemologies across the Social Sciences, including LIS.

Step 3 – The colonial imprint on libraries, and the white LIS profession. We move from the university context in which the LIS student is based, and into the LIS profession they are joining. Our discussions explore the impact of colonialism and dominant whiteness on

libraries, and the potential impact of a continued lack of diversity on effective service delivery. Without disruption, can our services ever provide a fair and equitable environment, a collection of resources representing a wide range of geographical and cultural perspectives, and a diverse workforce with the empathy and cultural awareness to deliver them?

These steps are merely a starting point, a simple framework I use to support LIS students in their academic and professional engagement with the wider context beyond the classroom. The risk factor is higher with this approach than with the previous two: it disrupts our long-held notions of the environments in which we live, study and work.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented three perceptions of social justice education, and how I have used them to inform the development of my LIS teaching. Although I originally saw them as distinct, my view now is that they are both interrelated, and incremental. Unless I acknowledge all three, my teaching on social justice remains static, and isolated from the rest of the curriculum. It is only when the third perception is addressed that I - and the students – can engage with the wider context, and the historical legacy that continues to shape both higher education and the library and information services we describe. In taking this approach, previously isolated topics become integrated, mainstream and (eventually) *core*. The term "social justice" is often used interchangeably with "diversity," yet I am now careful to use the two separately, noting Cooke and Sweeney's distinction that "While a recognition and commitment to diversity is about including and incorporating different cultures and perspectives, social justice asks that we go beyond including and incorporating. Social justice implies action, it challenges us to work towards the betterment, equality, and respect for those we want to include." (Cooke & Sweeney, 2017, p.6). In this way, I have tried to show that simply "including" a diversity-related topic in my teaching is not enough, and that effective

social justice education requires us to progress through our own experience, to reflect on our positionality and to situate it within a wider societal and professional context.

To conclude, teaching aspects of social justice in an LIS curriculum necessitates a thick skin, inevitably involves making mistakes along the way, but it can yield significant results for all:

> For those students with first-hand experiences with marginality via their race, class, sexuality, ability, or other positionalities, the course can be transformative in providing a language and framework through which to make sense of their lived experiences…Simultaneously, for students in dominant positions, they may experience deep paradigm shifts in encountering concepts such as *privilege* and *internalized dominance* for the first time (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014, p. 5).

In other words, when not viewed simply as a "box-ticking" exercise, an LIS education which moves beyond the disciplinary comfort zone and is open to disruption can arguably lead to lifelong attitudinal change for both the educator and the student, and a genuine contribution to social justice.

Chapter 2—Endnotes

[1] While American spelling is used throughout, original spelling is retained in direct quotes from both secondary sources and personal communication, including student evaluations

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