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## **Tune Up Your #Critlib Toolkit: Scaffolding Critical Information Literacy Discussions with Upper Level Students**

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# TUNE UP YOUR #CRITLIB TOOLKIT: SCAFFOLDING CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY DISCUSSIONS WITH UPPER LEVEL STUDENTS

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## THE CHALLENGE

Engaging students in conversations about information disparity and algorithmic bias without having time to build rapport can be challenging. Upper level students enrolled in capstone research seminars or graduate students taking research methods classes often come into the library session with specific research assignments. What are some strategies for engaging students in critical discussions while also assisting with their course-specific research assignments? This article shares a toolkit of three #critlib activities that can be used to build rapport and scaffold critical conversations with upper level students in one-shot sessions.

## CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY

Critical information literacy and critical library studies, often shortened to #critlib, seeks to interrogate structures of power and privilege within the information landscape. Eamon Tewell (2015) describes how critical information literacy “examines the social construction and political dimensions of information, and problematizes information’s development, use, and purposes” (p. 36). For example, rather than thinking of search algorithms and paywalls as neutral entities of the information cycle, #critlib interrogates the extent to which information is accessible to different groups in society and examines the consequences of information disparities.

Some of the foundational texts include *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Accardi, Drabinski, & Kumbier, eds., 2010), and the two-volume set *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* (Pagowsky & McElroy, eds., 2016), which provide excellent theoretical grounding and practical, hands-on lesson plans and activities. These resources have inspired me to develop #critlib activities that I have used in one-shot instruction with upper level students.

## #CRITLIB IN THE ONE-SHOT

Engaging students in critical conversations in the classroom may be more feasible in the context of a full-length semester course. During a semester course, students and the instructor have time to build rapport and work together to unpack critical issues. In a one-shot session, however, there lurks a sense of urgency to cram all research tips and skills into the allotted 50 or 75 minutes. Librarians teaching one-shot sessions also face the challenge of not knowing the level of research familiarity each student has, or whether students have attended a library research session in the past. With all of these uncertainties and pressures, efforts to engage students in critical discussions can seem impractical.

However, the liminal status of the one-shot session can provide a space apart to probe concepts from new perspectives. Because librarians are not the instructor of record for one-shot research visits, the library classroom is separated to some extent from grading pressures. While this can lead to student disengagement due to lack of extrinsic grade motivation, it can also open up a space for exploratory, inquiry-based class discussions.

Critical library scholars and practitioners such as Maria Accardi and Maura Seale emphasize the relevance and opportunities for #critlib conversations within the one-shot setting. In the book *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, Accardi (2013) points out, “While the one-shot class has its own set of challenges, it also has more flexibility that progressive librarians can take advantage of and subvert for progressive purposes” (p. 69). The fluidity and liminal status of the one-shot session can provide a space apart to probe concepts from critical standpoints.

In addition, #critlib seeks to uncover hidden assumptions that can surface when conducting basic searches, thus allowing ample opportunities for critical discussions while covering common one-shot concepts. Performing a basic keyword search in an internet search engine or library database can prompt conversations about paywalls and algorithmic bias. Maura Seale points out the possibility for such context-driven #critlib in her chapter, “Carrots in the brownies: Incorporating critical librarianship in unlikely places,” (Seale, 2016). When preparing a library instruction session, Seale recommends that librarians “identify how focusing on the context, constructedness, or choices...might allow you to incorporate critical information literacy” (p. 231). As you analyze the context and the construction of information tools and systems, foundational research practices can open the way to critical discussions. By incorporating flexibility and interrogating core research concepts, you can discover how #critlib helps improve student engagement in one-shot sessions.

## #CRITLIB TOOLKIT: SCAFFOLDING CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Working within the constraints of a one-shot session has helped me identify and prioritize my main purpose for including critical discussions. My goal is not to give an all-encompassing introduction to everything #critlib, but rather to include flexible, 10-30 minute #critlib activities to build rapport and open a space for inquiry. My main purpose in teaching these sessions is to 1) help students with their research assignments, and to 2) have interesting critical discussions along the way. I feel that students are well served if they can walk away from the session with improved research abilities, having shared a conversation with a classmate about information disparity or search engine bias.

The best part about these two priorities is that they work together to advance greater student outcomes. Applying critical concepts to actual research assignments helps students see relevant real-world applications, while grounding critical concepts within course assignments helps move beyond theory to thoughtful implementation. I have found that incorporating #critlib activities has led to robust conversations and engagement in the classroom.

The activities in the #Critlib Toolkit focus on concepts such as algorithmic bias, accessibility, information privilege (Booth, 2014, Dec 1), and students as information creators. Each activity takes between 10-30 minutes of class time. These materials are available online through a shared google folder (#Critlib Toolkit, [www.tinyurl.com/CritlibToolkit](http://www.tinyurl.com/CritlibToolkit)). The toolkit includes lesson plans, slides, and activity templates that are shared under Creative Commons licensing. They can be used, repurposed, and tailored to meet a variety of teaching needs.

### Activity #1: Algorithms: Beyond a Black Box

This activity focuses on exploring search engines and algorithms as systems that are created and influenced by very real human proclivities, assumptions, and biases. Exploring algorithmic disparities allows students to more clearly realize the intersection of information and power and privilege within society. This activity was inspired by the research of Dr. Safiya Noble in her book *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), and a faculty learning community I participated in that explored white privilege and the influence of structural racism in higher education.

I developed the activity for a one-shot session that I taught for a 400-level theatre course. The activity took about 30-40 minutes of the allotted 75 minute class session and introduced research practices relevant to the semester-long research assignment. By the end of the activity, I hoped students would be able to:

- Share their thoughts on what is helpful and/or problematic about the way information is organized and labelled
- Discuss the ways internet and library database search algorithms are socially constructed, and what they reveal about structures of power and privilege

I started off the activity by asking the students what might be helpful and problematic about search terms. We watched a brief portion of an online video of Dr. Noble (2016), and then launched into the small group activity. A detailed lesson plan and activity materials are included within the #Critlib Toolkit. Students were placed in small groups and given a research role card with a topic on inequality such as “How have mainstream television portrayed Latinx characters in the last 5 years?” and “How are themes of gender and sexuality being represented in modern theatre?” Topics can be tailored to the subject matter of the course.

I passed out a whiteboard and marker to each group. Before class started, I divided each whiteboard into three columns and labelled each “Group Brainstorm” “Google” and “Databases.” For the activity, I asked the students to brainstorm search terms based

on the research topic that they had on their role card. They could write the terms in the left column. Then, they were asked to search for information sources on both the internet and library databases, comparing and contrasting their search results and experience (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Photograph of student whiteboard example from Activity #1**  
<Placeholder; Editors will place Figure here in final doc>

After I had given the groups several minutes to explore their topic and write down their findings, I asked the students to discuss the following questions in their small groups before sharing out with the whole class:

- Is there anything you noticed that was similar or different between the internet vs. library databases?
- What might be helpful and/or problematic about the way information is organized and labelled?

When we returned as a larger group there were many students who were willing to contribute their thoughts. We had a robust discussion that flowed well into the remainder of the class when we worked on individual research topics.

There are a number of ways to conduct formative and summative assessment. Observing the level of student participation can serve as a formative gauge about student engagement and learning. Evidence of the small group discussions can be captured by photographing the whiteboards at the end of class. I prepared a brief written reflection for students to write down their responses to a few questions, including: What might be helpful and/or problematic about the way information is organized and labelled?

The reflections demonstrated the ability of students to engage in critical issues. Several students pointed out disparities in internet and/or library search engines. One student wrote, “People in power get to decide how information is organized and can prioritize the sources that other people see, so it's easier for already marginalized groups to become even more marginalized.” The student responses speak to an awareness of critical concepts beyond mere surface-level skills.

### **Activity #2 Information Systems as Borderlands**

This activity originated as I worked with a cross-listed Spanish and Gender & Women’s Studies class, and later I formalized learning outcomes and developed the small group activity and reflection sheet. A reading by scholar Gloria Anzaldúa was listed on the course syllabus, which gave me the idea to incorporate the theoretical concept of borderlands as a point of discussion during the research session. At the end of the session, I wanted students to be able to:

- Discuss how information structures and systems are not neutral
- Apply the concept of a borderland to systems of information retrieval & sharing

After sharing a quote about borderlands from Anzaldúa (#Critlib Toolkit), I asked the students this question: How can the concept of a borderland be applied to our systems of information retrieval and sharing (e.g., internet searches, library databases, social media, news, Wikipedia, etc.)? The students engaged with some really thoughtful examples. They discussed how easily information can be shared online, the ways borderland status is shown when some voices are not represented, and how Wikipedia serves as a borderland space.

In order to help scaffold the discussion, you can ask the students to pair up with a classmate and give each a card with a search tool combination (#Critlib Toolkit). Invite the students to look up information using the search tools listed on their card, and compare and contrast the search experience and results. Ask to what extent information systems can be compared to Anzaldúa’s description of a borderland. If the students are working on a research assignment in their course, ask how the borderland concept might relate to or inform their research process. This reflection can be done entirely as a class discussion, or you can pass around reflection sheets (#Critlib Toolkit) for students to write down their responses.

### **Activity #3: Contributing to the Scholarly Conversation**

The third activity focuses on illuminating the scholarly process and inviting students to participate as information creators rather than consumers. I used this activity in the context of working with upper level English students who had a final project option of submitting a conference proposal. In order to prepare for the session, I created a Google form version of the conference proposal form. I included dropdown entries where students could select the conference theme track they were most interested in, as well as a space to select the type of session format, such as presentation, panel discussion, workshop, roundtable, etc. I also had short answer sections where students could share a title and a brief description of their proposed presentation.

During the class session, I pulled up the conference website in order to show an example of the submission process and scroll through the submission requirements. After looking through the website, I asked the students to work in small groups to draft

a sample conference proposal. I emphasized that the purpose was not to generate a flawless, perfect draft but rather for students to try out ideas in a low-stakes environment.

The students hesitated a bit at first, but they soon started to brainstorm topics of interest with their team members. After about ten minutes or so, I encouraged the students to move from the brainstorming process to submitting their draft title and description in the Google form. I made sure that the form settings automatically sent each group a copy of their responses. As the class session wrapped up, I pulled up the conference website and encouraged the students to continue to finesse their drafts and submit to the conference. I was excited to later learn from the professor that a few of the groups decided to revise and submit their proposals to the conference. These students received acceptance and were able to attend and present. This was a teaching experience that helped bridge the student to scholar publication gap and position students as agents in the scholarly process.

## #CRITLIB AND DISTANCE LEARNING

These activities were prepared before the COVID-19 crisis necessitated distance learning in mid-March 2020. While the activities were designed originally for face-to-face instruction, the #critlib concepts are just as relevant and can be adapted to the online environment. For an online synchronous English session in April 2020, I adapted the conference submission activity by creating a shared Google document and having students work online in teams to develop their proposals. In other classes, I shared Dr. Noble's video presentation (2016) in both an asynchronous and synchronous format. In the synchronous class, I sent out the video for students to watch beforehand in preparation for a discussion via video conference. For asynchronous instruction, I embedded the video as part of an online research assignment. In both settings, students were asked to respond to the question, "What is helpful and/or problematic about the way information is searched and shared?" Similar to face-to-face class reflections, I found that student responses revealed critical thinking and awareness of information disparity.

Whether you teach online or in person, including #critlib activities can help scaffold more nuanced and robust conversations with students. The teaching materials are available under Creative Commons licensing and can be revised and tailored to a variety of settings. Lesson plans, slides, and activity materials can be accessed in a shared Google folder (#Critlib Toolkit, [www.tinyurl.com/CritlibToolkit](http://www.tinyurl.com/CritlibToolkit)). As students engage in conversations about algorithmic bias, information privilege, accessibility, and scholarly creation, they share valuable insights relevant to their course research assignments and gain confidence as scholars in their own right.

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Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

Figure 1

