

The Quarterly Interview: Jessica Critten

University of West Georgia

-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and main responsibilities? How long have you been in this position?*

Critten: I am an Associate Professor and Instructional Services Librarian at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton, GA. I teach a credit-bearing information literacy course and I've recently started coordinating our library's liaison program. I started this position in September 2011 and received tenure in 2016.

You have done work in critical information literacy. What is critical information literacy and what is the state of the field in this area?

Critical information literacy (CIL) is an approach that understands that the process of creating, selling, finding, using, and evaluating information is done within political structures. Taking a critical approach requires not only that we challenge the production of information but also our roles as producers and consumers of information: How do our personal ideologies inform how we interact with information? CIL asserts that libraries and librarians cannot be neutral because information is not neutral, not even "facts". Our work is always political, whether we want to take on that responsibility or not. I'm of the mind that information literacy that isn't critical isn't really information literacy; for instance, if you leave subject headings like 'illegal aliens' unchallenged in your teaching you aren't telling the whole story. If anything, you are doing harm.

Critical information literacy has been around for quite some time, whether or not it was explicitly called that. It does seem to be gathering more and more traction with (among other things, certainly) the #critlib chats and unconferences and conferences like CLAPS (Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium) in 2016.

How do you apply critical information literacy in the one-shot setting as well as the credit course setting?

Most of the time I think disciplinary faculty are better equipped to situate the work of critical information literacy within their course than I am. They have time with students, they have disciplinary context, and they can hold students accountable. I'd rather work with a faculty member on assignment design and/or provide them with resources that they can contextualize than do a traditional one-shot. When I do teach one shots I ask a lot of questions that are meant to inspire reflection: "Why did this article seem more relevant to you than another?" "How is evidence used here?" "Why do you believe this and not this?" When I talk about scholar-

ly sources, I complicate them (peer review is complex! There is a point of view represented here! There are points of view *not* represented here!).

The information literacy course I teach feels like it is different every single semester. I've taught the course situated around media literacy, news literacy, and I've also tried an approach that is designed around the idea that "research is inquiry" (Every week of the course was designed around a different question.) I've had successful approaches and complete failures, great assignments and total bombs. What has remained is a focus on ideology and language. I suppose these are the 'pillars' of my critical approach: We engage in reflection about where our ideologies come from to identify them as constructed (and this usually leads pretty nicely into discussions about constructions of authority, credibility, and evidence.) We also examine how language and rhetoric constructs meaning. How does language persuade? How does it exclude? How does it manipulate? How can we use it? How can it be used against us?

After teaching this course for five years now, I'm beginning to think more and more that information literacy should be situated in a theme or disciplinary context. In Fall 2017 I'll be teaching a first year seminar on true crime and this course will be, at its heart, a critical information literacy course. We'll examine different sources and structures of information, we'll critically evaluate media, but 'information literacy' will manifest as we respond specifically to the information needs that arise organically in the class.

How are critical information literacy practices received by the students and faculty versus more traditional instructional practices? Do the faculty have any concerns?

I've never had a faculty member voice concerns about the critical approach I take in my sessions. I mean this with all due respect: I don't believe I serve at the pleasure of disciplinary faculty. I also get a say about the spaces I teach in and what I teach. The work I do with students should be a negotiation between everyone involved: What do students actually need *right now*? Do I need to do a full session, or would creating supplemental research materials suffice? That said, faculty seem to be receptive to what I do and I have a great relationship with my liaison departments.

I've had students who really respond well to the focus on discussion and critical concepts and others who are disappointed because they thought my class would be an easy A. I've had students who've told me that my classes have real-

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ly changed their thinking and I've had students who tell me that I'm close minded after I've challenged them (well, only one has said this to my face, but it still really hurt). When we say that libraries are safe spaces, we don't mean that they aren't challenging spaces. We don't mean that there will never be discomfort or conflict. We don't mean that we won't confront difficult subjects. We wouldn't be doing a service to our students if we did. I accept that doing critical work is not always going to run smoothly or be easy and fun, but I still think it is worthwhile for students.

How do you assess or evaluate critical information literacy techniques?

I've heard a saying that you haven't really learned something until you communicate it, so I try to let that idea inform my assessment. That means emphasizing discussion, having students come up with examples or analogies related to our discussion, and having students teach each other things. This is also critical in the sense that I'm decentering myself as the ultimate holder of knowledge and "truth" in the educational space. Each student has something worthwhile to contribute and we can all learn something from each other.

I'm also always listening for students to say "I've never really thought about it that way before"; I often learn something because I'm surprised, or because an idea has opened up my world in some way. (Maybe this is a threshold concept, I don't really know). I do think that when we are surprised or brought up short, we are more present, more receptive, we do more mental and emotional work to locate ourselves vis-a-vis this new information.

I do think that librarians have to get right with the idea that we might not always see immediate evidence that we've made an impact. Students might not have a point of reference yet for what we are talking about. They might need to read more, or travel more or discuss more for something to be meaningful. They might think back to our time together ten years later and something will resonate. I know that's happened to me. Is my session a failure because I don't have quantitative data? I don't think so.

What are the most important things about this concept or practice you can share with librarians who may want to employ this in their instruction or in their work practice?

Honestly, I want to advocate for theory here. I think theory gets a bad rap as being elitist or impractical but reading articles and books concerned with critical theory is what has helped shape my practice the most. I've recently taught a 'critical theory for librarians' class for Library Juice Academy and I really wanted to get across the idea in this class that theory and practice are not a binary. They are not even really separate. Theory is practical because it helps us make deci-

sions. There isn't a rubric or roadmap for this necessarily, it's something that makes more sense the more you read and the more you work to synthesize and make connections. You begin to recognize problematic situations more and you begin to formulate solutions that are compatible with your values. For example, reading about feminist standpoint epistemology and the work of Patricia Hill Collins has really made me reflective about my positionality: I try to ask myself "Am I the person that needs to say this, or do this work?" Reading critical (and theoretical!) work from librarians like Karen Nicholson and Maura Seale has me questioning the way we gather data and demonstrate value in academic libraries. Having theory inform your practice might manifest materially in all kinds of different, often subtle ways.

What major resources are there for critical information literacy?

Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy have edited some fantastic *Critical Pedagogy Handbooks* that came out in 2016. I was really fortunate to be able to write the Introduction for Annie Downey's *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas* and it's one of my favorite things written on the subject. Downey really helps the reader locate critical information literacy alongside information literacy, critical pedagogy, and learning theory in general. Eamon Tewell also published a fantastic article "A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature" last year. Angela Pashia and I are co-editing a book coming out later in 2017 with ACRL about critical approaches in credit-bearing courses. I could really go on and on.

What books or articles have influenced you?

One article I keep coming back to is Cushla Kapitzke's "Information Literacy: A Positivist Epistemology and a Politics of Outformation." We can't forget that critical information literacy involves being critical, offering a *critique* and this is one of the best critiques of information literacy out there. Also, Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation" seems to always find its way into my work. Even if I don't always agree with it, it has been so helpful in really pushing me to consider the role that ideology plays in our interactions with information. It helped me see information literacy not just as an outward facing process; That is, it's not just about the information, it is about us and how we make meaning of that information. Lastly, Kevin Seeber's attention to the processes of research and push to continually challenge traditional conceptions of information literacy really inspires me. I love his chapter in the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*, "The Failed Pedagogy of Punishment."