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Diversity in local and comparative contexts

Grounding change in academic libraries through dialogue

In October 2020, the authors accepted an invitation to participate in an experimental collaboration observing an equitable, global, and inclusive process. Inspired by an Inclusive Classroom webinar[1] at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the shared Decolonizing Checklist,[2] the authors considered our tasks: 1) to develop a checklist or brief guide that is international in scope to help librarians worldwide develop their own or other educators' instructional materials, that is antiracist or inclusive, and 2) to publish the checklist/guide and a reflective essay of the process.

After reviewing the original checklist and attempting to construct our own, we realized that the task was more nuanced than originally thought, especially as we considered the central roles of libraries within the academy, and what would drive our construction of this checklist. We deliberated on matters of terminology, specific areas of focus for librarians and faculty, our personal viewpoints, and concluded that the conversation needed voices that represented other and wider perspectives. In the spirit of inclusiveness, we offer our conversation as a spark to further conversations towards a more fulsome and robust outcome.

Initial reflections

Spencer Lilley

When I was asked to contribute to a project to develop an academic library equivalent of decolonizing my syllabus, I thought that it would be very worthwhile, as I believe that libraries can make a significant contribution to successful outcomes for Indigenous faculty and students who have been consistently marginalized in higher education. My own research focuses on Indigenization, and I thought that this document would provide libraries with a transforming framework to serve the needs of Indigenous library clients. I quickly realized my naivety, as I started to work with the "checklist," as it touches on issues of inclusiveness about other communities that find themselves marginalized. It became apparent that although I could prepare a decolonizing checklist for Indigenous issues, I realized I have no mandate to consider these issues from other communities that find themselves on the "outside."

Kathryn La Barre

As we began our conversation, I first reflected upon my position in this space. I am a white, queer woman with a middle-class background who is the daughter of an immigrant father. Employed by a predominantly white institution with complex legacies of colonialism, slavery, conquest, and settlement, I'm actively engaged in antioppressive work on my university campus. I embed antioppressive pedagogy into each course I teach. Although I teach about information literacy (IL), I do not provide traditional IL instruction. Each moment in the classroom pro-

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vides opportunities, as many of my students provide IL in academic libraries and bring their own experiences to class discussions.

As our conversation unfolded, barriers to understanding arose quickly. This included logistical challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the general state of the world. More fraught was our realization that differences in terminology and underlying experiences were immense. To ameliorate this, we exchanged grounding literature about decolonization[3] in an attempt to bring more voices into the room.

During our discussion of these materials, we shifted our focus to creating space for an intentional conversation. We decided to issue a call for an even more inclusive conversation, with many more voices to identify core aspects that could inform the development of a checklist.

Paulette Kerr

I was honored to have been invited to be a part of the process, especially that this would mean having the voice of the Caribbean in the discourse. Yet I was somewhat cautious of what the final product would emphasize since not all forms of colonization are the same, and issues experienced and terminology currently used in other locations may not be reflective of Caribbean environments, which could result in blurring or exclusion of what matters. I considered the current difficult discussions in the Caribbean around poverty legacies and compensations, which are at odds with some discourses on decolonization. My hesitancy also centred around the many contending expressions of anticolonialism and inclusiveness, and whether as an academic librarian I had the wherewithal to pivot towards supporting institutions to amplify silenced voices through critical IL pedagogy or expanded collections. As I reflected, however, I realized that while my fears remain, this process is a call to understanding differences outside and within my realities, and to face the difficult and contending matters that impact "others" towards transforming my approaches. This was a much-needed learning experience.

Why do you think we need a document like the decolonizing your syllabus statement?

Lilley: A document like this helps an institution to ask questions about itself, and challenges individuals to think about how they engage with

people who are labelled as "different." The fact that we need to discuss what inclusion and exclusion look like demonstrates that there is much work to do.

La Barre: Intentional engagement is a key aspect of antioppressive or decolonial work. A checklist creates space to clarify intent and to focus reflections upon the importance of respectful relationships. Checklists inform the questions we ask, such as: What language do we use, and why? Which voices are lifted? Who is not in the room? What do we hope to accomplish?

Kerr: Trying to understand the varied conceptions, led me to seek clarification of how issues affect different constituents. This provided an opportunity to step back and ask what drives what we do as educators, to whom are we speaking, and from what perspective do we engage in building knowledge? This process of reflection may be useful to others.

Why do we need to discuss these issues?

Lilley: Who decides what is "different," and who is "included" and "excluded" when we talk about dominant and marginalized groups. Producing statements that identify how excluded groups' needs will be addressed reinforces the fact that they have been excluded by the majority. This could potentially be an exercise in re-traumatizing them and needs to be managed in a respectful and sensitive manner.

La Barre: Conversations like these are essential because without them, we cannot enact changes that transform our world into one guided by an ethos of anti-oppression. Throughout, I kept wanting to find common ground. For me, empathy, relationship building, and respectful engagement are fundamental. Without these, work to create inclusive, equitable systems and experiences may not proceed in the manner we anticipate.

Kerr: Having these kinds of conversations is important as issues of race, class, slavery and reparations, color, gender, and oppressive colonial and post-colonial structures are sometimes hidden, and not discussed out of fear of offending the "offender" who may be stronger, more vocal, more powerful, and more established. Yet all sides need to be heard, and so these conversations can facilitate a move towards intentional change in our approaches.

So, are you saying that we shouldn't develop these statements?

Lilley: No not all. Our institutions need to transform themselves and to provide services and resources that serve the needs of all its clients. However, these statements should not be developed in isolation. I think there is a need for libraries to partner with marginalized groups in their community to identify challenges encountered when using library services and to develop a statement together. As part of this, each institution needs to reflect on its own organizational and cultural foundations and at the same time have some "hard" internal conversations.

La Barre: Learning to engage in and facilitate hard conversations benefits everyone. Just because conversations are hard does not mean they are not worthwhile. In my classroom, we work to identify problems and reach toward transformation and liberation. I owe a debt of gratitude to the Womxn and Queer folk, including adrienne maree brown and many others,[4] who have generously shared their wisdom. The guiding framework for learning in my classes is from brown, "Small is good, small is all; Change is constant; There is always enough time for the right work; Never a failure, always a lesson; Move at the speed of trust."[5]

Kerr: I think the process of us as authors working together towards developing these statements from completely different backgrounds speaks to the power of reflective collaboration and seeing through the eyes of others. This can be modelled in our collaborative instruction sessions.

Why are these conversations hard, and what would they include?

Lilley: The hard part comes from the need to question assumptions, attitudes, prejudices, values, and beliefs as individuals and as an organization, and how these might impact on others, particularly groups or individuals that don't fit into "established" norms. In the Indigenous research literature this is referred to as locating yourself,[6] which is a process of reflecting on how your experiences and expectations influence how you approach or view situations that differ from your own. This can be a very challenging process, particularly when viewing these through the eyes of people who have previously been on the receiving end. I have seen how this has been transformative for non-Indigenous people who have gone through this process in terms of their engagement with Indigenous perspectives. However, I am also conscious that this process will take people outside their comfort zone, and this might include resistance to change, so expecting immediate change amongst all staff is probably unrealistic, especially if they are struggling to align their own values and beliefs with those expressed by other groups.

La Barre: Hard conversations require commitment and vulnerability. They can't happen without trust and equity. Clarity about expectations and how we will engage helps overcome the resistance that sets in when we feel challenged, or are called out. I often draw from B. Arao and K. Clemens,[7] who deconstruct the common notion of safe spaces. They propose creating brave spaces to help us lean into risk-taking, and overcome the pain and resistance inherent in learning and growth. By foregrounding courage over feeling safe, participants can imagine possible worlds of transformation and change, and begin work to unsettle and subvert oppressive systems.

Kerr: Such conversations are hard because they go against the grain of our beliefs, our areas of comfort, and even values we cherish, and because the process of change is never easy. These conversations require transparency, sincerity, and strength to deal with our own fears and biases. For example, how do we address "classism," which has now become normal, acceptable, and yet oppressive in our "post-colonial" environments? How do we address the difficult issue of maintaining traditional cultural expressions and language in our academic institutions, resulting in gatekeeping, where we exclude rather than open access to the other, the new, the different cultural expressions and perspectives? How do we repair, through resources and programs in our libraries, ongoing injustices that have been in existence for centuries? Decolonization in the Caribbean may "demand that we ask questions about who, when and why of representation in historical narratives,"[8] towards fronting a different history. How will the library, a seeming expression of hegemonic power, support and provide access to these different histories, these evolving cultural expressions of scholarship?

How would you suggest that hard conversations like these are managed?

Lilley: Hard conversations are aptly named. I think there is a need for staff and their institutions to grow their own awareness of how their own perspectives impact on these matters. This could be facilitated through training about unconscious bias, including seminars, readings, webinars, and sessions with representatives from different communities. Institutions could then discuss what these sessions have contributed to their own understanding of these matters. After this, I think that the dialogue with communities of interest within each institution could then be arranged, with a view to co-constructing a joint statement outlining how the library will ensure that services and resources will meet that community's need, along with an understanding of how the success (or not) of this will be measured.

La Barre: Hard conversations are iterative. They are a journey. We must be intentional and deliberate in our willingness to be vulnerable, to listen actively, and to show empathy (towards oneself and others). One cluster of approaches I take when preparing to engage in hard conversations includes asking people to consider their location or positionality, to name their intent, and to help co-create a community agreement to guide discussion, de-center dominant narratives, and assist with repairing harms that can occur. Such an agreement fosters conversations that create space for learning and change, even as participants may find themselves unsettled, discomfited, or resistant.

Kerr: Deep collaboration and engagement with our communities should be done early in the long walk. Providing spaces and opportunities for library staff to openly share and discuss their own inhibitions, stances, and approaches to the hard issues is paramount. Further, we may encourage staff to participate in committees for greater understanding and commitment to these matters. And commitment involves rethinking, interrogating, and redeveloping our collections and programs, including our IL pedagogies.

The call

Hard conversations are necessary to make meaningful change. Ensuring that there are enough voices in the room is necessary before real conversation can begin. We must be intentional as we prepare to work together. The process of decolonizing a syllabus, and particularly IL, is complex with varied aspects and different stakeholders. Changing the stance of IL pedagogy needs all voices. Transformation cannot be simply a box checking exercise, but a reflective and sometimes difficult process, providing an opportunity to ensure that our libraries become places where people from all groups feel heard, are seen, and are welcome and empowered to use facilities, services, and resources that reflect inclusiveness. The power to make that happen lies within our libraries, working closely with faculty towards impacting students. It takes a conversation to get started. Won't you join us?

Notes

1. University of Illinois, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (August 2020), "Creating Inclusive Classrooms Faculty Training," https://mediaspace.illinois.edu/media/t/1_ld4wxym8.

2. "Decolonize My Counseling Psychology Syllabus Checklist," by Academics for Black Survival and Wellness members Anneliese Singh, Elizabeth Cardenas Bautista, Germán Cadenas, Della Mosely, and others at the Academics for Black Survival and Wellness (A4BL) teach-in led by Pearis Bellamy and Della V. Mosely during the summer of 2020 in which Kathyrn La Barre participated, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t3MkzE_k4yIm2Z7cD0NWdUIWD0cJEe1h/view?usp=sharing (https://www.academics4blacklives.com/).

3. Bibliography of resources informing this conversation can be found at https://go.illinois.edu/dialogue4change.

4. See bell hooks, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa, Robin Wall Hooks, Angela Davis, Linda Tuwei Smith, Eve Tuck, and Janet Helms.

5. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, California: AK Press, 2017).

6. For a discussion about location in this context, I have often referred my students to: K. Absolon and C. Willett "Putting ourselves forward: Location in

valuable insight into the student perspective on information literacy. We would like to thank Renee Romero, Doug Worsham, and Annie Pho for their engaging conference presentation and the WI+RE toolkit. We would not have embarked on this project without them planting the seed and laying the groundwork for collaborative, reflective, team-based learning and content generation.

Notes

1. Renee Romero, Doug Worsham and Annie Pho, "Better Together: Student-Led Collaborative Media Creation" (presentation, LOEX, Minneapolis, MN, May 10-11, 2019).

2. UCLA Library, "WI+RE: Writing Instruction + Research Education, https://uclalibrary.github.io/research-tips/ (accessed May 3, 2021).

3. Annie Armstrong and Helen Georgas, "Using interactive technology to teach information literacy concepts to undergraduate students," *Reference Services Review* 34, no. 4 (2006): 491-97.

4. The tutorials have been embedded on numerous research and subject guides and web pages on our library's website, such as the First-Year Writing Program guide (https://researchguides.uic.edu/intro) and the Interlibrary Loan webpage (https://library.uic.edu/help/article/1935/request-items). ℘

Aboriginal research," in L. A. Brown (ed.), *Research as resistance: Critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches* (Canadian Scholars Press, 2005), 97–126.

7. Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, "From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice," in L. Landreman (ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2013), 135-150, https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/from-safe-spaces-to-brave-spaces.pdf.'

8. Jamaican Historical Society, "Decolonizing Jamaican History: An Unfinished Project," JHS webcast series, 2020-21. ℘