

# Developing an Undergraduate Information Studies Curriculum in Support of Social Justice

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## Abstract

Through a review of the current state of Library and Information Studies (LIS) undergraduate education and the orientation of sample programs at consortium member iSchools, this article proposes an alternative pedagogical model that foregrounds the integration of a critical, social justice framework into undergraduate curricula. Based on an initial study conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) by the authors and other participants of the Winter/Spring 2015 Teacher Training Seminar, this essay, in addition to positing an approach towards the building of critically engaged undergraduate curriculum, moreover highlights the increasing need and support for LIS students and professionals that have a nuanced information praxis. Inspired by UCLA's own commitment to a social justice orientation, the authors also point towards existing advocacy for social justice in LIS undergraduate education in the field and professional literature. In turn, underscoring the broader movement for a critical education and practice within LIS.

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## Introduction

Conceived of originally as a proposal for an undergraduate major to the Department of Information Studies (IS) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), in collaboration with our colleagues in the Winter/Spring 2015 "Teaching Training Seminar" (led by Dr. Leah Lievrouw), this paper intends to explore further the rich possibilities that exist within the field of Library and Information Studies (LIS) for undergraduate level education. As we maintained earlier in our thinking, undergraduate majors and coursework within LIS that are explicitly aligned with a critical, social justice focus have enormous potential for engendering students and future professionals that are informed, insightful and equally contributive in areas as diverse as technology and systems design, information policy and advocacy, law and government, as well as in more traditional spheres of libraries and archives. In addition, the training of undergraduates in a critical LIS praxis, one that also places an emphasis on the practical applications of theories studied and explored, effectively lays the groundwork for the cultivation of potential candidates for PhD programs throughout the iSchool network; who will be able to skillfully parse with the dynamic and continuously expanding nuances of LIS as a field of inquiry.

As articulated in the proposal, we advocate for a pedagogical approach that tackles LIS undergraduate education with an eye towards the broader socio-cultural and political impact of information praxis. Building on the strengths of UCLA's IS program, which focuses on the history, philosophy and practice of information from a decidedly analytical and critical perspective, we urged the rigorous grounding of undergraduate students in both the qualitative and quantitative traditions that undergird the discipline as a means of accessing a wide breadth of historical, theoretical and methodological

techniques. Furthermore, taking a page from Matt Ratto and his Critical Making Lab at the University of Toronto, we thought it important to place a concerted emphasis on 'making' as a key component of thinking critically about information and its place in society. Imbuing information practices with a consciousness about their role and function in the world, and in the lives of people, significantly contributes towards an awareness of the ramifications of the actions of LIS students, scholars and professionals on their environments.

Therefore, within this paper, besides laying out the current landscape of LIS undergraduate education, we seek to impress upon the reader the need for a critical rethinking of the goal and purpose of this education. While simultaneously not wanting to detract from existing programs' contributions and functions, we also see a space for improvement wherein LIS can be further situated at the forefront of engagement with the challenges confronting the world community. Whether it involves environmental, legal, political or cultural issues, information is at the crux of human development and interaction in society, and fuels the engines of necessary change. LIS scholars, students and professionals are therefore well positioned to make key contributions and have a productive impact on how we move forward across a number of spheres. It is this that we ultimately perceive as what needs to be at the core of LIS undergraduate education, and what we will elaborate upon in the pages that follow. In turn, it is our hope that the model proposed will serve as a template for ongoing and future innovations in our field.

## Literature Review

### Undergraduate LIS Education

The majority of literature on undergraduate LIS instruction is centered in paradigms where professional education and preparation for LIS careers is undertaken at this level. It emerged in concert with larger trends in international and comparative LIS research in the 1990s and continued to grow into the 2000s. It includes descriptions of expanding undergraduate LIS education and challenges faced in Thailand's public universities (Butdisuwan & Gorman, 2002); comparative studies of LIS education in Latin America and the Caribbean (Gallardo, 2006); the quality of programs in library science in Pakistan (Mairaj & Kanwal, 2010); and the use of information and communications technologies in the education and training of undergraduate LIS students in Kenyan universities (Makori et al., 2013). This literature does not address IS work that has aims beyond the scope of professional education and training.

In the late-1990s and early-2000s a significant interest emerged in forming undergraduate degree programs within U.S. based LIS schools and departments. The justification for these new programs was centered around perceptions of a changing workplace in an increasingly information-oriented service-based economy (Sherron, 1997). Such an economy would require from college graduates new knowledge and critical understandings of information users, services and technologies (Mcinerney et al., 2002). These undergraduate programs, unlike earlier incarnations, were not degrees in library science or a more narrow professional preparation for information systems analysis and design careers, but instead aimed to examine information across sectors, public, private and personal. The move towards increasing course offerings in IS was not just the purview of degree granting programs, but reached across LIS education settings. For example, new courses emerged that were not merely scaled down versions of graduate courses. They instead attempted to combine foundational LIS skills, concepts, and theories with other elements of undergraduate training, including

critical thinking skills and research methods (Sutton, 1996). Whether through a degree program or courses in LIS departments, the need for LIS components, especially the exploration of knowledge creation and dissemination itself, in undergraduate education is evident. This paper offers one strategy for meeting that need and speculates on the implications of this approach for iSchools.

#### Social Justice and Diversity in LIS and LIS Education

Social inclusion, diversity, and equity have been topics of concern for those in LIS for the last 50 years. Indeed, critical analyses of these topics have become canonical within the field (Abilock, 2006; Rioux, 2010; Longstaff, 2011; Bonnici et al., 2012; Hudson, 2012; Lor and Britz, 2012; Duff et al., 2013; Jaggars, 2014; Schroeder and Hollister, 2014). Furthermore, as a growing body of literature has demonstrated, libraries, archives, and other information institutions produce and reproduce both social justice and injustice in their shaping of the past, engagement in the present (Duff et al 2013, p. 319), and building of futures. Tracing the intellectual history of social justice from its roots in philosophy, Wendy Duff et al. posit a framework for measuring the social justice impact of, in this case, archives. For them, social justice is the:

Ideal vision that every human being is of equal and incalculable value, entitled to shared standards of freedom, equality, and respect...Violations of these standards must be acknowledged and confronted. It specifically draws attention to inequalities of power and how they manifest in institutional arrangements and systemic inequities that further the interests of some groups at the expense of others in the distribution of material goods, social benefits, rights, protections, and opportunities. Social justice is always a process and can never be fully achieved' (2013, pp. 324-325).

As Todd Honma points out, this necessary attention to social justice is in direct contradistinction to a rhetoric of 'diversity' or 'multiculturalism' that works towards disguising the pressing need to address inequity, prejudice and marginalization, and which instead supports the status quo (Honma, 2005). Rather than focus on "...benign liberal multiculturalism that celebrates difference and promotes "cross cultural understanding" empty of critical analysis...(Ibid., p. 11), instead we must support a social justice project that contests inequality and the structures of power which continue to reinforce it.

We begin here with an assumption that social justice is a worthwhile goal and that LIS labor, scholarship, and education have much to contribute to the ways in which social justice is envisioned and enacted. Education has been identified as a key area to address social justice issues (Punzalan and Caswell, forthcoming; Gilliland 2000; White 2009; PACG 2011). In the realm of archival studies leading scholars have advocated for the concept of "pluralism" to be extended to archival education, which at its core is the explicit recognition of cultural difference, diverse epistemologies, and multiple ways of knowing as both equal and valid perspectives of knowledge creation (PACG 2011; Christen 2011; McKemish, Faulkhead and Russell 2011; Punzalan and Caswell, forthcoming). As Caswell et al. (2012), argue it is vital for archival education in a social justice paradigm to take a number of actions including the recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds and historically marginalized communities, promotion of classroom environments that are sensitive to the diverse cultural needs of students, implement and value diverse ontologies and epistemologies, and to engage in analyses of power both within and beyond the classroom. We argue that such steps should be extended to LIS field more broadly and to the education of undergraduates.

### Survey of Information Studies Undergraduate Programs

In May 2015, a preliminary qualitative survey was undertaken of the websites of U.S. and Canada-based programs that are members of the iSchool Consortium in order to better understand how mission and value statements influenced curricular content (iSchools Organization, 2012). In particular, we were interested in the extent to which current LIS programs were reaching undergraduate students, embracing values of social justice and diversity, and situating LIS concepts and topics within a critical, socially conscious discourse. At the time of our review, twenty-nine schools were assessed based on information that was publicly available on their websites. It bears noting that this methodological approach may not be fully indicative of each program's values, especially if they failed to articulate aspects of their goals and foci as part of their online presence, or if websites were in need of updating. It should also be acknowledged that a number of programs offer (and even require) courses in complementary fields, as well as internship and practicums, which potentially provide students a number of options outside specific LIS programs; which in turn may contain more socially and critically focused courses. The authors' general response to this program sample was that the LIS field is lacking in programs emphasizing a critical approach to information at the undergraduate level.

In order to assess the content of departmental websites, the authors first identified webpages of potential importance when seeking to understand a school's core values: Overview, About, and Welcome pages, mission & value statements, published class descriptions, as well as webpages that explicitly discussed diversity, inclusion, and community partnerships. In addition to these targeted documents, good faith efforts were made to manually read all pages within a given website to locate any mention of curriculum and social justice outside of these contexts. To facilitate a more global, orthogonal review of content, the authors then articulated a series of keywords that were used to review entire sites using its search function; these words included, diversity, social justice, equality, freedom, culture, praxis, pedagogy, and community. The reasoning behind such an approach was that these keywords would most likely be found within text engaging in social justice and diversity oriented discussions. For this preliminary examination, applicable key words, phrases, and class descriptions were documented and analyzed collectively in order to gain a qualitative sense of a department's approach to a social justice curriculum.

The choice of an undergraduate major or minor in some domain of LIS is becoming increasingly commonplace and is represented in over seventy-percent of the sampled iSchools. Given this rise in undergraduate enrollment, we contend that this is a prime moment for LIS programs to assess the content of their curriculum and to consider an orientation more focused on social justice. With the 2014 revision to the American Library Association's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which strongly advocates for critical information use and the "social nature of the information ecosystem," it is clear that professional organizations also see a need for such revisions in the instruction and teaching of information-related concepts (ACRL, 2015, p. 6). LIS undergraduate programs have the greatest capacity for conveying the importance of power, equity, and balanced representation in the use and dissemination of information resources and infrastructures. The extent to which current programs have incorporated this critical approach in their curriculum, however, varies widely.

Most programs articulate an investment in diversity, interdisciplinarity, and democracy, particularly as these issues relate to the students, faculty, and staff they

wish to attract. Nevertheless, none single-out social justice as a core tenant of their philosophical approach and demonstrate such values in the content of their courses. As Jonathan Furner has indicated, LIS has historically exhibited a strong “ethical dimension” that is quintessentially about the intersection of technology, institutions, and the people and communities these infrastructures serve; and we see this general theme lightly represented throughout the programs surveyed (Bawden & Robinson, 2012, p. xx). A few programs include diversity more concertedly, offering courses infused with values of diversity and cultural attentiveness. The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for example, excels in this regard, advertising the importance of diversity in their program through a detailed Diversity Plan that outlines the core steps toward a supportive and inclusive environment for faculty and staff; indicating that such values will permeate through to the curricular offerings and research goals (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2012). UNC Chapel Hill in turn lists a course titled “Going the Last Mile: Information Access for Underserved Populations” as part of their curriculum which adheres to their stated mission (University of North Carolina, 2015).

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is perhaps the most direct when advocating for a critical approach to the field, promising to explore the “relationship between power, knowledge, and information” as an essential tenet of their learning outcomes, offering a class in “Information Divides & Differences in a Multicultural Society” (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2013). Finally, the University of Toronto, Mississauga, has a Digital Interactive Media Program that is intent on a “critical analysis of the social impact of new and emerging technologies” (University of Toronto, Mississauga, 2015). Classes at the university include “Information Culture in Context,” “Advocacy and Library Issues,” and “The Public Library in the Community: Developing a Critical Practice.” Outside of these institutions, most programs remain primarily concerned with technical training, focusing on systems, programming, and infrastructure. Among the twenty-nine programs examined, it is clear there is a need for a more critical bent that demonstrates an interest in social inequities, justice, and critical practice.

While core courses in reference, knowledge organization, LIS foundations, children’s literature, and public librarianship are still found throughout these programs, the vast majority of offerings have shifted to those focusing on the management of technical infrastructures and data studies. Alongside these offerings, programs need to adopt forums that contest and interrogate information infrastructures as agents of change, such as Dr. Scott Bernard’s “Evaluating Disruptive Information Technologies” course at the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University (Bernard, 2015). In this course, Bernard focuses on information technologies as a disruptive and changing force, transforming our practices and engagement with “social norms, beliefs, power structures, and economic/political/military orders” (Ibid, p.1). Courses in critical LIS can take this approach one step further and situate this disruption within a number of cultural and social domains, with the aim of restoring social equity and justice within these infrastructures. While courses focused on programming languages, human-computer interaction, social media, web development, information visualization, and e-marketing, are essential to a balanced and current LIS education, it is vital that we frame these issues as medial infrastructures whose architecture and cultural position must be always questioned and analyzed.

Given these preliminary and qualitative results, the next phase of this study will encompass a rigorous content analysis of websites and course descriptions. Such an approach will allow the authors to more fully understand the topics of pedagogical and curricular concern for current iSchools. This examination will strive to categorize and

describe iSchools using a grounded analytic approach, similar to Kalervo Järvelin and Pertti Vakkari's review of journal articles within information science, in order to categorize their approaches to curriculum, and to present a fuller picture of their pedagogical landscape (1993). Success for such an approach will be measured by the publication of our results as an article and its subsequent use in the planning of iSchool curriculums to develop more critical and explicit social justice approaches to information professions and topics.

#### UCLA Program and Proposed Curriculum

The Department of Information Studies is situated within the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSEIS) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). GSEIS "is dedicated to inquiry, the advancement of knowledge, the improvement of professional practice, and service to the education and information professions" ("Mission and Vision," n.d.). Its mission is to engage in work that is "guided by the principles of individual responsibility and social justice, an ethic of caring, and commitment to the communities we serve" (Ibid.). The Department of IS currently offers degree-granting programs at masters and doctoral levels, as well as a small selection of undergraduate courses at lower and upper division levels. It is an iSchool with faculty and students who are drawn from across the social, human sciences and humanities, and who are engaged in rich thinking about the human, cultural, and technological aspects of information. IS research and practice is viewed by the department as a means "to support the making of culture and community in an increasingly pluralist, globalizing world" (Ibid.). UCLA has the only iSchool with an explicit social justice mandate and is committed to "a strong, specific ethical commitment to the advancement of social equity, social justice, individual and community empowerment, and the promotion of diversity, accountability, and intellectual openness" (Ibid.). In the words of Anne Gilliland having such a "social justice orientation requires educators to contemplate proactively how to orient educational activities to achieve those ends, and, equally, how to evaluate that those ends have indeed been achieved" (2011, p. 195).

The curriculum described here is the product of the authors' shared interests in social justice approaches to in LIS and engagements with IS undergraduate education. The authors are doctoral students in IS who hold MSLIS degrees. Our prior experiences teaching upper and lower division courses to UCLA undergraduates in IS, as well as in the LGBT Studies Program, Writing Programs, General Education Clusters, and for the UCLA Library informed the curriculum model developed here. The curriculum benefited greatly from a review of syllabi for existing graduate and undergraduate courses from within the department. The social justice and critical approach to LIS has long been represented in the Department's courses, though recent curricular revisions have more deeply embedded these foundations in their pedagogical approach. The new curricular core for the MSLIS program consists of four courses: Artifacts and Culture, Description and Access, Values and Communities, and Systems and Infrastructure (GSEIS, 2015). This core takes a systemic approach to LIS issues, situating technologies, information control, design, institutions, and policies, within a socially aware discourse focused on communities, diversity, intellectual freedom, social justice, and labor issues. The underlying premise being that information infrastructures are culturally-specific notions that should be assessed critically to understand engrained biases and power structures. In addition, existing undergraduate elective offerings such as "Information and Power" and "Planet Google," prove to offer students an LIS education infused with courses that

are “[engaged] with and [are] driven by real world information issues and communities and institutional needs” (GSEIS, 2015b).

The proposed undergraduate major highlights the department’s strengths in approaching the history, philosophy, and practice of information from a decisively analytical and critical perspective. The major is structured as a two-year upper division program with preparatory courses offered at the lower division level. The courses proposed in our curriculum follow the established structure for undergraduate courses, meeting twice per week for two-hour sessions over the course of ten-week quarters. Class sessions were designed to involve a variety of methods in order to best engage the diverse learning styles of students. There are four specializations proposed: Technologies, Systems, Design; Policy, Law, Ethics, Economics and Management/Institutions; Community and Practices; and Self-directed. Regardless of specialty students will engage with a wide range of issues pertaining broader socio-cultural and political impact of information praxis from a social justice perspective.

A brief review of select courses demonstrates the diversity of our approach to the critical study of information for undergraduates. In a course on “Information, Technology and Social Justice,” students would examine the interaction between information, information technology, information infrastructure and its social and cultural influences on and across social, historical, and political contexts. A social justice approach can also be seen in courses such as “Economics and Politics of Information” in which students would explore how private and public sector institutions and groups create, use and control information and IT to advance various interests, agendas, and issues, both in the U.S. and internationally. In another course on “Information Institutions and Cultural Memory,” students would turn a critical eye towards the role of diverse information institutions in the formation and stewardship of cultural memory. The undergraduate major would culminate in students taking advantage of the rich areas of critical research within the department to focus their own studies in order to guide and structure their fieldwork and final Capstone projects. These projects might take the form of a more traditional written thesis, or other diverse projects including building/design projects, service learning, media productions or gallery shows.

## Conclusion

With the increase in public discourse about the role of data in our everyday lives, LIS programs are expertly positioned to rein in the zeitgeist of misunderstanding that guides these discussions by helping to articulate the technical, as well as socio-cultural and political functionalities of information in society. By vigorously inserting themselves in the education and training of undergraduates, iSchools can intervene early in the lifecycle of the formation of conceptualizations and attitudes towards information technologies. Moreover, these programs can be at the forefront of creating generations of individuals who have a greater comprehension of how information interacts with and influences both the quotidian and larger structural systems. But as we noted throughout this paper, an LIS approach towards pedagogy, and specifically the educating of undergraduates, needs to be intrinsically tied to a concerted critical and social justice focus that interrogates information theories, methods, and practices, and contends with questions of inequity, marginalization, and power. Rather than placing the onus of undergraduate education on the more technical aspects of systems and programming, for example, we advocate for a critical LIS praxis that eagerly engages current social, political, and cultural issues, and which seeks to broaden perspectives on the role and agency of information in our communities. By designing LIS undergraduate curricula

intent on combining cutting-edge developments in technology with the latest in critical thought and making, we believe our students can be best prepared to be contributive thinkers and practitioners in any professional realm they participate in. Indeed, we argue that it is this kind of education and training which can best prepare students for the current and future challenges facing the information professions and wider society.

If our own department at UCLA was the inspiration and impetus for this project and our commitment to social justice within LIS, it is our hope that this example can be extended within the field. As noted earlier, other institutions such as UNC Chapel Hill and UW Madison, have made great strides towards including initiatives and coursework in their undergraduate programs that are concerned with questions of diversity, power and critical practices within LIS. We envision our curricular model for undergraduates to be one among many templates for the future development of pedagogy within the field that can aid in the dissemination and popularization of critical approaches to the study of information. Viewed as a collaborative effort among institutions rather than a project limited to UCLA, this reconceptualization of LIS undergraduate education is a necessary endeavor that invites discussion and exchange. We hope that this paper helps further, if not helps open, that conversation, and serves as a conduit for deeper dialogue.

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