

YOU GOT TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN MY CRITICAL PEDAGOGY! CONNECTING TWO THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TO INFORM OUR INSTRUCTIONAL IDENTITIES AND PRACTICES

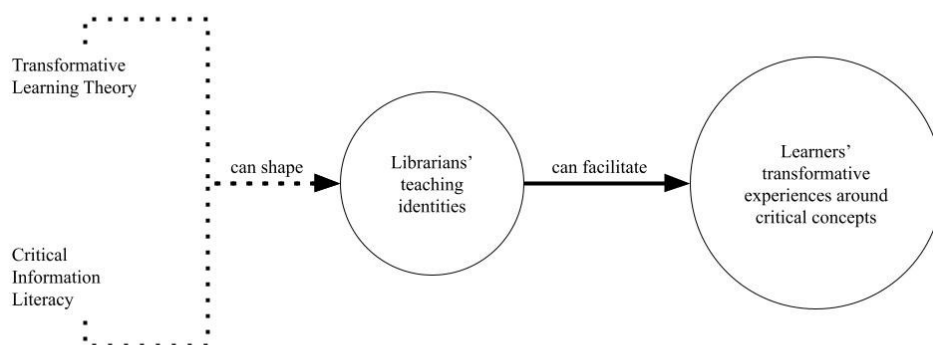
AMANDA NICHOLS HESS

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Accardi, Drabinski & Kumbier eds., 2010), academic librarians have meaningfully explored critical practices in our teaching and learning. Subsequent endeavors—including *Critical Library Pedagogy* (Pagowsky & McElroy eds., 2016), *Critical Information Literacy* (Downey, 2016), plus countless articles, presentations, and webinars—have cemented critical information literacy approaches and ideas as central to 21st century library instruction. In parallel, researchers have considered librarians’ teaching identities and how such perspectives may influence instructional approaches (for instance: Baer, 2021; Detmering, McClellan & Willenborg, 2019; Hays & Studebaker, 2019; Nichols Hess, 2018; Walter, 2008). Can we connect critical concepts and librarians’ teaching identities and practices in meaningful ways?

I posit that Mezirow’s (1981) transformative learning theory offers us a way to constructively consider these ideas. Like critical librarianship, pedagogy, and information literacy, transformative learning theory asks us to examine power structures, critique cultural systems, and work toward emancipation. In this paper, I outline how transformative learning can help us make sense of how we engage with critical information literacy so that we can develop more authentic, holistic teaching identities that we demonstrate through teaching praxis. We can use our individual understandings of how transformative learning and critical concepts work together to facilitate learners’ transformation around critical information literacy (see Figure 1).

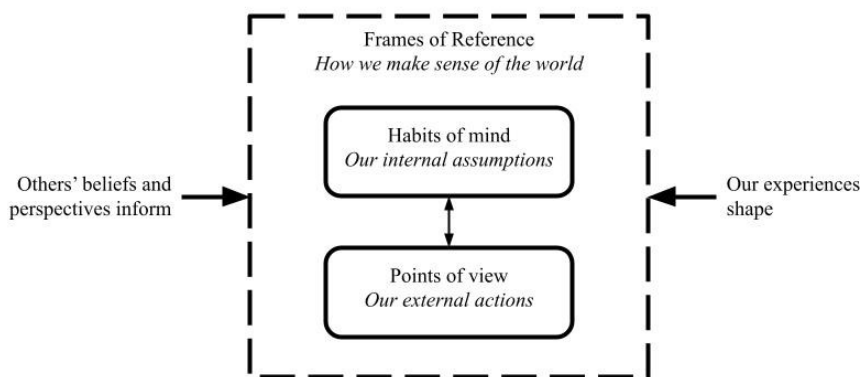
Figure 1: How transformative learning and critical information literacy can shape our teaching identities – which can in turn create transformative and critical learning experiences for students.



TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY & CRITICAL LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

In the 1970s, Jack Mezirow researched women's experiences returning to post-secondary education, and he used their experiences to construct transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow argued that adults often hold unexamined beliefs they've adopted from family members, religious or cultural communities, or other external perspectives over time; transformative learning offers us a way to understand how adults can change these attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Mezirow, 1981, 1991). Mezirow asserted that such transformation involves grappling with the cognitive structures they use to make sense of the world. Mezirow called these mental scaffolds our frames of reference (see Figure 2); by adulthood, such cognitive structures are well-established and may work without our conscious intention (Mezirow, 1997). Our frames of reference are made up of habits of mind, which reflect our internal assumptions; and points of view, which are how we externally convey our beliefs and attitudes to others (Mezirow, 2000). When adults intentionally consider how they understand the world around them, as well as the cognitive structures that shape their thinking, they're engaged in reconsidering their habits of mind. If these ways of thinking change, adults' external-facing points of view—their actions and behaviors—can change as well. When both habits of mind and points of view change, we revise our frames of reference—which Mezirow called process perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000).

Figure 2: Our frames of reference are composed of habits of mind and points of view; both our experiences and others' attitudes influence how we think and act in the world.



Perspective transformation involves:

1. Experiencing a disorienting dilemma;
2. Engaging in self-examination;
3. Critically assessing assumptions;
4. Recognizing that others have similar experiences;
5. Exploring options for behavior or action;
6. Developing a plan of action;
7. Acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills;
8. Trying on new roles and integrate feedback they receive into their practices / actions;
9. Developing competence, confidence, and relationships based on new ways of thinking; and
10. Reintegrating into environments with a changed perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

Although these ten stages are ordered, Mezirow asserted that adults' experiences may not be linear, and that they may experience false starts, stall-outs, and even abandon the process altogether (Mezirow, 1997). In the 50+ years since Mezirow introduced the idea of perspective transformation, researchers have explored adults' transformative experiences in a wide array of settings, including in academic librarianship (Nichols Hess, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b).

While transformative learning theory and perspective transformation can apply to many adult learning contexts, critical library pedagogy and information literacy offer us discipline-grounded ways of understanding critical theory. Critical theorists argue that our social structures are designed to protect existing privilege and power dynamics, thereby benefitting individuals who already hold power while simultaneously reinforcing the systems that got them there (Ketchum, 2020). According to critical theory, maintaining such status quos perpetuate racism, sexism, ableism, and other practices that oppress those in a society who don't hold power; critical practitioners interrogate and dismantle such ideologies (Ketchum, 2020). When it comes to librarianship, critical work involves addressing how libraries and librarians support and engage with these oppressive systems and power structures (Ketchum, 2020). Librarians have focused critical librarianship in ways that align with different facets of our profession, and that includes (but certainly is not limited to) library instruction. Accordingly, critical library pedagogy offers us a way of thinking about

how educators and learners learn from each other and create new knowledge (Keer, 2010). And in our information literacy instruction, critical approaches involve “developing a critical consciousness about information” (Elmborg, 2006, p. 198). When we do so, we can develop a more inclusive way of seeing information literacy—as both knowledge and practices—while also empowering learners to engage with the “sociopolitical, economic, and cultural aspects of... information and the research process” (Downey, 2016, p. 173).

I’m not the first person to suggest connections between transformative learning and critical librarianship. As aforementioned, they have common roots; both theoretical approaches grow from Freire’s conscientization and critique banking models of education (Mezirow, 1981; Tewell, 2016). What’s more, Annie Downey (2016) noted that connecting critical pedagogy and transformative learning theory in library instruction can create a “social-emancipatory approach,” which, in turn aligns with critical information literacy goals (p. 49). What I can add, though, is how we can take that connection further. If we use Mezirow’s ten perspective transformation phases as a heuristic to consider critical librarianship, pedagogy, and information literacy instruction, we can reflect on our habits of mind in our work as educators. We can also use this structure to consider how our points of view demonstrate critical concepts or practices in our teaching. And if we look beyond our own personal transformative experiences with critical information literacy, we can make these stages a scaffold around which we intentionally facilitate instructional interactions that help learners grapple with those concepts in productive, growth-oriented ways.

INSTRUCTION LIBRARIANS’ PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION AROUND CRITICAL CONCEPTS

Although instruction librarians may have common experiences across institution types and teaching environment, we are certainly not a monolith. In thinking about critical concepts in our perspective transformation, then, we need to first acknowledge that every librarian will engage with these ideas in unique ways. While I’ve tried to outline broad connections between transformational learning, critical information literacy, and teaching identity, I recognize that how each individual approaches these concepts may be very different. I’ve included several questions at the end of this section that you can use to consider perspective transformation and critical information literacy for your own teaching identity.

The first stages of perspective transformation are inward-looking: We feel disorientated when we recognize our beliefs and experiences are incongruous, and we experience a dilemma when we decide whether to engage with that dissonance. Instruction librarians might encounter disorientation in sea-change moments (often referred to as epochal events) or from experiences that accumulate over time (Mezirow, 1981). In either type of experience, we may find ourselves critically considering both our assumptions and our privilege within the information ecosystem and instructional interactions. Librarians who choose to engage with such disorientation may then deal with critical self-examination, often through self-reflection and metacognitive practices; from there, they might grapple with a sense of alienation—from whom they thought they were, or their values as an educator. Regardless of how our self-examination and alienation take shape, instruction librarians can use these moments to critically interrogate the invisible systems that structure our teaching practices, our information systems, and libraries as organizations.

Once librarians have grappled with these internal phases, they can constructively engage with others to share their experiences and begin exploring alternative ways forward. Mezirow (1978) advocated for discourse as a tool to structure these (and subsequent) transformative phases, and this approach offers us a useful connection point with critical library pedagogy. Doherty (2010), Drabinski (2019), and McCartin and Dineen (2018) each identified benefits that such dialogical interactions with colleagues offer us for critical information literacy concepts. Instruction librarians can also use discourse to continue in their perspective transformation process and develop requisite knowledge and skills, try out new approaches, and shore up their new ways of thinking and acting. The final phase of perspective transformation—reintegrating into our environments with new perspectives—may take varied forms for instruction, but all permutations will share a common goal: enacting more authentic, holistic, and flexible teaching identities that meaningfully incorporate critical information literacy. For the instruction librarian engaged in perspective transformation around critical concepts, we can see reintegration as praxis—where theory shapes practices, and practices inform theoretical constructs.

Since perspective transformation is an inherently personal and individual process, I encourage you to consider these questions, which connect transformative learning theory, critical information literacy, and your own experiences:

- Have you experienced (or are you experiencing) disorientation around critical information literacy or pedagogy?
- What approaches do you find most useful to examine or assess your engagement with critical library instruction?
- Who can you connect with to have meaningful discourse about critical pedagogy and information literacy?
- How have you gained (or might you gain) the skills, knowledge, competence, and confidence to successfully integrate critical information literacy practices into your instructional interactions?
- What does “reintegration” look like for you?

CRITICAL PRACTICES & LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Now that we've considered how perspective transformation can structure how we engage with critical concepts, we can shift our focus to fostering such experiences for others. Creating environments where learners can become more aware of their own assumptions is a well-established approach to facilitate transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 2008), so instruction librarians can use their own experiences and self-reflection to support such growth for learners. Because students often come to higher education with black-and-white, all-or-nothing mindsets (Swanson, 2010), critical information literacy concepts offer us meaningful disorientation opportunities. For example, have learners considered the behind-the-scenes structures like algorithms that limit or privilege our information access? Or how do they think about who has authority, why certain kinds of information have value, or how these factors support entrenched power and privilege systems? We can use such complex ideas to create conditions where learners can encounter disorientation (Downey, 2016). In such instances, problem-posing (Swanson, 2010), concept mapping (Mezirow, 1997), and guided self-reflection (Dirkx, 2006) may help learners to grapple with their disorientation, self-examination, and feelings of alienation as they reconsider what (and how) they think.

Discourse with others can help learners recognize that they're not the first—nor only—student to work through such experiences. Once they're ready to move forward, instruction librarians can employ critical incidents, concept mapping, and metaphor analysis to help learners explore alternative ways of thinking and acting (Mezirow, 1997). In such exploration and planning, learners can better understand themselves, the options available to them, and what it means to think autonomously. Instruction librarians can use problem-based learning and service learning facilitate transformed perspectives as we help learners to acquire and hone both knowledge and skills that they need to be critically information literate (Harris, 2010; Sinkinson & Lingold, 2010). We can look to metacognitive or reflective activities—like McCartin and Dineen's (2018) "learning-oriented questions" (p. 29) when we want to support those learners who are ready to strengthen their competence in and confidence with critical information literacy. When it comes to this phase, we may only be able to identify learners' reintegration retrospectively (e.g., seeking evidence of attitudinal, belief, or behavioral change). However, encouraging learners' self-reflection, prompting them to consider whether their thoughts about information, libraries, and where they fit into these ecosystems have evolved along the way may help us get a sense of learners' engagement in the transformative process.

Now, I encourage you to consider how you've worked to facilitate learners' perspective transformation around critical information literacy ideas—or, how you could foster such experiences in the future:

- What critical information literacy concepts have learners found most disorienting? How have you helped (or might you help) them grapple with that disorientation?
- How do you create learning interactions or environments where students can push past self-examination or alienation and connect with others in meaningful ways?
- What strategies have helped (or might help) learners to gain the skills, knowledge, competence, and confidence to make sense of critical information literacy ideas in their own learning?
- What kind of evidence would demonstrate that learners have "reintegrated" with changed practices and perspectives about critical information literacy concepts? Why?

TRAIN-THE-TEACHER – TO TRANSFORM

While we might facilitate transformative learning experiences around critical information literacy in classroom-based instruction, we shouldn't limit ourselves to seeing the potential for perspective transformation in those learning experiences. If we rely on our interactions with students to facilitate transformative experiences, we'll encounter time constraints, limited instructional autonomy, and surface-level interactions that limit the potential for any perspective transformation. However, if we think beyond classroom instruction and consider connecting with disciplinary faculty, we may be able to foster perspective transformation around critical information literacy ideas that's both broader and more meaningful for learners. Teaching faculty to integrate information literacy instruction isn't new to conversations about effective library instruction generally or, for that matter, critical library pedagogy more specifically. Both Hammons (2022) and Lechtenberg and Donovan (2022) have advocated for such train-the-teacher approaches for integrating critical information literacy in student learning, noting that it can offer librarians deeper and more authentic ways to integrate these concepts. Indeed, professional development with our disciplinary colleagues may be the most viable option if we want to make meaningful connections between learners' experiences and critical concepts.

Educator-centered professional development might prompt disorienting experiences around critical information literacy; it can also provide space where faculty can deal with disorienting dilemmas they've encountered around students' academic research, information systems and structures, or other critical concepts. From there, we can use many of the same approaches we identified

for ourselves and our learners—self-reflection, concept mapping, problem-posing—to help faculty engage in meaningful self-examination and assessment. And we can share our own experiences with feeling discontent and alienation, as well as navigating change in our instructional work to benefit our teaching colleagues in ways we can't necessarily do with other learners. Faculty may be able to build on these connections to create opportunities where learners can connect with critical information literacy concepts alongside disciplinary knowledge. Here again, instruction librarians can use discourse-centric approaches (e.g., problem-based learning, problem-posing, critical incidents, concept mapping) with faculty to explore alternative options, build requisite knowledge and skills, and test out potential approaches to integrate critical information literacy in their classrooms. Such experiences can also help educators to build competence and confidence in critical concepts while establishing new relationships around these facets of their instructional practices.

Instruction librarians' work, then, becomes about using a transformative lens to help our colleagues connect with critical information literacy concepts. If we can create spaces where they can revise their own habits of mind and frames of reference about authority, information value, the political aspects of knowledge, and other critical information literacy concepts, the disciplinary faculty we work with can more effectively create instructional settings where learners can engage in their own transformative thinking. When we focus on facilitating effective discourse with our instructional colleagues, we can all work to explore our frames of reference and habits of mind while developing more nuanced understandings of each other and invisible systems that shape how we interact with, use, and create information today.

Just as we've done for both ourselves and learners, I encourage you to stop and think about perspective transformation and critical information literacy instruction through a train-the-teacher lens:

- What critical information literacy concepts could disciplinary faculty find disorienting? How can you connect with faculty members around such disorientation?
- Does the idea of teaching-the-teacher around critical information literacy concepts prompt a disorienting dilemma for you? Why or why not?
- What strategies would be most useful to help disciplinary faculty gain the skills, knowledge, competence, and confidence to meaningfully integrate critical information literacy ideas in their instruction?
- What kind of evidence would demonstrate that faculty have "reintegrated" with changed practices and perspectives about critical information literacy? Why?

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we connected transformative learning theory and critical information literacy to meaningfully influence our identities as educators and engage in critical pedagogy in intentional ways. From our own reflection and understanding, we identified how we can help others—whether students or disciplinary faculty—to engage with meaningful perspective transformation experiences around critical information literacy. In these efforts we're considering what Edward Taylor (2008) called the central question to any educator's perspective transformation process: are we willing to transform in the process of helping learners to transform? When we are, we can develop teaching identities that are informed by theory, thereby engaging in instructional praxis. And we can then use this praxis to continue to create conditions where students' perceptions about information, libraries, and even learning itself may be transformed.

REFERENCES

- Accardi, M. T., Drabinski, E., & Kumbier, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods*. Library Juice Press.
- Baer, A. 2021. Academic librarians' development as teachers: A survey on changes in pedagogical roles, approaches, and perspectives. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 15(1), 26-53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/15.1.2846>
- Detmering, R., McClellan, S., & Willenborg, A. (2019). A seat at the table: information literacy assessment and professional legitimacy. *College & Research Libraries*, 80(5), 720-737. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.80.5.720>
- Dirkx, J. (2006). "Engaging emotions in adult learning: A Jungian perspective on emotion and transformative learning." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 109, 15-26. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.204>
- Doherty, J. J. (2008). "Towards self-reflection in librarianship: What is praxis." *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays from Progressive Librarian*, 109-18. <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL26/011.pdf>

- Downey, A. (2016). *Critical information literacy: Foundations, inspiration, and ideas*. Library Juice Press.
- Drabinski, E. (2019). "What's so critical about critical librarianship?" *Art Libraries Journal*, 44(2), 49-57.
- Elmborg, J. (2006). "Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32(2), 192-199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2005.12.004>
- Hammons, J. (2022). "The faculty-focused model of information literacy: Insights from the faculty development literature." *Journal of Information Literacy*, 16(2), 22-40. <https://doi.org/10.11645/16.2.3222>
- Harris, B. (2010). "Encountering values: The place of consciousness in the *Competency Standards*." In M. Accardi, E. Drabinski, & A. Kumbier (Eds.), *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods*, 279-292. Library Juice Press.
- Hays, L., & Studebaker, B. (2019). Academic instruction librarians' teacher identity development through participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 13(2), 4. <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2019.130204>
- Ketchum, D. (2020). "Introduction: Critical Librarianship," In S. S. Hines & D. Ketchum (Eds.), *Critical Librarianship*, 1-3. Emerald Publishing Group.
- Lechtenberg, U. & Donovan, C. (2022). "Undoing Our instructional past: Envisioning new models for information literacy." *College & Research Libraries*, 83(5), 837-840. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.5.837>
- McCartin, L. F., & Dineen, R. (2018). *Toward a critical-inclusive assessment practice for library instruction*. Library Juice Press.
- Keer, G. (2010). "Critical pedagogy and information literacy in community colleges." In M. Accardi, E. Drabinski, & A. Kumbier (Eds.), *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods*, 149-60. Library Juice Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). "Perspective transformation." *Adult Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 100-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202>
- Mezirow, J. (1981). "A critical theory of adult learning and education." *Adult Education*, 32(1), 3-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171368103200101>
- Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). "Transformative learning: Theory to practice." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>
- Mezirow, J. (2000). "Learning to think like an adult," In J. Mezirow and associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*, 3-33. Jossey-Bass.
- Nichols Hess, A. (2018). *Transforming academic library instruction: Shifting teaching practices to reflect changed perspectives*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nichols Hess, A. (2019a). Academic librarians' educational factors and perceptions of teaching transformation: An exploratory examination. *Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice*, 14(3), 52-76. <https://doi.org/10.18438/ebliip29526>
- Nichols Hess, A. (2019b). Instructional modalities and perspective transformation: How academic librarians' experiences in face-to-face, blended/hybrid, and online instruction influence their teaching identities. *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning*, 13(4), 353-368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533290x.2020.1720887>
- Nichols Hess, A. (2020a). Academic librarians' teaching identities and work experiences: Exploring relationships to support perspective transformation in information literacy instruction. *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(4), 331-353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1721939>

- Nichols Hess, A. (2020b). Instructional Experience and Teaching Identities: How Academic Librarians' Years of Experience in Instruction Impact Their Perceptions of Themselves as Educators. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 14(2), 153-180. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2020.14.2.1>
- Pagowsky, N., & McElroy, K. (Eds.). (2016). *Critical library pedagogy*. Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Sinkinson, C & Lingold, M. C. (2010). "Re-visioning the library seminar through a lens of critical pedagogy." In M. Accardi, E. Drabinski, & A. Kumbier (Eds.), *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods*, 81-88. Library Juice Press.
- Swanson, T. (2010). "Information is personal: critical information literacy and personal epistemology." In M. Accardi, E. Drabinski, & A. Kumbier (Eds.), *Critical library instruction: Theories and methods*, 265-277. Library Juice Press.
- Taylor, E. W. (2008) "Transformative learning theory." *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 119, 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.301>
- Tewell, E. (2016). Putting critical information literacy into context: How and why librarians adopt critical practices in their teaching. *in the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/putting-critical-information-literacy-into-context-how-and-why-librarians-adopt-critical-practices-in-their-teaching/>
- Walter, S. (2008). Librarians as Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry into Professional Identity. *College & Research Libraries*, 69(1), 51-71. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.69.1.51>