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Leave Your “Expert” Hat at the Door: Embracing Critical Pedagogy to Create a Community of Librarian Learners

Marisol Ramos

University of Connecticut - Storrs, marisol.ramos@uconn.edu

Jennifer Snow

University of Connecticut - Storrs, jennifer.snow@uconn.edu

Sharon Giovenale

University of Connecticut, sharon.giovenale@uconn.edu

Kathleen Labadorf

University of Connecticut - Storrs, kathy.labadorf@uconn.edu

Dawn Cadogan

Amherst College, dcadogan@amherst.edu

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HANDBOOK

**Critical
Library
Pedagogy**

Volume 1

ESSAYS AND WORKBOOK ACTIVITIES

Edited by Nicole Pagowsky
and Kelly McElroy



Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook

Volume 1: Essays and Workbook
Activities

*edited by
Nicole Pagowsky
and Kelly McElroy*

*Association of College and Research Libraries
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CHAPTER 20*

Leave Your “Expert” Hat at the Door

Embracing Critical Pedagogy to Create a Community of Librarian Learners

Marisol Ramos, Dawn Cadogan, Sharon Giovenale, Kathleen R. Labadorf, and Jennifer Snow

Introduction

The purpose of these activities is to bring together an open-minded community of learners that will foster a critical pedagogy environment among librarians in their workplace. In this way, librarians can reflect on their instruction and develop new skills and insights that will benefit both themselves and their students.

Outcomes

- Establish an engaged community of learners
- Provide a safe environment where *critical vulnerability* is allowed for *critical pedagogy* to be learned and applied to library instruction practice

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- Foster self-reflection and self-reflexivity among members to improve and deepen practice
- Share the lessons learned with the broader library community

Establishing a Community of Learners: Considerations

Before you begin a critical pedagogy community of learners at your institution, there are a few questions you need to answer. Addressing the issues in table 20.1 will generate talking points to ensure support for the community.

	Considerations	Suggestions
1	How will you discover who within your library is interested in critical pedagogy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for volunteers, e.g., librarians with an interest in instruction
2	How will you develop the group's charge?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncover your members' interest within critical pedagogy • Identify the core issues that you want to learn • Keep it simple • Be open to future revisions
3	What will the group's goals be?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep them specific and achievable • Advance ideals delineated in the charge • Ensure goals reflect the varied interests of group members
4	How should meetings be conducted?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set ground rules and meeting norms* • Decide who the facilitator will be • Document ideas, activities, and decisions
<p>* We recommend the NASCO (North American Students of Cooperation) Integrative Facilitation guidelines https://www.nasco.coop/resources/essentials-integrative-facilitation, which can be useful to foment open discussions in a welcoming environment.</p>		

Fostering Reflection and Reflexivity within the Community

Encourage community members to embrace what Marlene Ruck Simmonds calls *critical vulnerability*, a philosophical and leadership approach that asks individuals to take risks on oppressive systems embedded within academia.¹ By creating a community of learners that embraces vulnerability among peers,

members can share thoughts, concerns, doubts, and fears related to their practices vis-à-vis the institutional culture they inhabit. There are many ways to apply this approach. For example, you could use existing literature as a guidepost to frame discussions in the community. Set the tone of your group meetings by selecting one practical work and one theoretical. For example:

- Practical reading to provide real risk-taking classroom strategies: “How Do I Get Them to Pay Attention? Classroom Strategies for One-Shot Instruction” in Buchanan and McDonough’s *The One-Shot Library Instruction Survival Guide*
- Theoretical works to examine how a unidirectional teaching mindset works in opposition to student empowerment: chapter 2 of Paulo Freire’s seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or chapter 1, “Engaged Pedagogy,” in bell hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress*

For the inaugural meeting select readings that will help to unify community members’ common goals in teaching. During discussions, connect readings to actual work experiences and practices. In later meetings, give all members the opportunity to select readings and lead discussions so that each member’s unique interests are given equal time and respect.

Another useful activity is to dedicate time for each member to share their teaching experiences to encourage reflection and reflexivity. In our experience, these shared conversations help members reflect on their practices, underlying assumptions, and external factors affecting interactions with students. This activity provides an opportunity for members to shed the role of sage on the stage and embrace and reacquaint themselves with the role of learners as new ideas and practical applications are discussed.

Reflexive Journaling: An Introspective Tool

Reflexive journaling is an excellent tool to keep track and reflect on our practice both as an individual and as part of a group. To realize the greatest benefits from this group experience, suggest all members put emerging thoughts, reactions, reflections, and new practices into a personal journal entry regularly. Use this tool to reach back to uncover assumptions or beliefs. How do they hold up? Which ones now need rethinking? How have they changed through this experience?

Each participant is encouraged to keep a journal for their own benefit.

Some suggestions to inspire your writing could be

- Connections made with previous learning
- Thoughts reinforced by a reading or discussion
- I have questions about _____.

- I will _____ differently because _____.
- New insights/ideas

Sharing with Your Library Community and Beyond

Leave the comfort of your group of learners and share or discuss your experiences with the library community and offer opportunities to increase your colleagues' critical consciousness. Use table 20.2 to identify methods for sharing and exchanging ideas with your whole library community.

Key Lesson (Some Suggestions)	Suggested Format	Methods of Sharing
Incorporating active learning techniques in the teaching of literature reviews	Informal events to foster open discussion	Brown bags; roundtable discussions; THATCamp-style meeting
Reflexive journaling as a tool for self-improvement and understanding	Open forum for all staff	Departmental meetings; town hall
A member's reflection of lessons learned and ideas for self-improvement, e.g., after an instruction session, reference transaction, conference, or presentation	Personal narratives	Staff blogs; library newsletter

Conclusion

Librarians who bring critical pedagogy into their practice and classrooms are not simply “information deliverers.”²² We are professionals who grow and create knowledge continuously through self-reflection and rigorous intellectual challenge. We are culturally aware and recognize that educational practice exists in political and contested spaces where the historical and cultural awareness of the dominant group is accepted as the norm.

We hope these activities inspire library practitioners not to be afraid to leave the role of experts and embrace the role of learners (that mix of joy, fear, wonder, vulnerability, rebellion) as a way to turn everyday practice into the praxis of critical pedagogy.

Notes

1. Marlene Ruck Simmonds, “Critical Vulnerability: An Imperative Approach to Educational Leadership,” *Journal of Thought* 42, no. 1/2 (Spring–Summer 2007): 79–97.
2. Joe L. Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (New York: P. Lang, 2008), 25.

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