LIS Education in an Interdisciplinary Frame: Integrating Digital Media into the Ethics of Digital Personhood

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Rhode Island integrates digital media into its curricula and research as part of its ongoing interdisciplinary framework. Suggesting it is incumbent on LIS educators to both teach technological skills and examine digital media tools as objects of intellectual inquiry, this article contends that LIS education must consider core epistemological questions which inform the field and address significant philosophical and cultural questions regarding our digital selves. The article considers how we can attend to issues of equity for diverse populations, and work towards understanding the assumptions inherent in digital spaces and technological tools which are guiding the creation of our digital borders.

Keywords: Education, interdisciplinary, curricula, digital media, library and information studies, personhood, law

1. LIS EDUCATION IN TRANSFORMATION

Just as the American Library Association (ALA) President Sari Feldman's 2016 campaign 'Libraries Transform' suggests, library schools in the United States are experiencing a major transformation. Some current or formerly ALA-accredited library schools have transformed into I-schools (information schools), notably the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Illinois[1], emphasising the technological and data-driven nature of information science, and distancing themselves from traditional approaches to library school education. And so, as a potential rift emerges between those schools driven by ALA standards and those driven by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), the chasm between them grows larger. As such, library and information studies (LIS) education in the United States is at an interesting crossroads-serving the wide ranging community needs of libraries, which now also means producing information technology specialists. At the University of Rhode Island (URI), we are not so much mirroring the chasm between these approaches as we are straddling both sides of the spectrum by converging library studies and information science particularly in our reliance on teaching digital media. In our Graduate School of Library and Information Studies (GSLIS), our classes and our curriculum integrate digital media as pedagogical tools and critical objects of inquiry.

Taking a broad approach to the study of library and information science, like many schools, we forge strong alliances with programs in communication and media studies and engage in cross-disciplinary discussions and research that benefit from external collaborations. Specifically, at URI, we are now located in the Harrington School of Communication and Media, which houses five other academic units-Communication Studies, Film/ Media, Journalism, Public Relations, and Writing & Rhetoric-and allows us to draw on the strengths and resources of our affiliated programs. As a result, we highlight the interdisciplinary nature of LIS education, demonstrating the ways in which interdisciplinarity is both an intellectual endeavor and a resource-sharing mechanism. We are not alone, however: many U.S. library and information schools are now housed in either colleges of education (such as SUNY Buffalo, University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of North Carolina, Greensboro), or communication colleges or schools (as in the cases of Kent State, Rutgers, the University of South Carolina, and the University of Kentucky). Our placement within the Harrington School of Communication and Media means our students' study of digital media is done amongst access to high-end film and editing equipment and software, and media law and writing for technology courses. Our students can learn from scholars and students alike across disciplines in this venture, noting overlapping yet distinct disciplinary ways of visualising and interpreting texts and using contemporary technology and media.

The interdisciplinary curriculum, cross-disciplinary affiliations, and digital media research is exemplified in our current administration of a US $500,000 Federal Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant. Blending our traditional focus on library education with

our contemporary approach to digital media pedagogy, this grant is funding us to teach a cohort of school and public librarians how to integrate digital media technologies into their libraries, thereby inculcating patrons of these libraries-both students and members of the public-with empowering digital literacy skills to make them critical consumers and able producers of digital media products. The grant is allowing us to host a variety of workshops on such subjects as Scratch coding and Stop motion animation, as well as partner with the Providence Children's Film Festival and the Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS) for the State of Rhode Island to orchestrate practical and theoretical conversations about critical analyses and consumption of digital media. Through the workshops offered and the conversations being engendered, the university is not only teaching digital media skills, but we are also encouraging people to reflect on what it means to be a digital citizen in this information age[2].

Our cross-disciplinary partnerships are both a cause and effect of our emergence into digital media leadership. Our borders touch on the work of our colleagues in Film/ Media and Communication Studies and spread beyond our immediate partners in our school of communication and media to our colleagues in English, History, and Education. For example, we currently offer an optional track in school library media through which we have a strategic alliance with our School of Education. Similarly, we offer popular dual-degree programs with the English and History Departments so students can graduate with MA/MLIS degrees in less time than it would take for them to complete these degrees separately. Those students who complete such dual degrees are grounded in the traditions and trajectories of the Digital Humanities, and are well-prepared for specialty careers in museums, archives, and humanities reference/curriculum materials jobs across a range of libraries both public and private.

Sticking to our roots in training library professionals as advocates for community, Library and Information Studies at URI, in its local, regional, national, and international manifestations, lists responsiveness to our communities as a central tenet of all the work we do. Because we are devoted to making our communities thrive, we work closely with the State through the Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS), Coalition of Library Advocates (COLA), Rhode Island Library Association (RILA), and New England Library Association (NELA). By collaborating with and receiving continuous feedback from state and regional library officials, we provide leadership training to libraries and people across the State and region, caring for the well-being of our constituents by improving literacies, increasing access to information, and providing them with resources that should never be reserved only for the highly educated or wealthy. At least since the free public library movement, libraries have been the great democratising and equalising force in society. As times have changed and the needs

and demographics of our constituents shifted, library educators and professionals have adapted to meet the growing needs of our communities, particularly with regard to creating access points for digital media and internet technologies.

2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS WHICH LIS EDUCATION CALLS FORTH FOR EXAMINATION

Although the information sought by library patrons has shifted from primarily text products to incorporate all forms of old and new media, some foundational, epistemological questions continue to inform many of the inquiries animating contemporary LIS teaching and research. For example, a central query we explore is how our frameworks of knowing are created or impacted by the ways in which we search for information in an age when that information continues to multiply indefinitely. In both the physical and virtual realms, we have considered 'wayfinding' to help answer this question in geographical terms. Professor and theorist Lauren Mandel has stated, for instance, that '{w}ayfinding is a spatial information process that allows people to orient and navigate in the built environment.'[3] By drawing on design thinking and considering the reorganisation of contemporary libraries, Mandel discusses how people literally find their pathways to texts in physical libraries. But we can extend this statement metaphorically to capture the essence and conundrum of our contemporary moment: how do we come to terms with the labyrinth of information now available in our virtual worlds? How, more precisely, do we find the information we want and need when we are searching amidst an overwhelming amount of information with sometimes little critical skill at sorting, finding, and evaluating content? Our interdisciplinary courses ask students to think about how to evaluate and move between pathways of information, creating critical thinkers and close readers of texts.[4]

We as library professionals, educators, and researchers can do a lot to deliver resources and information to our constituents, but we also have an obligation to teach them and the research community about our complicity in digital citizenship. It has to be asked what happens to the boundaries of selves, cultures, ethnicities, races, and nationalities, when we digitally perform ourselves in virtual spaces. Historically, scholars like Gloria Anzaldua asked American Studies thinkers to consider Mestiza Consciousness as occurring at the Borderlands/ La Frontera. Anzaldua states as her formative preface: 'The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. . . Living on borders . . . keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an alien element.'[5] These are similar concerns of the contemporary LIS researcher

and educator, and LIS helps articulate the ambiguity and complexity of new digital borders, exploring what happens in the "thirdspaces" (in Edward Soja's term) of digital culture.[6] LIS educators and professionals are at the forefront of questioning how the nature of identity and its many manifestations gets presented or performed in bordered or borderless digital zones.

Our digital citizenship and identities oftentimes accentuate matters of discrimination and issues of power relations in the same way our physical identities do. For example, Melissa Villa Nicholas is studying the ways in which a group like The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking (REFORMA) is impacting not only the performance of the digital self specifically, but LIS education more generally. As Dr. Nicholas writes, 'In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, REFORMA members were organising at the juncture of the struggle for Latina/o rights and the digital age, anticipating a rapidly changing future with new technologies. The status of many Latinas/os in the United States with regard to racial and gender discrimination and class disparity positioned REFORMA as a librarian professional and activist organisation during the digital age.'[7] Nicholas invokes the 'digital divide,' pointing to the disparities brought about and reinforced by the digital era. According to her, {w}ith the digital age came a new phenomenon, the digital divide.

The digital divide is the phenomenon of a gap in access to information, technologies, and Internet that have become crucial for basic access to resources for a better quality of life in the United States and around the world. This gap manifests among populations based on race, gender and income, and can greatly affect an individual and group ability to access such resources as job applications, government documents, housing forms, online applications for welfare and online classes, to name a few. LIS education must necessarily address this by teaching practical skills, but also embracing lines of inquiry concerning where to find technological contact zones that can help bridge gaps of power and privilege, and create a new learning paradigm for equitable access to education.

With the convergence of library studies, information science, and questions of power, identity, political structures, and social policies, the contemporary manifestation of our discipline remains relevant to the extent it continues to serve our communities, engage in foundational questions, and tackle the disparities that come with developing our digital lives in new borderless spaces. While we might have always been concerned with such issues as way finding, it has never been more difficult to ferret out and evaluate which paths to follow. We as LIS educators play a critical role in training students, library professionals, and information leaders to think critically and philosophically about our work, and to disseminate this knowledge to our many diverse communities.

3. DIGITAL PERSONHOOD

The digital identities we constitute are no less governed by legal questions than our physical lives, and LIS education in the United States is profoundly concerned with laws and the American legal systems' concepts of self and textual ownership. The curricula is anchored in training people through legal epistemologies-ways we know the world through the legal constructs which bind our national borders and concepts of autonomy through invisible and visible architectures. Legal theorists like David Delaney and Austin Sarat have long thought about where law is 'found' throughout geography and culture. As Sarat, Douglas, and Umphrey have written,'
. . . Law invests place with value or meaning . . . Place sometimes is used metaphorically, as a way of organising our conceptions of the world.'[8] Digital spaces, created and regulated through national and international legal norms, organise our habits of communication in the world, and the new technological tools we provide and teach create national and global citizens imbricated in written or unwritten legal codes about autonomous or shared identities. Our notions of how we own ourselves and our texts, and how we share with each other through social media, are based on operating legal norms governing the digital realm.

We attend to this digital realm and the permeable disciplinary boundaries in the information economy to the extent we look at how real and virtual libraries and information spaces and places are being created as legal spaces, where the population adheres to national legal codes. In recognising ourselves as virtual and shared networked selves, LIS education is concerned with the interplay between bodily experiences and technology. Even as we teach digital media skills across disciplines, and inculcate in our students an understanding of how to use these tools in management, development, searching, displaying, and presenting, advocacy, and community engagement, we must critically investigate the consequences of that teaching every day. LIS education is answering the call of Katherine Hayles, to re-examine, 'how we think.'[9] Hayles's exploration of the proposition that 'we think through, with, and alongside media,' is central to LIS education, as we choose which digital tools to teach in our syllabi, which search devices to value, which presentation formats we suggest students master. With each pedagogical decision we make, we imbue the next generation of information and technology professionals with ways of thinking across space and time. We create the next generation of digital global citizens, with assumptions and expectations for how they may know the world.

In this way, LIS education is involved in shaping the contours of networked, digital, people. Our behaviours, our codes for engaging in the world, our very understanding of the limits and possibilities of interacting with ourselves and each other are formed in part by our co-evolution with machines. Scholars like Wendy Hui kyong Chun,

writing about the ways in which 'technology which thrives on control has been accepted as a mass medium of freedom'[10], invites LIS professionals to examine the ways in which what we are teaching in the name of 'free' searching not only models but also molds the ways we enter and are inculcated into controlling norms.

As LIS educators, it is incumbent on us to insist students critically engage with the formative assumptions underlying our technological strategies. We must teach not only the tools, but the critical awareness of the numerous modalities involved in being digital people. If, in today's world, for instance, people are concerned with the relationship between our perceived senses of autonomy and the risk of compiled information about us (like digital dossiers) being shared, we need to seek to understand cultural assumptions of privacy across the globe.[11]

LIS educators are still very much answering the call of information theorists like Mark Poster, who ten years ago wanted to inquire into the change in the nature of information, the way it mediates relationships and creates bonds between humans and machines, as well as the political implications that ensue.[12] GSLIS at URI explores this mediation by examining the oscillating relationship between theories, practices, and applications of library and information studies born from interaction with and impact across disciplines.

LIS education is transforming precisely because it is allowing itself to adapt to a new time, forging alliances with companion disciplines and scholars that help it to remain committed to improving its communities. Even if LIS education may be drawn in two different directions, the foundational questions we attempt to answer and the axiomatic principles upon which the discipline has been founded, ultimately remain the same. The digital age has given new meaning to LIS education. The curriculum has adapted because the community obligations have changed. Our research is focused on digital media because our students and their future patrons are living digital lives and as such, there has never been a greater need for LIS educators, as they are at the front lines of advocating for literacy, one of the greatest equalising forces in history.

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