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## Increasing Faculty-Librarian Collaboration through Critical Librarianship

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## Increasing Faculty-Librarian Collaboration through Critical Librarianship

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*From the Field*

## Increasing Faculty-Librarian Collaboration through Critical Librarianship

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### Abstract

Through the lens of critical librarianship, librarians are becoming increasingly involved in social justice, civic engagement, and human rights issues. This paper examines the collaboration between a subject librarian and a faculty member in an assignment that engaged in Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP), a teaching strategy with the goal of increasing students' sense of civic agency and personal and social responsibility by connecting their classwork to public arenas; and project-based learning, wherein students develop a question to research and create projects that reflect their knowledge, which they share with a select audience.

Keywords: critical librarianship, civic engagement, social justice, project-based learning, public sphere pedagogy, library instruction, collaboration, information literacy

### Introduction

Through the lens of critical librarianship, librarians are becoming increasingly involved in critical pedagogy, one aspect of which is increasing civic engagement and student empowerment. This paper explores collaboration between a subject librarian and a faculty member in an assignment designed to examine social justice and human rights issues. The collaboration involved two relatively unexplored methods for civic engagement: Public Sphere Pedagogy, which increases students' sense of civic agency by connecting their classwork to public arenas, and

project-based learning, a teacher-facilitated, student-driven approach to learning that incorporates multiple group-learning strategies. Incorporating Public Sphere Pedagogy and project-based learning, the authors worked together to engage students with a public issue: lead poisoning. Building on a literature assignment that targeted lead poisoning in poor urban areas, students created research projects that not only explored the ramifications of lead poisoning, but also the ways in which their chosen disciplines addressed issues surrounding lead poisoning. The final result was a formal presentation of student-designed, discipline-specific posters held in



the Michael Schwartz Library at Cleveland State University (CSU).

### Librarianship and Critical Pedagogy

Librarians have been promoting critical pedagogy in library instruction for over a decade. The combination of information literacy and critical pedagogy is often referred to as “critical information literacy.” Tewel defines critical information literacy as “ways librarians may encourage students to engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information’s production and dissemination.”<sup>1</sup> An important aspect of critical information literacy is its emphasis on student-centered learning, and the encouragement of students to take an active role in their own education.<sup>2</sup> Students are asked to consider what is happening in their world, ask questions, and take action to make necessary changes. While higher education is increasingly focused on producing students who will have specific job skills and be primed to enter the workforce, critical information literacy tries to promote education that has a purpose beyond the production of perfect workers. In critical information literacy, students are encouraged to acknowledge problems in society and work for social change.<sup>3</sup> For librarians, this means introducing dialogue and social issues into the information literacy session—a goal that aligns with both Public Sphere Pedagogy and project-based learning.

Critical pedagogy, by definition, withdraws focus from the individual and instead examines the larger social context. For this reason, it makes an ideal platform for collaboration in teaching information literacy. In this collaborative project, critical pedagogy provided a framework for shared understanding and purpose between the librarian and the English Department faculty member. The collaborators hoped to question both the traditional content of an academic research project, as well as the typical

process of teaching students to undergo research. Rather than having students write an annotated bibliography or research paper, the faculty member helped her students develop a product that reflected their own capacity to call out and shape the power structures in their fields of study. This approach both allowed and encouraged the librarian collaborator to step outside the typical method of teaching information literacy and, instead, empower students to direct their own learning and research process.

Critical pedagogy informed the impact of the collaboration, in addition to guiding the collaborative process. In this case, it gave the students and collaborators the opportunity to see various disciplines through the same lens—that of critical information literacy. It also helped the students see the role of research in questioning and dismantling hegemonic social structures in their own future professional communities. Finally, it allowed womanism (explained later in this paper) to take center stage in the activities of the course. The result was a class project that was more meaningful to students and more impactful to the campus community.

### Public Sphere Pedagogy

Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP) describes a method of teaching that adds a public component to instruction in an effort to address contemporary public issues and help students gain a deeper sense of civic engagement and responsibility.<sup>4</sup> PSP uses critical theory by helping students question authority and take control of the democratic process for themselves.<sup>5</sup> Rather than serving in the role of observers in the classroom, PSP asks students to engage in their communities, take the initiative to learn about issues that affect them, and take action based on what they have learned. This approach was first introduced by First-Year Writing instructors at California State University-Chico (CSU-Chico),



where Thia Wolf, Sofie Burton, Chris Fosen, Justin Gonder, and Jill Swiencicki used PSP to help students develop the dialogue and research skills necessary to be more civically engaged. Their idea builds on the work of John Dewey, who argued that students should be active participants in their learning, and that education should reflect the “life activities” in which students participate.<sup>6</sup> It also builds on the idea of “communities of practice” developed by Lave and Wenger in the 1990s. In communities of practice, student groups engage with shared issues and are driven by a common purpose.<sup>7</sup> Both of these theorists, while not explicitly referencing the relationships between their ideas and the development of an active democratic community, support the premise of PSP: that students should be actively involved in their learning with others in their communities such that they become informed participants in a democracy.

One PSP method introduced by CSU-Chico (first in 2006 and continuing to this day) is called the “Town Hall Meeting.” As part of this event, students are required to conduct individual research projects on controversial topics of interest, a project that involves writing annotated bibliographies, working on peer research teams to answer their assigned questions, and exploring potential action plans.<sup>8</sup> Then all 1,200-1,400 students come together to discuss the issue in groups of twenty-five, including subject experts from the community and moderators.<sup>9</sup> With the help of the subject experts, students then develop action plans that some go on to implement through Office of Civic Engagement internships.<sup>10</sup> The event ends with students writing reflections about the experience of having dialogues with others about these challenging issues.

Another PSP method employed by CSU-Chico instructors is called the “Great Debate.” At this event, which is open to the public and takes

place in government buildings in the community, students make speeches, give panel presentations, engage in debate, and conduct an “expo” of sorts with displays and activities to engage participants.<sup>11</sup> The topics of the all-day event are usually controversial and relevant to the community, and they require students to conduct research in preparation. Assessments of these events show that participants in the events tend to be more academically engaged afterward, and they often demonstrate (through their reflections) changes in thinking habits and higher levels of self-esteem.<sup>12</sup> The success of these events has inspired other instructors to begin adopting the principles of PSP in their own teaching.

At Cleveland State University, Adrienne Gosselin, Associate Professor in the Department of English, is one of two faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS) to incorporate PSP in classroom curriculum. Ed Horowitz, Associate Professor in the School of Communication, used PSP to help his journalism students explore public issues in 2014 through interviews of the public and poster presentations. In conjunction with another one of Dr. Horowitz’s classes, CSU also conducted a Town Hall event in 2015. This event had the CEO of a local grocery store chain as its keynote speaker, and engaged students in dialogue about food and their community.<sup>13</sup> These events have met with success and continue to be offered.

The PSP topic for the Fall 2016 semester at CSU was issues surrounding lead in the students’ communities (a significant problem in the city of Cleveland, where lead paint continues to be a risk factor in urban areas). In keeping with this theme, Dr. Gosselin incorporated PSP into the curriculum of her class, *ENG 208: Womanism/Feminism*. The PSP component built on a reading assignment featuring a detective novel by award-winning author Barbara Neely. The fourth in a series, the book *Blanche Cleans Up tar-*



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gets lead poisoning in poor urban areas by foregrounding the story of a single black mother whose child has been imprisoned for violent behavior, and her campaign for the city to investigate effects of lead on violence. Because conflicting course schedules prohibited participation in Dr. Horowitz's Town Hall event, the students in ENG 208 conducted original research that culminated in a poster presentation that could be shared with the CSU community.

Designed by Dr. Gosselin in 1996, ENG 208 is a general education course that meets requirements in both the Black Studies and Women's Studies programs. Grounded in black feminist theory, womanism is a social change perspective rooted in the experiences and methods of problem-solving as experienced by African American women and other women of color.<sup>14</sup> Unlike feminism, womanism is not confined to issues of gender or sexism. Instead it considers all sites and forms of oppressions that derive from social categories of gender, race, or class as targets of equal concern and action for all individuals, regardless of gender or race. Womanism shares pedagogical goals with critical thinking and critical pedagogy,<sup>15</sup> and as a general education course, ENG 208 provides a platform for fostering proficiencies that span all fields of study wherein students will encounter issues "as citizens in a globally engaged democracy."<sup>16</sup>

### Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is a model for instruction that engages complex tasks based on challenging questions or problems; involves students in design, problem-solving, decision making, and/or investigative activities; allows students to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminates in realistic products or presentations.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that project-based learning is not a supplementary activity to support learning.<sup>18</sup> Rather, like PSP, project-based learning is an integral part of

the curriculum that involves higher-level reading using a core assignment to explore for deeper learning. A study based on a qualitative review of articles on project-based learning identified five characteristics for best-practice in post-secondary education.<sup>19</sup> According to the authors, such projects:

- 1) involve the solution of a problem, often, though not necessarily, set by the student himself (or herself);
- 2) involve initiative by the student or group of students, and necessitate a variety of educational activities;
- 3) require work over an extended length of time;
- 4) involve teaching staff in an advisory, rather than authoritarian, role at any or all of the stages – initiation, conduct and conclusion; and
- 5) commonly result in an end product.

While the larger topic – issues surrounding lead – was the selected PSP topic for the semester, the project-based learning component in ENG 208 built on student research about lead poisoning issues and the ways in which their individual disciplines addressed these issues. The three-credit class met three times a week in the fifteen-week semester. Coursework was divided into five units, each with individual learning objectives. The PSP/project-based learning component was part of a four-week unit that included one week for reading and discussion of the text and three weeks for research activities coordinated with library instruction. During the week reserved for reading and critical discussion, students organized themselves into eight self-selected groups. Three groups represented various majors within the Colleges of Business, Science, and Engineering. Three groups represented departments within CLASS. Of these, two represented social sciences, with the other composed



of interdisciplinary majors within the college. The remaining two were interdisciplinary groups representing majors across the university, including CLASS, the College of Engineering, the College of Urban Affairs, and the College of Science (See Table 1).

Project-based learning requires multiple supports for students as they conduct their inquiry. Such supports should consider a range of scaffolds, including technology that can aid students in determining the viability of their questions, the merits of their designs and data collection, the adequacy of their investigation, and the accuracy of their data analysis.<sup>20</sup> The second week of the unit focused on information literacy, where partnership with the library enabled multiple strategies for scaffolding.

To address the interdisciplinary make-up of the course, prior to the library instruction session the English Department liaison librarian created a research guide in collaboration with other department librarians to help students from various disciplines find relevant sources about lead poisoning (<http://researchguides.csuohio.edu/eng208>). Although none of them had co-created a research guide before, all of them were eager and willing to provide suggested resources in their specialty areas for students to use. All of them also expressed a willingness to help students in the class should subject-specific research questions come up.

**Table 1. Student Colleges, Disciplinary Focus, and Poster Titles**

Poster Title	College	Discipline
Effects of Lead on People, Animals, and Plants	College of Science	Environmental Studies, Pre-Vet, Pre-Med, Biology
Contemporary Effects of Leaded Gasoline	College of Engineering	Computer Science, Mechanical Engineering
News Coverage on Lead	CLASS, College of Science	Journalism, Mathematics
Effects of Lead Poisoning on Mothers and Children in Black Communities	CLASS	Black Studies, Women's Studies, Political Science
Sherwin-Williams Controversy: Lead and the Business Community	College of Business	Marketing, Economics
Effects of Lead on Psychological Development	Sciences	Psychology
Effects of Lead on Urban Environments	CLASS, College of Urban Affairs	Urban Studies, Civil Engineering, Anthropology, Pre-Social Work
Lead and Criminal Behavior	CLASS	Criminal Justice

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The library session itself was held in one of the library instruction rooms where tech support included a Smartboard, laptops for all students, and access to the library's online resources. The session began with instruction on navigating the library's website and an overview of library resources, followed by hands-on exercises involving the fundamentals of research that introduced initial steps to develop topics for critical inquiry and allowed ample time for students to find sources. Because this was a 200-level, general education course, most students were not familiar with research as a process and even fewer were familiar with the mechanics of critical thinking involved in formulating a research question. In the third class, students worked independently in the library's computer lab, with the instructor and the librarian available for questions and directions. They were then required to post at least three findings to group discussion boards in the learning management system (LMS), Blackboard.

Following the library workshop, a staff member from Instructional Media Services spoke to the class on designing posters for professional presentation. To prepare, students were assigned to read and take notes on Colin Purrington's website, *Designing Conference Posters*,<sup>21</sup> to become familiar with principles of poster design. The instruction lecture was led by one of the library's Digital Production Unit staff members, who began the session by surveying students to assess their experience with poster design. She found that while some students had presented hand-made posters, none had experience with digital production. She then addressed components and mechanics for poster design. Her discussion of best practices was underscored by references to several example posters she selected in advance so that students could see and better understand the design principles. She also engaged the students in a critique of a "What-Not-To-Do" poster, which she designed for the session. The critique engaged

students who, by then, were able to discuss elements using fundamental terms of graphic design. She ended the session by giving the students a link to a PowerPoint template they were to use for their designs.

In project-based learning, while tasks are divided among participants, the aim is to construct a shared outcome. Work involves elements of both cooperative learning, determined by the extent of shared activity, and collaborative learning, which requires participants to solve a problem or perform a task together.<sup>22</sup> In the week following the instruction on poster design, students were given individual and collective assignments. Individually, they were to discuss the project with at least one professor in their respective discipline. During this interview, they were to explain the broad goal for the group topic and ask for any additional material and/or direction. They were also to take notes and bring the information to class by the end of the week. In class, they worked collectively. As a group they produced a rough draft of their poster design and rough drafts for content to be developed, with the understanding that group work in class would be followed up by individual work outside of class. Next, the class met in the library instruction classroom to work in groups on the provided laptops. In this session, they transferred rough drafts to the given PowerPoint format, working on design components, as well as researching potential graphic images and how those would be incorporated into the design. They also discussed results of the interviews with their classmates and determined if any feedback could be useful to the design components. By the end of the class, each group had assigned which student would be responsible for the content designated to particular design components.

Project-based learning must be complex in order to motivate students to generate questions on their own. Once the end product is defined, stu-





dents must work as a team to complete their creation. The process requires task-oriented interaction where students are forced to think as a team in order to execute steps in an orderly fashion.<sup>23</sup> The PSP project included multiple opportunities for group feedback in the week following the library instruction sessions. The first week focused on feedback on rough drafts. All three classes were held in the library instruction classroom. Students were given the first class to complete work on rough drafts begun in the previous class. The next two classes were allocated to feedback on these drafts. It was made clear that these were ongoing reports, and that the work didn't have to be finished but rather reflect the direction of the design and content for each individual component. In each class, using the master computer and projection screen, four groups were given ten minutes to present their drafts to their peers. Students not presenting were given review forms soliciting comments on strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement. Their forms were given to each individual student and their feedback given to each group.

For the next two weeks, coursework moved on to successive units, with different reading assignments and learning objectives. However, group-work on the posters continued outside of class. The fourth week was reserved for feedback on the posters. Once again, these classes were held in the library instruction classroom. Each group presented poster designs that were far more detailed, all incorporating suggestions from the earlier session. On this occasion, feedback came from group responses with evaluations completed collectively by members of each presenting group. These written critiques were given to the groups for final changes before submitting the PowerPoint files to the Digital Production Unit the following week, with poster-printing costs sponsored by the Office of Civic Engagement.

As a result of this activity, students were able to connect classroom curriculum with a public issue, explore the ways in which their majors interact with public problems, conduct research using library sources in the discipline of their major, learn how to produce and design an academic poster, and gain experience in poster presentation. Attendees of the poster session also benefited by learning about lead poisoning in various contexts and becoming more aware of this serious issue.

### Role of Collaboration

A class research project like this one, which relies on student autonomy, encourages creative research output, and includes research topics that vary widely in their subject matter, benefits greatly from collaboration. The collaboration that allowed for the success of this project can be described in terms of theories from of a comprehensive study on collaboration in higher education,<sup>24</sup> which defines faculty collaboration as "a cooperative endeavor that involves common goals, coordinated effort, and outcomes or products for which the collaborators share responsibility and credit."<sup>25</sup> As authors of the study note, their definition of collaboration is intentionally broad in order to be flexible enough to accommodate collaboration in both research and teaching, which they further define by purpose, organizational structure, team composition, and duration.

Of significance to this report are the ways in which the study's findings underscore the role of *common commitments* and *consensus building*. These factors, in turn, determine whether the activity will be one of "complementary collaboration" or "supplementary collaboration." *Complementary collaboration* is highly participatory and decentralized, engaging more give-and-take communication than do other types of research teams. As the authors describe, in complementary collaboration, collaborators with similar interests and qualifications work closely on a joint



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endeavor to “provoke one another's thinking and arrive at original insights together that neither one could achieve independently.”<sup>26</sup>

In terms complementary collaboration for this project, the framework of and shared interest in critical pedagogy allowed for a common understanding and purpose between the librarian and the English Department faculty member. Critical pedagogy also encourages provocative and original approaches to teaching, and, in this case, the collaboration inspired ideas from both parties. Pedagogically, the collaboration of project-based learning allowed students to hone skills, such as cooperation and active listening, which Austin & Baldwin characterize as *collaborative learning*. In this type of learning, knowledge develops from ongoing dialogue and interaction as participants (in this case, the students) share talents and abilities in ways that offer effective criticism, benefitting the group.<sup>27</sup>

Austin & Baldwin's idea of *supplementary collaboration* involves a more formal structure of cooperation. In this regard, coordinated efforts between the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, the Michael Schwartz Library, and the Office of Inclusion to fund and promote the event provided the opportunity for student work to be viewed by a larger audience, and for faculty to witness the role of critical librarianship in project-based learning, as well as to become familiar with Public Sphere Pedagogy. Both complementary and supplementary collaboration improved the outcomes of the project beyond what would have been possible by any single collaborator.

### Recommendations and Conclusions

Librarians have an important role to play in promoting critical information literacy in their instruction. Fortunately, some faculty already prioritize critical pedagogy and subjects of social change in the classroom. In those cases, librarians can provide valuable support in helping stu-

dents gain the necessary research skills, appreciate the importance of civic engagement, and present their work in a public forum. Here are some recommendations for librarians hoping to become more involved in critical information literacy, project-based learning, and/or public sphere pedagogy.

- Involve other librarians in your endeavor. The research guide created for this course was a group effort by librarians from all of our subject areas. Students also received valuable training in poster design from a staff member in our Digital Production Unit.
- Many general education courses are taught to students from a wide variety of majors, many of which may not be the subject being taught. Allowing students to draw connections between the course content and their own majors, especially with the support of their subject librarian, was a positive experience that librarians might consider trying in general education courses on their own campuses.
- Encourage students to make their research topics personally inspiring. One important way to inspire students to make changes in their society is to make the social issues relevant to their experience and interests.
- Provide space in the library as a public forum for student work. Students were thrilled to have various members of the campus community stop by to see their posters, which was the result of their placement in a busy, campus hub (the library).
- Consider providing specialized research help for students who are working on PSP projects, or other projects involving community issues. Often these projects require special research that can be difficult because it is so specific. Librarians can be particularly helpful here.



The PSP/project-based learning experience was very positive. The authors would recommend the use of PSP and project-based learning in the classroom as a way to promote critical pedagogy and civic engagement. Moreover, the librarian's involvement can be an important component of success for both PSP projects and/or project-based learning. Whether by providing help finding specific resources, poster design training, or a public space to share ideas for improving society, librarians can promote social justice through their support of student PSP work, leading to a more engaged campus and increased awareness about issues that affect the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Eamon Tewell, "A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature," *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Tewell.

<sup>3</sup> Tewell.

<sup>4</sup> E Horowitz, "Bringing Public Sphere Pedagogy into Your Course--A Beginners Guide--060616 (002).Pdf," 2016, <http://www.csuohio.edu/sites/default/files/Bringing%20Public%20Sphere%20Pedagogy%20into%20your%20Course--A%20Beginners%20Guide--060616%20%28002%29.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Thia Wolf, "Public Sphere Pedagogy: Engaging Students as Participants in Democracy," *Diversity & Democracy*, 2014

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey, *Education and Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

<sup>7</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Jill Swiencicki et al., "The Town Hall Meeting: Imagining a Self through Public-Sphere Pedagogy," *Liberal Education* 97, no. 2 (2011): 40-45.

<sup>9</sup> Wolf, "Public Sphere Pedagogy".

<sup>10</sup> Wolf.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf.

<sup>12</sup> Swiencicki et al., "The Town Hall Meeting."

<sup>13</sup> Horowitz, "Bringing Public Sphere Pedagogy into Your Course--A Beginners Guide."

<sup>14</sup> Layli Phillips, "Womanism: On Its Own," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (Routledge, 2006), xix-iv.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Bruenig, "Turning Experiential Education and Critical Pedagogy Theory into Praxis," *Journal of Experiential Education* 28, no. 2 (2005): 106-22.

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<sup>17</sup> John W. Thomas. *A Review of Research on Project-Based Learning* (PBL Works: Buck Institute for Education, 2000), [https://documents.sd61.bc.ca/ANED/educationalResources/StudentSuccess/A\\_Review\\_of\\_Research\\_on\\_Project\\_Based\\_Learning.pdf](https://documents.sd61.bc.ca/ANED/educationalResources/StudentSuccess/A_Review_of_Research_on_Project_Based_Learning.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Bell. "Project-Based Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; Skills for the Future," *The Clearing House* 83 (2010): 39-43. doi: 10.1080/00098650903505415.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Helle, Pa'Ivi Tynja'La, and Erkki Olkinuora. "Project-based Learning in Post-Secondary Education – Theory, Practice and Rubber Sling Shots," *Higher Education* 51 (2006): 287-314. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-6386-5.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *A Review of Research on Project-Based Learning*.

<sup>21</sup> "Designing Conference Posters," Colin Purrington, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://colinpurrington.com/tips/poster-design>.

<sup>22</sup> Helle, Tynja'La, and Olkinuora. "Project-Based Learning," 296.

<sup>23</sup> Helle, 291.

<sup>24</sup> Ann E. Austin and Roger G. Baldwin. "Faculty Collaboration: Enhancing the Quality of Scholarship and Teaching." *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, no. 7 (1991).

<sup>25</sup> Austin. "Faculty Collaboration."

<sup>26</sup> Austin.

<sup>27</sup> Austin.

