Transforming Knowledge Production: Decolonizing Information Literacy

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Abstract:
Acknowledging that traditional Western academic ways of producing and disseminating knowledge can further disenfranchise already marginalized communities, Gretchen Keer and Jeffra Bussmann incorporate concepts of research justice into a co-taught module in their two-unit "Introduction to Information Literacy" courses at CSU East Bay. This discussion session provided some theoretical background and definitions of important terms, as well as an overview of that module, and a hands-on activity whereby participants were able to interact with the actual readings and activities given to students during the module. The discussion session concluded by breaking into small groups to brainstorm how librarians can apply these concepts to a variety of different library instruction scenarios.

Introduction:
How can teaching librarians use decolonizing methodologies to involve students in knowledge production? Inspired by our participation in a Faculty Learning Community on community-based research and social justice, this is the question we asked ourselves as instructors of an introductory information literacy course for incoming freshmen at CSU East Bay. Information literacy curriculum reflexively validates traditional forms of knowledge production that can be alienating to students. In particular, students' lived experiences, and their familial and cultural wealth, is displaced by a curriculum that privileges external scholars' representations of their lives and communities. Many communities that are underrepresented in higher education distrust the motives of researchers due to a history of cultural and intellectual appropriation (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As a result, students are sometimes reluctant to embrace a new role as academic researcher. However, we see an opportunity within information literacy instruction to empower students to agency in their own knowledge production, while also providing them with the tools to participate in the world of traditional scholarly research.

Our learning outcomes for completing this discussion session stipulated that participants would be able to:
- define the decolonizing methodologies of research;
- identify the ways in which traditional forms of knowledge production alienate underrepresented groups;

- describe how information literacy instruction can empower students to apply research skills to their lived experience;
- develop course content that emphasizes student agency in knowledge production.

Description:

This session explored the ways in which teaching librarians with limited resources can apply social justice tenets to information literacy instruction. Participants discussed how decolonizing methodologies intersect with ideas of authority. We also involved attendees in classroom activities that make the connections between research and community explicit.

We began by introducing the participants to background information, including terms and theories that originate outside of the library field. The key terms we defined were social justice, community engagement, research justice, action research, community-based participatory research (CBPR), and decolonizing methodologies. Those definitions, and others, appear in Appendix 3.

By way of background information, we identified the ways in which traditional forms of knowledge production can alienate underrepresented groups. We used the story of Henrietta Lacks as an example of how members of an underrepresented group, in this case the Lacks family, were taken advantage of by the medical research community. To further illustrate how marginalized communities view tradition research methods, we provided a quote from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal work, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (1999). To further inspire our participants, we showed them a few minutes of the video, "Polling for Justice: Youth Participatory Action Research in NYC." This video was created by youth and adult researchers to highlight their findings from a community-based participatory research study about "youth experiences of injustice in education, criminal justice, and public healthcare." The video provides both an introduction to the concept of youth participatory action research and an example of an alternative method of information dissemination (ie. a video instead of a peer-reviewed journal article).

Next, we described the module as it took place in our class. The purpose of the module is not only to introduce students to alternative research methodologies, but also to inspire in them a sense of their own agency in the research and information dissemination process. We modeled the discussion session activities on what the students experience in class. Further information about the class session is available in the PowerPoint that appears in Appendix 1.

In order to give our participants a sense of what our students experience, we next broke them up into groups and provided them with two articles: one, an example of ethnographic research and the second, an example of CBPR. The participants formed groups based on the type of information literacy instruction they were most interested in, such as for-credit courses, subject-based information literacy (IL) instruction, workshops, etc. The groups read both articles and then completed the classroom activity (Appendix 2). We reconvened to discuss their responses.

Finally, the groups brainstormed ways to apply what they learned in the session and apply it in their home institutions.

Key points:

Participant Contributions

Prior to the breakout discussions, we felt it would be necessary to ground our participants in the terminology we would be using. After we discussed terminology, the Polling for Justice video further illustrated the meaning of important concepts related to this topic. Participants immediately shared positive feedback about the video and the Polling for Justice project.

During the discussion time, there was a lot of conversation and feedback about the structure and content of the module and the classroom activity. In particular, participants pointed out that the CBPR article was an example of inductive research, and therefore did not have a clear research question. One suggestion was to change the question on the worksheet from "How is the research question developed?" to "What is the purpose of the research?" However, in class our students learn strategies for developing research questions, and part of that involves identifying and then reverse engineering an argument. Additionally, in class we do address the fact that sometimes the research question is implied rather than stated explicitly in the form of a question. We will consider how explicit the research question should be in the sample articles in order for the exercise to be effective.

We also received feedback about the community engagement aspect of our session. In particular, one participant reflected that we are "developing a pioneering pedagogy grounded in interdisciplinarity and community engagement" and, as such, are exercising the concept of leadership at every level of the university[1]. In the future, we hope to make more explicit the connection between community engagement and research justice, specifically the role of the librarian in facilitating students' relationships with their communities.

Participants were excited about the possibilities of exploring CBPR with their students, but were cognizant of the need to get buy-in from instructors and other stakeholders they work with. There was a sense that this would be something that students would find invigorating and inspiring. Some librarians who attended the session were interested in approaching this topic outside the classroom, such as with extracurricular groups or student activists. We mentioned in the discussion session that after participating in this module, some of our students expressed interest in doing a community-based participatory research project on campus. This is something we as library faculty are currently not able to support but hope to incorporate into this module in the future.

In the small breakout groups, the participants discussed the feasibility of applying the concepts of research justice to their own teaching. Part of the discussion revolved around what classroom faculty think of the validity of this approach to research, in particular CBPR. There was some concern about whether or not academics would be suspicious of CBPR studies because they do not follow traditional hierarchical methods of data collection and dissemination. Research justice is a relatively new field, but it is increasing in impact and popularity in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and applied health. It is also true that the CBPR process is time consuming. It takes a lot of energy and effort to develop and nurture robust relationships with community members and to train community researchers.

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[1] From a letter by Amy Wallace, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, CSU Channel Islands.

Some attendees felt that the research comparison activity would be scalable to a one-shot and that it is an accessible way to critique the content without alienating classroom faculty. Some participants are already discussing indigenous research methodologies in their one-shots.

Overall, the discussion was robust and the session was well attended. As a result of this discussion session, we have been invited to repeat this workshop for library faculty at a Bay Area university.

Key Points & Takeaways
The key points from our session are:
- Terms that are often used interchangeably (research justice, social justice, CBPR, action research, etc.) can be parsed to illustrate the nuances involved in this complex topic;
- Information ethics can and should be expanded to include explorations around empowering students as knowledge producers;
- Traditional forms of knowledge production can alienate underrepresented groups, as is evidenced by Linda Tuhwai Smith's assertion on page 1 of Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples that, "from the vantage point of the colonized…the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism."
- Alternative research methodologies, such as CBPR, can be successfully integrated into information literacy instruction sessions, including one-shots;
- Instruction librarians can also incorporate elements of community engagement into information literacy curricula, despite not having content that lends itself to the traditional service learning model;
- While this is a relatively new area for librarians, there are an increasing number of scholars doing work in the area of research justice (for example, DataCenter, Allied Media Conference Research Justice track (https://talk.alliedmedia.org/content/research-justice), UC Berkeley "Research Justice: A Symposium Exploring Community Engaged Scholarship") as well as in social justice and its intersections with information literacy (Gregory, L. and Higgins, S. (2013). *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*. Sacramento: Library Juice Press.);
- Resources: Colloquium for Libraries and Service Learning (http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/libraries-and-service-learning/), DataCenter (http://datacenter.org/), Decolonizing Methodologies book (Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: University of Otago Press ; Distributed in the USA exclusively by St. Martin's Press.), Polling for Justice video (http://vimeo.com/22363812)

Appendix 1

PowerPoint slides can be found at http://www.slideshare.net/grkeer/carl-2014-gk-jb-33180382

Appendix 2

Complete the worksheet using the articles, "Studying and Addressing Urban Immigrant Restaurant Worker Health and Safety in San Francisco's Chinatown District: A CBPR Case Study" and "Occupational hazards and risks faced by Chinese immigrant restaurant workers."

Research Justice and Knowledge Production Activity

Questions	Part 1 -Traditional Research	Part 2 - CBPR Article
How is the research question developed?		
What does the researcher do?		
What do the research 'subjects' do?		
How is the research disseminated (shared)?		
What does researcher expect the research to accomplish?		

Appendix 3

Transforming Knowledge Production Vocabulary and Definitions
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Action Research: A research methodology that involves a systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change; practitioner-based; primarily in education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Community-Based Participatory Research: A research methodology that involves the community in the research process at all steps, to empower communities to make a difference and bring change.

Community Engagement: Pedagogy that involves the university/college in the community, building meaningful, reciprocal relationships.

Community Service: Individuals who volunteer their skills or services to 'improve' a community

Decolonizing Methodologies: A framework that approaches research as a way to unpack marginalization of indigenous peoples by Western academic research methodologies; title of a seminal work by Linda Tuhiwai Smith.

Ethical & Socio-Economic Issues: A component of information literacy standards that addresses fairness values related to information access, comprehension and use.

Information Life Cycle: Bussmann & Plovick (2013) created a diagram of this cycle such that it articulates how we interact with information (while specifically used in a science context, we believe it can be applied broader than that), in which knowledge production is one element. In fact, we are inclined to say that it is more frequently ignored or given less attention in IL instruction.

Information Literacy: A framework for interacting with information.

Knowledge Production: The process of how knowledge is produced, how information in created and made known.

Privilege: A special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people. (Google's definition)

Research Justice: Strategic framework to address structural inequalities in research methodologies, considered to be community-engaged scholarship.

Service Learning: Pedagogy that involves students in service for credit, relevant to the content of the course.

Social Justice: A view that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities.

Appendix 4

Transforming Knowledge Production References
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CARL 2014

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