

Addressing anti-Black racism in library and information science curriculum: A Canadian exemplar

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the development of the graduate course Anti-Racism in Library and Information Science that was piloted at Western University in 2022 and 2023. The one-semester (13-week) course was designed with Black-led community organizations and students contributed to anti-racist information and memory work through experiential learning partnerships. The course used critical Library and Information Science (LIS) literature alongside Black Canadian scholarly perspectives that were grounded in anti-oppression and anti-racism frameworks. The course goals were for students to develop an understanding of how race and other structural inequities inform lived experiences and tools to support collaborative community-led projects. The LIS-tailored approach to anti-racist reflection and relationship-building can be applied more broadly to similarly question and resist problematic power structures and practices to create more consciously powerful and valuable relationships for students, librarianship, and communities.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Social justice; Community and civic organizations; Curriculum; Critical librarianship.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Library and Information Science curriculum; Anti-racism; Experiential learning; Community-based partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2022, the first known Canadian Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) course was developed at Western University (Canada) to begin addressing anti-Black racism in the Canadian library curriculum. Anti-Racism in Library and Information Science was a one-semester (13-week) community-engaged learning course offered each summer in 2022 and 2023. Along with critical LIS literature, the course drew on Black-centred scholarly and community-based perspectives and Canadian anti-oppression and anti-racism frameworks. The course goals were for students to understand how race and other identities (e.g., gender, religion, sexuality, age, etc.) impact lived experiences in libraries and information spaces and tools to use in LIS workplaces to support collaborative community-led projects. The course was designed in partnership with Black-led community organizations and students used MLIS course learnings to contribute directly to anti-racist information and memory work locally. This was a guiding facet of the course as the instructor was a white woman and a large proportion of the students were also white (or white-passing). This sought to heed the call for colleagues to embody library values by sharing equity work (Ossom-Williamson et al., 2020). As an exemplar, the course approach and learnings provide community-based and anti-racist approaches to library curriculum and offer practical, evidence-based research and Black-centred resources to address anti-Black and other forms of systemic racism impacting library communities. Colleagues are warmly encouraged to build on the approach to self-reflection, learning, and partnership for use in their institutions.¹

ORIENTATION: ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN LIS & CANADA

LIS hosts a confusing body of ideas bound to the lingering effects of colonial ordering and misaligned current approaches that reflect strong commitments to equity (ALA, 2025). The core belief that libraries are inclusive and equitable is rooted in revisions of library history that have detached institutions from their roots in social control (Honma, 2005). These ideas were closely tied to national interests in which libraries helped mold dominant ideas of race, class, and gender. Others highlight how white is not recognized as a racial identity in society especially in library spaces (Espinal, 2001; Espinal et al., 2018). Leung & López-McKnight (2021), Mehra (2021), Mehra and Gray (2020), and Ossom-Williamson et al. (2020) also echo this in their anti-racist critiques of library history and contemporary practices. LIS curricula have also become important sites for critique. Cooke and Sweeney (2017), Gibson and Hughes-Hassell (2017), Mehra (2021b), Patin et al. (2021), and Burrell et al. (2024) discuss how the LIS curriculum can ill-prepare

¹ I also welcome personal communications and will share my syllabus, class content, and experiential learning plans.

students for work with communities through incomplete discussions of power and privilege. There is also a sizable body of literature on the erasure of librarians of color (Brown et al., 2021; Chou et al., 2018; Leung & López-McKnight, 2021; Overbey & Folk, 2022). These writings collectively demonstrate the social-structural nature of anti-Black and systemic racism in librarianship.

Canadian narratives also reiterate ideals of equity, diversity, and inclusivity (ALA, 2025). However, these beliefs are also reliant on a perception of Canada as a white nation that has welcomed others – including the Indigenous peoples on whose land Canada sits (Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019). As Walcott and Abdillahi note, this “normative myth of two founding peoples” ignores a colonial legacy tied to anti-Blackness and the exploitation of Black communities (2019, p. 51). Walcott elsewhere critiques the idea of Canada as “reconciling” when it has yet to reckon with the “anti-Blackness [that] continually produces Black people as out-of-place” in Canada (Walcott, 2021, p. 55). Walcott and Abdillahi add that “Black people remain a troubling addendum” and the Black experience “still is almost non-existent” as a “constitutive element of what it means to be Canadian” (2019, p. 51). A recent national report from the Canadian Race Relations Foundation explains that “the landscape of race relations has changed” as several national and international crises occurred rapidly (p. 1). They cite the anti-racist action following the murder of George Floyd, the COVID-19 pandemic, and, most disturbingly, the uncovering of unmarked gravesites of Indigenous children at former residential school sites across Canada (CRRF, 2021). Curiously, the report also concludes that “Canadians tend to see racism as a function of the prejudiced attitudes and actions of individuals rather than systemic inequities in the country’s laws and institutions” (CRRF, 2021, p. 2). Rather, the perception is that racism is “not a major fault line in Canadian society” despite ever-mounting evidence (CRRF, 2021, p. 4).

DISORIENTATION: A LIS/COMMUNITY-BASED EXEMPLAR

With scarce LIS resources and amid critical social moments, Anti-racism in Library and Information Science was offered at Western University in Summer 2022 (9 students) and Summer 2023 (18 students) in a one-semester (13-week) community-engaged learning and discussion-based format. The course was split into three core activities: class-based learning, self-reflective journaling, and an experiential partnership with Black-led community-based groups.

Anti-Racism in Library and Information Science: Theoretical Framework

The course used the anti-oppression research framework designed by Potts and Brown (2015). The crux was investigating the roots of inequitable power and relationships to find opportunities for more equitable LIS practices (Potts & Brown, 2015). The course also reflected best practices in Black-led anti-racism education. Specifically, it was grounded in Canadian education scholars George Sefa Dei (2017) and Carl E James (2021), who explore Black experiences in learning. Dei explains the self/disciplinary examination process alongside racial justice aims in this summary.

The study of racism must be preoccupied with the experiences and knowledge of the oppressed while simultaneously focusing on the benefits and privileges that accrue to the dominant from their oppression. The challenge is to come to name, mark, and work with the various identities that those who are oppressed

have and to acknowledge those identities that place even the oppressed in positions of dominance and power...Anti-racism emphasizes that bodies and identities (race, class, gender, sexual, spiritual, etc.) are linked to the production of knowledge as well as social practice. Hence, the learner cannot distance [themselves] from a study of racism and the construction of knowledge about race and anti-racism (2014, pp. 17-18).

Class-based Learning

Early classes dedicated extensive time to exploring the history of race and racism in Canada. This was then applied to LIS with readings on anti-racist approaches to LIS (Black & Mehra, 2023; Leung & López-McKnight, 2021), diversity (Hudson, 2017a), whiteness (Espinal, 2001; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017), and librarians from intersectional identities (Brown et al., 2018; Chou et al., 2018). In later classes, students explored anti-racism in academic libraries (Vong, 2022), public libraries (Matthews & Thomas, 2023), archives and special libraries (Jules, 2016; Patin et al., 2023), library classification (Adler, 2017), and archival description (Snow & Dunbar, 2022). The curriculum was also closely aligned with the *Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity: A Framework* (Joint ALA/ARL Framework, 2022).

Class topics were also explored using Black-centred multi-modal resources like visual art, spoken word, and film. For example, when considering archives and cultural memory work, students engaged with readings, exhibit photographs, and a short film on *The Afronautic Research Lab* by Camille Turner (2021). Turner emigrated from Jamaica as a child and often uses art and archival records to resist anti-Black narratives and erasure (2025). In *The Afronautic Research Lab*, visitors interact with “suppressed archival” records that document “colonial Canada’s links to and participation in the transatlantic trade in African people” (Turner, 2025, para. 3). Students completed search exercises to compare Canadian official archival records and considered how practices found in the *Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources* (2020) could be incorporated. Finally, students read excerpts from Black Canadians including *Immigration, Race and Survival: From Trinidad to Canada: Living in Parallel Worlds* (2021) by local writer Cecily Pouchet Alexander, an essay from Scotiabank Giller Prize winner Ian Williams’ *Disorientation: Being Black in the World* (2021), and from Walcott’s *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (2021) over the course of the term.

Self-Reflective Journals

Semi-weekly prompts were provided from anti-racist guided journals by Kendi (2020) and Saad (2020). Prompts also incorporated readings in librarianship such as the *ALA Code of Ethics* (2025). Students were not required to disclose personal information in their final journal output. Nevertheless, many seriously undertook the exercise and explored long-held narratives. The sample prompt below asks students to reflect on their experiential learning and potential careers.

Sample Journal Prompt: Race in Library and Information Science (week 3)

- What do you think is the significance of race in libraries?
- Has learning about the London Black Community Public Library changed your perspective? How could you envision this kind of library in your community?
- What kind of power (or access to power) do you think you will have as a library and information professional? How could you help share or redistribute power to others?

The outcome of the journal could have taken many forms (i.e., podcast, b/vlog, narrative, etc.). In one case, a student revised and published her self-reflective work in an LIS journal (Gillis, 2023).

Community-Based Learning

Over each term, students completed experiential learning partnerships with Black-led community groups undertaking anti-racist information and memory work locally. They self-selected projects from a list of needs submitted by the organization and worked in small groups. Students first learned about the organization in class, researched the identified needs, prepared an annotated bibliography, and began their projects. Groups had one hour during class to work on their projects with the instructor present for support (and the organizational partner available by request).

In the Summer 2022 semester, students worked with the *London Black Community Public Library*. It has a collection of 2,000 titles representing Black and other under-represented perspectives and offers library and community-based programs (Matthes & Thomas, 2023). students completed three class projects to enable the library to serve its community better including developing a volunteer training manual for library check-in/out using their TinyCat system, designing an innovative small-scale collection management system with a custom spine and label system, and writing a funding proposal as the library relies on donations.

The course was offered again in 2023 with the *London Black Heritage Council*. The projects were organized around a commemorative event to mark Emancipation Day (celebrated in many Commonwealth countries when the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 came into effect). A student group organized the event with a lecture on Black Canadian history and a question-and-answer session with founding members. The event also debuted a group's short documentary film. It allowed other groups to show their work including developing an organizational timeline (from two decades of meeting notes and photographs), creating a finding aid to help locate records and store new ones later, and making a full-color marketing book for fundraising and rebranding.

Method of Evaluation

In the first year, students were evaluated for participation (20%), a short reflection paper (15%), their community-engaged learning project (40%), and their self-reflective journal (25%). Students did not need to complete projects as designed – it was an iterative process of arriving at the best possible outcome with the allotted resources and time. However, some shared that systemic inequities were replicated with equity-deserving students taking a more invested approach. In 2023, I revised the syllabus to add an individual contribution (5%). I also added an anti-oppression community agreement (BC Campus Anti-Racism Anti-Hate Working Group, 2022).

Outcomes and Benefits: Student Reflections

The course elicited important critical reflections on how LIS can support forms of racial inequity. It also provided an important opportunity to center voices that were not often heard in LIS. As a Black woman, Gillis' self-reflection exemplifies the conscious shift anti-racism suggests toward reimagining historical ways of doing library work that resist harmful structures and relationships

The concept [of neutrality] promotes willful ignorance and an ambivalent nature that does not work in tandem with the recent emergence (and advocacy) of equity/equality, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID) strategies and committees...The LIS field is using diversity initiatives in a passive form as a tool to rectify racism in the workplace (2023, p. 4).

Students also became more competent (to varying degrees) in understanding the nuance of racial justice. This is exemplified in another student's journal response. Although this student had enrolled in the class, they also expressed many doubts about structural privilege in our discussions. In the excerpt below, the student reflects on a TEDTalk by Kimberle Crenshaw (2016) on intersectionality and reveals a crack in their past limiting beliefs about the world.

I am from a part of the world that was religiously, ethnically, and culturally very homogenous. It's hard to say that I've witnessed, for example, racism firsthand when I have actually spent very little time working with or speaking to people of a race other than my own...I do remember one thing that happened in my hometown that drove me insane. My hometown is a quite wealthy suburban area. There was one place in the town that used to be "lower income housing," one section of trailers that was tucked away out of sight. The town voted to demolish the trailer park, however, because it was "lowering property values." I would imagine that this wasn't the first time that something like this had happened before. So the racial homogeneity of my hometown may have been elicited, in part, by the lack of affordable housing, and as such, it was an intersection between racism and classism.

RE-ORIENTATION: EXPANDING ANTI-RACIST PRAXIS IN LIS

Many Black-led organizations are significantly under-resourced, less connected, and lack formal structures (Pereira et al., 2020). LIS can expand on this approach by building partnerships and raising awareness to further support other Black-led organizations. Below are some tangible ways to support local Black community organizations and support their *existing community-based work*:

- Share funding and other resource-related announcements
- Nominate Black-led groups for awards in your library association (if eligible)
- Support Black-led organizations in accessing municipal and philanthropic decision-makers (e.g., city councilors on library boards, business leaders, etc.)
- Contribute faculty space, expertise, and skills for free
- Donate used equipment or materials in good working order to organizations
- Develop community partnerships like those developed for the course

These are ideas that I have come across in "coalition" with Black communities (Dabiri, 2021, p. 26). Coined by Dabiri in her long essay *What White People Can Do Next: From Allyship to Coalition* (2021) (our core text in 2023), we found the space for two disparate groups to address an organizational issue – together. Their needs were placed at the centre and we focused on how supporting existing organizational efforts. It is important to be intentional and well-resourced when considering opportunities, though. Adequate support and/or any desired funding should be in place before approaching Black-led groups with community-based partnership opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This novel approach helped students better understand approaches to addressing anti-Black racism in partnership with Black community groups. The unique community-based partnerships provided many benefits for community partners, students, and the university. Importantly, our community partners also received greatly improved processes designed for free using existing LIS skills (e.g., knowledge organization, collection management, archival description, etc.). The LIS-tailored approach to anti-racist reflection and relationship-building can be applied more broadly to similarly question and resist problematic power structures and practices to create more consciously powerful and valuable relationships for students, librarianship, and communities.

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