

Examination of Anti-Oppressive Education: Informing Faculty, Staff, and Students

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ABSTRACT

The Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice (EDISJ) committee dedicated to supporting and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion within the College of Information, Data and Society (CIDS) has undertaken an ongoing project (now in its 5th year) to examine anti-oppressive education in Library and Information Science (LIS) and data analytics. Anti-oppressive education actively engages with and seeks to work against systems of oppression, including those embedded in both education and professional structures. Anti-oppressive education “requires *disruptive* knowledge, not simply more knowledge” (Kumanshiro, 2000, p. 34, emphasis added). Library and information science education, like libraries themselves, is historically intertwined with intersecting systems of oppression, including white supremacy, settler-colonialism, and patriarchy, as well as economic and class-based oppression. This paper addresses these aspects and shares our attempts to examine oppressive education in LIS and data analytics within our college.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Social justice; Education; Curriculum; Pedagogy; Teaching faculty.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Equity; Diversity; Social justice; Anti-oppression; Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Within both Library and Information Science (LIS) and Data Analytics, there is increasing awareness that our disciplines and the professions they support are inescapably intertwined with the power dynamics and oppressive systems of the broader society. An anti-oppressive approach to education ensures that our students, as future professionals, have the skills to navigate complex social issues and their impact on the many communities, stakeholders, and organizations our students will serve, and to navigate those issues “with intellectual nuance, analytical vigor, historical context, and empathy and compassion” (Berila, 2016, p. 2). As Berila writes, “The stakes for learning how to navigate these conversations are high, because the students in our classrooms will be shaping our societies for years to come. If they do not learn the skills in our courses, I am not sure where they will learn them” (2016, p. 2). This paper addresses the literature and shares attempts to examine oppressive education in LIS and data analytics within CIDS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining “Anti Oppressive”.

A full examination of anti-oppressive education, its contours, and the debates and disagreements within the literature around anti-oppressive education is beyond the scope of this paper. It is also worth noting that anti-oppressive education, as well as broader social justice efforts in both LIS and Data Analytics, rely on several bodies of theory and scholarship. Indeed, Brown, discussing Kumashiro’s foundational work on anti-oppressive education, notes that “Kumashiro constructs his theoretical framework from a wide array of critical perspectives including critical race theory, feminism (poststructural and psychoanalytic strands), cultural and multicultural studies, postcolonial theories, and queer theories” (2013, p. 74). Black feminist scholarship has been foundational to anti-oppressive theory and practice, including (but certainly not limited to) Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality (1989, 1991), bell hooks’ work on social class, race, and gender (2003, 2014), and the work of Angela Davis (2011), Audre Lorde, a librarian (2012), and the Combahee River Collective (1983). Because anti-oppressive education is, broadly, “education that works against various forms of oppression” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 25), it also draws upon several other social justice frameworks, none of which are monolithic, and which may disagree with one another [Critical Disabilities Studies (Bailey & Mobeley, 2019; Campbell, 2009; Kafer, 2013), Indigenous Studies (see, e.g., Andersen & O’Brien, 2016), and Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Lynn et al., 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016)].

In his widely-cited “Towards a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education,” Kumashiro explains that, with regards to the Other (“those groups that are traditionally marginalized in society,” including students of color, queer students, students from under-unemployed students, female and/or femme students, disabled students, and non-Christian students), schools are actively harmful spaces, where oppression happens through both the action and inaction of peers, teachers, and staff (2000, p. 26 - 27). Ruitenberg offers a simple explanation of “oppression”:

oppression is “implicitly or explicitly telling someone: ‘this world is not for you’” (Ruitenbergh, 2016, p. 17), and work on anti-oppressive education shows that such oppression happens in a number of ways, and on the basis of a number of axes of oppression, in schools.

As a response to this oppression, "anti-oppressive education is a form of education that actively challenges injustice and oppression at both the micro level of teaching and the macro level of education reform, and draws together various theoretical traditions, including critical, feminist, multicultural, queer, and postcolonial perspectives" (Kumashiro, 2012, p. 112). However, as Heringer concludes, “good intentions alone are not enough to pave the way to equity and students’ agency” (2020, p. 61). Rather, “solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these ‘beings for another’” (Freire, 2018, p.49). “The challenge for us as anti-oppression educators is to help students learn how to deeply and productively engage in these hard conversations, unpack the learned ideologies that produce inequalities in society, and learn more equitable and empowering ways of relating to one another” (Berila, 2016, p. 2).

Library and Information Science.

Libraries and archives, as institutions, and library and information science as a discipline, are inescapably embedded in the broader structures of society, informing and informed by oppressive structures such as white supremacy, cis-heteronormativity, settler-colonial power structures, and ableism. For example, with regards to race, “[l]ibraries, like academia, are historically white serving, have been complicit in the white racial project of the United States [...] and perpetuate the racial inequity in the field today through mechanisms such as unpaid labor” (Ferretti, 2020, p. 142). In preparing students for work in libraries and information institutions, LIS education must equip them to confront longstanding, deeply entrenched issues of injustice. In providing that education, LIS institutions must also address the issues of injustice embedded in both the discipline and academia.

That said, there are long-standing anti-oppressive efforts within LIS scholarship and education, particularly by marginalized scholars, educators, and information professionals. “Indeed, this work has long been part of the LIS literature and professional ecology as demonstrated by scholars like Chatman (e.g. Chatman 1984, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1996), Gollop (1997), Chu (1999), McCook (2000), Peterson (2003), Mehra and Braquet (2007), and Overall (2007) [...] As equity, diversity, and inclusion concerns have become more amplified in mainstream LIS discourse, there has emerged a growing - although much contested - body of work in critical librarianship (see, e.g., Drabinski, 2019; Hines & Ketchum, 2020), which “aims to understand how libraries participate in systems of oppression and find ways for librarians and students to intervene upon these systems” (Tewell, 2016). LIS scholars and educators have done important work on aspects of anti-oppressive education within the discipline and profession, such as Elborg’s widely influential work on critical information literacy (see, e.g., Elborg, 2006) and Pagowsky and McElroy’s handbook on critical library pedagogy (2016). Of particular interest to this project are works on critical pedagogy and cultural competence in LIS education. As Cooke and Kitzie explain, one of the ways in which LIS educators can address its “underlying hegemonic assumptions and norms [...] is by] radically reflecting on and redefining

one's pedagogy to engender trust between an instructor and their students [...] by being culturally competent of and valuing students' unique knowledge and backgrounds" (Cooke & Kitzie, 2020, p. 5 - 6).

Despite these efforts, as recently as 2017, Sung and Parboteeah found that "race received very little discussion (1.79% [of articles in four major LIS journals]) [...] little LIS research has focused on disability/accessibility (2.68%) [...]and] there was extremely little evidence of research on sexual orientation (1.15%)" (p. 81). Collins refers to the "LIS Diversity Void," arguing that LIS has a "decades-old rhetoric of diversity and inclusion [...that is] toothless and which is ultimately performative rather than effective" (2018, p. 40). Ferretti similarly argues that while critical librarianship has made performative efforts towards changing "patron-focused practices" and power relations, there remains a need to address the structural inequities that exist within our institutions and their impact on library workers, "to begin discussing these inequities and actively working to change them" (2020, p. 142).

Ensuring LIS students receive an anti-oppressive education is critical to their future ability to serve diverse communities in the many roles that information professionals may play. For example, as Seigel et al. report, "many LGBTQ patrons are reluctant to seek assistance from library staff due to fear of judgment or discrimination during a reference interaction" (2020). Furthermore, anti oppressive education can help extend the benefits of our programs more equitably amongst all LIS students, rather than reinforcing existing privilege. For example, another marginalized group within LIS education is first generation students. Bernier et al. find that:

While MLIS programs have historically served as "launching pads" into professional careers, few programs identify and focus on the experiences of FGS (students first in their families to earn a master's or professional degree). Programs and faculty thus remain largely unaware of this student identity or how it constitutes relative "invisibility." Programs and faculty are likewise unaware of the ways in which one's status as FGS and class, ethnicity, race, and linguistic diversity intersect (2020, p. 340).

Thus, first generation MLIS students are frequently at a disadvantage in leveraging their degree professionally compared to their classmates from more privileged class and educational backgrounds. While this review only touches the threads of anti oppressive education and pedagogy in LIS at a very high level, it is clear that LIS educators and scholars must continue their efforts if the field is to achieve its ambitions of empowering all LIS students to serve the vast diversity of communities that information institutions could - but currently do not - support and empower.

Applied Data Science.

While data science and data analytics are relatively young fields, one need only look at the historical relationship between eugenics and modern statistics to see the entanglement of systems of oppression. Furthermore, given the pervasiveness of data-driven technology and its importance socially, economically, and materially, data analytics must also prepare its students to encounter and confront systems of oppression in their professional lives. Data analytics and

datafication can impact both individuals and entire communities, potentially denying them services and access to opportunities, or leading to wrongful targeting and exploitation. In short, they impact our ability to participate in society” (Data Justice Lab, 2018). Finally, data analytics students are, first and foremost, people, and supporting their success requires acknowledging their positionality and valuing their unique experiences and knowledge. “Many harsh realities affect our lives, and the lives of our students, both in and outside of the classroom. Many face income inequality, structural racism, differential health outcomes during a pandemic, and sexism on a daily basis” (Witmer, 2021, p. 2). To do so, educators must “think about [their] pedagogical practice, including unexamined assumptions and behaviors,” (Witmer, 2021, p. 3). Data analytics students will be expected to step into a professional world in which their field “has been beset by controversies regarding its social impacts” (Green, 2018, p.3); ethics researcher Timnit Gebru was controversially fired by Google for co-authoring and publishing a paper (Bender et al., 2021) examining the risks of very large language models (Hao, 2021). Given the very real questions of oppression they will have to grapple with in their career, Applied Data Science students’ education should equip them to confront those challenges.

Much as with LIS, data science has its own long, complex history of critical and anti-oppressive scholarship, education, and practice, often led by marginalized professionals at the margins of the discipline, winding through such areas of study as Science and Technology Studies (STS), data ethics, data justice, and critical data studies. Again, as with LIS, anti-oppressive efforts within data science build on a number of critical theories, addressing such challenges as decolonising computational sciences (Birhane & Guest, 2020) and queering computing education (Paré, 2021). However, because of data science’s roots in practice, and particularly in technical practice, the social entanglements of the field can be less obvious, but nonetheless pernicious. As Green explains, “data science ethics relies on an artificial divide between technology and society [...which] leads to technological solutionism, focusing on improving the design as the key to creating ethical technologies” (2018).

Data analytics education must adopt an anti-oppressive stance to equip both students and educators with the critical perspective necessary to recognize the social and power dimensions of the choices to be made. Ultimately, “[n]ew data science techniques offer immense potential for scientific advancement and human development – there may even be a role for data science in advancing the democratic project. However, in order to ensure that these advances benefit all, rather than empower the few, it is crucial that data scientists work collaboratively with others to incorporate an analysis of power into their practice” (Bates, 2016). For this to happen, and for students from marginalized communities to thrive in their education, both students and educators must recognize that, not just is “data science itself [...] not neutral,” (Green, 2018, p. 7) but that data scientists are not neutral actors, but rather have “responsibility for the social and political impacts of their work” (Green, 2018, p. 10).

Finally, it must be remembered that, because oppression is complex, multi-faceted, and deeply rooted within society, there are significant areas of uncertainty, disagreement, and development yet to be had for both LIS and data analytics educators. As one example, the label “anti-oppressive” is not universally agreed upon; for example, a number of indigenous scholars

“resist being identified as primarily anti-oppressive due to [their] focus on decolonization,” maintaining that “decolonization is distinct from other human rights-based and social-justice projects.”(Zinga & Styres, 2019, p. 3). This does not mean that educators are free to ignore decolonization, but rather, that they must engage with Indigenous students, scholars, and perspectives on their terms if the educators are committed to equity. Furthermore, there are no monoliths; there are significant departures and competing viewpoints. As Green writes about “social good” within computer science, “there is a multiplicity of perspectives that must be openly acknowledged to surface debates about what ‘good’ actually entails (2019, p. 2). Finally, it is fully expected that this work will be uncomfortable. Despite the potential challenges in embracing anti-oppressive education, “[i]f educators are truly committed to enriching students’ learning experience, they are required to meaningfully engage in developing educational policies and teaching practices that foster diversity” (Mohammed Karkouti, 2016, p. 409).

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

The College EDISJ committee met monthly, beginning in fall 2020, upon appointment to discuss overarching tasks and determine the necessary steps. Diversity and inclusion are crucial in any organization, but particularly in a university that strives to recruit and retain a diverse faculty, attract diverse students, and foster diversity initiatives across campus. *Understanding* diversity and inclusion behaviors, educational approaches, and practices matters to our professional environment. We must examine our own pedagogical approaches if we want to build and sustain a diverse environment that is inclusive and accepting of difference.

With this we determined that we would need to review the literature related to anti-oppressive education in library and information science (LIS) and data analytics first, followed by a survey of CIDS faculty, staff, and students of the School of Information and Applied Data Science to effectively understand anti-oppressive education that could then inform next steps. From there, we determined we needed to build on the insights gained from the previous year’s work to advance anti-oppressive education within the College. Beginning fall 2021, we collaborated with the Center for Faculty Excellence and Teaching Innovation (CFETI) to offer workshops for faculty relevant to anti-oppressive pedagogy, including ‘Reimagining the Syllabus.’ We then offered an equity audit and action plan for faculty - led by our committee with CFETI check-ins and guidance. This included a review of syllabi and learning outcomes, with a discussion around what to bring into the classroom and what is currently involved, including assessments tied to the course. We reminded faculty about the optional IDEAS program with consultations provided by the CFETI office virtually.

In 2022-2023, CFETI offered asynchronous modular content around topics such as inclusive teaching, anti-racist pedagogy, accessible education, universal design for learning, and authentic assessment. From here, the committee decided it would be best to offer a customized certificate to our faculty based upon resources developed by CFETI. We are now in our fourth cohort offering faculty within our college the opportunity to take part in the ‘Achieving Equitable Student Outcomes’ certificate. The certificate covers topics such as equity and inclusion principles, creating courses that are equitable and inclusive, providing support

for students, and utilizing assessment strategies that promote equity. Participating faculty evaluate their teaching materials and methods to foster diversity and inclusivity in their classes, resulting in more equitable outcomes for all students. The committee has collected data from the cohort participants and has developed a report focused on the results to inform what comes next! The committee plans to continue with the certificate as long as sustainable and there is interest.

CONCLUSION

As a college committed to equity and the success of all our students, faculty, and staff, it is essential that we continue to move forward and improve. Recognizing and valuing diversity should be the core of all of CIDS' work. Working to apply an anti-oppressive lens, where we actively engage with and seek to work against systems of oppression, including those embedded in both educational and professional structures, helps us take meaningful action that improves diversity, equity, and inclusion. This research and project yields actionable insights and is a baseline for CIDS to track future actions and needs of faculty, staff and students. The data can also be used to inform policy decisions, as well as acting as a resource to assess our own practices and progress.

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