

Curiosity, Empathy, and Care: The Valuable Mindset in LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

Decolonizing Library and Information Science (LIS) education is essential to challenging the Western-centric frameworks dominating the field. While this work has focused on critiquing and revising curriculum and knowledge systems, we argue that decolonization in LIS begins with a fundamental shift in the attitudes and values upheld in the classroom. Rather than solely emphasizing technical skills and merit-based performance, decolonization calls for a refocus on humanity. This paper explores how three values, curiosity, empathy, and care, can be integrated in the classroom. By centering these values, LIS education equips future professionals to better navigate the complexities of diversity, challenge colonial legacies, and advocate for justice and equity in their practice. As a result, the LIS learning environment not only addresses the practice of the field, it also cultivates a sense of collective responsibility, empathy, and ethical engagement with the diverse communities and knowledge systems that shape our world.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Pedagogy; Teaching faculty; Students; Education.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Decolonization; Curiosity; Empathy; Care.

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INTRODUCTION

Our lives are increasingly defined by rapid and often volatile change. This frenetic flux extends to our work, which is often evaluated using borrowed commercial metrics that insist upon relentless productivity. The concept of decolonization is frequently framed as a call to action, one demanding large-scale movements and responses. Perhaps the initial step of decolonization is not one of grand gestures, but rather the challenging practice of reflection. Reflection that serves as an invitation to refocus on the heart of the practice of Library and Information Science (LIS), the human.

The focus of decolonizing LIS education literature has challenged the Western paradigms that dominate the field (Crilly & Everitt, 2022; Dali & Caidi, 2021), and has critically examined academic frameworks prioritizing Western knowledge systems while marginalizing others (Crilly, 2023; White, 2018). However, we recognize that the merit-based education system persists in placing undue emphasis on grades, reinforcing ideals of perfectionism and individual performance over collaboration and the collective growth of future professionals. Curriculum design, too, prioritizes procedural dissemination, leaving little space for students to reflect on their personal development or the humanity of their work. Moreover, efforts to improve LIS curriculum or programs focus on the student experience, with little attention on the educators' experience. What if the work of decolonization begins here, by reconsidering the values we uphold in the classroom?

In this paper, we propose refocusing on three core values: curiosity, empathy, and care. We see these values as creating a decolonized educational environment, as they are rooted in collective collaboration. Emphasizing curiosity encourages the art of asking questions and fosters a sense of inquiry. Cultivating empathy nurtures consideration for the human experience, inviting meaningful connections with the communities we serve. Care values students and educators holistically and empowers learning journeys. By centering these values, we create a learning environment that honors the varied identities and lived experiences each person brings to the collective.

THE VALUE OF CURIOSITY IN INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

Curiosity is often associated with a desire to know (Merriam-Webster, 2025). In educational settings, it is described as a critical motivator that enhances student engagement, learning outcomes, and interpersonal understanding (Pluck & Johnson, 2011; Vracheva, Moussetis, & Abu-Rahma, 2020). Within LIS, curiosity is foundational in fostering inquiry and professional growth and enabling practitioners to better serve diverse communities. As a core value in LIS classrooms, curiosity cultivates a lifelong practice of questioning and understanding, which is essential to both the profession and its pedagogical mission.

Curiosity as a decolonizing approach values the learning of the collective and their collaboration. Phillips (2016) refers to this as “sociable curiosity”, highlighting that curiosity is not a singular activity but is rather a collective practice. This sociability sparks a desire to understand others. When questions are asked, connections are strengthened, especially within

diverse communities. In the classroom, asking questions is essential for bridging theory and practice and supports developing librarians in their emerging professional identity. Irvin notes, "The LIS classroom is a space where this introspective level of inquiry can be collaborative, inclusive, critical and discerning," (p. 154). Through the act of questioning, we cultivate a practice of self-reflection which encourages understanding of our individual identities and how they shape our interactions with others and our engagement with the world (Irvin, 2016). The art of asking questions and cultivating curiosity are the roots of librarian's identity.

Librarians must be experts in not only in responding to questions, but also in asking them. As Watson (2022) explains, "when we engage in the skill of good questioning, we do not simply seek information; we competently seek information that is worth having" (p.140). Good questioning is both an act of self-reflection and a collective practice that must be nurtured as a personal mindset. Encouraging questions in the classroom opens pathways for exploring uncertainty and emphasizes the ability to navigate ambiguity and complexity (Irvin, 2016). This requires shifting the focus from a *transfer of knowledge* to a student's *active role* in constructing knowledge (Brown, 2012), thereby fostering a reflective, human-centered learning experience that prioritizes curiosity and the reciprocal nature of learning. Curiosity is the personal motivation and mindset, while a spirit of inquiry is the active engagement in the learning environment.

Inquiry-Based instruction is a pedagogy that emphasizes curiosity in the classroom. This student-centered approach leverages questioning to foster open dialogue and facilitate the critical development of personal understanding. Pierson, Goulding, and Campbell-Meier (2020) propose an inquiry-based assignment designed to promote self-reflection on professional identity. This assignment transcends simple reflection by engaging students in reflexive practice, encouraging them to examine their personal ways of knowing and how these influence their professional practice (p. 33). Structured around a series of questions in three phases, the assignment revolves around a critical incident, prompting students to reflect deeply on their evolving professional identity, which is continuously shaped and never static (p. 30).

The role of questioning in fostering open dialogue is also central to the reference interaction. Irvin and Nakashima (2023) introduce the *Query Search Method*, an inquiry-driven pedagogical approach to reference interactions that emphasizes the layers of questioning present in the exchange. In this method, students first identify the patron's underlying curiosity, then acknowledge their own curiosity in seeking an answer. This dual recognition helps students uncover the true inquiry guiding the reference interaction. Brown (2012) further advocates for promoting inquiry through "focused conversation," a technique that uses a four-level sequence of questions: Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional; to guide students through problem-solving and deep, deliberate thinking about their personal responses, analysis, and future applications of information (pp. 197–198). By refocusing inquiry within the LIS curriculum, we prioritize the human in the profession. We also shift the emphasis from grades to fostering deeper student engagement; underscoring the importance of student involvement in the co-construction of knowledge.

LIS educators must continuously reflect on the identities they bring to the learning space. As bell hooks asserts, "the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (1994, p. 11). A curious mindset

examines the personal identities and motivations behind the inquiry introduced in the classroom. This aligns with Irvin's (2016) suggestion that practitioner inquiry fosters self-awareness among LIS educators as they reflect on their practice. Reflection can be facilitated through journaling, reading, and the pedagogical tool proposed by Pierson, Goulding, and Campbell-Meier. Additionally, communities of practice for LIS educators are valuable as spaces for collaboration and mutual reflection. Where they enhance curiosity and support self-care (Carroll & Mallon, 2021). By cultivating this spirit in ourselves, we model the value of curiosity for our students.

EMPATHY AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL FOR COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING

Empathy, the second of the core values we propose refocusing LIS education on, describes the action of and capacity to be aware of, sensitive to, or vicariously experience the feelings and thoughts of another (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Dominant approaches in LIS have historically framed education and work as being shaped by and for socially privileged groups while positioning marginalized communities as "other." This framing reproduces exclusionary practices and, troublingly, allows professionals to espouse empathy for diverse groups while advancing a version of empathy that is ultimately misdirected, one that acknowledges difference without challenging the colonial epistemes that construct it. Achieving radical empathy necessary for meaningful change requires moving beyond superficial engagement with diversity. It demands rejecting the practice of othering, committing to reflexivity, and centering lived experiences not as markers of division, but as sites of connection and solidarity.

Edward W. Said's foundational text, *Orientalism* (1978), critiques how the "West" constructs the "Orient" as a necessary opposite – an object of knowledge existing only in relation to Western authority. In this binary, the West is "the actor, the Orient a passive reactor" (p. 109), rendering the Orient legible only through the colonial gaze. Said describes this reduction of the Orient to fiction as "disregarding, essentializing, [and] denuding the humanity of another culture" (p. 108). The consequence of othering, he argues, is dehumanized thought. This colonial logic extends beyond geopolitics and embeds itself in the knowledge systems structuring LIS. Just as *Orientalism* sustains an epistemic hierarchy privileging the West, LIS diversity frameworks often reinforce social hierarchies through their tacit acceptance of constructed categories like "race" and "gender" as neutral descriptors that fix human differences as natural. Well-meaning but essentializing approaches to diversity risk reifying identity markers rather than recognizing them as historically contingent constructs shaped by colonial histories.

The implicit practice of othering in DEI-focused discourse places a cognitive burden on practitioners, who are expected to cultivate empathy while simultaneously being conditioned to perceive socially classified groups as inherently different. A refusal to engage in othering opens possibilities for radical empathy. It allows us to recognize that while race, gender, etc. are socially constructed, the systems of racism, sexism, and all identity-based discrimination are materially real, structuring lived experience in concrete ways. A truly decolonial approach to LIS education requires moving beyond frameworks that understand identity as primarily difference and diversity as tolerance of such difference. Instead, it asks us to engage in radical empathy, one that works through difference to foreground lived experience as a means of collective

understanding. This radical empathy facilitates recognition of epistemic diversity, particularly cultural knowledge traditions marginalized in dominant LIS practices, essential for building inclusive professional practices and information systems.

Beyond facilitating connections with communities we serve, centering empathy as a core pedagogical value has implications for practitioners. Implementing decolonial pedagogy often feels like a fight, requiring us to challenge colonial legacies in LIS practices and confront how we ourselves may have been internally colonized. To mitigate exhaustion and burnout, we must extend radical empathy in every direction: towards others and ourselves. We need to recognize decolonization as what Said describes, an “ongoing and literally unending process of emancipation and enlightenment” (p. xv). Decolonial LIS pedagogy must sustain both students and educators, and it cannot do so without empathy. Centering our activities on humanity reinforces the true focus of our efforts in what is, at heart, a caring profession. By rejecting practices that reinforce colonial epistemic dominance and embracing radical empathy as an active force, LIS educators can craft learning environments that are not only inclusive and compassionate, but also resilient and sustaining.

PEDAGOGIES OF CARE IN LIS

Care work is traditionally associated with professions such as healthcare, education, and social services, which prioritize the well-being and development of communities within the public sphere (Stone, 2000). While care is an essential component in these fields, the role of care within LIS, particularly in LIS classrooms, is underexplored. Pedagogies of care, particularly within a decolonized curriculum, emphasize the well-being of individuals, fostering an environment where all learners feel supported, valued, and respected (Mortari, 2016). Similarly, hooks (1994) argues that transformational learning hinges on educators' ability to bring their full, authentic selves into the classroom. When instructors share their personal experiences and present their whole selves, they create a space where students feel encouraged to do the same. It is within such spaces of care that radical empathy can truly flourish.

Care entails a commitment to the well-being or support of others. In the context of education, care underscores the intentional support of the whole student, recognizing the distinct communities and cultures from which students come (Barek & Ravitch, 2021; Noddings, 2003). In higher education, pedagogies of care emphasize the significance of reciprocal and compassionate teacher-student relationships (Noddings, 2003). These approaches challenge hyper-individualistic, transactional models of education by prioritizing humanizing practices that address the holistic well-being of students, with particular attention to the needs of marginalized groups (Barek & Ravitch, 2021). A pedagogy of care requires deliberate action, mutual respect, and authentic dialogue, framing care not as a mere sentiment, but as a transformative and equity-driven pedagogical practice.

Incorporating care into LIS classrooms encourages educators to recognize students as holistic individuals, rather than mere participants in a transactional educational process (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). This approach integrates empathy and understanding into the learning environment, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. Such an environment enhances student engagement and self-confidence. One effective strategy for achieving this is by involving students in shaping their educational experiences. Inclusive classrooms may

implement "extension-without-penalty" systems (Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024) or develop rubrics collaboratively with students (Bacchus et al., 2020). Co-creation of the curriculum allows students to pose critical questions, contribute insights, and refine class projects in ways that reflect their perspectives. Consequently, learning environments become more dynamic and inclusive, facilitating a collaborative exchange of ideas. Ultimately, the integration of care in LIS classrooms fosters consideration for others and provides supportive frameworks.

Educators possess both emotional and professional development needs that are often overlooked in the pursuit of research, publication, and teaching. The educator, as a person, brings their identities, challenges, and passions into the classroom. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of the person at the front of the room is key to supporting their effectiveness. As Roos and Borkoski (2021) note, "We can only teach what we are, and when instructors have strong well-being, they are able to bring their authentic selves to the classroom" (p. 835). Faculty learning communities, whether organized through institutions or created informally on platforms such as WhatsApp or Slack, provide vital spaces for venting, collaboration, and connection (Murphy et al., 2020; Noddings, 2012). As hooks (1994) observes, "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (p. 15). When educators' emotional and professional needs are adequately supported, they are better equipped to model care.

PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR EMPATHY, CURIOSITY, AND CARE

To develop a pedagogical approach that both acknowledges and challenges the ways colonial legacies shape LIS, we must implement intentional strategies based on and aimed at further cultivating empathy, curiosity, and care. This requires shifting LIS pedagogy from reifying the categorization and management of identities to a humanistic, relational approach to teaching and practice. In doing so, we alleviate the cognitive burden of reconciling the contradictions inherent in practicing empathy and care within a framework that discursively constructs certain individuals and communities as inherently "other." Decolonial pedagogy, grounded in curiosity, empathy, and care, advances both the critical examination of how lived experiences are shaped by colonial legacies and the agency to challenge those structures. This approach not only sustains us in the arduous but necessary work of decolonizing LIS, but also serves as a safeguard against burnout by ensuring that the curiosity, empathy, and care we extend to others are continuously reflected back onto ourselves.

Dorothy E. Smith's work on standpoint and ruling relations provides a useful method for actualizing this shift within LIS pedagogy. In *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (1990), Smith critiques hegemonic modes of knowledge production for divorcing the knower from the known, an epistemic practice that mirrors the colonial estrangement of subjects from their histories and experiences. Smith argues that ruling relations, "the total complex of activities...by which our kind of society is ruled, managed, and administered", abstract knowledge away from embodied, lived realities, making it possible to govern people through textual and bureaucratic means (p. 17). In LIS, we see this clearly manifest in information systems that privilege dominant epistemologies while erasing or disqualifying knowledge that does not fit neatly within Western classificatory structures (Drabinski, 2013). For many, this epistemic exclusion causes a sense of

alienation, as practitioners and students struggle to reconcile their lived experiences with frameworks that render them illegible. Over time, this dissonance can lead to burnout and disengagement.

A decolonial LIS pedagogy must therefore examine and elevate lived experience as the site where colonial legacies continue to influence our realities, and where they can be countered. Use of Smith's standpoint method shows us that our material conditions, structured by colonial legacies, and by the racism and sexism embedded within them, are not just individual burdens but shared structures of domination and subordination. While these conditions affect us differently depending on how we have been socially categorized, recognizing their interconnectedness provides an opportunity for us to challenge them collectively, rather than reproducing in LIS discourse the divisions that sustain them.

To counteract these effects of epistemic exclusion, LIS pedagogy must adopt strategies that foster relational understanding, critical reflection, and engaged learning, methods that actively challenge the separation between knower and known that Smith critiques. LIS educators can support collaborative learning environments, through structures like intensive discussions, group projects, and participatory research activities. These collaborative activities have a great deal of potential to enhance mutual understanding, as they both highlight different lived experiences and show how they are materially connected within larger systems of power (Smith, 1990). Relational forms of teaching and learning reject the hierarchical transfer of knowledge from instructor to student, instead centering all participants as co-creators in the learning process (Accardi, 2013). In a decolonial LIS pedagogy, collaboration is not just a method but a structural commitment to dismantling the epistemic hierarchies that sustain colonial knowledge systems. Soliciting and being responsive to student feedback, through mid-semester evaluations (Delgado Community College, n.d.) and faculty-student curriculum partnerships (Assif et al., 2024), is not merely an inclusive teaching practice, but a challenge to the traditional top-down authority of curriculum design. These approaches directly integrate student perspectives into the knowledge production process, aligning with decolonial commitments to shared authorship and collective learning.

CONCLUSION

Decolonizing LIS education requires substantive and sustained efforts, many of which are already underway within the field. For this transformative shift to be sustainable, we must also direct our attention inward. Cultivating curiosity that sustains engagement, empathy that fosters deeper connections, and care that nurtures our well-being are essential components of this process. Decolonizing LIS pedagogy demands not only an outward-facing critique of institutional structures but also an internal decolonization, an unlearning of the results-driven culture we justify our work through. This process requires a slowing down, a deliberate quieting of our approach. Additionally, we see the proposed values encouraging critical self-reflection as counter to the vocational awe of librarianship. Vocational awe positions libraries as inherently virtuous and beyond critique (Ettarh, 2018), often prompting unsustainable expectations of librarians, leading to self-sacrifice and burnout, in pursuit of the vocation. By fostering a culture that prioritizes a reorientation of our own attitudes and values, we create collaborative environments in the vital work of reimagining LIS education. This reorientation not only

counters the detrimental effects of vocational awe but also reaffirms the profession's ethical commitment to social justice and collective transformation. This reimagining, grounded in curiosity, empathy, and care, transforms LIS education into a space of critical inquiry, prioritizing collective transformation and placing the human at the core of the profession.

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