

Decolonizing the Discipline of Information Literacy

Karen F. Kaufmann^a and Clarence Maybee^b

^aUniversity of South Florida, USA

^bPurdue University, USA

kfkaufma@usf.edu, cmaybee@purdue.edu

ABSTRACT

The emergence of scholarship focused on decolonizing information literacy (IL) indicates its importance and significance to the IL community. The recognition of information literacy (IL) as a maturing discipline has implications for the teaching and researching of IL, and for library and information science (LIS) education. While often associated with colonized university structures, scholars have argued that disciplines can be re-imagined to approach teaching and research in ways that are not, or not only, grounded in the colonizing epistemologies of the Western world. This paper identifies some ideas of the decolonization of IL presented in the scholarly literature and relates them to the sensibilities Warren and colleagues identify as necessary for the decolonizing of a discipline: dialogicality, multiplicity, and horizontality.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information literacy; Education; Pedagogy

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Discipline; Decolonization; Transdisciplinary; Information literacy; Praxis

Copyright 2025 by the authors. Published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.2025>

INTRODUCTION

Decolonizing information literacy (IL) is a topic that has emerged over time in scholarly literature. In this project, the authors, both white scholars whose recent work has focused on furthering the scholarly conversation around recognizing IL as a maturing discipline (Maybee & Kaufmann, 2023), explore the literature related to decolonizing approaches to IL and how this may contribute to the development of IL curricula and other educational efforts of academic libraries. The purpose of this work is to determine how ideas related to decolonization may inform the future development of the discipline of IL. There have been many definitions of IL since the term was first coined in 1974 by Paul Zurkowski (Zurkowski, 1974). These definitions have been created and influenced by many cultural and context associated variables. However, for shared understanding, we use this definition of IL as identified in a 2024 qualitative analysis of Media Literacy (ML) and IL definitions, which delineates IL for humans that “involves skills[competencies, understanding, knowledge] in locating, evaluating and effectively utilizing information in an ethical manner (Dadakhonov, 2024, p.126)

MATURING DISCIPLINE OF IL

As part of a group of scholars advancing the idea, the authors have previously written and presented about the maturation of IL as a discipline, and what this might mean for teaching and researching IL, and library and information science (LIS) education (Maybee & Kaufmann, 2023; Maybee, et al., 2023). Broadly speaking a discipline may be defined as such by a group of people with an interest in the study of the same subject (Westmeyer, 1983). However, disciplines are commonly associated with specific characteristics, including being a community with a shared history, ethics, approaches to inquiry, and ideas about knowledge (Becher & Trowler, 2001; White & Hitt, 2009). Largely, arguments for recognizing IL as a discipline have focused on its alignment with such disciplinary characteristics (Webber & Johnston, 2017; Maybee & Kaufmann, 2023). Elements associated with disciplines can be said to be ‘disciplining,’ that is giving structure to the research and teaching-focused work of a community of scholars interested in the topic. To the detriment of other approaches to understanding and creating knowledge (Campbell & Sich, 2023), this structuring of scholarly efforts may also be viewed as supportive of colonial interests. Yet, as cline and López-McKnight (2024) suggest, it is possible to imagine an IL discipline that is grounded in principles of decolonization.

As it is still maturing, there may be more opportunities for the IL community to shape and form the discipline of IL than would be true of disciplines with long historical legacies. Beth Warren and colleagues (2020) argue that disciplines can be re-imagined to approach teaching

and research in ways that are not, or not only, grounded in the colonizing epistemologies of the Western world. Such disciplines, they argue, must have three *sensibilities*: dialogicality, multiplicity, and horizontality. Noting that anti-dialogic approaches impart colonized knowledge from designated experts, *dialogicality* is about making meaning through the critical exploration of “words, points of view, tones, and values” (p. 285). As the name suggests, *multiplicity* refers to embracing multiple perspectives, approaches, and methods, while *horizontality* emphasizes drawing from multiple perspectives to collaboratively create knowledge, which allows for critique of the ways that disciplines “privilege and humanize certain ways of knowing and being over others” (p. 285). This paper explores ideas of the decolonization of IL presented in the scholarly literature and relates them to the sensibilities Warren and colleagues (2020) identify as necessary for the decolonizing of a discipline: dialogicality, multiplicity, and horizontality.

DECOLONIZATION AND IL

Historically, the term ‘decolonization’ was identified and defined by Moritz Julius Bonn, a German economist, in response to the newly achieved self-governance of former colonies in 1930 (as cited in O’Dowd & Heckenberg, R., 2020; Wesseling, 1987). As noted by Sanchez (2019), the process of decolonization is a community endeavor that involves challenging colonial narratives. Marsh (2022) found that the IL literature uncovers a history of colonized structures (see Table 1).

Table 1: Colonial Structures Associated with IL (Marsh, 2022)

Attribute	Description
IL as skills	Models focus on IL skills-based and behavioral approaches support colonizing narratives in which the purpose of education is to productively contribute to colonialist enterprise
Colonial practices	Colonial educational context and terminology adopted and codified, such as peer review, academic qualifications and scholarly publications
Imperial approaches to assessment	Draws from British imperial information systems and libraries’ methods of assessment, with their inclination towards quantitative measurements, surveillance practices, and institutional strategic planning
Colonizing policies	Policy-level colonial structures

Western epistemologies	Grounded in Western ways of knowing and focused on the creation and application of theory
------------------------	---

A counter approach for IL to the current colonial structure is recognizing that there are culturally specific models of IL and alternative forms of knowledge, including cultural and social practices that learners bring with them, and which support IL in transitioning to new cultural contexts and intercultural settings (Marsh, 2022, Streck, 2021).

Ideas related to decolonization have been explored by a number of scholars interested in IL or related topics (Gee 1990, 1998;;Marsh, 2022; San Pedro, et al., 2020; Hicks, & Lloyd, 2016). Much of the scholarly literature related to the decolonization of IL focuses on the teaching of it (ex: Campbell & Sich, 2023; Marsh, 2022; Méndez, 2020). As a teaching-focused discipline (Webber & Johnston, 2017) whose focus on pedagogy and curricula align closely with ideas about disciplinarity related to modes of inquiry and shared knowledge (Maybee & Kaufmann, 2023;Badke, 2008), this is an appropriate place to start a conversation about decolonization.

Widely adopted in librarianship and LIS education, critical information literacy (CIL) is an approach to IL that supports some aspects of decolonization by asking learners to “engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information’s production and dissemination.”(Tewell, 2015, p. 25). Grounded in the identification and examination of various perspectives (Drabinski & Tewell, 2019), CIL best aligns with multiplicity as outlined by Warren and colleagues (2020). The Association for College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL, 2015) *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education*, which provides guidance for IL education, has been associated with CIL (Bauder & Rod, 2016). Critical approaches to IL have been criticized for not addressing issues related to race and racism and for supporting limited progress while fundamental change is necessary (Leung & López-McKnight, 2020).

Closely related to the idea of dialogicality, James Paul Gee, one of the founders of the New Literacy Studies group, contributed to a theory of literacy as a social practice by theorizing the notion of discourse, which he defined as “socially accepted ways of using language, thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’ or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’”(Gee ,1990, p. 143). Gee’s work, noting the importance of the social implications of belonging as part of discourse, supports how building the IL community through the exploration of IL as a discipline can contribute to this area for decolonizing IL in practical ways.

Aligned with the concept of multiplicity, Hopkins and colleagues (2023) highlight that it is essential for new voices, and new discourse generally, to be included in approaches to

decolonizing IL. Indicated by the recent publication of new research, new voices continue to enter this conversation and enrich the IL literature on this topic. For example, Méndez (2020) stresses how LIS education in Puerto Rico continues to be grounded in Western and Eurocentric structures and calls for decolonizing the curriculum to reflect the Caribbean cultural context. It should be noted that sometimes for voices to be recognized, educators need to work with students in their native languages. A project was undertaken at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa to translate library guides originally provided only in English into indigenous languages (du Toit, 2024).

The IL community can continue to explore, examine, and learn together how to better shape our IL community's understanding of decolonizing IL and our discourse within the IL community of practitioners, librarians, researchers, academics, and administrators. As new voices emerge in the IL community, recognizing the importance of discourse, IL disciplinarity can potentially bridge shared understandings of IL to support decolonization and the social practices that enhance belonging. Social practices as part of discourse are valuable assets in the process of decolonizing IL within the discipline.

The following example highlights horizontality, which, in this case, cannot be separated from multiplicity. Co-creation of content and engaging with learner voices can support the IL efforts to decolonize IL. The findings from the study by Hopkins and colleagues (2023) explored a project titled 'Decolonization as Co-Creation' that involved students working to decolonize a reading list. Students engaged in multiple conversations and steps requiring discourse around the nature of decolonization. Students learned that it was not just identifying ways to approach decolonizing the reading list but recognizing the importance of understanding colonial perceptions of the other student voices, disciplinary contexts, and the potential influence on curricula. The study supports what Adebisi (2020) suggests, that a "decolonial approach" to learning and teaching, suggests a *way of being* rather than a destination.

The major takeaway from the scholarship related to engaging with student voices is that decolonization is a project that is not static and is a project for now and the future. The student voices reflect their own life and culturally influenced experiences to examine colonial structures - learning the importance of what it means to decolonize a structure –and widening the discourse for the context of decolonization work.

Reflective of all three sensibilities of dialogicality, multiplicity, and horizontality, the library staff at Western University in Canada participated in extensive work to build a decolonizing IL curriculum (Campbell & Sich, 2023). The new curriculum has six learning outcomes that focus on: 1) considering the limitations of knowledge, 2) critiquing one's own knowledge, 3) ethically searching for diverse sources of knowledge (multiplicity), 4) critically evaluating sources of knowledge, 5) making culturally respectful choices, and 6) acknowledging one's own power and ability to influence others (dialogicality).

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

When considering IL as a maturing discipline, there are new possibilities and paradigm lenses to discover allowing for the embrace of approaches grounded in dialogicality, multiplicity, and horizontality by IL educators and researchers and by LIS programs. The IL community should continue to bring new voices into the conversation and host more discourse on decolonizing the discipline of IL. As Hopkins and colleagues (2023) suggest, we must recognize the history of colonized culture and how to contribute to decolonizing in small steps. The history of colonized culture did not appear in one day. To adjust, the IL community must also consider how small steps matter. Just as a small pebble reverberates across the pond making ripples that matter to the water and ecology, we can be pebbles of influence to impact colonized ways of thinking into decolonized ways of thinking, communicating, knowing, and doing. Small steps can be influential in making impacts that continue to influence and mature in curricula, disciplines, domains, and areas of study (Hopkins et al, 2023). We will see how various approaches to this endeavor continue to unfold within IL communities globally.

The IL community may coalesce around a people-centered paradigm, including what can be learned from student voices (when given choices), their learning (when given agency), and the co-construction of knowledge and deconstruction of colonial influences. Discourse brings new and shared understandings about cultures and colonial influence that has shaped the past and informs pathways for addressing IL now and in the future. New voices, which include learner voices, are a significant “pebble” to impact decolonizing IL today and in the future (Hopkins et al., 2023; Hicks & Lloyd, 2016).

In building the global community of IL disciplinary research, education, practice, and discourse, it must be acknowledged that this work needs to recognize how it has been formed by its colonial past and strive toward decolonization. Part of its colonial history includes the way IL is invisible as explicitly identified in the literature when part of a project that crosses disciplinary fields of study (Hicks, et al., 2022) Highlighting the invisibility of IL needs to be part of the discourse taking place to address this phenomenon. Making IL visible provides opportunities for new voices to interrogate historical structures and ways to foreground IL to characterize how paramount it is in the discourse of other disciplines.

Examining the transdisciplinary (TD) nature of the discipline of IL is yet another approach to address decolonizing IL in research, practice, and education (Streck, 2021). Transdisciplinarity is a research practice that acknowledges the importance of knowledge from various disciplines to uncover ways to address questions from multiple perspectives. This lends to the understanding that TD research can contribute to knowledge creation using a decolonizing framework (Streck, 2021) and can be effective in contributing to IL work as a social and academic praxis and promote what Tandon and colleagues (2016) identify as *knowledge democracy*. Just as Warren’s group (2020) highlight the decolonizing of a discipline

dialogicality, with multiplicity, and horizontality, Streck (2021) brings a Latin American perspective to this concept with TD as a decolonizing research practice that can be applied to the discipline of IL in three areas. TD as a social and academic practice includes a change of attitude in relation to the world socially supporting the notions of being, knowing, and power and knowledge creation. Further TD as a research practice recognizes the humanizing of the research for various contexts and populations, further expanding the importance of convergence of various disciplines as a research practice. Finally, TD is a praxis that is intentional, recognizing the humanism of curiosity and discourse, including the elements of “action, reflection, dialogue and commitment to change” (Streck, 2021, p. 98).

The emergence of scholarship focused on the decolonization of IL indicates its importance and significance to the IL community. As Westmeyer (1983) suggests, discipline is a subject of interest and study by a community. There will always be tensions between new disciplines inheriting colonial structures from the institutions in which they exist. Yet, the community shapes the nature of the discipline through its research, teaching, and discourse. Rather than viewing it as counter to the disciplinarity of IL, decolonization can be understood as a disciplinary goal. As part of developing and further constructing the IL discipline, the IL community has the potential to influence the conversation around decolonizing IL. That future work of the discipline of IL will likely bring together voices from a variety of regions from across the world to collaborate and facilitate more discourse - new voices - influencing our 21st century information ecology.

REFERENCES

- ACRL (2015). Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, American Library Association, February 9, 2015 <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>
- Adebisi, F. (2020). A Decolonial Approach to Education and the Law (with Foluke Adebisi). Retrieved October 30, 2022, from [Interview].
- Badke, W. (2008). A rationale for information literacy as a credit bearing discipline. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 2(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.11645/2.1.42>
- Bauder, J. & Rod, C. (2016). Crossing thresholds: Critical information literacy pedagogy and the ACRL framework. *College and Undergraduate Libraries*, 23(3), 252-264. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2015.1025323>
- Becher, T., & Trowler, P. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines* (2. ed. ed.). Open Univ. Press.
- Campbell H. & Sich, D. (2023). Library curriculum as epistemic justice: Decolonizing library instruction programs. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 9, 1-39. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v9.40964>
- cline, n. & López-McKnight, J. R. (2024). before information literacy: Field notes on the end of IL. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 18(1), 5-13. <https://doi.org/10.11645/18.1.568>
- Dadakhonov, A. O.(2024). Analysis of media and information literacy definitions: A qualitative approach. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 12(2), 116-129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i2.6659>
- Drabinski, E. & Tewell, E. (2019). *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*,DOI: 10.1002/9781118978238 https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/gc_pubs/article/1638/&path_info=Critical_Information_Literacy_encyclopedia_entry.pdf

- Du Toit, E. (2024). Decolonising information literacy: Diversity integration for empowering minority groups. In Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences. Paper 3.
<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2024/mt/3>
- Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses, Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education*. London [England]: New York, <https://curricublog.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/gee-discourses-1990.pdf>
- Hicks, A., & Lloyd, A. (2016). It takes a community to build a framework: Information literacy within intercultural settings. *Journal of Information Science*, 42(3), 334-343.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551516630219>
- Hicks, A., McKinney, P., Inskip, C., Walton, G., & Lloyd, A. (2022). Leveraging information literacy: Mapping the conceptual influence and appropriation of information literacy in other disciplinary landscapes. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 55(3), 548-566. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09610006221090677>
- Hopkins, R., Traczykowski, L., Baksh, A., Huda, M., Islam, T., & Reyes, C. (2023). The Library and beyond: Decolonization as a student/academic Co-Created project. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 30(2-3), 202-218.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2023.2268591>
- Leung, S. Y. & López-McKnight, J. R. (2020). Dreaming revolutionary futures: Critical race's centrality to ending white supremacy. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 14(1), 12-26. Doi:10.15760/comminfolit.2020.14.1.2 <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/33131>
- Marsh, F. (2022). Unsettling information literacy: Exploring critical approaches with academic researchers for decolonizing the university. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 16(1), 4-29.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/16.1.3136>
- Maybee, C. & Kaufmann, K. (2023). The discipline of information literacy: Changing the conversation on your campus. In B. Sietz, S. Fabian, B. Marino, S. Memmott, & Robert Stevens (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 51st Annual LOEX Conference* (pp. 133-137).
<https://commons.emich.edu/loexconf2023/22/>

- Maybee, C., Kaufmann, K., Tucker, V., & Budd, J. (2023). Recognizing information literacy as a discipline: Reflections on an ACRL panel discussion. *College and Research Libraries News*, 84(10), 364-368. Available at <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/26111>
- Méndez, A. S. (2020). A decolonial curricular approach to LIS education. In ALISE 2020 Proceedings (pp. 211-219).
- San Pedro, T., Murray, K., Gonzales-Miller, S. C., Reed, W., Bah, B., Gerrard, C., & Whalen, A. (2020). Learning-in-Relation: Implementing and Analyzing Assets Based Pedagogies in a Higher Education Classroom. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 53(1-2), 177-195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2020.1749188>
- Streck, D. R. (2021). Transdisciplinarity as a decolonizing research practice:: A Latin American perspective.. *Diálogos Latinoamericanos*, 29, 88-100. <https://doi.org/10.7146/dl.v29i0.120252>
- Tandon, R. Singh, W. Clover, D. Hall, B. (2016). Knowledge democracy and excellence in engagement. Institute of Development Studies, 47(6), 19-36. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/report/Knowledge_Democracy_and_Excellence_in_Engagement/26449681?file=48234538
- Tewell, E. (2015). A decade of critical information literacy: A review of the literature. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 9 (1), 24-43. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2015.9.1.174>
- Warren, B., Vossoughi, S., Rosebery, A. S., Bang, M. & Taylor, E. V. (2020). Multiple ways of knowing: Re-imagining disciplinary learning. In B. Warren, S. Vossoughi, A. S. Rosebery, M. Bang, & E. V. Taylor, *Handbook of the cultural foundations of learning* (pp. 277-293). Routledge.
- Webber, S., & Johnston, B. (2017). Information literacy: conceptions, context and the formation of a discipline. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 11(1), 156-183. <https://doi.org/10.11645/11.1.2205>

Westmeyer, P. (1983). The nature of disciplines. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 20(3), 265-270. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.3660200312>

Zurkowski, P. G. (1974). The Information service environment relationships and priorities, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED100391>