Reimagining LIS Education: Integrating Evidence-Based Practice with Human-Centered Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines innovative pedagogical practices in Library and Information Science (LIS) that integrate evidence-based practice with humanistic, decolonizing approaches. Based on interdisciplinary research conducted by the "Libraries and Resilient Communities" group, we critique traditional LIS curricula for prioritizing technical competencies and quantitative measures over the complex realities faced by librarians serving diverse communities. Through participatory insights from public library directors and findings on libraries' roles in fostering community resilience, we propose a reimagined framework that embeds critical inquiry into the Evidence-Based Practice cycle. This approach incorporates culturally responsive assignments structured in five phases (Articulate, Assemble, Assess, Agree, Adapt), enabling students to address both technical challenges and the lived experiences of patrons. By fostering equity-driven, trauma-informed practices, this model prepares future librarians to navigate the intersection of technological expertise and social engagement, equipping them to advance scientific rigor while championing social justice in contemporary library practice.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Education; Pedagogy; Public libraries; Community engagement; Social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Decolonized pedagogy; Human-centered librarianship; Reflective inquiry; Evidence-based practice; Community resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, LIS education has grappled with a dual challenge. On one side, rapid technological advances in digital librarianship, algorithmic information retrieval, and artificial intelligence have reshaped the field, fostering an increased reliance on technology (Krtalić & Mandl, 2019) and evidence-based practice (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2006). Simultaneously, a parallel trajectory has emerged, urging educators and practitioners to address reflective questions around social justice, cultural identity, and the embodied dimensions of professional practice (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016; Mehra, 2021; Poole et al., 2021). This tension highlights a paradox: while technological progress embodies universality and objectivity, the human dimensions of identity, heritage, and embodiment resist such categorization, demanding approaches that acknowledge complexity and nuance.

Amid intensified global conversations on diversity, equity, and inclusion, the need to shift LIS pedagogies toward the human dimension has become urgent. This involves reclaiming and centering the diverse identities and heritages that shape librarianship, which have too often been treated as peripheral within LIS curricula. This paper emerges from an ongoing interdisciplinary research initiative, “Libraries and Community Resilience” (LARC), which critically examines public library practices in Midwestern and U.S. communities facing intersecting crises—environmental, economic, and socio-political. Drawing on participatory insights, empirical research, and evidence-based pedagogical frameworks, we propose a reimagined, decolonizing pedagogical approach that redefines professional identities for librarians while addressing the complexities of contemporary library practice.

Aligned with the ALISE Strategic Plan’s focus on innovative pedagogy, this paper explores the transformative potential of assignment-based methods. Such methods can integrate evidence-based practice with humanistic reflection, fostering a synthesis between LIS traditions and the lived identities of practitioners and communities. Central questions guide this inquiry: *How can pedagogical practices address the inherent tensions in librarianship as an embodied, situated practice*? *How might educators integrate evidence-based frameworks with cultural reflection to cultivate librarians who are not only skilled professionals but also reflective practitioners committed to social justice*?

BACKGROUND: REFOCUSING OUR LENS ON HUMANITY

Traditional LIS programs in the U.S. have prioritized alignment with professional competencies, as defined by organizations such as the American Library Association (Dodd, 2019). These competencies, while responsive to evolving library work, often emphasize technical skills over the lived realities of librarianship. Recent research reveals a persistent disconnect between these competencies and the challenges faced by librarians serving diverse and vulnerable communities (Hu et al, 2023; Saunders 2015; Westbrook and Fabian, 2010; Williams and Saunders, 2020).

Our earlier work within the LARC team (Laurian et al, 2025; Vamanu, Logsden, and Laurian, 2025) documented how public libraries support well-being during crises such as natural disasters, economic downturns, and public health emergencies. Yet, as socio-political climates grow more polarized and movements against diversity, equity, and inclusion intensify, the need to interrogate the cultural dimensions of LIS practice has grown more critical.

Since 2021, our interdisciplinary research group has explored how libraries adapt in times of crisis, focusing on their role as safe spaces, information hubs, and centers of civic engagement. Drawing on perspectives from Library and Information Science, Urban Planning, Sociology, Social Work, and Business Analytics, we have examined how libraries contribute to community resilience. Building on these findings, we now ask*: How can LIS pedagogies be reshaped to center human experiences and diverse heritages, equipping future librarians to serve communities through inclusive, transformational approaches*?

This inquiry extends beyond technical competencies to address identity and agency. For instance, *how does the dichotomy between technological practices and embodied human experiences shape knowledge production and sharing*? *How can decolonized pedagogies cultivate LIS identities that honor cultural and communal heritages*? Finally, *how can educators design assignments and curricula that nurture empathy, cultural humility, and a commitment to social justice alongside technical skills*?

RE-IMAGINING PEDAGOGY: EMBRACING HUMANITY IN LIS EDUCATION

Our interdisciplinary research has highlighted a growing concern among public library directors regarding the disconnect between traditional LIS curricula and the realities of modern library practice. While libraries remain committed to their core missions—cultivating a love for reading and providing reliable information—they are increasingly tasked with broader civic responsibilities. For example, public libraries now serve as essential safe spaces during crises such as extreme weather events, economic downturns, and public health emergencies. They also address critical community needs, including mental health support and food security initiatives.

One library director noted that while their staff often “know who they should contact” when patrons experience trauma, they lack the tools and training to engage effectively with these individuals. Another emphasized the pressing need for trauma-informed care, arguing that the cumulative effects of community trauma necessitate a rethinking of how librarians support both their patrons and their own well-being.

Our findings suggest that traditional LIS training often misses these complex realities, focusing primarily on managing resources like collections and information systems. This focus, while important, tends to overlook the intricate dynamics of human interaction, the significance of cultural heritage, and the need for practices informed by empathy and lived experience. In times of social and political upheaval, this gap becomes more pronounced, underscoring the urgency of reimagining LIS education.

To address these challenges, we propose a pedagogical shift that integrates technological proficiency with a deeply humanistic perspective. In this context, “decolonizing” LIS education involves critically examining and reconfiguring how we teach professional competencies. Rather than simply rejecting colonial frameworks, it calls for the development of an expansive approach rooted in criticality, care, reciprocity, competency, and accountability. These principles provide the foundation for a pedagogical model that embraces the diversity of human experiences, fosters cross-disciplinary collaboration, and strengthens connections between librarians and the communities they serve.

One way to operationalize this theory is through innovative assignments that merge Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) frameworks with reflective, identity-centered inquiry. A sample assignment invites MLIS students to envision themselves as librarians at a library they aspire to join—a space that serves as a vibrant community hub and a safe space for diverse populations. Working collaboratively, students conduct community needs assessments using the Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP) framework (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2016). In this exercise, students confront both technical and social challenges, such as ensuring equitable access to information and fostering digital literacy, while also addressing broader questions of social justice.

Students are tasked with imagining how their library can act as a site of healing, cultural exchange, and civic empowerment. They design services that honor the diversity of human identities while resisting censorship and other regressive forces. For example, recent student projects included developing a collection in Arabic and French for non-English speakers at a community college, establishing a seed library paired with healthy eating and gardening workshops at an urban public library, creating a Reading Buddies program for special education students, expanding the circulation of technology at a rural library to improve connectivity, increasing efforts to document transgender student histories, and designing sensory-friendly library spaces for neurodiverse individuals. These topics illustrate the wide range of challenges public libraries face today and the creativity required to meet them.

The assignment is structured into five steps—Articulate, Assemble, Assess, Agree, and Adapt—each designed to help students critically evaluate mainstream assumptions and articulate culturally conscious, pragmatic solutions.

1. **Articulate**: In this initial phase, students investigate and frame the problem they aim to address. They pose critical questions, such as: *Who is affected by this issue*? *What interventions are needed*? *What alternatives exist, and what outcomes are most desirable*? Students use established EBP frameworks like "PICO" (Richardson et al., 1995) and "SPICE" (Greenhalgh et al., 2004) to structure their inquiry, ensuring their problem statements are clear and comprehensive.
2. **Assemble**: In the next phase, students gather evidence by conducting "environmental scans" (Aguilar, 1967) and "organizational scans" (Thompson, 1967). These tools help students analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT)—as well as aspirations and desired outcomes (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009)—that pertain to their chosen library and its community. This phase emphasizes the importance of robust data collection informed by local context.
3. **Assess**: In this phase, students critically evaluate the evidence they have gathered. They apply evaluative frameworks such as the CRAAP test (Blakeslee, 2010) or the RADCAB method (Christensson, 2001) to assess source credibility and relevance. Students examine the credentials and biases of evidence producers, interrogating the plausibility, detail, and corroboration of their findings. This step encourages them to account for both the strengths and limitations of the data.
4. **Agree**: After synthesizing their findings, students develop a detailed plan for their proposed project. This phase requires them to reflect on key questions: *What is the long-term vision for the project*? *What are the most pressing community needs, and how do they intersect with broader equity considerations*? To integrate issues of racial equity and justice, students adapt tools like the Racial Equity Toolkit from the Louisville Free Public Library, ensuring their proposals address the structural inequities that libraries can inadvertently perpetuate. Concrete goals and measurable objectives are outlined, with students identifying specific outcomes and evaluation methods to track their success.
5. **Adapt**: The final phase emphasizes reflection and adaptability. Students evaluate their entire process, identifying successes and areas for improvement. They compile their findings and recommendations into a comprehensive report, which they present to peers for feedback and discussion. This reflective practice ensures that students consider the iterative nature of real-world problem-solving and develop the flexibility needed to respond to evolving community dynamics.

By engaging in this assignment, students do more than apply an EBP model; they actively contribute to a reimagining of librarianship as a practice that integrates technical expertise with cultural humility, empathy, and a commitment to social justice. The assignment challenges them

to consider the broader implications of their decisions, equipping them with the skills to address the full spectrum of human experience.

Ultimately, this pedagogical approach raises critical questions for LIS education: *What should the next generation of librarians learn to prepare for the expanding scope of their roles*? *How can we design curricula that go beyond technical proficiency to nurture resilience, empathy, and critical reflection*? By adopting a pedagogy that merges evidence-based research with an acute awareness of our collective humanity, we can begin to close the gap between traditional LIS education and the complex realities librarians face today. In doing so, we equip students to navigate a rapidly changing landscape while remaining steadfast in their commitment to advancing social justice and fostering community resilience.

THE ROLE OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN CULTIVATING HUMAN-CENTERED LIS EDUCATION

Evidence-based practice, traditionally focused on quantitative assessments and operational efficiency, must evolve to address the human dimensions of librarianship. Embedding critical inquiry into every stage of the process can help LIS educators reorient EBP to foreground human agency and cultural context.

For instance, when articulating problems, students are encouraged to consider who is affected and how intersecting identities shape community needs. During the evaluation phase, they scrutinize whose voices are amplified and whose are marginalized, ensuring a more equitable approach to knowledge ecosystems. This expanded EBP framework trains librarians not only as technical specialists, but as reflective practitioners committed to equity and justice.

This pedagogical shift aligns with broader calls to decolonize education by integrating diverse perspectives and addressing systemic inequities. Through efforts to foster critical reflection alongside technical proficiency, we can hope students will be prepared to navigate the complex realities of librarianship in an increasingly polarized world.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe the future of LIS education depends on our ability to merge evidence-based research with human-centered values. Rapid technological change, coupled with rising socio-political challenges, urges us LIS educators to rethink how we train future librarians. Our paper has outlined a pedagogical framework that integrates EBP with cultural reflection, emphasizing the need for empathy, critical inquiry, and social engagement in LIS training.

Our proposed assignment model exemplifies this approach, inviting MLIS students to engage with real community needs through innovative, evidence-based methods. By centering cultural humility and social justice in LIS education, we can redefine professional competencies and prepare students to navigate the complexities of contemporary librarianship.

Ultimately, this work calls for a collective effort to decolonize not only our theoretical frameworks but also our everyday teaching practices. By imagining ways to synthesize technological advances with human values, we can ensure a more inclusive and vibrant future for librarianship. This integrated approach empowers students to become professionals grounded in both technical expertise and the rich, diverse human experience, fostering resilience and transformation in the communities they serve.

Through this lens, reimagining LIS pedagogy becomes not just an academic exercise but a necessary act of resistance and renewal, aligning our teaching with the realities of a rapidly changing world.

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