

Raising Awareness of Diversity and Inclusion in One-shot Information Literacy Classes

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Introduction

Many academic departments in higher educational institutions rely on their libraries to offer Information literacy (IL) classes. Librarians typically design the content of their IL classes in consultation with the teaching faculty members. The content may include topics on avoiding plagiarism, strategies for reading a technical paper, finding relevant resources, evaluation of information sources, and general library orientations [1]. These sessions can be taught synchronously and asynchronously. Regardless of the content and discourse platform, these IL classes are typically one-shot classes that are forty-five to ninety minutes long. As such, time is of the essence for librarians teaching IL sessions. The challenge is to create an inclusive learning environment when librarians are pressed for time for content delivery and assessment activities.

In a typical IL session, students come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds and have varied perceptions of library services and the roles of librarians. They have different learning styles and expectations and varied communication preferences. Should librarians focus on helping students become information literate, to assess learning outcomes, or to broaden their global perspectives within the short duration of an IL session? Academic institutions often have a mission to offer students a place where they learn civic, social, and personal responsibilities [2]. Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) believe that the degree is important because it helps students acquire a fuller understanding of cultures, and strengthen the foundation for informed citizenship, participation in community life, and public leadership [3]. Academic libraries can further this mission by strategically and thoughtfully imparting the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their discourse with students. The question is how would librarians uphold this mission of higher education, particularly in a one-shot information literacy session.

In this article, I discuss methods of implementing critical inclusive assessment framework, in order to create an inclusive learning environment. This kind of learning environment is possible when both instructors and students have an awareness of classroom diversity, and make a conscious effort to engage with the diversity.

Critical inclusive assessment practice

Critical inclusive assessment practice draws on the theoretical concepts of Critical Inclusive Pedagogical Framework (CIPF) in teaching and learning. CIPF was developed by Dr. Saran Stewart, an expert in higher education [4]. She expanded on the five tenets of inclusive pedagogy outlined by Dr. Frank Tuitt, VP and Chief Diversity Officer at the University of Connecticut [4]. These tenets are: Activation of Student Voice, Sharing Power, Dialogical Professor-Student Interaction, Faculty-Student Interaction, and Utilization of Student Narrative [5]. Critical inclusive assessment practice is an adaptation of CIPF, a conceptual and theoretical base developed to engage students in higher education as co-constructors in the teaching-learning process [4]. When practicing critical-inclusive assessment in a one-shot IL session, the focus is on the first two tenets: Sharing Power and Activation of Student Voice. This is because “they

[the first two tenets] are central to breaking down the traditional relationship between student and teacher – without them, achievement of the other tenets may be not possible [4].” Sharing Power is “about students recognizing their responsibility for their own learning and making the classroom a democratic space where everyone feels valued and has a responsibility to contribute [4].” Activation of Student Voice is defined as “listening to and valuing the views that students express regarding their learning experiences; communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change; and treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of teaching and learning, thus empowering them to take a more active role in shaping or changing their education [6].” Lorente-Catalan and Kirk [7] note that in order to break the hegemonic student-teacher relationship, instructors need to rethink assessment methods. Democratic and educative assessment creates “...a community of shared practice where nothing of the assessment process is hidden from the students and they can assess their own learning [7].” The focus here is not so much on the design and deployment of assessment tools, but a shared and meaningful understanding of assessment results. We should be intentional about using assessment results in an actionable, impactful way. The tenets of CIPF deem both assessment of teaching and student learning essential. Assessment is an imperative and integrative component of critical pedagogy that addresses classroom diversity. If assessment is used properly, it can transform the hegemonic relationship between students and instructors. One study has shown that open-minded, approachable, and flexible instructors create an environment where students are motivated to learn because such an environment allows students to challenge each other’s opinions and accept a different point of view [8]. Angelo & Cross state that “the quality of student learning is directly, although not exclusively, related to the quality of teaching. One of the most promising ways to improve learning is to improve teaching [9].” Therefore, neither teaching assessments nor student learning assessments are optional.

Given that assessment practices and classroom diversity are inevitable, how can we integrate assessment in our pedagogy that does not overlook the essential practice of inclusivity in a diverse classroom? Fig 1. identifies elements of pedagogy and classroom diversity that can be folded into the critical inclusive assessment practice. In order to embrace diversity and promote inclusivity in classrooms, we should evaluate various aspects of pedagogy, and strategically incorporate assessment results in our instructional practices.

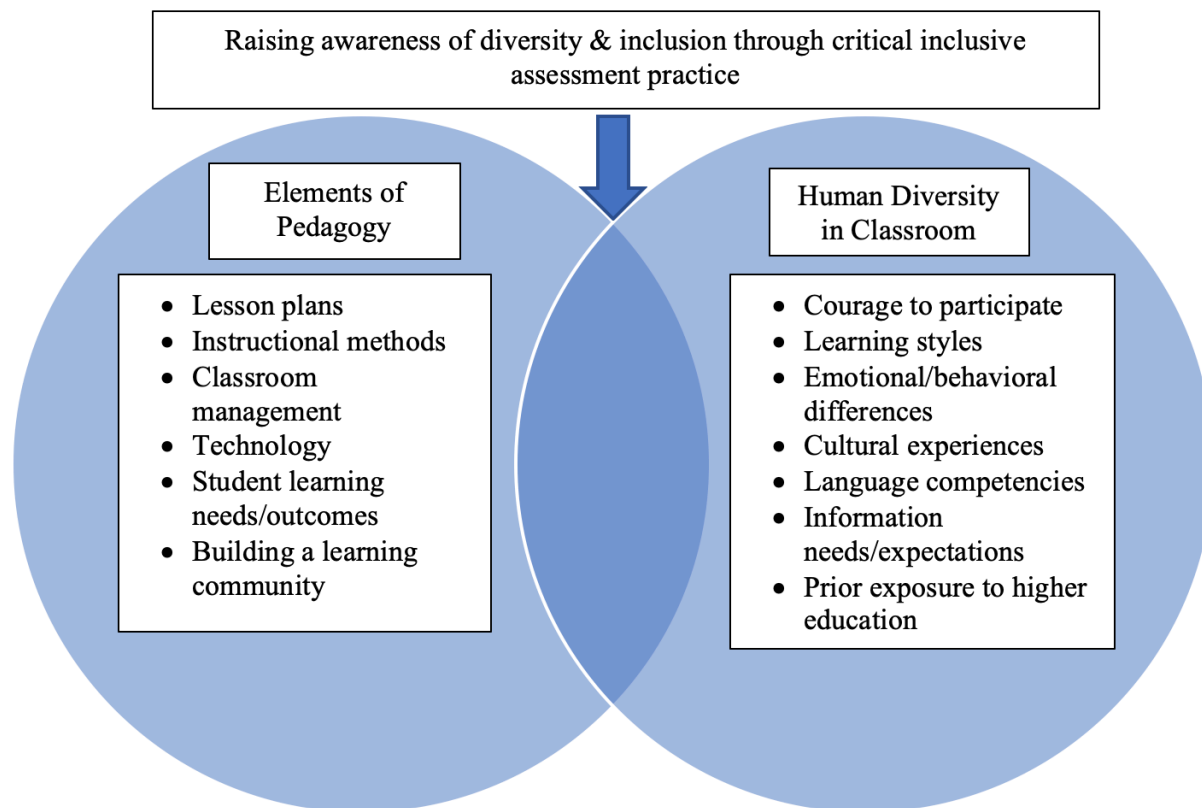


Fig 1: Use of critical inclusive assessment practice in raising awareness of diversity and inclusion in a classroom

Practicing critical inclusive assessment in one-shot IL sessions

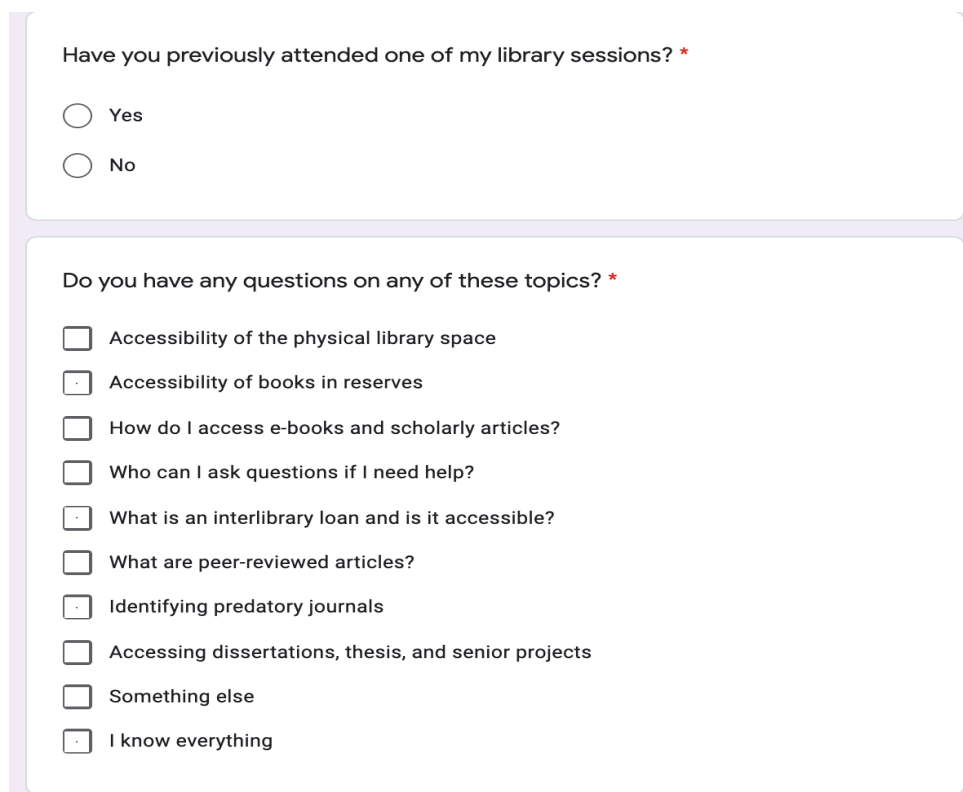
The two tenets of critical-inclusive assessment, namely Sharing Power and Activation of Student Voice can be incorporated in one-shot IL sessions. When implemented properly, it can help nurture classroom diversity, and practice inclusivity. As Fig. 1 indicates, diversity is multi-dimensional, meaning, the concept remains apropos to cultural and educational experiences of students, as well as classroom management and pedagogical methods of instructors.

Following are some of the critical-inclusive assessment based instructional strategies used in one-shot IL sessions developed for engineering students. While these IL sessions were specifically used in Engineering courses, strategies discussed can be used in IL sessions for other disciplines as well.

1. Strategic use of an introductory survey to recognize classroom diversity

McNair defines *diversity* as “individual differences (e.g., personality, prior knowledge, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations) [10].” Diversity can be recognized by observing the composition of the classroom community without

knowing specific information of individuals. However, observation is not enough to understand the diversity of categories such as prior knowledge, learning ability, and learning expectations. Librarians have to be intentional in surfacing such differences.



Have you previously attended one of my library sessions? *

Yes

No

Do you have any questions on any of these topics? *

Accessibility of the physical library space

Accessibility of books in reserves

How do I access e-books and scholarly articles?

Who can I ask questions if I need help?

What is an interlibrary loan and is it accessible?

What are peer-reviewed articles?

Identifying predatory journals

Accessing dissertations, thesis, and senior projects

Something else

I know everything

Fig. 2: Sample introductory survey for IL sessions

One of the strategies is to begin an IL session with an anonymous introductory survey (see Fig. 2). Students can take two to four minutes to complete the survey at the beginning of the session. Librarians can observe the survey completion rate, while frequently encouraging the entire class to take the survey. It is best to create the survey using a tool that has a data visualization tool such as Google form and Qualtrics. The purpose of the survey is twofold: a. To understand what students' expectations and the diversity in their expectations are, and b. To help students actively recognize the diversity among their peers. Librarians can get a sense of classroom diversity by looking at the results of the survey. However, that alone does not advance the concept of inclusion.

According to McNair, *inclusion* is the “active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity—in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect—in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions [10].” Librarians create an inclusive environment when they display the results of the survey to the student body and spend a few minutes interpreting survey results with the students (see Fig. 3). While scaffolding the results of the survey, it is important to emphasize the diversity in prior knowledge and information needs

of students in the classroom. Librarians can encourage students to share and respect diverse knowledge and ideas to support the learning community.

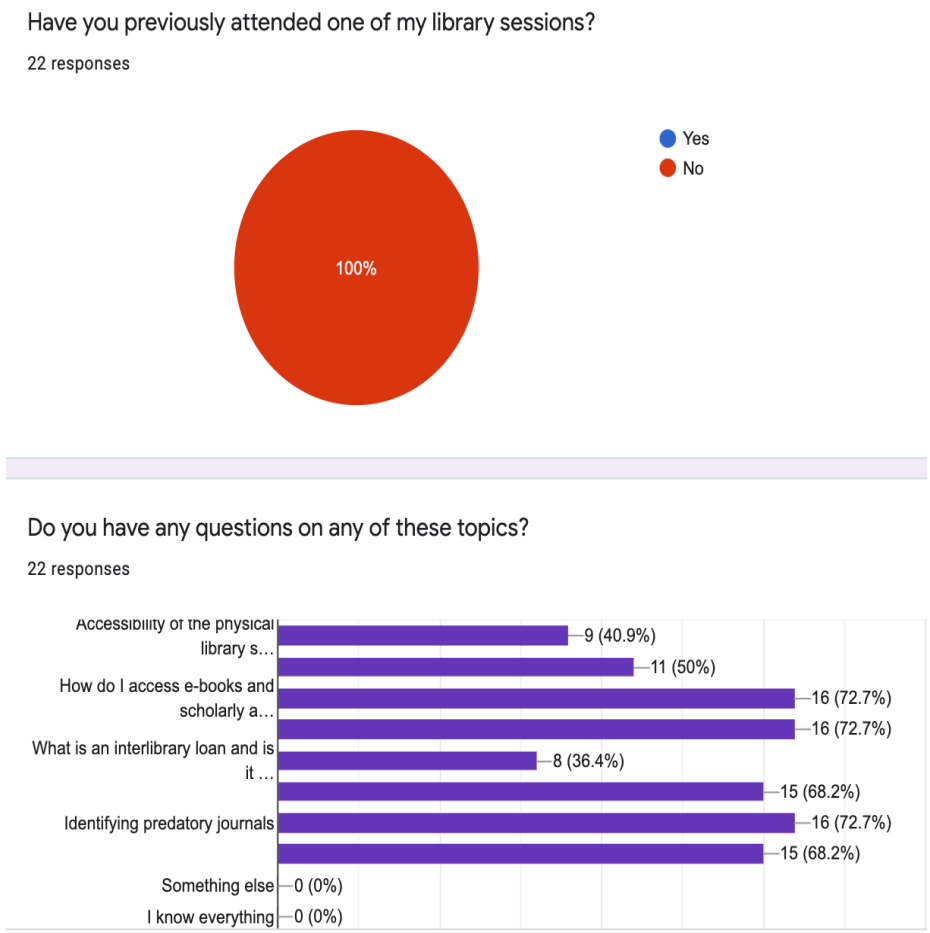


Fig. 3: Sample introductory survey results

The impact of this brief activity is significant in developing student responsibility at the onset of an IL session. Students actively become aware of the diverse student knowledge and learning needs. They realize the value of the IL session even when they have prior knowledge of some of the topics discussed. Librarians can refer to the survey results throughout the IL session to ensure that student voices are heard, and expected contents are covered.

2. Creating an IL curriculum based on threshold concepts

It is important to bring a shift to the objectives of IL sessions taught by librarians. Often IL sessions are viewed as the only opportunity for librarians to impart their knowledge on a slew of IL topics such as plagiarism, info search, publication types, predatory journal, and evaluation of information. In fact, there are multiple opportunities to continue the librarian-student interaction that is initiated in a one-shot session. There are opportunities for continued interaction with students during reference and research consultation services. Librarians who participate in student clubs, research expos, or practice embedded librarianship are able to build meaningful connections with students to provide research and academic support. Therefore, IL

curricula should be carefully and frequently evaluated for excessive materials. Librarians should refrain from the urge to teach everything in a single session. Instead, they should consider the approach to ‘microlearning’ or bite-sized learning. This approach to microlearning is a part of threshold concepts, which are the basis for ACRL framework [1]. Threshold concepts “are those ideas in any discipline that are passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline [1].” Studies have shown that in learning, size matters. Kim Egan, the VP of Development at the US-based training company observed that “Too much consumption of ‘learning’ at one time – that is, not using micro-learning – can be painful and stressful, and the value of this learning can be lost [11].”

3. Examining the power dynamics between students and instructors

Student-teacher relationships have a long-lasting effect on students’ academic and intellectual development. Studies have shown that strong teacher-student relationships positively impacts student engagement, attendance, retention of information, and behavior [13], [14], [15]. “This is a difficult task to accomplish in a university structure that imposes a model of hierarchy and authority [4].” In a typical classroom, student interactions are expected to happen in an environment that is structured and controlled by the instructors. Inversely, “critical and inclusive pedagogues see students as partners in the learning process and work to share authority and power with students [16].” It is important that librarians become intentional in examining the power dynamics that may otherwise discourage shared leadership in an IL session. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Southern California states,

“A lot of teachers ... have really strong abilities to engage socially with the students, but then it’s not enough. You have to go much deeper than that and actually start to engage with students around their curiosity, their interests, their habits of mind through understanding and approaching material to really be an effective teacher [17].”

In a shared leadership environment, learning objectives remain the same. The topics that need to be covered are pre-determined by the librarian. Students and the librarian collectively determine how, when, and the extent to which those pre-determined topics need to be covered in a particular session. A shift in instructional tone can help create a space where the sharing of power becomes possible. For instance, I often tell students,

“I do have an agenda for this session, but I am reluctant to use it. I want you to drive this session. That means unmute yourself, or type in the chat any questions or comments you have. Do not hesitate to interrupt me anytime during the session. Tell me what you would like me to cover in this session. Every now and then, I will go back to the introductory survey result (Fig. 3) to check if I am addressing the topics you wanted me to cover.”

Students have varied learning styles and knowledge on pre-determined topics. Constructivism learning theory emphasizes building upon existing knowledge and experience. This shift in instructional tone encourages students to speak up and stay engaged. It also makes it easier for librarians to assess students’ prior knowledge within a short amount of time. Additionally, it helps students recognize their responsibility for their own learning and making the classroom a democratic space [18].

4. Structuring small group for equitable participation

Small group discussions is one of the tenets of learner-centered approach [19]. Studies have demonstrated that small group discussions are beneficial in multiple ways. It helps develop communication skills and improve learning [19], [20]. Small group discussions allow students to think aloud, think critically, clarify misconceptions, hear multiple perspectives, and effectively internalize information delivered through lectures. Students who participate in small group discussions tend to attain a higher level of understanding and score better in exams [21], [22]. In a small group, learners have greater control on self-directed learning and have the opportunity to practice self-reflection and self-discipline [23]. These skills are essential for lifelong learning [23]. Small group discussions promote deep, rather than surface learning [24].

Despite many advantages, small group discussions can be a challenge for many students. According to [25], “ Many of the difficulties arise because group work involves the coming together of groups of individuals, each with their own knowledge, attitudes to learning, sets of experiences and personalities.” In a typical classroom, diversity amongst students is inevitable, even amongst domestic, English speakers. Students’ social and communication behaviors are influenced by their cultural and ethnic backgrounds [26]. First-generation college students often have personality traits (differences in self-esteem, communication apprehension, and social acceptance), requiring additional academic support [27]. They exhibit a hesitancy in sharing their thoughts [28], [29]. International students have often been nurtured in educational systems that are different from the system in the United States. Educational environments shape students’ expectations of classroom practices, social etiquettes, and personalities. Some students may be exposed to certain instructional and learning strategies more than others. Literature suggests that “culturally dissimilar groups do not spontaneously mix [30].” In such cases, small group discussions are not effective. Studies on intercultural learning show that native English-speakers find it challenging to work with non-native English speakers because of the perceived language barrier [31]. It is worthy to note that “cultural differences are important and, along with other factors, can potentially influence the success (or otherwise) of group work in the academic environment [26].”

This begs the question on how to structure ‘small group discussions’ in IL sessions that enable equitable participation. The goal is to make space for all group members to contribute to learning regardless of emotional, psychological, social, and behavioral differences. Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy [32] offer a method of structuring small group (no more than four members) where each member has an assigned role such as facilitator, recorder, reporter/spokesperson, and process observer. Everyone participates in thinking, reflecting, and sharing their thoughts at a level they are comfortable with. The assigned roles encourage members to keep each other accountable for their contributions. For instance, if a shy individual chooses to be a recorder, the person will stay engaged in order to document the discussion accurately. Because of the assigned roles, the hesitancy to ask group members for clarifications would be diminished. Poole found that when a student act as a moderator, other students are more likely to participate [33]. An introvert who assumes the role of a facilitator might find it easier to interrupt an extrovert because the individual’s responsibility is to manage time so that everyone gets a turn to speak. Without proper documentation, the reporter is unable to represent the group’s work; thus, engaging in soliciting contributions. Also, at the end of a small group

session, each member experiences a tangible sense of accomplishment. The following recommendations were adapted from [32] to implement effective and equitable group activities in IL sessions.

- i. Keep the small group size small. Four members is ideal, and when groups are uneven, three is better than five.
- ii. When students first begin working in small groups, it is sometimes helpful to assign roles so that everyone knows what to do. Some roles include:
 - a. Facilitator (distributes turns equitably, moves the group through assigned tasks)
 - b. Recorder (writes notes to record or capture group thinking for the reporter)
 - c. Reporter/spokesperson (presents the group's work to the assigned audience)
 - d. Process observer (reports to the group on how individuals participated and how the group worked together)
- iii. The librarian's role is to clearly define assigned roles and specify expected products of group work. The librarian can allow students to negotiate their roles with group members
- iv. The librarian monitors small group process. The librarian mentors students by modeling appropriate group interactions, asking probing questions that facilitate thoughtful approaches to the activity.
- v. The librarian listens in on group conversations and collect examples of group exchanges and ideas to bring back to the ensuing class discussion.

In one-shot IL sessions, librarians often embed small group activities for students to get hands-on experience, collaboratively solve problems, learn different approaches, and internalize certain concepts. This method [32] of structuring small groups allows every small group member to participate in some form or another, therefore, having a positive impact on student engagement.

Conclusion

It is possible to raise diversity and inclusivity in IL sessions by strategically incorporating critical inclusive assessment methods. Many of us are already thinking about assessment in terms of student evaluation of teachers, or evaluation of student learning outcomes. Many of us already have some forms of assessment in place. We need to spend much of our time thinking how we can use those assessments. How can we put those assessments that we collect to work? What are the various dimensions of assessments that are meaningful to making learning happen? Some assessments are reviewed in isolation, but others bear fruit when they are reviewed with students.

It is important to highlight the two tenets of critical-inclusive assessment, i.e. Sharing Power and Activation of Student Voice. These two tenets play a crucial role in creating an inclusive learning environment. When students realize that diverse perspectives are permissible, they engage. When they realize that they are partners in the learning process, their classroom apprehension is diminished and they ask questions. Students are then aware of the diversity amongst their peers and every member becomes actively engaged in recognizing his/her/their needs, as well as the educational needs of others. They learn new things because they speak up and because someone else has spoken up.

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