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LILAC 2022: A reflection on inclusivity

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Inclusion was a central theme at this year's LILAC conference, held at Manchester Metropolitan University, 11–13 April 2022. Perhaps it was the forced isolation of the past few years, the rich and packed LILAC programme or the wonderful buzz of the host city that made this year's in person conference particularly exciting.

In her informal welcoming address Jane Secker sensitively recognised that our collective in person gathering, though undoubtedly stimulating, might prove challenging after our enforced physical isolation. She invited us to be kind to ourselves and others. LILAC committee members were visible and available throughout the conference and were always happy to help with directions and other conference-related enquiries. They provided a welcome friendly presence.

Session content frequently focused on inclusion. Highlights for us were the keynote speeches from Marilyn Clarke and Emily Drabinski. Both speeches addressed urgent challenges and power imbalances at play within our libraries and educational institutions. Clarke highlighted the lack of diversity evident in the library profession (the CILIP ARA workforce survey (2015) revealed that 96.7% of the UK workforce identify as white), and apparent in the ethnic make-up of the LILAC audience. Clarke, who did not have a black tutor until she reached higher education, gave a moving personal account of how this lack of representation has affected her. Drabinski approached the issue by revealing libraries as structures of power. Power is at play in how we organise our information, in the language that we use to describe it. It influences our relationships at work, and how we design and manage our spaces. She highlighted the power structures inherent in classification systems which might for example separate information on transgender issues from information on gender studies or prioritise a colonial version of history over that told by indigenous people.

The need for change is clear and, as both speeches recognised, when we work together, we have the power to make that change. Clarke asked us to challenge historical biases and create reading lists that reflect students from all backgrounds. In recent years a number of critical titles have been published on race and colonial legacies and many institutions have begun reviewing their collections. Clarke referenced initiatives such as [The Black Curriculum](#) (2021), which seeks to address the lack of Black British history in UK education and the '[Liberate our library](#)' strategy at Goldsmiths University which works with students to decolonise the curriculum and diversify reading lists (Goldsmiths University of London, 2022). Drabinski mentioned the campaign led by students at Dartmouth College to change Library of Congress subject headings such as 'illegal alien' and the work done by the Xwi7xwa Library at the University of British Columbia to organise its collection according to 'indigenous ways of knowing'. These initiatives show that library staff can make a meaningful difference. In this context, Drabinski's call to teach students critical information literacy (IL) to help them negotiate the structures of power and understand their own role as knowledge creators makes a lot of sense.

This theme of inclusivity was also evident in many of the parallel sessions. Maria King gave an excellent presentation on how teaching practices can be made more inclusive for neurodivergent learners. Her presentation powerfully combined practical tips with her personal insight as a self-styled 'neurodivergent librarian'. She spoke about the need for proactive

support, through the adoption of universal design, making documents and the web more accessible and sending out slides in advance. In addition, individualised support needs must be considered so that adaptations can be made flexibly and in a personalised way. Her advice to highlight key information repeatedly (both visually and verbally) is a takeaway we will immediately use and one that will benefit all learners.

Many speakers, such as Andrew Walsh, emphasised a pedagogical move away from didactic approaches towards those that show more nuance and a greater focus on the learner and their context. This change of approach is inclusive, compassionate, anti-oppressive and empowering. Billie Coxhead and Julia Flood from the University of the Arts London, for example, delivered an inspirational 'Critical Sustainability Research Workshop'. Their innovative object-based learning approach started by providing students with tangible pieces of material as an impetus to research. This approach was engaging and offered an interesting new way of teaching IL skills. Similarly community-building was another facet of inclusion mentioned at the conference: Michael Courtney showcased this in an undergraduate Education course where students spend time in Rwanda to develop critical global citizenship. He argued that community-based learning should integrate the development of cultural humility, the active search for global citizenship, continuous and diverse forms of reflective practice and pay attention to power, privilege, and positionality. Assignments, activities and course readings are carefully designed to enable a cross-cultural perspective. Lorna Dawes and Toni Anoya's presentation looked at how a post-Covid, hybrid teaching and learning approach has the potential to develop more flexible instruction that supports community, enquiry and active learning. It is inclusive by allowing students to choose whether they want to attend classes in person or online and it is also defined by its intentional use of technology.

Most of the parallel sessions recognised the importance of considering accessibility and inclusivity in our IL work. Practical tips included:

- Communicate in various formats (video, audio, text) and build flexibility into activities.
- Always provide slides in advance.
- Break activities into smaller tasks.
- Highlight important information visually and verbally ("This is a really key point") and repeat key information more than once.
- Add in regular breaks.

A Panel conversation with the editors of *Communications in Information Literacy (CIL)* and the *Journal of Information Literacy (JIL)* centred on how inclusion and equity can be prioritised in IL Scholarship. They discussed current issues with the content of the large journals databases whose inclusion criteria excludes many high-quality independent journals. If journals are not in the databases, they are not being read. They also looked at their own publishing practices and identified opportunities to improve their own inclusivity. Changes included the use of inclusive language by authors and editors, representation of board members from different continents, more accessible data, and an open peer review system.

The IL Forum took a different angle on inclusion by discussing to what extent other disciplines considered IL. The resulting picture is a mixed one and depends on the discipline. It shows a very limited, skills-based understanding of IL and the Forum recommended librarians to publish outside their field, to explore the literature in professional areas, to continue to work with professional bodies so that IL appears in professional literature and to continue collaborating with teaching faculty. Further advice is to explore how IL has been utilised in areas outside higher education and to use peer review to highlight connections. Librarians are encouraged to co-author papers with academics in this context to make IL an integral component in other disciplines.

Conferences like LILAC position us as students. This is a useful learning opportunity. We experience first-hand the benefits of inclusive teaching, as well as the consequences when opportunities for inclusion are missed. Most of the sessions we attended were delivered in the same format: a presentation with slides and questions at the end. More interactive workshops could have allowed attendees to engage with session topics more deeply and provide opportunities to reflect different learning styles. The keynotes in the large hall were particularly difficult to hear for attendees sitting at the back. Whilst the speeches had previously been sent out via video, the questions were read out rather than being displayed on the screen.

This year's LILAC conference has given us much to reflect on. We thoroughly enjoyed being a part of it and appreciated its emphasis on inclusion in its many different facets. Our own practice, moving forward, will surely benefit from the many useful suggestions that have been put forward.

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