**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**Make me think! Exploring UX through the lens of critical information literacy**

**Keywords: Information literacy, User Experience (UX), Critical librarianship**

**Introduction**

In their shared goal to make academic libraries into sites that support student success, user experience (UX) and (critical) information literacy (IL) practices seek to understand and improve the ways that communities interact with libraries and librarians. At first blush, the relationship between the two appears to be largely symbiotic: for example, better usability could free up information literacy librarians to move beyond ‘point and click’ instruction to address higher order issues related to the production and use of information. In our view, however, this relationship is more complex than it initially appears. While teaching and learning—and information literacy, therefore—can be unpredictable, inefficient, and unbounded, library UX often emphasizes reduction and simplification, as the title of one of the foundational texts of usability, *Don’t Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*, illustrates (Krug 2006). And, while critical information literacy practitioners acknowledge that the classroom is a site of power enmeshed in contradictory political, economic, and social formations, library UX typically has the end goal of helping students to get things done efficiently and ‘seamlessly’ rather than interrogating the power structures that bring tensions to complex digital information environments. UX work that aims to position an information environment that requires “no thought” at the center of our mission to facilitate lifelong learning, civic engagement, and education, as Krug’s text proposes, consequently forms a direct challenge to many of the goals of education.

**Theoretical Framework**

This paper uses the lens of critical information literacy to explore library UX practices. Critical information literacy (Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier 2010) has emerged over the last ten years as the means to foreground the inherently messy, embodied, affective nature of teaching and learning. It acknowledges that the information literacy classroom is a site of power, one enmeshed in political, economic, and social formations that are themselves contradictory, historically contingent, and always changing. It also values the recursive, non-linear shape of learning and the various paths and trajectories learners take to construct understanding within today’s complex digital information environments.

**Research Questions**

This paper will consider the relationship between information literacy, critical pedagogy, and user experience in academic libraries. To this end, our research questions focus on exploring to what extent these practices can be considered as complementary, conflated, or conflicting. More specifically, what is the impact of UX, which foregrounds the creation of experiences and happiness, on the goals of critical library instruction, which centres a learner’s engagement in broader sociocultural information environments?

**Methodology**

In this paper, we review the literature on the historical development of usability and user experience in order to understand its emergence, assumptions, and concerns. We then use theoretical literature from diverse fields—including anthropology, human-computer interaction, and LIS—to analyze usability, user experience, and library user experience texts and practices. Our methodology combines historiography with critical and theoretically informed analysis.

**Findings and Discussion**

This paper highlights four overarching sites of tension between UX and critical information literacy: the decontextualizing effect of UX and its impact on teaching and learning practices; the treatment of time in UX; identity and the body in UX; and the implications of UX upon our understandings of search and discovery.

*The Decontextualisation of Research*

The first site of tension relates to a mismatch between the ways in which library UX and IL consider a user’s information interactions. Origins in business values means that library UX aims to simplify and reduce choice by distilling and extracting a shared common experience. However, from an information literacy perspective, the emphasis on singular experience could be seen as threatening to enforce normativity and as hailing a return to restrictive pedagogies that centre on measurable information skills rather than the enactment of complex and affective social practices. The emphasis on isolated models of practice further means that library UX risks separating a learner’s information interactions from the broader context in which they take place as well as disregarding the social dynamics that both constrain and enable a person’s engagement with information. Seen in this light, library UX challenges information literacy research as well as teaching and learning practices that aim to support student engagement within complex and dynamic digital information environments.

*Time*

Time forms a second site of tension. The concept of time has previously been used as a lens to examine neoliberal logics within higher education, academic libraries, and information literacy. A temporal analysis reveals that library UX can be interpreted as subject to many of the same pressures. The recognition that one of the purposes of UX research is to generate profits by seeing into the future, for example, illustrates how library UX can be seen as employed to manage future risk and alterity within a corporate education sector. An emphasis on fast-paced ‘guerilla design’ further moves research away from its ethnographic antecedents by foreclosing the kinds of questions we ask, the problems we address, the tools and strategies we use, and the “solutions” we propose. Running counter to the practices and aims of critical and feminist pedagogies, library UX subsequently both strips and is stripped of its transformative potential.

*UX, Identity, and the Body*

A third site of tension is the body, which can be seen as simultaneously erased and exploited within library UX research. The body, which has long been overlooked within information literacy research, has recently been reconceptualized as forming a rich site of embodied and situated knowledge (Lloyd 2010). However, the emphasis on the impersonal and disembodied ‘user’ means that library UX flattens people’s identities; the use of personas as a research method further runs the risk of engendering and promoting stereotypes. At the same time, the emphasis on traces of human activity—touchpoints, ‘pain points,’ interactions, and maps means that library UX can also be seen to exploit bodies by using them in the library’s ongoing enterprise to demonstrate value. The hyper (in)visibility of the body consequently threatens to reinforce whiteness, ageism, and ableism (Andrews 2016; Barron and Larose 2017) while subverting understandings about rich, corporeal sites of knowledge.

*The Decontextualisation of Search*

The ways in which search engines are understood and positioned forms the fourth site of tension. Academic libraries have widely implemented single search boxes, initially through federated search tools, which appeared in the early 2000s, and then through web-scale discovery services. However, while these developments have often been hailed as vital within the Google era, they also erase how search behavior is produced and reproduced through interaction with search interfaces; the fact that students are accustomed to one-stop searching does not mean that it is the best way to think about search. More expressly, Google models strip out context by prioritizing efficiency while also contributing to problematic auras of completeness and closure. While the single search box might constitute a positive user experience, focusing solely on user experience might be antithetical to the goals of higher education and information literacy instruction.

**Conclusion**

This paper explored the origins and values of UX through a critical lens. Drawing on research from outside LIS, we traced the historical antecedents of UX as well as its manifestations within academic libraries, drawing attention to various sites of tension between UX and critical information literacy. Through this work, we open a dialogue and lay the groundwork for a library UX practice more closely aligned with the critical turn in information literacy.

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