

## Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

### Event review of '*Towards a critical (art) librarianship: theories and practices*' at Chelsea College of Arts, 25 May 2018

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#### Abstract

Event review of the 'Towards a critical (art) librarianship: theories and practices' conference, held at Chelsea College of Arts on 25th May 2018.

In the decades to come, when historians are writing about the movement that created global inclusive higher education curricula and pedagogy in the creative arts, they might look to the momentum started in recent years. For example, campaigns such as 'UAL So White' initiated by Arts SU (UAL's student union) in 2016. This had roots in another student led campaign by the National Union of Students (NUS), and which started the previous year, 'Why is My Curriculum White?' (Hussain, 2015). Other precursors include the multi-faceted movement and platform 'Shades of Noir', founded by Aisha Richards in 2009. As we analyse these initiatives and comprehend their gathering strength, the story will quickly coalesce around the significance of the material resources in libraries and archives, and their power to structure how we think about the world around us.

Organised by UAL's Library Services, *Towards a critical (art) librarianship: theories and practices* took place at Chelsea College of Arts (UAL) in May 2018. I am not a librarian, but primarily a researcher, and so attending a conference on 'critical librarianship' was not a natural or obvious step. I was drawn by the organisers' apparent willingness to question the very fundamentals of their working environment. As stated by Jessica Crilly in the conference flier, the event was motivated by a wish to explore how things could be other than they are:

Libraries have long been concerned with ideas of social justice, and with supporting the potentially marginalised voice, and university libraries are now also collaborating with decolonisation movements in their institutions.

The aim of the day is to discuss theoretical perspectives on the notions of critical (and radical) librarianship and libraries as non-neutral spaces, to see how these ideas might provide frameworks to contextualise and support these critically engaged practices in libraries.

(Crilly, 2018)

The taken-for-granted premise of this conference that libraries are 'non-neutral spaces' was itself a significant inducement to attend. So often among academics the discussion does not start with this premise, and begins at a much earlier point: the idea that the teaching environment is non-neutral and positioned socially and historically is itself tiresomely contested. Here was a forum that promised to get to the interesting bit, asking what are the implications of positionality, what impact do they have and how do we respond critically to, and in, this reality?

It was evident from the welcome by Pat Christie (Director of Library and Student Support Services at UAL) and the introduction from Professor Simon Ofield-Kerr (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic) that

this was no marginal event. This discussion was not an act of institutional subversion, but a foregrounding of a new institutional appetite for change.

In her keynote presentation, Emily Drabinski (Associate Professor and Co-ordinator of Library Instruction, Long Island University, Brooklyn) envisioned critical librarianship as:

a persistent longing for a librarianship that looks and acts in ways that disrupt the status quo, that center a commitment to social justice and social change, that elevate and amplify the voices of a diverse group of librarians, and that grapple directly with the problems of power concentrated in the hands of only a few.

(Drabinski, 2018a)

One could substitute 'teaching' or 'art practice' for librarianship and in doing so demonstrate how much commonality of purpose there is among these different professional groups. What is most striking here, however, is that Drabinski's first point of practice pinpoints relations within her professional group. She does not fall on easy references to 'the student experience'. She sees her immediate social relations as constitutive of the possibility to enact wider social change. What would this particular aspect of her vision mean if it were applied to teachers and other practitioners?

The first of Drabinski's five precepts for critical librarianship outlines that practitioners must 'interrogate the work of power in structures and systems' (2018a). Again, she pinpoints librarians' own systems of classification and cataloguing and observes the differentiated impact of those systems on individuals and groups who are positioned in various degrees of advantage and disadvantage in relation to them. In seeking to 'acknowledge the social, economic and political context of library policies and processes' (second precept, 2018a), Drabinski situates her professional practice in the midst of ethical dilemmas that may originate beyond the academy, encompassing immigration and concerns about security that play out in tensions within her working environment. She looks also to the role of professional practice in perpetuating a version of higher education to which not all of us are signed up: 'the devaluation of the humanities and liberal arts and the shift of HE toward a credentialising model that simply turns on widgets rather than people.' (Drabinski, 2018a).

These comments left me musing on what 'the widget experience' might look like and whether a National Widget Survey might be constructed to measure it. With this in mind, the third precept 'surfacing hidden labour' compels my attention (Drabinski, 2018a). A series of examples outlining under-valued or misrecognised labour drive Drabinski's point home, but she also touches on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and the particular burden that we place on colleagues of colour who find themselves sustaining students who otherwise feel they do not belong. I start to count the number of anecdotal examples I have come across as a researcher, that resonate with this notion of 'hidden labour' and lose count.

In illustration of her fourth precept to 'articulate the infrastructures that enable some lines of inquiry and not others', Drabinski offers a profoundly perceptive account of her position (2018a). This acknowledges the limits in supporting students who are pursuing questions that are beyond her own system of values. She observes that we

all have these kinds of blocks on what our brains are capable of thinking [...] that affects the kinds of questions we are able to get students to ask [...]. Making these blocks visible so that we can begin to move around them is critical.

(Drabinski, 2018a)

Drabinski ends on the optimistic precept: 'It could have been otherwise'. As well as recognising that our day-to-day conventions and practices are structured and contingent, she urges librarians to

recognise their own power in perpetuating how things are. While she addresses librarians in particular, her message is relevant to all of us who work in higher education and beyond:

we have significant power, more than we think we know that we do, and we can choose to wield it every day. Part of the task [...] is to delineate the boundaries of that power [...] and how it is produced, and identify the moments where we can enact it, when we build our collections, connect with our users, and make the case of our work outside of our libraries.

(Drabinski, 2018a)

Practical examples followed. Viv Eades (Assistant Academic Support Librarian at Central Saint Martins, UAL) explicitly drew on Drabinski's work in her report of an initiative that invited students to critique the Dewey Classification system. The absurdity of taken for granted categories was illuminated in her discussion of students' lived experiences. There were examples of misplacing items to the point of causing offence, including materials relating to transgender identity, and the diminution of the category 'African literature' in comparison to the specificity of categories such as 'twenty-first century English and Irish literature'. In this engagement with the library environment, students were asked to situate themselves as readers, with valid perspectives on the organisation of knowledge. The aim was not to over-write current classification but show that it is contestable and to invite contestation. From Zine collections as a means of expanding such canons to 'Wiki-pedia Editathons', the paper revealed the rich seams that can be exposed by current practices of critical librarianship in UAL's libraries and collections.

What is less clear, on the whole, is the extent to which these initiatives are sustainable and embedded in the wider University. To what extent are the critical approaches of these librarians specific to them as motivated individuals? Are these initiatives part of a growing critical mass? Do they inhabit the libraries in isolation or are they part of an institution-wide critical cultural turn? Clearly they draw strength from external currents, as demonstrated in the presentations of Stephanie Moran (Institute of International Visual Arts, Iniva), and Tabitha Austin (Shades of Noir), which presented tantalising snippets of the paradigm-shifting potentials of collections. Yet, I wonder how widely utilised they are? How will they establish their relevance when these innovative, alternative approaches to collections and library categorisation are unknown to so many. How do we bring about a climate that compels the larger penumbra of our colleagues to go and fetch, rather than reproduce, as a matter of course?

It will be the towering relevance of resources that reside in UAL libraries, exhibition and performance spaces, and institutions like Iniva and Shades of Noir that will provide the bedrock of change in art and design curricula. Perhaps it is our very conceptions of relevance that have to change before they become part of our mainstream.

## References

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## **Biography**

*Dr Duna Sabri* has been Director of the UAL Academic Development Fund since December 2018. Starting her career as a researcher at Royal Holloway's Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies, she moved to ten years in educational development at the University of Oxford. After a doctorate in HE policy, she undertook independent institutional research and co-authored a national review of inequality in students' outcomes. She is Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Public Policy Research, King's College London. Her interests are in the causal mechanisms that underlie institutional and global inequalities in HE and approaches to building social justice.