Beyond Cultural Literacy: Building Introspective Information Professionals

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Abstract. Self-reflection is a vital tool that can be used in preparing introspective information professionals who would thrive in multicultural workplace settings. A qualitative analysis of students' identity exploration papers demonstrates how information professionals discover and understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality between them by navigating their own cultural identity. Findings reveal the importance of self-awareness in cultivating a culturally responsive mindset. This study demonstrates how cultural literacy approaches can be applied to develop introspective information professionals who would be critical agents of change in efforts to increase inclusivity and help patrons become active participants in their community.

Keywords: Cultural literacy · Self-reflection · Cultural competence · Intercultural communication · Diversity · Cultural identity

1 Introduction

Globalization, multicultural populations, and changing workforces increase expectations for employees to have intercultural skills to serve patrons from diverse backgrounds and communities. This means that information professionals need to be culturally sensitive and skilled in imparting information literacy when working with multicultural patrons.

Information professionals utilize their information literacy skills in educating patrons on a variety of topics relevant to their everyday life. Frequent topics include citizenship, immigration, technology skills, and civic engagement conversation. Patrons come to libraries seeking help with everyday life information literacy skills, which often revolve around leisure and community activities, citizenship and the fulfilment of social roles, public health, and critical life situations [1]. Information literacy is necessary to help patrons become self-advocates within healthcare, citizenship, education, everyday life, and the workplace [2]. However, when dealing with such topics, an information professional must be culturally aware of the patron's background.

Possessing information literacy skills is not enough. According to the "2017 ALA Demographic Study," the LIS profession remains predominately white and female [3]. Consequently, some information professionals lack a deeper understanding of effective intercultural approaches and strategies in spite of their excellent information literacy skills. This is why cultural literacy is necessary for information professionals in addition

to information literacy skills. Cultural literacy has many definitions but can generally be defined as "the knowledge of history, contributions, and perspectives of different cultural groups, including one's own group, necessary for an understand of reading, writing, and other media" [4, p. 231]. Developing self-awareness through critical self-reflection is considered a crucial component in facilitating cultural literacy. While scholarly activity on developing cultural competence has increased significantly in recent years, the LIS scholarship remains limited in addressing cultural literacy approaches that incorporate experiential and introspective learning activities [5, 6]. This study examines students' Identity Exploration papers to understand if asking students to navigate their own cultural identity through self-exploration helped them become more culturally sensitive. The primary objective of this learning activity was to raise critical awareness of racial identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality through a critical social justice framework [7]. Findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the cultural literacy approach in engaging students in a process of self-exploration, discovery, and introspection in cultivating a culturally responsive mindset [8, 9].

2   Background

2.1   Understanding Cultural Literacy

Information organizations attract the needs of information users from diverse populations. The ACRL (2006) defines information literacy as "the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information" [10]. Information literacy involves both digital literacy and media literacy. One aspect of information literacy is that multicultural patrons often turn to libraries for is computer technology help. In order to provide for the information needs of non-English speakers, libraries have begun adapting their technology to be useful for the population seeking information and have tried to hire more multi-lingual speaking staff members [11]. It has been found that "structural barriers such as language or learning how systems work affect immigrant information practices" [12, p. 25]. The internet is more geared toward English patrons, rather than non-native speakers. This causes difficulty for patrons in trying to obtain information. By recognizing these difficulties and making the necessary changes, the library is able to impart information literacy skills onto diverse populations that may be seeking help.

Collaboration between community and information organizations, as well as knowing the social, political, and cultural characteristics of the community, is imperative to properly performing information literacy skills [13]. By knowing community demographics and needs, the information professional will be able to tailor their information literacy skills toward topics of interest in the community, such as technology, immigration, citizenship, politics, and healthcare. Information professionals would be more effective in their information literacy skills if they have a better understanding of their patrons' cultural backgrounds and their preferences, wishes, and needs. This means they need to be equipped with cultural literacy skills in addition to their information literacy skills.

Discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been popular in LIS academic discourse. Prior studies have discussed the importance of increasing diversity in

collections and services [14], increasing inclusivity in the LIS workforce [15], and cultural competence education for LIS professionals [16]. The ACRL "Diversity Standard: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries" (2012) reinforces the ideas all of these studies [17]. It lists 11 standards that information professionals should uphold to achieve and promote diversity within different areas of their information organization. The 11 standards are cultural awareness of self and others, cross-cultural knowledge and skills, organizational and professional values, development of collections, programs, and services, service delivery, language diversity, workforce diversity, organizational dynamics, cross-cultural leadership, professional education and continuous learning, and research [17]. Despite all of this research done on the topic of DEI in LIS, the concept of cultural literacy has not been explored in-depth in the LIS profession.

Shliakhovchuk (2021) has done extensive research on the concept of cultural literacy [4]. He asserts that an information professional must be able to recognize and handle cultural change and cultural differences if they are to effectively deal with the needs of multicultural patrons [4]. Polistana (2009) and Anning (2010) have two compelling conceptualizations of cultural literacy that are worth exploring more in-depth [18, 19]. According to Polistana (2009), "cultural literacy includes cultural competence but adds to it the ability to critically reflect on, and if necessary, bring about change in, one's own culture" as well as the ability to analyze the behaviors of dominant cultures in relation to other cultures [4, 18, p. 235–236]. Polistana (2009) identifies four key cultural literacy skills: cross-cultural awareness, local cultural awareness, critical reflection and thinking, and personal skills for coping with being a change agent [19]. Anning (2010) identifies four key competencies one must achieve to become culturally literate. These four competencies are "appreciation and comprehension of cultural diversity, effective communication with people from other cultures, treating everyone with no pre-expectations or stereotypes, assessment of each situation and adjusting one's behaviour" [4, 19, p. 236]. It is important that, at the graduate education level, aspiring information professionals are taught these skills and competencies that Polistana (2009) and Anning (2010) outline in their research. More importantly, both of these studies emphasize the importance of critical reflection and thinking in increasing cultural sensitivity and cultivating intercultural skills [18, 19].

2.2 Cultural Literacy Approaches in Enhanging Self-awarness and Intercultural Skills

Discussions, reflections, learning diaries, and experiential learning approaches are all appropriate measures that can be taken to enhance self-awareness when it comes to intercultural skills, cultural literacy, and cultural competence. It is not enough for an individual to recognize that there is cultural diversity in the world. This is because it "absolves individuals from learning and understanding the impact of their own sociopolitical and ethnocentric biases on their work with clients who are racially/ethnically or culturally different from themselves" [9, p. 224]. It is important that one understands their own culture, obtains knowledge of other cultures, and recognizes "diversity as normative" [9, p. 224]. It is the recognition of one's own culture and the biases that they have as a result of their culture that is key to self-awareness. Without reflecting on

one's own experiences, they will not be able to successfully cultivate self-awareness and intercultural skills.

Self-awareness and self-reflection are not new ideas within the LIS field, especially in terms of MLIS programs, intercultural skills, and cultural competency. Abdullahi (2007) asserts that, although some LIS students have a sense of who they are socially and culturally, "most need to engage in autobiographical exploration, reflection, and critical self-analysis to develop that sense" [20, p. 454]. In a similar vein, diversity audits, family histories, journaling, reflections, and self-evaluations have also been considered to facilitate cultural self-awareness in classrooms [5, 6, 21]. This requires LIS educators to be cognizant of their own social position, pedagogy, course content, and practices in order to impart self-reflection and intercultural skills upon their students. However, despite an influx in work on cultural competency in the last 20 years, a knowledge and skills gap in LIS graduate programs is immediately visible [22] and the emphasis on cultural self-awareness is basically non-existent. This paper seeks to demonstrate that self-reflection and continuous learning are two key values that information professionals must uphold if they are to become culturally literate and aware of biases that may exist within themselves and their information organization.

3   Methods

This study presents a qualitative analysis of 43 students' reflections in the "Identity Exploration" assignments they completed in the "Cultural Competence for Information Professionals" courses offered between 2019–2021 at St. John's University in the United States. With the exception of three male students, the course participants were all female and belonged to different races/ethnicities, including White ($n = 34$), Black/African Americans ($n = 2$), Latino ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 2$), and Multiracial ($n = 3$).

3.1   Context of the Assignment

The cultural competence course focused on preparing students to work effectively at the individual and organizational level by learning and applying the cultural competence knowledge, skills and practices required in a culturally diverse environment. The course readings were social justice oriented and explored a wide range of topics including an understanding of cultural competence framework including race, implicit, bias, privilege, intersectionality, microaggressions, cultural intelligence, and multicultural communication. Alongside these course topics and related readings, students also participated in activities that aimed to increase their critical consciousness and cultural competence skills. At the beginning of the course, students were asked to take the Cultural Compass test that helped them understand their own cultural value preferences and blind spots in dealing with people from diverse cultural background [23]. As the course progressed, students were provided opportunities to analyze their own privileges by participating in an online privilege walk as well as completing a privilege quiz to determine how their identities privilege or impede their experiences and their implications for their lives and professional practice [23]. In a similar view, students were encouraged to take the Implicit Association Test in order to understand their unconscious biases in dealing with

people from diverse cultural backgrounds [24]. Students were also exposed to the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity that them understand how people experience and engage cultural difference [25].

The primary objective of the identity exploration assignment was to raise awareness of identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality issues through a critical social justice framework that "recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural) and actively seeks to change this" [7, p. xvii]. In keeping with this background, students were required to reflect on five of the ten types of identities: race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, religion, ability, language, nationality, sexual orientation and class. The teacher provided a set of discussion prompts to help students navigate their personal identity narratives. Furthermore, the students were asked to articulate their learning reflections from this assignment and if the identity exploration exercise helped them gain better insights into their cultural identity. Finally, the students were asked how this cultural awareness made them more sensitive towards people of other cultures (if applicable).

3.2   Analysis Approach

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of new information professionals as they embarked on critical self-reflection in their Identity Exploration papers. Reflections were analyzed by utilizing a thematic analysis approach adopted in prior studies [8, 26]. The phenomenological research suggests that "themes may be understood as the structures of experience" [27, p.79]. By utilizing this approach, effort was made to uncover experiences informing something "telling," "meaningful," and "thematic" expressions in the Identity Exploration papers [27, p. 86]. Furthermore, reflections were examined by taking into consideration the various types of resistance that could be exhibited through distancing or intense emotions through guilt, anger, frustration or fear [28]. While students reflected on various identities, this study focused only on understanding their viewpoints and perspectives on race, privilege, oppression, power, and intersectionality among them.

4   Findings

4.1   Navigating the Conundrum of Race

Findings suggest that the foundation of racial identity is laid in the experiences of childhood through a complex process of all interactions within family, school, communities, and society at large. This sentiment was reflected by quite a few White students who stated that, "Identifiers like race and sexuality were not really a part of the conversation growing up" (S20.3)]. They also reported tacit or explicit discouragement from their parents when intermingling with their friends of color. A student remarked, "My parents never stayed to talk with my black friends' parents like they would with my white friends' parents. They were uncomfortable driving me to my friends' homes on the other side of town and would encourage me to make friends with the kids in our neighborhood instead" (S20.4). Similarly, another student remarked, "race was a strange topic in my

family. My parents and uncles always made stereotypical jokes about other minorities but always had friends and welcomed people of other races" (S21.5). Their reflections demonstrate how racial prejudice is expressed through both unspoken and overt social signals and their influence in hampering meaningful relationships and interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, their upbringing in homogeneous "cultural bubble" (S21.3) characterized by the primacy of Whiteness highlighted their "little exposure to different cultures for a large chunk of time" and how their "privileged background" kept them insulated from learning about people from diverse cultural backgrounds and their "struggle" for equality (S20.11). Some White students also reflected how their mistaken beliefs in equality contributed to the development of colorblind ideology. A student commented, "I mistakenly believed that all cultures are basically the same, but I have learned to recognize my privilege" (S20.14). Another student remarked that, "by not acknowledging the cultures that are around me, are most likely interpreted as blindness" (S19.3). Quite a few White students also highlighted their struggles, awareness, and efforts to overcome the challenges of implicit bias. A student remarked, "I feel as though these days I am much more aware of what it means to have implicit bias and I am working to not only be aware but consciously eradicate it as much as possible from myself."

A majority of the White students did not have any personal experiences of racial discrimination or oppression. They typically stated, "I have never been discriminated against because of the color of my skin, my sexuality or income level" (S19.8). They also noted that "there is still defensiveness when it comes to past interactions and most white people are uncomfortable being told that an action or comment they never realized was racist is unacceptable" (S20.6). In contrast, students of color experienced racial discrimination, oppression, microaggressions and stereotyping as a part of their development. An Asian student commented, "Many of my American friends have racial stereotypes because they believe Asian women prefer staying home, doing housework, and taking care of kids" (S20.9). Similarly, a Black student noted, "I was constantly told that I "talk like a white girl," and that I am "pretty for a Black girl" (S19.7). Findings also suggest that a majority of White students were aware of racial differences through movies and readings. However, higher education helped expand their cultural awareness by providing them opportunities to interact with more diverse communities of learners. A student reflected, "I really only began to experience diverse cultures in college where I learned about biases and racism. I am now aware of the ways in which I lack experiences with diversity and new cultures" (S20.13).

Overall, findings demonstrate that this introspective exercise helped students navigate the conundrum of race through exploring many nebulous social nuances that influenced their identity development.

4.2   Grappling with White Privilege

The findings revealed that a majority of White students were aware of the pros and cons of their race, ethnicity and background and the implications of those qualities for their professional careers. A majority of them acknowledged their "privilege" and related benefits for their careers and lives. Typical comments included, "I have learned this semester, with everything that has happened within society, that my whiteness came

with a certain level of privilege that I was blind to. That it was not just my willingness to work and do hard work that have gotten me to my station in life. While my life was not necessarily easy, it was not made harder because of the color of my skin, or my religion, or my sexuality" (S19.5). A small number of White students also acknowledged that they are still "grappling with realizing the privilege, being aware of it, and at the same time feeling so grateful for it" (S20.6). Some of them also indicated that they chose to "downplay" (S20.7) and "deflect" (S21.7) their privileges or "feigned" ignorance on some occasions when it was "convenient or helpful" (S20.7). Similarly, many students also exhibited strong emotions and feelings of White guilt as they navigated their cultural identity. A student reflected that, "I do not believe white guilt is a productive way to deal with white privilege. While it is a visceral way to identify my own privilege, it does not lead to productive change. White guilt prevents me from having uncomfortable conversations that might transform my understanding of other races and cultures. Once I begin to feel that guilt, I deflect" (S21.7). At the same, a small number of White students also acknowledged their blissful ignorance of their privileges before working on this assignment. Interestingly, almost every white student emphasized that their lives have not been without struggles and they have worked hard to accomplish everything. They typically remarked that their "life is not without struggles but overall it is easier than most" (S19.6). Paradoxically speaking, while on one hand they grappled with acknowledging their privileges and reflected their empathy for students of color, they also implied the notion of meritocracy behind their accomplishments at the same time.

Overall, findings indicated that race and privilege are two sides of the same coin and play a critical role in determining an individual's social power, oppression and opportunities throughout their careers and lives. Findings also highlighted that students had not engaged in in-depth analysis of their privileges, and their implications for their lives and professional practice prior to working on this assignment.

4.3 Exploring Intersectionality in Identities

Findings highlight that students made efforts to navigate through their own cultural identities while looking through the lenses of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, language, and more, and discovered an intersectionality between them. The findings reveal that Latino and Black students expressed feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and a constant pressure to prove themselves due to their position as outsiders in a White dominated society. A Black student commented, "I am constantly concerned about my work not being good enough due to what many call imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome, which can be described as feelings of inadequacy that persist despite one's success, is especially prevalent among people of color" (S19.7). Similarly, Asian students highlighted their struggles in navigating their intersectionalities and dealing with the typical stereotype perceptions of being quiet and introverted. A student remarked, "I admit that I struggle with my intersectionality—being a female, an Asian, and a Chinese-American. Many of my American friends have racial stereotypes because they believe Asian women prefer staying home, doing housework, and taking care of kids" (S20.9). In particular, biracial students grappled with identity crises. If they have more Asian or Latino features than White, it made their lives challenging. Consequently, despite their mixed racial identity, people identified them as Asian or Latino. In contrast, if their features and complexion

were predominantly White, their predominant White features benefitted them. Furthermore, in spite of their biracial identity, they were perceived as White. A student from mixed racial background stated, "It wasn't until I was much older that I learned more about intra-community prejudices. As someone with light skin and "good" hair, I didn't face the explicit antiblackness and colorism rampant in my family. It didn't matter that my father was a biracial Black man, because there were no physical markers of Blackness on me" (S20.8). In contrast, a desire to grow, learn, and evolve was a consistent theme in the reflections of White students' identity exploration papers. Their reflections highlighted their evolving worldviews as they navigated their intersectionalities among various identities through self-exploration. A student stated, "Learning about my intersectionality has not only taught me more about myself, but also how I view others and how I need to be more willing to learn about their culture and them as an individual" (S21.4). Similarly, another student reflected that, "My ethnicity, gender identity and expression, religion, ability, and class have affected my life and shaped me into the person I am today. I am aware of the advantages I do have, and I try to work to help others who do not have them and will continue to do so professionally as well as personally" (S19.2). Overall, students perceived learning about intersectionality its implications to be one of the most profound and enlightening experiences of the Cultural Competence course.

4.4 Insighs Gained

As developing cultural competence is a lifelong journey, students were asked to reflect on three action steps to further develop their cultural competence skills in their identity exploration narratives. Their comments suggest that reflecting on ones' own beliefs and prejudices is a necessary precursor to empathizing and understanding those of different backgrounds, an imperative skill for any information professional. A student remarked, "I believe this new [cultural] awareness will help me become more culturally competent because I have a better understanding of how my identity has been shaped by my culture. Understanding my own identity is the first step to understanding how others are different from me and how to accept those differences and understand those individuals" (S21.4). Furthermore, across the board, students emphasized the importance of continuing education and professional development as a part of their desire to become culturally competent information professionals. Their typical comments included, "To become a better librarian, I [they] must keep reading, learning, and informing others of the inequalities in our society as well as in our own field and workplace" (S20.15).

The analysis revealed that all of the participants acknowledged inherent structural inequities and barriers that contribute to promote homogeneity in the LIS profession. In particular, their reflections indicated a willingness and desire to help correct structural inequities in libraries for marginalized patrons. Their reflections emphasized the need to practice cultural humility at both the individual and organizational level. Students' discussions also recognized the importance of continuing self-reflection in order to hone their cultural competence toolkit. A student remarked, "After reflecting on my experiences observing different forms of discrimination and intersectionality, I am pleased to say that I am more aware of my advantages/privilege than ever before and I will do my

best to support others who are less privileged than I and fight back against discrimination" (S19.6). Overall, students emphasized the importance of respectful listening and pushing their thinking as useful approaches to gaining deeper insights into the nature of their blind spots or as remedial strategies that could lead to growth.

5 Discussion and Implications

Students' reflections revealed how the Identity Exploration assignment helped them gain better insights into their cultural identity by examining many nuanced and uncomfortable social justice topics. Their reflections also revealed how this introspective exercise helped them examine their own beliefs, identities, positionalities and privileges within the sociocultural context of LIS education. Although all students made connections between their identities and its implications for their personal lives and professional practice, a handful number of students exhibited resistance in the form of distancing by avoiding discussion on their racial identity. Furthermore, quite a few students expressed intense emotions through the expression of White guilt, anger, and frustration. Nevertheless, students questioned and contended with their own values and beliefs and their implications in serving ethnically marginalized patrons. Regardless of their discomfort, students were upfront in reflecting on issues of race, privilege, and intersectionality and how this reflective exercise assisted them to become culturally literate information professionals. Many students explicitly described the insights they gained by engaging in self exploration of their cultural identity. They recognized the importance of continuing self-reflection in order to practice cultural humility and hone their cultural competence skills.

The findings also highlight implications for incorporating antiracist pedagogical approach in teaching diversity and multicultural education courses in LIS programs. Bringing antiracist pedagogy in classroom begins with faculty becoming aware of their social position, its impact on their teaching, and their role and responsibilities in a race-conscious society [29]. Consequently, this approach requires teachers to develop self-reflexive exercises to engage students in uncomfortable and meaningful explorations of social construct of race and its implications for professional practice. This would ensure that the conversation about race is not wrapped-up behind euphemistic phrases of multiculturalism. Additionally, cultivating a safe and supportive learning environment would go a long way promoting self-disclosure among students. This study demonstrates how cultural literacy approach can be applied in improving critical self-awareness, appreciating the advantages of self-reflection in practicing cultural humility, and facilitating uncomfortable conversations around race in teaching DEI courses. Finally, this study emphasizes that culturally literate introspective information professionals would be critical agents of change in efforts to increase inclusivity and help patrons become active participants in an ever-changing global society.

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