

Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice, edited by Elizabeth Brookbank and Jess Haigh

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Volume 8, 2022

Special Focus on Labour in Canadian Academic Libraries

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092339ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v8.38939>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians / Association
Canadienne des Bibliothécaires en Enseignement Supérieur

ISSN

2369-937X (digital)

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Cite this review

Campbell, H. (2022). Review of [Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice, edited by Elizabeth Brookbank and Jess Haigh]. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship / Revue canadienne de bibliothéconomie universitaire*, 8, 1–3.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/cjalrcbu.v8.38939>

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Book Review: *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice*

Brookbank, Elizabeth, and Jess Haigh, eds. *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice*. Lepton, Huddersfield: Innovative Libraries Press, 2021, 334pp. Open access from <https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/8110/>; \$49.94.

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Keywords: *critical information literacy · critical pedagogy · critical theory*

Designed as a practical addition to the critical information literacy discourse, *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* appropriately identifies itself as a continuation of Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy's 2016 two volume set, *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*. An edited series of practical lesson plans and reflective narratives, *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* tries to answer the question: how are librarians concretely using the lessons and ideas posed within the *Handbook*, five years after its publication? By positioning their book in a line of critical library pedagogy texts, editors Elizabeth Brookbank and Jess Haigh caution readers against starting with *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice*, appropriately directing critical theory newcomers to the introduction of Pagowsky and McElroy's *Handbook* (1). In making this decision, and by accepting fewer chapters than the *Handbook*'s two volumes, Brookbank and Haigh give authors space to discuss the nuances of critical theory and consider its complexities when applying it in practice. In many chapters of this book, as a result, we get a rich sense of what it means to be a critical library educator.

As the preface outlines, the first half of *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* looks at critical pedagogy in 'typical' library classrooms. Many readers will appreciate the exemplars, lesson plans, or handouts included by authors in this section. I found the reflection questions most applicable to my critical practice: Darren Flynn's description of critical one-shot lesson planning is a strong example here, as his rich and thoughtful reflection questions can easily be adapted to a wide range of teaching contexts. But I think it is Brookbank and Haigh's prioritization of a narrative approach that gives this book life. Clare McCluskey Dean's chapter, "Exploring how Reading List Design is Influenced by Power and Structures with Undergraduate

Students,” is a personal favourite: she has me questioning who I consider to be my learners and where my critical practice can cause unintended harm.

The second half of the book explores contexts, “outside of ‘traditional’ information literacy instruction settings” (1). When teaching about systemic bias, Caroline Ball uses Wikipedia as an alternative to academic databases, for example, while Cal Murgu demonstrates how we might teach students about power, privilege, marginalization, and ‘neutrality’ through web archiving and other born digital objects. Themes that begin in the first section of the book carry through the second, often centring on difficult but necessary questions about critical library practice: what must critical librarians unlearn in order to fully demonstrate a critical approach? Where do critical librarians hold power to effect systemic change, and where are we walking away from that responsibility?

Brookbank and Haigh acknowledge in the preface that *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* chapters were written before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with editing taking place in its early stages. While authors mostly describe face-to-face teaching, this did not detract from my ability to engage with, and take lessons away from, the book. As many have said before me, the COVID-19 pandemic simply shone a line on existing societal problems, so *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* captures many questions that are still front-of-mind today. Even with its focus on practical lessons and takeaways, we can see future directions for critical librarianship weaving through authors’ narrative reflections. Sanji Lacey (Chapter 3) and Clare McCluskey Dean (Chapter 5), for example, begin a thread questioning librarianships’ reliance on a ‘deficit’ teaching model, where we make false assumptions about what our learners already know and can do. This theme is further challenged by editor Jess Haigh in her chapter, as she names the harm our implicit biases cause to students: “I do not want the next generation... to feel they should erase their own cultural practices while studying, or using library resources” (229).

The chapters looking at decolonization most strongly indicate what post-pandemic critical librarianship may look like. As with most critical information literacy texts, *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* features predominantly white authors; all are situated in the global north, as well.¹ Brookbank and Haigh acknowledge this lack of diversity by directing readers to a—somewhat out-of-place—list of Librarians of Color organizations in the preface; they also encourage readers to explore the often excellent reference lists supplied by authors, which I will echo here.² But there is also a string of decolonization-focused chapters that challenge librarians to acknowledge

1. Specifically, eight chapters focus on institutions in the United Kingdom, two in Canada, and four in the United States.

2. As the editors suggest, I recommend exploring Clare McCluskey Dean’s list of references, in particular.

our responsibility to make change—in our profession, for society, and within ourselves. Alice Harvey and Laura Elliott (Chapter I), and Marilyn Clarke (Chapter II), show us how an institutional commitment to decolonization can lead to meaningful change within the work and hearts of librarians, in their descriptions of the *Liberate Our Library* initiative at Goldsmiths, University of London. The book’s final chapter by Christa McCartney and Edmund Wilkinson expounds this theme as they move us “Toward a Critical Curriculum.” Librarians have an essential role to play in decolonizing our institutions (and societies), they say, and a unique position within university power structures from where to do it, but first we must confront our complicity in “perpetuating an outdated global hegemony” (325).

I recommend reading this book in its entirety to get the most of out of these thought-provoking themes. I will share, though, that the theme-based analysis in this review of *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* took work on my part. I think the book would have been strengthened by an introduction and/or conclusion from the editors, whose own chapters were so strong. I also encourage future readers to interact with this book electronically, even for those who prefer print, like me. With no index or ability to download individual chapters from the publisher, searching specific concepts or keywords requires a PDF reader. There are nice benefits to the electronic version, too, as some authors included links to handouts, websites, and other practice materials. Overall, *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* is a fine addition to the growing series of practical texts for library educators looking to ground their teaching practice in critical theory. *Critical Library Pedagogy in Practice* lives up to its claim of building onto and enriching the ideas introduced in the *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook* and encourages readers to ask important questions about how our field must continue to change.

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