

# **Critical Voices: A Community of Practice during COVID**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article describes how a group of students and an instructor at an MLIS program developed a community of practice (CoP) around critical librarianship. We provide a literature review on CoPs and relate this to our own experience with the reading group. We include our individual narratives that reveal the similarities and differences in our experiences as students and practitioners. The Critical Librarianship Reading Group provided a community for peers, knowledge building around critical librarianship, and an opportunity to hear from a number of voices through the readings and the members of the group. We hope this inspires other MLIS programs to develop their own CoPs that connect students, instructors, and alumni/practitioners.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

critical librarianship; continuing education; students

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

community of practice; reading groups; online communities

## **INTRODUCTION**

Once a month, affiliates of the University of Pittsburgh's MLIS program meet virtually to discuss a peer-assigned reading, centering the concepts of critical librarianship. Our critical

librarianship reading group was born in a critical librarianship course offered during the 2020 summer term. As the semester drew to a close, the instructor and some of the students proposed having the class's meaningful discussions continue through a monthly reading group, which they called the Critical Librarianship Reading Group (CritLib Reading Group). Each session would be led by a different member who chose the reading and facilitated the discussion. All readings would focus on critical librarianship topics or other related critical theories, like critical pedagogy, critical race theory, or disability studies.

The CritLib Reading Group began in the thick of a global pandemic, necessitating meetings through Zoom. Reading group members include current LIS students, recent LIS alumni from the University of Pittsburgh, and MLIS faculty. We draw upon members' experiences and knowledge to enhance discussion in each meeting. The sharing of power and peer learning built into the group structure helps newer group members feel a sense of empowerment and belonging. Rotating facilitators means that the majority of our participants are heard throughout our meetings. Typically, the facilitator chooses an article relevant to their own librarianship practice or interests, supporting a rich discussion on implementation of critical librarianship in library careers or schoolwork. Discussions frequently cover how the issues and suggested solutions in the article might be applied to a work situation or life experience, contextualizing the topic.

The virtual group helped connect our members during the stress and fear of COVID quarantine and created a sense of community, even with members in different time zones and states. Where we lost a physical shared space, meetings allowed for the exchange of information and ideas during a period of mass isolation that often felt stagnant and oppressive. It creates connections between current and former MLIS cohorts through a shared interest, and most importantly, it provides developing professionals a space to explore theoretical and actionable critical librarianship, or, in other words, a community of practice.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Lave and Wenger introduced the concept of communities of practice (CoP) in 1991. They describe how learners become socialized through "legitimate peripheral participation," in which those new to a community interact with more experienced members and move gradually into deeper participation, starting as an outsider and then becoming an insider or practitioner. One becomes an insider by adopting the practices, language, and values of that community. Allowing for different degrees of participation makes everyone feel included but also enables members to participate in a way that matches their comfort level, expertise, and interest (Wenger et al., 2002). Communities of practice arise from situated, informal learning environments rather than from a formal learning experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger et al. (2002) state that communities of practice have three attributes – a domain of knowledge, a community of people interested in that domain, and a practice in which that knowledge is applied.

Brown and Duguid (1991) use ethnographic studies from workplaces to reveal the processes of communities of practice. They determine that narration, collaboration, and social

construction are important elements of the informal learning process of a CoP. Storytelling allows community members to build relationships, problem-solve, and share knowledge. Learning is communal rather than individual, and this learning is situated. Through storytelling, the community of practice is able to construct its identity (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

There are many examples in the literature of CoPs for library science students or library practitioners. Kimmel et al. (2019) describe how Old Dominion developed support for rural, online, school librarian students. Cyre et al. (2021) created a CoP at the University of Washington libraries called LibCares to support staff through stressful times and interactions. At the University of Houston, a CoP was created to help liaison staff develop their emotional intelligence (Gola & Martin, 2020).

CoPs for library practitioners have also been developed in entirely online environments. The LIS Pedagogy Chats, organized by Laura Saunders and Melissa Wong, take place over Zoom and include librarians, LIS faculty, and LIS students; these include rotating facilitators, a practice encouraged as an effective practice for CoPs by Wenger et al. (2002), who provide a short presentation on a topic and then facilitate discussion. While this online format allowed for participation across geographic boundaries, the online format has become a necessity now in the wake of a global pandemic. For example, because of COVID-19, librarians at Vanderbilt created an online CoP for discussions about teaching and learning at the libraries (Carroll & Mallon, 2021). They created “Mini CoPs” of smaller groups to allow for specific discussions and easier participation. After surveying the participants, no one mentioned any frustration with the online format (Carroll & Mallon, 2021).

## **OUR STORIES**

The narratives below show how our community of practice helped to shape our experiences – perhaps as we moved from outsider to insider status, or as we engaged in the storytelling and knowledge-sharing that occurred in the CoP. Some of us are students while others are practitioners, and our stories show how our CoP has helped us navigate our roles in the group and in our professions and to become better practitioners of critical librarianship in any stage.

### **Author 1**

As an instructor who was previously a librarian, the CritLib Reading Group has connected me to those alums who are or are becoming library practitioners; I hear from practitioners who are early in their careers and in a variety of positions. While my networks outside the reading group provide me with a better understanding of my previous area – academic libraries – from a mid-career perspective, being part of the reading group connects me with early-career librarians and information professionals, who share their unique successes and difficulties in implementing the critical librarianship approaches. My insider/outsider status allows me to be both a learner and a contributor to our conversations. On a more personal level,

this has allowed me to maintain relationships with alums who are geographically dispersed and during times when, because of COVID, face-to-face meetings are unsafe.

The reading group enables me to interact with students in a way that flattens the typical hierarchies of higher education. Generally, I do not facilitate our meetings, and, since the group is extra-curricular, I do not grade nor evaluate. I am able both a learner and a contributor without completing rubrics or submitting feedback. An unexpected outcome of the reading group is that it has encouraged me to integrate critical librarianship concepts throughout my courses, not just in the Critical Librarianship course. Because we read articles from a variety of perspectives and we hear from many voices during the discussions, I have learned more about the relevance of critical librarianship to my other courses and can implement critical librarianship in my position in more effective ways.

## **Author 2**

As someone who had become disillusioned with my career in retail, librarianship appealed to my desire to connect to and support my community. I entered an MLIS program to foster that desire and create an opportunity to do more meaningful work. I was in the middle of my second semester when COVID-19 hit, and it changed a lot about my career trajectory as well as my progress in changing career paths. The job market itself changed, and there was a new emphasis on job security and stability for me. With so much change and uncertainty, my pivot into librarianship has halted, and it's been difficult not to feel disappointed by that, but the CritLib Reading Group has been a crucial part of keeping my connection to the aspects of librarianship that I care about most and a meaningful community of peers. It has created a space to engage with my former cohort, some of whom are professionals in the field, and also with the new cohorts of current students about issues around common interests. Participating in a group that draws upon individual expertise and experience has also kept me abreast of current issues and discussions in librarianship.

While my disillusionment with retail work has far from faded, the shared community of the critical librarianship reading group has helped empower me to create as much change as possible in my immediate work environment. I have prioritized advocating for my employees and coworkers in a meaningful way, and pushed for advancements in our business practices to better reflect my personal ethics. Many members are passionate about suggesting plans of action or ideas for change, and many of those ideas have influenced proposals I have made at my work. Our discussions have also sharpened the tools I've needed to speak out about injustices I've witnessed in the workplace, allowing me to be a better ally to my coworkers while I remain in a flawed work environment.

## **Author 3**

When I began the MLIS program at the University of Pittsburgh, I had heard of critical reading groups but had never been a part of a community of practice like this, so I was nervous but excited. I had been out of school for a few years and with the pandemic happening, I really did not communicate with people outside of my closest friends and my coworkers, so this was a

chance for me to connect with current students and alumni in a social setting while adjusting to graduate school.

Within the MLIS program, the Critical Librarianship course is offered typically during the Spring semester, and when I started in the Fall, I was not sure if I would be able to fit the course in my schedule. Having the opportunity to still learn about critical librarianship and interact with my peers was incredibly beneficial. I could still gain valuable knowledge and experience and not have to miss out on a learning opportunity just because I had limited time and credits.

Part of why being a member of the reading group has been so helpful is the opportunity to hear different perspectives. One example of this is when we were discussing the sudden trend and funding for researching health care inequalities, which created an influx and prioritization of white researchers studying medical racism. I have some experience with research, but not enough to know the intricacies of getting research approved and peer reviewed, and I know next to nothing about the medical field. Hearing from others in our group about their experiences working in the medical field or their experiences with the medical field helped me understand in a way that just reading an article or listening to a lecture could not.

#### **Author 4**

Before my first week as an MLIS student at the University of Pittsburgh, I had never even stumbled across the term “critical librarianship” – even though I spent plenty of time during my undergraduate studies working in the university library. When introduced to the CritLib Reading Group, I decided to join mainly to have another opportunity to interact with other students, as being an online student can feel isolating, not quite realizing that I was signing up to be part of a community of practice such as this. The first meeting I was honestly terrified and realized I was out of my comfort zone – but that was not the bad thing that I initially thought it was. I quickly realized that the reading group was filled with other people (students, faculty, and alumni alike) who were there to form connections and learn more about the perspectives of others – specifically those whose voices have been historically silenced – and what we can do to fix things that have remained broken for far too long.

Throughout my two semesters of experience with the reading group, I have become more aware of my privilege, more open to other perspectives, and I have learned to implement some of the things we talk about in my current job within the digital marketing industry, as well as my previous job within the pharmaceutical industry. The discussions we have are not just valuable within the context of librarianship, but within the context of being human and trying to do that in the best way that we can.

#### **Author 5**

I joined the CritLib Reading Group as a recent graduate of the LIS program to continue my own journey in social justice focused librarianship, to connect with peers during the pandemic, and to stay connected to libraries and a supportive community while job searching. There were times I felt isolated, discouraged, and disconnected with the social upheaval and

social distances during Covid, but the reading group was a safe space to connect and share successes, failures, and frustrations. I took Critical Librarianship in my graduate program and as the class helped me uncover my own biases and assumptions, I worried about losing the space to hear other views. The CritLib Reading Group allowed me to continue to engage with other perspectives, while developing a core sense of how I wanted to shape my library practice through equity, critical thinking, and sharing power.

In addition, the community of practice created by the CritLib Reading Group helped give me more confidence to speak up for more equitable library procedures at my workplace, even as a very new librarian. For example, my library was updating its hiring practices and I volunteered for the working group updating the practices, as I wanted to reduce structural barriers to the application and screening process that typically affect minoritized applicants. Inspired by the CritLib Reading group, I shared my own experiences with the hiring process and argued for important changes, like including a minimum salary in the job posting and providing all applicants with the interview questions before their first interview. Throughout my time in the CritLib Reading Group, a number of facilitators have found articles with practical suggestions for implementing critical changes in libraries, which has made actionable changes to my own librarianship practices easier.

## CONCLUSION

While we hope that our narratives will encourage other programs to develop a community of practice around critical librarianship, we recognize that our experiences are limited to one institution and five individuals, over the course of a year and a half. Additionally, all of the authors are white, which means that we cannot speak for librarians and students of color involved in the reading group. Future research could examine the role of reading groups as communities of practice at other institutions and through a more intersectional lens.

Communities of practice create a sense of belonging for those who may not consider themselves “insiders” when they enter the group. The Critical Librarianship Reading Group, as illustrated by the narratives above, provides a CoP that emphasizes shared leadership and open discussion. Moreover, participants are exposed to different perspectives related to critical librarianship and critical theory, which has helped to highlight voices who have been historically left out of conversations around LIS and elsewhere. As we become or develop as practitioners of critical librarianship, we will continue to seek and listen to these voices.

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