



## CHAPTER 10\*

# Critical Consciousness and Search

## An Introductory Visualization

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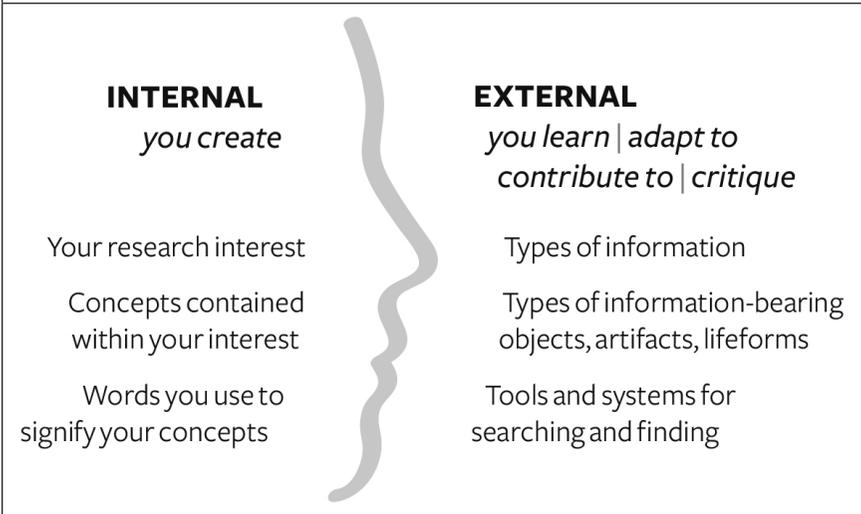
### Introduction

Most of my teaching consists of one-shot sessions within courses in my subject areas. Incorporating critical pedagogical approaches into one-shots is challenging. One of the most effective approaches, I've found, is to start conversations around how social, political, and economic systems influence how people create, organize, find, and gain access to information.

To initiate these conversations, I created a simple visualization of the main elements that are in play when we search for information (see figure 10.1). You could use this lesson plan as the basis for an entire instruction session, but really this is a lesson plan for a single image that can be incorporated into a one-shot. It has become a classroom staple of mine over the past several years. In this plan, I'll describe its origin and its connection to critical pedagogy. I'll also discuss questions and conversation ideas that you can use if you include it in your own teaching.

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**FIGURE 10.1.** Elements of Search

I am skeptical of models of human information seeking that reduce searching to a linear process. Some information-seeking models, even including Carol Kuhlthau's long-studied Information Search Process, also tend to position librarians as rational intermediaries whose role is akin to "diagnosing" people's information needs.<sup>1</sup> I have attempted not to reproduce these tendencies here. Rather, my goal is to encourage consideration of the complexity of the information landscape, while acknowledging the capability and knowledge that students bring to searching.

This means that this visualization is not to "teach people how to search," but to create discussion around what goes on in a searching situation, and from there, discussion of broader questions. It helps students parse their own complex searching practices. It also supports students' articulation of these practices without requiring them to indicate a progress point on a straight line between start and finish. There are many things happening within any searching situation. Trying to express an interest, figuring out what sort of information could help, wondering why there can't just be one search box for everything; these (and more) often occur all at once, for searchers of all kinds, sometimes so simultaneously that the question and the answer seem to become clear at the same time. There is nothing abnormal about this. Quite the opposite.

How does this visualization serve the goals of critical pedagogy? First, it enables conversations that reach beyond a conventional, operationalist emphasis on tools (e.g., databases) and procedures (e.g., click here, then click here). It acknowledges what students already know and what they bring to

their searching. It helps them equip themselves to communicate about the complexities of their searching. Last, it encourages them to make their own observations both about library systems and also about larger systems, including the social, political, and economic systems affecting information access. In these ways, this visualization encourages critical consciousness, articulated by Paulo Freire as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”<sup>2</sup> As Bryan M. Kopp and Kim Olson-Kopp have observed, “The development of critical consciousness in a library setting depends first and foremost on *humanizing*, or putting a face on, and grounding it in the realities which shape it.”<sup>3</sup>

## Learning Outcomes

- Observe that searching for information is a complex activity consisting of numerous elements, some of which are more directly within our control than others
- Analyze searching experiences and describe them reflectively
- Express questions about why and how we search for information as we do
- Suggest ways in which the information landscape could change or exist differently

Depending upon your goals and the time available, this visualization could contribute to other outcomes. For example, one potential conversation surrounds why so many search tools exist: why can't there be just one place to search for everything? This sparks a discussion that can go in different directions, from commodification to labour to technological change.

## Materials

The only material required is the visualization itself. Sometimes I introduce it as part of a conversation in which I reveal the elements one-by-one on screen. Sometimes I present it as a skeletal one-page handout with room for notes. Both options work.

## Preparation

To prepare, I suggest familiarizing yourself with students' context, as broadly as you can: What are they working to learn and accomplish? How is knowledge created within their discipline? How does the visualization connect with any other critical or analytical work with which students are involved?

## Session Instructions

1. Introduce this visualization toward the beginning of a session focused on searching for information. Introduce it before working with any tools or discussing search strategies. It can be discussed in any order or way that makes sense; it is not linear.
2. At any point in examining the visualization together, student questions can prompt discussion. I also ask questions for discussion, depending on the session context and focus.
3. Discussion could include, but is not limited to, any of the following:
  - A discussion of the searcher's position in the centre of the searching process. This might include a discussion of what we bring to searching: our ways of working, our goals, our wider circumstances, everything we already know and know how to do.
  - A discussion of the elements on the left side of the visualization. These are elements that are significantly **up to us**: interest, concepts, and words. This discussion involves encouraging analytical thinking about our interest and the language we use to describe it. Sometimes we may think of these three elements as one thing, when they're not. In classes where students are not free to pursue their own interests (e.g., essay topics are assigned), I weave this into the discussion.
  - A discussion of the elements on the right side of the visualization. These are the elements that we **encounter** and **navigate** while searching. We don't control them, but we can discuss them, recognizing that they are created by people, and we can analyze them, adapt to them, criticize them, and try to improve or disrupt them if we want to.
  - A discussion of why we have so many databases and search tools.
  - A discussion of the difference between information and the people or artifacts that carry information (e.g., books, articles). This can involve discussing the differences between how these two elements, information and its artifacts, are created, and how this varies with time, geography, and other circumstances.
  - A discussion of access to information, the many ways in which this varies, and why.
4. Every element in the visualization is a potential conversation: about semiotics, about language and culture, about objectivity, about expressing one's self, about power and control, about the political economy of information. Each element supports further discussion and activity, limited only by time and the other typical constraints of the one-shot.

## Assessment

Since I began sharing this visualization, I have noted an increase in students' awareness of the complexities and context of search. For example, they are more vocal about the shortcomings of the search tools they use and the barriers they encounter.

You could certainly assess the above outcomes in a variety of ways, from short quiz questions to substantial assignments, either freestanding or as enrichment of another course assignment. You could also provide the visualization to students in advance of your instruction session, asking them to consider it in relation to their own lives and to identify anything that's missing from it. I have not formalized my own assessment of its impact.

## Reflections

Critical pedagogy drives at several goals, such as social justice and engaged, informed citizenship. Critical consciousness makes these things possible. Encouraging it is not easy, let alone within one-shots where we also strive to address other needs and circumstances. As we are very often called upon to help students learn about searching for information, contextualizing search in a way that enables critical understanding is the place to start.

## Final Question

What do you do in your teaching to encourage critical consciousness?

## Notes

1. Kimmo Tuominen, "User-Centered Discourse: An Analysis of the Subject Positions of the User and the Librarian," *Library Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1997): 350–71, doi:10.1086/629971.
2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, Continuum, 2000), 35.
3. Bryan M. Kopp and Kim Olson-Kopp, "Depositories of Knowledge: Library Instruction and the Development of Critical Consciousness," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 57.

## Bibliography

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York, Continuum, 2000.

- Kopp, Bryan M., and Kim Olson-Kopp. "Depositories of Knowledge: Library Instruction and the Development of Critical Consciousness." In *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. Edited by Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, 55–67. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010.
- Tuominen, Kimmo. "User-Centered Discourse: An Analysis of the Subject Positions of the User and the Librarian." *Library Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1997): 350–71. doi:10.1086/629971.