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FestivIL 2021: Conference report

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I have wanted to attend LILAC for as long as I have been a librarian. It seemed to be a glittering showcase of all the wonderful possibilities available if we stretch ourselves. I began in F.E. (Further Education) Libraries and moved on to becoming a school librarian, and with one thing and another I've never quite managed to get there. Until, of course, 2021 brought FestivIL – and along with it the glorious trinity of affordability, accessibility and great timing (although it turns out that the last week of the academic year is *not* the best time to be indisposed for half of the week...).

I've never attended an online conference before, and I have to say following this experience I would enthusiastically sign up again. Everything ran smoothly, procedures were clear, help was on hand, and – for good and bad – the conference gave the option of 'socialising' that is both great and exhausting. A mammoth list of tasks that needed completing in that last week of the year could also be ticked off when I had a few minutes – the constant struggle of solo working and removing yourself from your to-do list rages on.

FestivIL was focused on bringing the information literacy (IL) community together to share experiences in facing the challenges of (and I promise not to say this again) "these unprecedented times" – not just the practical impact of COVID-19, but the emotional toll it has taken upon all of us, and what this might mean for us as a profession. We are also experiencing an essential and powerful shift in taking responsibility for enacting change against divisive and oppressive systems and structures in which we work and, perhaps unwittingly, uphold – political neutrality does not, should not, cannot, mean acceptance of the exclusion and othering of huge groups of people.

FestivIL opened with the outstanding Emily Drabinski and her powerful words on *Teaching the Radical Catalog*. Emily's recorded presentation (Drabinski, 2021) is one of the most empowering and eye-opening talks I have ever seen. I believe it is an absolute must-watch for everyone – and it is indeed available, so get to it if you haven't already! You won't regret it. The Question and Answer session with Emily offered a really wonderful opportunity to engage with the difficult truth that we cannot place ourselves 'outside of the system.' It is enraging to participate in oppressive structures, but the reality is even with the best of intentions, we cannot build an unbiased system. Teaching our pupils how to navigate – and challenge – the structures which erase them is a very important life lesson which we, as school librarians, are well placed to deliver. We may not teach them Subject Headings but we can discuss the power structures at play in information retrieval. 'Wringing what you need from systems that exclude you' is such a vital skill that it must be embedded into our education system as early as possible – on this, I think everyone is agreed – except, sadly, the Department for Education.

The discussion panel on IL in a post 2020 world provided an opportunity to consider the longer-term impacts of recent events. The students on the panel spoke with great clarity and insight on how IL skills can help us navigate the chaos of the last year; the power of silence and how we might treat and interpret this communication tool; how the digital divide has been furthered by the lockdown and how we might meet this gap; looking at the value of redefining 'suffering' with illness to 'coping' and how we can empower our service users in this; and the impact of the huge staff redundancies in public libraries and what this might mean for public library services. This session really brought home how dramatically the world has shifted – and will continue to shift – and how we must rise to this challenge in order to support our users most effectively. We

may need to rethink how we can empathetically and ethically relate with others – surely the most fundamental part of our role.

Barbara Fister's alarm call (Fister 2021) for how our profession may have contributed to the rise of the 'QAnon Era' through our 'question everything' instructions in IL highlighted the essential need to provide more nuanced skills delivery. Achieving this in such time-pressured constraints is a balance we must address in order to truly equip our users with the skills that will be essential to their futures.

The 'big picture' keynotes have inspired me in countless ways – my summer was spent quite differently to how I'd planned! The workshops proved enormously fruitful, with practical, actionable ideas that will be implemented from the start of this new academic year. It begins with (admittedly, the long considered) complete ditching of the CRAAP (Currency, Relevancy, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) framework in favour of practical, evaluative activities based upon the brilliant work of the Stanford History Education Group (Wineburg et al., 2016) and showcased inspirationally by Anna Richards and Neil Skinner in their *Cutting the CRAAP* wildcard presentation. Fundamentally, this involves a shift towards longer term life skills alongside those intended to address immediate academic need. This may require some infiltration into the timetable, but the conference really demonstrated the value and importance of these skills.

Much was said at the conference about how IL skills need to be embedded in early education: being able to discern false information and challenge problematic structures is an essential life skill and must begin at the earliest point possible. School Librarianship has many challenges, but if we recognise the changes we make for what they could really mean for even one of our pupils, we can truly recognise the value and impact of what we do. We have the opportunity to build and sustain an inclusive, representative library for our communities, and we have the responsibility to do this to the fullest extent possible.

Ultimately, my attendance at FestivIL will result in a transformed library – physically, digitally and academically. Quite a bargain, I would say!

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