"Critical workplace information literacy : Laying the groundwork for a new construct"

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Article

Critical workplace information literacy: Laying the groundwork for a new construct

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Abstract

In this paper, the author explores the prospect of, and the rationale for, the *critical workplace information literacy* (CWIL) construct, by situating it at the junction of critical information literacy (CIL) and workplace information literacy (WIL), the two hitherto discrete frameworks and subdomains of information literacy (IL). This preliminary attempt at the conceptualisation of a new construct was guided by the question of what role CIL can play in empowering workers to attain decent work. The author frames the conceptualisation around the 'decent work' (DW) concept, as a normative goal of the critical workplace information literacy construct, and discusses the rationale for it in the framework of the discussion on the decent work deficits in the contemporary work and information environment. Freire's critical hermeneutics and dialectics of voice and empowerment are drawn upon. The paper argues positively for the role of CIL in attaining decent work and for the need for a new construct that would help fill the knowledge and discursive gap in IL and its subdomains and overcome the current silos in the IL community. The author concludes that developing a concept requires a broad deliberative process informed by both theoretical and empirical research, and gives suggestions for future research.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

A humanistic thesis on the centrality of social justice is at the heart of critical information literacy (CIL). Information literacy (IL) in general is proclaimed, especially by professional groups and national and international organisations, as a means of empowerment enabling full participation in society and a precondition for attaining normative goals of democratic progress and social justice. However, despite the rhetorical proclamations, social justice, as well as the broader interrelated issues of the social, political, economic and corporate dimensions of information and IL, have been discussed only at the margins of the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature (Cope, 2010; Gregory & Higgins, 2013; Mehra et al., 2006). Indeed, corporate interests have prevailed over human(istic) ones, with IL and IL instruction designed almost exclusively around economic returns, reduced to one-dimensional, hegemonic discursive human capital rhetoric, and adjusted to the pragmatic demands of capital, ignoring the issues of social justice and worker empowerment and emancipation, silencing other voices and perspectives, such as those of workers and trade unions (Giroux, 2001; Nesbit, 2002; Yasukawa & Black, 2016). In the process, decent work and workers' rights, as integral dimensions of social justice, have been left out of the narrative (Šobota & Špiranec, 2022).

This pertains particularly to workplace information literacy (WIL) research, which deals almost exclusively with issues related to the performance of work and with aspects relevant to employers. CIL too, which emerged as a response to the inadequacy of key paradigms in addressing social justice issues and has been considered a theoretical stronghold for the denunciation of social reality and a practical instrument of empowerment for social justice, is nevertheless confined almost solely within (academic) libraries.

IL research in general has mostly been carried out in the context of (academic) libraries and has moved away from the historical origin of IL in the workplace context (Hicks, 2022; Irving, 2020; Whitworth, 2014; Widén et al., 2021). The institutionalisation of IL within the frameworks of librarianship and information science harms its progress and perpetuates the theory-practice gap (Whitworth, 2014, p. 73), risks the label of "elitism" (Saunders, 2017), and reduces it to a stereotypical perception as a "library skill" (Whitworth, 2011a) and a professional construct, instead of being a right for all (Crawford, 2020). Maintaining such a narrow locus limits the wider application of critical practices and IL in other contexts (Whitworth, 2020, pp. 21, 40) and leads to a serious knowledge gap (Hultgren & Limberg, 2003; Kirton & Barham, 2005; Lloyd, 2010; Lloyd & Williamson, 2008). Another consequence is that IL is not known, understood or recognised outside the confines of librarianship (Cheuk, 2002; Conley & Gil, 2011; Crawford & Irving, 2011; Goldstein, 2020; Kirton & Barham, 2005; Thornton, 2010), including in the workplace (Cheuk, 2017; Williams et al., 2014), and that concepts and research outcomes are not used in other disciplines (Hicks et al., 2022), or engaged with them, despite the clear connections to disciplines such as critical theory and education, and despite the claims of LIS to interdisciplinarity (Seale, 2013, p. 40). While it is not argued here that the distinct IL discourses are oppositional nor that they cannot inform each other, the evident silos in the IL community, a narrow locus and a lack of critical dimensions in WIL research, however, do affect the progress of IL development.

This paper, therefore, responds to the calls to extend the deliberations on CIL beyond the confines of academic libraries as well as to engage with broader research questions in WIL research, beyond the typical bounded professional focus (Hicks, 2021). Specifically, the paper aims to move forward the conversation started by Šobota and Špiranec (2022), who proposed a new construct—critical workplace information literacy (CWIL)—to map out a new IL research framework situated at the junction of the hitherto discrete theoretical frameworks of CIL and WIL, and seeks to respond to the underlying question of what role CIL can play in empowering workers to attain decent work. While it is beyond the aim and scope of this paper to provide a conclusive answer to this question, it guides the attempt to explore further the prospect of the CWIL construct via a theoretical-analytical exercise conducted on the basis of a literature review. What follows will amount to a few starting points and a sketch for the CWIL conceptualisation.

The remainder of this article is organised into five sections. It starts with a literature review of WIL and CIL which aims to set the scene for situating the CWIL construct at the junction of those two frameworks. The following section offers a baseline understanding of the world of work today and of the concept of decent work (DW) which, together with Freire's dialectics of voice and empowerment, serves as a basis of a sketch for CWIL conceptualisation in the fourth section. The final two sections critically reflect on the prospect of the CWIL construct, offer some arguments that make the case for it, suggest further research, and provide concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

2.1 Workplace information literacy (WIL)

The concept of IL was conceived in the mid-1970s, in a workplace context, as a response to the demands of the information industry and perceptions of the inadequacy of workers' skills for economic success and the needs of the labour market. Zurkowski (1974) defined IL as an individual's capacity to use information tools and sources to solve problems in the workplace. He perceives the information problem as an economic one, being primarily interested in the economic influence of the changing information environment as well as in the need to create knowledge workers (Drabinski, 2014). Such a functional/utilitarian perception of IL and its conceptualisation according to the needs of the (labour) market explains what may seem an unexpected turn from the historical origin of IL in the workplace context. Namely, the instrumental view of IL resulted in a focus on quantifying generic and transferrable skills and competences as measurable outcomes and in researching IL predominantly in the education context (Lloyd, 2021; Widén et al., 2021). This stemmed from the obvious role and purpose of the (Western) education system demanded by (neo)liberal ideology led by economic principles and human capital theory, to produce a functionally productive future workforce for market and capital needs.

Research interest into the importance of IL in the wider context, primarily in relation to employers' needs and expectations, began in the first half of the 1990s, while stronger interest in researching IL in the workplace context became evident in its second half, during the "exploratory" research phase (Bruce, 2000, p. 94). WIL deals with researching the processes workers go through while seeking and using information to perform their work (Cheuk, 2000, p. 178). The positioning of IL as a key competence for an information-intensive work environment was the primary preoccupation of initial research into WIL (O'Sullivan, 2002, p. 8). This research focused on the information activities of white-collar workers, such as Bruce's (1997) pioneer research among academics and administrative workers in higher education, based on which she developed the relational model of IL, as an alternative to the then predominant behavioural approach, and defined it as a way of thinking. Later research turned to experiences of IL in the work environments of different professional groups of workers such as firefighters (Lloyd, 2004; 2005a), lawyers (Macoustra, 2004), senior managers (Kirk, 2004), academic administrative staff (Hepworth & Smith, 2008), ambulance officers (Lloyd, 2009), tele-health workers (O'Farrill, 2010), nurses (Bonner & Lloyd, 2011; Forster, 2015; Johannisson & Sundin, 2007) and web designers and developers (Sayyad Abdi, 2014; Sayyad Abdi et al., 2013; 2016).

The sociocultural turn that characterises the second phase of WIL research moved the focus away from skills to interactions between people and information practices. The strongest influence in that phase is the research by Lloyd (especially the pioneer research on firefighters 2005b, but others as well, e.g. 2005a; 2006; 2009; 2010; 2015; Lloyd et al., 2013; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016), who reconceptualised IL in relation to the context and redefined it as a "complex sociocultural and embodied process constituted through a series of information modalities" (Lloyd, 2007).

Research from this second wave indicates that IL cannot be reduced to generic skills (Lloyd, 2013; Lloyd & Somerville, 2006) nor to the context and information landscape of an individual, but that a holistic approach is needed which acknowledges the complexity of workplaces as social constructs and the variety of information source landscapes (Forster, 2017; Lloyd, 2006; 2007; 2010; 2017b; Tuominen et al., 2005); that is, the social dimensions of the workplace in relation to information sources and interactions (Crawford & Irving, 2009; Bruce et al., 2012; Lloyd, 2017b). Furthermore, WIL research shows that, due to the differences in the nature of a workplace, interpretations of IL in various workplaces also differ (Lloyd & Williamson, 2008; Weiner, 2011). In other words, IL differs depending on the context, which explains the

numerous IL definitions, conceptualisations and articulations as well as the impossibility of borrowing IL definitions from one context and applying them to another (Cheuk, 2017). In that regard, skills transferability from one context to another (from education to workplace and everyday life) is also questionable. The WIL research also shows that IL is characterised by a collective dimension of information practices of information use and production, and efficient moving through a complex workplace information landscape (Lloyd, 2011). Lloyd's recent WIL research redefined IL as "*a **practice** that is **enacted** in a social setting", "composed of a suite of **activities** and **skills**", and "*a way of knowing*" (Lloyd, 2017a, p. 94, emphasis in the original).

Analysis shows that the majority of WIL research deals with researching the phenomenon and does not attempt to define IL in relation to the workplace (Williams et al., 2014). Accordingly, there is no unique WIL definition nor is the term itself unified and recognised in the workplace (ibid.). However, it is possible to identify a common approach that focuses on the role of information-handling skills in relation to work practices and goals (Widén et al., 2021), but which remains in the physical and conceptual confines of the workplace and focuses solely on IL for the purposes of work or preparation for work (Milosheva et al., 2022).

2.2 Critical information literacy (CIL)

Issues that go beyond the confines of the workplace and primarily pertain to power relationships among social actors are a subject of interest in CIL. Compared to IL, *critical* IL has a holistic character and offers a counterweight to a pragmatic, but limiting, perspective of IL, and includes, but does not limit itself to, instrumental and functional dimensions (Špiranec et al., 2016).

Being anchored in a sociocultural, and even more so in a transformational theoretical and research paradigm, and with its roots in critical theory and critical pedagogy, CIL relates literacy and education to issues of power, equity and social justice (Luke, 2014). The call for a "new" IL was expressed originally by Hamelink in 1976, almost coinciding with the origin of the IL concept itself. Drawing upon Freire's understanding of literacy, Hamelink emphasises the importance of the "situational context" and a dialogical approach to information, considering IL necessary for "liberation from oppressive effects of the institutionalized public media" (1976, p. 1). Although Hamelink does not use the syntagm *critical information literacy,* his political understanding of IL and the concepts he uses can be considered its proto-definition, albeit his work was not greatly influential. Among the first more influential CIL advocates were Luke and Kapitzke (1999) who criticise the existing IL standards, frameworks and definitions for their anachronic and counterproductive generic, linear and hierarchical approach that ignores ambiguity, variety and the multiplicity of information; instead, they emphasise the importance of critical perspectives and approaches that enable a critical shaping and repositioning in relation to information and its sources. Kapitzke extends this critique by criticising conventional IL for perpetuating injustice through a functional approach focused on the production of a passive workforce; she argues for a transformative-critical IL that deals with the nature of information and its ideological construction by encouraging students to "analyze the social and political ideologies embedded within the economies of ideas and information" (Kapitzke, 2003a, p. 49). However, it was only after Elmborg's work (2006) that a true CIL discussion began, albeit only within librarianship and higher education. For him, literacy cannot be described as a set of universal skills and processes that may be abstracted but as a sociocultural practice that maintains the ideology of the community and is under the influence of the power and control that certain groups have over information.

At the heart of CIL are transformative approaches directed at critical conscientisation and empowerment for critical forms of action against oppressive structures, which question the dominant values in society with a view to achieving social justice and emancipation (Cope, 2010), allowing people to take control, become active agents and participate in the decisions that affect their lives (Elmborg, 2006; Whitworth, 2009). By problematising and engaging with

"[t]he power structures underpinning information's production and dissemination" (Tewell, 2015, p. 24), CIL researchers also problematise the neoliberal economic system generating those structures, including the ideological foundations of IL. With this, they demand the theoretical transformation of IL so that it addresses the ideologically and socially constructed nature of information (e.g. Kapitzke, 2003b; Mirza & Seale, 2017; Nicholson, 2016; Seale, 2013). This pertains to the criticism of reducing IL to (labour) market needs (Enright, 2013), problematic assumptions that the "adoption of information skills will automatically lead to favourable outcomes" (Tuominen et al., 2005, p. 333) (Nicholson, 2014; Street, 2003), including also better productivity and economic growth (Kapitzke, 2003b; Matusov & Julien, 2004), as well as to the criticism of the understanding that access to information will equip and empower individuals with the skills needed for successful work and citizenship (Doyle, 1994)—that is, of the generally perceived advantage of information itself, which idealises IL because it ignores the wider context (Hicks, 2018).

The very idea of empowerment is also questioned. Empowerment, according to neoliberal ideology, is presented as the responsibility of an individual and an automatic outcome of IL by removing the "deficit" on the part of an individual—an approach which ignores structural causes and necessary social action and power (cf. Batliwala, 2007; Hicks & Lloyd, 2021; Kapitzke, 2003b). CIL postulates that information (and IL) always need to be perceived as intertwined with power structures and relationships, and with questions of authority and the wider social context. Consequently, for IL to fulfil its potential for empowerment and emancipation (Andretta, 2005), information literate citizens need to be able not only to interpret the information environment but also to actively change it, including through the production of information (Habermas's *communicative action*), a key characteristic of the new information economy and also of CIL (Whitworth, 2006), and by taking control of information practices through the distribution of authority (Whitworth, 2014). The key tenets and concepts in such an understanding of CIL are *transformation* and *praxis* – informed concrete action linked with values (Freire, 1970); the normative dimension of CIL arising out of critical theory dictates on the unity of theory and practice because its purpose is not only to describe and analyse but to lead to social activism bringing about social justice and equ(al)ity.

3. Decent work (DW) as the conceptual basis of critical workplace information literacy (CWIL)

3.1 Introduction

As stated in the Introduction, this paper attempts to move forward the conversation started by Šobota and Špiranec (2022) whose research was situated at the junction of WIL and CIL, as a "logical setting and theoretical framework" for researching IL in the context of workers' rights. They maintain that the complexity of the rights landscape and the tightly intertwined individual and collective (social) dimensions and factors that affect workers' rights require analyses at the intersection of the workplace and broader sociopolitics. In other words, dialogic discursive approaches are required that regard the information landscape of individual workers, and their work-related information practices, but also the social dimensions of a workplace, asymmetrical power relationships and the broader sociopolitical level. Šobota and Špiranec therefore propose carving out critical dimensions in WIL, currently missing in the research narrative, and bridging the distinct theoretical frameworks and discourses of CIL and WIL by conceptualising a *critical workplace information literacy* (CWIL) construct. They argue that this new research framework and "refocusing of the critical grounds for information literacy research and education would help empower workers" in their pursuit of decent work and social justice, hence helping to ensure the relevance of IL for citizens and workers.

This paper aims to explore the prospect of and the rationale for the CWIL construct, by conceptualising it around the concept of decent work (DW)—encompassing but also going

beyond the notion of workers' rights—and the question of the ways in which CIL can empower workers for critical action directed at transforming their jobs into decent jobs. The appropriate point of departure is a baseline understanding of DW and of what the world of work looks like today, as IL cannot be adequately understood, nor a concept with the potential to contribute to the achievement of DW developed, without a consideration and a situated understanding of political and socioeconomic conditions.

3.2 Decent work (DW): the concept and (its) deficits

The main purpose of work has always been to meet basic human needs (ILO, 2015, point 37). Accordingly, work is seen through the prism of ensuring subsistence and survival, and has become reified as the path to economic prosperity, gaining profit, productivity and competitiveness for companies and, at the same time, as the path to individual self-fulfilment, personal development and success, as well as the foundation for self-respect (Pickett, 2021, p. 19). This largely economic—typically capitalist—perspective which views work, and therefore also labour, predominantly as a productive factor, is in contrast with a perspective which views workers as socially embedded, as social agents and human beings with entitlements and capabilities (Barrientos et al., 2011, pp. 321–323). Indeed, work and the workplace have been a central locus of primarily collective, organised fights and critical action by workers for the protection and improvement of rights and entitlements—for meaningful and decent work. The success of this is dependent upon power relationships, structural causes and factors both at macro level, in the broader world of work and the economic and social environment, and at micro level in specific contexts (i.e. the workplace).

There is no single, accepted definition of "decent work"; also, authors use different terms interchangeably to describe the same concept (e.g. job quality, employment quality, job satisfaction, etc.), or they mean different things while referring to the same concept (Clark, 2015; Steffgen et al., 2020). Moreover, because of its "inherent multidimensionality and elusiveness" (Steffgen et al., 2020), there are multiple conceptualisations and operationalisations of the DW construct, chiefly in terms of determining its fundamental dimensions and characteristics. Despite their differences, these conceptualisations share the same or a similar universe of content, broadly covering every aspect of the job related to the well-being of workers. This paper adheres, albeit with some reservations, to the DW conceptualisation provided by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), due to its unique and leading mandate and authority in the world of work.

The ILO adopted "decent work" in 1999 as its primary goal and its response to the challenges posed by globalisation, bringing together the concepts of workers' rights, social security, quality employment and social dialogue, i.e. the collective representation of workers. The fundamental goal was to promote "opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity" in order to decrease the differences which exist between people's aspirations regarding their work and their current work situations (ILO, 1999, p. 3). The ILO, in general, considers work decent when it is productive and guarantees fair income, secure employment and safe working conditions, equality of opportunity and treatment, and social protection; and offers prospects for personal development and social integration, the chance for recognition and freedom to express concerns, organise and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Although the breadth of the concept seems a useful policy instrument and elaboration of universal principles at international level, it is not without its problems and critiques (for a review of literature surrounding the DW concept, see Brill, 2021). It has been criticised for its claims to universalism and for being too vague, focusing on principles instead of rights—hence on *decency* instead of *dignity*. The concept has also been criticised for not being more oppositional to global capital (Standing, 2005, 2008, 2009; Selwyn, 2013, 2014); that is, for not being sufficiently radical or revolutionary, as a consequence of the ILO's tripartite structure (i.e. the

balance of forces in its decision-making bodies) and hegemonic state influence over its values and agenda (Moore et al., 2015; Vosko, 2002) as well as the high-tide of neoliberalism at the time of its adoption (Hoffer, 2011). Another important criticism pertains to the "proceduralist approach" and the assumption that the concept's normative validity relies upon the means by which it has been achieved: that DW is achieved if basic terms and conditions are secured through a set of legal instruments or if the bargaining relationship is sufficiently equalised, while not taking into account the content of the activity of work nor its subjective activity aspect (Deranty & MacMillan, 2012). Such an approach, which *a priori* specifies what DW is, does not make room for the autonomy of each individual to define for themselves what they consider as decent (ibid.), despite the remarks by Juan Somavia (2000, pp. 2–3), the then ILO Director-General who introduced the concept, that "decent work is not defined in terms of any fixed standard" and that "everybody, everywhere, has a sense of what decent work means in terms of their own lives, in relation to their own society". The risk of a top-down, *a priori* definition is that it maintains the status quo by limiting what the DW concept is and what really matters in a job for individual workers, as well as the means of its achievement, and thus curbs its transformative potential.

Nevertheless, DW is increasingly salient, especially if extended by a bottom-up approach and subjective valuations, in light of the reality of work being, for a number of workers, the opposite of "decent", as the text below will show. Therefore, DW presents an unfinished project, which should not be dismissed as mere idealism but an ideal to be pursued, as a matter of urgency.

The contemporary world of work is characterised by "decent work deficits" (ILO, 2001, 2015) and is increasingly moving away from, not towards, the achievement of social justice (ILO, 2015, 2, point 9). It is rapidly changing as a consequence of technological, demographic and climate change, global economic integration, financialisation and migration (cf. Visser, 2019). Its features are growing and intersecting inequalities, precarity, fragmentation, isolation, individualisation, spatial and functional mobility, automation and platformisation, lack of control at and over work and the consequent alienation, and the erosion of social and collective networks. Today's dynamic labour markets and the knowledge or informational economy do open new possibilities for workers and more flexible choices (although only seemingly voluntarily), but they also demand from them higher levels of (new) skills and lead to global competition for highly qualified workforce. This creates a new division of labour and anxious competition between workers, and vastly increases the vulnerability of the "illiterate" or "undereducated" in societies like our own which demand constant education and training, in line with the ubiquitous demand for employability.

Information in today's economy and society is a key economic resource and a resource for, among others, employment and citizenship, while it also amounts to a powerful factor in decision-making (Anderson & Johnston, 2016; Buckland, 2017; Mason, 2015), so it is unsurprising that the contemporary work environment shares many of the features of the contemporary information environment. We can speak of the intersecting crises of work and information, which must be seen and analysed jointly as they are indeed intertwined, interdependent, and sometimes co-constitutive (cf. Haider & Sundin, 2022). The quantity and diversity of information relevant to workers are growing exponentially, as is the intensity of communication. At the same time, access to information and understanding is becoming increasingly difficult due to the complexity and range of work- and rights-related information and information sources and the increasing fragmentation and individualisation of the workplace. The crisis of trust and authority (including also employers' withholding of information or workers increasingly not knowing the identity of their employer, especially in the gig and platform economy) also affects information and knowledge transfer. Just like contemporary work, (the state of) information in contemporary society is likewise characterised by instability, volatility, fragmentation, individualisation and politicisation, together with the platformised, corporate

information infrastructure and the erosion of the collective basis of trust as constitutive of the crisis of information (Haider & Sundin, 2022).

Such conditions inevitably influence the working conditions and well-being of workers (Steffgen et al., 2020) and make work unbearable for many (Dejours & Bègue, 2009 in Deranty & MacMillan, 2012; Swain, 2012). Workers feel their work is burdensome and not meaningful; they feel undervalued, disrespected and increasingly alienated; and they suffer poor health due to a lack of control over work (Swain, 2012, pp. 65–66). Another consequence of the current order is that it weakens solidarity and the strength of organised labour (including trade unions) and that it deactivates workers' agency, decreasing the likelihood they will engage in collective action to improve their conditions and challenge the system. Although historically workers' efforts to win DW have never been an easy task, it seems that the current social composition dispossesses them of political force, rendering liberation an unlikely possibility (Berardi, 2017), and that the "tactics and strategies which were previously capable of transforming collective power into emancipatory gains have now become drained of their effectiveness" (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). Mental paralysis and "reflexive impotence"—knowing things are bad and knowing you cannot do anything about it (Fisher, 2009, p. 21)—is increasingly evident, on top of a paralysis of the political, programmatic and even theoretical imaginary which is becoming incapable of articulating and thus of effecting change. This comes as a consequence of the current neoliberal order and hegemonic construction of the "common sense" of the Thatcherite "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009) mantra that "there is no alternative", coupled with extreme individualisation, a dismantling of social solidarity and a "neoliberal subjugation of knowledge" (Berardi, 2017) each of which denunciates and disables futural thinking and the utopian ideas which are key to every attempt at liberation and transformation.

All this points to the urgency of a "language of possibility" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1987), a "practice of possibility" (Williams, 1980), a "pedagogy of possibilities" (Giroux et al., 2022) and a "pedagogy of liberation" (McLaren & Lankshear, 2003 [1994]). In other words, it points to the urgency of (critical) information literacy and of imagining how the unique power of CIL can help respond to these crises and conditions by empowering individuals (workers) and transforming society and the world of work, bending both toward social justice and DW. In that sense, CIL also becomes political, academic, pedagogic and research imperative, as well as a part of a counter-hegemonic strategy.

4. Critical workplace information literacy (CWIL): a sketch for conceptualising the construct

First, it needs to be clarified that this paper subscribes to a holistic, socioculturally-anchored understanding of IL, reflected both in WIL and CIL, which encompasses "critical awareness of the importance of the wise and ethical use of information" (Johnston & Webber, 2003, p. 336)— useful for CWIL deliberations as it expresses IL's importance for society and the workplace and its potential for progressive change (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 107)—and an understanding according to which information is socially produced and distributed, and can therefore be accessed primarily through social context and social relationships (Lloyd, 2006). In particular, my understanding of the information literate worker is grounded in the CIL framework and the view that workers can be transformative agents by becoming empowered to take control of and shape their working lives.

As argued above, the success of workers' critical action, of their agency (understood as "self-awareness, resistance to oppressive conditions, commitment to a better self and society, and cultural engagement" (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 118)) and their power (understood as the capacity to bring about one's interests (Lukes, 2021)), is context-dependent and influenced by factors both internal and external to the workplace. Consequently, empowerment and its outcome—here DW—may be different for different workers and their different contexts, or even

for the same worker at different times. The centrality of context (and situation) implies that building workers' power and agency has to start with the awareness of their immediate context (i.e. their workplace) as well as the broader socioeconomic and political context in which they live and work. Also, along the lines of Webber and Johnston's arguments (2017, p. 172), since agency is context-dependent and can be both supported and constrained by context and situation, workers need also to develop *situational awareness* to adjust their (information) behaviour to a given context and according to broader conditions. In other words, it is crucial that workers develop a holistic awareness of themselves and of the conditions that shape their working lives. This requires an awareness that these contexts and conditions are changeable (cf. Hamelink, 1976, p. 123) and that workers themselves are historical actors who can bring about transformation and make a difference (cf. Graeber, 2012, p. 437).

As transformative agents, workers need to reflect and self-reflect, read themselves and read their world (cf. Freire & Macedo, 2005); that is, come to know themselves and their reality objectively, achieve a critical consciousness which will enable them to unmask and lay bare the sources of oppression and act upon this knowledge. The relationship between consciousness and action, knowledge and agency—*critical hermeneutics*—is the basis of Freire's emancipatory praxis (Peters & Lankshear, 2003 [1994], p. 190).

Freire's democratic problem-posing pedagogy, subjective-objective dialectical approach and bottom-up perspective as an essential characteristic of empowerment is useful for CWIL conceptualisation. As noted, the bottom-up approach and subjective valuation of DW for individual workers is an important addition to a top-down understanding of DW (and of IL). IL happens at the level of an individual, or their local community; individual workers communicate and register their problems, analyse and generate their themes and thematic universe; and they need to be able to recognise the sources of oppression and domination that have an impact on their jobs, to realise that their jobs are not decent and to act upon this to transform the conditions of their oppression. The emphasis on knowing one's context (and the information landscape) is a central feature also of the most recent socioculturally-anchored understandings of (W)IL, including especially Lloyd's theory of IL wherein she defines it as "a way of knowing" relevant to the context (Lloyd, 2017a, p. 94) and advocates the phrase "literacies of information" to emphasise that IL is shaped according to context. However, the crucial difference in relation to CIL and Freire's conception of literacy is in the desired outcome of the process of knowing/conscientisation, that is, in response to the question what (information) literacy is for. For Lloyd, it is the enhancement of information practices and the transformation from novices to experts and better workers (Lloyd, 2006, 2017a); for CIL and Freire the desired outcome is empowerment for transformation, redistribution of power and emancipation from the sources of oppression (Freire, 1970). Although Freire's oppressed peasants, and the complexity and scale of their problems, are in many respects different from the oppressed workers of today, his dialectical principles still pertain as the quest for liberation and DW remains unchanged.

CIL in the workplace can play a vital role in this quest and should serve to enable workers to understand critically how the world of work works, to identify the power structures and forces that influence their condition in the workplace and empower them to challenge those forces, take control of their working lives and transform their jobs into decent ones. Indeed, although as already noted there is scant literature on IL and workers' rights, the authors that have addressed these issues regard IL as helpful to workers' quests for DW. For instance, Jones (2015) argues it can help workers both respond to their employers' demands and resist their dominant narratives, hence to protect their rights and improve their position in the workplace. Similarly, Šobota and Špiranec's research (2022) shows IL is an important tool in the prevention of and opposition to workers' rights violations. IL is also presented as helping workers and their representative organisations better understand the phenomena of the new world of work and to become aware of their rights (Goldstein, 2018), as well as to adapt successfully to these new phenomena and rapid social and technological changes (Pawley, 2003, p. 423).

The ability to articulate one's problems and demands—that is, constructing and reclaiming one's voice—is key to workers' attempts to win DW and take control of their working lives. The concept of voice is therefore among the practices, basic skills and dispositions that the CWIL construct should encompass. It is also a fundamental element in Freire's emancipatory literacy, constructed around a dialectical theory of voice and empowerment, and is an important signifier of agency. It refers to the discursive means to make oneself "heard" and understood and to define oneself as an active participant in and an active author of one's world (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 235). Myles Horton, an American educator who worked closely with Freire, considered voice—the ability to demand more from bosses (together with the ability to stage a protest)—as the basic skill that workers needed (in Downey, 2016, p. 64). Although from an ideologically different position and perspective on IL's instrumentality, strongly criticised in the CIL literature, Zurkowski admittedly also notes that "individuals require not only the right to speak, but also the right to be heard" (1974, p. 25).

As stated above, freedom to express workers' concerns and participate in the decisions that affect their lives is among the key dimensions of (and a means of achieving) the ILO's DW concept. Voice in the workplace is, in essence, a question of autonomy and control over one's work, the content of work tasks and the production process, but also, essentially, over one's rights and condition. The autonomy of workers in the design of their job and within the work process is a prime concern for a theory of justice, and it is the normative concerns of autonomy and justice that can be used as key normative criteria for determining whether work is decent or not (Deranty & MacMillan, 2012, p. 394). The extent to which workers are able to take control of their work, and whether one's voice is being heard, ultimately depends on power relations within the workplace and the wider context, as attested by Gramsci in his description of hegemony (1971). Workers as "subalterns" become unrepresentable within a hegemonic discourse (i.e. the workplace) where they are denied a platform to speak (cf. Spivak, 1988), especially in non-unionised workplaces. They can also be excluded because they have not mastered the complex jargon of workers' rights and landscape due for example to information overload or knowledge underload (cf. Cheuk, 2008; Whitworth, 2011b, p. 199) and are thus not able to articulate their demands efficiently, at least not without intermediaries (e.g. union representatives). As Freire noted: "the more the oppressed […] grasp the dominant syntax, the more they can articulate their voices […] in the struggle against injustice" (Freire, 1996). Put differently, a feasible conception of DW is possible so long as it incorporates mechanisms to recognise and dismantle power inequities in the world of work. This also means that the transformation of work into DW also requires denaturalising work: making it visible that the current condition is a historically contingent set of power relations and not a "natural" state of affairs that cannot be changed (Horgan, 2021, pp. 164–165). For this to happen, it is necessary to develop workers' consciousness against capitalist work and their class consciousness—consciousness beyond the perimeters of each workplace (ibid.).

Furthermore, the relative lack of power of workers compared to employers means that workers cannot gain control by acting as individuals; rather, organising workers (collectively, in trade unions) is indispensable for gaining control and for achieving DW. The ILO acknowledges this by integrating freedom of association and the right to organise among its fundamental rights and emphasising that social dialogue/collective bargaining lies at the core of DW. Collective bargaining—a process of negotiation between employers and unions, as workers' representatives, over workers' rights and the functioning of an enterprise—is arguably the most efficient tool for improving rights and is a critical dimension of DW (see, e.g., Anker et al., 2003; Ghai, 2003), and its benefits have been confirmed in the literature on workers' voice (Wilkinson et al., 2010). Together with unionisation, it is *the* tool to bring more democracy into the workplace, enabling workers to reclaim their voice and have a more direct say in how their work is organised and valued; this includes also more direct forms of worker participation in decision-making such as co-determination and worker ownership.

To sum up, without attempting to offer a CWIL definition, to achieve DW it is necessary for workers to acquire critical holistic context and situational awareness of their rights, power structures and dynamics in the workplace as well as societal conditions; develop self-awareness and consciousness beyond the perimeters of the workplace; construct and reclaim their voice and gain control of work; win power to fight oppression; assert the ability to own their rights; and build the capacity to mobilise for change, individually but foremost collectively.

5. Critical reflection on CWIL and suggestions for research

In what follows I critically reflect on the prospect of CWIL, offer some arguments to advance the case for it and suggest pointers for research.

The proposed CWIL clearly has a transformative ambition and agenda: to empower workers to achieve DW. An idealistic, maybe even utopian ambition. Indeed, one might argue that, in light of the current social composition and the constant, mainly precarious, changes in the work and information environment that pose ever new challenges to workers and demands for constant improvement, achieving DW and IL becomes an unmeetable, moving horizon.

However, it is precisely these conditions that make it necessary to imagine and propose a set of critical tools which are needed for successful adaptation to those changes and challenges and for making steps in the direction of overcoming DW deficits.

At the same time, while it might be that the concept's goal is *idealistic*, it is neither anticipated nor promoted that the proposed CWIL, once it comes to life in a given context, would result in *radical* implications: post-work society, overthrowing capitalism, and the like. Rather than existing in the domain of radical (idealism), the concept remains in the domain of the critical. It aims at rebalancing power relationships in the world of work and regaining a sense of control (cf. Tilley et al., 2006), thus providing foundations for rehumanising the world of work. Its implied outcomes are *winning power* to be *heard* and the power to *reclaim* work by, for instance, strengthening workers' ability to produce information in the workplace, ensuring their stronger (collective) voice, greater workplace democracy, participation in decision-making regarding work and rights, and transformation in ownership. In that sense, CWIL is not anti-business, but *anti-business-as-usual,* anti the current model which dehumanises workers, leaving them to their own devices and employers' arbitrariness.

Also, just as illiteracy is not the cause of the current crises of work and information, critical workplace information literacy neither automatically, by itself only, guarantees the achievement of DW. This implies that the connection between CWIL and DW needs to be established as a normative goal (for an excellent discussion on IL and normativity, see Haider & Sundin, 2022, Chapters 3 and 7), including at the policy level, to establish convergence between research and the politics necessary for attaining DW and IL. The CWIL agenda indeed is normative, as it promotes the principles, values and ideals to reach and may be considered part of the response to the DW deficit. This is in line with CIL's transformative agenda and the approach taken here, in the sense that it does not merely want to describe or interpret the current condition but aims to provide critical tools to bring about change.

Normative concepts have political implications; no transformative agenda is politically agnostic. A critique might be in order: the more normative the concept—the more transformative actions are attached to it—the more hegemonic it becomes. This may seem in stark contrast to the claim that CIL should be a part of a counter-hegemonic strategy. At the same time, we may just as well pose a polemic question: *whose* hegemony is allowed/should be countered; and is an agenda aimed at giving voice to the silenced really hegemonic? Furthermore, taking a cue from Haider and Sundin (2022, p. 68), if we regard the DW deficit as a problem for workers, society

and democracy, we should go beyond problematising normativity as well as agree with Whitworth (2011b, pp. 189, 200) that IL "has unavoidable political implications" and is largely concerned with judgements about value. Nevertheless, this potential critique is avoided in the CWIL outline by not including a prescriptive (nor purportedly exhaustive) list of skills or criteria for evaluating whether a worker is information literate. Namely, prescribing what to include/exclude from qualifying as literacy is related to power issues (Bernstein, 2000, p. 178) and risks creating a divide between those seen as literate and those who are not (Hamilton, 2016, p. 5), as well as making workers responsible, and accountable, for obtaining those skills or meeting those criteria. Hence, I suggest that the normative framework, based on the pre-defined, top-down ILO framework for DW, is complemented by a bottom-up approach. Indeed, every counterhegemonic activity must come from the bottom up (Whitworth, 2011b, p. 210) or, as Marx (1873, p. 5) famously put it, it is the working class itself that should "write recipes for the cookshops of the future". Further work on CWIL conceptualisation, and research, should therefore represent the oppressed and disenfranchised, and integrate and reflect the voices of workers and their representative organisations.

This sketch for a CWIL construct is made in rather broad strokes and is by no means finished. Apart from expressly stating a normative-transformative stance, as we continue to engage the (prospect of a) CWIL construct it is important that we carefully delineate its meaning, dimensions, purpose and limit(ation)s, to avoid the risk of it becoming a floating signifier, a concept devoid of meaning, thus deprived of analytical and transformative potential. Developing a concept takes time and a broad deliberative process, informed by research to avoid the risk of merely assuming, instead of empirically examining, as well as the risk of bias.

Therefore, the above literature-derived outline of the construct needs to be further developed through a combination of theoretical-conceptual and empirical approaches. A useful method would be to look into the issues of normativity in critical theory and notions such as Habermas's communicative action and instrumental action and rationality. Furthermore, given the discussed centrality of context and issues of power, it is vital to map information, information sources, forms of information and the actors/authorities that constitute the information landscape and work environment and are relevant in the context of DW. The use/production of information, in the sense of workers' capacity to articulate their problems, interests and demands (including the forms this takes, e.g. protests and collective bargaining), should be explored in relation to different DW dimensions to examine how this relates to improving their position in the workplace and their job satisfaction. Such a research approach would help cross-connect the normative and situational understanding of IL and help bridge CIL and WIL, here done (inevitably) in passing. Furthermore, since the use of information, and its transformation into knowledge, actions and decisions, is inextricably linked with empowerment (Todd, 2017, p. 132), more research is needed to focus on how information is related to oppression, exploitation and dominance (Fuchs, 2009, p. 245), to examine the value of information as an empowerment tool and the relationship workers have with the (supposedly) empowering information and to explore the facilitators and barriers to workers' empowerment in the work and information environment. In relation, an interdisciplinary diagnosis of the intersecting work and information crises is needed in which a mapping exercise of the information and information landscape might be useful.

Such a mapping will be carried out through a critical grounded Delphi study as part of my own PhD research developing the CWIL concept from a multidomain position. The Delphi study will also explore the views of an international panel of CIL, WIL and labour researchers, as well as trade union experts, practitioners and workers' representatives, on how CIL can empower workers to attain DW and the competences and dispositions which make a worker information literate. The Delphi study will be informed by thematic analysis of the CIL and WIL theoretical frameworks, facilitating a mapping and then a synthesis of the definitions, concepts, themes and features in them so as to form a preliminary definition of CWIL, situated at the junction of CIL

and WIL. It is hoped that the research will contribute to the further theoretical development of IL, specifically of WIL and CIL, by establishing and describing CWIL from the perspective of various domains and by synthesising the discrete theoretical frameworks and thus contributing to IL terminological and conceptual coherence as well as creating a new discursive space merging the narratives of various domains.

The need for such research is well established in the literature. For example, Kos and Špiranec's (2015) analysis of CIL papers indicates that conceptual approaches to CIL are needed, as is research from new geographic and sociopolitical contexts and other domains and disciplines. On the other hand, since CIL literature is mainly descriptive (McDonough, 2014), more empirical research is needed, as well as articulated definitions to examine the concept, its importance and applicability more critically (Downey, 2016; Elmborg, 2006). Webber and Johnston (2017) argue, taking CIL as an example, that overcoming the silos within the IL community, developing a shared language unifying different concepts and working in a collegiate way would enable progress in IL development. Pavelić and Špiranec (2022) advocate bridging the research discourse from different perspectives and exploring how different literacy domains interact with and supplement each other. Todd (2017) maintained the importance of attaining conceptual coherence with regard to existing IL research, as well as synthesising the results of research undertaken from different theoretical perspectives, for instance by merging and articulating IL competences, hence contributing to its theoretical development. In a similar vein, Bruce (2016) speaks of the need to strengthen IL territory by adopting an integrative approach that synthesises the existing research and theories within the field and analyses their contribution to IL, to develop new IL concepts or constructs and use the potential of the research-practice nexus.

In the WIL context, Widén, Steinerová and Voisey (2014) claim it is in general necessary to pay more attention to researching IL in the workplace, which demands a multidisciplinary, multidimensional, holistic approach. Hicks (2022) calls for research that deals with the issues of power and action, agency in relation to information practices and to untypical, broader research issues such as the implication of the new (exploitative) world of work on information and IL, which would create necessary new research avenues (Hicks, 2021). In that regard, research focusing on various vulnerable groups of workers and on the new precariat in the digital economy and surveillance capitalism is warranted. This new research avenue could comprise, for instance, an exploration of information practices and landscapes of remote, internet and platform workers; of ways in which platforms exacerbate information and power asymmetries; of the disruptive force of artificial intelligence in the world of work; the interconnected issues of disintermediation, digital surveillance, and online (gender-based) violence and harassment; and on the other hand, a potential agentic power of digital networking mechanisms. Such research would at the same time enable an exploration of how other literacies (e.g. digital and algorithmic) interact with CIL.

Finally, since critical pedagogy is inextricably linked with CIL, which considers learning the main route to social transformation, more attention should be paid to this aspect. For instance, research would be useful to establish if those concepts and methods are applied, expressly or inadvertently, and understood in workers' and trade union education activities; also, where critical pedagogy is applied, research should look into the content and especially the outcomes of those activities. My own PhD research will attempt to contribute to this aspect by proposing a set of recommendations for labour market actors, primarily trade unions, pertaining to workers' IL education. A possible complementary research avenue could focus on (undergraduate and graduate) students' comprehensions and views on how (C)IL can improve their prospects as future workers, both in terms of their employability, career progress and in particular their decent work prospects. Such research would also help understand whether and how the discourses of IL in (higher) education and WIL/CIL can inform each other.

6. Conclusion

This paper attempted to lay the groundwork for a *critical workplace information literacy* (CWIL) construct, building on the conversation started by Šobota and Špiranec (2022). In this (very provisional) sketch of such a construct, several concepts were discussed to frame its conceptualisation and to provide initial ideas in response to the question that guided this paper: What role can critical information literacy (CIL) play in empowering workers to attain decent work? The point of departure was a discussion on the concept of decent work (DW) as well as its deficits in the contemporary world of work, since information literacy (IL) cannot be adequately understood, nor a concept with the potential to contribute to the achievement of DW developed, without a consideration and a situated understanding of the political and socioeconomic conditions. The paper also drew upon Freire's emancipatory literacy and dialectics of voice and empowerment, suggesting that the concept of voice and the ability of workers to articulate their problems and demands—that is, to construct and reclaim their voice—is key to their attempts to take control of their working lives and attain DW.

Although it was beyond the scope and aim of the paper to provide a conclusive answer to the question of the role of CIL in attaining DW, the paper argues positively for its role but also maintains that CWIL cannot automatically, by itself only, ensure DW, especially considering the current social composition and neoliberal order. Therefore, the connection between CWIL and DW needs to be established as a normative goal, which has implications for research, policy and practice.

The CWIL conceptualisation attempted here is by no means a finished project. What lies ahead is a broad deliberative process and a combination of theoretical-conceptual and empirical research that would help carefully delineate the concept, its meaning, dimensions, limit(ation)s and purpose. This new research avenue would, on the one hand, contribute to CWIL gaining traction in the real world, meeting the set normative goal of moving beyond defeatism and defensive struggles and transforming workers from passive objects into critical agents of transformation. On the other hand, it would help extend the deliberations on CIL and WIL beyond their current narrow confines. With this, the paper and the proposed (future) conceptualisation also offer an alternative to the prevailing hegemonic and economistic narrative, bringing IL back to the workplace as its historical origin and in which it is recognised as most useful and relevant (cf. Bruce, 1997, p. 183) and CIL, in line with its tenets and origins in critical theory and critical pedagogy, back to Freire's oppressed and disenfranchised.

Acknowledgements

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