

Theory and Practice: Introduction to the FiP 2021 Conference

Michael McNichol¹, Jenn Laskosky²

¹ School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta. Email: mcnichol@ualberta.ca

² School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta. Email: jlaskosk@ualberta.ca

To Cite:

McNichol, M., & Laskosky, J. (2021). Theory and practice: Introduction to the FiP 2021 Conference. [Special Edition]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder45>

Abstract

In this short introduction, the co-chairs of the 2021 FIP Conference discuss the effect the pandemic had on the conference, the importance of theory to practice, and the moral importance of theory to librarianship.

Keywords: Theory, Student Life, Pandemic

The Forum for Information Professionals' (FiP) 2020 conference was one of the last in-person events held at the University of Alberta before the COVID-19 pandemic caused the closure of University buildings and the mass transfer of learning from in-person to online. In the year since, the Executive Committee for FiP 2021 struggled with a new responsibility: how do we hold a conference that is pandemic-safety compliant while still ensuring that we provide space for the best student and early career professional presentations possible?

Moving to a virtual platform, where we could ensure that both our presenters and our audience were safeguarded against the virus, was an obvious choice for practicality. It raised a number of questions, though. By moving online, could we serve a larger audience? Could more people be included? Could we make accommodations, such as

Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals 2(1), p 1-4.

ISSN: 2563-2493

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder45>

©The Author(s) 2021.

including closed captioning, that would not have been possible, within our student group budget, if the conference were to take place in-person? What would an online conference *mean*?

These questions naturally brought to mind the problem of *theory*. In the library, as in so much of our society, theory is treated as if it were a luxury, a “pie in the sky” rumination that has little to do with the lived reality of individual people. Theory is what the eggheads do in their ivory towers; the tyranny of practicality holds sway in the real world. When the premier of Alberta, Jason Kenney, mocked the 2020 federal Throne Speech for having included “kooky academic theories like intersectionality,” he was speaking for a certain view of theory itself.

As the co-chairs of the conference, our core job is to guide the proceedings and to make sure that the other members of the Executive Committee are supported to complete their work. When “Kooky Academic Theories” was suggested as a conference theme, meant as a satirical jab at this viewpoint, we did not anticipate that the members of FiP 2021 would agree, nor that the library community at large would be so interested in a conference focused on the theoretical aspects of librarianship. But this speaks to a different view of theory, one that is perhaps coming into prominence in libraries, namely, as our keynote speaker, Sam Popowich, said, that “at its simplest, all theory is just this: a way of explaining, making sense of the complex material of our lives as it relates to other people’s lives” (Popowich, 2021). By placing a relation at the centre of our thinking, rather than by focusing only on the individual, there is a moral aspect to theory. In this sense, knowledge becomes an act of resistance.

In this light, our presenters’ work is incredible. Although all either students or early career professionals, they critically engaged with problems such as the overwhelming Whiteness of the double-blind peer review process in scholarly publishing, the need for dementia-friendly reading materials, and the concept of value as related to special collections. They completed exceptional scholarship, such as performing thematic analysis of online posts to identify the information behaviours and needs of non-binary and gender nonconforming individuals with binary transgender individuals. They were brave and tackled issues such as the serious inequities faced by trans peoples in libraries.

INTRODUCTION TO THE FiP 2021 CONFERENCE

We would like to sincerely thank our Executive Committee, without whom this conference would not have occurred: Hannah Friesen, Abirami Muthukumar, Karla Mallach, Rynnelle Wiebe, Lakshmi Balaraman, Christine Coulson, Christian Brown, and Tyler Chawner. We would also like to extend a special thank you to Shane Klein from Tech in Ed at the University of Alberta for his invaluable technical assistance.

While it may have been difficult to move the conference online, we are exceedingly proud of the work that FiP 2021 was able to showcase this year. Although it may be some time before we meet again in person, we will continue to focus on the “kooky academic theories” that help make libraries, and our lives, better.

References

Popowich, S. (2021, February 12). *The Onus of Explanation* [Speech transcript]. Forum for Information Professionals 2021: Knowledge as Resistance: 'Kooky Academic Theories' in Action, Edmonton, AB, Canada.