

## **Promoting and Resisting Student “Success”: Critical Information Literacy Instruction in the Neoliberal Academic Library**

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### **[1] Promoting and Resisting Student “Success”: Critical Information Literacy Instruction in the Neoliberal Academic Library**

#### **[2] First stop: neoliberalism**

This presentation was inspired by the work of several others, especially Karen Nicholson, who in her recent article for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *College and Research Libraries* (“The McDonaldization of American Libraries”) wrote: “...we need to find productive ways to talk about our role in preparing students for work while continuing to advocate for education and libraries as public goods. We need to frame our critiques of neoliberalism in higher education in a manner that acknowledges the socioeconomic and political realities of our campuses and lobbies for change *at the same time*. The point I’m making, one that others have made before me, is that we need to acknowledge the neoliberal context—the McDonaldized paradigm—within which we practice to think critically about its impact and consider what constraints and affordances it presents.”

#### **[3] Problems with neoliberalism?**

Some librarians seem increasingly uncomfortable with this term being used in the context of academic library work and have expressed exasperation or intolerance of its use by their colleagues. It’s important to note at the start that there are different interpretations and usages of the term, but that this heterogeneity of usage and attribution does not automatically invalidate it. And while any ‘ism’ can be wielded thoughtlessly or recklessly, most represent very real issues and complexes with which we must wrestle if we are to attain some degree of control over our own professional functioning. While some have

claimed that the term is sometimes being used to ‘shut down’ discussion of issues that are of pressing concern to libraries, many others believe that the term is indispensable in understanding what is happening to academic libraries today. While you may simply ask, “is there a ‘neoliberal library?’”, my answer (and the answer of several others who I will cite here) is an unqualified ‘yes.’

#### [4] **Neoliberalism in LIS**

Jonathan Cope has recently provided an excellent explanation of how neoliberal language and concepts help shape the ways in which academic libraries conceive and approach information: “Neoliberalism creates a discursive framework in which the value of information is determined by its ability to be monetized.” For this reason, he claims, “...LIS must address how neoliberal conceptions of the market have shaped the ways in which information and knowledge are viewed.” (Cope 2015)

#### [5] **Yes, here’s your neoliberal library!**

I claim that there are indeed neoliberal libraries. In fact, all of our libraries are, to a greater or lesser extent, neoliberal today. Here are just a few of the hallmarks of the neoliberal library, which should be familiar to anyone who works in a library:

- The need to constantly justify the existence and purpose of the library: it’s not a given that the library is a good thing, a necessary thing.
- The need to remove protections from those parts of the library that serve no widely used purpose (legacy collections, outdated technologies, underused services like reference) – useful things must prove their worthiness through metrics and money.
- Information literacy should serve the needs of industry and state for competitive individuals. (Seale 2013)
- The need for new ‘movers and shakers’: management strategies to improve performance, value, return, etc.

## [6] Neoliberalism in information literacy instruction: following the leader?

The very concept of information literacy and its codification by the ACRL in both the Standards and the Framework can be seen as symptomatic of neoliberal trends in academic libraries. According to this view, information literacy, and the various iterations of 'standards,' are in essence forms of 'academic socialization.' (Lea and Street 2006)

Much of the recent debate surrounding the ACRL Framework has served to remind us of the original driving purpose behind information literacy. The Framework is touted as much more accurately reflecting the way learning actually happens in the college classroom and in academia more generally. The implication of much of the argumentation supporting its promotion (it has not yet been officially 'adopted' but only 'filed' at this point) is that the Framework will go much further in insuring student success, and thereby legitimize the library's self-assigned role as facilitator of this ultimate goal of education.

But the recent debates have also allowed some of the internal contradictions and dubious functions of library-based IL instruction to be exposed. They have reignited debates about the purposes of IL, and of the library itself. Moreover, it is impossible to isolate these discussions from daily reminders of the assault on higher education from the forces of what is often called neoliberalism.

## [7] Critical pedagogy and IL instruction

Even while acknowledging my co-presenter Joshua Beatty's helpful insights about Paulo Freire's ideas about 'first-world' pedagogy (Beatty 2015), this statement from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is something worth considering for us in north America, especially in light of the current environment in academia: "...education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction." (Freire 1970, 72) No matter how dedicated we are to critical pedagogy and alternative methods, we must face this contradiction, and working in a neoliberal context, ideologically and materially, has sharpened the contradiction. A look at the concept of student success can help dramatize how we increasingly work in an

environment in which the interest of the student and that of the critical librarian (or librarian committed to social justice) may diverge or even clash.

#### **[8] Success**

The most difficult part of the student's educational agenda to critique is the student's goal of professional success. It is much easier for a student to sympathize or share our critiques of knowledge itself, and of the larger social and political systems themselves.

#### **[9] Student success and the academic contract**

Higher education, as it is structured today in the U. S. and Canada, is premised on a certain kind of contract, between student and institution and between student and instructor. According to this contract, the student is required to perform certain tasks and if they are judged to have done this in a satisfactory manner, they will be granted varying levels of approval and ultimately a diploma (also with varying degrees of distinction) that presumably bestows its possessor with increased power (in the form of social and cultural capital, and in the form of credentials) in the world at large. It is assumed, by both the institution and usually the instructor, that the student has willingly entered into this contract, and seeks to acquire the best possible grades and a diploma with the highest possible distinction. This, in the view of many people within and outside of academia, is what success means in academia. And this success is thought to prefigure that student's future success in the world of work, wherever that might be.

#### **[10] Libraries' role in the contract**

Because this particular version of student success is placed at the center of higher education, the mission of the library has become to make itself indispensable/necessary for student success, as defined by the contract. To do this, libraries and organizations like ACRL have created new mandates to explicitly link library with student success (such as *The Value of Academic Libraries*).

Libraries and librarians always have been careful to position themselves advantageously within the contractual structure of higher education. They have presented themselves as among the most valuable aids for the student, if not the most valuable, to facilitate or even make possible academic success. In recent decades, information literacy in particular has been the preferred vehicle through which to assert the library's unique position as the enabler of student success. Cushla Kapitzke has traced the adoption of the term and the practice of IL into academic libraries. The concept of IL was explicitly developed in response to a perceived crisis in industry regarding "inadequate workplace skills" among graduates. IL was adopted by academic libraries as a response to libraries' failures to have 'bibliographic instruction' or 'library skills' required parts of curricula. (Kapitzke 2003, 2-3)

**[11] Isn't this what academic libraries always did?**

Sort of.

**[12] The purpose(s) of higher education**

It's important to remember that higher education in North America, Europe, and perhaps much of the rest of the world, too, has usually been driven more by the requirements of state and capital than by any democratic impulse to educate and liberate people. It is true that higher education was democratized to an unprecedented degree in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with far greater numbers going to college than ever before in history, anywhere. But just as today, most of the students in colleges and universities in the 1950s through the 1970s were there to get jobs, and their path to college was made possible by business and state interests that needed an educated work force.

The romanticization of liberal arts education commonly expressed today on both the liberal center and moderate right paints a false picture of higher education's past, even at elite institutions. To pretend that liberal arts education was ever primarily about teaching students 'what it means to be human' or how to appreciate 'the greatest achievements of humankind in the arts and literature,' rather than about acquiring social and cultural

capital and reifying particular social relations, is to ignore the manifest evidence of the very purposive and practical requirements established for such educational curricula.

And even though in Europe and Canada a more robust welfare state granted a free or nearly free education to millions, it still remained limited to only a minority of the population, and it still remained focused on producing graduates for various professions, enabling them to assume, or maintain, specific positions in the middle and upper classes. Indeed, it was the welfare-state-driven higher education system, subsidized through higher taxes, that helped to create what is now referred to in the United States as “the middle class.” But this middle class was and is a part of a stratified system of class oppression; it may be commonly portrayed as the aspirational destination for immigrants and impoverished citizens, but it was never capacious enough to contain the entire population.

### **[13] 1960s and beyond**

During the last 1960s and early 1970s various movements in education sought the transformation of society through radically new approaches (critical pedagogy). The teacher was seen as helping to liberate students and to transform society while working within the existing educational system. Teachers were able to benefit from the protections of tenure and unions to further these aims. But this vision was soon confronted by the advent of neoliberalism which began to erode such protections, and the practice of critical pedagogy, although it gained in popularity within the academy, became more difficult.

### **[14] Post-1970s**

The economic slump of the mid-1970s provided the opportunity for the forces of what became called neoliberalism to roll back many of the gains of labor and the public sphere of the previous couple of decades. This period saw a revival of idea of education as a means to an end (jobs, training, skills), and not coincidentally, the advent of the concept of information literacy in libraries and LIS. In addition, the Reagan and Thatcher era witnessed a growing assault on higher education, which conservatives and even many

liberals perceived as a bastion of 'radical' 1960s political commitments. The 1980s produced the media phenomenon of the 'Culture Wars', which provided another opportunity to attack the academy for 'protecting' progressive educators. This period saw the marketing of the conservative version of liberal arts education: the 'best' ideas and creations of 'mankind'. This was a non-utilitarian education, perhaps, but only for an elite, and it was decidedly backward-looking. It revived the social capital-generating function of higher education for the old and new ruling classes.

**[15] Today: evisceration of public education through defunding AND philanthropy**

The illusion of being able to use higher education to achieve a middle class life has been shattered for millions, resulting in, in the United States at least, a furious attempt to reassert White supremacy and an explicitly exclusionary, class-based assault on the already shaky foundations of the American welfare state, especially public education. The cause - but also the remedy being offered - is neoliberalism: free markets, disruption, competition, innovation and reform, we are told, are the only things that can save the middle class dream.

Lauren Bialystok identifies the hallmarks of neoliberal education policy as "...high-stakes standardized testing, increasing privatization and commercialization of the education system and assaults on subject areas and teaching methods that are seen as superfluous or radical." (Bialystock 2014, 416-17). This approach to education may be most devastating to primary and secondary education, but it also affects higher education and academic libraries.

An inordinate focus is placed on the student as a consumer, who doesn't have rights, but does have choice. Because the student is a paying customer, they are presumably entitled to as much 'choice' as possible, and the service providers must compete in the 'open market' for their money, without any support from taxpayers. Thus many public institutions are busy transforming themselves into entrepreneurial, money-raising

institutions seeking a competitive edge, or at least the means to stay afloat. Because of the sink or swim environment, they can always point to financial necessity for any unpopular decision that needs to be made. Libraries have had little choice but to conform to these trends.

One aspect of this new maneuvering is the need for fundraising, even at the level of community colleges. According to a recent *New York Times* article about a successful fundraising campaign at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, fundraising is now seen as "...a way to expose students, someday perhaps donors themselves, to the kinds of experiences and possibilities and habits from which they have been excluded."

Despite the emancipatory rhetoric behind the philanthropic push of private funding for community colleges, it's possible to argue that some types of institutions are designed to enable a type of success that virtually guarantees that students will remain at a certain place in the social structure. That is, greater social mobility may in fact be hindered rather than accelerated by an education from certain types of institutions, such as community colleges (Ireland 2015, 150). Community colleges and colleges that focus on vocational training, some believe, are more or less designed to do this. We could also say that in general lower-tier colleges and universities that produce middle management or lower-level professionals, the people who might achieve a comfortable middle class life, but who are far from joining the upper-middle classes or ruling classes. These higher-level groups, mostly people from wealthy and powerful families (increasingly from all over the world), tend to be the ones who attend the elite private and public institutions (again, aside from a sizable minority who do not). Because we know that (North) American society is more rigid in its class divisions than either myth or common belief has it, it is easier to see the idea of student success is one that is limited by the structural facts of professional and social mobility.

Therefore, no matter how successful a student is in their academic program, they might very well be frustrated in their attempt to find the ultimate success that they might dream of. This fact itself is something they should be made aware of as much as possible through their education. But the problem is that educators and administrators are working hard to



inflate the perceived value of the education itself. For librarians to actively work to puncture this illusion is dangerous and could alienate the students who don't have alternatives once they come to the realization that their prospects may not be as promising as they had been led to believe.

#### [16] **Academic libraries today**

Here again I cite Karen Nicholson for her wisdom on how neoliberalism has shaped the academic library today. She notes that "...as a profession, librarians have largely embraced—or at least unquestioningly accepted—change rhetoric and corporate models...The discourse of transformational change, grounded in an uncritical adoption of neoliberal philosophy and corporate practices, has become the dominant ideology according to which we in academic libraries conceptualize our work, frame our “challenges,” and identify their “solutions.” (Nicholson 2015, 332) Part of the problem lies in the fact that these processes have come to seem natural, part of the information or academic ‘ecosystems.’ “It is precisely *because* neoliberalism is part of our everyday lives that it remains largely invisible to us. This might explain why LIS has paid little attention to neoliberalism to date.” (Nicholson 2015, 332)

#### [17] **Information literacy and student success**

So how does the current push for student success affect what the library does? From the perspective of instruction and information literacy, the most common complaint among librarians is that teaching faculty, administrators and often students themselves demand that the library teach skills. These should be relevant to the workplace, their acquisition should be measurable and assessable, and the library should be able to demonstrate consistently that it is the best equipped part of the university to teach these skills so that it will be viewed as indispensable to the mission of (re)producing student success.

From the standpoint of critical information literacy, or critical librarianship, librarians need to question the eagerness with which their colleagues are rushing to prove their

indispensability to their administrators and faculty. But at the same time they have to acknowledge that the structure of higher education, and of society itself, necessitates that these skills be taught and learned, not only for ‘success’ in the narrower sense of employability and earning power, but for survival itself.

In what ways do we see libraries trying to quantify or demonstrate student success? One is the adoption of business and market-oriented language with which we have been familiar for a while now: “return on investment”

(<http://connect.ala.org/files/ACRL%20AiA%20open%20forum%20Dec%202013.pdf>).

### [18] **Teaching success: two levels**

The lesson we should draw from the preceding observations about neoliberalism in the academy and library is that it is important to respect students’ aspirations for success according to the contract. Our challenge is to teach success on *two* levels. But to encourage alternative definitions of success while at the same time ensuring success in the existing system is a delicate balancing act. One can err on the side of excessive cynicism or pessimism toward the status quo, and discourage a student’s ‘playing the game,’ but this approach will disproportionately affect working class, immigrant and minority students. It is much easier for students from privileged backgrounds to take a cynical attitude toward the information system or the social and political system as a whole, because they already possess much of the cultural and social capital they will need in order to succeed in the world beyond academia (or inside it, for that matter). This is something that many librarians and instructors should keep in mind with respect to their own roles. Many of us come from varying degrees of privilege, and many of us occupy privileged positions in the library classroom (although this is not always the case). It is all too likely that critical attitudes toward our society and system will appear to students as an extension or facet of our privilege – and indeed it is! If a critical stance is interpreted in this way, it can easily be dismissed as hypocrisy or simply a luxury that only some can afford.

### **[19] Students already feel the tension**

We may ask them to question that contract, but we cannot ask them to break it, because it is not likely that we will be able to offer a viable alternative. Context matters: who is the student, what do you know about them? This should be one of the first things to understand before this complicated balancing act can succeed.

Of course, for librarians there's the one shot caveat: it's rare that we know the students in the class, and we will more often base our reactions to general impressions, and knowledge of the student body as a whole.

### **[20] Conventional academic success and revolution: a long tradition**

It's not hard to cite examples of people who have succeeded in a system but gone on to challenge its very foundations, such as Angela Davis [in the slide, with her teacher at Brandeis, Herbert Marcuse].

What we can do is to explore our own students' definitions of success – we may discover that although they have accepted the limited terms of the contract, this does not mean that their own definitions are circumscribed by its terms. In other words, they may wish to get good grades, learn the skills that will enable them to get good jobs, and succeed in professions whose ground rules have already established, but they might also wish to see the injustices they have experienced in their lives and careers ameliorated or eradicated through the power that they might acquire through their conventional success. To this end, librarians can seek examples of people who did just that – most of the world's activists, revolutionaries, and iconoclasts were people who were raised and educated within the oppressive systems that they sought to reform, remove or destroy. Many, if not all, of these people did not have the advantage of a Freierian education – they had usually received a banking model of education. Yet they nevertheless used whatever power this gave them (whether specific skills or social and cultural capital).

### **[21] Teaching for revolution?**

Assata Shakur wrote that “no one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free.” This again speaks to the contradictory position of the teacher vis-à-vis the student, especially when the teacher is committed to social and political change.

In light of this, we also need to consider our own ‘success’ as instructors, librarians, and academics. In many ways both students and librarians/faculty are on the same level and enmeshed in the same system. We, too, are driven to succeed according to the same rules, and we, too, have entered into contracts (with our employers and with the profession as a whole) that stipulate certain behaviors and results. In the neoliberal economy, the fates of every worker and consumer are being made increasingly interdependent. A cashier in a drug store, for example, needs customers to take a survey and give her the highest rating possible in order for her to retain her job or to have a chance at a modest raise. Likewise, instructors in the classroom are evaluated, scored and ranked according to feedback given by students/consumers. And the best way for an instructor, or librarian-instructor, to prove their own success is to somehow demonstrate that their teaching is resulting in the increased success of their students – in the form of higher paper grades, course grades, higher graduation rates, etc.

## **[22] Always keep alternative meanings of success in view**

When we question what student success is we necessarily have to ask what instructor or librarian success is. This is a big debate with a long history, and I can’t address it directly here. But in terms of linking our success to that of our students, we can say that if we wish to question the purely utilitarian or instrumentalist version of student success we have to align our own success accordingly. We should question our own definitions of success. The competitive and individualistic structure of academia is accepted as normal, it seems, by a majority of academic librarians (even though we critique and complain about it a great deal, as does everyone else in the system). The system of rewards and privileges is more or less the same in libraries as it is elsewhere in academia. We compete for papers to be

accepted to conferences, for publication in journals (which are ranked in a hierarchy of status), for prizes and awards (of which there are a bewildering variety), for promotion and tenure, and for higher salaries. While librarianship seems more collegial and collaborative, and relatively supportive, there is the cold reality of competition in almost everything we do. And our CVs and introductions at conferences bear witness to the fact that we play the game in order to survive and acquire what we desire for ourselves.

### [23] **Praxis**

My first advice in considering how to best approach these issues in the library classroom is to go read Emily Drabinski's, "Toward a Kairos of Library Instruction." (Drabinski 2014) Her suggested approach is very useful as a way of resisting, or simply ignoring, the pressures that neoliberal structures and mandates place on the library instructor. To focus on the immediate, local needs of a specific context is how we can succeed in promoting a praxis of dual success.

In the credit course that I taught in the library at New York City College of Technology (CUNY), I never lost sight of the fact that the students were oriented toward academic and professional success, according to the contract that the institution had offered them. I never questioned the legitimacy of this contract, in the sense that the students deserved what they signed up for (they actually deserved much more than it offered, but that is another issue), and that it was my responsibility to best enable them to achieve that. And yet the course made it clear that it was possible to simultaneously enable their success while encouraging their critical attitudes toward many aspects of the system that they were navigating. Because CUNY students personally face a wide range of issues including inadequate housing, discrimination in employment, state and police violence, inadequate or missing child support, etc., they do not lack for critical views of the existing social and political order. They may not be eager to bring those issues into the classroom, where, according to the contract, they are supposed to primarily master a set of skills and knowledge that will enable them to be valued by future employers (and by the society at large). So they may see a conflict between expressing dissatisfaction with society as it is,

and the need to fit in to it on some level. But I sought to achieve an environment in the class where such critiques could be expressed freely without any accompanying sense of either cynicism or contradiction to career aspirations.

## Citations

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