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A PEDAGOGY OF INQUIRY

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Library instruction continues to evolve. Regardless of the myriad and conflicting opinions academic librarians have about the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy*, the debates and the document itself have engendered greater discourse surrounding how and why librarians teach. The *Framework* provides an additional push toward designing instruction with big ideas rather than a skills-based curriculum. However, we still must contend with constraints imposed upon us by higher education taking on business models and enforcing a skills agenda. To enact the pedagogy of the *Framework* in contrast to changes in higher education presents a challenge. We should consider ways in which the *Framework* can help us push back against these neoliberal agendas in our pedagogy and reinvent our roles as librarian educators.

Communications in
INFORMATION LITERACY

[PERSPECTIVES EDITED BY ROBERT SCHROEDER]

[W]e're the children of Dionysus, floating by in a barrel, accepting nobody's authority. We're on the side of those who don't offer final answers or transcendent truths. Our mission, rather, is the asking of questions.

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 2013

I think one thing we can all agree on about the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (2015), regardless of individual feelings on the frames, the elimination of standards, or the notion of “threshold concepts,” is that the *Framework* is creating larger conversations around pedagogy. Whether we have already been teaching this way, or whether it is brand new, librarian educators are re-examining our practices as a field in the expanding discourse. What I want to focus on through this re-examination is what the *Framework* can enable us to do with our teaching, and how we can change expectations surrounding library instruction. It is our “mission” to ask questions as Tolokonnikova says, both as teachers and as learners; and the asking of questions should guide our pedagogy.

A pedagogical focal point of the *Framework* is on bigger ideas of information literacy, by way of using Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding by Design instructional design model (2005) to guide teaching practice. Instructional design via big ideas, uncovered with essential questions, helps lead students to knowledge through inquiry. The philosophy behind essential questions according to the most recent, titular volume by McTighe and Wiggins (2013), is to

stimulate thought, to provoke

inquiry, and to spark more questions, including thoughtful student questions, not just pat answers...By tackling such questions, learners are engaged in *uncovering* the depth and richness of a topic that might otherwise be obscured by simply *covering* it (p. 3).

This is in opposition to teaching memorization of “disembodied ‘truths’ that are just ‘out there,’” mandated by teachers or texts (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 122). Curricula driven by disembodied truths—or a banking model of education¹—in tandem with instilling skills in students that employers deem will meet their demand, can be referred to as a skills agenda. This skills agenda in higher education and the pedagogy it entails invalidates a curriculum designed with big questions.

Many extant instructional design models became popular after being developed to efficiently and systematically instill specific abilities in military and industry personnel. The goal was quick indoctrination of procedural skills, not necessarily to develop deeper understanding, and certainly not to engage in inquiry. From my experience in studying instructional design, McTighe and Wiggins' model is one of the few that are more appropriate for educational settings. L. Dee Fink also has a great model based on “Designing Significant Learning Experiences,” which focuses on creating learning through integrated course design. In other words, it takes a variety of overlapping teaching and learning approaches to make learning significant. What Fink refers to as foundational knowledge, application learning,

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integration, the human dimension of learning (caring), and learning how to learn (metacognition), must all be inextricably linked for impactful instructional design (2005, p. 9). Skills cannot be taught in isolation or as a driving force. This means that according to Fink, and to McTighe and Wiggins, teaching holistically is critical for the learner to truly gain knowledge and deeper learning—and I agree.²

Across higher education, opposition to teaching this way is undergirded by anxiety about whether a holistic pedagogy built on big ideas will result in students getting jobs.³ This concern can seep into information literacy instruction as we have been moving away from banking skills and more toward big ideas over time, as information literacy instruction has traditionally been attached to skill-focused pedagogy, particularly so in its previous iteration as bibliographic instruction. Simultaneously, information literacy skills are appealing for employment. Altering pedagogy could be perceived as negatively impacting that belief as well as any formal accreditation outcomes⁴ associated with employability.

This urgency for employable skills seems to be particularly emphasized where students from marginalized groups are concerned. This reasoning assumes that learning for these students, particularly those coming from poor and racial minority backgrounds, is solely a means for obtaining jobs and that they do not have time for or interest in inquiry. Misperception of poor learning ability⁵ is often paired with the assumption that students' primary interest is in obtaining jobs. This provides false evidence that there is no time in the curriculum for

asking big questions or having larger dialogue because this form of pedagogy is not viewed as the most efficient means to the end. The way we use technologies to enact this efficiency falls in line with these perceptions. However, teaching certain students information literacy skills through a banking approach but encouraging others to pursue inquiry creates, in essence, an information literacy caste system. Bryan Alexander broke down what he refers to as the “Gilded Age Campus” into the following strata: “face-to-face for the 1%, distance learning for the middle class, and MOOCs for everyone else” (2014). Although distance learning technologies and MOOCs have the potential to be used innovatively, this concept of a Gilded Age Campus shows how a skills agenda is often raced and classed: as most directed to whom Alexander references as “everyone else.” To teach only skills, face-to-face pedagogy is not considered efficient. If a skills-based curriculum can be neatly boxed into modules, standardized, and shipped out to online platforms, it provides a more cost efficient way for lower income students to gain immediately applicable skills in the short term. In the long term, it allows for a more profitable way for institutions to collect tuition from more students while saving money by investing more heavily in the cheaper and undervalued labor of contingent faculty.⁶

With this in mind, we cannot think about the *Framework* in isolation from what is happening in higher education across the country, such as the corporatization of instruction, standardized learning, and institutional defunding coupled with the escalation of higher student debt. These examples create fear that transforms into

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scapegoating pedagogy, which creates a perceived and urgent need for these changes to save higher education. This indictment is the result of neoliberalism, which is hot topic terminology appearing all across critical examinations of academia as of late. However, popular term or not, this reactionary change in higher education's mission affects how universities, departments, programs, and information literacy instruction functions. In contextualizing neoliberalism, Nicholson explains, "economic exchange becomes the defining relationship between students, staff, and the institution. Demands for a skilled workforce to support the global knowledge economy have resulted in the massification of higher education and a curricular shift toward vocationalism" (2015, p. 330). And although vocationalism pursued through a skills agenda especially affects marginalized groups, it is being increasingly pursued throughout higher education for a majority of all student populations. Maybe we can invoke the term "trickling up" here.

As a skills agenda becomes more pervasive in higher education, the belief grows stronger that we are preparing all soon-to-be graduates to meet demands of the global knowledge economy, and to find jobs. However, this global knowledge economy is characterized as uncertain and demand fuels anxiety about unknown needs. Even the *Framework* feeds into these fears—albeit for the reverse of a skills agenda to instead teach with big ideas and questions. The *Framework* states that, "the rapidly changing higher education environment, along with the dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem in which all of us work and live, require new attention to be

focused on foundational ideas about that ecosystem." What has occurred is a feedback loop of fears surrounding—and created by—neoliberalism, but neoliberalism has become such an invisible and pervasive force it has been removed from the equation. It is a silent partner in our consciousness. In this sense, the global knowledge economy is represented as an independent force for which no one is responsible. Lack of ownership and responsibility for the global knowledge economy make the world seem uncertain. Workforce skill demand is constantly changing, which would cause phenomena such as staggering rates of unemployment (Moltó Egea, 2014, p. 271). A skills agenda is then believed as essential, perhaps a last bastion of hope to combat this uncertainty and the subsequent, looming, and devastating rates of unemployment. Such fears push higher education to readily adopt a skills agenda, often employer-driven, which then is neatly subsumed by yet another Matryoshka nesting doll of neoliberalism.

Aligning education in this way, as Gerrard explains, "may unquestioningly adopt a lower status, vocationally oriented education in which learning is tied to specific workplace and employer requirements, leaving students unexposed to the system of meaning within which this knowledge is embedded" (2015, p. 78). Gerrard wrote this perspective specifically concerning another marginalized population: homeless students. A focus on skills for this demographic is a particularly effective example of the rhetoric surrounding the need for jobs, as here it is assumed there is certainly no time or need for a pedagogy of big ideas or inquiry:

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homeless students would simply need skills for jobs—and more urgently than anyone else.

These fears propelling neoliberalism and therefore the higher education market also affect educators, as we are the ones teaching skills and/or inquiry. Kiedrowski points out that neoliberalism functions to disempower teachers (2013, p. 208). He is writing in the context of K-12 education, but this is applicable to higher education as well. Higher education institutions, and thus academic libraries, are being positioned as markets where students are viewed as consumers. There is a fear that if we do not meet the consumer demand for job placement upon graduation, that these consumers, our students, will make another choice: one that is not us. This feedback loop then continues to build where education is a market and educators are customer service providers. This set up, not surprisingly, is appealing to employers who can then make demands, influence consumer need, and direct higher education on what it must do to survive.

The nature of this relationship between higher education and corporations confines educators in role and subsequent pedagogy. It presides over how we operate and how our “value” is quantified and perceived. I have presented, written, and edited numerous pieces about librarian identity and others’ perceptions of us, particularly faculty. I want to draw out from this work that because librarians operate essentially as subordinates to disciplinary faculty in the hierarchy of higher education we should be aware of how neoliberalism influences faculty expectations of us. Faculty expectations do influence the work we do,

and disempowerment is compounded for librarian educators, as we exist almost doubly within the infrastructure of higher education. We must not only navigate the restrictions neoliberalism puts in place on the academy, but also navigate them through the lower hierarchical status of librarian educators.

Teaching is de-valued along with librarianship because the work is not transparent; it is not clear what we do as educators, nor as librarians. On one hand, faculty and campus administrators do not often know what librarians do, and so assumptions are made about our work and the level of complexity involved. Likewise, teaching is perceived as simplistic transmission and appears easy because teaching, learning, and pedagogy are not transparent. This assumption of ease is most applicable when the teaching is skills-focused (as is often assumed of library instruction). Loughran points out that this results in fostering “simplistic understandings of teaching and learning that are counter-productive to seeing teaching as complex and based on an evolving array of sophisticated skills and knowledge” (2013, p. 120). Moving away from teaching information literacy as solely skills-based and making our pedagogy more explicit will not only work to improve student learning, but can also transform our image to campus. Nicholson and Beilin both imagine how educators—librarians and faculty alike—might work through and around disempowerment through this force of neoliberalism in the university. As Nicholson says,

[W]e need to find productive ways to talk about our role in preparing

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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* (2015, p. 333).

Beilin follows this line of thought as an advocate for “promoting a praxis of dual success” (2015, Sec. 22). What would this look like, then? A pedagogy of inquiry can emerge from the *Framework* through focus on holistic teaching and designing instruction from big questions. Additionally, teaching skills and teaching big ideas do not have to be mutually exclusive. Inherently, students must grasp the bigger concepts to effectively apply lower-level and more granular skills, and to see connections between these skills. Teaching inquiry and asking big questions can also help students become aware of what they do not know. What Holmes tags as a “psychology of ambiguity” is something both students and educators should not just accept but pursue, because learning is messy (2015, p. 2). We need to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. Holmes additionally points out that “people tend to think of not knowing as something to be wiped out or overcome, as if ignorance were simply the absence of knowledge. But answers don’t merely resolve questions; they provoke new ones” (p. 2). If we can agree that inquiry is at the heart of education and of information literacy instruction, how can we use the *Framework* to push back against the hegemonic agenda of neoliberalism, where there is a perceived urgency for teaching a skills agenda submerged within the

disempowerment of educators?

Fabulation is one way we could position the *Framework* in productive visualization and action. Although my first guess at a definition upon coming across the term would have been to say it is the action of making something fabulous, Deleuze’s appropriation of this process is more articulate. Murphy and Done interpret Deleuze, Braidotti, and Massumi’s discussions of this process, noting that fabulation encompasses an approach to re-imagining in-place systems and structures in order to create change and turn these imaginings into reality (2015, p. 524). They detail how “for Deleuze, ‘literature is health’ to the extent that it breaks with dominant systems and effects a minoritisation of language, opening up lines of flight or escape and resisting ‘everything that crushes and imprisons’” (p. 550). So engaging in fabulation could be a way to re-invent our discourse in higher education and academic libraries. It works to dissolve binaries, to disrupt judgment, and to question of what we prescribe value. It could be not only a way to break down the perception of mutual exclusivity between teaching skills and big concepts, but also a way to re-position our identities as librarian educators as we work with disciplinary faculty and campus at large. We could use the *Framework* as a jumping off point to transcend our pedagogy and our identity—constricted by social, economic, and political orders—to instead shape how we *could* teach rather than being stuck on how we are *expected* to teach. And likewise, how we *could* be perceived rather than what expectations already exist. We need to be more explicit about what we do and demonstrate how complex our pedagogy

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truly is rather than being passive, perceived as teaching by transmission. If faculty believe librarians are only capable of skills-based teaching through such approaches as demonstrating databases or giving tours, it is difficult to work beyond that expectation in our collaborations. If campus perceptions of us surround a false conception of our work, incongruent expectations will follow. We can use what we create from the *Framework* on our campuses to engage in new conversations, imagining what could be, and putting this pedagogy into action.⁷

In Smith's 1998 introduction to his translation of Deleuze's *Essays Critical and Clinical*, he highlights the conception of fabulation by Deleuze as metamorphosing it from a religious practice as it originally existed, into a transformative process for arts, culture, and revolutionary acts to re-create the future and disband oppressive forces. Smith explains,

But 'fabulation' is a function that extracts from [colonizer ideology] a pure speech act, a creative storytelling that is, as it were, the obverse side of the dominant myths and fictions, an act of resistance whose political impact is immediate and inescapable, and that creates a line of flight on which a minority discourse and a people can be constituted (p. xlv).

If we consider who neoliberalism silences, who is awarded power, and what questions and dialogues fade away in the space between, fabulation can help us bring these to the forefront. Hamer and Lang posit that, "education ultimately has to (re)envision and (re)invigorate a humane social contract, one that repudiates neoliberalism from branch to root" (2015, p. 909). This process

can help us fathom an escape from imposed stagnation, where change is perceived as not possible. If neoliberalism creates a false sense of helplessness (Deresiewicz, 2015), fabulation might give us an opportunity for hope.

The *Framework* is not perfect for all, but we might be able to use it to create our own stories. We could use the openness and flexibility of this document to help us enact holistic pedagogy, evolve our identities as librarian educators existing within campus perceptions, and scrutinize what "value" in our teaching can mean when escaping a skills-based agenda. I am not suggesting we just see, hear, and speak no evil about neoliberalism and it will go away by imagining a different reality. We still must contend with its existence throughout higher education and be aware of how it governs expectations. But we can acknowledge that just as in teaching a pedagogy of inquiry, our existence in the academy could be examined through inquiry: something from which we can create our reality. We can dare to dream.

NOTES

1. Paulo Freire is credited with creating the term "banking model," to refer to this same idea of how teachers or authoritative texts would deposit skills in students with an expectation of uncritical regurgitation. See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or Freire's other works for an expansion of this.

2. I shared a first attempt in 2014 at developing information literacy outcomes derived from big questions to use in our instruction program at the University of Arizona:

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<http://pumpedlibrarian.blogspot.com/2014/12/acrlilrevisions-next-steps.html>.

3. And additional anxiety being: if it can't, vis-à-vis value demonstration, will we be able to keep *our* jobs?

4. See New Jersey academic librarians' open letter that speaks to concerns around accreditation, <http://acrlog.org/2015/01/07/an-open-letter-regarding-the-framework-for-information-literacy-for-higher-education/>, and a good interrogation of this letter and other critiques by Jacob Berg, <http://acrlog.org/2015/01/21/scholarship-as-conversation-the-response-to-the-framework-for-information-literacy/>.

5. This phenomenon is referred to as *expectation effects* in educational psychology, where teacher perceptions of students (through ability grouping, stereotypes, or other means) influence how students are treated, and that treatment in turn influences how students perform.

6. Contingent faculty can include adjuncts, TAs, non-tenure track faculty, and more, who have insecure and unsupported positions. See more about the definition and related issues of contingent faculty at <http://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency>.

7. We have begun to do this through our Libraries' instructional philosophy on my campus <http://acrlog.org/2015/07/16/one-instructional-philosophy-to-unite-them-all/>.

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