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Rethinking the Neoliberal University: Critical Library Pedagogy in an Age of Transition

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Abstract

In the chapter we wrote 10 years ago for *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* we asked instructors to free themselves from the stifling heritage of positivism that privileged tools and instrumentality above meaning. Drawing on Henry Giroux and Oscar Wilde, we urged our peers to embrace dialogue that respects the individual and draws connections between information literacy and the students' authentic goals and experiences. In this essay we describe numerous changes over that past decade that embrace the central themes of our chapter. We then explain that these examples coexist within a vast edifice of antithetical, neoliberal institutions. We summarize Giroux's recent work decrying the influence of neoliberalism on universities, describe how pressures to deliver instruction economically while demonstrating wide impacts are affecting the adoption of critical approaches, and discuss how the trend toward increasing specialization is giving new life to traditional, non-critical instruction. We conclude by repeating our call for library instructors to use dialog to help learners become more reflective and capable.

Keywords: Henry Giroux, Oscar Wilde, information literacy, pedagogy, ACRL, dialogue, neoliberalism, *Critical Library Instruction*

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Rethinking the Neoliberal University: Critical Library Pedagogy in an Age of Transition

Ten years ago we authored the book chapter, “There’s Nothing on My Topic!’ Using the Theories of Oscar Wilde and Henry Giroux to Develop Critical Pedagogy for Library Instruction” for the volume *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*. In that work we lamented the influence of positivism on the prevailing practices and structures of library instruction. We decried the instrumentality of the goals embodied in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2000) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* as antithetical to the values of humanism and the sustainability of a democratic polity. To counter this pedagogy of conformity and de-individualization, we looked to Oscar Wilde and Henry Giroux. We observed that Wilde’s embrace of rhetoric as a method for facilitating individual growth and Giroux’s insistence that education be centered on the lived experiences of students could both be honored through an approach to information literacy grounded in dialog that takes as its starting point students’ own lives and thoughts and presents research not as an abstract hunting and seeking exercise, but rather as an opportunity to express their individuality and impact on their own futures. We called for moving skills to the background of the profession’s focus and intentionally foregrounding meaning.

We did not realize then that our feelings of unease with what Nicole Pagowsky (2015) terms a “skills agenda” (p. 137) was held by so many others. Through their courage to call out injustice and their ability to question strategies, visions, and underlying values imposed by professional and institutional authorities, these fellow critics have made significant progress in lowering the pressures of positivism and inspiring us and our colleagues to practice Giroux’s pedagogy of hope—the idea that educators can recapture hopefulness by intentionally creating spaces for democratic thinking. Such spaces, Giroux (2019) asserts, are urgently needed to nourish students’ critical imagination and to equip them with the capacity to question the forces of authoritarianism that are becoming more and more prevalent. They should feature pedagogical practices that are “connected to the resurrection of historical memory, new modes of solidarity, a resurgence of the radical imagination, and broad-based struggles for an insurrectional democracy” (p. 16).

The decision by the ACRL Board to sunset the *Standards* and adopt the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* in 2016 was a controversial one and continues to be debated to this day. In fact, there has been an explosion of research, both supportive and critical, about using the *Framework* as a pedagogical foundation in information literacy (Bauder & Rod, 2016; Folk, 2019; Miller, 2018; Young & Maley, 2018). The *Framework* sought to rescue information literacy for those, like us, who saw the *Standards* as overly prescriptive and pernicious in their blindness to context, culture, and identities. By turning the focus of the information literacy teacher from abstract skills to the development of understandings about six fundamental aspects of information, the *Framework* calls for educators to place the learner, not the skills, at the center of their lessons. However, some critics have challenged this ideal claiming that the *Framework* is oppressive due to its discursive nature and over-reliance on what Amanda Folk (2019) terms “privileged cultural capital” (p. 662). According to Folk, students who belong to groups that have been historically marginalized in higher education may not respond as well to a structure that is deeply rooted in a privileged way of interacting with the world. This emphasis on the individual is something we explored in our book chapter. For example, we noted that Wilde’s ideal of individuality is achieved through participation in dialog and that the teacher’s role in the process is also as a participant (Pankl & Coleman, 2010).

While the adoption of the *Framework* is perhaps the most well-known manifestation of our profession’s desire to move beyond the legacy of the Enlightenment and its obsequious adherence to a belief in positivism, there have been many others. The emergence of so many critical voices of the ways instruction is enacted in libraries and the academy more broadly led numerous scholars to join forces and create a new journal to inspire scholarship and create a community. *The Journal of Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods*, founded in 2017, has become a vibrant platform for asking questions about the values and the value of library instruction and interrogating the power structures and societal mechanisms that shape the profession. As well, the American Library Association (ALA) and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) launched the Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Models for Change initiative in 2016. This Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded project is intended to promote conversations that can help libraries better meet the challenges experienced by members of their communities. By intentionally increasing engagement between libraries and the individuals they serve, this initiative will help librarians who teach by giving them insight into the language,

backgrounds, and struggles their learners face. This, in turn, will reinvigorate their efforts to connect the goals of information literacy lessons to the lived experiences of learners.

While there have been many inroads toward the dialogue-based lessons that foreground students' production of meaning, some instruction we encounter in libraries is still profoundly attached to the idea that success can be measured in a student's ability to answer a specific question in a specific way. Library conferences still include sessions on information literacy that demonstrate how to standardize and measure so that the impacts of librarians' efforts can be recognized by administrators. Strategic plans, mission statements, and innumerable discussions within libraries make paramount that we need to justify the funding we receive by presenting objective figures that demonstrate our contributions to student success. And despite the awakening of a resolve to teach differently, we and our well-meaning colleagues far too often are preoccupied with numbers of students taught and metrics that show a change in their ability to meet pre-established, external definitions of literacy. Our evaluations, abilities to be tenured, and opportunities to be included in conversations with the rest of the academy far too frequently are tied to our willingness to engage in more efficient, more instrumental modes of instruction than those we wish to pursue.

This tension between desires to foreground learners and the need to work within systems that ask us to abstract, measure, and generalize outcomes produces roadblocks to meaningful instruction. Reductions in budgets and the drive to innovate and provide new services that can be marketed in ways that connect to consumers present challenges that are difficult to overcome. In addition to drawing strength from the recognition that there are numerous others who feel the same way and that some have learned that they can make significant inroads, we can gain clarity and inspiration from understanding the causes of this situation. For many, the main culprit is an unabashed embrace of neoliberalism on the part of institutions of higher education. There are a number of scholars who have been seeking to better understand neoliberalism and the reasons why it seems so intractable.

The remainder of this reflective essay will examine the ideas of Henry Giroux and other scholars regarding neoliberalism as they relate to critical pedagogy in libraries. David Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as a "theory of economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (p. 22). In his book *Neoliberalism's War*

Against Higher Education, Henry Giroux (2014) contends that since the 1970s, the wealthy elite in developed economies have been intentionally implementing policies and using marketing strategies to reduce the ability of the populace to dissent against a system that relentlessly commodifies every aspect of culture, including education. He unapologetically frames this as a violent assault and identifies avaricious greed as the fundamental motive for a series of overt and invisible actions against the academy. This greed, he asserts, is what has led so many state legislatures in the U.S. to reduce funding for institutions of higher education while simultaneously enacting tax cuts for the wealthy. He argues that this reduced funding has established conditions of scarcity that have driven universities to compete for students, grants, and funding. Efforts to maintain or potentially increase allocations from legislatures and private donors have led, he contends, to an immense apparatus of marketers, administrators, and financial professionals who tie education almost exclusively to job opportunities or to improvements in our military capacity.

Giroux stresses that this war has been extremely effective in using our culture's celebration of individuality and freedom to blind us to the ways in which power operates to limit our opportunities and to circumscribe what we can envision as ways to interact as free individuals. Giroux contends that neoliberal thinkers promote the fiction that an individual's circumstances are entirely a result of personal effort; that each person's fate is within his or her control. This radical view denies the influence of social, political, and cultural forces, arguing instead that we are each personally responsible for our success or lack thereof. In the chapter we wrote ten years ago, we also celebrated individualism and urged educators to focus on the lived experiences of their students. There is a vital difference between our view of individualism and that at the heart of neoliberal agendas. We view the individual as intricately and inextricably connected with the social world and the institutions and language practices that help to convey culture. We see freedom as conditional and contextual and recognize that it is never absolute. Our goal in urging educators to focus on lived experiences of students was to situate the student at the center and to help them see the connections between their lives and the societies in which they live. Like Giroux (1989), we believe that education involves discovering how one's own difficulties connect to those of others. In recognizing patterns and the role of history and power, we wish to help students recognize that they are not fully responsible for their own fates.

One of Giroux's (2014) most important theses in *Neoliberalism's War Against Higher Education* is that the language of personal responsibility promulgated by neoliberal leaders and the

conditions required for success exempt larger systems from scrutiny. This, he argues, creates a power dynamic in which the poor are blamed for their conditions and are compared against their more privileged peers primarily in terms of the deficits of their character. Crucially, he observes that the defunded circumstances of higher education leave these students with few meaningful supports and produce pedagogical practices that disconnect class discourse from their lives. All students suffer profoundly from the influences of neoliberalism in his analysis. Giroux goes on to say that this is because the university's impulses to train workers cast the humanities and arts as expendable luxuries that are in competition with revenue generating, student-attracting programs. Those parts of the academy are where students are most likely to develop as individuals and to learn to think critically about the possibilities of their lives. In the absence of opportunities to question and analyze, students are unequipped to resist the prevailing drives to define their worth solely in terms of their purchasing power.

Giroux explicitly lists libraries as one of the parts of the academy that have been disadvantaged as neoliberalism has gained an increasing foothold in higher education. Although he does not delve into the ways this influence has manifest in libraries, many other scholars have. Jamie Lee and Marika Cifor (2019) assert that "neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology of LIS institutions, shaping how LIS professionals and academics conceptualize their work, frame problems, and offer solutions" (p. 5). Karen Nicholson (2015) links several prominent features of academic libraries to this dominant ideology. Among them are one-shot instruction sessions, short videos, learning analytics, preoccupation with the need to constantly change, use of the terms clients and customers to describe library users, decisions founded on return on investment, and reliance on patron preference as a guide to making decisions. In a more recent article, Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale (2019) identify just-in-time approaches of patron-driven acquisition, triage models for provision of help, and chat reference service as responses libraries have implemented as they seek to remain relevant in the age of Google.

Imperatives to be efficient, measure impacts, scale services, and support larger institutional priorities for improvements in student retention and enrollment are not conducive to efforts to carve out space and time for dialogue. Giroux contends that this frenetic, frantic churn is itself a feature of the neoliberal agenda designed precisely to deny academics opportunities to nurture critical capacities in learners. According to Odysseos and Pal (2018), students themselves feel the pressures of the neoliberal agenda and, in fact, bring

their own form of resistance to the academic enterprise. Unfortunately, the relative success of the neoliberal agenda and that design feature in particular explains why information literacy sessions do not necessarily feature robust dialogue about the rhetorical goals of research in the context of individual lives. Those dialogues are not efficient, standardizable, or measurable. They are not instrumental. Rather they are opportunities for students to see themselves as the most critical of the many actors in the practice of research. They are experiences that humanize and connect rather than transmit. As such they are deemed superfluous luxuries by neoliberals and the essential antecedents to change by those who wish for higher education to enlarge the potential for individual expression and enrich capacities for experience of meaning and beauty.

Librarians who work under pressure to prove impact through data and who are expected to provide instruction efficiently and often might well wonder how they can incorporate more dialogue and emphasize the pedagogical value of reflection. And where pre-established scripts or quizzes are in place, it might seem completely impossible to focus on the individual. We have both been in those situations, so we understand the need to conform to broader goals and dictates. However, even in the most constrained circumstances, there are opportunities to connect to students as individuals and to make the lessons personally meaningful. You can preface even the most instrumental lecture with a reminder that the skills you are teaching can apply to non-academic exploration as well and with an invitation to try them the next time they are making an important life decision. At the close of the lesson, you can ask students to reflect on what they will do with the information they have learned and urge them to consider sharing their new skills with others in their lives. But we hope that you might find yourself in a circumstance where you have (or you seize) permission to have the lesson take the form of a dialogue that delves into questions about what qualifies as useful information, who makes those decisions, and why they make them, and how to navigate the current situations to flourish as individuals.

Now more than ever it is imperative that we invest in students and encourage them to be creative, productive, and thoughtful citizens. As Folk (2019) demonstrates, identity and diverse ways of knowing are fundamental to how students learn. Consequently, it is only by connecting with who students are and their previous experiences that we can hope to expand the role of education. Giroux (2014, 2019) likewise situates the learner, rather than a prescribed body of facts and skills, at the center of the educational system. He calls for educators to spark student's imaginations by urging them to think about how their lives and

the lives of others could be better. He sees historical events and movements, poetry, and creative production as powerful tools for educators.

Democracy is in peril due to the profound distrust in government, the attack on science and the arts, and a fundamental breakdown of faith in the ability of our institutions to give us opportunities to live full and meaningful lives. Although information literacy may seem to be a small piece of this big puzzle, it is clear that by educating students to be critical consumers of information we are opening the door for new forms of trust to emerge. It is important for students to learn that it is incumbent on them to develop the capacity to think for themselves.

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