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## Working Conditions Are Learning Conditions: Understanding Information Literacy Instruction through Neoliberal Capitalism

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# Working Conditions Are Learning Conditions: Understanding Information Literacy Instruction Through Neoliberal Capitalism

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## Abstract

Neoliberal capitalism's demands for efficiency and innovation have greatly impacted North American academic libraries and the work conducted in them, including information literacy instruction. The divisive forces of neoliberalism must be met with resistance, and libraries hold the potential for generating an information literacy praxis where learners engage information with a critical consciousness instead of a consumerist one. Using library labor conditions and the contradictions between innovation and student learning as focal points, we argue that academic library workers should seek to center attention to inequities and injustices in the information economy and scholarly information systems in their instruction, identify shared issues within their workplaces to organize around, and build coalitions outside libraries to transform what is possible for academic labor and student learning alike.

*Keywords:* information literacy, neoliberalism, capitalism

## ***Perspectives***

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## Working Conditions Are Learning Conditions: Understanding Information Literacy Instruction Through Neoliberal Capitalism

World capitalism sits on the precipice of changes not seen since the early twentieth century. A years-long pandemic, shrinking markets for labor and resources, and climate catastrophe pile onto the ruling elite's efforts to compete for economic power and hegemony. Political conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and rising fascism threaten the working class worldwide. At the same time, there is growing resistance to neoliberal, racist, and patriarchal systems, including the intensification of privatization and austerity measures that have impacted public institutions since the 1980s. Neoliberalism can be understood as "a variation of capitalism favoring free trade, privatization, minimal government intervention in business, reduced public expenditure on social services...and weakening the power of labor" (Bagakis, 2018, para. 13). The result is a "structur[ing of] society to think of each person as an independent contractor responsible for their own assessment of risk" (Zvyagintseva & Ribaric, 2022, p. 5). The concept of information literacy followed closely in the wake of neoliberalism's rule.

An idea that came of age in the 1980s and 1990s against the backdrop of the neoliberal agenda, information literacy has developed in line with and under the control of late capitalism (Seale, 2013). A widely held but mistaken assumption by the public is that libraries are inherently democratic projects and are immune to reifying the negatives of the societies they are part of (Kranich, 2001). It may be preferable to think that libraries and information literacy automatically eschew the interests of capital and the production of compliant workers, but neoliberal capitalism has organized society so fully that its hallmark calls for efficiency, deregulation, and innovation are presumed to be desirable in all settings, including libraries. What can we do to resist neoliberal ideology's hold on libraries, especially in our teaching efforts and work that happens directly with learners? We argue that such resistance is not only a means of making information literacy education more relevant and meaningful for students and library instructors, but also a way to challenge broader power structures in small but significant ways. The authors agree with Nopper's (2023) assertion that research "can help us move from abstraction or critique to targeted action" and is useful in "knowing who to be mad at" and to target with political action, and that the same can be true of learning in libraries (para. 14).

We can begin locating information literacy within the neoliberal power structure by looking to the connections between instruction librarians' working conditions and student learning in higher education. By further identifying how capital and libraries are intertwined, we can consider how to upend capitalism's demands in the context of librarianship, as a number of works have considered (Birdsall, 2001; Estabrook, 1981; Estep & Enright, 2016; Gregory & Higgins, 2018; Harris, 1986; Hudson, 2020; Pawley, 1998; Popowich, 2019; Seale & Mirza, 2020; Vong, 2022; Zvyagintseva & Ribaric, 2022). Three prominent themes in prior research on libraries and capitalism include: 1) the need for changes to how library workers labor, including increased visibility, increased staffing, and more opportunities to conduct work that is meaningful to them (Almeida, 2020; Bales, 2015; Burns, 2018; Glassman, 2017; Guild, 2019; Shirazi, 2017; Sloniowski, 2016; Zvyagintseva, 2021); 2) understanding the corporate university and how students are increasingly positioned as consumers of education (Eisenhower & Smith, 2009; Enright, 2013; Lawson, Sanders, & Smith, 2015; Nicholson, 2015; stringer-stanback, 2019); and 3) challenging publisher and vendor practices through teaching and learning, which ultimately necessitates changing how scholarly communication is produced and reimagining the current system of for-profit corporations acquiring and then renting out information to libraries at exorbitant prices (Bignoli et al., 2021; Fister, 2010). We will focus on instruction librarians' working conditions and students' learning in North American institutions of higher education and share what actions library workers might take in regard to teaching and learning in libraries going forward.

## Issues and Opportunities in Library Instruction

Challenges in teaching information literacy can be many, from the minimal time allotted for instruction for "guest lectures" in new student orientations to the subscription resource-focused content often requested by teaching faculty for course-embedded instruction. At the same time, libraries hold the potential for resisting the status quo, in which a consumerist approach to information is promoted, which is well documented in the literature (Behrens, 1994; Beilin, 2016; Cope, 2014; Critten, 2015; Drabinski, 2017; Ellenwood, 2020; Gohr & Nova, 2020; Kapitzke, 2003; Nicholson, 2016; Nicholson, 2018; Seale, 2013). For example, Nicholson (2016) found that due to its brevity and irregular occurrence, the one-shot session is in fact "in perfect sync with the accelerated, fragmented 'corporate time' *chronos* of contemporary higher education" (p. 27). In comparing the similarities between the one-shot information literacy session and the one-off equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)

workshop, Leung (2022) observed that both serve as “particularly insidious mechanisms through which white supremacy and settler colonialism manifest,” and provide the intentionally misleading impression that meaningful progress is being made (p. 757). It is for this reason that some, including Ryan and Sloniowski (2013), advocated for teaching outside of the existing curriculum in order to more effectively address social justice issues as they intersect with information literacy (p. 286). One might also take the example of “student success,” which is a common interest of colleges and universities. Beilin (2016) argued for teaching success on two levels: “It is important to respect students’ aspirations for success...we ought to encourage alternative definitions of success while at the same time ensur[ing] success in the existing system,” which can be accomplished through “focusing on the immediate local needs of a specific context” (pp. 18–19).

We should use all sites of teaching in libraries, whether one-shot sessions, exhibits, outreach events, or research consultations, to open new possibilities of transgression, liberation, agency, and what Seale (2020) called “troublemaking,” informed by critical pedagogy and other frameworks depending on one’s context (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1968/2000; hooks, 1994; Leung & López-McKnight, 2020; Loyer, 2018; Paris, 2012). Teaching and learning that draws attention to the problems of neoliberal capitalism enables the potential for consciousness-raising and greater awareness of the dominant order, which in turn can lead to questioning and challenging these problems as they are manifested in different areas of life. Ellenwood (2020), for instance, outlined an information capitalism curriculum that focused on “(1) the commodification of information, (2) information labor, and (3) surveillance and privacy” (para. 47), while Seale (2020) described the content for library sessions for new history majors as including, “the historicity of primary sources, how libraries and archives preserve what we value, in both an economic and moral sense, and how what we value changes over time” (p. 83). In many of the same ways that neoliberal capitalism impacts information literacy, it impacts library instruction. The specific mode that information literacy is taught, whether via a one-shot session, an online module, or a research consultation, is largely irrelevant if library instruction is not recognized as an issue of labor, shaped by austerity, chronic understaffing, flat wages, and the constant expectation of demonstrating value through quantifiable metrics.

Simply identifying capitalism’s functions within information literacy as a professional construct or a library instruction session does not, of course, result in change. Just because we present information to students does not mean that they agree with or accept it. Moreover, there are considerable limits to pursuing the development of critical

consciousness, defined as the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it, within workplaces and especially workplaces that have largely conformed to neoliberalism's demands (Jemal, 2017). These issues are compounded by the institutionalization and enclosure of practices such as critical library instruction. However, we can use teaching and learning opportunities, from research consultations and reference interactions to instruction sessions and outreach, to sow greater knowledge concerning how libraries and information both reproduce and can resist capitalism. We can do this in the hopes that our efforts will plant seeds of awareness and action that can take root and grow.

## Library Labor Conditions

Library workers face many challenges in bringing critical perspectives to their efforts with learners, and perhaps foremost among them is the demand for efficiency. Efficiency is one of neoliberalism's rationales for hollowing out public services and the funding and infrastructure that supports them, in order to redirect those resources to the private sector. Libraries have adopted this call for efficiency due to institutional demands and declining funding, combined with the fallout of reduced capacity and the need to perform continually expanding duties with fewer workers. Paradoxically, efficiency is both symptomatic of the neoliberal university and perceived as the answer to the workload burdens it creates. Estabrook (1981) noted three troubling phenomena in libraries at the beginning of the Reagan and Thatcher years: an emphasis on productivity due to limited resources, being used as captive markets for the information industry, and library services being repackaged as information products. To trace the lineage of efficiency further back, Gregory and Higgins (2018) identified the 1890–1920 Progressive Era's "efficiency movement" and the expansion of capitalism during that time as molding libraries and librarians in the likeness of businesses.

Efficiency is a key element and frequent selling point of the one-shot instruction model. The pressure to achieve efficiency is felt by instructors who are responsible for covering a wide swath of content to meet the expectations of the corporatized university. Thus, teaching librarians are yielded a minimal amount of time to work directly with students. Librarians often rationalize their allotted time by accepting any interaction with students at all, even at the devaluation of their own selves and time (Nataraj & Siqueiros, 2022). Without the time necessary to pursue student- and context-centered instruction requiring considerable preparation and attention, librarians are more likely to revert to demonstrating databases—

sometimes a necessary skill and sometimes not, but with the unintentional effect of librarians acting as salespeople for proprietary information that libraries rent out at exorbitant prices and that students will be locked out of upon graduating.

The preoccupation with efficiency as it relates to information literacy results in not only the compression of time spent in a given classroom, but a premium placed on easily quantifiable metrics: the number of class visits made, instructional videos and research guides viewed, and students “reached.” Making all library instruction digestible and disposable suits neoliberalism well, but is at odds with critical teaching and learning practices. An efficient information literacy education means a diminished student experience that places quantity over quality due to library instructors being overextended and unable to provide critical and self-reflective instruction. Moreover, maximizing efficiency and having no time to recharge or reflect are key causes of burnout for library instructors, who leave their positions or the profession altogether when they can no longer cope (Johnson & Page, 2023; Nardine, 2019). When there is no librarian to support teaching and learning, who benefits? Certainly not the students. Yet the demand for efficiency intensifies.

In response, it is essential first and foremost for librarians to recognize themselves as workers. Professionals in academic settings can have the tendency to associate their labor with the intellectual aims of education, and as a result fail to realize their labor is exploited just as workers in any other sector (Harney & Moten, 1999). As Lee (2022) argued, the socialization of library and information science students as “professionals” instead of workers plays a role in cultivating this class-based and misguided distinction. Even if one does not share the politics of fighting imperialism, racism, sexism, and capitalism, we must move past neutrality as a core principle of librarianship. As Kapitzke (2003) wrote two decades ago, “the profession needs to acknowledge that, irrespective of whether they view their libraries...as physical places or electronic spaces, there is no space outside of language, politics, and ideology” (p. 9). Some of the tenets described in slow librarianship are useful in resisting cultures of productivity, particularly when “slowing down” one’s work or focusing on work important to them is pursued beyond the individual level (Farkas, 2021; Glassman, 2017). While slowing down is an important practice, particularly when it comes to the preservation of one’s mental and physical health, it is not an answer to fascism and the continued domination of capitalism. Responding to efforts by the far right to ban books on racism and LGBTQ+ content in school libraries, for instance, requires anything but a slow approach (Harris & Alter, 2022). It necessitates a swift and organized counter-response which library workers can and do lead (Gonzalez, 2023). Swift, as well as slow counter-

responses, are essential to respond effectively to other issues as well, such as the expectation to continually adopt new technologies and “innovate” for the sake of capital’s progress.

## **Contradictions of Innovation and Student Learning**

An appeal all too familiar to workers in higher education is the need to innovate. Innovation has meant not only an incessant drive to create new services, resources, and programs to appeal to current students and attract new ones, but also the expectation to prioritize activities that increase an institution’s cash flow, from grant-seeking to donor relations to monetizable research. As Levesque (2020) observed, “Libraries partake in the prestige of technology through the use of terms like innovative—which connotes masculinity along with technology” (p. 15). Innovative disruption in the neoliberal sense seeks to destroy, replace, and wring profits from what is left of minimized workforces and/or acquisition of lesser-quality products (Newfield, 2019). This has been especially true of academic libraries for the past thirty years, which today in some cases have new visualization labs or makerspaces that are “designed to run with no new staff” (Schwartz, 2013, para. 12). The outcome is top-dollar offerings at the altar of innovation.

Library instruction has borne some of the brunt of innovative practices of the neoliberal university (Nicholson, 2015). Library workers have had to wrangle first-hand with the proliferation of emerging technologies in higher education, which are sold to make teaching more efficient and cost effective. These technologies have proven profitable to universities that use them to attract students and increase enrollment, and invaluable to the companies that have further accumulated capital through the data collected from surveillance tech (Lamdan, 2022). At the same time, librarians have been used to clean up the mess that disruptive innovation leaves in its wake. Whether troubleshooting learning management systems and online learning roadblocks or explaining and finding workarounds for poorly designed yet increasingly expensive subscription databases and e-book platforms, the jobs of library workers often involve smoothing over the entanglement of capitalism, class, and racial disparities in knowledge and access to technology. This is evident from the chat reference questions from students seeking to access textbooks, chapters, and articles, to programs such as laptop lending.

The ethos of innovative practices that improve education relies on competition and competitiveness (Dakka, 2020). In this space, library instruction outcomes are transformed into tangible skills that contribute to the marketplace of neoliberalism, profiting the elite



while exploiting the working class. This tendency can be traced back to the American Library Association's (1989) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy Final Report, wherein information literacy is positioned as a "survival skill in the Information Age." This is not to ignore the fact that students may be enrolled at a university with their primary or sole goal being to increase their employability and gain entry into a chosen field. While recognizing the massive challenges students face, such as food and housing insecurity or working multiple jobs while taking classes, we can and should aspire to more than providing instructions on how to find the required sources for a research paper and obtain a passing grade for the assignment and class. When information literacy instruction teaches students to become consumers of information, it upholds an individualistic and human capital-oriented status quo. Unless actively questioning the goals of many recent educational technology interventions, from invasive online test monitoring to mandatory plagiarism detection tools—which generate immense profits while offering dubious benefit to learners and educators (Acumen Research and Consulting, 2022; Vie, 2013)—we allow information literacy instruction to be another site for the reproduction of problematic technology and innovation narratives. The constant disruptions of innovation thus detract from any kind of reflective, critical praxis of teaching and deprive students of the skills necessary to build knowledge that is used to create liberatory information and action for social change.

It is crucial to recognize that students' experiences, from the lecture hall to study spaces, from on-campus dining to online research, are closely intertwined with the working conditions of all employees in the higher education setting, including librarians. Our working conditions are inextricably linked with students' learning conditions. Taking this fact seriously means that we advocate for ourselves and students together, and as sharing many interests and aims. We require offices and classrooms that are maintained and functional. We require flexibility within working hours to not only accommodate class and operational needs but more importantly, for our own needs as well. We require fair compensation that enables us to not have to cobble together several jobs to make ends meet so that we can be present and provide attention to our work. Being more effective in linking what we need to do our jobs to what students need to learn means resisting the "student as customer" model that only benefits the profit system.

## **Toward Anti-Oppressive Library Instruction**

Academic librarians are in a unique position to pull back the curtain and reveal information as a commodity, but the demands of affective and feminized labor, use of libraries as a cheap

source of educational labor to teach new technologies to produce profit, and intensification of work, combined with inadequate staffing, leave libraries in a diminished state. Unless another approach is deliberately taken, information literacy under neoliberalism defaults to instructing students to be consumers and not critical thinkers. We must use library instruction as well as other points of contact with library users, such as events, workshops, and research consultations, to find areas of unity. We can make apparent the contradictions of the capitalist system by identifying information resources' human connection to the profit system. Just as libraries are not neutral, neither are vendors, publishing companies, or scholarly communication systems. All have many individual actors making up the whole, and all are driven by different motives and ideologies. We must develop relationships with learners as well as other workers that are not based on market values and the exchange of commodities, but rather on human values, dialogue, and solidarity. The one-shot and other single-serve forms of instruction cannot by themselves result in these relationships. However, they can potentially serve as an entryway to discussions that can continue and even lead to radical engagement, especially in conjunction with other teaching and work we do with and within our communities. This is the paradoxical nature of critical instruction in the neoliberal university: our teaching efforts are both a product of and means to draw attention to issues of labor, efficiency, and innovation.

As we look to take concrete actions, we must first and foremost recognize ourselves as workers. With this understanding and solidarity, we can know and act upon the fact that we share others' struggles for better working conditions and compensation that allow us to do our jobs effectively. We can thereby challenge the underlying foundations of libraries, universities, and information systems that structure our work and personal lives with a more solid footing. Especially in regards to graduate students, adjunct instructors, and others in precarious employment within the neoliberal university, it is important to demonstrate solidarity through a variety of means, whether donating to a strike fund; drawing attention to labor struggles on our campuses during library instruction, consultations, and conversations with students; or simply showing sincere support by thanking them for keeping the university running and asking what challenges they face that they hope can one day change.

Regarding actions to take concerning student learning, we should point out the contradictions inherent in neoliberalism's effects on our relationships to and with information. The information economy is an excellent place to start. We should share with

law and business students and faculty that LexisNexis is a data surveillance company with a lucrative contract selling individuals' data to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement for deportations and circumventing sanctuary protections, and that there are advocacy efforts for ending libraries' and universities' contracts with the company (Mijente, 2023). We should create learning environments where we discuss with students that the reason Google seems to magically know what results we seek is largely because it collects dozens of personalized data points for every search, while the library catalog requires more effort to search because it does not hoard individual information to inform its algorithms. We should explain that e-books have been known to disappear from a platform based on a publisher's profit motive, specifically highly-used titles in a subscription package in order to pass on the cost to students desperate to access course readings (George Washington University Libraries, 2022). And most importantly, we must relate these examples to student interests and learning.

Taking advantage of instructional opportunities to shine a light on inequities and injustices in scholarly information systems and processes can be planned in advance with an instructor, be part of a lesson plan, or simply be subjects that come up naturally based on the content being taught and on student interest. There are many topics that one can address. The authors have had success with class discussions on the following issues that were either offered by students or initiated by the author:

- Textbook inaccessibility and why the library is unable to buy and make available all textbooks used for courses
- The peer review process and how it marginalizes perspectives from early-career scholars as well as researchers not affiliated with academic institutions (Espinal et al., 2018)
- Discussing how whiteness and Eurocentrism impact which types of knowledge academe and libraries tend to value (Bhat, 2022; Ferretti, 2020)
- The paywalling of news sources and how it leads to important world event information being inaccessible
- The scholarly publishing model that many journals engage in, wherein scholars contribute their research while earning no direct compensation as the publisher sells this information back to libraries and other subscribers
- The racist and patriarchal biases that exist in search algorithms (Noble, 2018)

It is essential to balance our teaching efforts with being comfortable declining instruction and other work that does not respect our contributions. This can mean saying no to requests for class visits that do not provide adequate notice or time to prepare, to instructors with track records of harassment or being difficult to work with, and to sessions that do not allow for sufficient time with learners. Drawing a line requires the support of supervisors and directors, as well as the understanding that we can provide meaningful learning opportunities only if our value as educators and people is respected.

Within the library, we can seek change through our day-to-day activities in library instruction and otherwise. The labor and student learning conflicts inherent in information literacy and library instruction that further capitalist hegemony also have the potential to produce critical consciousness by exposing the market forces and instruments of power at play in information systems. More important than the mode of instruction or even content is determining collaboratively and collectively within a workplace which aims and principles guide our efforts. Even if that means seeking whatever common ground exists and accepting if there is little to none, it is worth the effort. There is strength in identifying shared issues and interests with one another and building upon those, whether by creating programmatic approaches to critical information literacy through a credit-bearing course or series of workshops, organizing events or speaker series that center social justice issues, or making collections decisions that may prioritize small and independent presses and cancel contracts with vendors who infringe on library values such as privacy and intellectual freedom.

When working collectively we have the ability to set the stage, and if we fail to do so, someone else will for us. To the best of our personal abilities and capacities, we must dialogue and organize with allies who are committed to fighting exploitation and oppression at our libraries, universities, and beyond—from teaching faculty who recognize the value of the library to student organizations and interest groups to other library workers near and far. As hooks (1994) wrote, “To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences” (p. 130). These are the seeds of contesting the dominant power structures that impact us all.

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