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Resisting Neoliberalism

Information Literacy Instruction as a Political Act

Much scholarship, especially in the field of critical university studies[1], has been written concerning the trend toward neoliberalism in higher education. Less of this work focuses specifically on academic libraries; however, librarianship has, to some extent, internalized neoliberal values. This internalization appears in the language we use. We "market" our services to faculty members, even making "elevator pitches." Students ask to "rent" books from the library, and some libraries even intentionally call patrons "customers." In our instruction, we teach students that information has value, but we rarely engage with how that value is determined or how a view of information as capital affects the ways in which students use the information they seek. In doing so, we reduce librarianship to another cog in a capitalist machine which exists to create laborers, rather than to educate citizens prepared to engage in society.

Instead of accepting this trend toward neoliberalism and academic capitalism,[2] I argue that academic librarians should challenge neoliberalism from the perspective of our discipline. The concepts and ideas the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (henceforth, the Framework) provides can be used to bring us closer to justice. Critical pedagogy gives us a lens through which we can reexamine our instruction as a political act and work to dismantle structures of oppression that affect our instructional methods.

Critical Pedagogy: Against Neoliberal Ideals

Many definitions of neoliberalism exist. For this article, I selected a general definition from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which defines neoliberalism as "the philosophical view that a society's political and economic institutions should be robustly liberal and capitalist... [which] redefines citizens as consumers."[3] The harms of neoliberalism have also been extensively detailed. Racial capitalism, a framework that understands capitalism as grounded in the exploitation of nonwhite people,[4] is one helpful critique. Though neoliberal thinkers see capitalism as morally neutral or arbitrary, racial capitalism and other critiques see capitalism as an oppressive, biased, and racist system. Critiques of neoliberalism in higher education describe the neoliberal university as an "edufactory" or a place in which "all forms of knowledge are considered in service of the neoliberal agenda that would privilege and protect competition,"[5] rather than in service of the learner. Librarians are often encouraged to connect information literacy skills to labor—how will applying the Framework help students to seek jobs, careers, and economic gains? In short, how does information literacy serve to grow one's prowess in a capitalistic system?

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But what happens if we approach information literacy for its role in developing the student not as a laborer but as a citizen and member of a community? Critical pedagogy gives us a lens through which we can critique these oppressive capitalist structures and helps our students to examine the ways in which power dynamics affect the information available to them.

Henry A. Giroux is noted for his focus on utopian pedagogy, which aims to resist neoliberalism in education. He argues, "if students lack the ability to address how knowledge is related to power, morality, social responsibility and justice, they will have neither the power nor the language necessary to engage in collective forms of struggle against society's efforts to write them out of the script of democracy."[6] What else is information literacy if not that very ability? The following paragraphs detail strategies for reframing our information literacy instruction toward that end, focusing on three of the six frames.

Engaging with the Framework

Rethinking Information as Capital: Information Has Value

Many of the frames encourage us to see information as capital, but none so much as Information Has Value. The frame describes information as a "commodity," and the dispositions call upon learners to "see themselves as contributors to the information marketplace rather than only consumers of it."[7] This is not done without critique—indeed, the frame expresses that "experts understand that value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices."[8] This vague language can be both frustrating and liberating. Though it does not provide guidance to help students understand what those "powerful interests" may be, it allows librarians to open discussions about the power dynamics inherent in distributing information as capital, particularly by engaging with information privilege.

Within the dispositions of the frame, learners are encouraged to "examine their own information privilege."[9] Others have noted that the Framework does not define the term, nor does it suggest the steps learners should take in examining their privilege.[10] However, critical pedagogy gives us a means to explicate information privilege. Since "critical pedagogy pushes us to surface power dynamics in the classroom and the larger communities in which our learners live,"[11] it is our duty to encourage students to see not only the reality of their information privilege, but the structures that prevent others from accessing information. Duke's Library 101 Toolkit[12] provides an excellent lesson plan for discussing information privilege in the classroom.

The way we talk about our resources can also help us to engage with information as capital. We often describe our resources as "free" for students to access and use. Instead, we should help students understand that academic libraries serve as intermediaries between database companies and students. That's not to say we should spend entire one-shots detailing our consortial agreements and contracts. Rather, I recommend short explanations about why some information is available to them and not to others outside of academia. This can naturally take place when students encounter paywalled information or wonder what their access to library resources will look like after graduation.

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual: Beyond Checklists

To move toward information literacy as social justice and away from neoliberal applications, students should combine their understanding of information privilege with evaluation

skills. The frame Authority is Constructed and Contextual is crucial. Laura Saunders argues that "without the cognitive abilities to engage with information and assess its authority, credibility, and relevance, other forms of access are not useful."[13] However, prescriptive checklists, such as the CRAAP test, and media bias charts merely give students the ability to identify disinformation or bias without recognizing the structures that create it. Critical pedagogy calls upon us to create knowledge collaboratively, rather than presenting as a "sage on the stage." To that end, having conversations with students about *how* authority is constructed within academia and without, as well as who they see as authoritative or trustworthy, helps us to build our understanding of authority together. Conversations like this engage our students in learning more than any checklist ever could. Demonstrating lateral reading[14] and other critical reading strategies can also help students to ask detailed questions about an author's or publisher's intent, biases, or credibility.

We should also encourage students to develop evaluation skills, not just for the end goal of getting a good grade for using "good" sources in their papers, but as a means for resisting disinformation as citizens. In doing so, we fulfil the promise of training students for life outside the university without making concessions to neoliberalism—instead, we ask students to "make visible the connections between power and knowledge, and provide the conditions for extending democratic rights, values, and identities."[15]

Scholarship as Conversation: Between Whom?

In Scholarship as Conversation, the Framework encourages learners to "identify barriers to entering scholarly conversation via various venues."[16] When we apply the lenses of racial capitalism and critical pedagogy, we can explicate this statement more deeply. Rather than vaguely gesturing at historic and current barriers to publishing scholarship, we can have substantive conversations about racial capitalism, academia's own biases, and the power structures that operate within and outside our institutions.

In my instruction, I have noticed I often (lazily) point to citation metrics as a reflection of a piece's value in a field. In doing so, I am teaching my students that an information source's contribution to a conversation is measurable in purely capitalistic and quantitative terms. By engaging with citation justice[17] in our instruction, we can help our students to see whose work is valued in the neoliberal university, specifically, predominantly white scholars whose research brings revenue to their institutions. In doing so, we can encourage students to seek out the scholarship of those who have been denied access or amplification in academia.

This is not to say the scholarly landscape is entirely bleak: scholars cite open access, OER, and expanded opportunities for publication as helping to resist neoliberal models of commodification of information.[18] As librarians, it is our responsibility to help students locate this information and to hone their skills beyond simply picking the article with the best citation metrics.

Conclusion: Students as Collaborators, Coconspirators, and Comrades

We cannot dismantle systems of oppression in a one-shot. It takes valuable time we don't always have, and energy that students do not always have to offer to engage in praxis. However, when we see our students as collaborators in both knowledge creation and resistance to neoliberal ideals, even the smallest changes can have outsized impacts. Giroux argues that

"democracy has to be struggled over, even in the face of a most appalling crisis of political agency."[19] Critical pedagogy requires us to see learning as collaborative, and that knowledge creation occurs for all participants—students and teachers. When we apply critical pedagogy to the classroom, we invite students to join us in the struggle.

To achieve the stated goals of the Framework, we must resist neoliberal attacks on higher education, as well as any efforts to depoliticize our instruction. A return to critical pedagogy and critical information literacy will help us to reorient our teaching and to deepen our knowledge of the Framework. When we engage in a pedagogy that brings us closer to the democracy of our imagination—where students are educated as citizens, rather than as laborers—we work toward its creation.

Notes

1. Jeffrey J. Williams, "Deconstructing Academe," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 58, no. 25 (February 24, 2012): B7-B8.

2. See: Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

3. Kevin Vallier, "Neoliberalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Winter 2022, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/neoliberalism/.

4. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition,* revised and updated 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

5. Gaile S. Cannella and Mirka Koro-Ljungberg, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education: Can We Understand? Can We Resist and Survive? Can We Become Without Neoliberalism?," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 3 (June 1, 2017): 155-62, https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708617706117.

6. Henry A. Giroux, "Neoliberalism and the Weaponising of Language and Education," *Race & Class* 61, no. 1 (July 1, 2019): 26-45, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396819847945.

7. *"Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,"* American Library Association, February 9, 2015, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

8. *"Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."*

9. *"Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."*

10. Sarah Hare and Cara Evanson, "Information Privilege Outreach for Undergraduate Students," *College & Research Libraries* 79, no. 6 (September 6, 2018): 726, https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.6.726.

11. Laura Saunders and Melissa Wong, *Instruction in Libraries and Information Centers: An Introduction* (Windsor, CT: Windsor & Downs Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.21900/wd.12.

12. "Information Privilege - Library 101 Toolkit," August 13, 2018, https://sites.duke.edu/library101_instructors/2018/08/13/information-privilege/.

13. Laura Saunders, "Connecting Information Literacy and Social Justice: Why and How," *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (July 12, 2017): 59, https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2017.11.1.47.

14. Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, "Lateral Reading and the Nature of Expertise: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information," *Teachers College*

Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education 121, no. 11 (November 2019): 1-40, https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811912101102.

15. Henry A. Giroux, "1. Utopian Thinking in Dangerous Times: Critical Pedagogy and the Project of Educated Hope," in *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization*, ed. Mark Cote, Richard J.F. Day, and Greig de Peuter (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 25-42, https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442685093-004.

16. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."

17. Sarah Clark and Caroline Monnin, "Incorporating Citation Justice within Citation Instruction," 2025.

18. Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education."

19. Giroux, "1. Utopian Thinking in Dangerous Times."