What's With All The Owls? Critical Pedagogy and Student Staff Development

Jeremy McGinniss

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Good morning-thank you for coming to this session. I would like you to consider the possibility that the shelving or re-shelving of a book is a pedagogical opportunity. If you were to visit my library and tour through the stacks you would note the presence of yellow laminated owls at particular intervals in with the books. As books are re-shelved, student staff members write their initials on the owl and then stick that owl to the left of the shelved book. One of the other library staff members checks each owl pulling the correctly shelved ones. For those owls/books that are incorrectly shelved, we follow up with that student by leaving a slip with the call number of the incorrectly shelved book on the student's name tag. The student then checks that particular book and addresses the shelving issue, including the owl with the newly shelved location. If all is well, the librarian will then pull the owl. We record all correctly and incorrectly shelved owls so that at the end of the semester we can recognize those students who have done particularly well. The owls as well as the slips provide a touchstone and dialogue with the student.

Because "everything we do is pedagogy." Particularly if it is recognized that "pedagogy occurs whenever knowledge is produced…"[1] Therefore any method or type of training and working with student staff is pedagogical. Embracing a critical approach is deliberately adding a critically pedagogical perspective and practice to how the library is engaging with its student staff. Critical pedagogy provides a particular way of thinking about, planning for and

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[1] Henry A. Giroux. *Border crossings: cultural workers and the politics of education*. (New York: Routledge. 1992), 218.

constructing opportunities (whether hiring, training, developing or assessing) in holistic ways that seek connection, understanding and questioning for both the student and the library/ian. As Jacobs writes "All forms of learning are always additive, cumulative, iterative and relational..."[2] If everything is pedagogy, taking critical approach is to build upon the additive, cumulative, iterative and relational aspects of learning. This is not meant as an end to itself, to achieve better library staff or more generous alumni. Rather it meant as a connecting, integrative approach that views library employment as an actively contributing element in the formation of the student.[3]

"Critical pedagogy…affords students the opportunity to read, write and learn from a position of agency-to engage in a culture of questions…imagining literacy as a mode of intervention, a way of learning about the *word* as a basis for intervening in the *world*…."[4] (emphasis mine) The library, in its approach to student staff, is eminently qualified to take this approach particularly because critical pedagogical practices provide frameworks for connecting student staff with a culture of questions, imagination and intervention. Significant chunks of time have been spent by libraries in the pursuit of information literacy initiatives particularly in the context of the college classroom. The ties to pedagogy seem to be much more obvious in the classroom setting. If Jacobs is correct and all elements of learning are indeed additive, cumulative, iterative and relational then library employment should be approached as a pedagogical opportunity.

Critical pedagogy is both confrontational and aspirational. If the library is truly going to be "…a place where students actively engage existing knowledge and shape it to their own

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[2] Heidi Jacobs, "Information literacy and reflective pedagogical praxis." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (2008): 259

[3] Freire describes this as "…the framework of the whole" where the whole is understood as the "…historico-social, cultural and political framework." This is a challenge in the context of library employment, to say the least. Paulo Freire, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, and Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of hope: reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. (New York: Continuum. 1994), 68.

[4] Henry A. Giroux, *On critical pedagogy*. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 155.

current and future uses"[5] then that space and opportunity needs to be available. The library's

pedagogical approach and mission does not focus merely on the classroom or only in set

"learning situations". The pedagogical approach extends into and informs all areas of a library's

interaction with students. This then leads, logically I think, to a particular question. **How can**

library employment teach/equip/_____   student staff for active intervention in the world?

This is a tall order; it is an intimidating question because it asks a lot of the librarian and the

student staff member. If I may play devil's advocate briefly: All I as a library staff supervisor

want is some students to re-shelve books, assist in printing and answer basic user questions.

Where's the pedagogy in that? This is not an uncommon response. Is there an unresolvable

tension in desire to accomplish what are considered "basic library tasks" and the aspirational

calling of the pedagogical approach? A library's response to this question proceeds out of that

library's *ethos* where ethos refers to the "characteristic customs, morals and spirit of an

institution or community. "[6] Critical pedagogy must, be both vehicle and driver, of a library's

ethos.

As with most complicated questions, answering this question is a complicated and

difficult process. At the very least, embracing critical pedagogy as an approach to student staff

development takes time. It takes time to figure out how to develop opportunities at the library to

engage students in the process. It takes time to figure out what criteria student staff should meet

to fit the ethos of the library. It takes time to try different ideas that are going to fail or not work

as well as might have been hoped and need to be tweaked. Critical pedagogy in its embrace of

action→reflection allows for this process.

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[5] James Elmborg, "Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 193.
[6] Elaine J. O'Quinn and Jim Garrison, "Creating Loving Relations in the Classroom" in *Teaching, learning, and loving: reclaiming passion in educational practice.* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 62.

Critical pedagogy sees learners as active, hope-ful(l) agents, participating in the construction and understanding of their world.[7] This is opposed to seeing students merely as assets to be managed. If everything is pedagogy then the library employment context is an educational one. Because learning is additive, cumulative, iterative and relational, the library employment context is an integrative one, where integrative refers to connecting prior/current learning with one's immediate context. My sense, from research, emails and conversation with other librarians, is that many librarians who are responsible for supervising student staff have limited to no experience with doing so and are looking for direction and guidance. Typically, it seems that this direction and guidance does not come from the institution so librarians have to go elsewhere to educate themselves. Librarian literature addressing the supervision of student staff has borrowed extensively, and almost exclusively, from the business world in approach and language

Being able to be active and intervene in the world requires thinking differently about it. Only pulling from a language of supervision and asset management is going to be limited in its effectiveness. If students are going to be able to intervene in the world the world needs to be thought about differently. "A way of thinking beyond seeming naturalness or inevitability of the current state of things, challenging assumptions… soaring beyond the immediate confines of one's experience, entering into a critical dialogue with history and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present."[8] To see the world from multiple angles, dialoging with possibilities, not accepting things for the way they are "supposed" to be. How does a yellow laminated owl or shelving books help a student do this? I posit the owl provides a vehicle for

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[7] This idea is the primary drivers of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope*. Freire writes that "hope is an ontological need." This hope not only influences how the educator approaches the education process but also how the educator is approaching the interactions with the learners as well as with the learners themselves. Paulo Freire, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, and Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of hope: reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. (New York: Continuum. 1994), 2.

[8] Henry A. Giroux, *On critical pedagogy*.(New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 155.

paying attention, owning one's efforts and dialoging through the process when mistakes are made. Learning in its cumulative state includes failure just as much as success.

Being willing to see everything as pedagogy also recognizes that students are whole human beings. "Seeing the students before us as whole human beings in search of meaning is the kind of understanding that a loving perspective affords teachers."[9] Critical pedagogy seeks to provide an opportunity for the student to do connecting work with other aspects of what they are learning. Rather than seeing ourselves as only or merely supervising assets, managing workflows, we need to see ourselves as teachers just as much in the student staff employment context as in the context of the classroom. This care for the student and her development is informed by and emerges from the critical pedagogical approach. The library/ians' recognition of the student as a whole human in search of meaning is going to be driven the library's *ethos*, in conjunction with other cumulatively relational aspects of learning. Embracing this approach allows for really interesting questions to be asked, such as how can or does library employment offer opportunities for the whole student or the whole student's abilities? How are we providing opportunities through student staff employment to do that explorative and connecting work? However those opportunities require a particular attention to language usage.

Consider this particular book title written for an academic library audience working with student staff: *Complete Guide for Supervisors of Student Employees in Today's Academic Libraries*.[10] This title reframes the relationship of the librarian and student into that of supervisor and employee removing any pedagogical interaction or possibility. Framing students only as employees transforms them into assets to be managed rather than viewing the library setting as a

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[9] Daniel Patrick Liston and James W. Garrison. "Introduction" *Teaching, learning, and loving: reclaiming passion in educational practice*. (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 2.
[10] David A. Baldwin and Daniel Barkley. *Complete guide for supervisors of student employees in today's academic libraries*. (Westport, Conn: Libraries Unlimited, 2007). An image of the cover was used in the presentation.

continuation of their learning process. If one were to have these students in a classroom they would be recognized in the role as students. But in their shift over the border from the classroom to institutional employment their role as students tends to be downplayed. Only focusing on students as employees leverages library employment as ongoing participant in making students more suitable for future employment. This is not to say that approaches to personnel and management from the business world are not helpful. Rather this language cannot be the main framing which guides the library's approach to student staff.

As Emily Drabinski points out "students require[d] information literacy skills so that they would be prepared to work in an information literate society…"[11] Framing our language around supervisor/employee relationships limits library employment to preparation and continuation of pliable workforce inclusion. Critical pedagogy sees the student as a whole human in the context of their academic, spiritual, physical, emotional development and process. While skills for future employment may be acquired the focus is on the student in their present context, working for an integration of thinking and skills from past and present.

Library employment offers an active, dynamic platform for the development of new skills integrated with prior knowledge for the synthesis of diverse experiences. Thus we should focus our "pedagogical attention on the teaching situation rather than the externally-defined standards that produce the pedagogical situation in the first place." This approach expects the teaching situation to arise and that the librarian will have the pedagogical tools, training and wherewithal to engage the student in it. These moves past acquiring a set of supervisory skills toward a mindset of expectation and anticipation that teaching situations are going to arise. As an example: how do you respond when a student asks a procedural question or a troubleshooting question (The printer is broken, the front desk is not working, computers won't load, I can't do

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[11] Emily Drabinski, "Toward a Kairos of Library Instruction." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 5 (2014): 482.

X, etc.) Typically my first response is to fix the problem. I'm going to step in and do what needs to be done. Hopefully the student staff member has observed my expert troubleshooting skills as I semi-mumble an explanation and then back I go to whatever I was doing previously.

Choosing how to respond to these types of questions should come from an ethos of pedagogy. I want my student staff to be empowered both in the library and outside of it. And for some of those students that empowerment begins by owning a troubleshooting process, creating that mental space from the problem so that they can view it and address it. Their default is to revert to the authority for assistance before interrogating the problem. This reflects how they think about the word and the world due to years of enculturation and training. But if they are going to ever possibly intervene in the world, they need to practice, even in contexts as mundane as navigating a gnarly printer jam. "What makes one problem "real" and another contrived? One indication is the degree to which it connects to the concrete realities of human beings in particular situations."[12]

My goal is then to treat each of these interactions dialogically and reflectively. Before I get up from my chair I need to create that mental space to recognize this as a pedagogical situation in order to engage with the student and not the problem. Engaging only with the problem only sees the student as a messenger and misses the pedagogical opportunity. Because ten times out of ten, the student is more than capable of addressing the issue, they, for a variety of reasons (confidence, practice, habit etc.) do not trust themselves to do so. Paulo Freire and Horton discuss this idea in *We Make the Road by Walking*. Horton states "You have to respect their [the student's] knowledge, which they don't respect, and help them respect their knowledge." Freire responds "The teacher has to know the content that he teaches…to *continue*

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[12] Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier.. *Critical library instruction theories and methods*. (Duluth, Minn: Library Juice Press, 2010), 65.

to know why the student…*really* learns when the student becomes able to know the content that was taught. It's Impossible to escape from knowing that what is important is to know what it *really* means to know."[13]

The library's approach to student staff should be informed by pedagogical and critical resources that view the library tasks as pedagogical opportunities. Library tasks can be recast as integrative opportunities rather than as ends unto themselves.[14] This is how a laminated paper owl can offer a way into pedagogy. Ultimately my goal for library employment is that the library's mission and the student staff's passions for intervening in the world find overlap so that the library serves as platform for student staff. I believe this is what Elmborg calls for when he writes that librarians should "…become specialists in coaching intellectual growth and critical development."[15]

In conclusion, I return to this question: **How can library employment teach/equip/_____   student staff for active intervention in the world?** I do not have concrete answers. Rather I believe that a critical pedagogical approach to student staff which recognizes the necessity for students being able to read, write, dialogue, learn from a position of agency, engaging in questions are essential for intervening in the world. This takes creativity, this takes imagination, this takes time. I think if libraries are really serious about the whole student and the library's pedagogical role, critical pedagogy must inform student staff development. Thank you.

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[13] Myles Horton, Paulo Freire. *We make the road by walking: conversations on education and social change*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 55-57.

[14] I do give student staff a head's up when the library staff is going to try something new. They are definitely not just getting experimented upon. I am very up front and honest with them about what has worked, what needs tweaking and what has tanked. Typically they will provide insightful and helpful feedback about what should be tried which contributes to the richness of the process.

[15] James Elmborg, "Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 198.

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