5B—The Languages of Academic Libraries

Innovations in Excellence: Neoliberal keywords in Canadian academic library strategic plans, Courtney Waugh (University of Western Ontario)

The past thirty years has seen a progressive shift in higher education, with an increased emphasis on corporate managerial practices in the daily work-life of academics under the broader ideological agenda of neoliberalism. Hallmarks of neoliberal thought within the context of higher education and libraries include marketization, privatization, quality assurance, and internationalization. These themes are reinforced through ideological-discursive practices that naturalize the language of neoliberalism to a degree that other alternative discourses may be suppressed or ignored.

This research explores the impact of neoliberal language on ten Canadian academic libraries in an attempt to understand how they are engaging with neoliberal concepts through the institutional discourse of their public planning documents. Strategic planning documents represent the public face of the library, and can be used to understand organizational practice. As institutional priorities reflect wider changing social practices and dominant discourses, examining the language used in these planning documents may shed some light on how deeply neoliberal thought permeates the strategic visions and goals of academic libraries. Using content analysis and Fairclough’s method of Critical Discourse Analysis, the documents were analyzed for evidence of how broader social practices and discourses impact the language of librarianship, influencing or re-contextualizing the meaning of selected words and concepts.

How are academic libraries engaging with these neoliberal ideas and concepts? How are we using this language to frame our institutional identities—language that often runs counter to traditional librarian core values, such as equity, democracy, privacy, and intellectual freedom?

The focus of this paper is on unpacking the meanings behind two ubiquitous buzzwords, innovation and excellence, in the context of academic library strategic planning documents. Innovation and excellence are explored as neoliberal keywords that serve to reinforce the rhetoric of the market while appearing unrelated to it. Raymond William’s concept of keywords is used as a frame for examining the contested meanings behind these words, and for uncovering the social and ideological structures which underpin them. These keywords are discussed in relation to the broader themes of marketization and quality assurance, and are considered as part of the larger discourse of change framing academic libraries and higher education. This paper is an attempt to “denaturalize” the rhetoric of innovation and excellence, and to nudge a conversation about the uncritical adoption of language in our strategic planning documents.