Innovations in Excellence: neoliberal keywords in Canadian academic library strategic plans.

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Like many of you in this room, I have spent the past few years watching with great interest and consternation, as the landscape of higher education changes under the broader ideological agenda of Neoliberalism. A recent presidential salary scandal at my own institution has unmasked what many feel is an increasingly corporate approach to university management, and a disdain for collegial governance. The gift that emerged from the fallout of the scandal is a movement across campus which questions the increasing corporatization of the university and demands a renewed focus on the core mission of the university. From my perspective, part of that inquiry is an exploration into the way certain neoliberal keywords act to reinforce market ideology in higher education and academic libraries, while feigning no relation to it.

Today's presentation is part of a larger research project that I began about three years ago which explores the degree to which Canadian academic libraries are engaging with neoliberal language in their institutional planning documents. To define neoliberalism I will refer to Daniel Saunders who views it as "a varied collection of ideas, practices, policies and discursive representations . . . united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor." As the dominant political ideology for almost forty years, neoliberalism has become part of our collective consciousness and has extended into our public institutions and is shaping them in economic terms (Buschman, 2003).

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 (Fister, 2010; Gorman, 2000)? 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 (Ayers, 2005; Gaffikin & Perry, 2009; Greene & McMenemy, 2012).

This project began as an exploratory study of three Ontario academic libraries but I have since expanded it to include 10 (English-speaking) CARL member libraries. I used content analysis and Fairclough's method of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine four dominant themes influencing Canadian post-secondary education as identified by Kirby (2007) : marketization, quality assurance, privatization, and internationalization. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach that examines language and text as social practice and considers issues of power and oppression (Fairclough, 1995). This approach entails a close reading of the documents multiple times and ties themes to broader social practices and discourses. The analysis also considers who produces the documents, who consumes them, and who or what is missing.

A review of the literature indicates that universities and libraries are choosing to include neoliberal language in their public planning documents. Findings from the literature acknowledge the discursive power of neoliberal language to influence the language of librarianship, and reframe the public's perception of library services (Greene & McMenemy, 2012). Some authors suggest that we live in a post-Neoliberal era as a result of the 2008 financial

crisis (where the market was essentially saved by the public purse), and must reconsider the relevance of neoliberal rhetoric in light of the philosophy's perceived failure (Holborow, 2012; McMenemy, 2009) This reinforces LIS scholar John Budd's (1997) assertion that language is not neutral, and can be used as a powerful rhetorical tool to rationalize policies that undermine the public democratic function of libraries.

As I began sifting through the four neoliberal themes, two keywords kept nagging at me for further exploration: innovation and excellence. Innovation emerged as a sub-theme of marketization in my analysis, and excellence is tightly tied to the theme of quality assurance and is informed by the outcomes of innovation. The nagging was prompted in part by the sheer exasperation that I felt every time I read them, and partly by my own confusion at not consistently understanding the meanings behind these words. They were interesting to me because they are ubiquitous and over used, not only in library-land but pretty much *everywhere*. They are used to qualify many elements of our work, while simultaneously existing as vague signifiers of something else that I could only articulate as general newness or greatness or better-ness or something along those lines. They evoke competition between rivals and yet their widespread adoption suggests an even playing field.

And when I did a little more digging it was clear to me that while there appears to be consensus around these terms, at least we can all agree that they are heavily used, these terms are also contested because their meanings are malleable and unclear.

I was also drawn to them because my own institution is currently undergoing a new strategic planning cycle and both innovation and excellence emerged respectively as desirable values and outcomes as a result of staff and stakeholder feedback.

Today I will be discussing how innovation and excellence are used in selected academic library strategic planning documents, and we will consider their meanings as neoliberal keywords. So what exactly do I mean by "keywords"? For librarians, the term keywords has a specific meaning related to the search process; that is, keywords are understood as target words which can be used as search terms in online research databases and catalogues. In the context of this research study, the meaning of keywords goes beyond our professional understanding and considers them as part of a larger "cultural vocabulary"—their uses and meanings dancing between consensus and contestation. Raymond Williams (1985) first advanced the concept of keywords as a way of interrogating selected ". . . ideologically sensitive words whose associations and connotations were not settled and whose meanings were under negotiation . . . as diverse actors struggle with social change" (Holborow, 2012). His book by the same name gained Williams a reputation as one of the most significant thinkers of his day, and his work continues today through the University of Pittsburgh's *Keywords Project*. By adopting Williams' framework, we can   examine the words as elements of larger social and cultural problems, and make sense of both their implicit and explicit connections.

Context & Background

It is important to note the larger context in which these plans exist. All of the library strategic plans are explicit about aligning with the strategic directions of their parent institutions. The institutional plans provide context and meaning, and the libraries draw their direction from them. Dalhousie University Libraries in fact, references a libraries operational review report that recommended "using the 2010-2013 University Strategies *rather than* the unique Dal Libraries strategies, and identify Dal Libraries goals and objectives for each of the University's strategies."

This strategic alignment is important to consider from the perspective of professional advocacy, especially in cases where institutional values and core librarian values are at odds.

The number of times the terms are used in the documents is less important than the ways in which they are used, but the numbers are of interest inasmuch as they highlight preferences for certain themes among the libraries. The plans vary in length from 2 to 22 pages, so for example, although UTL has the highest number of references (17) to innovation (and variations such as innovative, innovators), if we look at it per thousand words, McMaster actually has the highest rate of engagement with this term. Excellence was used much less frequently in the documents, but its use was so enthusiastically vapid that it was pause for consideration. Per thousand words, Western had the highest rate of engagement with excellence based on its newly unveiled Strategy Map, followed by UBC.

How are these terms being used in the plans?

All ten libraries employed the term innovation, or the variations of the term, in their plans. It is used in a variety of contexts, but is never really defined which indicates that it is so accepted—so taken for granted—that a definition is seemingly unnecessary. The closest proximity of a definition can be seen in the triad "innovation, creativity, risk taking." Both UBC and University   of Saskatchewan libraries employ this triad as part of their plans' respective value statements.

McMaster modified this to include another concept, collaboration, alongside innovation, creativity, and risk taking; and this grouping also appears as part of the Values section of the McMaster document. In these groupings, innovation, creativity, and risk taking refer back to one another as reinforcing elements that are necessary for progress and change. Taken together the

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value statement being communicated both internally and externally is around the ability to respond to change. Innovation when it stands on its own is much more amorphous.

Innovation does appear on its own alongside other singular concepts in the Values and /or Principles sections of the Dalhousie, University of Manitoba, and Western plans. The way it is used here can be interpreted as a statement of the library's identity or a statement of institutional brand loyalty, yet it is ultimately detached from any referent, and is assumed to be understood on its own merit. Innovation is as innovation does.

The values piece is important to consider as these documents articulate to the public what core principles guide librarians. In all instances where innovation occurs as part of a value statement, it exists alongside other librarian-centric values such as stewardship, access, privacy, intellectual freedom, diversity, and service. For the most part, the balance in value statements is in alignment with library core values; however, there is a noticeable creep of neoliberal hallmarks such as innovation, quality, and accountability, and customer service.

Innovation is part of a larger discourse of transformational change in academic libraries that Karen Nicholson (2015) describes as, "grounded in an uncritical adoption of neoliberal philosophy and corporate practices." When we invoke innovation as a value, we reaffirm the need for libraries to change according to the conventions of the market and we perpetuate the pervasive "libraries in crisis" narrative, for which there is no other alternative but to innovate. We also acknowledge that innovation is a value that is as important as privacy, intellectual freedom, and stewardship for the profession's very *existence*.

McMaster, University of Saskatchewan, Dalhousie, and Queen's also include variations of innovation as part of their Vision and/or Mission statements. As it is used in these contexts it describes the aspirational culture of the library, and can be seen as a key indicator by which

library services are developed and assessed. An example: "McMaster University Library will be recognized as Canada's most innovative, user-centred, academic library"; and University of Saskatchewan Libraries: "As leaders and innovator*s* in a dynamic information environment, we collaborate with our community to create a positive experience that leads to success in leaning, scholarship, and practice." In the Queen's vision statement, innovations are outcomes of collaborations and partnerships: "Our best innovations happen through collaboration—across the library, with our faculties, through our schools and through our regional, national and international partnerships." Through these outcomes the institution affirms innovation as an aspiration.

Where innovation does refer to something in the strategic plans, it describes just about every aspect of the library. These include technology, services, scholarship, teaching, academic programs, leadership, staff and faculty innovations. There is a sense that everything can be innovated upon, and in more than one strategic plan, multiple innovations are mentioned within a single document. Here innovations are inventions, new or expanded ideas, improvements to existing services, and so on. It is also something that can be cultivated through funding strategies or professional development. Victoria Rubin and colleagues (2011) suggest that, the rhetorical use of the term may function as a remedy that will save libraries from forces that threaten their existence. However, slotting innovation in as the solution to anything and everything the library delivers truly weakens any force behind the term so as to make it hollow and meaningless.

Excellence is similarly employed in the strategic plans to describe numerous elements of librarianship. For example: "excellence in library collections," "excellence in current operations," "research excellence," "scholarly excellence," "educational excellence," "service excellence," "organizational excellence!", and "excellence of library staff." Other uses include

"strategies for excellence" and the mildly bewildering statement, "So we can operate effectively and with excellence." The latter is exemplary of what Professor Philip Moriarty (2014) describes as "the vacuity of excellence." In a recent blog post, he demands, "What else is a university, or any type of organisation, going to do than try to be excellent? Strive for mediocrity? Pursue adequate performance? Try to be a little better than the rest, but not aim too high?"

But excellence is more than just wanting to be excellent in the current OED sense of "extremely good." Excellence is "The state or fact of excelling" relative to something else. However, the oft- used expression "excellence in" implies no direct comparison with others— there is a likelihood that everyone has the potential to demonstrate *excellence in* the same area (Allan, n.d.). And yet, there is an implied rivalry by institutions who increasingly hail excellence as a distinguishing characteristic.

Through their abundant and myriad applications, innovation and excellence can be characterized as "floating signifiers." A floating signifier is defined as "a signifier without a specific signified"—that is, a term stripped of any stable referent and can stand for many things. Another way to think about it is a term that *absorbs* rather than emits meaning. The rhetorical use of floating signifiers can institutionalize language and legitimize ideological power structures that exist beneath the surface (e.g. funding structures, corporate models). As language is institutionalized, it becomes naturalized and less vulnerable to criticism—in this way, innovation and excellence become like wallpaper as they cover almost every aspect of librarianship (Marginson, 2011).

The ideological underpinnings of floating signifiers are not always obvious, yet in the ways which they are used, the ideology by default becomes the referent, or, as Christopher Carter (2005) suggests, the terms are "re-referentialized." For example, excellence as it is

generally used   signals quality but it also implies comparison in the way that one institution excels relative to   another. Underlying the concept of excellence in higher education are problematic global   rankings systems such as the Maclean's University Rankings and the Carnegie Classification   system. When universities invoke excellence they reinforce and reproduce competition within the   global market of higher education through the ideology of merit (Allan, n.d.; Carter, 2005).

Bill Readings (1996) in his book *The University in Ruins* suggests that excellence has become "the common currency of ranking" within higher education.

Innovation, both as activity and discourse, is a practice imported from the corporate sector. It is   emblematic of the "knowledge economy" narrative to improve society through economic growth.

In the higher education sector good academic research is seen as socially and economically useful   research. The commercialization of scholarship is accelerated through various policy and funding initiatives based on market logic, such as the Canadian Foundation for Innovation and others. As money follows innovation, universities are increasingly forced to compete for research funds based on their potential social and economic contributions. As a result there is a competitive advantage for certain types of research, and by extension certain research disciplines (STEM disciplines have the advantage while A&H, music, and programs that support our own profession are under real threat of elimination—and we are seeing this happening). A related unintended consequence of research funding policy is increased hierarchy among institutions and decreased status for those institutions and programs that cannot compete (Fisher & Rubenson, 2010; Pekkola, 2009).

There are endless blog posts and articles about our unconscious adoption of buzzwords. In a

2012 infographic about the ubiquity of innovation in U.S. business speak, innovation was

mentioned   over 33,000 times in quarterly and annual reports. And yet we continue to adopt and

incorporate   them into our milieu. Why are we so willing to do so?

Innovation and excellence work in the context of librarianship because they are innocuous

and   appeal to emotion and common-sense logic. We can all agree on the need for innovation

and   excellence. It is the "power of positive thinking" and "the promise of a new tomorrow"

associated   with these terms that make them so attractive and impervious to criticism. Innovation

for   example, is less crudely economic than terms like "entrepreneurial," and yet it lives within

the   same sphere of reference, that of the market. These keywords are ambiguous yet heavy in

connotation which makes them susceptible to appropriation to suit a diversity of agendas

(Mautner 2005).

Neoliberal rhetoric focuses heavily on opportunities rather than acknowledging any

problems   inherent in a broken system. Contradictions are *cloaked* beneath emotion and

common-sense   logic. The immediately positive connotations of innovation and excellence are

foregrounded   while any inequities resulting from underlying structures fall into the

background. It is through this uncritical adoption of neoliberal philosophy that academic

libraries internalize the attitudes   and dispositions necessary to embrace innovation and other

corporate practices. That is why defining innovation seems unnecessary because we accept it as

a positive necessity not to be questioned or resisted (Carter, 2005; Nicholson, 2015; Pekkola,

2009). This brings us back to John Budd (Budd, 1997), who reminds us "that the language of

consumerism and commodification dominates beyond the sphere of librarianship is not

sufficient reason to accept it uncritically."

So what do we do with all of this? Where do we go from here?

The analysis presented here is an attempt to "denaturalize" the rhetoric of innovation and excellence by considering them as ideologically sensitive keywords, and to nudge a conversation about the uncritical adoption of language in our strategic planning documents. Part of that conversation is raising critical questions at our own institutions and acknowledging the neoliberal context in which we operate.

Rather than looking to business models to solve our perceived problems of diminishing value and relevance, we should be exploring alternative discourses grounded in a reaffirmation of core library values because it is these values that are increasingly under threat, and like our colleague Lisa Slonoiski (2012) suggests, "we need to be ON MESSAGE."

Since keywords are the focal points around which discourses of change take shape, it is also useful to consider our core values as keywords in the context of neoliberalism—privacy immediately comes to mind here—and advocate strongly for them, as their meanings are becoming fragile and open to interpretation. Thank you.

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