

Enlightenment, Neoliberalism, and Information Literacy

In recent years, library scholars and practitioners have argued that libraries and librarians should explicitly embrace and promulgate ideas such as rationality, objectivity, positivism, and progress popularly associated with the historical Enlightenment. For example, several scholars, particularly John Buschman (2003, 2005, 2006), use Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere to articulate the current role of libraries. In Habermas's formulation, the bourgeois public sphere, a site of "non-governmental opinion-making," arose in the eighteenth century in conjunction with the market economy and the widespread diffusion of print communication. In the view of scholars such as Buschman, the library today plays the same role as the public sphere did in the eighteenth century; it is a space in which members of the public can rationally discuss, critique, and challenge government policy and actions. In his book, *Libraries and the Enlightenment*, Wayne Bivens-Tatum argues that "The philosophical and political principles of the European Enlightenment provide the philosophical foundation of American academic and public libraries" (2012, p. ix). Those principles are based on a "coherent set of values centering on human reason and freedom" (2012, p. xi). The use of the Enlightenment in library discourse frequently functions as a call to arms for libraries, as a way of identifying and promoting the valuable yet so frequently undervalued work that libraries do. However, as literary critic and postcolonial studies scholar Suvir Kaul notes, "When [Enlightenment] is deployed in an unexamined, unqualified, or self-congratulatory and Eurocentric way, it functions as the celebratory common sense of several modern disciplines" (Kaul, 2009, p. 318).

As some of you may know, the role of common sense in library discourse is my nemesis, so this presentation will focus on the ways in which ideas popularly associated with the

Enlightenment function as common sense in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which was formally approved by the Association of College and Research Libraries at the beginning of this year (ACRL, 2015). I should note that I am talking about the way popular, and more specifically, popular American, understandings of the Enlightenment are deployed, not about specific texts of the historical Enlightenment. I appreciate the heterogeneity of those historical texts and ideas, but also contend that heterogeneity does not preclude ideological hegemony, and note that the ideas I will be discussing do have a specific history, and emerged during the Enlightenment or modernity. That connection with the historical Enlightenment gives these ideas particular power, specifically within the American context. The bulk of this presentation will be a close reading of the Framework for Information Literacy but that close reading is primarily a jumping off point for the final, exploratory, and speculative section of the presentation. My abstract promised answers, but I will end with more questions. I just hope they are productive questions and that I can discuss them with some of you.

The Framework is, not surprisingly, given that it was written by committee, a conflicted and contradictory document. Unlike other documents produced by ALA or ACRL, it does not overtly endorse neoliberalism. There are some uncritical references to the information society, the strange connection of information literacy to an “education reform movement,” and frequent use of the phrase “information ecosystem,” whose emphasis on the natural I find a little troubling. The new definition of information literacy emphasizes “dynamism, flexibility, individual growth” which seem like they might fit well with John Patrick Leary’s Keywords for the Age of Austerity (ACRL, 2015). Overall, though, the Framework seems to have taken many of the critiques offered by the critical information literacy movement to heart. This is not anything

like the decontextualized, ahistorical, and apolitical Standards we knew and hated. But the Framework is conflicted, internally contradictory, and ambivalent about some of these changes, specifically in its understanding of power relations and standards.

Unlike the Standards, the Framework is explicitly interested in power relations and clearly articulates the ways in which power influences information production and consumption. In the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame, for example, “Experts understand the need to determine the validity of information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations.” This frame wants learners to “remain skeptical” of systems that endow authority and to “recognize that unlikely voices can be authoritative.” In the “Information has Value” frame, “Experts understand that value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices.” Learners should eventually “Understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information” and be “inclined to examine their own information privilege.” The “Scholarship as Conversation” frame notes that “established power and authority structures may influence [learners’] ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information” and asks that learners “Recognize that systems privilege authorities” (ACRL, 2015).

This emphasis on power relations pervades these three frames, but is almost entirely absent from the other three frames, even though these areas are not immune to power relations. “Searching as Strategic Exploration” does not recognize the constructedness of information systems while “Research as Inquiry” could easily gesture towards Kuhnian formulations of

knowledge production but does not. “Information Creation as Process” points out that information may be of different value depending on the context but then unproblematically uses editing and peer review as a proxy for “quality” (ACRL, 2015). Roughly half of the Framework is extremely interested in the role of power relations in information creation and access and roughly half would rather not mention it.

The Framework is similarly conflicted about its own position. Its introduction explicitly rejects standards and “is called a framework intentionally because it is based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards, learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills.” Shortly thereafter, though, the document notes: “Two added elements illustrate important learning goals related to those concepts: *knowledge practices*, which are demonstrations of ways in which learners can increase their understanding of these information literacy concepts and *dispositions*, which describe ways in which to address the affective, attitudinal, or valuing dimension of learning.” The introduction continues with “Neither the knowledge practices nor the dispositions that support each concept are intended to prescribe what local institutions should do in using the Framework; each library and its partners on campus will need to deploy these frames to best fit their own situation, including designing learning outcomes. For the same reason, these lists should not be considered exhaustive” (ACRL, 2015).

Within each frame, the lists of knowledge practices and dispositions are introduced with the sentence “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities do the following” (ACRL, 2015). Occasionally a frame will have only a couple of dispositions listed, but generally the lists of knowledge practices and dispositions are quite lengthy and specifically detailed. They

are actions and behaviors performed by individual learners. Despite the extensive verbiage in the Framework's introduction, the knowledge practices and dispositions look like standards, learning outcomes, and prescriptive enumerations of skills. If the knowledge practices and dispositions are not intended to be prescriptive, why are they necessary? If they are not intended to be exhaustive, why are there so many of them and why are they so carefully and specifically articulated? Given that ACRL produced and disseminated the Framework, how can it not be considered in some way a standard? It is meant to apply to all academic libraries and librarians, as well as to all students, and is meant to replace Standards that owned their standardness.

If the Framework is ambivalent about its own authoritative position and the importance of power relations, it is unequivocal in its embrace of change. It is probably somewhat inevitable that a document about learning would be grounded in a narrative of linear progress, but it is not the only way to frame learning; indeed, information search is frequently described as recursive and non-linear. The Framework, however, is positioned as the means for information literacy to "realize its potential" at a moment of great historical change. The Framework is moving past, progressing beyond the old Standards and as such, will "open the way" for librarians to do great things. The use of threshold concepts, or "passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing," implies progress, as does the Framework's claim to "fresh ideas." Learners move along a trajectory from novice to expert within the Framework, becoming information literate through "dynamism" and "individual growth." The very idea of information literacy relies on progress, as there is a time before information literacy, when individuals are not information literate. This progress is achieved almost entirely through individual actions, although the Framework does reference community learning in the revised definition of

information literacy. Learners individually become information literate, by acquiring knowledge practices and dispositions. Librarians use the Framework on their individual campuses. The universal goal is information literacy, but the progress and the changes that will result from this individual action are in the realm of reform, not revolution: “The Framework opens the way for librarians, faculty, and other institutional partners to redesign instruction sessions, assignments, courses, and even curricula.”

The Framework’s inconsistent analysis of power relations, disavowal of standards per se but simultaneous embrace of universal measures of learning, and grounding in a narrative of progress reveal its investment in liberalism, a political philosophy that emerged from the Enlightenment/modernity. Although there are many varieties of liberalism, David Theo Goldberg identifies its core concerns in his book *Racist Culture* (1993):

“Liberalism is committed to individualism for it takes as basic the moral, political, and legal claims of the individual over and against those of the collective. It seeks foundations in universal principles applicable to all human beings or rational agents in virtue of their humanity or rationality. In this, liberalism seeks to transcend particular historical, social, and cultural differences[...] Moral, political, economic, and cultural progress is to be brought about by and reflected in carefully planned institutional improvement” (p. 5).

For Goldberg, liberalism is the dominant mode of understanding the self and society in modernity; for political theorists Chantal Mouffe and John Gray, liberalism functions as hegemonic ideology, particularly in the United States. Mouffe (2005) notes that liberalism cannot think politically or about power relations in a meaningful way because it cannot

understand collective identities and unresolvable antagonisms; in liberalism, differences can always be subsumed into some sort of universally appealing “harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble” (p. 10). The Framework’s inconsistency in incorporating power relations into the frames reflects this, as does its universally achievable goal of information literacy, which may appear to accommodate differences in learners and libraries in its emphasis on the local, but ultimately functions as a universal standard.

The liberal underpinnings of the Framework are also apparent in how it talks about learning and measures of learning. Learning is understood to be individual act, and is the same for each learner, who acquires knowledge practices and dispositions and moves from information illiterate to information literate. The figure of the learner is emptied of history; despite the emphasis on local contexts, there is no sense that context and history bear on learning. This is paralleled in the position of the Framework as a universal standard. The Framework gestures towards local contexts but at the same time insists that the Framework works in all contexts. Its narrative of progress is totalizing in its insistence on the fundamental sameness of learners and institutions. Progress, in the Framework, has a single trajectory, which forecloses the alternatives promised by the Framework’s simultaneous emphasis on the local. This particular path of progress becomes reified, natural, and the only possible path.

The liberalism underlying the Framework does not challenge neoliberalism but rather makes it easier for neoliberalism to take hold. Liberalism emphasizes individual freedom and action, which resonates with neoliberalism’s emphasis on “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” in order to advance human progress (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Liberalism also insists upon universals; the Framework focuses on the universality of information literacy and its

accompanying knowledge practices and dispositions for students and on the Framework as a universal guiding document for libraries and librarians. Within neoliberalism, the market is understood in totalizing terms; it is the solution to all problems. The liberal subject is born free, into a world without constraints, as is homo oeconomicus. Because of the decontextualized and ahistorical approach to subjectivity and the social world in liberalism, both tend towards reification (Mouffe, 2005). The world as it is becomes the world as it should be, and alternative configurations of society disappear.¹

As I mentioned earlier, the Framework continually contradicts its own liberalism. It is able to identify and describe power relations and difference, context, and history are foregrounded in the introduction even if they are undermined in the Framework's position as a standard. This creates space in which we can productively theorize a vision of library instruction and information literacy that critically engages with, rather than relies on, Enlightenment ideas such as universality and progress, but avoids retreating into meaninglessness, cynicism, and nihilism. In order to do so, I would like to turn to postcolonial and political theorizations of the Enlightenment. Because, as Suvir Kaul notes, "Imperialist ideologies have been enormously successful in translating self-centred and parochial views of the world into explanatory paradigms whose universal force is hard to shake," postcolonial studies can offer ways of responding to universalizing or totalizing narratives of progress (2009, 324). In *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty points to the constructedness and unnaturalness of the analytical categories used to describe the history of non-Western nations and peoples. The project of provincializing Europe is "tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort

¹ See also Brown, 2015 for an in-depth explanation of neoliberalism as ideology.

at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be radically heterogeneous” (p. 46). It is identifying and articulating that which cannot be captured by purportedly universal yet fundamentally Western explanatory frameworks, but still using those frameworks when they are useful. Nikita Dhawan similarly understands the role of postcolonial studies in relation to the Enlightenment. “The challenge,” she argues “is to unsettle and subvert the mastering ambitions of the Enlightenment without a simple rejection of its claims” (2014, p. 68). Its claims to have overcome history, its universal principles, its instrumental reason, and its hegemonic forms of knowledge must be denaturalized rather than uncritically celebrated; ironically, the critical consciousness that enables us to do this, is, as postcolonial theorists such as Dhawan, Chakrabarty, and Gayatri Spivik (1999) point out, also a legacy of the Enlightenment.²

Mouffe and Gray’s theorizations of liberalism reveal why this challenge is crucial. According to Gray (2007), within liberalism, “cultural difference is seen through the distorting lens of choice, as an epiphenomenon of personal life-plans, preferences and conceptions of the good” (p. 187) rather than as incommensurably different ways of being and living. This understanding of historical difference as choice allows it to be subsumed in the totalizing sameness of liberalism. The pluralist perspective Gray proposes, in contrast, leads to the “possibility of a diversity of irreducibly different regimes, liberal and non-liberal” (2007, p. 191). This creates grounds on which to contest neoliberalism, which Gray theorizes as “the attempted dissolution of distinctive ways of life animated by incommensurable cultures in the all-consuming commensurability and homogeneity of the global market” (2007, p. 233). This is

² See also Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002.

similar to Mouffe's theorization of democracy. Antagonism and conflict are what make democracy possible; a lack of dissent signifies the imposition of authoritarian order. Moreover, the presence of conflict creates space in which existing orders and power structures can be challenged and their reification resisted: "An agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed" (2005, p. 33).

The questions I would like to conclude on, then, are: what would it look like to frame our instructional (and other?) work around the ideas of irreducible difference and political antagonism? Can this help us think through the goals of library instruction without reducing those goals to a list of behaviors and attitudes? Can the dialectical relationship between postcolonial studies and the Enlightenment speak to librarianship? I am particularly interested in working with Spivak's formulation of education. She describes the relationship between teacher and student as "learning to learn from below" and fundamentally dialectical. Her interest in learning "from the singular and unverifiable" might offer a way to center learning on difference and antagonism. (Millan & Zafer, 2014, p. 321). I ask these questions not to get at the Truth of Information Literacy - Emily Drabinski's (2014) intervention in this debate using the notion of Kairos is absolutely correct - but in order to more productively think about the political work we perform when we enter the classroom.

References

- Association of College and Research Libraries. (2015). Framework for information literacy for higher education. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>
- Bivens-Tatum, W. (2012). *Libraries and the Enlightenment*. Los Angeles: Library Juice Press.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Buschman, J. (2003). *Dismantling the public sphere: Situating and sustaining librarianship in the age of the new public philosophy*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Buschman, J. (2005). On libraries and the public sphere. *Library Philosophy & Practice*, 7(2), 1-8. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=lxh&AN=17712687&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Buschman, J. (2006). "The integrity and obstinacy of intellectual creations:" Jurgen Habermas and librarianship's theoretical literature. *Library Quarterly*, 76(3), 270-299. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=lxh&AN=24325932&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Dhawan, N. (2014). Affirmative sabotage of the master's tools: The paradox of postcolonial Enlightenment in N. Dhawan (Ed.), *Decolonizing enlightenment: Transnational justice*,

- human rights and democracy in a postcolonial world* (pp. 19-78). Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Drabinski, E. (2014). Toward a Kairos of library instruction. *Journal Of Academic Librarianship*, 40(5), 480-485. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2014.06.002
- Goldberg, D. T. (1993). *Racist culture: Philosophy and the politics of meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gray, J. (2007). *Enlightenment's wake: Politics and culture at the close of the modern age*. London: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kaul, S. (2009). Coda: How to write postcolonial histories of empire? in Carey, D., & Festa, L. M. (Eds.), *The postcolonial enlightenment: Eighteenth-century colonialism and postcolonial theory* (pp. 305-327). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Millan, A. & Zafer, A. (2014). Provincializing cosmopolitanism: Democratic iterations and desubalternization. In N. Dhawan (Ed.), *Decolonizing enlightenment: Transnational justice, human rights and democracy in a postcolonial world* (pp. 311-326). Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. London: Routledge.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

