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CHAPTER 4*

“Taking Back” Information Literacy

Time and the One-Shot in the Neoliberal University†

Karen P. Nicholson

Introduction

Librarians openly acknowledge the shortcomings of the one-shot (i.e., when a faculty member invites a librarian into the classroom to provide one-time information literacy instruction, typically related to a research assignment). The library and information science (LIS) literature is replete with discussions of the pedagogical weaknesses and practical constraints of this approach, yet it remains the dominant model for information literacy instruction in North American higher education nonetheless. To date, however, with the exception of Emily Drabinski’s 2014 article “Towards a *Kairos* of Library Instruction,” LIS researchers have not used time as a heuristic to examine issues related to information literacy.¹ This is somewhat surprising, given the fact that the one-shot is all about time: how to negotiate with faculty for additional class time, how to manage classroom time effectively in order to facilitate student learning, how to “stretch time” using

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approaches such as the flipped classroom. Building on Drabinski's creative work, in this essay I propose to use time as a lens to explore why, despite our best efforts to move beyond the one-shot, librarians have largely failed to establish information literacy as an integral part of the higher education curriculum.

Time: *Kairos* and *Chronos*

As both a theoretical construct and a practice, information literacy has an indelible “time stamp,” the imprint of the context in which it appears, and a “time signature,” the metre that marks the rhythms of information literacy instruction. These dual temporal orders are represented in the concepts of *kairos*, a kind of qualitative time, and *chronos*, the quantitative, abstract, and socially constructed time of clock and calendar.² Unpacking the time of information literacy reveals that, as a mechanism for structuring social life, time is not neutral; in the words of Drabinski, “Linking time and action enables us to de-naturalize accepted norms of professional discourse and practice.”³ Time, as *kairos*, requires us to acknowledge that information literacy—like all literacies—is a situated practice, fixed in and informed by particular sociohistorical contexts, values, and technologies.⁴ “In its origins, the concept [of *kairos*] was used to give shape to the present as always already embedded in a context, produced by social and political forces and demanding responsive and proportional action in order to effect change: the present does not exist outside of the conditions that precede it.”⁵

Using time as a framework allows us to challenge mainstream conceptions of information literacy as a set of cognitive skills for the “post-industrial information society”—a view of the “information age” prevalent in the LIS literature, largely based in Daniel Bell's controversial book, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*—to propose instead that information literacy is, and always has been, a political practice shaped by the influence of “academic capitalism” and its attendant temporal order.⁶ Time, as *kairos*, allows us to uncover the pernicious issue at the heart of information literacy—namely, information literacy is a construct developed for and taught within the broader context of the neoliberal university, which embraces a skills agenda.* I contend that if

* Karen Nicholson, “Information Literacy as a Situated Practice in the Neoliberal University,” in Proceedings of the Annual Conference of CAIS (St. Catharines, ON, May 28–30, 2014), 3, <http://www.caais-acsi.ca/ojs/index.php/caais/article/view/901>. As a theory of political economic practices, neoliberalism refers to “the general idea that society works best when the people and the institutions within it work or are shaped to work according to market principles.” Lester K. Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2015), 3. The main tenets of neoliberalism include privatization, deregulation, free trade, reduced public spending, and the elimination of the public good. Although most research on neoliberalism in higher education focuses on the university, neoliberalism has had a similar impact across institutions. Daniel B. Saunders, “Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States,” *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 55, available online at <http://www.jceps.com/archives/626>.

librarians have struggled to move beyond the one-shot model, it is in no small part because by virtue of its brief, episodic nature—one that can result only in a superficial, skills-oriented approach—the one-shot is in perfect sync with the accelerated, fragmented “corporate time” *chronos* of contemporary higher education.⁷

The *Kairos* of Information Literacy: Preparing Workers for the Information Society

In her exploration of time and information literacy, Drabinski employs the concept of *kairos* to reveal that information literacy originates as a political response on the part of the library profession, largely left out of neoliberal educational reforms in the 1980s intended to better prepare workers for the “information age.”⁸ Information literacy is not an ahistoric truth, it is a form of academic capitalism that allows librarians to stake a claim for themselves in the higher education curriculum—and more broadly, in the information or knowledge economy, “the biggest business” for “highly advanced societies like the United States.”⁹

Because the information age requires workers with a new set of skills, the state deems educational reform a necessity: “Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce...If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in today’s markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system.”¹⁰ In a neoliberal knowledge economy, the state invests in education in order to enhance the future economic productivity of workers (human capital); students and their parents invest in it because they believe it will lead to better (more lucrative) future employment.[†]

The focus on skills and the discursive representation of “worker-as-skills-bundle” or “portfolio” operates within a particular juncture in the history and conditions of capitalist production, variously portrayed as post-Fordism, late capitalism, flexible accumulation, or neoliberalism.¹¹ In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard argues that in the post-industrial era, knowledge has become a commodity, important for its exchange value (the time of the future) rather than its use value (the time of the

† Higher education—in the West at least—has always been driven by the demands of state and capital. What distinguishes the neoliberal university is “the scope and extent of [its] profit-driven corporate ends, as well as how many students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers explicitly support and embrace the[m].” Saunders, “Neoliberal Ideology,” 55.

present).¹² In essence, then, information literacy is about investing in human capital in exchange for economic gains. It is about work and wages. And it is here that the shift from *kairos* to *chronos* occurs: clock time is the medium through which work (labour) is translated into its abstract exchange value as wages; that is to say, workers are compensated for their labour *calculated as time* (e.g., an hourly rate of pay).¹³ In order to understand this point and how it relates to information literacy, it is useful to briefly outline the relationship between time, capital, and labour from the industrial age to the information age.*

Chronos: Time, Capital, and Labour

Karl Marx and Max Weber both understood that capitalism depends on changing not only how people use time but also how they perceive it.¹⁴ Prior to the rise of commodity production under the factory system, time was imprecise, marked “by the changing of the seasons, religious rituals, and market fairs.”¹⁵ With the advent of industrialism, however, a new scientific and social order began, characterized by regular, universal, abstract temporal measures and the separation of work and leisure time.¹⁶ Whereas previously, work served as the measure of time as the workday expanded or contracted as required by the task at hand, time now began to serve as *the measure of work*.¹⁷ Time became a resource for exchange and a bargaining tool: “Labour is exchanged for money in a mediated form and time is the medium through which labour is translated into its abstract exchange value.”¹⁸ Through this process of commodification, time came to function as if it were money, a scarce resource to be saved, invested, borrowed, spent, or wasted. With the application of Frederick Taylor’s principles of scientific management (based on time-motion studies) to Henry Ford’s assembly lines, time not only became fetishized but also began to serve as a measure of efficiency, productivity, social progress, and social control.†

Contemporary capitalist knowledge economies underwent a further temporal shift with the change from Fordist modes of production to flexible accumulation in the 1970s, a regime characterized by the expansion of capital into new global labour markets, flexible workers, automation, and just-in-time inventories, contingent upon accurate, real-time information.¹⁹ In the words

* For a more nuanced review of the differentiated impacts of industrial capitalism on the ways that people experience time and space, see John May and Nigel Thrift, eds., “Introduction,” in *Timespace* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1–46.

† Robert Hassan, *The Chronoscopic Society* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Christopher Hermann, *Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time*, *Frontiers of Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2015). The considerable influence of Taylorism in education is evident in mainstream approaches to curriculum planning and the emphasis on standardized testing and behavioural objectives. Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and Texts* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

of Judith Walker, “Whereas the modern capitalist sought to control time, the global postmodern knowledge worker seeks to obliterate time.”²⁰ This shift not only impacts the relationship between time and work, but also intensifies and accelerates our everyday experience of time. Sociologist Manuel Castells claims that “asynchronous and instantaneous information and communication technologies distort our relationship with time,” replacing the rational, metered time of the industrial age with the nonstop “timeless time” of the global networked economy.²¹ In the same vein, Robert Hassan affirms that with the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production, regular, metered, chronologic time is replaced by 24/7 hyper-accelerated “chronoscopic” time.²²

The *Chronos* of Information Literacy: “Corporate Time”

The *kairos* of neoliberalism in higher education impacts the *chronos* of teaching, learning, and research as “educational institutions are impelled toward a rationality that privileges competition, privatization, and efficiency, all of which involve changing the temporalities of academic life for both students and academics.”²³ Numerous scholars maintain that time has become accelerated in the corporate university, leaving instructors and students facing a “time crunch.” Giroux and Searls Giroux argue that “time as value and the value of time [in higher education] have been redefined through the dictates of neoliberal economics” since the 1980s.²⁴ The shifting aims of higher education manifest themselves in conflicting temporal orders within the academy: the highly scheduled and regulated rhythm of bureaucrats, managed professionals, and student-clients; the urgent, contracted time of the academic as entrepreneur and adjunct, competing for research funding and temporary positions; the deferred time of education as training for future employment; and the endless time of lifelong learning, which Nathaniel F. Enright describes as “a compunction to... training and retraining” which compels us all to act as “entrepreneurs of the self.”²⁵ Layered onto the “visible remnants of old capitalism and modernity” which persist in the contemporary university is the postmodern “dimension of time/space compression and time intensification” associated with globalization and academic capitalism.²⁶ Academic capitalism is contingent on faculty and students “justifying their use of time and seeking to outsmart it.”²⁷ Librarians also experience considerable time pressure and stress, as evidenced in a growing interest in the affective dimension—the emotional labour and high burnout risk—of their work.²⁸

For Giroux and Searls Giroux, the transformation of the university from “democratic public sphere into a training space where students, as paying

‘customers,’ gain marketable skills,” introduces a shift from “public time” to “corporate time.”²⁹ Under corporate time, the tempo of teaching, learning, and research becomes accelerated and fragmented, leaving little time for deep (as opposed to surface) learning, critical thinking, reflection, or writing. Corporate time dictates particular pedagogical approaches, including flexible delivery and pace and easy-to-digest content chunks.³⁰ In my view, corporate time is the *chronos* of information literacy as skills training, the abbreviated, intensified time of the one-shot and the bite-sized “how to” video. In this way, the *kairos* of information literacy determines the *chronos* of information literacy instruction: because information literacy is developed for and taught within the neoliberal university which embraces the skills agenda, the one-shot format—a format that can result only in a superficial, skills-oriented approach—is in perfect sync with the accelerated, fragmented time of the corporate university. The intensification of work—associated with a shortage of time—becomes the primary obstacle to developing a critical pedagogy for the information literacy classroom.

With fewer people juggling more work, it becomes easy to fall back on database training as the sum total of our teaching efforts...It also makes it easier to justify our unwillingness to engage in more nuanced questions about how information is used, collected, packaged, and marketed. Who has the time to think carefully through these questions and prepare such challenging material in ways that resonate with students while still teaching them the basic skills needed for their assignments?³¹

More than just technical method, pedagogy is “a moral and political practice that always presupposes...what constitutes legitimate knowledge, values, citizenship, modes of understanding, and views of the future.”³² In this sense, the pedagogy of the one-shot, tied to a human capital view of education in which “librarian-as-trainer becomes complicit in the formation of student-as-commodity for the market,” is fundamentally at odds with the social justice project of a critical information literacy.³³

“Taking Back” Information Literacy

Giroux and Searls Giroux hold that in order to “take back” higher education, we need to “make the pedagogical more political,” beginning with “the crucial project of challenging corporate ideology and its attendant notion of time.”³⁴ In keeping with this call to action, I will conclude this essay by offering some

ideas about how a slow scholarship approach might enable us to take back or “slow down” our work by changing the ways that we think about and practice information literacy—shifting them away from the *kairos* and *chronos* of skills training for the workplace toward a more critical praxis.

Notions of critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and social justice have been linked with information literacy since 2004;³⁵ to date, however, few scholars have engaged in a critical, reflexive way with information literacy as a neoliberal construct.³⁶ Yet, as Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith contend, “The very possibility of a critical pedagogy of library instruction would seem to hinge on a prior critique of the aims and conditions of library instruction, a critique we have not made explicit to ourselves.”³⁷ A critical pedagogy based in self-reflexive practice can ill afford to leave its theoretical assumptions unexamined.* And, if being information-literate requires “the capacity to critically evaluate the system itself,” as James K. Elmborg suggests, then it is incumbent upon us as information literacy educators to engage in such a critical self-reflection.³⁸

A Slow Scholarship of Information Literacy

While I have doubts whether information literacy can ever become a liberatory pedagogy, I do believe that a slow-scholarship approach that seeks to problematize normative views of information literacy offers some promise; as Maura Seale claims, “Information literacy, if theorized differently, could work to challenge neoliberal discourse rather than eagerly adopting it.”³⁹ The slow movement, often associated with slow food, seeks to transform culture and society by challenging the dominant temporal narratives of the current global economic order.⁴⁰ Slow scholarship—which applies to academic work in the broad sense to include teaching, research, and service—resists the accelerated, fragmented time of the neoliberal university, along with its audit culture, intensified work order, and “fast, take-way, virtual, globalized, download/up-take” pedagogies.⁴¹ Feminist slow scholarship seeks to re-envision the university itself by challenging structures of power and inequality and calling attention to the value (and toil) of academic labour.⁴² In the following section, I will outline what a slow scholarship of information literacy might afford.

First, a slow-scholarship approach to information literacy is an interdisciplinary one, one that requires us to engage with sociocultural theories in

* Carmen Luke, “Feminist Politics in Radical Pedagogy,” in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 32. For those interested in feminist critiques of critical pedagogy, see the entire volume edited by Luke and Gore.

which literacy is understood as an array of ideological practices. As mentioned above, literacy as situated practice refers to the notion that literacy practice is embedded in and shaped by historically defined social contexts, values, and technologies. A situated practice lens reveals that information literacy is produced by and productive of a neoliberal skills agenda that conflates education and training and casts students (and faculty) as competitive, flexible entrepreneurs. I contend that acknowledging this neoliberal *kairos* might allow us to take back information literacy by reframing it as skills training not for the workplace but *for the academy*. Examples of such a slow-scholarship approach can be found in the work of Anne-Marie Deitering, Michelle Holschuh Simmons, and Emily Drabinski. Deitering suggests that information literacy instruction is a means to help students to navigate “the constructions, assumptions and values of this new cultural space (the academy or higher ed).”⁴³ Simmons describes librarians as “disciplinary discourse mediators” who make “tacit practices visible, [and] help students see that information is constructed and contested.”⁴⁴ These approaches are consistent with what New Literacy Studies theorists describe as the “academic socialization” approach to writing.⁴⁵ By borrowing the concept of *kairos* from composition studies, Drabinski shifts her information literacy teaching away from atemporal “truth claims” articulated in standards and frameworks toward “an eternal present,” one that reflects “the social, economic, and political location” of the students in her classroom in a given moment.⁴⁶ This *kairotic* pedagogy aligns with sociocultural approaches according to which the meanings and values—the time—of literacy practices are contingent and situated.⁴⁷ It is also consistent with feminist and postcolonial pedagogies that acknowledge embodied subjectivities and ways of knowing in the classroom.⁴⁸

Second, slow scholarship offers a means of resisting the utilitarian turn of the neoliberal university by changing the ways that our work—and our time—counts and is counted. Information literacy allows the library to demonstrate return on investment to stakeholders in the form of outputs and impacts; the one-shot is important because numbers on spreadsheets make our work visible. Information literacy is, in no small part, a matter of fiscal survival. Nevertheless, moving away from an exclusive or predominant focus on teaching within the curriculum to explore ways to engage students and faculty outside of it—even when these activities aren’t seen to count as much as fifty minutes in the classroom—would alleviate frustrations and stress. Moreover, it might enable us to extend our teaching beyond the skills paradigm by affording us the time and space to work toward a more critical information literacy. For example, by using extracurricular programs to address issues of information justice, Patti Ryan and Lisa Sloniowski have mitigated the “significant challenges” of classroom teaching without “foreclos[ing] upon the possibility of a radical praxis in curriculum-integrated environments.”⁴⁹

Finally, a slow scholarship of information literacy is about decolonizing time by embracing the fact that teaching, learning, and research are recursive, embodied, disorderly, and sometimes unproductive. Drawing on anti-colonial perspectives, Riyad A. Shahjahan argues that the neoliberal logics of the university function as “hyper extensions of colonial time” used to classify “indigenous and other subaltern groups” as slow, lazy, undeveloped, and unproductive.⁵⁰ This same logic informs the fictitious accounting of the corporate academy that claims “to count what can’t be measured and ignores other areas of academic work.”⁵¹ It lies at the heart of the theory/practice, researcher/practitioner, scholar/activist binary which continues to hold sway in many areas of LIS. Slow scholarship refuses this divisive standpoint that ultimately inhibits our ability to work together to effect change.

A feminist mode of slow scholarship works for deep reflexive thought, engaged research, joy in writing and working with concepts and ideas driven by our passions....Slow scholarship can help create the space for writing and organizing against gendered and sexual violence, empire, settler colonialism, and war...Our call is about more than simply making time for ourselves and our own scholarship; it is about collective action—big and small.⁵²

Literacy practices are always a site of struggle “between authority and power on the one hand and individual resistance and creativity on the other.”⁵³ I argue that we have allowed a neoliberal *kairos* to dictate the ways that we think about and practice information literacy and to limit our ability to imagine alternatives; as Christine Pawley writes, “Even an innovative professional practice carries with it the marks of its inheritance...hidden traits that have the potential to deflect...programs...from their ultimate goals.”⁵⁴ Some hope remains, however: as “an argument against timeliness” that demands “apprehension of the moment, and calls for action that is appropriate to that moment,” *kairos* bids us to slow down and make time for critical reflection and action.⁵⁵ As an interdisciplinary feminist praxis of resistance, slow scholarship enjoins us to challenge the governmentality of the neoliberal university by counting and valuing differently—together. A slow scholarship of information literacy can’t make fifty minutes any longer, but it does suggest alternative means by which we might collectively engage in a more critical information literacy praxis.

Notes

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32. Giroux and Searls Giroux, *Take Back Higher Education*, 8.
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