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The "Value Agenda": Negotiating a Path Between Compliance and Critical Practice

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Introduction

Good morning everyone, and thank you for being here. I'd also like to thank the conference planning committee for the invitation to present this keynote; it's an honour to have been asked. And finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to my awesome colleagues Robin Bergart and Dave Hudson, from the University of Guelph, as well as Maura Seale, from Georgetown, for their generosity in providing me with feedback on this talk.

I'd like to start off by asking you take a minute to reflect on and then complete the following statements. Feel free to jot down your ideas on the paper provided at your tables if it's helpful to you.

1. The value of assessment in academic libraries is …
2. The challenge of assessment is ...

We'll come back to these statements and your responses in a moment.

Quantitative and qualitative studies about library value make up a significant percentage of practitioner scholarship. A quick and dirty search in the *Library Literature & Information Science Full Text* database for (assessment OR evaluation) AND "academic libraries" produced over 2500 results published since the year 2000 alone. Assessment has become

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[1] With a nod to the work of Emily Drabinski for providing me with this title. See Drabinksi, E. (2017). A kairos of the critical: Teaching critically in a time of compliance. *Communications in Information Literacy*, *11*(1), 76-94.

an industry in and of itself: to help us to deliver data for accountability and accreditation purposes, we have toolkits, publications, reports, conferences, workshops, and webinars. CARL (2017) supports members as they generate "outcomes-based evidence to establish the research library's return on investment" through "programming, information sharing, and support for relevant research." As a profession, we've become veritably obsessed with value.

Assessment, particularly in the form of input and output measures, such as the number of volumes, checkouts, gate counts, reference questions, and instruction sessions, has long been a part of our work. Select North American academic libraries began reporting statistics, known as the "Gerould Statistics," as early as 1907 (Association of Research Libraries, n.d.). The first major publications on library assessment begin to appear in the 1970s (Hufford, 2013). That being said, when I started working as an academic librarian in 2001, assessment was in no way such a significant part of library work. Sure, I wrote learning outcomes and gathered and reported statistics on a regular basis, but expressions like "demonstrating value," "return on investment," and a "culture of assessment" were not part of everyday conversations. It wasn't until I'd been working as a librarian for a couple of years that I came face-to-face with assessment and accountability in my daily practice. It wasn't until 2005, when the library where I worked hired a new Director of Libraries. I remember a conversation one day when the new Director warned us we could no longer take it for granted that those outside the library would see the value of our services, collections, and spaces; we were facing a tough new competitor in Google, and we needed to become more relevant to our students or face the risk of being bypassed. Seemingly overnight, students and faculty became our "clients." I recall being surprised, puzzled, and concerned by this. As it turns out, changes to make higher education more like a business had been underway for some time, and as a "newb," I was unaware of discussions that were taking place at the higher echelons of the library and the university administration. That being said, this idea was not something I'd encountered before in my many years as a student or since becoming a librarian, and it didn't jibe with my own values.

I'm sharing this with you not to wax nostalgic for a time long gone when higher education and libraries were considered public goods but to draw attention to the fact that our preoccupation with accountability is not timeless or eternal. Framing assessment in academic libraries primarily as demonstrating value to stakeholders is a relatively new phenomenon, one that needs to be understood within a broader socio-economic, political, and historic context. In this morning's talk, then, we'll spend some time unpacking our assumptions about assessment and the value agenda. As anthropologist Chris Shore (2008, p. 283) writes, "the subtle and seductive manner in which managerial concepts and terminologies have become integrated into the everyday language of academia is… worth reflecting upon." Some of the questions we'll consider are, what are the broader logics that underlie our preoccupation with assessment? To what extent does the focus on competition, efficiency, and metrics normalize corporate values in higher education? How might we engage critically with quality assurance and assessment to better align them with our professional values and the academic mission of the university?

The Value Agenda

So what are the dominant ideals and beliefs, the prevailing truths and stories about academic libraries and assessment? I'd like to surface some of them by asking you to share your responses to the questions I posed earlier.

One key publication that has shaped contemporary assessment practices in academic libraries is the ACRL's *Value of Academic Libraries Report*, published in 2010 (hereinafter referred to as the *Value Report* or the *Report*). This document serves as an artefact of the truths and stories about higher education, academic libraries, and assessment today. In my view, the following quote from the *Value Report* effectively sums up the zeitgeist of contemporary academic librarianship as it relates to assessment, one I refer to as "the value agenda":

> Academic libraries have long enjoyed their status as the "heart of the university." However, in recent decades, higher education environments have changed. Government officials see higher education as a national resource. Employers view higher education institutions as producers of a commodity—student learning. Top academic faculty expect higher education institutions to support and promote cutting edge research. Parents and students expect higher education to enhance students' collegiate experience, as well as propel their career placement and earning

> potential. Not only do stakeholders count on higher education institutions to achieve these goals, they also require them to *demonstrate evidence* that they have achieved them. The same is true for academic libraries… They must demonstrate their value. (ACRL, 2010, p.11, original emphasis)

This account is largely accurate. Today's university functions as an engine of economic growth. In Canada, U15 universities represent 83% of "contracted private-sector research" and contribute more than 36 billion dollars to the economy each year (U15 Group of Canadian Research Libraries, n.d.). And because a skilled workforce is pivotal to the state's ability to compete in the global knowledge economy, universities serve as privileged sites for the reproduction of human capital, defined by the OECD (1998, p. 9) as "the knowledge, skills, competences, and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity." This reorientation of the university is the result of changes to state policy implemented in several nations, including Canada, Australia, the U.K., and the U.S., starting in the 1970s. I'll return to this idea in a moment.

And yet, if we look more closely, the *Value Report* (ACRL, 2010) doesn't simply present us with a "factual" account, if such a thing exists. There's a particular narrative that's being recounted here. The *Report* opens with a warning that libraries' traditional status and place within the university is at risk. Gone are the good old days when we could rest on our laurels, confident in the knowledge that those outside the library trusted in the value of our work, our collections, and spaces. Today's climate is tougher, we are told. It's competitive. Change is an imperative to which libraries must respond or become obsolete. The use of capitalist language in higher education is normalized: education is a national resource, learning is a commodity, and degrees are credentials to be exchanged on the job market. At the same time, education becomes something individuals own and possess rather than a public good. And while the library may no longer be able to count on funding, "top" faculty, those who engage in cutting edge research, demand it. (As an aside, I'd like to point out to you that the *Report* makes no mention of what "lesser" faculty are doing, so one can only assume they're busy in the classroom carrying out the educational mission of the institution or doing the kind of old school research that requires library resources.) Students go to university not to learn or become informed citizens but to have an "experience"; ultimately, they expect to be rewarded for the time they've invested with a career. Not just any career either: one that will allow them to leverage their earning potential, their human capital.

Parents and students, government and employers expect a strong return on their investment and require the university to provide evidence thereof through quality assurance processes, which include accountability, audit, and assessment. Megan Oakleaf, the principal author of the *Value Report*, claims that “while… these external pressures may seem overwhelming, in fact they offer higher education administrators an exciting opportunity to engage in rigorous self-examination, [which] can lead to the development of a new concept of higher education—one aligned with current stakeholder expectations” (p. 26). By embracing corporate ideals and regimes of accountability and audit, we are told, a more efficient, more useful university will emerge.

In making a distinction between “research” and “assessment,” Oakleaf (2010, p. 31) notes that “while research attempts to be apolitical,” “assessment virtually always takes place in a political context.” In keeping with this assertion, the authors of the *Report* acknowledge that “a variety of perspectives” exist about “the increasingly managerial orientation” of higher education, with its focus on “assessment, accountability, and value” (p. 6). For example, they note that “those critical of the assessment movement” argue that methods and approaches borrowed from the private sector “may not work well with the mission of higher education and academic libraries” (p. 6). They concede that while “profit measures” are readily quantifiable, student learning, scholarship, and “institutional quality” are less so (p. 6). They further acknowledge that some who question the inevitability of the value agenda “go so far as to advocate” for the development of alternative measures and approaches (p. 7). Yet the authors refuse to engage with opposing viewpoints in any substantive way. These critiques are summarily dismissed: critical perspectives, while “appreciated,” are ultimately “impractical,” they say (p. 7). Rather than “taking sides” in larger conversations and debates about the value and purpose of higher education, the authors prefer to “take a pragmatic approach” (p. 7). In the words of Oakleaf (p. 31), “although there is a great need for rigorous research to demonstrate library value, there is an equal or greater need for practical, local, less arduous assessment.”

Dismissing critical perspectives as impractical and advocating for pragmatism, as the authors of the *Value Report* have done, isn’t a neutral stance, it’s a political one, and it has important implications. As a recent editorial in one of our flagship publications cautioned, the emphasis on demonstrating value may serve to normalize corporate practices higher education and libraries and limit “our vision for the future of our field” (Drabinski & Walter, 2016, p. 267). York University librarians Sarah Coysh, William Denton, and Lisa Sloniowski (in press) have described this position "as a failure to imagine that [academic] libraries can do more than serve the quotidian needs of neoliberal higher education priorities."

Debates about the value of "practical" and "critical" perspectives are hardly new within our profession, however; they've been with us for over a century at least. According to Michael Harris, "librarianship was initially understood as 'a mechanical art best assimilated through precept and practice" (1986, p. 516, cited in Drabinski & Walter, 2016, p. 265), and as a result, our research questions and interests have primarily focused on the instrumental—"how we do our work, not what that work is or how it connects to larger political and economic structures" (Drabinski & Walter, 2016, p. 265). Maura Seale and I just finished editing a book entitled *The Politics of Theory in the Practice of Critical Librarianship* (Nicholson & Seale, in press) in which contributors explore the tensions between theory and practice through a variety of critical lenses and sites of professional work. We wrote the following in the Introduction:

> While progressive movements within the profession may be longstanding, until recently, they have remained somewhat marginal; in the main, librarianship emphasizes practicality, efficiency, and service. …Much library scholarship is based in case studies describing projects or practices and how to implement them. Action-oriented empirical methods tend to be seen as more valid, are valued highly by the most prestigious journals, and figure prominently in calls for conference presentations. In several Canadian academic libraries, research and publishing outside of LIS doesn't 'count' towards promotion and tenure or merit. ...
>
> One could go so far as to say that the dominant ideology in librarianship is practicality. David James Hudson argues that in its calls to common sense logics—"the exaltation of clarity, plain language, on the everyday, the utilitarian"—practicality is inextricably entwined with our profession's false claims to neutrality. The "practicality imperative," as he refers to it, "subtly police[s] the work we end up supporting and doing… our sense of what useful and appropriate political interventions look like from the standpoint of the profession." (Nicholson & Seale, in press)

So I ask you, to what extent does the work of assessment in academic libraries, the gathering and reporting of data through surveys, "action-oriented" research, user experience studies or the assessment of student learning outcomes, also fall prey to the practicality imperative? As a case in point, the *Canadian Library Assessment Workshop* website promises that workshop participants—all of us here—will gain "tangible and practical ideas" to take back to our workplaces (CARL, 2017). To what extent does the value agenda require us to focus on that which is utilitarian, effective, or commensurable to the detriment of exploring that which is abstract, intriguing, or immeasurable?

I'd like to think that the critical questions that affect our work are broader in focus, or maybe even altogether different, than those outlined in the *Value Report*, and that there are other ways that we can, and should seek to make a difference. Academic librarians have engaged in research and activism related to issues of importance to contemporary society at large, including the commodification of information, literacy, privacy, neoliberalism, social justice, diversity, and white supremacy. While some, but perhaps not all of these topics are beyond the scope of this talk, even within the narrow scope of inquiry of the value agenda, there is still room to take a more critical approach. As the editors argued in a 2016 issue of *College & Research Libraries*, "theory and practice should be mutually informative in our field, and inquiry into 'values' should occupy as privileged a place as inquiry into 'value'" (Drabinski & Walter, 2016, p. 267). Barbara Fister (2012) has wisely suggested that in addition to measuring what we do, we should ask ourselves why we're doing it. Anthropologists Donna Lanclos and Andrew Asher (2016), both of whom conduct ethnographic research in academic libraries ask, "Is the goal to simply have something measurable to report? Or [is it] to generate information that allows discussion of meanings, motivations, and yes, values?"

I believe that even if it's difficult to take a more critical approach to assessment and to imagine alternatives to our current reality, there's value in that effort. As I wrote earlier this year in an article for the Ontario Library Association's *Open Shelf* magazine,

> For me, the "value agenda" meant years of struggling with action-oriented research projects—in part because the MLIS hadn't adequately prepared me to do them—when what I *really* wanted to understand are the larger social and political economic drivers behind this agenda, behind the push to make higher education

> more like a business and to treat students as clients and librarians and faculty as entrepreneurs. Action-oriented research couldn't help me with these questions. (Nicholson, 2017)

I'm not suggesting that action-oriented research and assessment have no use; "in the context of higher education today, academic libraries are indeed required to provide evidence of their impact in order to compete for resources" (Nicholson, 2017). What I am saying, and what many others have also said, is that "librarianship has adopted… corporate practices [and values] that foreground practicality and efficiency with little reflection and critique" (Nicholson & Seale, in press). Critical perspectives aren't impractical, elitist, or a waste of time: they're essential. What I'd like us to think about as a profession is, how can we take a less pragmatic, more critical approach to questions of value? In my view, understanding and situating the requirement to tally statistics, measure outcomes, and report metrics, the requirement to comply with the value agenda, is an important first step toward challenging this agenda.

In the rest of this talk, I'll attempt to situate the value agenda within the context of neoliberal reforms to higher education. I'll introduce concepts from the literature on quality assurance in order to suggest that some of the work we're doing is more about audit than assessment, about paying lip service to accountability than enhancing student learning. In so doing, I'll draw on the one hand, on work I completed during a secondment to the Council of Ontario Universities related to the implementation of the province's *Quality Assurance Framework*, and on the other hand, on my doctoral research, which uses the concepts of time/space to explore the work of information literacy librarians in the neoliberal university in Canada. Finally, I'd like us to consider how we might "take back" the work of assessment in higher education to "make the pedagogical more political," to borrow a phrase from critical educators Henry and Susan Searls Giroux (2004, pp. 240, 238).

How Did We Get Here? Or What is Neoliberalism?

The reforms to higher education described in the *Value Report* are part of a larger neoliberal project; in the next section then, I'll briefly outline the main tenets of neoliberalism and talk about its particular arrangements in the context of higher education.

Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices based in the belief that "society works best when the people and the institutions within it work or are shaped to work according to market principles" (Spence, 2015, p. 3). What this means is that in a neoliberal framework, the state takes a deliberate and active role in creating the conditions, laws, and institutions necessary to facilitate free operation of the market. This is not your grandmother's classic *laissez-faire* liberalism with its invisible hand. Paradoxically, however, the market is portrayed as an organic entity, a natural and efficient way to organize both the public and the private spheres (DeVault, 2008).

First implemented as state policy in the 1970s and early 80s—the appearance of the neoliberal state is commonly associated with Pinochet, Thatcher, and Reagan—neoliberalism has now been embraced to some degree by virtually all countries. It has become so pervasive that we see it as "common sense" (Harvey, 2007, p. 3)—or rather, we don't see it at all—it has become an invisible part of the fabric of our daily lives.

The fundamental principles of neoliberalism include competition, deregulation, and privatization. Neoliberal policies and practices transform public sector institutions such as universities to make them more efficient and more accountable—more like businesses. And because neoliberalism replaces the concepts of "the public good" and "community" with individual responsibility and competition, it also work to govern or discipline people by persuading them "to see themselves as... active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being" (Larner 2000, p. 13, cited in Rottenberg, 2014, p. 421). The poster child for the successful neoliberal citizen is the entrepreneur who "optimiz[es] her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative, and innovation" (Rottenburg, 2014, p. 422). She leans in.

We might best think about neoliberalism as an intensification or a "doubling down" of deeper capitalist ideals, which are fundamentally about individualism, the primacy of the market, and competition. What distinguishes neoliberalism from other forms of capitalism is the degree to which it has facilitated the incursion of market values into every aspect of our everyday lives, dismantled the welfare state, and exacerbated structural inequalities in society. The primacy of the individual within neoliberal frameworks masks systemic inequalities. It promotes self-interest rather than the pursuit of larger shared social concerns, such as equal access to education or environmental protection, thus working against social justice (Harvey, 2007). The most disadvantaged and at-risk people in society are required to find their own "solutions to their lack of health care, education, and social security"—and then blamed if—or when—they fail (Martinez & Garcia, n.d.).

The vast majority of us are not better off under neoliberalism. Political economist David Harvey (2007) points out that since the early 1970s, labour productivity has increased (as much as 80 percent in the US) while wages have declined—as a society, we work more and we earn less. More people are precariously employed; the majority of Canadian university students today are taught by adjuncts (Basen, 2014). Many people work more than one job but still can't make ends meet. What is arguably worse is that we celebrate the idea of the entrepreneur, hustling to make ends meet, and fail to see the broader ideological framework from which this idea emerges and the negative societal consequences it brings. Doing "whatever it takes to get by is [seen to be] a virtue in today's economy" (McCabe, 2015). We have begun to view ourselves as "portfolios" of skills and competencies and each of us works to develop, push, and monitor our unique "brand." In today's neoliberal society, "anybody who isn't constantly looking for ways to improve the return on his [sic] personal human capital simply isn't hustling enough" (McCabe, 2015). If you're not making it, you simply need to be more flexible, more agile, more entrepreneurial, more innovative, more resilient.

The Neoliberal University

So let's look now at how the particular logics and practices of neoliberalism I've just described have shaped higher education today. As I mentioned earlier, from the 1970s on, important neoliberal policy reforms were implemented within the higher education systems of numerous countries, Canada, Australia, the U.K., and the U.S. among them. These reforms drastically reduced state funding and replaced student bursaries with loans (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). They also brought in New Public Management practices and tools, which seek to increase effectiveness and efficiency, "introduce flexibility into organizational structures, in particular through downsizing and decentralization," foster innovation and entrepreneurialism, "develop a culture of excellence within public administration," and accord stakeholders a greater role in decision-making (Charbonneau, 2012).

These reforms changed the higher education landscape in a number of important ways. Institutions of higher education and their employees increasingly engage in for-profit activities and market-oriented behaviours, including raising tuition fees, pursuing public-private partnerships and grants, and seeking donations from alumni and corporations as a means to make up for lost state revenues (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). There is a greater curricular focus on areas of research and teaching that bring in more money, such as the STEM and applied disciplines. The drive to make the public sector more efficient and accountable has introduced quality assurance processes and a more managerialist approach to university governance. The number of administrators has increased, as has the number of students, and the ratio of students to faculty; conversely, the number of fulltime tenure-track positions has decreased—dramatically.

Evidence of the corporatization of the university provided by the twenty-four Canadian librarians I interviewed in 2016 as part of my Ph.D. included an emphasis on reputation and marketing the institution as a brand; generating revenue in the form of grants, alumni donations, and tuition fees, particularly from international students. Participants also described an increasingly managerial culture at the expense of collegial governance, and a lack of appreciation for the value of education—and libraries—as public goods. One participant stated that "philosophical or more high-minded conversations" around the value of education and the "larger role of the university in society" were not welcome at the higher levels of the campus administration (personal communication, March 26, 2016). Others cited the deskilling of librarians' work, the treatment of students as customers or clients, an increased focus on producing job ready graduates, and the expansion of distance learning and executive or professional programs.

The "demands of state and capital" have always been a driving force in higher education (Nicholson, 2016, p. 27); one of its primary functions has always been prepare the next generation of workers. What *has* changed in the contemporary university is the degree to which student development and educational outcomes are defined by job training and career prospects, and the extent to which "students, faculty, administrators, and policymakers explicitly support and embrace" these goals and priorities (Saunders, 2010, p. 55). Students are primarily seen as future workers in need of new skills to perform in the global knowledge economy, and as a result, generic skills and aptitudes such as information literacy, leadership, and teamwork, also referred to as 21st century skills or fluencies, have become increasingly important within the curriculum. Rather than a radical re-orientation of higher education, the focus on skills and training is better understood as an intensification of changes underway for some time (Saunders, 2010). The contemporary university is not fundamentally different from its predecessor then, but it has been described as "highly derivative" (Marginson, 2000, p. 31).

The late Bill Readings' book *The University in Ruins* (1996) provides insight into the contemporary university as an institution in decline. Many years ago, when I was a doctoral student in Comparative Literature at the Université de Montréal, Bill was my advisor. Bill died in a plane crash on Hallowe'en at the age of thirty-four, almost twenty-three years ago to this day (and I never finished that PhD). His book was published posthumously. In it, Bill argues that in our contemporary era of neoliberal globalization, "the link between the university and the nation-state no longer holds" (p. 14). In the 19th century, the purpose of the university was to inculcate a sense of shared national identity and culture among the people, the process of *Bildung.* Humboldt University is cited as an exemplar of this so-called University of Culture. In an era when national borders and identities have become increasingly fluid, however, the historical *raison-d'être* of the university as a guardian of culture is no longer relevant; the university now exists as a "*ruined* institution" (p. 19, original emphasis), an "autonomous bureaucratic corporation" (p. 40). In the late twentieth century, the pursuit of Culture, previously central to the university project, is replaced by the pursuit of Excellence. Measured in terms of inputs, outputs, and performance indicators, excellence allows the university to demonstrate its accountability to stakeholders. The problem, as Readings demonstrates, however, is that excellence has no tangible external referent: it refers only to an endlessly deferred signifier, and as a result, it can effectively mean anything—or nothing. It matters less and less what is taught or researched, what is measured or reported, only that it is done excellently.

I'd like to pause here and ask you to share your thoughts about the neoliberal university at your tables. What conversations are taking place on your campuses about these issues? What evidence, if any, of corporate values and practices do you see in your work? Are your experiences consistent with or different from those of the librarians I interviewed?

Audit Culture

To this point, I've described neoliberal logics of competition, efficiency, and accountability and the changes they've brought to higher education. In the second half of this presentation, I'd like to return to the value agenda and assessment in academic libraries. Questions I'd like us to consider include, in the context of the literature on quality assurance in higher education, how might we describe the aims and outcomes of assessment in academic libraries? What are the challenges and limitations of this work? How might we take a more critical approach to assessment?

Demonstrating value hinges on the notion of quality. But what is quality in the context of higher education? As it turns out, quality, like excellence, has various meanings, each of which does different work. "For many scholars, this lack of agreement surrounding the meaning of quality suggests that the concept—borrowed from business and industry—is ill suited" to the context of education (Nicholson, 2011, p. 4). Let's look at some of the more common definitions of quality in higher education. In a liberal education paradigm, on the one hand, quality is frequently operationalized as "transformation," "enhancement," or "value-added," that is to say, the degree to which students have changed or become empowered by their learning (Harvey & Knight, 1996, cited in Nicholson, 2011). This definition requires us to measure internal processes such as program reviews, curriculum design, and student assessment, processes in which students and educators are active participants. Much research within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, participatory action research in particular, is informed by this view of quality. In a neoliberal educational paradigm, on the other hand, quality is most frequently operationalized as value for money, which measures return on investment, or "fitness for purpose," which measures quality against institutional mission (Harvey & Knight, 1996, cited in Nicholson, 2011). This is also referred to as "mission-based assessment" or "fitness for self-defined purpose" (Westerheijden, 2007). Value for money and fitness for purpose require us to measure inputs, outputs, and outcomes and report them to external stakeholders. In this view, "quality is a product made available to clients or customers" such as students, parents, faculty, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, and government (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 68, cited in Nicholson, 2011, p. 9). Value for money or fitness for purpose are the measures of quality in the University of Excellence.

In summary, transformation and accountability derive from two philosophically opposing ideas of quality, each of which takes a fundamentally different view of the societal role of the university. The purpose of accountability is to monitor and maintain quality. As a result, it is often criticized for limiting innovative or creative approaches to teaching and learning and curricular reform. In response, some argue that moving to outcomes-based education is the key to effectuating a change from accountability-driven models of quality assurance to those that focus primarily on enhancing student learning (see, for example Tagg, 2010). Outcomes-based assessment has featured prominently in the library literature on assessment since the late 1990s (Hufford, 2013). The benefits of outcome-based education are often oversimplified, however; in discussions related to quality assurance and accountability, the pros and cons of learning outcomes remain a contentious issue, a site of "tensions between best practice and bureaucracy" (Hussey & Smith, 2003, p. 358).

Audit Culture and Corporate Time

Quality assurance processes have ushered in what many refer to as "audit culture," "a term used to describe 'managerialist conceptions of accountability' focused on quantitative performance measures" (Lilburn, 2017, p. 91). In the context of higher education, audit culture is about using numbers or scores to enable commensurability across institutions, programs, teachers, students, and librarians: in the words of one anthropologist (Shore, 2008, p. 286), performance is "quantified, calibrated, compared, scrutinized, rendered visible, ranked, rewarded or punished—all in the name of 'improving quality'." Audit culture, associated with corporate ideals and practices in higher education, aims to increase efficiency and productivity. Questioning these logics is seen "as a resistance to public accountability" rather than a "critique of the logic of accounting" (Readings, 1996, p. 26). It's interesting to note that many library documents talk of fostering a "culture of assessment," when in fact many of our policies and practices foster a culture of compliance.

One of the things I'm exploring in my research is how audit culture has changed the nature and pace of work in the academy. There's a significant body of research that suggests that time has become accelerated in the university as a result of audit and the intensification of work, and by that I mean the need to do more work in less time, fewer unscheduled hours within the workday, the blurring of work and personal life. With "the transformation of the university… into a training space [for future workers]… 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" (Nicholson, 2016, pp. 29-30). Giroux and Searls Giroux (2004) refer to this new cadence as "corporate time." Larger class sizes and fewer TAs mean less time for marking, making standardized assignments and multiple-choice tests increasingly common. The result is fewer opportunities for students to engage in higher order learning and receive meaningful feedback. Precariously employed faculty rush from campus to campus, hustle to secure contract upon contract. An article published in *University Affairs* just last week describes the impact of corporate time on students as follows:

> Constant low-value busywork that doesn't leave time for thinking, let alone an appreciation for thinking**;** constant micro-testing that gives the impression that every substantial portion of understanding can be hacked into a minimum testable bit**;** an obsession with marks that places what is regurgitated above what is digested**;** and, of course, [final] exam scheduling. (Baumann, 2017)

In academic libraries, we spend a great deal of time producing bare bones, easily digestible guides and tutorials for time-strapped students. I've written elsewhere about how corporate time translates into "the abbreviated, intensified time of the information literacy one-shot class and the bite-sized 'how to' video" (Nicholson, 2016, p. 30). Patti Ryan and Lisa Sloniowski (2013) at York describe how the intensification of work creates barriers to developing a more critical pedagogy for information literacy instruction. One librarian I interviewed described presenting and publishing "chapters here," "little articles there" in the area of professional practice as a way to go for the "low hanging fruit," a quick win that would allow them to fit their scholarship requirements into an already overloaded work schedule (personal communication, March 14, 2016). Another talked about low salaries for librarians at their institution and the pressure they felt to engage in scholarship and service activities in order to be eligible for a merit pay increase, even when that meant taking "regular" work home in the evenings and on the weekends (personal communication, April 4, 2016).

The impact of audit culture on the nature and pace of work in the academy is particularly well summarized in the following passage written by a group of feminist geographers in Canada and the U.S.:

> Audit culture, with its feedback mechanisms and ostensible goal of “continuous quality improvement,” is designed to elicit compliance without resistance. While we dutifully count and upload our “progress,” this counting imperative simultaneously informs our identities and interactions, both scholarly and personal. Counting culture leads to intense, insidious forms of institutional shaming, subject-making, and self-surveillance. It compels us to enumerate and self-audit, rather than listen and converse, engage with colleagues, students, friends and family, or involve ourselves in the meaningful and time-consuming work that supports and engages our research and broader communities (Mountz et al., 2015, pp. 1242-1243)

One of the things that this quote highlights is that audit culture values most that which is commensurable, that can be counted. Building relationships with students, faculty, colleagues, vendors, etc., the affective labour that is key to our work, is seen to inefficient because it can’t be counted. It is only the material result of that relationship, be it a consultation, class, or a contract, that counts. Intellectual and creative work is also inefficient. How many hours did we all spend preparing our presentations, posters, and workshops for this conference? And yet all that intellectual and creative work will translate into one single line on our CVs, one tick next to the “scholarly contributions” box in our annual reports.

Maura Seale (2017) writes the following:

> What if we understood reference and research consultations through relationship-building or emotional/affective labor rather than as something to be counted? …What would the assessment of reference or research consultations in terms of relationship-building or affective work look like? I’m not entirely sure… but I would suggest it might be a more interesting or productive question than the ones we have been asking. I would also suggest that assessment in these terms would more accurately capture what we do as librarians and what students get out of meeting with or talking to librarians. Moreover, assessment that focuses on relationships or emotional labor and that is able to show how and why they are important to the university or college pushes back against notions that only things that can be

> measured, counted, and monetized are important; it claims that librarianship matters. (Seale, 2017, p. 8)

Conclusion: Making the Pedagogical More Political

Contextualizing the work of assessment in academic libraries within the broader context of accountability and audit helps to shed light on the why and the how of this work. It also helps to understand its limitations. In my view, although we talk a lot about measuring outcomes and impact, measures that frame quality as transformation, the purpose of most assessment work in libraries is to demonstrate accountability or fitness for purpose. As Oakleaf explains in the *Value Report*,

> Not only does assessment give librarians a venue for communicating with stakeholders, it determines "the fit" between institutional mission and achieved outcomes… articulates effectiveness, fosters improvement, increases efficiency… and demonstrates accountability. (ACRL, 2010, p. 31)

As someone whose work is centered in information literacy, I see a disconnect between accountability, which requires us to go for the quick and dirty quantitative measures that we can easily report—number of classes, number of students in those classes, perceived self-efficacy—and the kind of assessment strategies that would enable us to measure our impact on student learning. Return on investment makes sense as a measure of value in some areas of library work—when we're talking about collection budgets, for example—but not when we when we're talking about student learning. I don't mean to suggest that one area of library work is more important than another, only that a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment is ineffectual for measuring value and understanding impact. In this final section, then, I'll offer some ideas on how we might "take back" the work of assessment in higher education and "make the pedagogical more political."

Audit culture creates a misalignment or a gap between our aspirations and our approaches. For example, we continue to rely heavily on quantitative methods, even when these may not be the most appropriate, because they are the most expedient. Lanclos and Asher (2016) note that academic libraries spend "a great deal of time and effort… attempting to measure things that… at least appear to be readily quantifiable" because these methods and data serve “to make the complex organization of a library [appear] more rational.” According to a 2015 study (Halpern, Eaker, Jackson, & Bouquin), the most popular data collection method employed by librarians and library researchers is the survey, no doubt because it’s “relatively easy to administer…often inexpensive to deploy” and “less time-consuming to analyze” than many other methods. Surveys help us to answer questions such as how many? How often? How much? They’re a practical tool for “measur[ing] the impact of services or collections [and] inform strategies for outreach,” and they’re particularly useful “when a large number of data points are necessary” (Halpern, Eaker, Jackson, & Bouquin, 2015). That being said, as the authors of the study point out, “excessive reliance” on quantitative methods, and the survey in particular, imposes “limitations on what we can know about our field and our users.” Is it possible that we rely on the survey because audit culture also imposes limitations on our ability to ask different questions about our field and our users? Lanclos and Asher (2016) argue that because more practiced ethnographic work requires time and expertise, it “can feel risky” in a context in which “cash-strapped, results-oriented” library directors want quick, easy to understand payoffs.

It seems to me the goal of much user experience (UX) work in libraries also serves to demonstrate accountability or fitness for purpose, despite the fact that this work is framed as enhancing or improving processes and often employs qualitative or mixed methods. For example, under the criterion of “value,” the University of Toronto’s User Experience Toolkit (Nagel, 2017) states “our sites must deliver value to our users. For non-profits, the user experience must advance the mission.” Another website describes the purpose of user experience work in libraries as “the practical application of design thinking… to empower decision-makers with user-centric strategies to better meet mission or business goals” (Schofield, 2015). (To be honest, I’m not sure I understand what this means; there’s an awful lot of corporate-speak in that statement, contrary to UX principles which, as I understand them, advocate for using plain language.) I can’t help but wonder if this accountability frame isn’t a vestige of the origins of UX as a practice imported from the corporate sector. Some library websites suggest that making our students and faculty “happy” is the new standard by which user satisfaction and “quality” service should measured. Steven Bell (2016) recently wrote, “libraries will never be Disneyland, but perhaps we can be the one place in the community that delivers the happiness experience on multiple levels by altering someone’s perception about the library as a dull, painful experience." Framing our interactions and services as theme park "experiences" normalizes corporate values and practices in higher education. As John Buschman once wrote,

> Aping business rhetoric and models doesn't save libraries, it transforms them into something else. We're a profession and an institution in crisis because we have a structural contradiction between our purposes and practices as they've historically evolved and our adaptation to the current environment. (Buschman, 2004)

It's not my intention to debase the good UX work that is being done in our libraries nor do I want our users to be unhappy or frustrated by their interactions with us. But I do want to draw attention to the gap, the "structural contradiction" (Buschman, 2004) between our values, our stated purpose, and our practice. Lanclos and Asher (2016) describe the current state of UX work in libraries as "ethnographish," that is to say, inspired by ethnographic methods but superficial in approach. This work often focuses on finding quick solutions to known problems using "pre-packaged 'off-the-shelf' methods." And while they acknowledge that "in many cases," ethnographish studies have produced "real insights" leading to better libraries, these studies haven't decreased our reliance on quantitative methods of data collection. In contrast, Lanclos and Asher claim, "more widespread and deeply practiced… ethnographic approaches," which offer alternatives to metrics, would allow for a "transformative moment…wherein libraries can actually be thought about and experienced differently, not just rearranged."

I wish we spent more time inquiring into how students are learning and changing as a result of the time they spend with us and less into their customer satisfaction with these interactions. These two orientations, library as educational institution and library as business, seem incompatible to me. To me, learning is about being challenged, curious, inspired, puzzled, enlightened, empowered—and yes, even frustrated. It can't always be "frictionless."

I don't mean to suggest that I've got this whole assessment thing figured out. My team[2] has an assessment strategy and a plan for managing our data. We do use a curriculum mapping

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[2] While I recognize the use of "team" here sounds very corporate, the term is accurate: the University of Guelph Library is structured according to functional work teams, and the name of the group I manage is the "Information Literacy Team."

strategy that allows us to prioritize our outreach efforts and see where we're engaging with students in their programs and where we're not, what percentage of students we reach in a given program, and how well our activities align with our strategy. I was reminded yesterday when I came in from the airport with my colleague Ron Ward that at the University of Guelph Library we also experimented for a time with logic models, an initiative I found valuable (albeit tricky) because it forces you start by identifying desired impacts and outcomes instead of focusing on current outputs or activities. Logic models also ask you to consider the alignment between your intended outcomes, your outputs, and your inputs, a focus that can help to identify insufficient resources or inappropriate assessment strategies. But for the most part, my team and I continue to report numbers of classes taught, numbers of students in attendance, hits on guides, measures of perceived self-efficacy, etc.

Gathering and reporting data, qualitative or quantitative, is important. It matters to my team because it allows us to document our work and talk to administrators about the value of that work in ways that are useful to them. It allows us to be accountable. It also allows us to be strategic, to identify gaps and opportunities. I was thinking just the other day that by using the statistical data we already track to identify peak periods of teaching activity, as opposed to total number of classes taught across an entire semester or year, I might be able to make a stronger case for hiring another IL librarian, given that our staffing has decreased even as the number of students at Guelph and our IL classes and consultations continue to increase.

Having these tools and strategies in place also means the information literacy team can spend less time counting and reporting and more time on work we believe has a different kind of value, work that we hope will have a lasting impact on our students, such as developing more critical approaches to teaching information literacy. We're trying to "resist… the utilitarian turn of the neoliberal university by changing the ways that our work—and our time—counts and is counted" (Nicholson, 2016, p. 32). To this end, we've grounded our work in a theoretical framework (Lupton & Bruce, 2010) that allows us to see information literacy as a continuum, as an array of generic, situated, and transformative practices. We build how-to guides and develop short videos that support generic skills but we also work within the curriculum to help students develop competencies and aptitudes "not for the workplace but *for the academy* (Nicholson, 2016, p. 32, original emphasis). We're engaging with the ACRL Framework to be more intentional about helping students to develop a more critical approach to the consumption and production of information. We're also committed to exploring alternative spaces outside of the curriculum within which to engage students and faculty on issues of global information justice and civic responsibility, "even when these activities aren't seen to count as much as fifty minutes in the classroom" (Nicholson, 2016, p. 32). In sum, we're trying to negotiate a path between compliance and critical practice, trying to take a more critical approach to assessment, trying to make the pedagogical more political.

In closing, I hope this talk will inspire you, over the next two days in Victoria and beyond, to consider critical approaches to the work of assessment, in addition to those that are merely tangible and practical.

Thank you.

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