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Information Into Action? Reflections On (Critical) Practice (Keynote Address, WILU 2018)

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Information into action? Reflections on (critical) practice¹

Keynote address, WILU 2018, University of Ottawa, June 8, 2018

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I. Introduction: Information into Action

The subject of my talk today centers around the conference theme, “Information into Action.” Librarianship is a service profession: service, professionalism, and expertise form the basis of our identity (Hicks, 2014). Librarianship is also a practical profession: evidence-based practice, action-oriented research, standards, and guidelines inform much of what we do. It would seem then, that the theme of this year’s WILU conference, “Information into Action,” aligns well with our professional values and practices. And yet, this theme gives me pause. It makes my Spidey sense tingle, as does much of what happens in academic libraries and higher education today. It’s this theme, and this unease that I want to explore with you in my talk today. Before I go any further, I want to emphasize that it’s not my intention to disparage the theme nor the conference organizing committee for choosing it; the theme is, in fact, exemplary, that is, highly characteristic of mainstream professional discourse, as I hope to demonstrate. My aim then, is not to criticize but rather to critique, to use the theme to draw attention to broader issues within the profession and higher education in the hopes of creating a space for reflection and dialogue and possibly bringing about some small change in our collective practice. In this sense, I hope, critically examining the idea of information into action might allow us to reclaim it.

I’d like to talk today about big ideas related to the future, change, and vocation, and how they structure our professional discourse, as does neoliberalism. These are weighty ideas, I’ll admit, and lot to consider in the space of a thirty-five minute talk. So forgive me if I touch on

¹ With thanks to the WILU 2018 Organizing Committee for the invitation to present this keynote. Thanks also to Maura Seale for her feedback and to my colleagues at the University of Guelph for taking on extra work while I’ve been on leave, working on my dissertation.

some them rather lightly. Where possible, I'll ground what I'm saying in specific examples drawn from the interviews I conducted with information literacy librarians working in Canadian universities as part of my doctoral research.

In terms of an outline, I'd like to start off by considering the idea of turning information into action in the context of the corporate—or neoliberal—university, an institution subject to accountability and audit, with an accelerated and intensified work order. Next, I'll situate it in relation to the way we, as librarians, view our profession and go about our day-to-day work. Finally, I'll talk about critical practice, and more specifically, critical information literacy, as a means of reclaiming the idea of information into action.

II. The Neoliberal University

Our interest in turning information into action is, in part, a product of the corporatized higher education context in which we all studied and many of us continue to work. As a result of political reforms that began in the 1970s, today's university focuses on producing skilled workers and functions as a driver of economic growth for the nation-state in the global knowledge economy. In the face of reduced state funding, the university relies heavily on revenue from tuition fees, research grants, and public-private partnerships. Through the introduction of corporate values and practices such as competition, risk, value for money, and entrepreneurship, higher education has become more accountable and ostensibly, more efficient. Characteristics of the neoliberal university include a focus on quality assurance and assessment, reduced support for the liberal arts in favour of the STEM disciplines, top-heavy administrations, precarious labour, and the acceleration and intensification of work, and by this I mean more work in less time, fewer unscheduled hours within the work day, and the blurring of work and personal life.

Like their parent institutions, academic libraries have also been transformed by corporate values and practices. They too have become more efficient, more accountable. They have also become more predictable: we offer the same services, many of the same collections, and the same “innovative,” often oversimplified, technology-driven solutions to the complex problems of teaching, learning, and inquiry (Quinn, 2000; Nicholson, 2015; Berkovich & Wasserman, 2017; Mirza & Seale, 2017). As LIS scholar Catherine Closet-Crane (2011, p. 37) argues, the dominant narrative within the profession is that the value of today's academic library depends “on the

visibility it affords to the university, technological innovation, and its educational mission.” Demonstrating the value and impact of the library’s collections and services on accreditation, rankings, and student success has become a central preoccupation, a veritable industry in and of itself (Drabinski, 2017). For me, the notion of turning information into action is a product of this preoccupation. It further evokes the tradition of positivism and evidence-based practice within the profession, and librarianship’s foundation in the principles of scientific management or “Taylorism,” intended to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity through the streamlining and standardization of work routines (Gregory & Higgins, 2018; Kont, 2013).

The work of academic librarians has also changed as a result of the corporatization of higher education. Traditional pink collar public service work, including reference and information literacy, has been devalued (Shirazi, 2014; Sloniowski, 2016). The labour of digital librarianship, primarily done by men, “is increasingly prevalent and arguably valorized as the future of librarianship” (Sloniowski, 2016, p. 649). In order to demonstrate their contribution to the institutional mission and bottom line, librarians must now take on new digital roles in addition to their other work (Mirza & Seale, 2017; Mulligan, 2016). In a 2011 paper, Simon Fraser AUL Karen Munro argues that in becoming more flexible and resilient, by “specializ[ing] in generalizing,” librarians become more valuable to the institution because they can not only do more varied work but they also accomplish a greater volume of work. Like that of their faculty counterparts, librarians’ affective labour, the invisible yet intense work of managing emotions upon which the service economy depends, is characterized by anxiety; being mentally prepared for work at any time, by incessantly checking email, for example; and a compulsion to stay “constantly connected and on top of new information in one’s field” (Sloniowski, 2016, p. 658). It is also marked by “feelings of instability and being overloaded, and ... ongoing fears of being left behind” (Sloniowski, 2016, p. 658). The success of the neoliberal university depends on individuals internalizing the need to work more quickly, more efficiently (Bansel & Davies, 2005). There is no time to pause or reflect, only time to act. In this way, the theme of information into action is consistent with mainstream visions and imperatives of the academic library: change is inevitable, and “the present is consistently depicted in terms of... disruption, innovation, and progress” (Mirza & Seale, 2017, pp. 175-176). As my colleague Maura Seale so aptly put it, “we are always already behind.” Maura pointed me to an article by Julia Glassman (2017) entitled “The Innovation Fetish and Slow Librarianship: What Librarians Can Learn from the Juicero.”

For those not familiar with the Juicero, it was a Silicon Valley startup failure that proposed to make freshly squeezed juice from juice packets using a machine that cost \$400 US. In her article, Glassman writes:

There is intense pressure [in librarianship] to constantly innovate, to throw out the old and invent something new. This phenomenon is situated, of course, within a profession (and, indeed, a culture) that kicks around the word “innovation” as if it were a hacky sack. Innovation isn’t just one factor of success in librarianship; it often seems to be the sole benchmark by which we measure the worth of our work. We’re pressured by tenure clocks and hiring committees to publish papers and present at conferences, and no conference is interested in a presentation on how the teaching technique you developed five years ago is still working fine.

Writing about makerspaces in public libraries, Shannon Crawford Barniskis (2017) invokes the concept of “library faith.” Barniskis suggests that in the context of new digital services and spaces, library faith is used to reposition libraries as centres of technological innovation and knowledge production. In the case of the academic library, library faith serves to promote the library’s role in facilitating the university’s contribution to the global knowledge economy.

As a case in point, last year’s *Library Annual Report* at my place of work, the University of Guelph, entitled “Reinvent,” focused on renovations, user experience, digital scholarship, digital humanities, and special collections (University of Guelph McLaughlin Library, 2017). Information literacy, reference, and collection development were not highlighted, not even in the section entitled, “Tried, Tested, and True.” We need to understand that the increasingly narrow focus on technological innovation, competition, and branding, all materializations of “information into action,” is a fairly recent phenomenon in academic libraries. Given the pervasiveness of this trend, however, it’s easy to simply accept it as the way things have always been.

The interviews I conducted with information literacy librarians in Canada as part of my PhD provided evidence of neoliberal logics very much in keeping with what I have just described. In total, I spoke with 24 librarians, working in ten public research-intensive universities located in six provinces from coast-to-coast. In the interests of time, I’ll share only

some of what these librarians had to say about the impact of corporatization on their professional practice. They talked about the importance of working quickly in order to manage their workloads, and used expressions like “burnout,” “being overloaded,” “scrambling to meet deadlines,” and “getting swept away” to describe how they felt as they tried to cope. Strategies they used included “going for the low hanging fruit,” chunking up work, carving out time, colour-coding calendars and keeping multiple lists and spreadsheets to track and report their work. Some had automated their work by creating online modules, short on-the-fly screencasts, and scripted answers to send in response to student emails in order to work more efficiently. Their work day had become increasingly fragmented and intensified, punctuated by back-to-back meetings and consultations with students. Paradoxically, working beyond regular hours, by answering email in particular, was also seen as efficient.

Study participants believed information literacy to be a core part of a university education. Information literacy prepared students for their assignments, for work, for life as engaged citizens. Through their information literacy work, these librarians felt they were making an important contribution to the university’s educational mission and to society at large.

In the face of reduced funding and shifting institutional priorities, however, some of these librarians reported that information literacy had been devalued by library administrators. Many reported providing new services intended to support the university’s research enterprise, such as research data management, research metrics, and support for digital humanities, on top of their existing duties. These services and roles were often described as “shiny and new,” suggesting that they were intended, above all, to attract attention. “Shiny and new” was also used several times to describe showcase-type spaces such as digital humanities centres, makerspaces, and media studios built to enhance the library’s reputation as progressive or “innovative.”

Technology was often equated with progress and possibility. It also served as a means of control and regulation. Staying ahead of the technology curve was an important means of demonstrating one’s continued professional relevance. Those who remained skeptical of shiny new roles or who continued to believe in the value of more “traditional” service models were perceived by their colleagues as behind the times, “dusty,” or change averse.

As McGill professor Charles Taylor (2001, p. 4, cited in Basu, 2004, p. 621, original emphasis) reminds us, it is important to understand that neoliberal reforms to higher education have been legitimized “by a *perceived need* to improve the efficiency of the public sector while

simultaneously... increasing standards, improving outcomes, and ensuring accountability.” Similarly, there is a perceived need in academic libraries to demonstrate value by embracing efficiency, innovation, and technology over ideas, reflection, and relationships. While numerous studies have been published demonstrating the impact of library services and collections on student success and retention (e.g. Blake, Bowles-Terry, Pearson, Szentkiralyi, 2017; Bowles-Terry, 2012), there is little evidence that this value agenda has had a direct impact in securing library funding. In my view, the long-standing crisis narrative in librarianship has simply been repurposed to serve a new political agenda.

III. Practicality, Vocational Awe, and Library Faith

Our interest in turning information into action is not only a product of the context in which many of us work, however. It is, in fact, part of the very fabric of our profession.

Information into action highlights what my colleague Dave Hudson (2017, p. 212) has described as “the practicality imperative” in librarianship, “the exaltation of clarity, common sense, the everyday, the utilitarian.” Dave argues that practicality is the dominant ideology within the profession. The “practicality imperative,” he writes, “subtly police[s] the work we end up supporting and doing... our sense of what useful and appropriate conferences, publications, and research [are]... and... more generally,... what useful and appropriate political interventions look like from the standpoint of the profession” (p. 206). Practicality demands that we *do*, not think. Practicality requires us to conform, not critique. Practicality urges us to turn information into action. As a case in point, ALA President for 2017-18 James Neal urged librarians to “focus less on ideas and more on action—getting things done” (Neal & Smit, 2016). To be practical is to be efficient, output-oriented, and compliant. To be practical is to be resilient, flexible, and energetic. To be practical is to ignore or be complicit in the ways we reinscribe racial, sexual, gender, and class norms in our everyday practice. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (2018) further argue that practicality, and capitalism, are an inextricable part of our profession: the spread of libraries and the establishment of library science as a field of study and as a profession in the US, they write, occurred alongside the rise of private enterprise and the ‘efficiency movement’ in the Progressive Era (1890–1920). As a result, libraries were built in the image and model of corporations, and library education and training “was designed to create efficient, pragmatic workers, who were often underpaid (undervalued) women” (p. 25).

Mainstream ideas about libraries and librarianship are also representative of what Fobazi Ettarh (2018) refers to as “vocational awe,” a concept similar to that of “library faith.” Vocational awe is “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that... libraries as institutions are inherently good” and that librarianship is not merely a job, it’s a calling. In keeping with Hudson’s argument about practicality, Ettarh suggests that vocational awe masks the role libraries have played and continue to play in perpetuating social injustice. It also exacerbates occupational issues within libraries such as burnout, low salary, and job creep. When your job is your passion, you would never think to complain about low wages, the slow and subtle expansion of your duties, and the toil of affective labour. In my view, vocational awe facilitates the circulation of neoliberal discourses of resilience, flexibility, and entrepreneurialism within our libraries.

The common sense ideology behind library faith, the practicality imperative, and vocational awe disenfranchises library workers because it asks us to accept the status quo as normal, the way things are, and normative, the way things should be. Critical educator Kevin Kumashiro (2002) notes that commonsense discourses serve as barriers to social change and perpetuate oppression within our classrooms. I worry that as a profession, we’re too focused on efficiency, too invested in measuring what can’t always be measured. We’re too hasty to jump on the innovation bandwagon, too happy to embrace the latest tech trend. We’re in a race to reinvent, always already behind, rushing to catch up. As a case in point, information literacy, described by Patricia Breivik in 1989 as a “revolution in the library” (Breivik & Gee, 1989), emerged as a priority for the profession in the mid 1980s, when librarians found themselves left out of neoliberal reforms to higher education intended to better prepare workers for the “information age,” reforms I described earlier. As Stephen Foster wrote in 1993, “information literacy is largely an exercise in public relations... a response to being ignored by the establishment, an effort to deny the ancillary status of librarianship by inventing a social malady” (p. 346). During the 1980s and 1990s, librarians worked to define and legitimize the concept of information literacy (Behrens, 1994); the result was the publication of early information literacy standards around the year 2000. As we know today, the view of literacy represented in these standards is highly problematic: literacy is not a set of generic skills or something we do or do not possess, it’s a sociocultural practice, it’s something that we do, and *what* we do with literacy depends on the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which we do it. Literacy looks different

in different contexts and communities. Literacy is not neutral, it's ideological. There are dominant and marginalized literacies. In fact, New Literacy Studies scholars pointed all of this out as early as 1984, right around the time when librarians started to think about information literacy (Street, 1984). But in our rush to demonstrate our value in a time of political uncertainty, to usher in the next revolution in the library, we ignored this. The reality is, as Elmborg wrote back in 2003, library instruction has developed "working programs first" and looked to theory second (p. 71).

Issues such as literacy, student success, diversity, and fake news are complex socio-political and economic problems, far beyond simplistic, individualized, technological solutions. Far beyond the library. Yet somehow, we seem to think that these issues are all of the same magnitude, all problems to be solved. Perhaps it's because in thinking we can't meaningfully change our situation, we feel compelled to change *something*.

Common sense ideology also lies behind critiques of critical librarianship, with its reliance on theory, "as removed from the practical concerns that confront library workers and the communities they serve" (Preater, 2018). The theory/practice debate is the subject of Maura's and my book. As Emily Drabinski wrote in the foreword, on the one hand, "something about the word 'theory' triggers anxieties: theory is too hard, it's for snobs, I don't have time for it, it's for the leisure class" (Drabinski, 2018, p. vii). Practice, on the other hand, she notes, remains largely unquestioned. Practice is common sense. As a result, as another contributor, Andrew Preater (2018) has pointed out elsewhere, the "more practical suggestions and ethical approaches [of critical librarianship] are sometimes read as *just good librarianship*," plain and simple.

IV. Reclaiming Information into Action

In the last section of my presentation, I want to talk about critical practice, information literacy, and slowing down as a means of reclaiming information into action. Critical practice is about using theory and reflection to take informed action. As Gregory and Higgins (2018) contend, "examining our past in relation to capitalism raises our awareness of historical and economic contexts within which our practice still occurs." In this sense, critically examining the idea of information into action and situating it within the political and economic past and present of librarianship might allow us to reclaim it. Glassman (2017) writes, "Perhaps, if we reject the capitalist drive to constantly churn out new products and instead take a stand to support more

reflective and responsive practices, we can offer our patrons services that are deeper, more lasting, and more human.” “Critical information literacy seeks to bridge the gap that separates practice from theory within librarianship and the broader LIS discipline” (Nicholson, 2014, p. 2). In the words of Barbara Fister, “it [also] asks librarians to work with their... communities to co-investigate the political, social, and economic dimensions of information... [It] seeks to involve learners in better understanding systems of oppression while also identifying opportunities to take action upon them” (Fister, 2013).

Critical information literacy is informed by critical, feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, and queer pedagogies. Common elements of these approaches include creating a more inclusive, less authoritarian classroom through the use of dialogue and reflection, centered in critical content. To me, critical information literacy is part of the “slow” movement, an attempt to “take back” higher education by resisting “the accelerated time of the neoliberal university,” its values, practices, and pedagogies (Nicholson, 2016). These latter include time-efficient, superficial tools and approaches like the CRAAP test, LibGuides, and canned searches, carefully engineered to produce specific results. Slow information literacy is about giving ourselves permission to step away from intended learning outcomes and scripts in order to address the needs of students as they emerge in the moment (Nicholson, 2016).

There are many challenges to introducing a critical approach to information literacy in the neoliberal academy, not least of which is the accelerated, abbreviated one-shot guest lecture format. In light of this, what the information literacy team at the University of Guelph has been trying to focus on, in addition to an extensive curriculum mapping project, are the kinds of small changes that might help us bring more critical perspectives to our teaching, little tweaks in the ways that we talk about information, scholarship, and the academy. These small changes, we believe, might help us move beyond a superficial, efficient approach to one that is more consistent with our professional values as educators. This approach, we hope, will ultimately better prepare our students to be critical thinkers and actors. To this end, we’ve been working for over a year now with my Immersion colleague Wendy Holliday to identify what Wiggins and McTighe (2005) refer to in their book, *Understanding by Design*, as the “big ideas” and “essential understandings” of a critical approach to information literacy. (As an aside, for those not familiar with the work of Wiggins and McTighe, UBD is one of the models that informs the *ACRL Framework*.) In many of the faculties we support at Guelph, one-shots continue to be the

primary way we engage with students in the context of their discipline. But rather than focusing on the one-shot as a deficit model,² I've come to see it as being in perfect sync with the accelerated and intensified time of the neoliberal university, as I've written about elsewhere (Nicholson, 2016). In most cases, it's probably the best we're ever going to get. So rather than giving up this opportunity, or choosing an overly simplistic, technology-driven solution to a complex issue, we're focusing on changing what we can, slowly, thoughtfully. In so doing, we believe we can meet the needs of the assignment and introduce students to the political economy of information at the same time. We're also exploring partnerships with students outside of the curriculum, trying to extend our work beyond the classroom, beyond the idea of information literacy as a situated practice for the academy in order to facilitate political action and civic engagement on and beyond our campus. Practice meets theory, information becomes informed action. We hope.

V. Conclusion

Something about the theme of information into action makes me think about big, flashy, innovative librarianship, the kind we see plastered all over glossy library annual reports. This kind of librarianship prioritizes technology and transactions, and devalues craft, expertise, and relationships. This kind of librarianship reinscribes capitalist values and oppressive gender, racial, and class norms in our daily practice. Unfortunately, prioritizing shiny and new librarianship and devaluing affective labour is not new. In a fascinating study, University of Toronto scholars Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb (2004, p. 152) "examined... obituaries of librarians in the *New York Times* between 1977 and 2002 to determine how librarians were presented to the general public by a major newspaper." (Again, I want to acknowledge Maura for sharing this article with me.) They found that almost two-thirds "of the obituaries chronicled the lives of male librarians" despite the fact that librarianship is a female-dominated profession (p. 152). Moreover, they primarily featured academic librarians, although public and school librarians are far more numerous. They also focused on "large-scale achievements," "produc[ing] an image of librarianship as a glamorous profession" (p. 152). As Dilevko and Gottlieb point out, the problem with this portrayal of the profession, in yesterday's obituaries and today's annual reports, is that it "tends to obscure the contributions of librarians who daily perform countless

² Thanks to my Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe for helping me to see this.

small and caring acts that, summed together, positively affect the lives of ordinary individuals” (p. 152).

I don't think librarianship is a glamorous profession. I also don't believe we're well served by thinking of it as a vocation. It's a job. It's one that I care deeply about, although these days, one I feel decidedly less sure about.

In her book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), feminist antiracist scholar Sara Ahmed argues that we need to work *on* the university when we work *at* the university. In a similar vein, LIS professor James Elmborg (2008) writes that “the institutions we create are constructed by us, and they represent the values we choose to encode in them” (p. 506). In closing then, I'd like to challenge us, as a profession, to think about the kind of university or library we want to work in, the kind of professional values we want to uphold, the kind of pedagogical practices we want to enact, and the kind of small, caring acts we might undertake to bring about positive change in our libraries and our classrooms. Merci de votre attention. Thank you.

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