

# Reproducing and Resisting Capitalism through Information Literacy

Nora Almeida, New York City College of Technology, CUNY  
Romel Espinel, Stevens Institute of Technology  
Eamon Tewell, Long Island University Brooklyn  
Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Libraries in the Context of Capitalism Symposium  
METRO, NYC, Feb. 2 2018



What capitalist metaphors or language do you use with colleagues/patrons/administrators?

# The Language of Information Literacy

Nora Almeida

# What's in a word?

Do capitalist metaphors work to...

- Position students as consumers?
- Simplify knowledge production environments?
- Reinforce neoliberal ideology?

# Capitalist Rhetorical Paradox

If capitalist metaphors capture reality of neoliberal institutions and “knowledge economy” ....

- Can we address these ideas without legitimizing them?
- How is this critique related to the goals of information literacy instruction?

# Information Literacy: A brief history in 2 texts

- **1974** Paul Zurkowski, president of the American Information Industry Association, coins term “Information Literacy” in a report called ***The Information Service Environment Relationships and Priorities***.
- **1989** American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy publishes a ***Final Report*** that formally establishes IL as a professional touchstone.

# The Information Service Environment: Relationship & Priorities

1974

FRAMING

**“Information has value in direct proportion to the control it provides [the consumer] over what he is and what he can become.”**

“Libraries seek to reach out to precisely the same people to whom the private sector is seeking to market similar or even identical services. From an economic standpoint **there is a real danger that this kind of unfair competition will destroy the economic viability of the creator of the [information] service involved.**”

# Framing

“A concomitant of free expression is the need for the user to have confidence in the information source on which he proposes to rely. **Subsidization of activities that preempt alternative sources eliminates one base for confidence: competition among products delivering concepts and ideas.**”

“Government should not perform services for its citizens which the citizens are capable of performing themselves”



# ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report

1989

Institutionalization

**“Information literacy is a survival skill** in the information age”

“Although libraries historically have provided a meaningful structure for relating information in ways that facilitate the development of knowledge, they have been all but ignored in the literature about the information age.”

# Institutionalization

**“Within America’s information society, there also exists the potential of addressing many long-standing social and economic inequities.”**

“The cultural and educational opportunities available in an average community are often missed by people who lack the ability to keep informed of such activities, and **lives of information illiterates are more likely than others to be narrowly focused on second-hand experiences of life through television.**”

# Neoliberalism Unleashed

Romel Espinel

Over the past 40 years, neoliberalism has crept into all aspects of life.

- Privatization
- Corporatization
- Free trade
- Competition

Aided by unending wars, globalization, global warming, and shortages of resources . . .

- Consolidation of Power & Capital
- Falling wages
- Diminishing power of unions and workers movements
- Dismantling of welfare state

# By 2009 when Pres. Obama declared October National Information Literacy Awareness Month

Neoliberalism embedded in our best efforts:

- "Crisis in Authenticity" =  
Necessity through "Crisis" (Shock Doctrine)
- "Information Marketplace"
- "Competencies" with the new modes of  
production (new tech)
- "Taking advantage of information for  
themselves"
- "Informed Citizenry"

2009 was also the  
year the world  
economy was in  
disarray

So the “Informed Citizen” was no longer the Jeffersonian:

“An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people”

Instead, an educated citizenry is vital to the survival of themselves as a wage-slave in fast-changing, retooling of the marketplace ruled by inter-imperialist rivalry. STEM everybody!

# The “promises of information literacy” with capitalist constraints

- Better informed
- Efficient
- Democratic
- Reflective
- Smarter



*“Never mind what's  
been selling  
It's what you're  
buying”*

-Fugazi

IF not taught within the context of capitalism and the power structures that control knowledge, then IL becomes about

- Tracking
- Outsourcing
- Individualization
- Surveillance state
- Sowing more class, race, sex divisions

# Capitalism and the Practice of Information Literacy Education

Eamon Tewell

# The Commodification of Information

The commodification of information is an ongoing project of neoliberalism,

Which is intertwined with the commodification of information literacy,

Which is intertwined with the commodification of higher education,

And so forth...

“The discourse of information literacy links the selective consumption of information to the production, pedagogically speaking, of autonomous subjects.

But information is a commodity—and not only *a* commodity, but the preeminent commodity—form of contemporary capitalism”

– Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith

“The Library as ‘Stuck Place’: Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University,” 2010

# The One-Shot Session

Represents most academic librarians' only opportunity to teach students in the classroom setting

Reflective of corporate time and accelerated, surface-level learning (Nicholson, 2016)

Dependent on collaboration with faculty, who are often also stretched thin and/or in contingent positions

“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”

- Karen Nicholson

“‘Taking Back’ Information Literacy: Time and the One-Shot in the Neoliberal University,” 2016

# “Database Instruction”

Over-reliance on demonstrating databases within instruction due to limited time and other factors, which leads to further reinforcement of scholarly communication status quo

We sell the same products to students that are sold to our libraries, primarily because they're sold to our libraries

“We often operate as extensions of the database vendors whose products we rent and encourage our students to consume for the brief time that they are with us...

With fewer people juggling more work, it becomes easy to fall back on database training as the sum total of our teaching efforts”

- Patti Ryan and Lisa Sloniowski

“The Public Academic Library: Friction in the Teflon Tunnel,” 2013



# Summing Up

Information literacy is produced by and helps to produce the imperatives of capitalism

We can and should push back, but this is largely dependent on our status within the workplace

To resist capitalism's overdetermination of what's possible within libraries, it is essential to build collective power; to unionize and create coalitions

And ... They Need a Job

Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe

# Getting a Better Job Motivates Going to College

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>The following reasons were "Very Important" in deciding to go to college:</b>						
A mentor/role model encouraged me to go	—	—	—	—	—	—
I could not find a job	—	—	—	—	—	—
My parents wanted me to go	—	—	—	—	—	—
There was nothing better to do	—	—	—	—	—	—
To be able to get a better job	84.7	85.9	87.9	86.3	86.1	85.2
To be able to make more money	71.2	71.7	74.6	73.3	72.8	69.9
To get training for a specific career	77.6	77.6	79.3	77.1	77.1	76.1
To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas	72.4	72.4	72.8	69.6	70.6	71.5
To learn more about things that interest me	82.8	82.9	82.5	81.6	82.2	82.4
To make me a more cultured person	50.9	50.3	50.6	45.9	46.6	48.8
To prepare myself for graduate or professional school	60.2	61.4	61.9	60.8	59.7	58.8
Wanted to get away from home	—	—	—	—	—	—

# Shared View of Importance for Career Success

**Employers and College Students Rate the Importance of College Learning Outcomes**  
*(Proportion of employers and students who rate each outcome an 8, 9, or 10 on a zero-to-10 scale)*

	<u>Employers</u> %	<u>College Students</u> %
The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources	68	73

# Many are Studying to Be Capitalists

“Of the 1,870,000 bachelor's degrees conferred in 2013–14, the greatest numbers of degrees were conferred in the fields of **business (358,000)**, health professions and related programs (199,000), social sciences and history (173,000), psychology (117,000), biological and biomedical sciences (105,000), and education (99,000)...”

[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/ch\\_3.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/ch_3.asp)

# Choosing to Navigate the Tension

Resist the  
Temptation of  
Neutrality

Accept the  
Obligation of  
Positionality

# Pragmatic Strategy – Loaded Examples

“The examples must be relevant to the course content and cannot confuse or distract learners, but within these broad parameters we have a great deal of latitude in selecting examples ...

Examples convey messages about values and the importance of certain topics. This is true whether the examples are intentionally chosen to do so or inadvertently do so. I would go so far as to claim that there is an ethical responsibility to be intentional about examples because examples convey messages beyond their utility for demonstrating strategy or tools.”

Hinchliffe, Lisa Janicke. 2016. "Loading Examples to Further Human Rights Education." In Pagowsky, N. & McElroy, K. (eds), *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*. Chicago: ACRL.

**MY GOAL:**  
information literacy instruction  
that prepares students for their  
careers while also seeking to  
develop their critical information  
literacy abilities



# Ideas for Critical Resistance

[tinyurl.com/ILcapitalism](https://tinyurl.com/ILcapitalism)

# Contact

Nora Almeida  
nalmeida@citytech.cuny.edu  
@nora\_almeida

Romel Espinel  
respinel@stevens.edu  
@cudjoe70

Eamon Tewell  
eamon.tewell@liu.edu  
@eamontewell

Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe  
lisalibrarian@gmail.com  
@lisalibrarian