

From Value to Values: Information Literacy, Capitalism, and Resistance

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



What's in a word?

Do capitalist metaphors...

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

Think/Pair/Share:

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

Information Literacy in the Time of a Neoliberal Regime

Romel Espinel

CAPITALISM



Primitive accumulation of capital by means of slavery and colonialism and birth of industrial capitalism

Regulated Regime

Neoliberal Regime

That's a real good question.

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 and capital
- Falling wages
- Diminishing power of unions and workers movements
- Dismantling of welfare state

2009, Obama
declared
October National
Information
Literacy Awareness
Month

Hallmarks of the Neoliberalism:

- “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 and the neoliberal regime was bailed out.

Austerity Alert!

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!

“Never mind what’s been selling

It’s what you’re buying”

- Fugazi

Taught within the context of capitalism and the power structures that control knowledge, then IL can become about:

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

The promise of information literacy

- Better informed
- Democratic
- Reflective
- Social justice
- Class consciousness (maybe?)
- Liberation

The Language of Information Literacy

Nora Almeida

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 Two 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

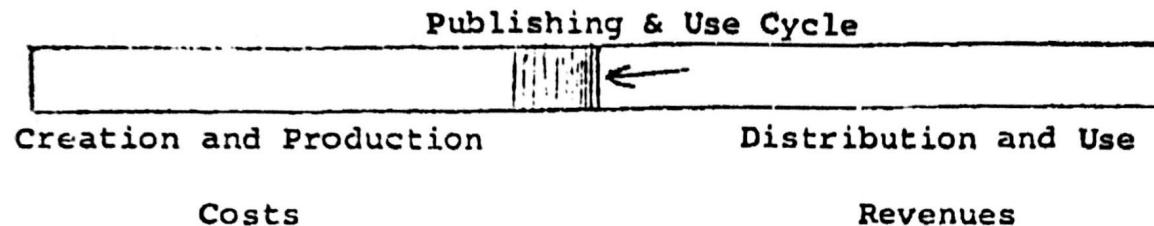
1974

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



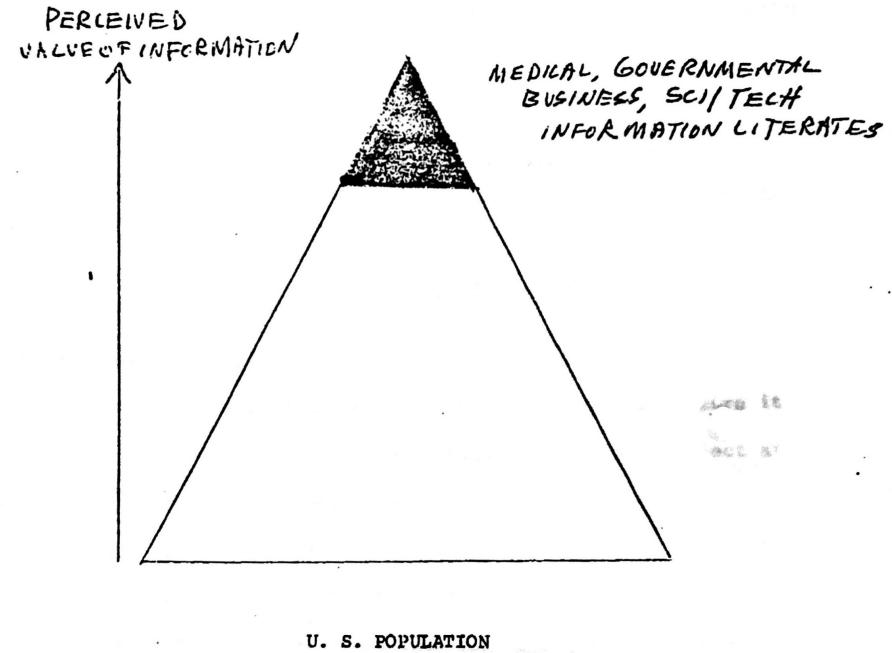
In the publishing and use cycle the major costs are associated with creation and production. Revenues are generated from the distribution and use end. Photocopying, while not generating revenues for libraries, does push the publisher farther and farther back into the cost area and out of distribution and revenue area.

The Information Service Environment: Priority

1974

Framing

FIGURE 3



While the population of the U.S. today is nearly 100% literate, only a small portion - perhaps one-sixth, could be characterized as information literates.

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.”**

Capitalism and the Practice of Information Literacy Education

Eamon Tewell

Information Literacy is...

A construct, and one that is inherently political, contested, and continually changing

Intertwined with the demand to prove our value and relevance to our institutions, precarity within libraries and higher education, and market-driven majors and programs

A concept linked to human capital and the commodification of information since the moment the term was coined

“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 knowledge and 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

What We Can Do

Recognize that information literacy education isn't necessarily a problem of time, but of labor

Move from reacting solely to faculty or student requests for classes, and direct the conversation with them and other library workers

Resist the division of labor to build collective knowledge and power across departments and professional statuses

And...They Need a Job

Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe

Getting a Better Job Motivates Going to College

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
The following reasons were "Very Important" in deciding to go to college:						
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	—	—	—	—	—	—

Employer View

Very Important Skills for Recent College Graduates We Are Hiring*



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

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.

Lisa's Goal

“information literacy instruction that prepares students for their careers while also developing their critical information literacy abilities”

Ideas for Critical Resistance

padlet.com/eamontewell/ILcapitalism

From Value to Values: Information Literacy, Capitalism, and Resistance

Romel Espinel
respinel@stevens.edu
@cudjoe70

Eamon Tewell
eamon.tewell@columbia.edu
@eamontewell

Nora Almeida
nalmeida@citytech.cuny.edu
@nora_almeida

Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe
ljanicke@illinois.edu
@lisalibrarian