CAIS Paper: Information Literacy as a Situated Practice in the Neoliberal University

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Abstract: Information literacy (IL) emerges within the context of a neoliberal agenda in higher education. This paper uses the Academic Literacies Framework (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006) to critique current LIS approaches to IL, and to reframe IL as a situated practice within the neoliberal university.

Résumé:

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the development of students' generic skills has become an increasingly important focus of higher education. This change can be linked to human capital theory according to which investment in the development of workers' knowledge and skills is essential to increased productivity and to maintaining a competitive edge in the global knowledge economy (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Holborow, 2007; Tuchman, 2009; Saunders, 2010; Côté and Allahar, 2011). Kapitzke (2003), Seale (2013), and Enright (2013) demonstrate how the emergence of information literacy (IL) happens within the context of this neoliberal "skills agenda". Information literacy itself is based in a problematic and largely unquestioned assumption that "learning information skills will lead to beneficial outcomes" (Tuominen, Savolainen, and Talja, 2005, 333). I contend we need to move beyond current debates about information literacy within LIS to undertake a critical re-examination of information literacy as a situated practice within the neoliberal university.

2. Literature Review

In approaches to IL dictated by standards and guidelines, literacy is seen to be an array of decontextualized and generic cognitive and technical skills. Numerous problems have been identified with this "check box" approach to IL. First, it reduces a complex set of skills and knowledge to discrete steps and favours a surface learning approach (Webber and Johnston, 2000; Seale 2010). Second, structuring information literacy instruction around standards such as the ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards (ALA, 2000) is rooted in a problematic positivist assumption that students are in a deficit position (Accardi, Drabinksi, and Kumbier, 2010; Seale, 2010; Jacobs and Berg, 2011). In this model, skills such as literacy, numeracy, writing, and information literacy are often viewed as precursor skills that must be taught before students can engage with

disciplinary content, underscoring a view of teaching and learning as linear and hierarchical (Kelly, 2009). The model itself then, stands in the way of integrating IL into the curriculum, a "best practice" approach (ALA, 2000; 2003). Finally, information needs and skills cannot be taught "for life" independent from the sociocultural and historical contexts in which are enacted (Luke and Kapitzke, 1999; Tuominen, Savolainen, and Tanna, 2005; Lloyd, 2005; Lloyd and Williamson, 2008).

LIS scholars and practitioners have both voiced criticisms of mainstream approaches to IL. On the one hand, new models of information literacy as situated practice, more closely aligned with New Literacy Studies (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Street, 2003), have recently been advanced within the scholarly discipline of LIS (Luke and Kapitzke, 1999; Lloyd, 2005; Tuominen, Savolainen, and Talja, 2005; Lloyd and Williamson, 2008). In this view, literacy is best understood as a set of social practices, patterned by institutions and power relationships, and embedded in particular socio-historical and cultural contexts. On the other hand, within the professional practice of librarianship, critical information literacy has recently emerged as a translational praxis (Jacobs, 2008; Accardi, Drabinksi, and Kumbier, 2010). Critical IL has two broad goals: the first is to bridge the gap that separates practice from theory within librarianship and the broader LIS discipline (Accardi, Drabinksi, and Kumbier, 2010); the second is to bring outside approaches and disciplinary perspectives to bear on IL (Swanson, 2004; Simmons, 2005; Elmborg, 2006; Jacobs, 2008; Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier, 2010; Cope, 2010).

This paper will extend the theory and practice of information literacy by considering the limitations of IL as a situated practice within the neoliberal university.

3. Theoretical Approach and Methodology

Within the abundant literature on information literacy, few studies explore information literacy as a situated practice; none of these do so in the context of higher education. Equally rare are those that explore the link between IL and neoliberalism. In order to identify relevant materials, I conducted keyword searches in the Library Literature and Information Science Full Text (LISA), Library and Information Science Technology Abstracts (LISTA), the Social Science Citation Index, and WorldCat respectively, using the following queries:

- "information literacy" AND "new literacy studies"
- "information literacy" AND "situated practice*"
- "information literacy" AND "academic literac*"
- "critical information literacy"
- "information literacy" AND neoliberal*

False hits (e.g. articles that use the term "academic literacy/ies" outside the context of New Literacy Studies) and items that do not focus on higher education were eliminated, leaving a total of 20 articles and 2 books. I then used citation tracing to locate additional

materials of interest. This recursive process was applied until no new materials were found.

I use the lens of Lea and Street's Academic Literacies Framework (1998, 2006), developed from the area of New Literacy Studies, to explore and critique contemporary approaches to information literacy. The concept of "academic literacies" provides a model for understanding approaches to skill development as situated practices within the university context. More importantly, it allows us to see beyond current ways of framing issues with information literacy to question the theoretical and practical assumptions that underlie IL in the global context of neoliberalism in higher education.

4. Discussion

I contend that contemporary critiques of IL fail to recognize that approaches to information literacy in higher education are necessarily situated literacy practices since "engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset" (Street, 2003, 78, emphasis added). In fact, information literacy practices in higher education—including critical information literacy—map closely to approaches to literacy instruction developed from the area of New Literacy Studies and mapped out by Lea and Street (1998, 2006) in their Academic Literacies Framework. As a result, the Academic Literacies Framework can be used as a lens for reexamining "information skills" training in higher education by positioning bibliographic instruction, information literacy, and critical information literacy as overlapping, situated practices. The "point and click" approach to bibliographic instruction (BI), which emphasizes the superficial features of library research tools and information systems and is typified by behaviourist pedagogical strategies, resembles what is identified in the Academic Literacies Framework as the "study skills" approach to academic literacy instruction. This approach focuses on the acquisition of writing as a technical, generic skill that is transferable from one context to another. Information literacy instruction delivered through stand-alone courses, workshops or modules also maps onto the "study skills" approach. Course-related information literacy instruction, with its emphasis on acculturation into disciplinary practices and constructivist pedagogies, aligns with what Lea and Street call the "academic socialization" approach to academic literacy instruction. Finally, critical information literacy and Lea and Street's "academic literacies" approach to literacy instruction are both concerned with "meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foreground the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context" (Lea and Street, 2006, 369).

The fundamental and pernicious issue with information literacy that remains, however, is that it is a construct developed for and taught within the broader context of the neoliberal university, which embraces the skills agenda (Holborow, 2007; Miller, 2010; Saunders, 2010; Côté and Allahar, 2011; Enright, 2013). The focus on skills and lifelong learning—a kind of "'compunction' to training and retraining that makes individuals 'entrepreneurs of the self'" (Enright, 2013, 26)—is consistent with a dehumanizing neoliberal discourse that casts workers as "portfolios" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Enright, 2013). In this view, "employability" is not only a question of the diverse skills and experiences one has assembled but also a measure of how quickly one can "shape shift" in order to reconfigure them into the desired combination (Gee, 2000, 61).

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Discourses of "lifelong learning" produce disciplined and self-disciplining subjects (Usher and Edwards, 2007). As a result, for IL to truly become a form of critical pedagogy would require "an almost complete rethinking of the concept" (Seale, 2013, 58). In order to make any theoretical or practical advances with IL therefore, we need to undertake a critical re-examination of information literacy itself.

I conclude by proposing that Multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Luke, 2000), an alternative approach to literacy as social practice which focuses on discourse, literacy, and socioeconomic and cultural forces—globalization and fast capitalism in particular— might allow for a more nuanced and situated reading of contemporary approaches to IL. Information literacy and Multiliteracies share the common goal of empowering students for academic, professional and personal success (Cazden et al, 1996; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Cumming-Potvin, 2009), but Multiliteracies draws upon and extends the sociocultural perspective of literacy as diverse, contextually situated practices and "engages in a critical dialogue with the core concepts of fast capitalism" (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, 12) to propose new approaches to literacy education (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Cumming-Potvin, 2009). Because Multiliteracies attends to the ways in which the borders between new business and management Discourses and those of higher education are becoming increasingly blurred, and calls for literacy educators to take a critical stance toward their practice, it affords a particularly rich framework for rethinking information literacy in our current context.

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