

CAIS LRI Poster: Information Seeking in a Global Context.

The creeping influence of economic globalization & corporatization: Neoliberal discourse in Canadian academic libraries.

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Abstract

Strategic planning documents are "key sites to institutional discourse" and reflect the public face of the library. This research explores the extent to which Neoliberal discourse permeates the strategic planning documents of three Canadian academic libraries, and examines how these institutions are responding to mounting and diversifying global economic and political pressures. Through content analysis and a critical lens, this exploratory research examines the tension between libraries as a public good versus libraries as marketized commodity.

Résumé

Introduction and Background

The past thirty years has seen a progressive shift in higher education, with what some have noted as a "rising dominion" of neoliberal ideology (Ayers, 2005). Neoliberalism briefly defined, refers to policies and processes that put economic interests before the interests of the public, emphasizing the primacy of the market over the interests of the collective (Harvey, 2005). Associated with the Thatcher-Reagan years, it has become the "defining economic paradigm of our time" (McChesney, 1999). Increasingly this market logic is expanding into the public realm, creating very real challenges for social and cultural institutions such as libraries. Hallmarks of neoliberal thought within the context of higher education and libraries include corporatization, privatization, quality assurance, efficiency, accountability, and globalization (Ayers, 2005; Buschman, 2003; Gaffigan and Perry, 2009; Giroux, 2002; Greene and McMenemy, 2012; Kirby 2007). These values are reinforced through ideological-discursive practices that naturalize the language of neoliberalism, allowing this discourse to proliferate uncontested at the expense of alternative discourses. This dominant discourse is difficult to resist when presented as common sense through rhetorical messages based on efficiency and accountability (Basu 2004; Budd 1997). Indeed the ubiquitous and insidious nature of neoliberalism all but erases the idea of other discourses leading to blind acceptance (Ayers, 2005), and to what Harvey (2005) refers to as "the construction of consent".

Neoliberal values are generally viewed as antithetical to foundational values of libraries and librarians. Historically, libraries have been viewed as a public good, allowing unfettered and equal access to information, thereby promoting an informed and democratic citizenry. Many librarians have written on the challenges that the market ethos poses for libraries as cultural institutions but also for librarians whose values emulate core democratic principles of intellectual freedom, open access, and social justice (Budd 2007; 2012; Buschman, 2003; Buschman, 2012; Fister, 2010b). Recently, there has been a groundswell of resistance to neoliberal values on professional practice. Librarians are beginning to question practices such as Demand Driven Acquisition (DDA), zealous assessment practices such as ROI, and other manifestations of corporate managerialism; and they are advocating for dialogue and change (Fister, 2010a).

Strategic planning documents are "key sites to institutional discourse"(Gaffigan and Perry, 2009) that can offer a window into how libraries are responding to mounting and diversifying global economic and political pressures. Strategic documents are the public face of the library, and reflect lengthy development and planning processes involving stakeholder consultations, and require significant investments of time and resources. These documents are used to outline strategic goals, identify future trends, and they function as the framework under which library services are developed and assessed. As institutional priorities reflect wider changing societal practices and dominant discourses, examining the language used in these planning documents may provide evidence of the downward transmission of neoliberal thought as it funnels from government policy to institutional planning (Ayers, 2005; Gaffigan and Perry, 2009) .

Within the literature there is evidence that institutions and libraries are choosing to include neoliberal language in their public planning documents. Gaffigan and Perry (2009) examined neoliberalism, particularly globalization and the notion of the "global university" as manifest in the strategic plans of selected American research universities. They concluded that the presence of global discourse in the assessed documents played a key role in shaping the institutional direction, goals and values of American higher education. They wisely acknowledge that the extent to which these themes are actually operationalized cannot be easily determined, however the mere inclusion of them points to an obligation on the part of the universities to "engage with the issues in how they publicly represent themselves via their core strategic documents."

Ayers' (2005) discourse analysis of community college mission statements in the United States revealed a narrow educational focus on economic development and job training, and a reframing of its educational mission to that of economic commodity. He also noted that the predominant neoliberal ideology as reflected within the discourse of community colleges functions to undermine its institutional mission as a viable postsecondary alternative to marginalized communities, and reinforces class inequalities in education that community colleges, by their nature, seek to remedy. Both Gaffigan and Perry (2009) and Ayers assert that while neoliberalism may permeate the discourse of higher education institutions, there exist alternative or "rival" discourses that must be explored. In this study, I affirm that the core values of librarianship are an historic rival discourse that must be revisited and considered equally alongside institutional values when crafting strategic documents.

There is also much written on the impacts of neoliberalism and corporate managerialism on public libraries. Green and McMenemy's study examined the policy statements of public libraries in the UK between 1997-2010 for evidence of neoliberal discourse, examining narratives of declining professionalism, the citizen consumer, choice as an indicator of global competitiveness, and standardization. Their mixed methods approach of content and discourse analysis confirmed the existence of neoliberal language in the policy documents of UK public libraries, to varying degrees. They stress that language is not neutral, and can be used as a powerful rhetorical tool to introduce policies that undermine the public democratic function of libraries. They conclude that librarians must be cognizant of the language choices that they make not only to themselves, but to those outside the profession.

There is very little examination of neoliberal discourse in academic libraries. Budd (1997) offers an insightful critique of customer and commodity within academic libraries which lends itself nicely to an examination of institutional discourse related to neoliberal themes. This study is the first step toward an original research contribution in this area.

Canadian academic libraries are paying attention to the changing landscape of higher education and the encroachment of neoliberal values, and engaging in critical discussions. The 2012 CAUT Librarians Conference theme: Contested Terrain: Shaping the Future of Academic Librarianship, highlighted the incursion of

corporate managerialism, a hallmark of the neoliberal agenda with a view to developing action plans to protect the profession. The divergence between librarian professional association ideologies and core librarian values was also considered begging the question "Who Speaks for Libraries and Librarians?" (Dekker, 2012, Sloniowski, 2012).

Methods

This exploratory analysis employs a mixed methods approach combining content and critical discourse analysis, similar to that used by Green and McMenemy (2012) in their examination of neoliberal ideology in UK public library policy documents. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify themes within neoliberal discourses influencing higher education generally, and post-secondary education (PSE) in Canada and libraries more specifically. These key neoliberal themes and narratives were considered within the context of the LIS literature, and were examined with a view to understanding the degree to which these discourses are being embraced by Canadian academic libraries.

Kirby's 2007 review of Canadian PSE policy provides a useful framework for examining neoliberal discourse as it potentially trickles down from government policy to institutional planning. In examining major reports from four different provincial systems, Kirby identified an "increasingly utilitarian, market-oriented ideological outlook on post-secondary education's *raison d'être*". Four dominant influences characterized these major reports: privatization, marketization, quality assurance, and internationalization. These themes capture the ongoing debates between market and public good, and institutional values versus professional librarian values. These four themes are explored in the present study.

The strategic plans of three Ontario Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) member libraries were analyzed. To understand the degree to which neoliberal themes are being operationalized within each library, it was also important to consider the libraries' action plans, and goals and objectives. In the case where the libraries' goals and objectives or action plans were not articulated within the strategic plan, supporting documentation such as values statements, and strategic initiative documents was also consulted.

Each strategic plan is publicly available and was retrieved from the websites of each library. The content of each document was analyzed and hand coded for words and phrases that represent the four broad themes of neoliberalism as identified by Kirby : privatization, marketization, quality assurance, and internationalization. Given the length of the documents (between two and five pages long), hand coding was preferred to using content analysis software. Considering the limitations of word counts, the focus of the analysis was on the existence and expression of neoliberal trends. However, repeated use of the same or similar words or phrases within a single document suggested an emphasis on one or more themes to the degree that comparisons could be made between the three documents.

Using Fairclough's method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the documents were also analyzed for evidence of how broader social, political, and economic discourses are transmitted downward, influencing or re-contextualizing the meaning of selected words (Fairclough, 1995; 2002).

Findings

This exploratory study indicates all of the neoliberal themes identified by Kirby are present in the three academic library strategic plans to varying degrees, with marketization, internationalization, and quality assurance being most prevalent. Themes of privatization were less evident throughout. It is important to note

that these four themes are interconnected and at times overlap, and that words and phrases representing each theme may fit within more than one. Sub-themes were identified and within each them and explored within the context of larger social discourses. In the case of marketization for example, sub-themes of innovation and "customer driven librarianship" as coined by Buschman (2007) were identified and explored within the larger context of human capital theory and the growing emphasis on the marketability of knowledge and the commercialization of scholarship.

The author suggests that librarians respond to shifting discourses by reengaging with core librarian values such as intellectual freedom, open access, and social justice through discussion and dialogue with colleagues and stakeholders, and as Jacobs and Berg (2011) suggest, by deliberately including language that reflects these key principles in their planning documents.

The results contribute to ongoing discussion and debate surrounding the re-imagining of libraries as they respond to increasing economic demands driven by a dominant Neoliberal ideology. It also expands the dialogue surrounding the seeming disconnect between changing institutional values and fundamental professional values.

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