

Libraries, Learning, and Liberation

Barbara Fister, LACUNY Institute, April 4, 2014

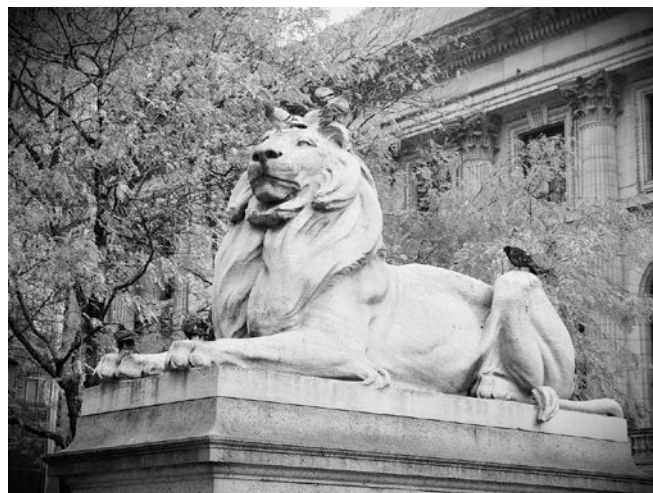
I was so pleased to be invited to this event. So many of the librarians who inspire me are CUNY librarians. You do such good work, and hosting this conference full of interesting speakers is just part of that. Thank you, and a shout-out to the awesome speakers we'll be hearing from later today. The theme of this day's work together – information literacy to empower – is one I feel strongly about. So let's start by thinking through some of our basic assumptions. What are libraries for? *Who* are libraries for?

Let's examine three visions of the library from the perspective of students. Students come in many different varieties, I'll ask you to imagine one – a student you may have met, a composite of students you've worked with, or perhaps the student you once were. Put yourself in that person's shoes for a minute as we think about libraries.



One vision of the library sees it as a temple of knowledge, a place where people go to connect with great ideas and great thinkers of the past. It's a place where, ideally, individuals can feel a connection with culture and a sense that they belong in a place where ideas are brought together to mingle and inspire. It's a place that holds up ideals through a cultural canon and invites people to become part of it. It's very much built on an enlightenment ideal, but it is also a place full of barriers that may be invisible to those most comfortable there. For example, the first time I walked between the

lions into the New York Public Library on 42nd street, I got overwhelmed and left before I ever figured out how to get to the public reading room. I felt like a bag lady walking in to the lobby of a grand hotel, certain that guard at the door would escort me out if I didn't do it myself. Which I did, until I got my courage up to go back. A library like this can be incredibly empowering. When I got brave enough to ask a few questions and figured out how to request books (somehow pneumatic tubes were involved) I loved working in the reading room next to other people engaged in whatever work they were doing, feeling connected to something grand and also to the act of inquiry in a space that ennobled that act. I finally appreciated the way everyone was welcome to use the library. It was just that the encoded messages in the architecture of the building had made me feel intimidated and unwelcome at first. Though I did finally feel comfortable there, it made me feel that in order to belong, I had to accept its idea of order, one that is particularly Western and elitist. And guarded by lions.



Another vision of the library is one that I once saw described admiringly in a conference announcement as the “merchandized library.” This is a library that is eager to market its products to its customers, and is certain that the best lessons about how to do that well are found by studying retail stores and through the gee-wizardry of Google and Amazon, who invented search and service - or so one might think. The rise of reader’s advisory practices in public libraries is a really wonderful development, but it’s disturbing to me how often it’s framed around the challenges of creating the right product mix, being aware of the next big brand, and promoting books to library customers through displays, programs, and hand-selling techniques. It’s well-intentioned and has made public librarians far more informed about readers’ diverse tastes and experiences than the publishing industry is, but it’s seldom self-critical and only calls power relationships into question when publishers make ebook lending difficult – and, even then, the assumption that the purpose of the library is to provide individual readers with the commercially-produced books they want delivered to the device of their choice (which do little to protect patron privacy) goes largely unexamined.

We academic librarians, of course, got there first. In our rush to provide access to as much information as possible, because growth is always good and bigger always better, we have allowed publishers to seize control of the record of knowledge. While in the past, publishers often held the



copyright to a book or an article, we held *copies*, and they couldn’t pull them off our shelves, change them, or charge a higher price to allow us to read them again next year. We could even loan our copies among libraries, a practice that today is called “piracy.” There were problems, of course. Owning stuff requires taking care of it. That takes space (either in a building or on servers) and the technical labor of making stuff discoverable. Space and people are expensive. Besides, there was too much

information being produced for any library to keep up. Licensing access from publishers made sense. But we didn’t read the licenses carefully or critically enough. We noted the benefits, but didn’t object loudly enough to the costs. Students at my small library today have far more access to scholarly materials than they had twenty years ago, even though we have the same amount of space and fewer staff. But we really should rename our budget lines to reflect reality. Most of our money isn’t going to acquisitions. It’s rent.

And why is it so important to have so much stuff? Because *freedom!* We want our users to get whatever they want when they want it. That is their right and our purpose, even if it means we have to meet the terms of highly-profitable corporate publishers, the same ones who push some fine print in front of our faculty after their stuff has been accepted for publication. More often than not, academic authors click through the fine print, not really aware that the article they wrote for a journal that belongs to their scholarly society will thereafter belong to a profit-making corporation. That article, in turn, will get repackaged by a vendor to land on our library websites, where we spend many FTEs and

fortunes on trying to weave together material from many proprietary platforms to make it easily accessible. Just like Google, only clumsier.

In this scenario, we are frequently urged to be entrepreneurial, or to think like a start-up, because that's our model for progress and positive change – or, as some would put it, our best strategy to avoid irrelevance. As Alice Marwick has pointed out in her book about social media and culture, *Status Update*, it's far more respectable these days to identify oneself as an entrepreneur rather than to be merely an employee. Though most start-ups fail, believing oneself to be a free agent perpetuates the myth that everyone has a crack at success, that a meritocracy is at work sorting the wheat from the chaff, that those at the top deserve to be there because of their own hard work and skill. And those who are not, presumably, could be there if just worked a little harder. These beliefs have percolated through our culture and are embedded in the very design of social media, which encourage us to market our identities as brands and measure our success by accumulating likes and friends and followers.

So that's the second kind of library, the merchandized library, the library that works hard to make an abundance of choices available to our customers and make shopping for sources as friction-free as possible.

The third vision of a library is a bit harder to nail down because it's full of contradictions. This library belongs to the people who use it, and that's an expansive definition because everyone is invited to use it. It's a place that lets individuals decide for themselves what to be curious about and it provides



opportunities to connect to others interested in the same things. It's a place that's safe and peaceful while also being destabilizing and full of conflict. It's a place of order that encourages disorderly conduct in the pursuit of truth. It's a place where, ideally, there are no customers and no products to be consumed. The producer/consumer dichotomy doesn't exist here. Rather it is a space where people interact with other people through various media, connecting,

creating, sharing, and saving. It's a self-governing commons without tollgates where any question can be asked without fear of reprisal, where nobody will track your explorations. A place where you can learn and share your own stories. A place that is both personal and social. A place that doesn't just belong to the present, but which accommodates whoever we are now as well as our ancestors and our descendants. This is, of course, an imaginary library. But it's not impossible.

Just as the libraries of the past were encoded with messages about what is good and who we should strive to be, libraries today encode in their operations certain beliefs about human behavior that are mapped to a certain set of economic beliefs about society: that we are all fundamentally self-interested actors whose behavior is most efficiently guided by an unregulated free market system through which goods and services are improved through competition. In this framework, the library's job is to provide access to as much information as it can afford to rent so that students can recoup their return on investment and be prepared for the workforce, as well as to enable maximum faculty productivity. This is the Google way: to organize the world's information and make it accessible and useful. The only thing missing from that mission statement is the profit motive – which, in the current regime, accounts for our inferior search experience.

This is how we are expected to explain our value. How do we contribute to student success as measure by retention and graduation? How do we enable faculty productivity as measured in grants and publications? I am reminded of a passage in [Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*](#), in which educator Thomas Gradgrind, “a man of realities. A man of facts and calculations” corrects schoolgirl Number 20, who is too fond of flowers, and tells her there is no room for those flowers, for imagination or “fancy” in the real world. With just a little bit of editing, his speech sounds thoroughly modern.

“You are to be in all things regulated and governed by metrics. We hope to have, before long, a board of metrics, composed of commissioners of metrics, who will force the people to be a people of metrics, and of nothing but metrics. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be contradicted by metrics.”

Our current fascination with measuring our value in economic terms in effect displaces our values. And in the current climate for higher education, our values are needed more than ever.

Let's not forget the environment within which this temporary, contingent, rental library evolved. It has been decided that pooling our funds for common goods is wrong, even morally wrong and inimical to freedom, so we've decreased taxes, particularly for the wealthy, and dismantled our system of public higher education, making universities more businesslike, competitive, and self-supporting. A majority of faculty today are contingent, which means they can be hired by the course and paid poverty wages, even while providing the primary labor of the university and producing scholarship, which have become the lottery tickets they need for the rare chance at a steady job. Contingency is the modern way to treat workers. Now that a college degree is both required to get a job – any job – and a consumer good, the costs must now borne by students, who become indentured in hopes that future employment will provide the means to pay back their debt.



Let's return to that student who I asked you to imagine. Though we argue for the value of information literacy in terms of civic engagement and lifelong learning, we spend an awful lot of our

and lots of choice. Of course, those choices keep getting more expensive, so we stop buying books and cancel journals that aren't in the package, sacrificing access to the small and the quirky, sacrificing any information that isn't packaged into a corporate deal.

Some of those packaged choices are worse than useless. The fact that the white supremacist publications [Mankind Quarterly](#) and [American Renaissance](#) have in the past been included in full text in standard databases is a case in point. Few librarians noticed, and when some of us [raised](#) the issue, many librarians said removing them would be censorship. Apparently, we are morally obliged to subsidize hate because we must in all things be neutral and it's our job to offer as much information as possible, including every possible viewpoint. (Except, of course, those *not* included in corporate databases.) Students schooled in evaluating articles based on a checklist approach might well assume articles in these journals are safe to use in an argument and as likely to be "true" as any others, particularly as individual articles show up in a mass of results, with little indication available to the novice researcher what the general orientation of the publication is. These titles are no longer included in EBSCO's offerings, I was pleased to discover, but it's an example of how our approach to information abundance runs counter to our simultaneous claims that students should use library databases because they are superior to what's available freely on the web.

We have to help bewildered new students survive the system, but being capable shoppers is not necessarily empowering. Our systems do very little to help students figure out which of the thousands of options they've uncovered is most valuable. Making judgments, after all, contradicts our supposed neutrality. Google is also assumed to be neutral, organizing everything to make it useful, though the results you see are algorithmically sculpted to fit the worldview Google has decided fits your personal interests. The more pleasing your results are, the more likely you are to click and click and refine what Google knows about you so that their advertising can be more effectively targeted. And, of course, it only can find that which is digital in the first place.

Our systems will never compete with Google's relevance ranking because we don't have its deep pockets – and we don't spy on our users to improve their experience. (Well, we don't, generally, though many of our vendors do – just not as effectively as Google.) The filters the faculty employ when using the literature come from things our

Library



students do not have available to them and which our systems leave out: familiarity with people in their scholarly community as well as the language they've developed for discussing ideas, and the ability to interpret citations and resolve them into texts. Students have no way of recognizing authors' names or the relative prestige of journals. They have to do a lot of reading before they learn what keywords and phrases will unlock a search, and they have trouble making sense of those fine-print ingredient labels stuck at the end of articles. The number of steps they have to take to resolve those non-hyperlinks is intimidating, and half the time the sources aren't immediately available. We've made it so much easier to go shopping for sources through a search engine that's like Google, only not as slick.

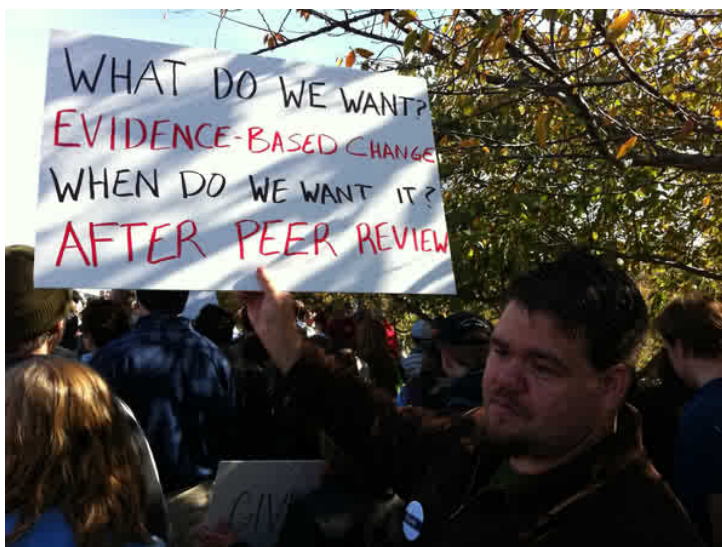
These are the things we need to consider if we're serious about information literacy as more than training for information consumers. How do we help students negotiate the system so that they

can stay in the game without disempowering them as thinking, feeling human beings with authority of their own?

In recent years, I've had a couple of small epiphanies. One was when the composition scholar Doug Downs wrote in an email, "sources are people talking to other people." It's terribly important for students to realize that books and articles are not inert things, stuff manufactured at some knowledge factory, but are the thoughts of people like them, people who are trying to make sense of the world. People who form communities inquiring about the world in particular ways, using peculiar code words. People who decide as a community what kinds of questions are worth asking and how to go about answering them in a fair and even-handed way. Communities that might well welcome students if they can find a way in.

A second "aha!" moment came when reading [an article](#) reporting on an experiment in a single course. The authors, Wendy Holliday and Jim Rogers, found that it made a difference whether the research process was described as "finding sources" rather than "learning about." The first approach (and I confess it's one I have fallen into far too often) suggests that finding and extracting stuff from containers is the main way we experience knowledge. In this scenario, knowledge can't be found in yourself. It's in containers that are other people's property, useable only with permission. "Learning about" involves the student in making meaning. It doesn't assume all knowledge is created by and owned by other people. This is a very small metaphorical tweak, but it's important.

Another term that I am reconsidering is the word "evidence." I have often told students that the reason you want to pick good sources is because you want the best sources on your side to confirm what you have to say. Pick ones that your audience will find impressive and chock full of authority. However, I've realized that metaphor reinforces a tendency to think of research as merely persuasion, as a way of winning an argument by cherry-picking material that will support your claims, a process we



witness too often in our politically polarized climate. It seems to me important to describe research as something else, as a process of learning about an issue, weighing people's insights, and applying your own critical and moral choices as you make up your mind. It's important not to discount ideas just because they aren't consistent with your own. I want students to start with questions, not pre-determined answers, and to be prepared to rethink their assumptions if what they learn leads them to change their minds. In many ways this is the essence of research: finding things out that may change minds.

Now, this risky inquiry is really hard for people who don't necessarily feel welcome, who find their papers are always returned full of red ink correcting their mistakes, who have a hard time finding holes in an argument that uses words they don't know and baffling methodology and assumes all kinds

of tacit knowledge unavailable to the student. How do you argue with these authoritative voices? Somehow we have to help students recognize the rules of the game while helping them understand how those rules are sometimes arbitrary, sometimes rigged, sometimes really valuable. And at the same time, we have to find ways to help students believe in the value of their own voices, their own experiences, their own authority.

Finally, a metaphor I've used a lot is promising, but problematic: research as conversation. This is a useful metaphor because it acknowledges that what we call knowledge is socially negotiated, that people are involved, that the choices those people make matter, that people operate in communities that set their own rules and boundaries, and that each of us has a role to play in this shared process of making knowledge. But it's also important to acknowledge that not all conversations are hospitable to outsiders, and even those that are tend to operate with a great deal of insider information and tacit knowledge and often fail to recognize how exclusionary they are. It may be empowering to realize that knowledge is constructed by people, but it can be off-putting to think that entry to the conversation is only allowed if you do your best to fit in and don't ask troublesome questions or challenge the rules.

So how do we do this – make information literacy a critical practice that is at the same time of practical use to our students? How do we recognize their very real time constraints and “save the time of the reader” while also saying “hold on, there's something about this you should know.” How do we balance learning how it works with learning how it *doesn't* work?

The good news is that it's far more interesting to learn how things work (and don't work) than to simply learn rules. Our students have all used and created information before college. Using an academic library for academic purposes is at first overwhelming, but it's also exciting. Helping them



examine the inner workings and the contradictions in information systems doesn't make them harder to use. It's actually empowering. Let's respect our students' capacity for critical thought. Even if our primary vehicle for student learning is having fifty inadequate minutes in a course, we can make those fifty minutes more critical and more interesting by helping them understand how the systems that produce and organize knowledge reflect social systems that are not always just. We can also think about how we make information available on our websites and shelves. We can afford to be more analytical and nuanced in our

resource guides rather than copying and pasting vendor descriptions that tend to focus on how much stuff is available. We can resist the commodification of knowledge in our collection development choices. We can work with faculty by offering spaces for discussing their experiences and pedagogies, we can share our observations about student experiences with research, and we can help these experts understand the larger ecosystem of knowledge as it is evolving. We can even help our faculty colleagues question their identity as productive scholar-entrepreneurs whose work is measured in publications and ask “so what?” – what does all this productivity really get us? How can the knowledge they have to share make a difference?

As for librarians, we can change our public identity from being a supposedly neutral purchasing agent, delivering commodities from the vast corporate farms of knowledge that now lay claim to our intellectual heritage, to being master gardeners cultivating our local gardens, while keeping an eye on the health of our global knowledge ecosystem. We should stop putting our creative energies into tweaking and harmonizing proprietary shopping platforms and instead think about how we can rebuild the global infrastructure for sharing knowledge in a way that reflects and embodies our shared values. We need to stop believing that the only things that really matter are access to information and service and remember that our core values include other important things: privacy, democracy, diversity, lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, and social responsibility. How often do we sign license agreements that trade away values that matter in exchange for access?

While it may seem impossible to reinscribe our institutions with values that don't fit the dominant cultural narrative of our time, we are in a good position to remind our communities what we are for and to recall how our intellectual commons can work – and that this, in fact, is what education is truly about. The critical work of information literacy is empowering students by making libraries theirs, by making knowledge a process and a community they can belong to and shape. As [Paolo Freire](#) wrote, education should be “the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” The library should be the democratic classroom for this education. Our libraries can be places where our students can practice freedom.

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