



## CHAPTER 17\*

# Cultivating a Mind of One's Own

## Drawing on Critical Information Literacy and Liberal Education

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### Introduction

Recent conversations about the value of a college education often conflate value with affordability, marketability, and market-based competitiveness. The administrators and politicians having these conversations imply that critical thinking and other more intangible aspects of education are not required to prepare students for the “real world.” In this chapter, we consider the ideals of two movements devoted to intangible aspects of education: critical information literacy and liberal education. Liberal education seeks to educate students outside disciplinary boundaries and emphasizes critical inquiry. Critical information literacy seeks to empower students to think critically about information in order to actively create social change.

Both liberal education and critical information literacy situate students as critical thinkers, guided to learning not with modules of marketable skills, but through self-directed inquiry and developing a tolerance for ambiguity. Both face powerful challenges in the knowledge economy. Patti Ryan has written that

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information literacy scholarship has “tended to accommodate, rather than confront, a neoliberal shift in higher education.” We attempt to confront this shift, connecting critical information literacy to the ideals of liberal education (for example, engagement with ambiguity and agency of learners) as a framework.<sup>†</sup>

We consider these questions: How can instruction librarians employ critical information literacy pedagogy to support college students’ development as critical thinkers and informed citizens? And how can those of us practicing in other educational contexts borrow from the tradition of liberal education to do so?

## The Value of Our Education

What is the value of a college education? How is its meaning constructed by individuals, and how is it represented more broadly? In the years since the 2008 recession, there has been an increasing emphasis on the monetary and capitalist value of higher education: from the U.S. federal government, politicians, and higher education institutions themselves. A 2015 handbook for provosts, for example, asserts that the purpose of going to college is to “obtain a career foothold immediately upon graduation.”<sup>1</sup> This neoliberal viewpoint is hostile to both the traditions and ideals of liberal education and to the core tenets of critical information literacy. Both of these approaches inherently support students in questioning this neoliberal viewpoint of higher education and the power and information structures in which it is entrenched.

Higher education has received a lot of attention from politicians in the first part of the twenty-first century. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education released the College Scorecard. Its homepage features, among other similar lists, the “23 four-year schools with low costs that lead to high incomes” and “15 public four-year colleges with high graduation leading to high incomes.”<sup>2</sup> The Scorecard measures the value of a college degree by combining metrics like tuition, graduation rates, and post-graduation incomes. In the words of

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\* Lisa Sloniowski, Mita Williams, and Patti Ryan, “Grinding the Gears: Academic Librarians and Civic Responsibility,” *Urban Library Journal* 19, no. 1 (2013): <http://ojs.gc.cuny.edu/index.php/urbanlibrary/article/view/1419>. For a brief, clear definition of neoliberalism, please see Elizabeth Martinez and Arnoldo Garcia, “What Is Neoliberalism? A Brief Definition for Activists,” CorpWatch, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=376>.

<sup>†</sup> In doing so, we build on the ideas from Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shelley K. Hughes, “Information Literacy as a Liberal Art: Enlightenment Proposals for a New Curriculum,” *Educom Review* 31, no. 2 (March/April 1996): <https://net.educause.edu/apps/er/review/reviewarticles/31231.html>. To be clear: by liberal education, we do not refer to the curriculum or mission of any particular liberal arts institution, which may or may not be influenced by neoliberalism.

a *Yale Daily News* reporter, the scorecard is “a website with school-specific data meant to be utilized by students searching for the biggest ‘bang for their buck.’”<sup>3</sup>

Educational reform legislation has been passed in many states at the urging of their governors; for example, in Florida by Governor Rick Scott and in North Carolina by Governor Pat McCrory. But Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker went further, proposing that Wisconsin depart from its mission to “extend knowledge” and instead emphasize “meeting the state’s workforce needs.”<sup>4</sup> With the rise of measures like the College Scorecard that prioritize graduates’ earnings, colleges and universities across the country face growing pressure to demonstrate either how a liberal arts degree translates into marketability or to defund and de-emphasize majors that do not obviously contribute to lucrative career trajectories.<sup>5</sup>

Prospective college students read about these changes alongside glum job reports, news about slow economic growth, and alarmist articles that present higher education as a zero-sum game, one in which neither liberal arts nor STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors are safe career choices.<sup>6</sup> Many of them see tuitions rising as college degrees are marketed as commodities for purchase.<sup>7</sup> With so many competing priorities and so much pressure, it is not surprising that this generation of college students has been characterized as “on a tightrope,” struggling to balance as they maneuver towards a sustainable future.<sup>8</sup> We will explore the related philosophies of liberal education and critical information literacy and argue that librarians can help students to develop a broader view of their own education and make their own meaning outside of these fixations on monetary value.

## Making Meaning

Philosophy scholar Daniel DeNicola defines liberal education as “structured learning that aims at human flourishing” and as learning that equips students to define for themselves what *flourishing* means.<sup>9</sup> Education scholar D. G. Mulcahy writes that liberal education “embraces a broader view of knowledge than that represented by the academic disciplines, one that includes practical knowledge and understandings. To these it adds skills and understandings essential to active participation in the world, including the search for new knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> The ideals of liberal education are “intended to improve the agent *as an agent*”<sup>11</sup>—that is, to empower students to act on their own behalf and as agents of their own learning.

All of these ideas—empowering students to construct their own meanings of success and life, taking an extradisciplinary approach to knowledge, and encouraging active participation in the world—align with the key tenets of

critical information literacy. As Eamon Tewell writes: “Critical information literacy...argues that education should fulfill a purpose other than that of creating efficient workers.”<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Shapiro and Shelley Hughes reinforce the symbiosis between liberal education and information literacy more broadly, contending that “information literacy should in fact be conceived more broadly as a new liberal art.”<sup>13</sup>

Both liberal education and critical information literacy seek to educate the whole person. Historian Michael S. Roth writes about the ways that liberal education nurtures students’ hearts and spirits, helping them to understand themselves, commit to learning and engagement, and ultimately transform themselves into capable adults and citizens.<sup>14</sup> And others have written extensively and well about caring for and teaching the whole student in the library instruction classroom.<sup>15</sup> Education and communication scholars Laurie Schreiner and her colleagues have established the impact that even a small connection (like remembering a student’s name) between faculty or staff and students can have, particularly on high-risk students.<sup>16</sup>

We argue that critical information literacy classrooms and initiatives can be sites of resistance, naturally aligned with the ideals of liberal education, that encourage all students to engage in critical inquiry. Even in the much-maligned one-shot library instruction session, we can connect with all of our students, convey breadth and depth, and open small windows onto multiple ways of making meaning besides the ones imposed on them.

## Engaging with Ambiguity

It can be challenging to incorporate the ideals of liberal education; liberal education has been co-opted in many ways to align with neoliberal and capitalist ends. Liberal education has been billed variously as

- an asset to college graduates in a “creativity economy”<sup>17</sup>
- a one-way ticket to unemployment in a volatile knowledge economy<sup>18</sup>
- a return to a traditional, solid education shorn of empty twenty-first-century bells and whistles<sup>19</sup>
- a system that serves to entrench elitism, sexism, and other forms of structural inequity<sup>20</sup>

These first two characterizations depict liberal education as two sides of the same coin: one valuable and the other worthless. When cast in economic terms, the essential aims of liberal education become lost. Education and policy scholar Daniel B. Saunders explains how market-based distortions of education affect both students and faculty this way: “Similar to students’ own hesitancy to engage with the ambiguities inherent within the educational process,

scholars assert that a customer-service approach restricts the extent to which faculty will actively challenge students' preconceived ideas about particular course content and the social, cultural, and economic realities of our world."<sup>21</sup> Saunders encourages scholars to resist the concept of student as customer and of education as a commodity;<sup>22</sup> liberal education does this by asking students to articulate their own meaning apart from market-based language.

From a critical information literacy perspective, in order for students to engage with ambiguity when seeking and evaluating information, they first need to see themselves as more than passive consumers and their education as more than a form of currency. This can be challenging when students may see a paper as a means to the end of a grade (which then becomes currency with which they can purchase a job) instead of an intellectual exploration and when that view may not be challenged by instructors or librarians. We argue that making use of the broad and inquisitive tradition of liberal education can provide a powerful form of resistance to neoliberal, market-based characterizations of liberal education.

The other two characterizations of liberal education—as a return to tradition and as a structurally inequitable system—are also two sides of a coin. Any cry of nostalgia for a “simpler time” is complicated by the structural inequalities that shaped the past and continue to shape the present state of higher education. The history of liberal education, from its classical roots through the founding of the first universities in the United States, is one that does include elitism and deliberate structural inequities.<sup>23</sup> We argue, however, that the ideas behind liberal education outlined in the introduction can be liberatory when practitioners also employ critical information literacy by being conscious of, and directly questioning, power structures as part of their practice.

How can instruction librarians combine the principles of liberal education and critical information literacy to support students' development as critical thinkers and informed citizens? This is not easy when information is packaged into commercial databases, many of which offer seemingly straightforward limiters for “scholarly” or “peer-reviewed” resources as arbiters of quality. Even when we may be constrained by a very discipline-focused assignment or the requests of faculty to show students “how to search,” we can make small, broadening adjustments. For example, we can ask students to provide topics from their own experiences, or talk in a business course about how to look at consumer statistics from different disciplinary points of view. Daniel DeNicola writes, “Liberal learning requires us to connect our experiences and may be undermined by fragmented, specialized, and packaged learning; the compartmentalization of life's spheres of activity, the segmentation and commodification of education oppose such a holistic approach.”<sup>24</sup> Critical information literacy provides the framework for instruction librarians to resist such compartmentalization and to help students to do so as well.

Neoliberal rhetoric defines meaningful work very narrowly, portraying a well-paying corporate job as the ultimate symbol of greater opportunity and security. Liberal education asks students to think more broadly about what work might mean to them and what other ways they might make meaning from labor outside of financial and capitalist meaning. Critical information literacy asks students to critically consider the content and structure of information being communicated to them and can empower them to critique the systems in which they are being educated and in which they may choose to work.

For example, an information literacy instruction session might ask students to investigate the language of corporations through the examination of trade journals, memos, and other corporate communications. Learning about the language and tropes of corporations before entering a corporate environment gives students power to better understand what is being said, how, and by whom, and to equip them to respond in a more informed way. An information literacy instruction session might also ask students to investigate the language of higher education through the examination of institutional websites, admissions materials, curricula vitae, and other forms of higher education communications. Information literacy librarians can organize information to support students in interrogating, and provide spaces for them to interrogate the policies and processes at their own institutions. A notable example of this is the online guide that Amherst College librarians created to support a student movement, Amherst Uprising,<sup>25</sup> which had previously chosen the library as the site of a massive sit-in in 2015.<sup>26</sup> Following the successful sit-in, the library staff further expressed solidarity with and support for the student-led movement.<sup>27</sup> This library, as others can, served as both a physical and intellectual site of resistance for students to transform critical inquiry into action.

Without this critical thinking and complex reasoning and the ability to use them to critique systems and choose meaningful work, students are more likely to remain entrenched in structures and systems that disadvantage them and others. As sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa show, a college education in itself is not enough to support all students' academic and personal achievement; truly meaningful educational interventions must happen.<sup>28</sup> Critiques could include investigating the sources of wealth that helped to build institutions of higher education and examining the biases that have made students in underrepresented groups feel that a liberal, rather than vocational, education is a luxury they do not deserve.<sup>29</sup>

## What Will This Learning Mean?

Librarians can facilitate the education and empowerment of the students we work with in a variety of ways. On a course or class level, we can develop as-

signments and instruction that emphasize lifelong habits of mind, including the ability to interrogate the production of every piece of information one encounters and the ability to hold more than one point of view at a time.

Librarian Barbara Fister asserts that as librarians, we can focus on student success beyond retention and graduation: “We are also in a position to ask, over and over again, so what? Why do we ask students to find and use sources? What will this learning mean after graduation? What aspects of this experience will stick, will continue to matter five years from now, or ten?”<sup>30</sup>

While other educators are of course also considering these questions, librarians are in a unique position to help students make sense of all types of information and to understand the power dynamics behind the production of information and its structures. We can help students to understand the language being used in scholarly communication and by higher education administration and the meaning and power behind it. We can push beyond the “scholarly = reliable” equation to help students understand their role in an ongoing conversation. We can use our place at the intersection of disciplines to help students decompartmentalize learning and inquiry from the individual course or credit and to decouple what they learn in college from its marketability. In doing so, we can foster the metacognitive abilities and habits of inquiry that are inherent to both critical information literacy and liberal education.

## Notes

1. James Martin and James E. Samels, *The Provost's Handbook* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 4.
2. College Scorecard, U.S. Department of Education, accessed October 4, 2015. <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov>.
3. Tyler Foggatt, “Yale Fares Well on White House Releases College Scorecard,” *Yale Daily News*, September 15, 2015, <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2015/09/15/yale-fares-well-on-white-house-releases-college-scorecard>.
4. Eric Kelderman, “Where Scott Walker Got His Utilitarian View of Higher Education—and Why It Matters,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 2, 2015. <http://chronicle.com/article/Where-Scott-Walker-Got-His/232803/>.
5. Ibid.
6. “Economic News Releases: Employment and Unemployment,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified September 24, 2015, <http://www.bls.gov/bls/newsrels.htm#OEUS>; Chico Harlan, “U.S. Economic Growth Slows to 0.2 Percent, Grinding Nearly to a Halt,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2015/04/29/the-u-s-will-release-economic-growth-this-morning>; Mark Hendrickson, “Mythbusting 101: Uncomfortable Truths Your College Won't Tell You,” *Forbes*, August 16, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markhendrickson/2012/08/16/mythbusting-101-uncomfortable-truths-your-college-wont-tell-you>; Rich Bellis, “How to Get a Job of the Future with a Liberal Arts Degree,” *Fast Company*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.fastcompany.com/3051625/the-future-of-work/how-to-get-a-job-of-the-future-with-a-liberal-arts-degree>.

7. Daniel B. Saunders, "Exploring a Customer Orientation: Free-Market Logic and College Students," *Review of Higher Education* 37, no. 2 (2014): 210.
8. Arthur Levine and Diane R. Dean, *Generation on a Tightrope*, 3rd ed., Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), ix.
9. Daniel R. DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 37.
10. Donal G. Mulcahy, *The Educated Person* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 192–93.
11. DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, 37.
12. Eamon Tewell, "A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature," *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 25, [http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path\[\]=v9i1p24&path\[\]=205](http://www.comminfolit.org/index.php?journal=cil&page=article&op=view&path[]=v9i1p24&path[]=205).
13. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shelley K. Hughes, "Information Literacy as a Liberal Art: Enlightenment Proposals for a New Curriculum," *Educom Review* 31, no. 2 (March/April 1996): <https://net.educause.edu/apps/er/review/reviewarticles/31231.html>.
14. Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
15. For example, see Maria Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013).
16. Laurie A. Schreiner, Patrice Noel, Edward "Chip" Anderson, and Linda Cantwell, "The Impact of Faculty and Staff on High-Risk College Student Persistence," *Journal of College Student Development* 52, no. 3 (2011): 321–38.
17. Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2015): 78.
18. Zac Anderson, "Rick Scott Wants to Shift University Funding away from Some Degrees." *Herald-Tribune*, October 10, 2011, <http://politics.heraldtribune.com/2011/10/10/rick-scott-wants-to-shift-university-funding-away-from-some-majors>.
19. Roth, *Beyond the University*, 184–89.
20. Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993): 78, 173–76.
21. Saunders, "Exploring a Customer Orientation," 210.
22. *Ibid.*, 213.
23. Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, 40–71.
24. DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, 242.
25. "Amherst Uprising Information and Sources," Amherst College Library, accessed November 24, 2015, <https://www.amherst.edu/library/find/researchguides/amherstuprising>.
26. Amherst Uprising website, accessed November 24, 2015, <http://amherstuprising.com/index.html>.
27. "Reflection on Amherst Uprising," Amherst College Library, accessed December 9, 2015, <https://www.amherst.edu/library/node/622674> (requires login).
28. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 47–50.
29. Francine Rosselli, Regina Day Langhout, and Jonathan Feinstein, "Assessing Classism in Academic Settings." *Review of Higher Education* 30, no. 2 (2007): 177.
30. Barbara Fister, "Decode Academy" (presentation, LOEX conference, Nashville, TN, May 2–4, 2013).



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## Further Reading

For suggestions on further reading, please visit Caro Pinto and Elizabeth Galoozis, "Critical Information Literacy and Liberal Education," Zotero group, registered May 21, 2015, <https://goo.gl/95rsoJ>.