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Balancing Visions and Values: An exploration of market rhetoric in Canadian academic library strategic plans

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Balancing visions and values

An exploration of market rhetoric in Canadian academic library strategic plans

Introduction

Two years ago I attended the CAUT Librarians' & Archivists' Conference, the theme of which was Contested Terrain: Shaping the Future of Academic Librarianship. Much of the program examined the incursion of corporate managerial practices into the daily work-life of academic librarians under the broader ideological agenda of neoliberalism. There are many definitions of neoliberalism, but I would like to share one that I came across by Saunders (2011) via the Feral Librarian blog (Bourg, 2014) that works well in this research context. Saunders defines neoliberalism as "a varied collection of ideas, practices, policies and discursive representations...united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor." As the dominant political ideology for almost forty years, neoliberalism has seeped into our collective conscious and has become part of the figurative furniture of our culture, extending itself into our public institutions and shaping them in economic terms (Buschman, 2003).

I began thinking about and wondering how academic libraries are engaging with these neoliberal ideas and concepts — because as the conference discussions played out, clearly we are. What are we saying about ourselves

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and our profession? What things do we emphasize or value? What are the implications of adopting neoliberal language to describe who we are and what we do? How are we using this language to frame our institutional identities - language that often runs counter to traditional librarian core values, such as equity, democracy, privacy, and intellectual freedom (Fister, 2010; Gorman, 2000).

This study explores the impact of neoliberal language on three Canadian academic libraries in an attempt to understand how they are engaging with the language of marketization and corporatization through the institutional discourse of their public planning documents. This research aims to contribute to our understanding of how language shapes meaning and impacts practice.

Why Strategic Plans?

Strategic planning documents are "key sites to institutional discourse" (Gaffigan & Perry, 2009) that can be used to understand organizational practice. Academic library strategic plans respond to strategic priorities outlined in the planning documents of their parent institutions, such as university mission and vision statements and strategic plans. Library planning documents offer a window into how libraries are responding to mounting and diversifying global economic and political pressures. As the public face of the library, these documents reflect lengthy development and planning processes that involve stakeholder consultations and require significant investments of time and resources. They are used to outline strategic goals and 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 shed some light on how deeply neoliberal thought permeates the strategic visions and goals of academic libraries (Ayers, 2005; Gaffigan & Perry, 2009; Greene & McMenemy, 2012).

Relevant Literature

There is evidence in the literature that universities and libraries are choosing to include neoliberal language in their public planning documents. My study is based on the work of Greene and McMenemy (2012), whose landmark study combined content analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine neoliberal discourse in UK public library planning documents between 1997 and 2010. Their findings acknowledge the discursive power of neoliberal language to influence the language of librarianship, and reframe not only the public's perception of library services, but also the services themselves. Their study also echoes LIS scholar Budd's (1997) assertion that language is not neutral, and can

be used as a powerful rhetorical tool to rationalize policies that undermine the public democratic function of libraries.

I also drew on a 2007 review of Canadian post-secondary education (PSE) policy by Kirby. 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 reports: privatization, marketization, quality assurance, and internationalization. These four themes capture ongoing debates contrasting the interests of the market and the public good and the values of institutions and professional librarians.

Methods
The libraries

The strategic planning documents of three Ontario Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) member libraries were analyzed: Western University (*Vision: Integration as Key Partners in the Academic Enterprise 2010-2013*), Queen's University (*Queen's University Library Annual Plan 2013-4*), and McMaster University (*McMaster University Library Strategic Plan 2010/2013*). These three universities fall within the "Medical-Doctoral" category as defined by *Maclean's* magazine for its annual survey and rankings, and were chosen because they are comparable institutions supporting research and teaching for a wide range of undergraduate, graduate, professional, and medical doctoral programs. This sample also allows for comparison across the consistent context of a single province with regards to post-secondary education policy and funding.

Approach

Using Fairclough's (1993; 1995) method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the documents were analyzed for evidence of how broader social practices and discourses impact the language of librarianship, influencing or re-contextualizing the meaning of selected words and concepts. The content of each document was analyzed and coded for words and phrases that represent the four broad themes of neoliberalism identified by Kirby: privatization, marketization, quality assurance, and internationalization. The focus of the analysis was the identification and expression of these neoliberal themes. Repeated use of the same or similar words or phrases within a single document suggested an emphasis on one or more themes, with each library showing a preference for certain themes. These four themes are interconnected and at times overlap, and words and phrases representing each theme may fit within more than one theme.

By looking at strategic documents we can explore the degree to which academic libraries engage with this language as an outward expression of their institutional identity. What's harder to see is how this language is operationalized.

Findings and Discussion

All four of the neoliberal themes identified by Kirby (2007) were present in the three academic library strategic plans to varying degrees. For the purposes of this study, words and phrases were coded for the theme or definition that best fit. For example, while the use of the phrase "customer service" may be borne out of a desire to demonstrate quality service, and is related to the theme of quality assurance, the idea of customer service as argued by Budd (1997) implies an economic exchange or a trade in commodities. For this reason, language related to customers and customer service was coded for the theme of marketization.

In this paper, I will be discussing the findings related to the theme of marketization by highlighting a couple of interesting examples of how this theme is manifest in the documents and by offering some thoughts and interpretation.

Marketization

Marketization refers to the use of business language or the language of commerce to describe and characterize library services. Two main sub-themes emerged under the umbrella of marketization: customer service and innovation.

Customer Service

The language of the customer was evident in two of the three strategic plans, those of Western and McMaster; however, the word "customer" was used sparingly and often alongside other more neutral terms. In describing the people who use the library, Western Libraries employed the term "user" quite heavily throughout the document except in two instances. The lengthy first section of the plan ("Vision") describes the staff's "customer centred approach to service delivery" and the shorter second section ("Implementing the Plan") talks about the importance of staff development related to "customer service." As vision statements are used to paint a compelling picture of what the organization will be upon implementing the plan, including "customer service" in the Vision section suggests that the creators of the Western document see "customer service" as important for carrying out the operations of the library. Students are seen as consumers in a library market.

McMaster's plan contains a short summary statement as well as short sections broken down by Vision, Mission, and Values. The plan also includes a "Strategy Map" outlining high level strategic priorities, as well as a Strategic Initiatives document that lists specific action items and outcomes. As with Western, the term "user" is used throughout the document, and is included in the summary, Vision ("user centred"), and Strategy Map sections of the plan; the term "customer service," however, is reserved exclusively for the Values section. From the perspective of the document's creators, "customer service" is a core priority in the organizational culture and is key to shaping priorities and actions within the organization.

This raises a few questions, the first being why the ambiguity? Why use both user and customer? Are these terms equal or are they different? And if they are different, what is the distinction? One observation is that, in the case of Western, "customer service" is used exclusively in relation to staff. From this it would appear that the user becomes a customer at the point of a service transaction or when they interface with staff.

Queen's chose not to engage with the language of the customer; rather, they characterize their service as "people centred." "People" is the term of choice used throughout the Queen's document which, like McMaster's, is broken down into three sections: Vision, Mandate/Mission and Principles/Values. The term "community" is also used in the body of the Queen's document. It is only in the Goals and Priorities portion of the plan (essentially the action part of the plan) that the term "user" comes into play. In describing the people who use the library and the services it provides, the language in the Queen's library strategic plan is more inclusive and takes a more non-consumerist approach.

Customization

Another way that the theme of customer service was represented in the documents was through the concept of "customization." Variations on the term (i.e., customizable, customizing) were used exclusively by Western in relation to library services, who also used the related phrases "tiered levels of personal services" and "self service access." Customizing services is nothing new, for most library services allow for varying levels of personalization, but compared to McMaster and Queen's, the creators of the Western Libraries plan make an effort to highlight language that emphasizes the individual. Customized services respond to the citizen as consumer, empowering the individual through an emphasis on choice — in this case, choice in the selection and use of library services.

The rhetorical use of choice was observed by Greene and McMenemy (2012) to legitimize the consumerist approach to public library services in the UK against other options, because it appealed to the emotions and logic of the

individual. In other words, it is common sense — who wouldn't want choice? Budd (1997), however, points out that the idea of choice presumes that library users know what information they want, and understand the range of resources and services that are available to them, when in fact that may not be the case.

The language in McMaster's and Queen's plans focuses less on the individual — there are no references to customization, personalization, or self service, although I do not doubt that they offer these types of services. McMaster's plan speaks more broadly, providing "exemplary service that is responsive to user needs." Queen's, in their Principles/Values section, promotes "service that is people-centred, high quality, discipline-focused, and inclusive."

I am not suggesting that libraries cease to provide customized options for users. However, by focusing on individualized services in our public documents, there is a tendency to highlight or elevate the user as the expert, which may have the inadvertent consequence of devaluing the professional knowledge and skills of librarians and other library workers. The first priority initiative listed under the goal "People" in the Queen's Goals and Priorities document is "staff redeployment," and Western's plan acknowledges the library system's "practical limitations on staffing" as justification for developing new service models with an increased emphasis on self service access. If the expert user is more prominent in the documents, and staff knowledge and skills are minimized, then that can open the door to legitimize claims that staffing efficiencies are a positive necessity.

Neoliberal rhetoric works by appealing to common sense logic and ideal messages like efficiency that are hard to argue against. It works slowly to erode and undermine alternative discourses like the professional rights, roles, core principles, and ethical guidelines of librarians. As de-professionalization and labour precarity are increasingly part of the neoliberal post-secondary education institutional landscape, it behooves academic librarians to make their work visible in their public documents on their own terms and in their own professional language.

The Western plan uses some interesting market language to describe the contributions of librarians and staff. The plan states that it is the "intellectual capital" of the staff that plays a direct role in providing "knowledge based services." This language appeals to neoliberal notions of the new knowledge economy, and aligns itself with human capital theory and the growing emphasis on the marketability of knowledge and the commercialization of scholarship (Ayers, 2005; Kirby, 2007). This way of referring to staff reinforces an economic vision of the library by framing knowledge as a commodity.

So what might libraries be saying when they adopt a customer service stance? Many have commented on the customer service phenomenon. Budd (1997; 2012) suggests that when library users are cast as customers there is a perception of the library as a place that "trades in commodities." Budd

(2012) further states that by adopting corporate language and a consumerist ethos, libraries will be forced to re-define their mission and frame outcomes in terms of commodities. Buschman (2003) suggests that a focus on "customer driven librarianship," as he coins it, reflects an "institutional and professional acquiescence to the new public philosophy" and "reinforces an economic vision of librarianship." And finally, Huzar (2014) powerfully states that, "As 'customers' rather than 'patrons', 'users' or simply 'people', certain possibilities of what the library can be are closed down, while others are reinforced, and yet others are opened up."

The customer service narrative is as polarizing as it is pervasive; although it was not present in all three strategic plans, it reflects a dominant discourse in our profession (Buschman, 2003).

Innovation

A second sub-theme of marketization evident in the strategic plans is innovation. The concept of innovation was described in various ways in all three strategic plans. The words "innovation" and "innovative" were used by both McMaster and Queen's, but not by Western.

The concept of innovation is quite prominent in the McMaster plan. It is used several times in what is a very short document. As the Vision statement reads, "McMaster University Library will be recognized as Canada's most innovative, user-centred academic library." The terms innovation and innovative are also used in the Mission and Values statements of the document indicating that it is a core priority from the aspirational to the operational level. McMaster also talks about how it has "transformed" itself in recent years and how it will continue its "ongoing transformation" through the implementation of its strategic priorities. Innovation is often a catalyst for transformation, and for that reason, the terms related to transformation were coded for the sub-theme of innovation. "Risk taking" and "creativity" are related concepts that are listed alongside innovation in the Values section of the plan, and these terms were also coded for the sub-theme of innovation.

Queen's also includes the word "innovation" in its Vision and Principles/Values sections, and employs the related terms "experimentation" and "excellence" (related to research and scholarship) in its Mandate/Mission section, indicating that it is a core priority for the library.

Western does not use the term "innovation" but articulates a possible vision of innovation by committing to "take the steps necessary to achieve the required transformation to become [a] 21st century academic library."

Innovation is a hallmark of the "knowledge economy" narrative to improve society through economic growth. Innovation drives change and feeds institutional marketing initiatives by demonstrating what sets institutions apart.

Innovation also intersects with the theme of internationalization, as it is viewed as a driver for global economic competitiveness. As money often follows innovation, universities are increasingly forced to compete for research funds based on their potential social and economic contributions (Pekkola, 2009). The need to become innovative is a rhetorical mantra used to reinforce the pervasive "libraries in crisis" narrative, hitting the profession where it is most vulnerable: its professional identity. After all, a profession that fails to innovate becomes obsolete.

But what does it actually mean to be innovative? As often as this word is used, it is still a difficult concept to pin down. In their investigation of innovation discourse in library white papers and website features, Rubin, Gavin and Kamal (2011) state that "innovation for libraries is a highly amorphous concept, potentially including every aspect of the library." I would argue that this is also true for the ways in which innovation is used in these documents. Aside from one example in the McMaster plan where innovation is used in relation to technology, the term is not defined in any way and seems to relate to any number of things. In this sense, one could argue that the term innovation has been overused to the point of becoming hollow. This brings us back to Budd (1997), who cautions against the blind adoption of language as it can become empty and devoid of meaning.

Concluding Thoughts & Further Exploration

This paper explores how Canadian academic libraries are engaging with neoliberal concepts, particularly marketization, through an examination of institutional strategy discourse. In examining the strategic plans of three academic libraries in Ontario, it was evident that these institutions are choosing to engage with potentially problematic market language in their public planning documents. They are also, however, choosing to include language that reflects librarian core values such as diversity (e.g., "inclusivity") and equity (e.g., "barrier free access"). The ambiguity in the documents is at times striking, which leads one to question whether it is intentional or just happenstance (Abdallah & Langley, 2014). This ambiguity suggests that there is more than one discourse at play, that the neoliberal path is not absolute, and that there yet exists a space for librarians to exercise their professional agency. Librarians need to raise more questions about how strategy documents are created, consumed, and interpreted, and explore alternative discourses that uphold the social role of libraries.

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