The Library as “Stuck Place”: Critical Pedagogy in the Corporate University

Working closely with faculty in a first-year undergraduate writing program, some of whom teach courses expressly construed in terms of critical pedagogy and social justice, we use the word pedagogy, and to a lesser extent, critical pedagogy, to rally ourselves and our library colleagues around approaches to teaching research that go beyond the bounds of typical library instruction. We use pedagogy, moreover, as a wedge to open space—in a discursive field dominated by the rubrics of “information literacy”—for a more intellectually sustaining and reflective way of thinking about what we do, a more fruitful praxis. “Praxis,” as described by Lather (1998), is “about philosophy viewing itself in the mirror of practice” (p. 497). To claim critical pedagogy as a practice and a theoretical position, and to undertake this mirror test, we must first consider what we mean by the phrase and how we engage with it specifically as librarians.

Historically, critical pedagogy and its attendant literature rose up as a critique from the “radical” educator who recognizes and helps students to recognize and name injustice, who empowers students to act against their own and others’ oppressions (including oppressive school structures), who criticizes and transforms her or his own understanding in response to the understandings of students. (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 300)

According to this model, such a pedagogy works to create a democratic public sphere in which citizens debate critical issues and transform civil society into a more socially just network. Ellsworth’s feminist critique of critical pedagogy literature, including the work of Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, takes issue with the lack of context for these abstract goals, with the absence of serious reflection on how teachers are necessarily implicated in the oppressive formations to which they draw attention, and with the heavy dependence on rationalism as the means for students to arrive at critiques that lead to social action.1

In the course of trying to write an essay about the links between critical pedagogical theory and our own teaching practices, we came to realize that we do not exactly teach what we preach, and that the very possibility of a critical pedagogy of library instruction would seem to hinge on a prior critique of the aims and conditions of library instruction, a critique that we have not made explicit to ourselves. This essay, then, is our gesture toward such a critique, putting the work we do—as instruction librarians, and as critical pedagogues engaged in library instruction—in the context of contemporary labor, capital, and the corporatizing university.

We take as our starting point a claim Lather (1998) makes, quoting Ellsworth (1997): not only is “critical pedagogy in the field of schooling…impossible,” but teaching itself is also

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1 For Ellsworth, the critical pedagogy discourse that posits student “empowerment” as the central purpose of this teaching practice has succumbed to a model in which the teacher has the “consciousness-raising power” and must enlighten the student, while outside real classrooms, far from teachers’ hopeful eyes, students participate in discourses and take action based on their own desires for social justice not granted legitimacy by the authority of the critical pedagogue.
impossible. According to these writers, the entire educational project is paternalistic, and as teachers we must “[come] up against ‘stuck place after stuck place’ as a way to keep moving within ‘the impossibility of teaching’ in order to produce and learn from raptures [sic], failures, breaks, and refusals” (p. 495). If this seems true, and to us it does, then the librarian as critical pedagogue must ask herself these questions: how are librarians to work toward social justice in the library classroom, if when we hold our educational philosophies—and our very selves—up to meet our practices in the mirror, those practices are very often not our own but those of the faculty with whom we collaborate? Is such social justice work even a reasonable desire given the particular ways librarians are suspended in the bureaucratic structures of a corporate university?

The classroom as technology: the reproduction of the corporate subject

Working in the classrooms at our large urban university, many of which sit in the basement of office buildings—classrooms without windows, awkward polygons full of motley furniture, with dry-erase boards now useless after years of neglect—one gets a distinct impression of the relation between a university education and the corporate structure it supports. No longer is the former intended to be a sphere apart, a world of intellectual pursuits from which students descend to the more mundane concerns of bourgeois livelihood, having been formed as self-reliant citizens in a crucible of liberal subjectivity. Even as we acknowledge the many limitations of that model, and the exclusions and inequities that it has tended to reproduce, we should note that it serves rhetoric and marketing far more than it describes practice. These classrooms suggest, on the contrary, that higher education makes up the bottom rung of the corporate ladder.

Education today does not “form” students into something (responsible workers or citizens). It informs them. Beyond communicating disciplinary content, education imparts “skills” necessary to stay afloat in a fluid and contingent workforce. And this is a workforce tasked, above all, with the arts of communication, with handling information. ACRL’s Information Literacy Standards, much like the model of standardized testing universalized by No Child Left Behind, make this link between school and work abundantly clear: the reflective self-reliance of the sometime bourgeois subject becomes the potential for “life-long learning” and its corollary, continuous “self-assessment.” To what else does “life-long learning” refer, but the need for workers to stay productive by re-tooling in response to the demands of capital and changes in the modes of production? And what does “self-assessment” mean, other than that the worker must absorb the burdens of management, learning to measure her own performance by abstract rubrics, learning even to quantify it—instead of following the intrinsic and elusive voice of what was once called “responsibility,” and before that, “craft”? In these examples of the fate of labor after Ford and Taylor, discussed widely in the critical literature (see, for example, Dyer-Witheford, 1999, pp. 78-82), one thing stands out in particular. As the finessing of information occupies more and more of the labor in virtually every field, labor itself is turned into an informational potential. It is not only counted and broken apart into discrete quanta—that, of course, has been true since at least the Industrial Revolution—but also abstracted into “skills,” “knowledge,” “abilities,” “networks,” “connections,” etc. Marx talked about labor-power in terms of time, but capital seeks subtler
mechanisms to measure and absorb that power, sending its tendrils deep into the reservoirs of intelligence and personality.

As an agent of communication/information, the worker is no longer a cog in an industrial-style machine—or as a cog, she puts different parts of herself into play. Lazzarato (1996) offers the following assessment:

In today’s large restructured economy, a worker’s work increasingly involves, at various levels, an ability to choose among different alternatives, and thus a degree of responsibility regarding decision making. The concept of ‘interface’ used by communication sociologists provides a fair definition of the activities of this kind of worker—as an interface between different functions, between different work teams, between different levels of the hierarchy, and so on. What modern management techniques are looking for is for “the worker's soul to become part of the factory.” … workers are expected to become “active subjects” in the coordination of various functions of production, instead of being subjected to it as simple command. We arrive at a point where a collective learning process becomes the heart of productivity…” (p. 134)

Workers, not only white-collar professionals but also workers in the service and manufacturing sectors, are expected to collaborate, to manage themselves, to contribute to teams and working groups convened for specific tasks. They are part of an increasingly contingent and amorphous collective medium, in which the work demands greater performance of the “whole” self. Virno (1996) calls this performance “sentiments put to work” (p. 14): whether for the fast-food cashier expected to offer her customers a “real” smile, or the hedge-fund manager whose bonus depends on “thinking outside of the box,” or the librarian charged not just with helping patrons track down sources and facts, but with empowering students to “think critically.”

The discourse of information literacy links the selective consumption of information to the production, pedagogically speaking, of autonomous subjects. But information is a commodity—and not only a commodity, but the preeminent commodity-form of contemporary capitalism, insofar as the production and exchange of all commodities increasingly depends on sophisticated techniques of information-gathering, from the surveys and focus groups that precede product design to the sales data that are used to create increasingly complex (and personal) profiles of consumers. We argue that the a priori commodification of information—and the technology that it depends on—raise questions about the form of subjectivity that information literacy can produce. As Virno (1996) writes, the material conditions of an "informed," endlessly mediated mass culture render a certain ideal of self-awareness, of intellectual autonomy, less and less viable:

The superabundance of miniscule perceptions becomes systematic in an environment of artificial actions. In a workplace dominated by
information technologies, thousands of signals are received without ever being distinctly and consciously perceived. In a completely analogous way, our reception of the media does not induce concentration, but dispersion. We are crowded with impressions and images that never give rise to an “I.” (pp. 28-29)

We may take issue with the scope of Virno's rhetoric, but all the same we can acknowledge the ubiquity of superfluous experience in our daily lives. Shopping malls, supermarkets, animated billboards, video games, television's thousand channels, the vast thirsty sea opened up by Google, the satellites that make it possible, in theory, to triangulate anything on the planet—what do all these signals communicate? Even before they can be parsed as messages, they are measured as facts of production. In other words, they are the voices in which capital speaks to itself. And how much of what we feel and take to be fact comes from the media, from Hollywood, from commodities that live and die according to market trends? And when we consider that by “market trends” we mean only a rule of information, information that we ourselves supply by consuming—hence by desiring and communicating—we can begin to see how the totality of social life is involved in what Lazarrato (1996) calls “immaterial labor”. If culture was once opposed to the material stuff of life, to the forks and spoons and beans and roofs and automobiles, the concept of information dissolves this distinction (Schiller, 1997). Information technology establishes feedback loops that convey nuances of need and desire on the part of consumers, nuances which can then be analyzed and used to make new products, the ideal being a product that responds to a need consumers did not yet know they had. Through these mechanisms, both consumers and producers take part in the process of production with an intimacy that belies the importance accorded the factory by classical economic and organizational theory. Likewise, the close suture between work and leisure calls into question the role of the school. As Lazzarato (1996) cannily observes,

If production today is directly the production of a social relation, then the “raw material” of immaterial labor is subjectivity and the “ideological” environment in which this subjectivity lives and reproduces. The production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control (for the reproduction of mercantile relationships) and becomes directly productive, because the goal of postindustrial society is to construct the consumer/communicator—and to construct it as “active.” (p. 143)

On the laptops that we supply them with, our students update their Facebook status (“Bored in the library!”), check the stats on ESPN, search for the best value on holiday flights, etc.—all behaviors that replicate, on the explicitly “personal,” “subjective,” or social level, the components of “information literacy.” A critical pedagogy of information literacy might help our students explore what it means and what it does to consume particular information, which is at the same time to produce it—Facebook being a golden example of a product woven almost entirely out of the humble straw of its
own consumers, out of their very desires, moreover, and their strange self-fashioning. The consumers of Facebook supply the labor whose product they consume, in a circle much crazier, though of course much less oppressive, than that between factory and factory-store.

Here labor is, in a funny way, immediately social; it manages to exist without needing to be disciplined. In fact, it flourishes by virtue of being a non-discipline: as a student (or a librarian) you go to Facebook when you want a diversion from your “work.” (That is not to say that using Facebook involves no discipline; rather, the discipline involved is social and ideological.) If above we said that a critical pedagogy might take this labor for its object, we said so because by and large in our classroom, the demands of a rigorous supplementarity still hold sway. Our students come there to learn the discipline of constructing a scholarly, “literate,” academic, critical self, a subject of discourses far removed, ostensibly, from the anecdotage on Facebook and the twitter on Twitter. With some exceptions, they come to retrieve books from the shelves and articles from scholarly journals, to practice formulating academic arguments, to apprentice themselves to the pleasures of bibliography. This is true even though many of the courses we work with take some form of popular culture as their critical object: horror films, conspiracy theories, comic books, video games. All of which evokes a set of further question: What labor does or can the “critical” perform, in the discursive forms in which it is currently given? How might we give it new forms to work with?

The biopolitics of the classroom: critical and affective labor

On the one hand, the classroom is a space full of discrete subjects: a space for different bodies, voices, names, ID numbers, genders, races, nationalities, etc.; and, of course, a space for the differentiation that it is the business of schools to accomplish through the various mechanisms of assessment and discipline. On the other hand, we have the “class” that comprises these subjects, considered as a part of social life. It is a network woven of various discourses, some of them explicit (the disciplinary/curricular discourse), and many more that go unarticulated (discourses of fear and desire). The network exists long before the students enter the room. But once the class period begins, one is aware—one’s body is aware—of certain resonances that travel from person to person, and which lend the space itself a “character” (like the “scene” at a party or in a bar) touched by the immanence of discipline, torqued in the direction of those particular passions of the school: boredom, anxiety, ennui. A joke or a topic of idle chat rumbles from one table to another, or else a complaint about the assignments. A tacit mood of irritable distraction or, more rarely, of genuine enthusiasm, communicates itself from those already there to those now walking in, or vice-versa. Naturally, these phenomena are impossible to pin down, being highly fluid, subject to sudden shifts and accumulations that dissipate just as quickly. Mechanisms of anxiety—and here we are speaking as instructors, whose anxieties occupy a privileged place in the classroom—may very well magnify this data emanating from the others (Are they laughing at me? Do I look bad today? Do I sound like I don’t know what I’m talking about?), but each magnification or projection only adds in turn to the store of resonance, affecting the others, too, in ways they cannot not perceive.

As Lazzarato (1996) observes, “immateri al labor constitutes itself in forms that are immediately collective, and we might say that it exists only in the form of networks and flows” (p. 137). As
political phenomena, these flows both serve and pose challenges to the forms of power that circulate through society in the age of neoliberal government. This government and its apparatuses of security, as Foucault (2008) calls them, aim to control society at the level of the population, by adjusting and intervening in social life through the analysis of norms and trends, of desires, interests, and behaviors. These analyses divide the social mass into units that are not subjects per se, but rather strata or bands of subjectivity: number of people who eat oatmeal for breakfast, who suffer from eczema, who have been convicted of shoplifting, who watch *Desperate Housewives*. These bands of experience, derived from “statistically significant” samples, not only yield new products and services, but also inform policy, programs, and infrastructure aimed at optimizing life: at extending the number of lives that fall within a certain range of longevity, health, mobility, fertility, etc., and that conform to certain patterns of behavior and belief—lives that, above all, are conducive to the overarching goal of unchecked social and economic growth. For at stake in these rational analyses is the reproduction of the structures of rationality from which they derive—accomplished through the ceaseless flow of information, multiplying and refining itself.

The collaboration, the active learning, the critical discussion that prospective donors glimpse through the windows of our classrooms would thus be in tune with the informational milieu of global capitalism. Or to imagine it another way, pedagogy adjusts the index of refraction in its subjects, making them more (or less?) efficient media for the flow of information. The horizon of this adjustment can be found in the contemporary workplace, where, as Lazzarato (1996) puts it, “The subject becomes a simple relayer of codification and decodification, whose transmitted messages must be ‘clear and free of ambiguity,’ within a communications context that has been completely normalized by management” (p. 135). The discourse of “information literacy,” of course, stakes its whole appeal on the pertinence of this process. But even the “critical” —in “critical thinking,” and perhaps, its radical claims notwithstanding, in “critical pedagogy,” —can be seen to serve the reproduction of a society managed and governed according to neoliberal models. Again following Foucault (2008), we can think of (neo)liberalism as “a tool for the criticism of reality”:

> criticism of a previous governmentality from which one is trying to get free; of a present governmentality that one is to reform and rationalize by scaling it down; or of a governmentality to which one is opposed and whose abuses one wants to limit. (p. 320)

The critical is the preeminent mode of neoliberal rationality because the latter tends toward a perpetual anxiety of regulation, of adjustment, of optimization—and toward reason’s perpetual self-improvement. But how does this critical engine handle—except by excluding it from its analysis—what falls outside of the realm and the scope of reason, what refuses to be reasonably governed: i.e., emotion, feeling, affect? Feminists have long recognized the ways rationalism excludes women, people of color, and so on, and teachers, even critical pedagogues, have unquestioningly valorized rational discourses in their classrooms as the logical path to the teacher’s own conception of social justice and how to act toward and on it. Perhaps many of the “raptures [sic], failures, breaks, and refusals” in our classrooms, and between our ideas about teaching and what happens in our
classrooms, happen where reason fails and reveals feeling—not illegible or incomprehensible, but frustrating “stuck places” rooted in intuition and experience. For Ellsworth (1997), the term “critical” itself masks the particular work scholars and teachers are doing by coding anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, etc., with the ambiguous word that surely represents critique, but of what sort?

The classroom as workplace: pedagogy and the post-Fordist organization

In our particular library’s case, we are caught in a learning organization—a post-bureaucratic organizational governance model that links power, within an ostensibly flexible institutional structure, to demonstrable learning: self-development embodied by discursive prowess, innovation, and self-management, among other attributes. The learning organization bases its work on shared vision with leaders that, rather than heroically driving the institution into the future, function as teachers, stewards, designers, “managers of the creative tension between what is and what might be” (Coopey, 1995, p. 195). Coopey outlines the “learning culture” based on his survey of learning organization literature:

A ‘learning culture’ encourages the development of individuals and the transformation of the organization by nurturing a questioning spirit, experimentation, differences, openness and a tolerance of disequilibrium. Shared mental models of how the organization might best function within its environment inform the processes and structures. (p. 195)

But the minimally structured, flexible learning organization cannot fulfill its promise, as Coopey discovers, and as we have found here. A lack of usefully articulated performance appraisal standards exacerbated by leaders whose relish of the exercise of power is camouflaged by a rhetoric of shared vision, democratic collaboration and policy-making, and non-hierarchical operations, results in conformity to managers’ tacit expectations and an informal social jockeying for political power. To rank-and-file eyes, management appears to wield its power arbitrarily: not based on the knowledge that individual learners glean from external networks, but responsive primarily to those learners’ discursive facility for rationalizing their function and value within the organization.

A rhetoric of critical pedagogy put into play in the context of this particular learning organization, in meetings and informal interactions between instruction librarians inside a corporate university, positions us as educators in opposition to organizational goals linked to external professional measures and neoliberal values—assessable outcomes, metrics, efficiency, economy. But this rhetoric also provides an occasion to demonstrate our discursive facility/power before our colleagues. Part of our counterhegemonic work, or at least our talk about such work, is possible because of our library’s structure of ostensible self-governance and our labor contracts, which make firing librarians difficult. Speaking out, or up, in the learning organization, we “critical pedagogues” vocally resist institutional mandates for programmatic assessments that quantify student learning in ways passionately ignorant of knowledge as a “structural dynamic … not a substance” (Ellsworth,
1997, p. 68) and heavily invested in the consumerist model of student as customer. Maybe the question is, What kind of work does our “defiant speech” do? Is it defiant enough? Is it defiant at all, or simply the expected “questioning spirit” that is finally disciplined by power arbitrarily executed, or by the disciplinary conventions and ideologies and identities of those of our faculty colleagues who resist considerations of “pedagogy” at all?

Librarians entwined in social and labor relations with faculty grounded in shared critiques of such institutional power, commitments to social justice broadly conceived, and social constructivist approaches to knowledge produce a kind of value for the library as an organization, despite our attempts at defying it. The library as an enterprise and librarians as professionals, both individually and collectively, must constantly justify their worth to university administrations, municipalities, and corporate trustees to ensure continued funding and self-preservation. Much of library literature takes up this task of how librarians can convince the powers that be of their value and, even more important, how they can revise their identities to serve the needs of a constituency formed by cultural trends, social policies, and economic shifts. As we enter discursive communities on campus (largely humanities-related because of their often leftist social theoretical approaches) as allies in the struggle against “oppressive formations” (Ellsworth, 1997), we become more in demand as intra-institutional collaborators, which administrations generally deem “innovative,” and as co-teachers of research. The bottom line is that our counterhegemonic work results in our insinuating ourselves more into committee work, classroom teaching, and, ironically, the bureaucratic structures of the university. What we mean to the library, then, are increases in teaching, in numbers of students taught, in departmental collaborations, in university-wide committee work, and thus quantifiable efforts that demonstrate the library’s support of the work of the university. Our discursive resistance to the corporatization of higher education and its implicit distortions of learning and knowledge—it’s obsession with quantitative assessment, student satisfaction, outcomes, and consumerist attitudes toward learning—is subsumed in its Foucauldian way into numbers that scaffold the very discourse we critique.

The numbers (metrics), though, also disguise the intimate publics we have built:

One of the striking things about academic life is the way its institutional spaces and relations of professional labor support the production of intimate publics. That is, they become public contexts of collective life on which people come to rely for sustaining their identities, their opinions, and their relations to power, as well as their fantasies, rages, and desires. Usually without realizing it, workers invest in these scenes anxieties and needs for mirroring one normally associates with the institution of privacy and domestic intimacy (Negt and Kluge, 32-38). But because most intimate publics are generated in institutions that seem merely instrumental to people’s survival, they tend not to experience their own institution-based intensity as something emanating from themselves, their needs and desires. (Berlant, 1997, p. 150)
The formations of our own subjectivities, according to Berlant, rely heavily on these intimate publics and our conceiving of our “work” as counterhegemonic. We call attention to this word because of the particular labor that teaching librarians do and do not do in the classroom and in the educational institution itself. In many ways, our subjectivities and their formations are so closely tied to those of faculty that the relationship feels parasitic at best, in conflict with our own praxis at worst. We feel supplemental, marginalized, undisciplined, and though we may have capacities for playing out critical pedagogy in the classroom, our ability to do so is almost completely determined by the desires, fantasies, identities, opinions, and relations to power of our faculty counterparts. If I teach library instruction with a faculty member in the business school who, if he ever encountered critical pedagogy, would regard as counter to his job the “politicization of the classroom,” do I engage him about it? The clear answer is no. Instead, I resist voicing my opinions, desires, and my ventriloquism and silencing of critical teaching practice result from assessing my own relationship to his power within the institution: he is faculty, a masculine profession, and I a librarian, a feminine profession, perceived to be servile and self-effacing. Whereas he develops bodies of abstract knowledge, I “[serve] others through applying and communicating [that] knowledge” (Holbrook, 1991, p. 203). Moreover, he controls my access to classroom teaching, as all faculty ultimately do. Even faculty engaged in the feminized work of composition and the impossibility of teaching often regard library instruction in instrumentalist terms because they have not considered how discourses of “information” and the critique of such discourses can open alternative spaces in the classroom for thinking about the labor of scholarship and our relation to the infrastructures and systems that discipline it.

As librarians, our affective investments, and hence the forms of subjectivity we employ in the classroom (or during office hours or on the reference desk), are by and large a sort of supplement to the flows of pedagogical power and authority: our virtues are chief those of patience, active listening, understanding, the willingness to help; our discourse is one of encouragement and suggestion, not prescription, inspiration, and charismatic authority. Publicly interrogating our own positions in classroom power relations—based on what the institution grants us along with our gender, race, class, etc.—as one piece of a critical pedagogy would likewise reveal that as our authority is vicarious; in the intimate public of the classroom, because of our limited time there, librarian-workers look to faculty to interpret students’ mirroring of our needs and anxieties because faculty have built the intimate public, we have not. On the other hand, our work is perhaps less visible than that of our faculty colleagues to the disciplining forces of efficiency: it is difficult to make more efficient the work of someone whose job it is (at the reference desk, for instance) to stand and wait. As parts of the pedagogical apparatus, our labor is, in the sense defined above, immaterial, but because our impact on the production of subjects (corporate or critical) is, by and large, rather small, our labor can seem immaterial in another way: i.e., does it really matter?

In the end, our position remains profoundly ambivalent. As librarians, our engagement (with pedagogy) is not given but must be wrested from situations that would reduce such engagement to
the motives of efficiency, even if the place of that efficiency, in the overall “business” of teaching at the university, seems at times to verge on the negligible. Or if not negligible, then a smooth surface to which nothing sticks. Thus, the perennial complaint by librarians about how little students learn from them becomes, when considered in the inverted mirror of praxis, the ideal role of information literacy in the corporate-educational imaginary: a point that reduces friction in the flow of potential labor and (future) capital, a Teflon funnel through which the noise of thinking and wondering and not-knowing and resistance gives way to the signal of productive work. So to return to the metaphor from which we began, perhaps the most that we can hope for is to hit those “stuck places” where thinking occurs. For praxis is only ever the messiness of philosophy and practice as they confront forces (capital, gender, bodies, etc.) in dissonance, and the value of praxis comes from seeing what can happen when we defer, a little while, the recuperation of force into value.

Works Cited


