Enlightenment, Neoliberalism, and Information Literacy

Maura Seale

Georgetown University

ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the ways in which ideas popularly associated with the Enlightenment function as common sense in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which was formally approved by the Association of College & Research Libraries at the beginning of 2015. A close reading of the Framework is followed by an analysis of its ideological underpinnings, specifically liberalism. Postcolonial and political theory are used to look at the role of historical difference in pedagogy generally and in the information literacy pedagogy articulated by the Framework more specifically. Ultimately, the Framework should be approached and understood strategically, with an awareness of its limitations, rather than as truth.

Keywords: *academic libraries · critical theory · information literacy · neoliberalism · pedagogy*

RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte s'intéresse à la façon dont les idées communément associées aux Lumières servent de sens commun dans le Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Cadre pour les compétences informationnelles dans l'enseignement supérieur), qui a été officiellement approuvé par l'Association of College & Research Libraries au début de 2015. Une lecture attentive du Framework est suivie d'une analyse de ses fondements idéologiques, plus précisément du libéralisme. La théorie postcoloniale et politique sont permittent de réfléchir au rôle de la différence historique dans la pédagogie de manière générale et dans la pédagogie de la culture informationnelle telle que présentée par le Framework plus précisément. Enfin, le Framework devrait être abordé et compris de manière stratégique, en tenant compte de ses limites, plutôt qu'envisagé comme une vérité absolue.

Mots-clés : *culture informationnelle · bibliothèques universitaires · néolibéralisme · pédagogie · théorie critique*

IN recent years, as the value of libraries has been widely questioned, numerous library scholars and practitioners have turned to ideas associated with the historical Enlightenment to articulate the importance of libraries. In *Libraries and the Enlightenment*, Wayne Bivens-Tatum (2012) argues that “the philosophical and political principles of the European Enlightenment provide the philosophical foundation of American academic and public libraries” (p. xi). This foundation includes ideas such as reason, rationality, empiricism, positivism, progress, freedom, and democracy and is frequently seen as advantageous:

With all of the ignorance, hatred, bigotry, violence, poverty, insecurity, and uncertainty in the country, both libraries and the Enlightenment can still provide hope for better days. Libraries are still places where people can find enlightenment, education, and enrichment. They are not warehouses for old books, as some people think, but active thriving places where ideas clash and cultures engage, where values other than the strictly commercial survive and inspire, places people can go, physically or virtually, and emerge better people, their lives improved and through them perhaps our society improved. (Bivens-Tatum, 2012, p. 192)

Bivens-Tatum carefully traces the ties between the Enlightenment and libraries throughout the book and concludes with a forceful articulation of the significance of the Enlightenment and libraries, particularly at this historical moment. Other library scholars, in contrast, allude to and critique the Enlightenment less explicitly. For example, Budd (1995), Harris (1986), Benoit (2002), and Dick (1991, 1995, 1999) have problematized the roles that empiricism, positivism, objectivity, and neutrality, the epistemological legacies of the “rational scientific enterprise of the Enlightenment,” have played within the broader discipline of library and information science (Dick, 1995, p. 227). Weissenger (2003), Cornelius (2004), Burton (2009), and de Jesus (2014), like Bivens-Tatum (2012), understand librarianship as having originated in the Enlightenment. More specifically, Pawley (2003) argues that information literacy emerges from the Enlightenment belief that “reading could *transform* society by *informing* its people” (p. 422, emphasis in the original).

Pawley (2003) suggests that Enlightenment views of information can help create a critical “Promethean” vision of information literacy that ultimately can lead to democratic empowerment. Pawley is careful to limit her argument to specific aspects of both librarianship and the Enlightenment, but the connection between librarianship, democracy, and freedom is perceived as obvious in much scholarly and practitioner literature. Searches in October 2015 of EBSCO’s Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database for *librar** and *freedom* and *librar** and *democra** yielded 3 846 and 1 541 results respectively.¹ Scanning the articles

revealed that they were not solely produced by American librarians but rather were written by library scholars and practitioners from around the world.

While some library scholars and practitioners, such as those cited above, interrogate the work performed by Enlightenment ideology in librarianship, library discourse more broadly takes the connection between libraries and Enlightenment ideas such as democracy, freedom, and reason to be self evident and fundamentally beneficial. Enlightenment ideas frequently function as a call to arms for libraries; since they are what Pawley (2003, p. 424) calls “hooray” words, they are especially effective in promoting the often undervalued work performed by libraries and in buttressing claims of the library’s importance. Literary critic and postcolonial studies scholar Suvir Kaul aptly summarizes the dominant role of the Enlightenment in librarianship: “When [the Enlightenment] is deployed in an unexamined, unqualified, or self-congratulatory and Eurocentric way, it functions as the celebratory common sense of several modern disciplines” (2009, p. 318).²

Despite its apparent naturalness, “common sense” is not non-ideological. This essay will focus on the ways in which ideas popularly associated with the Enlightenment function as common sense in the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (hereafter *Framework*), which was formally approved by the Association of College & Research Libraries at the beginning of 2015 (ACRL, 2015).³ This essay will begin with a close reading of the *Framework*, followed by an analysis of its ideological underpinnings, specifically liberalism. I then use postcolonial and political theory to think through the role of historical difference in pedagogy generally and in the information literacy pedagogy articulated by the *Framework* more specifically.

The *Framework* is—not surprisingly, given that it was written by committee—a conflicted and contradictory document. Unlike other documents produced by ALA or ACRL, it does not overtly endorse neoliberalism. There are uncritical references to the information society, the strange connection of information literacy to an “educational reform movement” (ACRL, 2015, p. 2), and frequent use of the phrase “information ecosystem” (ACRL, 2015, pp. 2, 3, 12), whose emphasis on the natural is troubling.⁴ The new definition of information literacy emphasizes “dynamism, flexibility, [and] individual growth,” which evokes neoliberalism (ACRL, 2015, p. 3). Overall, the *Framework* seems to have taken to heart many of the critiques offered by the critical information literacy movement (Beilin, 2015). It is not like the decontextualized, ahistorical, apolitical, and widely criticized *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (hereafter *Standards*; ACRL, 2000). But the *Framework* is conflicted, internally contradictory, and ambivalent about these revisions, specifically in its understanding of power relations and standards.

Unlike the *Standards*, the *Framework* is explicitly interested in power relations and clearly articulates the ways in which power influences information production and consumption. In the “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” frame, for example, “experts understand the need to determine the validity of information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations” (ACRL, 2015, p. 4). This frame wants learners to “remain skeptical” of systems that endow authority and to “recognize that unlikely voices can be authoritative” (ACRL, 2015, p. 4). In the “Information Has Value” frame, “experts understand that value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices” (ACRL, 2015, p. 6). Learners should eventually “understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information” and be “inclined to examine their own information privilege” (ACRL, 2015, p. 6). The “Scholarship as Conversation” frame notes that “established power and authority structures may influence [learners’] ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information” and asks that learners “recognize that systems privilege authorities” (ACRL, 2015, p. 8).

This emphasis on power relations pervades these three frames but is almost entirely absent from the other three frames, even though these areas are not immune to power relations. “Searching as Strategic Exploration” does not recognize the constructedness of information systems. “Research as Inquiry” could easily gesture towards the *Framework*’s earlier problematization of knowledge production in the “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual” frame, but it does not. “Information Creation as Process” points out that information may be valued differently depending on the context but then uses editing and peer review as a proxy for “quality” (ACRL, 2015, p. 5). Roughly half of the *Framework* is extremely interested in the role of power relations in information creation and access, and the other half would rather not mention it. As Ian Beilin (2015) notes, the *Framework* does not emphasize the “hierarchies of knowledge and status within academia” but “concentrates its efforts on the solitary mastery of the existing system,” and its inconsistent approach to power exemplifies this approach.

The *Framework* is similarly conflicted about its own position. Its introduction explicitly rejects standards and “is called a framework intentionally because it is based on a cluster of interconnected core concepts, with flexible options for implementation, rather than on a set of standards, learning outcomes, or any prescriptive enumeration of skills.” Within each frame, the lists of knowledge practices and dispositions are introduced with the sentence, “Learners who are

developing their information literate abilities do the following” (ACRL, 2015, p. 4). Occasionally a frame will have only a couple of dispositions listed, but generally the lists of knowledge practices and dispositions, which are actions and behaviours performed by individual learners, are quite lengthy and detailed. Despite the extensive verbiage in the *Framework*’s introduction, the knowledge practices and dispositions appear as standards, learning outcomes, and prescriptive enumerations of skills. If the knowledge practices and dispositions are not intended to be prescriptive, why are they necessary? If they are not intended to be exhaustive, why are there so many of them, and why are they so carefully and specifically articulated? The rhetoric of the *Framework* ultimately forces it to function as a standard, as does its intention to apply to all academic libraries and librarians as well as to all students. Moreover, it is a wholesale replacement of the *Standards* (which acknowledges its standardness).

If the *Framework* is ambivalent about its own authoritative position and the importance of power relations, it is unequivocal in its embrace of change. It is unsurprising that a document about learning would be grounded in a narrative of linear progress, but that is not the only way to frame learning; indeed, an information search is frequently described as recursive and non-linear. The *Framework*, however, is positioned as the means for information literacy to “realize its potential” in the “rapidly changing higher education environment,” “dynamic and often uncertain information ecosystem,” and “rapidly changing ecosystem” (ACRL, 2015, pp. 2–3). The *Framework* is progressing beyond the old *Standards* and, as such, “opens the way” for librarians to do great things (ACRL, 2015, p. 3). The use of threshold concepts, or “passageways or portals to enlarged understanding or ways of thinking and practicing,” implies progress, as does the *Framework*’s claim to “fresh ideas” (ACRL, 2015, p. 2). Learners move along a trajectory from novice to expert within the *Framework*, becoming information literate through “dynamism” and “individual growth” (ACRL, 2015, p. 3). The very idea of information literacy relies on progress, as there is a time before information literacy, when individuals are not information literate. This progress is achieved almost entirely through individual actions (Beilin, 2015), although the *Framework* does reference community learning in the revised definition of information literacy. Learners individually become information literate by acquiring knowledge practices and dispositions. Librarians use the *Framework* on their individual campuses. The universal goal is information literacy, but the progress and the changes that will result from this individual action are in the realm of institutional reform, not revolution: “The Framework opens the way for librarians, faculty, and other institutional partners to redesign instruction sessions, assignments, courses, and even curricula” (ACRL, 2015, p. 3).

The *Framework* is inconsistent in its analysis of power relations. It disavows the use of standards per se yet simultaneously embraces universal measures of learning. These aspects, together with its grounding in a narrative of progress and individualism, and faith in the efficacy of institutional reform, reveal its investment in liberalism, a political philosophy that emerged from the Enlightenment/modernity. Although there are many varieties of liberalism, David Theo Goldberg identifies its core concerns in *Racist Culture* (1993):

Liberalism is committed to individualism for it takes as basic the moral, political, and legal claims of the individual over and against those of the collective. It seeks foundations in universal principles applicable to all human beings or rational agents in virtue of their humanity or rationality. In this, liberalism seeks to transcend particular historical, social, and cultural differences. . . . Moral, political, economic, and cultural progress is to be brought about by and reflected in carefully planned institutional improvement. (p. 5)

For Goldberg, liberalism is the dominant mode of understanding the self and society in modernity and after the age of Enlightenment. For political theorists Chantal Mouffe (2005) and John Gray (2007), liberalism functions as hegemonic ideology, particularly in the United States. Mouffe (2005) notes that liberalism cannot think politically or about power relations in a meaningful way because it cannot understand collective identities and unresolvable antagonisms. Within liberalism, differences can always be subsumed into a universally appealing “harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble” (p. 10). The *Framework*’s inconsistency in incorporating power relations into the frames reflects this, as does its universally achievable goal of information literacy, which seeks to accommodate differences in learners and libraries in its emphasis on local contexts. It ultimately functions as a universal standard.

The liberal underpinnings of the *Framework* are also apparent in how it speaks of learning and measures of learning. Learning is understood to be an individual act and is the same for each learner, who acquires knowledge practices and dispositions and moves from information illiterate to information literate. The figure of the learner is emptied of history; despite the emphasis on local contexts, there is no sense that context and history bear on learning.⁵ This is paralleled in the position of the *Framework* as a universal standard. The *Framework* gestures toward local contexts, but at the same time it insists that it also works in all contexts. Its narrative of progress is totalizing in its insistence on the fundamental sameness of learners and institutions. In the *Framework*, progress has a single trajectory, which works against the alternatives promised by the *Framework*’s simultaneous emphasis on the local. The *Framework*’s attempts to emphasize the context of the learner, the librarian, and the institution, as well as its claims to not be a standard, are in the end unsuccessful in the face of both its own internal contradictions and hegemonic liberalism.

The liberalism underlying the *Framework* does not challenge neoliberalism but is rather contiguous with it. Liberalism emphasizes the freedom of individual autonomy and representative democracy. Neoliberalism is also invested in “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills,” but only within the context of the market, within which all other activities are subsumed (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). The market is the universal solution to all problems in neoliberal ideology. Liberalism is more expansive but also insists upon the universality of liberal subjectivity and understandings of progress. The decontextualized liberal subject, the learner in the *Framework* who is born free, into a world without constraints, easily becomes the *homo oeconomicus* of neoliberalism. The evacuation of history and removal of the social world in both liberalism and neoliberalism mean that both tend towards reification of the existing world (Mouffe, 2005).⁶ This acceptance of current inequalities, hierarchies, and power relations, and the corresponding rejection of the possibility of change, are antithetical to the critical information literacy that the *Framework* means to instantiate.

As described earlier, the *Framework* continually if unsuccessfully contradicts its own liberalism. It is able to identify and describe power relations; difference, context, and history are foregrounded in the introduction⁷ even if they are undermined in the *Framework*’s rhetorical stance as a standard. The tension created by these contradictions allows for productive engagement with (rather than uncritical, unexamined, and self-celebratory adoption of) Enlightenment ideas such as universality, progress, and liberal subjectivity in articulating critical information literacy and pedagogy. As Suvir Kaul argues, “imperialist ideologies have been enormously successful in translating self-centred and parochial views of the world into explanatory paradigms whose universal force is hard to shake” (2009, p. 324). Thus postcolonial theorizations of the Enlightenment can offer ways of responding to universalizing or totalizing narratives of progress and subjectivity. In *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty points to the constructedness and unnaturalness of the analytical categories used to describe the history of non-Western nations and peoples. The project of provincializing Europe is “tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be radically heterogeneous” (p. 46). It identifies and articulates that which cannot be captured by purportedly universal yet fundamentally Western explanatory structures (such as the countless local contexts meant to be covered by the *Framework*), but it still uses those structures (such as the *Framework* itself) when they are advantageous. Nikita Dhawan similarly understands the role of postcolonial studies in relation to the Enlightenment. “The challenge,” she argues, “is to unsettle and subvert the mastering ambitions of the Enlightenment without a simple rejection of its claims” (2014, p. 68). The Enlightenment’s claims

to have overcome history, its universal principles, its instrumental reason, and its hegemonic forms of knowledge must be denaturalized rather than uncritically celebrated; ironically, the critical consciousness that enables us to do this, is, as postcolonial theorists such as Dhawan, Chakrabarty, and Gayatri Spivak (1999) point out, also a legacy of the Enlightenment.⁸

In “Righting Wrongs” (2004), Spivak articulates a vision of pedagogy that embraces the tension between the universal and particular and between the Enlightenment and the postcolonial. Her pedagogy seeks to do what the *Framework* is ultimately unable to, due to its unexamined reliance on liberalism: incorporate the entirety of local and heterogeneous information literacy pedagogy and yet not standardize or reduce it. Spivak seeks to bring together the rights-bearing, liberal subject of Enlightenment thought with an ethics of responsibility to the other in a supplemental/suturing pedagogy. This pedagogy is never complete and always exists in the mode of “to come” (Spivak, 2004). Spivak distinguishes the pedagogies appropriate for metropolitan students (residents of the global North and middle- or upper-class residents of the global South) and subaltern students (the rural poor of the global South). Metropolitan students must learn responsibility to the other. Subaltern students must actively take on that responsibility but also claim their status as the liberal subjects of the rights discourse of hegemonic liberalism. For metropolitan students, education should be “an uncoercive rearrangement of desires,” through the development and practice of what Spivak calls “literary reading” (2004, p. 526). Literary reading is

suspending oneself into the text of the other—for which the first condition and effect is a suspension of the conviction that I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end product for which history happens. (2004, p. 532)

It is “training to learn from the singular and unverifiable” and supplements institutional education by cultivating responsibility to the other and “also adding something discontinuous” (2004, p. 532). Metropolitan students must experience difference and a decentering of their own subjectivity in order to feel responsible to the other. The rural, global South, in contrast, is a space of “immense heterogeneity” (2004, p. 541), and so Spivak’s pedagogy here is different: “Education . . . should suture the habits of democracy onto the earlier cultural formation” (2004, p. 548). Subaltern students must relearn responsibility to the other but also learn to work with and within liberal political and social formations. Responsibility to the other is central for all students, as it enables contestation of capitalist inequalities, including those of neoliberalism.⁹

Spivak's emphasis on the recognition of difference and responsibility to the other as fundamental to challenging capitalism echoes Mouffe and Gray's understandings of the role of difference. Within liberalism, cultural difference is seen as "choice, as an epiphenomenon of personal life-plans, preferences and conceptions of the good,"¹⁰ rather than as incommensurably different ways of being, which allows it to be subsumed into the totalizing sameness of neoliberalism into the "all-consuming commensurability and homogeneity of the global market" (Gray, 2007, pp. 187, 233). In contrast, the pluralist perspective that Gray proposes leads to the "possibility of a diversity of irreducibly different regimes, liberal and non-liberal," which creates space in which to envision and challenge neoliberal and other hegemonic ideologies (2007, p. 191). Mouffe's theorization of democracy is similar. Antagonism and conflict are what make democracy possible; a lack of dissent signifies the imposition of authoritarian order. Moreover, the presence of conflict creates space in which existing orders and power structures can be challenged and their reification resisted: "They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed" (2005, p. 33).

Working in the global North, our students are the metropolitan students of Spivak's essay; their education needs to be supplemented with responsibility to the other and rooted in recognition of difference in order to contest neoliberalism. The *Framework* does incorporate this sense of difference and responsibility to the other, by highlighting local contexts and power relations—although this is thoroughly undercut by its unanalyzed liberalism. As Spivak emphasizes, Enlightenment notions of liberal subjectivity and rights are also important; they are aspects that are needed in subaltern education, so that subaltern cultures are able to act politically, within institutions that are invested in those ideas. This too emerges in the *Framework*, specifically through its commonsense embrace of liberalism. For Spivak, both the Enlightenment idea of the individual, liberal subject possessing natural rights and the notion of responsibility to the other are "begged questions"—that is, neither one is the truth, although the former particularly is often the subject of truth claims.

For the *Framework* then, neither its claims that it is totally local nor its disavowed universality are true, and ultimately this does not matter. In "Toward a *kairos* of Library Instruction," Emily Drabinski turns to the notion of *kairos*, which is an understanding of time that is always "linked to the occasion, the opportunity, and the action" (2014, p. 481), in order to think through information literacy. She argues that "the concept of *kairos* allows librarians an analytic alternative to grappling with the truth claims of competing frameworks of information literacy" and to focus instead on "local contexts" rather than "global abstractions" (2014, p. 484). Those global abstractions, such as the *Framework*, are not rendered irrelevant but instead become

“the basis for making institutional claims” (p. 484), much as Spivak’s subaltern students must become liberal subjects in order to act politically. The *Framework* attempts to address both, but is it necessary that one text perform both tasks? What would a framework that focused solely on supporting institutional claims and making institutional changes look like? How might truly local, rooted-in-difference, immediate, and highly specific needs appear in a *Framework*-like, but not rhetorically or otherwise standardized, future document? In both local and global documents, the political work performed by the text is important, but the stakes of that work vary with its context and goals. Liberalism presented and understood as a truth claim, as it is in the *Framework*, is distinct from Spivak’s working with Indian teachers so that subaltern students are able to claim their status and power as subjects within liberal democratic regimes. The hegemonic, ideological liberalism of the *Framework*, its universality, narrative of progress, and uninterest in power, must be supplemented with historical difference in order to provide context for its truth claims and to inculcate responsibility to the other. This work could take the form of kairotic information literacy pedagogy, or local and contextual articulations of the *Framework*, or something else. The *Framework* is not worthless, but neither is it the sole answer to the problems of information literacy and library instruction within higher education.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maura Seale is currently the collections, research, and instruction librarian for American history and studies, European history, and women’s and gender studies at Georgetown University. She received her MA in American studies from the University of Minnesota in 2005 and her MSI from the University of Michigan in 2007. Her research interests include critical theory, information literacy, and mass culture. She welcomes comments at MAURASEALE@GMAIL.COM.

NOTES

1. Book reviews were removed from the results.
2. The philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, particularly his notion of the bourgeois public sphere that emerged with the historical Enlightenment, is also quite popular with library scholars and practitioners. See, for example, Williamson (2000), Peterson (2014), Mathiesen (2015), and Buschman (2003, 2005, 2006). Habermas’s understanding of the Enlightenment is complicated, though, so this subset of scholarship dealing with libraries and the Enlightenment will not be discussed here.
3. The focus in this essay is on dominant and popular understandings of the Enlightenment within librarianship, rather than on specific texts of the historical Enlightenment.
4. See Beatty (2014) for a discussion of the ideological work performed by this metaphor.
5. Although she does not refer to it as liberalism, Pawley (2003) sees this same dynamic at work in the ideology of information literacy: “We need to pause and recognize that focusing exclusively or even principally on users’ agency threatens to obscure the relational character of the process of knowledge production. By minimizing structural features that act to deprive users of agency, we risk ignoring the ways in which the material and intellectual qualities of textual production and distribution shape readers’ experiences” (pp. 433–434).
6. See Brown (2015) for an in-depth explanation of neoliberalism as ideology.

7. I do agree with Beilin's (2015) point that the *Framework* overall "accepts the existence of a particular regime of knowledge" rather than changing that system and believe this is another symptom of its internal conflict.
8. See Horkheimer and Adorno (2002).
9. Spivak's distinction between metropolitan and subaltern students echoes Beatty's (2015) discussion of Paulo Freire's discussion of the differences between pedagogy in the First and Third worlds. Beatty's analysis emphasizes the role of authority in Freire's work, and although Spivak does not explicitly address authority, her varying approaches to metropolitan and subaltern students suggest a similar view. When teaching subaltern students, the teacher must learn from below and "giv[e] up convictions of triumphalist superiority" (2004, p. 551). This is in contrast to the metropolitan teacher, who "rearranges," even if uncoercively.
10. See also Marx's classic critique of liberalism, *On the Jewish Question* (1844/2009), which describes the division of the liberal subject into the citizen of the state and the living individual of civil society. Difference is relegated to civil society and plays no role in the state.

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