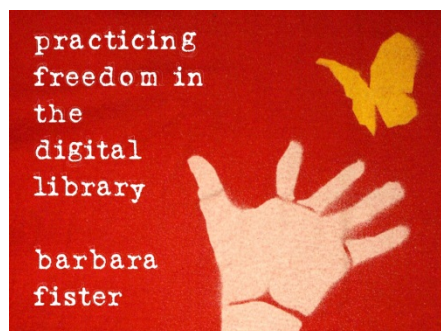


Notes from a talk given at The Digital Shift, October 16, 2013

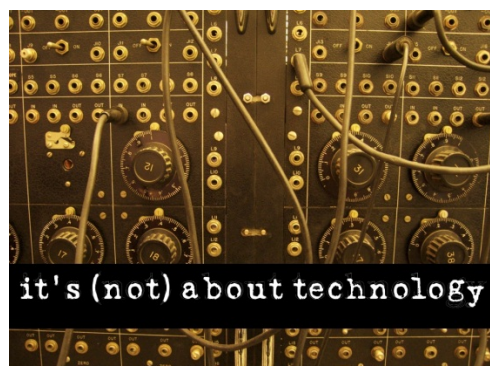
Practicing Freedom in the Digital Library | Barbara Fister



[slide one]

Hi everybody! Thanks for being here. When Library Journal decided to add an instruction track to this event, I was really pleased because we spend so much of our energy and our resources on providing access to information, but sometimes we forget that the main reason that we do that is to support the teaching and learning that libraries enable. So as we look at our digital options, keeping our learning goals in mind is really important.

In this digital era, publishers, vendors, and tech giants have assumed many of the social and cultural roles that libraries once held, and that puts our core values under pressure. What does it mean to provide equal access to information when we sign license agreements that forbid sharing? What does privacy mean today when we routinely trade it for access to seemingly free digital platforms? What are we doing to defend intellectual freedom in an era of big data and corporate ownership of so much information? These have been big questions we've faced for many years, but for me, Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA made me feel that it's more urgent than ever that our information literacy efforts need to go beyond teaching students how to consume information. Instead, we need to help them understand in a critical sense how information works.



[slide 2]

Technology would seem to be the great change agent at work in libraries in recent decades. Way back in 1998, when we were working on a strategic plan for my library, the word "technology" came up constantly. What changes would we see? Were we prepared? Could we keep up? But when we held focus groups with faculty, that wasn't what they cared about. As one professor put it – and it made a

huge impact on my thinking – “it’s not about technology. It’s about pedagogy.” For him, the greatest role the library could play would be to help students learn – and help faculty teach – in a world that was changing around us.

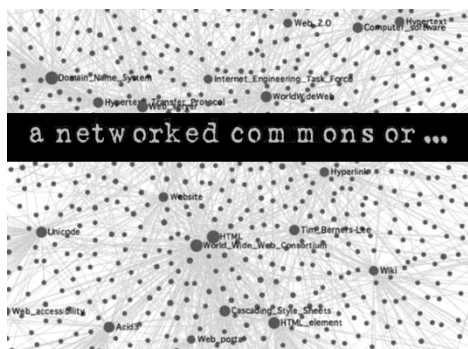


it's about learning

[slide 3]

So much of what students need to learn is technology-independent. In 1990, before the Internet had changed the way we share and search for information, I interviewed students about their research processes. A dozen years later, I repeated the study, thinking technology would have fundamentally changed how students tackle research projects. What I learned was that it really hadn't. They faced exactly the same challenges – finding a focus, understanding context, making good choices among sources, finding their own voice as researchers. They located information differently, and could get their hands on information much more quickly, but the process they was described was virtually the same, and the challenges were just as challenging. But this is great, because the deep learning that libraries support won't be wasted when the interface changes or they graduate and everything they've learned is behind a paywall.

So that deep learning remains valuable, but something about the library has changed profoundly during those years, and that change is more about macroeconomics than about technology. We have become part of a very different information ecosystem.



Slide 4

Libraries once were the way we shared and preserved information. Each library was a commons for its community, and these commons were linked through interlibrary cooperation and shared values. With technology, we could gain greater access to information, but in the process libraries ceded ownership

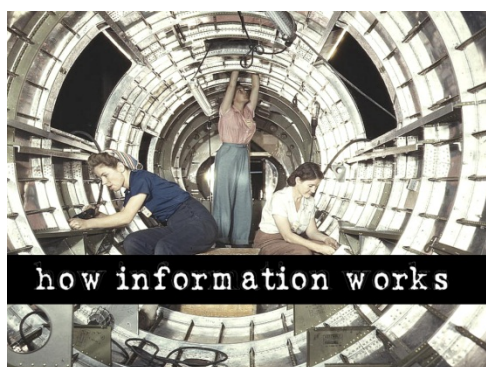
and the control that ownership gives to corporations. Like the institutions we serve, academic libraries have undergone in recent decades a neoliberal transformation . . .



[slide 5]

. . . that urges us to market our services, improve our shopping platforms for a better customer experience, and make sure our value proposition is well understood by campus decision-makers who want to know what we contribute to faculty productivity and the retention of tuition-paying students. When we fall into that trap, we're losing sight of our purpose.

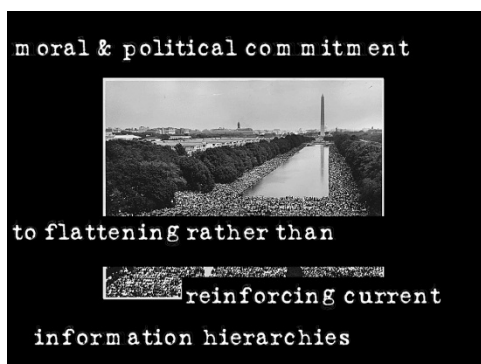
This change in identity influences how we teach. Far too often, our instructional efforts go no further than helping our students be more efficient information consumers. When we focus on information consumption, we have little room to do more than assist students in gathering sources so they can complete assignments.



Slide 6

That squeezes out an important kind of learning, the kind that critically examines how knowledge is made and shared. Christine Pawley wrote [an interesting analysis](#) of our assumptions in an article titled "Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling." The word "information," she says, treats knowledge as small, discrete bits of stuff that can be acquired and traded without context or meaning. And literacy, while unassailable -- who could possibly be against literacy? -- promises empowerment but with strongly controlling flavor. You'll be empowered as soon as you learn to follow our rules. She concluded with some great recommendations:

Our teaching "should highlight, in addition to the tools and skills metaphor, the importance of learning about context and content in understanding how information 'works.' "



Slide 7

She said, “we need to be explicit about [libraries’] moral and political commitment to flattening rather than reinforcing current information and literacy hierarchies.”

And finally, she said, “we need to recognize that information "access" is not just about information consumerism,



slide 8

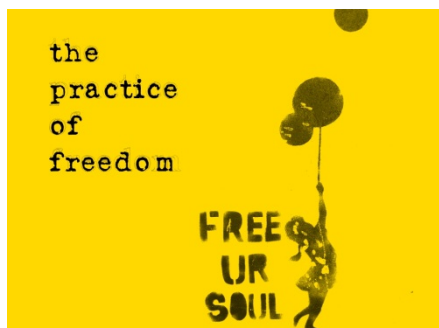
but also about individuals and groups of people actively shaping the world as knowledge producers” – not just consumers.

Are there ways that we can support any of this? Can we provide more of a sense of where information comes from and how it plays out in the world? Can we help students recognize that they are capable of shaping the world, and that research is more than being able to find and use sources according to rules?



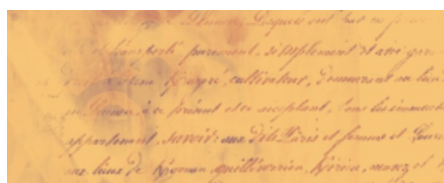
Slide 9

Paolo Friere wrote about the “banking concept” of education, the notion that students are empty coffers, awaiting deposits of knowledge. While research is meant to be experiential and engaging, it too often is represented as a matter of gathering up other people’s words and ideas, as if acquiring and displaying them is the point of research. We imply that knowledge is other people’s property, procured and exchanged but not influenced by the student’s own life experience, thoughts, or beliefs.

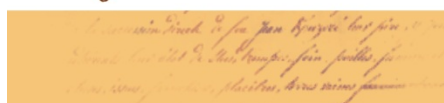


Slide 10

Freire believed that education should instead be “the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” Education is the practice of freedom.



public liberties



Slide 11

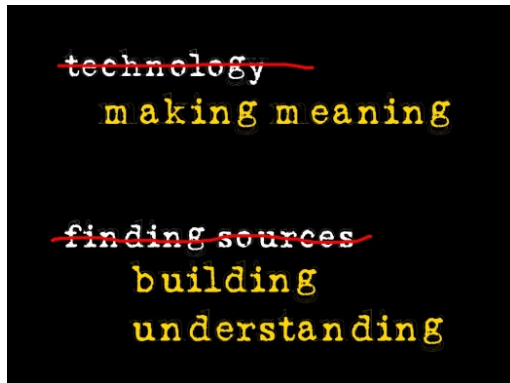
This connects to Michael Polanyi’s idea of the [Republic of Science](#), a society in which the freedom to pose questions and explore alternatives is not a private liberty used primarily for personal advancement. Rather, knowledge is a collaborative effort to seek the truth for the greater good. Individual liberty, while essential, is in service to public liberties.

Our teaching practices should present libraries as more than the Bank of Sources, from which usable phrases can be withdrawn as needed. They should be workshops, labs, studios, or hacker spaces, where students engage with ideas and invent their own, through conversation with others interested in the same things. They should be places where students develop their own identities as they learn the critical habits that civil society requires.

Because we are in a position to see the big picture, we can help students gain a sense of agency and a feel for how information works that isn’t limited to how this database, this library, this assignment

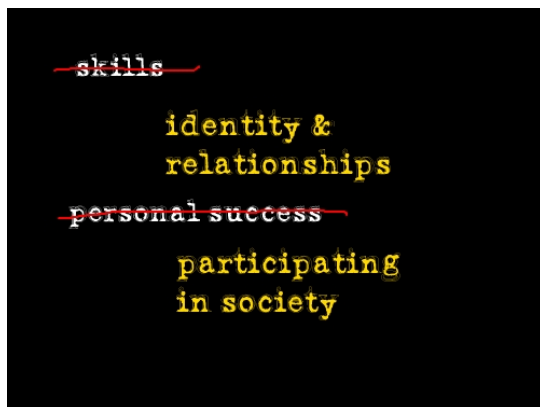
works (though that's also important). What I'm arguing for isn't so much replacing one thing with another as it is about asking ourselves "so what?"

So I started thinking about how to extend that comment a professor made to us in a focus group way back in 1998.



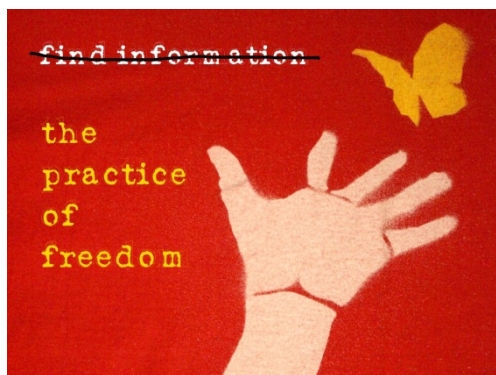
Slide 12

- It's not about technology. It's about using technology to make meaning.
- It's not about finding sources. It's about taking on the task of building understanding.



Slide 13

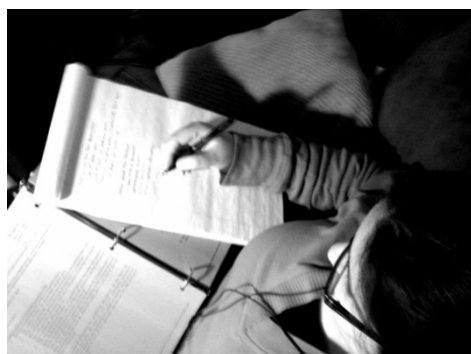
- It's not about learning skills. It's about identity and relationships.
- It's not about individual success. It's about participating in a society that values justice.



Slide 14

- It's not about finding and using information. It's about practicing freedom.

Now, that's fairly abstract stuff. It's certainly not something that will fit easily into a 50-minute one-shot library session. So what could this mean in practice?



Slide 15

Making slight changes to the way we talk about what happens in libraries may give students a clearer view of how knowledge works. One idea that I borrowed from writing instructor Doug Downs is "Sources are people talking to other people." This is such a simple statement, but it makes it clear that students are part of a conversation, that meaning is something made, not found in sources.

Wendy Holliday and Jim Rodgers recently suggested that we stop talking about what we do as "finding sources" but rather as "finding out about a topic." Again, it's a simple idea, but it puts the focus not on containers, but on the ideas that spill out of containers and the student's engagement with those ideas.

Don't shy away from complexity and ambiguity. Talk to students about the myriad ethical and moral problems that come with information these days. They will appreciate your speaking to them as grownups. And it will break down the artificial barrier between information from the library and information out in the world, between school and real life.

Talk to faculty about these issues, too. We have expertise that is valuable and we keep a finger on the pulse of where information is going.



Slide 16

Blind them with library science!

We know a lot about student learning, too – because we observe their students in the wild, and that's valuable information for them. Provide common ground where faculty can talk to one another about how best to involve students in authentic research. They want to have those conversations.

Finally, don't be afraid to be controversial. Take stands. Bake a cake for Darwin's birthday. Hold discussions about the NSA's surveillance programs. Talk about fair use and creative commons and open access. Sometimes we think in order to be even-handed, we have to erase any evidence that we hold any opinions whatsoever. We should hold strong opinions about our values, and we should make those opinions known, even while encouraging dissent and discussion. If the library won't provide a place for those discussions, who will?

In short, we are in a unique position to help students and their teachers explore the ways that information functions in our complicated, troubled world, so that they will be aware of what's at stake and feel empowered to change it for the better. The digital world of the future is theirs to make, and that is why I think our instructional role is so important – and why freedom takes practice.

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