



Peer-Reviewed Article

Scaffolded Information Literacy Curriculum: Slow Librarianship as a Rejection of the Hegemony of Neoliberalism

Frances Brady, *Adler University*

ABSTRACT

The one-shot library instruction model emphasizes skill training, which fits well into the transactional structure of higher education. Therefore, one-shots often perpetuate the status quo by focusing on individual skills rather than systemic barriers to information literacy. Slow librarianship radically counters these neoliberal values. This article provides a concrete model for how slow librarianship can empower librarians to develop a scaffolded series of information literacy sessions. The author explores how, rather than just a series of one-shots, these collaborative sessions provide space for librarians to journey with students by creating lesson plans which challenge racism and other biases.

KEYWORDS

slow librarianship; one-shots; information literacy; relationships; burnout

SUGGESTED CITATION

Brady, F. (2023). Scaffolded information literacy curriculum: Slow librarianship as a rejection of the hegemony of neoliberalism. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 8(2), 29–40.

<https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/14/2>

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Introduction

Exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, instruction librarian burnout's direct causes include the Herculean attempt to provide adequate services amid library resource scarcity (King, 2021; Peterson, 2022). However, the roots of budget cuts and subsequent burnout stem from neoliberal values in academia. Beyond an economic theory, neoliberalism places the market as a value above all other ethical concerns (Treanor, 2005). Neoliberalism manifests in higher education by students caring more about future jobs than about learning (Buschman, 2022; Quinn & Bates, 2017) and administrators investing more in revenue-generating departments than those which enhance learning. Since the library does not bring in money, librarians justify themselves through data, prioritizing tasks that can be counted and charted (McDonald, 2017).

The current library instruction model of the one-shot supports the hegemony of neoliberalism. Most one-shots occur at the request of a faculty member who wants specific skills taught toward a particular assignment. The quantifiable nature of these sessions serves to justify library work (Nicholson, 2019) to administrations concerned with finances. The sessions' transactional interaction reinforces academia's hierarchy of faculty status above librarians since the faculty determines what is taught, by whom, and when. Even the language used to differentiate teaching faculty from librarians points to this status inequality, as librarians also teach and are often faculty.

The one-shot, therefore, remains "a superficial, skills-oriented approach...in perfect sync with the accelerated, fragmented 'corporate time' chronos of contemporary higher education." (Nicholson, 2016, p. 27), which impacts information librarians' sense of time (Nicholson, 2019). This overwhelming intensity leads to declines in executive functioning, including the decreased ability to prioritize (Farkas, 2021). The scientific process of research inherently requires creativity and collaboration, but creativity needs fallow periods of not working to generate ideas (Smith and Evans; Bec, 2022). Additionally, the Western dichotomy of brain versus body combined with academia's prioritization of the mind physically harms the neglected body (Shahjahan, 2015). Since the causes of mental and physical exhaustion are systemic, the solution cannot be individual resilience (Berg et al., 2018).

Given the structural roots of the neoliberal one-shot, it is not surprising that the adverse effects go beyond harming individual librarians. Without adequate time, librarians often cannot engage in scholarship, which not only harms their careers but also starves the profession of the creative exchange of ideas, depriving students of quality education (Nicholson, 2019). The lack of quality and uninterrupted time to reflect ensures that lesson plans replicate society by focusing on individual skills and obfuscating the structural forces involved in information privilege. The short time frame of the one-shot itself and the power dynamic with the faculty member requesting it are such that librarians focus on showing database skills, feeling they do not have time to challenge biases through critical thinking.

Academia, in general, and libraries, in particular, continue to benefit White people at the expense of BIPOC individuals. Challenging these structures takes energy, however. For those of us who are White, the frantic pace of library instruction helps us maintain the white savior complex that our busyness of teaching is benefitting others while not doing the hard work of struggling to dismantle racist structures. Without adequate time, lesson plans often reinforce the idea that librarians are keepers of knowledge by simply presenting resources or a cursory demonstration of database navigation rather than helping students understand concepts and processes. Since the profession is predominantly White, the idea that librarians have the answers reinforces the hierarchy where White people hold knowledge, infantilizing others. Presenting research as merely memorizing where to click stifles the “twisting, infuriating and (occasionally) joyful process of research” (Hicks, 2015, para. 1). Librarians teaching research must prioritize journeying alongside students to empower students to navigate the process themselves, rather than maintaining librarians as gatekeepers of information (Poole, 2023)

Recently, calls have been made for slow librarianship, which resists this dehumanizing overwork through reflective practice, moving towards becoming anti-racist, humane, and thoughtful (Farkas, 2021; Glassman, 2017). “Perhaps, if we reject the capitalist drive to constantly churn out new products and instead take a stand to support more reflective and responsive practices, we can offer our patrons services that are deeper, more lasting, and more human.” (Glassman, 2017 Learning from the Jacaranda Tree section, para. 4). Slow librarianship stands in contrast to “quiet quitting,” in which workers, exhausted by burnout caused by structural problems, perform the bare minimum to maintain a job rather than performing at high achievement (Nyce, 2022). While both may result in reduced task output, slow librarianship regenerates rather than retreats and thus can create healthier culture by promoting relationships, dismantling hierarchy, and reducing scarcity mentalities. Poole explains further that slow movements emphasize purpose over efficiency and mere consumption (Poole, 2023).

Librarians advocate for fostering relationships with faculty (Brasley, 2008), but often, the end goal is to market our sessions better, to get a foot in the door. What if, instead, the relationship itself were paramount? What if the end goal of reflection were not a higher output of scholarship but a holistic being within the workplace? The former replicates the capitalist value of using people as commodities. The slow movement can empower librarians to be equal partners with faculty in teaching students. By purposefully letting go of the frantic-paced achievement of tasks, librarians will have more time and energy to immerse themselves in research consultations with students. Rather than racing through databases (“buttonology”), a slower, holistic movement will allow librarians to connect with students’ affect on a deeper level. Setting boundaries for relationships and reflection will show what patrons need. Relational instruction radically changes the paradigm of transactions, thus empowering librarians (Pho et al., 2022).

While the above research demonstrates interest in the field around these problems, the solutions are theoretical rather than specific and pragmatic. Individual efforts will not solve these systemic dilemmas, but as a profession, we need to start brainstorming how to move the needle away from market values. One suggestion is to develop a series of sessions embedded within the curriculum. Developing multiple sessions is not new; many libraries already do this (Buchanan et al., 2015; Garritano, 2007; Khailova, 2021; VanScoy & Oakleaf, 2008). Some counter that these are simply a series of one-shots. Others fear that, with limited time and resources, they do not have the bandwidth to go beyond what they are already doing. However, a structured series of sessions can radically shift the paradigm by empowering librarians.

First, librarians will gain more control over their schedules, providing the boundary against last-minute requests for new lesson plans. Second, freeing librarians from the confines of a particular assignment provides opportunities to create high-quality lesson plans ahead of time. Librarians thus move into relational rather than transactional work by teaching higher-level concepts that better engage faculty and students. Lesson plans can more deeply connect with students' emotional journeys. Focusing on the connection of affect to research helps students see the tension between their emotionally held beliefs and new knowledge (Banerjee & Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, 2021). Furthermore, teaching higher-level concepts is more rewarding for librarians than regurgitating buttonology. Unlike quiet quitting, developing more meaningful relationships and lesson plans requires energy. However, the slow movement prioritizes processes and relationships over tasks, which protects against exhaustion. Slow librarianship is not the solution, but it might start to move the needle and at least engage more people in discussions to transgress neoliberalism.

Develop a series of scaffolded information literacy sessions

Below I trace the steps I took in 2015 to develop a series of information literacy sessions at my small graduate institution. As a White librarian, my cultural capital allows me leverage in my role that others are not afforded. Additionally, while I was still a relatively new librarian in 2015, I received the protection of my director, who provided me space to set boundaries, allowing for time to develop relationships with colleagues and for personal reflection.

Step 1: Listen to Faculty (Build Faculty Relationships)

I performed an informal needs assessment while simultaneously building relationships by chatting with faculty individually. My office is directly behind the library help desk in our small library, so I saw and heard all faculty who came to the library. While the faculty checked out materials, I asked which courses they were teaching. After a few initial conversations, I sought faculty in their offices or the halls. Walking a line between engaging and bothering, I tried to read their stress level and leave before the conversation tapered.

My questions pushed faculty to discuss the emotional aspect of teaching, moving beyond topics of databases, searching, and citations. What activities or assignments were they most excited to teach that semester? Later, in my office, I walked myself through the assignments as if I were a student to learn how I could teach them. I also actively queried faculty about their frustrations with grading bad student assignments and the library. First, most people appreciate having someone to listen to their venting. Second, faculty frustrations with the library typically stemmed from misperceptions, which made it easy for me to increase goodwill simply by teaching faculty (which in turn led them to want their students to learn what they had recently discovered). They also complained about students' lack of research skills, providing specific examples of where they struggled. Listening allowed me to empathize and explain how I could augment what faculty were already covering.

Step 2: Listen to Students

The relationships with faculty increased my one-shots from five sessions in the academic year 2012-2013 to 20 sessions in 2013-2014, but these sessions were still ad hoc, so my next step was to collect data from students at the end of each session. First, I connected with student emotions in class, just as I related to faculty. For example, given the lack of a curriculum, some students received the same session several times. Therefore, I opened my sessions by allowing students who had already received library instruction at my institution to leave the class if they desired. None ever did. However, students appreciated my acknowledgment of the lack of systemic instruction. My second question asked what frustrated them about the library. Again, as with the faculty, their complaints tended to stem from a lack of information. Students became excited when I could (often) quickly solve their problems (such as finding full text). My third question finally moved into content when I asked what the most challenging aspect of the research was, which moved the session into the content. Thus, my main learning objective was changing student affect towards the library and research.

At the end of each session, students took an anonymous survey which included a Likert scale, open-ended feedback, and the question, "What would be the best term to have received this instruction?" Collecting feedback about whether students liked the session does not necessarily demonstrate whether any learning occurred, so I removed these attitudinal questions in future years. However, these data were initially critical in establishing the information literacy program by giving students a voice in what they wanted to learn and convincing faculty that students wanted the information. Student learning is difficult to assess, especially at the end of a one-hour session. It would not have been as effective to show faculty that students had memorized or even applied skills within one hour, which they might forget or be unable to apply the information adequately. In subsequent years, I could partner with faculty to assess student learning in relationship to literature reviews, but at first, I needed a foot in the door. The most helpful information I collected in those surveys was which semester students would have liked the session. 63% of students said the first year would be best. 27% did not

answer. Of the remaining 11%, answers varied from Orientation to “current course” to “every year.”

Step 3: Make a Strategic Demand (Bring it to a Vote)

Student feedback indicated that they wanted library instruction early in their program. Armed with the knowledge of specific faculty concerns about student research and student perceptions of their struggles, I presented at the faculty council’s end of the academic year. I began by describing the specific research skills and concepts faculty had told me graduate students needed to succeed and then explained that library instruction could teach those concepts. Next, I shared some of the Likert scale results from the post-session surveys. For example, most students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “The material covered in this session provided me with new information which will help me with research.” I also pulled specific quotes from the open-ended questions, including “seriously, I needed this for research help.” After illustrating its importance, I reported that some students received this session multiple times, while others received zero sessions. Lastly, I showed a pie chart of which term students wish they had received the instruction.

After presenting these data, I suggested that the faculty vote on implementing a one-hour information literacy session in each first-semester graduate-level seminar course. Faculty who had a session in their classes advocated in favor, and no one seemed opposed. The initiative was overwhelmingly approved.

Step 4: Develop lesson plans that challenge the status quo

The scaffolded curriculum has afforded me more empowerment and time to generate instruction sessions that allow students to move towards “cultivating and fostering intellectual curiosity and openness,” rather than “efficiency, ease, and getting rid of effort” (Seale, 2017, p. 143). With more time, I focus on information literacy concepts over skills and reinforce what students learned in previous classes with each new session. For example, I meet with students during Orientation (Apx 1: Orientation) to show students how to navigate the library website and set up a few library accounts. However, my primary purpose is to reduce students’ library anxiety so they are more primed for learning in later sessions. Then, in small seminar classes in Fall semester, I build on the connection and baseline skills from orientation (Apx 2: Session 1 – Strategic Exploration). At the beginning of the session, I give them two minutes to draw the concept of research, assuring them it will not be collected. I use this to have them shout out what emotions arise from their drawings, so they see that research involves affect and is not a neutral experience. Sharing my drawing, I introduce students to positionality and how it impacts my scholarship, providing them space to consider how their positionality impacts their sense of self as researcher (Weaver et al., 2023). When we search together in APA PsycINFO via Ovid, I use the specific topic of “Diagnosing Autism in African Americans.” First, students see how subject headings are useful in collating outdated diagnoses of autism with the updated “Autism

Spectrum Disorder.” Less useful, however, there is no subject heading for “African Americans” and students easily grasp that the subject heading “Blacks” broadens the scope of their search results considerably. Probing further, we discuss some implications of who decides how information is organized.

With a baseline of skills covered, my session the following semester focuses on how to select articles for assignments (ApX 3: Session 2 – Critical Evaluation of Sources in Context). I use a real-world example in which my sister asked me to evaluate a media story about a connection of cats to schizophrenia prevalence in children. The students work through how to respond to my sister by finding the original study and evaluating whether that one study provided enough information to respond to my sister. This example is an excellent way to introduce biases without strong emotions since most people have preferences for or against cats. We then extrapolate how systemic racism and other biases would further impact research, particularly in mental health fields (which includes most of my students). This discussion around positionality builds on the previous semester’s drawing activity and subject heading discussion (ApX 2: Session 1 – Strategic Exploration). Our search for further articles on this topic also builds on the skills learned in Session 1.

By sessions 3a and b (ApXs 4 and 5: 3a & 3b Literature Reviews – Research methods), students have a foundation on which we can scaffold higher-level information literacy concepts. In these sessions, I connect my research experience to students’ emotional journeys, helping them situate the literature review within the complete research process (Droog et al., in press). I use examples from my scholarship as examples in helping students understand the process of writing a literature review. First, I state my area of interest for the article; explain that I was finding resources in multiple disciplines; share article maps of my sources; and then review the literature review in my published article. In addition to connecting with students, the more I share about struggles with my scholarship (and solutions I tried), the more core faculty perceive me as a colleague, providing space for further collaboration with them outside of class. Returning to positionality, we read Burke’s parlor metaphor for research as a conversation (Burke, 1973). We visualize his scene, entering the imagined parlor of yesteryear to consider who might be there. Students then split into pairs to discuss the authors of their own topics. How would they feel in a room with people discussing their niche? How would they contribute to the discussion, and how would others respond to them?

Creating space for examining positionality requires that I be fully present and honest with students and open to the possibility of learning from the students. “We want (y)our instruction to be frightening – too beautiful, too heavy with love; traveling through landscapes and time, listening and speaking, seeing and remembering, witnessing as everything is falling apart, disintegrating” (Leung & López-McKnight, 2020, p. 23). I am not there yet, but those moments where I am the most open are also where I see the deepest connections of students, not only with me but also with their research.

Baby Steps: Pushing sideways against neoliberal values

Various factors, including institutional size and culture, may restrict the immediate implementation of a scaffolded model. Rather than an all-or-nothing attitude, instruction librarians can start with baby steps to push sideways against neoliberal values. Rather than merely using relationships with faculty to reach more classes, librarians can push to transform interactions with faculty into collaborations around teaching. Yes, relationship building is trickier now with more people working from home, as it is difficult for casual conversations to start spontaneously. Instead, librarians can forge these conversations via email. Librarians can initiate deeper conversations by sending faculty lesson plans with activities derived from the Framework. The email can explain any connections between these Frames and their syllabus, but also ask how the faculty will reinforce the session's learning objectives. To push further, librarians could include explicit social justice discussions and activities and ask how the faculty member teaches these concepts in their course.

However, one concern of smaller libraries in creating a structured information literacy curriculum is the lack of resources to reach all the courses, which can lead to librarian burnout. A relational approach to library instruction protects against the disempowering and transactional nature of the one-shot (Pho et al., 2022). Laying the groundwork for scaffolded sessions in the way described above is inherently relational and empowering for librarians, faculty, and students. Thus, the institution changes, which starts to chip away at the causes of burnout since burnout is a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon (Berg et al., 2018). However, the workload will still increase as the number of sessions and (likely) in-depth reference appointments will increase. As a response to the enormous increase in sessions, I trained upper-level graduate students to teach the ground-level sessions (Brady, 2021). Training graduate students to teach makes my job more collaborative, which improves the lesson plan and my teaching praxis. Their teaching frees me to develop new and higher-level sessions with deeper, richer content. Lowe et al. created a similar program of peer teachers, including a graduate student and several undergraduates (Lowe et al., 2023). Unfortunately, the pandemic paused the program, preventing the peer teachers from doing any solo teaching. However, they effectively co-teach with librarians, demonstrating that this model can work at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Conclusion

Taking time to form relationships and to reflect resulted in an enormous increase in instruction sessions. Over several years, these sessions expanded into a scaffolded curriculum, which increased my workload. However, the curriculum itself provides an opportunity to delve deeply into complicated and exciting concepts with students. We discuss sticky topics in class, such as information privilege and research positionality. Due to the scaffolded sessions, research

consultations focus more on emotions, structure, and process than clicking in a database, which allows for more holistic interactions.

Seven years later, I again pushed the boundaries of expectations at my institution for librarians by becoming the first librarian awarded a semester research sabbatical. These months away provided me time for reflection and better boundaries, which I desperately needed after two years of emotionally exhausting work in the multiple epidemics of Covid-19 and structural racism. Due to the fatigue of being a social support for our students in these challenging times without structural support from administration, quiet quitting seemed the only option to remain sane. However, this attitude depletes energy rather than generating it. It is time, again, to return to slow librarianship by letting go of many tasks (including those which make one look busy and productive) to create space for holistic humanity.

Reflection time can easily be infringed upon when we work from home if we are tempted to chat with our spouse, mind the pets, call our mother, or pick up the kids from school during our reflection time. However, nothing is so important as making time to be fully human rather than simply worker drones. Slow librarianship will require creativity and acceptance. It requires those with privilege to recognize it and determine where it can help those without it and where we can fight against what the privilege affords us. This work is not easy. However, it is necessary. The alternative is quiet quitting, which is far more demoralizing to our spirits while also being a disservice to our colleagues and students. So let us redefine what counts as success. Let us start changing the culture of our institutions, one small relationship and one moment of reflection at a time. Hopefully, these small shifts will lead to more structural solutions to these intransigent problems.

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