

Urban Library Journal

Volume 19

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Libraries, Information and
the Right to the city: Proceedings of the 2013
LACUNY Institute*

Article 9

12-17-2013

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Recommended Citation

Adler, K. (2013). Radical Purpose: The Critical Reference Dialogue at a Progressive Urban College. *Urban Library Journal*, 19 (1). Retrieved from <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol19/iss1/9>

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Radical Purpose: The Critical Reference Dialogue At a Progressive Urban College

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Abstract

Metropolitan College of New York pioneered “Purpose-Centered Education,” a pedagogical model that blends theory and practice in students’ jobs and lives to produce graduates with a guiding vision of social justice. This paper explores critical information literacy and the reference dialogue in the context of the Purpose-Centered Education.

Keywords: critical information literacy; critical pedagogy; critical reference dialog; progressive urban college; reference librarianship

Introduction

Metropolitan College of New York (MCNY) is located in downtown Manhattan. We have about 1,200 students of diverse ages, backgrounds and incomes enrolled in graduate and undergraduate programs: business, human services, public administration, American urban studies, education, and emergency and disaster management.

MCNY, in its original incarnation, was founded in 1964 as the Women’s Talent Corp, by Audrey Cohen, “a determined visionary and radical woman” (Grant & Reisman, 1978, p. 136). The Talent Corps was originally dedicated to placing urban, generally African-American women in federal work programs. However, Cohen saw that there was a deeper educational need and in 1970 the renamed College for Human Services was fully accredited. It would be renamed again the Audrey Cohen College in 1992 and finally, in 2002, Metropolitan College of New York. The curriculum was designed to nurture core competencies. As described by Grant and Reisman in *Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College* (1978), the belief was that “disadvantaged persons may be

exceptionally qualified to serve others with intelligence, purpose and humanity” (p. 152).

Audrey Cohen pioneered a pedagogical model known as Purpose-Centered Education (PCE). It is designed to blend theory and practice—praxis—in the workplace and in students’ lives. It seeks to produce graduates with a guiding and principled vision of social justice. In a semester long Constructive Action (CA) writing project students are asked to use analytic skills developed in the classroom to envision and implement change in the field by “planning, researching and promoting progress” in a specific work environment. Cohen said that the “fundamental principle” of PCE is “that students learn best when they use their knowledge and skills to achieve a purpose that makes a positive difference in their lives and the lives of others” (Cohen & Jordan, 1995, p. 30) and this remains the anchoring view of the school’s pedagogy.

Education at MCNY is rooted in nurturing and developing “productive, socially concerned citizens.” It is hoped that students come to believe that school, work and life are about finding opportunities to have a positive impact on the world around them. To this end the curriculum is built not around semesters but “Purposes.” Each purpose pivots around five integrated trans-disciplinary perspectives called Dimensions: Purpose, Values, and Ethics, Self and Others, and Systems and Skills. Cohen believed that these dimensions eliminate the alienating framework of traditional disciplines while still providing context.

Toward a Critical Reference Dialog

Cohen and Janeth Jordan wrote, “Students should learn to think and behave in such a way that they can take information and perspectives from vastly different areas of life, synthesize them and use them to achieve positive social accomplishments” (1995, p. 25). Here the fundamental principle of critical information literacy is articulated and more specifically the role of the library at MCNY. Librarians have spent a good deal of time and ink mining pedagogical discourse to think through critical information literacy and library instruction. However, there is relatively little literature on critical pedagogy as applied to reference work. Reference is, of course, a form of teaching (Elmborg, 2002). Indeed, mapping critical pedagogies to information literacy instruction courses is a relatively straightforward affair. It is not so clear, though, how best to do this in a reference transaction.

Reference is a form of teaching but it is also an informal conversation. Exchanges at the reference desk are traditionally referred to as a “reference interview.” I suggest that we reframe this somewhat and adjust the term to borrow from the lexicon of critical pedagogy and think of the work that goes on at the reference desk as a “reference dialogue” or a “critical reference dialogue.” This phrase crystalizes

the unique kind of pedagogical work that happens in reference. Indeed, Bopp and Smith (1995, p. 36) define the reference interview as a “conversation between a member of the library reference staff and a library user for the purpose of clarifying the user’s needs and aiding the user in meeting those needs.” Critical pedagogy should engage students in a critical dialogue and hold them accountable for their own views according to Henry Giroux (1983). Unlike classroom teaching, it is at heart a conversation. It is student-driven, it is informal, it is focused on developing engaged and autonomous individuals and helping to cultivate their ability to “both acquire and utilize knowledge in an informed way that furthers socially beneficial goals for the short and long term” (Cohen & Jordan, 1995, p. 25).

Unlike a traditional classroom or even a library instruction session, the librarian is often learning something new in the process of a reference dialogue. In fact, it is often the case that the student comes bearing more knowledge about the subject than the librarian. A student is in the process of studying a specific subject and may work in the field. The “reference interview,” as it is traditionally called, requires that the librarian educate and orient him/herself by asking open ended questions, gathering information, confirming and reshaping the question.

The first step in a “reference dialogue” is welcoming the patron into a negotiated space where a conversation can take place and where both parties are at ease. At MCNY students are encouraged to come behind the reference desk—where there is ample space—so that they can see the computer and take control of the keyboard so that formalizing power dynamics can be relaxed and short-order “transactions” are avoided. Citing Barbara Fishther’s 1996 study, *Common Ground: The Composition/Bibliographic Instruction Connection*, James K. Elmborg argues in “Teaching at the Desk: Toward a Reference Pedagogy” that the role of the reference librarian is to “encourage...exploration, to help students move through the process of discovery by talking with them, asking questions and generally keeping up the momentum of exploration” (2002, p. 458). Learning here, he says, happens in the purpose-driven, “authentic,” and messy process of research. The term authentic is key here. Learning happens in an authentic conversational space. It is authentic because both parties are engaged in the informal getting-to-know-you work of human connection; learning from one another and reacting to needs as they arise. Yet there is also—on the part of librarian—an emancipatory pedagogical agenda. Critical pedagogy is “the educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010, para. 1). In the critical reference dialogue, constructive action is the ability to evaluate information, to make decisions, to choose a variety of sources and to synthesize information. Not simply for the assignment at hand but in all areas of life. At MCNY, a Constructive Action project which focuses on implementing in the workplace the change-theory and self-reflection studied in the classroom is the culmination of every semester.

Within critical pedagogical practice the dialogue serves as a foundation of reflection and action, and the relationship between students and teachers is dialogical (Baltodano, Darder & Toress, 2002). Pablo Freire (1970, pp. 60-61) identifies dialogue as an “existential necessity” through which we name the world in conversation. Dialogue cannot be reduced to a mere “depositing of ideas” but rather it is an act of creation, a generative space that requires and develops critical thinking. Students learn from teachers and teachers from students. This is especially so in the context of the critical reference dialogue wherein the librarian does not necessarily come into the situation with prior knowledge about the topic.

Dialogue is at the heart of critical pedagogy, and it is at the heart of critical thinking. Truth is constructed inside a dialogue. Dialogue builds solidarity and alliances that stand at odds with the notion that there are “truth knowers” who deposit facts in the “student receptacles.” Rather, students speak from their own place of uniquely situated knowledge and engage in the kind of critical thinking and communication without which there can be no true education. It’s this communication that can resolve the contradiction between teacher and student according to Freire’s formation (1970, p. 72).

The critical reference dialogue shares with Purpose-Centered Education the goal of creating a space for student-generated transformative action. Writing about critical pedagogy at a community college, Charles Reitz (2002, pp. 199-203) identifies nine elements of education that serve as an illustrative tool for thinking through the tenets of critical pedagogy in the critical reference dialogue and in Purpose-Centered Education:

- 1) The “teacher” (or librarian) must work to establish an active rapport and facilitate solidarity;
- 2) Each element of the curriculum should be participatory and should seek not only to ask questions but to unpack the epistemological logics of the very questions it poses (e.g. what is critical thinking? What makes higher education higher?);
- 3) A directed dialogue with students focusing on social problems. Here, students identify problems by examining obstacles that limit their situation and challenge their (our) potential. They identify structural institutional obstacles to real change;
- 4) Curriculum must be developed in accordance with multicultural and interdisciplinary interests;
- 5) Teachers must act as a guide, rather than a central performer;
- 6) Assignments should take the form of study/action projects with the aim of engaging in civic work and the public good (and assessing the structural realities of doing so);

- 7) Instructors must identify the needs for college level institutional change;
- 8) The (community) college should become an engine for community development and social change;
- 9) Coalitions and alliances must be built locally, regionally and nationally.

Reitz' vision for a critical pedagogy in the community college maps very well to the essence of Purpose-Centered Education in its focus on student directed, action oriented civic-good. It is a call to blend theory and action and is aware that in order to do so it must engage and unpack the structure of institutional systems. It is instructive, too, because community colleges serve as a helpful model for thinking about the population and goals at MCNY.

In her discussion of critical pedagogy and information literacy at a community college, Gretchen Keer cites the demographics that make up community colleges, which are also true of students at MCNY. On average they are older than typical college students and are at a turning point in their lives. They are seeking out a practical education rather than a broad liberal arts background. This need, according to Keer, provides an opportunity for the teacher/librarian to be direct and honest with students. Students "who feel their education is relevant to their daily concerns are more likely to fully engage with their instructors, the material and each other," (Keer, 2010, p. 157). Keer goes on to warn us against eschewing theory and encourages working to create an intellectually stimulating environment. The nature of the population also allows for a philosophical dedication to "lifelong" learning, a concept that the library in all of its forms, public and academic, has always had at heart.

Keer rightly cites the ACRL report, *Information Literacy and Competency Standards for Higher Education*, asserting that by helping students to construct "a framework for learning how to learn" universities and librarians can "provide a foundation for continued career growth. This contributes as well to their roles as informed citizens and members of their communities. Information literacy is a key component of, and contributor to, lifelong learning" (2000, p. 4). Keer goes on to dissect some of the assumptions at work in the ACRL statement. Information is not neutral, after all and knowledge is socially constructed. The critical reference dialogue can, by guiding research in a comfortable conversational space—in Freirean terms—illuminate where information is coming from, what are the assumptions and how should it be critically digested. In Keer's words, "It is vital, even essential, to make the classroom a place of dialog and mutual learning for learners of all backgrounds and cultural contexts. Critical pedagogy—and, I argue, the critical reference dialogue—provides an opportunity for all students to fully interact with the curriculum, not only to obtain the maximum benefit from it but also to apply it constructively in their own lives" (Keer, 2010, p. 157) and, indeed, the world.

Libraries and librarians play a unique role in this project of creating lifelong learners and an informed citizenry. Libraries are open spaces that are not devoted to any particular curricular agenda. Academic libraries support the curriculum of their institution, but they are at heart anarchistic spaces that support the autodidact as much as the student. It is perhaps the autodidact that best personifies the lifelong learner and here the role of the library is to support learning for the sake of learning. In instructional sessions I encourage students to explore the research process by looking into anything that interests them, be it zombies or daycare options for their children.

Unlike the university, the library is responsible not only for helping to develop the critical thinking tools necessary for an informed citizen but also for advocating for the transparency of information and the means of access. Increasingly in our information-based society, Marxist critiques of ownership of the means of production apply also to information. Troy Swanson sites Daniel Bell's prediction in the 1970's that "knowledge will replace capital as the basis of the economy; information will be commodified...national boundaries will be dissolved because knowledge, unlike capital, is easily transported" (Swanson, 2004, p. 66). Information is the both the raw material and the tool by which currency is created in modern society. The ability to effectively produce, access, and analyze information is a means to overcome alienation in the Marxist sense. This is what Audrey Cohen had in mind when she founded the school.

According to Siva Vaidhyanathan (2004), libraries are "leaks in the information economy" (p. 123). Essentially a state-funded institution (Vaidhyanathan is speaking of the public library but in spirit I'd like to think that this applies to all libraries) that enables the efficient distribution of texts and information to people who can't afford to buy these things: "[T]he library pokes holes in the commercial information system" (p. 123). In doing so the library is a site of political empowerment.

Librarians generally take a stance of neutrality. All serious questions are welcomed, encouraged and explored, but not all information is neutral. Therefore, the selection of material in collection development is not neutral. It is the goal of all critical reference dialogues, critical library instruction sessions and information literacy in general, to help students be anything but neutral in their evaluation of information. For example, in looking at statistical resources, I often encourage students to think critically about demographic statistics. Why are categories framed as they are? To what ends—good, bad or indifferent—is statistical information deployed? In looking for financial or governmental information, I ask students not only to think about what is available but to question why certain types of information are either not publicly available or are difficult to find. Herein we are placing information itself within a larger ecosystem, just as students are asked to do in the "Skills and Systems" Dimension in the MCNY curriculum.

For Foucault, power and knowledge must be understood as a “multiplicity of force relations.” The complex methodology through which this occurs and is coordinated is, in his lexicon “an apparatus.” It is the apparatus that articulates a full systematic process. Helping students to develop an intuitive sense of these abstract notions as applied to the very real structure of the world around them and the information economy is at the heart of praxis and the critical reference dialogue and the Purpose-Centered Education at MCNY.

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