The Library as a Site for Knowledge Construction and Literacy

When conceived as a place of learning, the academic library becomes a possible site for knowledge construction, cultural production, and social transformation. Teaching, learning, and research are interrelated literacy processes with ontological and epistemological dimensions (Kincheloe, 2003; 2005). In this sense, literacy cannot be adequately defined as a functional skill or ability. Literacy is a critical, interpretive, dialogic response to the world. It is a process of reading and rewriting reality, the use of a “language of possibility” for the reinvention of culture and power (Freire, 1987). As a creative meaning making process, literacy is the ability to determine history through praxis.

Making Space for Praxis

Academic libraries are situated in a culture of higher education where “dominant and subordinate voices define and constrain each other” (Giroux, 1997). In this tension all voices compete for recognition and legitimacy (Couldry, 2010). As educational institutions tend to reproduce the asymmetrical power relationships of society (Bartolomé, 1994) and as teachers reinforce power imbalances through positivist reductionist curriculum, student voices are silenced and marginalized.

Making space for voice is possible through reflexive critical pedagogy or “research as praxis” (Lather, 1986; 2018). In this approach respect for reciprocity and validation of student ontology direct the course of learning. Teaching and learning practices build on the lived experience and cultural capital of the student. The roles of teacher and students are periodically reversed as they participate in the construction of knowledge and mutual negotiation of meaning and power (Lather, 1986; 2018).

Teaching and learning are informed by a critical constructivist pedagogy that:

- Affirms the complexity of knowledge and avoids simplification.
- Considers the relationship of phenomena to the historical contexts that shape and sustain constructions of reality.
- Makes space for new interpretations and ongoing questioning.
- Exposes the role of power in constructing phenomena and the way it relates to the cultural and political landscape in which it is situated.
- Incorporates and validates diverse voices, especially those of historically and culturally marginalized people.
- Makes space for a creative and authentic response from both teacher and learner.

(Kincheloe, 2003; 2005)
Students are given space to:

• Speak from their own ontological awareness.
• Examine information and question theory from their own ontological and epistemological understanding.
• Interrogate the teacher’s use of theory and the teacher’s understanding of the student’s lived experience and understanding of reality.
• Participate in critical dialogue as a means to question how information, ideology, and discourses influence their learning and ontology.
• Participate in production of new knowledge, theory, and culture.
• Demonstrate their learning through the expression of their own voice in a form that is authentic, visible, and validated.

(Couldry, 2010; Lather, 1986)