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Becoming Librarians, Becoming Teachers: *Kairos* and Professional Identity

Devenir bibliothécaire, devenir enseignant : Le Kairos et l'identité professionnelle

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Abstract: Using *kairos* as an analytic lens, this article examines debates around the professional role of librarians as teachers as an example of professionalizing discourse. Rather than inexorably leading librarians toward the best way to understand and teach information literacy, kairos surfaces the discourse as being productive instead of the profession itself.

Keywords: Kairos, information literacy, library instruction, professionalism, time

Résumé : Cette étude s'appuie sur la notion de kairos comme outil d'analyse pour examiner le débat autour du rôle professionnel des bibliothécaires en tant qu'enseignants, comme exemples de discours de professionnalisation. Plutôt que mener les bibliothécaires inexorablement à la meilleure façon de comprendre et d'enseigner la compétence informationnelle, le kairos émerge du discours comme productif en lieu et place de la profession elle-même.

Mots-clés : kairos, compétence informationnelle, instruction en bibliothéconomie, professionnalisme, temps

Introduction

How does time function to order professional behaviour? As librarians perform the work of the everyday—changing toner cartridges, cataloguing and classifying materials, answering questions at any of the iterations of the reference desk— they also produce what will become their past and create pathways toward uncertain futures. Punctuating the labour of the present are moments in professional discourse that stop time, occasioning reflection about *how we have always done it* and *how we should do it next*. This article attempts to take seriously these moments of fixed time, asking how to understand them as *kairotic* products of the labour of everyday professional life, productive of both the stories the profession shares about its past and the futures it imagines for itself.

Writing about time is itself an arrest of time, a fixing in place of ideas that shift and change through the discourse of which this writing—this particular sentence—is a part. In some ways, this is the only mechanism by which we can begin to analyze the present moment, to name it as such by writing it down. Writing about the present almost inevitably casts it as exceptional, as if only as an exception is the moment worthy of analysis and action. To access the immediacy of time, the present must be cast as being different from all other times, notable, distinct, and requiring response.

The present is also inextricable from an impending and urgent future, inasmuch as the present is always already what just happened. The present is over as it begins. Indeed, the present matters largely because of its imbrication with the future. A 1986 *Library Trends* issue on the present state of the profession opened with the editor's assertion that the present mattered "because of the urgent and important need for us to understand and to change" (Patterson 1986, 139). The future is what occasions the present as a necessary category of analysis. Such a casting of the present as only a function of the future permeates the library profession. When the American Library Association (ALA) was founded in 1876, it framed itself as being necessary in response to a present suffused by the rapid growth of libraries "in unexampled ratio" (US Bureau of Education 1876, xii). Fast forward to 2013, and the ALA founded the Center for the Future of Libraries, a present-tense act that is critical because "libraries of all types, and the communities they serve, *are* undergoing transformational changes" (American Library Association 2013; emphasis added). For librarianship, the present is always exceptional and always requires exceptional attention to take action for the coming future.

The connection of time to action is called *kairos*. A concept from the ancient Greeks, kairos allows us to understand how time and action interact to produce things that appear timeless: truth, the self, and other aspects of life that seem natural and eternal. This article deploys this concept of time to analyze contemporary discussions among professional teaching librarians about what constitutes their professional work. These discussions work to produce professional identities, associations, and discursive formations. They always begin with a proclamation that the present is exceptional and requires the professional to change course. This exhortation of the present produces the terrain of a contested future.

I have written elsewhere about kairos as being analytically useful for centring teaching practice in a given classroom context (Drabinski 2014). In this piece, I use kairos as a way of thinking through the process of professionalization for teaching librarians. I begin with a discussion of kairos as concept of time that tightly links time and action. Next, I turn to the kairos of professionalization, describing the ways in which librarianship consolidates in response to particular social and economic contexts. In particular, I examine debates around the professional status of librarians as teachers. These debates have been fraught whenever they emerge, always cast with the high stakes of crisis that demand urgent change if librarianship is to survive. The contemporary moment sees the field engaged in yet another iteration of these high stakes debates as the Association

of College and Research Libraries puts forth revised approaches to teaching information literacy. Kairos disconnects readings of these debates from questions of right and wrong, of whether librarians should be teachers or should not be, whether information literacy is a thing to have, a way to be, or a threshold to cross. Rather than taking these debates at face value, kairos allows us to look at what informs and produces these debates in the first place.

Kairos: time and action

The exceptional present always demands action, and this marriage renders it kairotic. Kairos is a way of understanding time as being material rather than abstract, constructed in and through human behaviour and interaction with the world. If *chronos* is time at a remove—the clock tells a time that is correct only if we all agree that it is—kairos is time close at hand, the 5:00 pm of quitting time. In its earliest articulations, kairos describes the concrete time of craft: the moment "when the weaver must draw the yarn through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth being opened" (White 1987, 13). Kairos is the moment where new things are made.

For the ancient Greeks, the scope of kairos was subject to debate: was everything subject to kairos or did some things—truth, beauty, and knowledge—exist in a realm of ideals, away from the scene of human action in time? In his dialogue *Gorgias*, Plato (2004) chronicles the debate between Socrates and Gorgias, a Sophist. Gorgias argues that oratory not only produces power for the orator but also the truth of his claims to it—if it could be sufficiently argued, it would be true. Here, Plato saw the danger of rhetoric. The orator, who could convince anyone that anything was dangerous, must be controlled by philosophers who had access to knowledge. For Socrates, kairos shaped the best method for the teacher to help the student move closer to apprehending truth. For Gorgias, the apprehended truth was itself constructed through kairos.

As an abstract debate, the ancient Greek struggle over the terms of contextual time might seem to bear little relation to contemporary professional discourse in libraries. What connects the preoccupations of the Sophists and Socrates to working librarians is the question of what is constituted in these exceptional moments where kairos frames human behaviour. For contemporary Platonists, debates about a given issue are conducted on the terrain of truth finding. When we talk about what librarians should do or be, we are uncovering something real about those questions. For contemporary Sophists—we might call them post-modernists—these professional debates are about the effects they produce in terms of organizing the terrain of work. For example, kairos might be mobilized by a Platonist to determine when in the academic calendar teaching faculty might be best approached for conversations about the latest discoveries in teaching and learning about information. Kairos used in a Gorgian sense might be used to ask which approach to information literacy would be most strategically deployed on behalf of the resource claims in a library. In both cases, timing matters, but in the latter, timing determines the content as much as it does the method of sharing it.

Professional discourse about appropriate standards for work practice serves as a site for analyzing the work of kairos. Such standards are never settled, despite their status as consensus documents of appropriate behaviour. To be named a standard is to be subject to contestation and debate. This contestation always emerges in response to an exigent present that has rendered standards suddenly outdated, relevant to a past that is always slower and less complex than the future. In such debates, the truth proposition is cast as what is at stake. Viewed through the lens of a Gorgian kairos, however, these moments can be understood for the work they do to redistribute power and solidify the claims librarians make to professional status.

Librarians as teachers

Librarians have often been regarded primarily as collectors and guardians of materials. They construct the bibliographic spaces where scholars come to learn, but they do not teach themselves. The trope of the library is usually one of Jorge Luis Borges' Library of Babel or Michel Foucault's heterotopia: the library is a space of infinitely ordered collections and the librarian exists primarily to enforce icy, silent, total control. When she appears at all, the librarian is a figure enforcing silence behind a forbidding desk, impeding, rather than encouraging, access.

Against this popular stereotype, librarians have worked to reconceptualize their professional status as teachers. In library literature, the librarian emerges as a teaching figure in the context of a seventeenth German model of university education (Ewert 1986; Lorenzen 2001). In the seventeenth century, German higher education positioned the librarian as an instructor for students pursuing independent research in libraries. This role was "mostly limited to hints on study techniques, to descriptions of the most important reference works, and to suggestions on the use of libraries. Methodologically they used primarily the style of exhortations" (Ewert 1986, 178). While perhaps not properly pedagogical, Gisela Ewert suggests that a link can be drawn from these early German librarians to the focus on instructional roles that dominates the discourse of public service librarianship in North American libraries today.

The kairos of the nineteenth century paired an explosion of print culture with the rapid growth of libraries, library technologies, as well as the professionalization of librarian identities. Between 1639 and 1800, 39,000 books were published in the United States. In 1880 alone, 2,000 books were published, and this number ballooned to 5,400 titles in 1895, just five years later (Salony 1995, 33). Library buildings transformed to accommodate this rapid expansion of collections, a transformation that included the integration of other kinds of spaces, including classrooms to accommodate an influx of scholarly library users (Weiss 2003). Melvil Dewey's organizational scheme, developed in 1876, ordered the incoming flood. The turn of the century also saw the consolidation of librarians as a professional class. A group of librarians met as early as 1853 to discuss forming an association; in 1876, the ALA was founded at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (American Library Association n.d.).

What would constitute the practice of these newly professionalized librarians? As the first schools opened to educate them, their role as teachers emerged as a site of contestation within professional discourse. Dewey founded the School of Library Economy at Columbia University in 1876, and by 1883, he was mobilizing the exceptional present as a warrant for developing new curricula for library education. In the late nineteenth century, claimed Dewey (1886, 3), "librarianship means to-day quite a different thing from what it meant twenty years ago" and required librarians to be trained to edify the working classes by connecting them with the better books emerging from the flood. For Dewey, champion (and, perhaps, profiteer) of the new librarianship, this teaching role was central: "The time is when a library is a school, and the librarian is in the highest sense a teacher'" (Lorenzen 2001, 8). In academic libraries, this role was even stronger, as "professor after professor sends his classes, or goes with them, to the library and teaches them to investigate for themselves and to use books, getting beyond the method of the primary school with its parrot-like recitations from a single text" (Weiss 2003, 235).

Many other leading librarians in the nineteenth and early twentieth century took up the charge to be teachers, conceiving of themselves as professors of the most liberal of the liberal arts. Justin Winsor, the librarian of Harvard University and a founder of the ALA, argued in 1880 that librarians were the most important teaching faculty at a university: "He saw the library as the center of the university and the natural location to teach classes. He was skeptical of textbooks and believed that students should use the library collection to learn instead" (Lorenzen 2001, 8). Winsor saw academic libraries at the end of the nineteenth century as poised to begin a "new career" as a centre for teaching rather than simply as a collection of books (Hardesty and Tucker 1989, 97). Teaching librarians should teach students to engage the collections for their own intellectual projects. Azariah Smith Root, librarian at Oberlin College in 1887, argued that librarians were teachers responsible for helping the student "to discover his own capacities, aptitudes, and interests, [to] learn about the character and conditions of occupational life and may himself arrive at an intelligent vocational decision" (Weiss 2003, 240). Similarly, William Warren Bishop, librarian at Princeton, felt that the rapidly expanding number of books in libraries required training not only in access but also in the evaluation of materials to select the right book at the right time (Lorenzen 2001). M.D. Bisbee, librarian at Dartmouth College, writing in 1897, saw this role as the primary teaching mandate of the librarian: "Unless the scholar has a better method than the common people of selecting books and reading them, his primacy is gone … Nowhere, then, is definite instruction more needed than in bibliography" (Weiss 2003, 237). In 1912, Louis Shores began advocating for his library–college concept, a model where all teaching and learning would take place in the library, with librarians being equal partners with students and disciplinary faculty in the development of the intellect: "He believed that undergraduates should be taught in the library. Rather than lecturing to students, faculty and librarians would emphasize problem solving within a liberal arts

curriculum" (Lorenzen 2001, 10). Shores' work culminated in *Origins of the American College Library, 1638–1800*, a book-length history of academic libraries that concluded with an argument for the library college.

If the last decades of the nineteenth century can be considered to be an early golden age of library instruction discourse and practice, the age was both shallow and short. After the turn of the century, interest in systematic, institutionalized instruction—while never particularly widespread—began to fade away. Seventeen colleges and universities had systematic library instruction programs in 1900; eight of those had given up on their programs by 1903. A 1913 survey by the ALA indicated that this trend continued: "Out of 446 responses, seven required credit bibliography courses for graduation and nineteen offered elective classes" (Salony 1995, 35).

This decline can be attributed in part to the voices that dogged library instruction initiatives then as they do now. While librarians have usually been able to make the case for integrated library instruction, at least to themselves, library instruction has always been a harder sell to disciplinary faculty. Lucy M. Salmon, a history professor at Vassar College, argued in a professional library journal that while library instruction was vital to higher education and the work of scholarship, those lessons should really be the domain of disciplinary faculty who were better equipped to link instruction with particular course work (Salony 1995, 36). For Salmon, as for many critics of library instruction in higher education, librarians should busy themselves not with instruction but, rather, with "maintaining accessible libraries and help faculty in book selection" (Lorenzen 2001, 9). Part of the argument from Salmon and others stemmed from the intense competition for resources in the newly corporatizing university. Rewards went first to departments that could reliably argue for themselves as efficient producers of the managerial class sought by capital (Berlin 1988). Library instruction, a field still at the beginning of defining itself as a profession, was unable to effectively combat the argument that it should occupy itself strictly with the acquisition and access functions of the profession.

From the perspective of the moment, it must have seemed to Salmon and her faculty colleagues that they were right—they had won, momentarily. Librarians whose efforts to establish instruction programs saw those efforts fail as instruction departments shuttered. And yet, fast forward to the present, and we see a continuing deep and contested focus on instruction and libraries indicating that the role of teaching librarians in higher education is anything but a settled question. Neither side was correct. Rather, each was engaged in a struggle to claim power and resources from within the university, a struggle that required appeals to truth, whether that truth could ever be finally established. Understood through the lens of kairos, these truth claims make a different kind of sense, indicating less the merit of individual positions than the kairos in which these debates took place.

At other points in the history of the profession, similar debates have emerged at kairotic moments of professional identity crisis. The late 1970s saw the emergence of a discourse around the information society, with information literacy

pitched as a "core skill for education and workplace" (Kapitzke 2003, 38). Higher education required trained knowledge workers, and librarians were quick to assert themselves as the appropriate instructors in this regard. Librarians worked to integrate information literacy into broader discussions about higher education reform, particularly in the context of *America 2000: An Education Strategy* (Kapitzke 2003, 38). The ALA's Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) formed a presidential committee and by 2000 had developed a set of Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. As always, these standards were pitched as "increasingly important" due to "rapid technological change and proliferating information resources" against a background of "escalating complexity" (Association of College and Research Libraries 2000). As Lisa O'Connor (2009, 272) has argued, while this work and discussion was about teaching and learning in libraries, it was also "in part a professional response and an attempt to rearticulate and legitimate librarians' claim to an educational jurisdiction") and, thereby, produce a warrant for academic librarians in the classroom.

The kairos of the framework

Actions taken in the 1970s and 1980s to solidify information literacy as the teaching librarian's domain successfully produced information literacy as a flourishing domain of professional practice and identity. Professional associations developed information literacy round tables and sections, articles about information literacy appeared in a range of scholarly journals, and other journals were established, dedicated exclusively to information literacy: *Communications in Information Literacy* and the *Journal of Information Literacy*. Information literacy took on the appearance of a settled question, an object of professional knowledge outside of kairos, something that would always be with us.

The Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education were adopted by the ACRL in 2000. In 2011, as part of a cyclical review, the organization assembled a task force, which determined that the standards should be revised in light of the changing contexts in librarianship and higher education more generally. In 2013, the revision task force was given an explicitly kairotic charge:

> To update the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education so they reflect the current thinking on such things as the creation and dissemination of knowledge, the changing global higher education and learning environment, the shift from information literacy to information fluency, and the expanding definition of information literacy to include multiple literacies, for example, transliteracy, media literacy, digital literacy, etc. (Association of College and Research Libraries 2015)

The settled question of information literacy was now subject to debate. This debate resulted in the generation of a new document, the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries 2015). Drawing on theories of threshold concepts and meta-literacy, the framework represented a significant shift in thinking about information literacy for the

field. In early 2015, the framework was filed as part of the ACRL's "constellation of documents" related to information literacy.

The shift from standards to framework was marked by dissent. Practitioners and theorists have argued against the adoption of the framework on the grounds that "there's just no scientific evidence in favor of threshold concepts as a successful way to teach students anything" (Klipfel 2015) or have dismissed the framework as "pedagogical gimmicks" (Wilkinson 2014). Others have defended the framework as an "authentic and useful statement on information literacy and learning" (Swanson 2015) and threshold concepts as "grounded in research on teaching and learning (Townsend et al. 2015). Indeed, the process of gathering public comments on the framework produced more than 1,000 pages of commentary from outside the revision committee (Association of College and Research Libraries 2014). Even before the framework was formally approved by the ACRL's Board of Directors, scholarly articles had already appeared in the literature, addressing assessment using the framework (Oakleaf 2014) and using the framework to teach health sciences information literacy (Knapp and Brower 2014).

The questions librarians asked about the framework largely took the process of developing the framework at face value. They took as a given that the framework would represent something either true or false about teaching and learning in libraries. Are threshold concepts real? Can they be proven? Can teaching under a threshold concepts framework improve student learning? Were the standards a better description for what librarians should teach and what students should know? A kairotic analysis recasts this debate somewhat. Rather than producing a settled truth about information literacy, the debate can be seen as producing and reproducing professional identities. As librarians marshalled arguments for and against the framework, they were also developing professional identities. To have a position on the framework is to occupy a position in a professional discourse, one where one's knowledge and values, informed by practice, gives one the right to speak.

Conclusion

The analytic frame offered by kairos sets aside the question of truth in professional discourse and allows us to ask instead what kind of work is being done when we lay claim to how things ought to be done. Debates about teaching in libraries, like other aspects of professional practice, surely lead to changes in how librarians work. Information production and dissemination are different today than they were when Dewey developed his ten pigeonholes, but the fact of difference is the same. This is the nature of kairotic time—the present emerges from what came before, and what feels normal and natural emerges from actions taken in time as well. Our present is no more exceptional than any other present in which librarians have found, and will find, themselves working.

Discourses around professional practice may present themselves as investigations into the correct way to be or act as professionals. Kairos helps us see professional discourse as being constitutive of professional status itself: we are

professional at least in part because of our engagement with our own exigent present and our desire to shape what comes next. Of course, one gets something by being right in the context of these professional debates. Being right means wielding power: access to resources or the capacity to assign them. Kairos encourages us to attend to these effects and to understand the ways that the urgent, insistent debates in which we find ourselves are ultimately about power, how librarians take it, wield it in various contexts, and distribute it among ourselves. Kairos helps us think more clearly about the futures we want to make.

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