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Abstract

In neoliberal western societies, the demise of knowledge as a domain for broad-based independent thinking, critique, and action is directly related to the increasing association of information learning with political and economic rationalities. In this context, autonomous knowledge is reduced or replaced by information learning that is inextricably linked to pragmatic agendas and policies of markets or sovereign states. The new mantra accorded information learning is perpetual lifelong learning which can be characterized as narrow in scope and specific to retooling to meet the demands of ever-changing neoliberal agendas. The sense of the academy, as the arbitrator of epistemology, the historical guardian, generator, and facilitator of independent knowledge, is lost or severely restricted. My objective is to raise awareness of the insidious substitution of knowledge for information learning in the discipline of nursing that has developed primarily from increasing neoliberal realities over the course of the past thirty years.

Key Words Foucault, information learning, knowledge, lifelong learning, neoliberalism

The Rhetoric of Information Learning in Nursing: Where is Knowledge?

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Introduction

I approach this discussion in two distinct sections: first, analytics, in which I summarize historical, or genealogical, developments of the relationships between liberalism, social liberalism, and neoliberalism with Foucault's[1] notion of governmentality. It is from the standpoint of understanding how societal power relations function that I deploy Foucault's concept of governmentality as a mechanism of understanding the evolution of structures resulting from temporal critiques of governance, specifically, liberalism to neoliberalism. Additionally, a critique of Olssen's[2] normative suppositions for democratic global learning will be developed. Second, I offer a discourse surrounding the

diagnostics of knowledge, information learning, and lifelong learning applicable for the discipline of nursing within the neoliberal context. The antecedents outlined in the analytics discussion are essential for understanding the premise of the paper that asks: Where is knowledge in the rhetoric of information learning in nursing? Are independent knowledge exploration, creation, and critique in the traditional sense forever lost among our new realities?

Analytics: understanding and acknowledging the ramifications of history

Foucault's concept of governmentality

Foucault's[1] conception of governmentality should be understood not as a theory of the legitimacy of sovereignty structures but rather as an understanding of how the reality of power structures function through various means of conduct, spanning the individual to populations. In this context, to govern is a form of activity aimed to guide and shape conduct through various mechanisms of rationalities linked

to specific technologies collectively understood as relationships of power within open fields of possibilities. This individualizing and totalizing rendition of power relationships is strategically deployed over free subjects. Foucault's[3] meaning of 'strategy' includes three processes: first, a means to an end through the deployment of rationality to arrive at an objective; second, the designation of anticipated behaviours of 'gaming' parties as to estimated expected actions of each—mapped out as a course of action to gain advantage over others; and third, it is the means to obtain victory.[3 p 224-5]

Schematically, governmentality refers to interactions of relationships of power between three distinct historical modes of societal organization: sovereignty, discipline, and government.[1] These modes participate through 'apparatuses of security' in various forms and designs for the sustainment of populations. To summarize, governmentality is an understanding how historical relationships of power function in sustaining given populations. It is not about the structure of various spheres of separation from the sovereign state that were begun in the 18th Century but rather about how relationships of power functioned between sovereign states and the semi-autonomous spheres of economy, population, and civil society.

From liberalism to neoliberalism

Liberalism is approached historically neither as a coherent set of ideas nor as a definite institutional structure. A more accurate framing would include, not a philosophy based on the "rule of law" and the protection of individual rights and freedom against the unnecessary encroachments of the state, but rather a critique, a characteristic way of posing problems against the previous forms of government from which it wishes to distinguish itself.[4] This means, historically, that targets of liberalism have changed over time. Dean suggests that "at the end of the eighteenth century, it was notions of 'reason of the state' and police; at the end of the nineteenth century, it was earlier forms of liberalism; after the Second World War in Europe, it was forms of national and state socialist totalitarianism; at the end of the twentieth century, it includes not only the ideal of a welfare state but also the very concept of the nation-state".[5 p49]

Liberalism can be seen as the critique of state reason, advocating for limits of sovereignty and the pedagogy of sovereigns and statesman. These limits can be understood as the concerns of what is possible to know and shape at will, and the state actions concerning the nature of political subjects who are individuals with rights, desires, needs, and interests

that cannot be dictated by governments.[5 p50]

An understanding of the reality 'to be governed' is situated among several processes that are both necessary to the ends of government and not directly visible to the agents of sovereignty. These processes can be understood as both autonomous and overlapping spheres of the economy, population (bio-political) and civil society. A key component of liberalism as an art of government is to find a set of political norms that can balance the competing imperatives derived from knowledge of the processes that constitute these spheres.[5]

Vital to liberalism as an art of critique is the balance between circumstances and their combinations that allow play of market forces, afflictions of families, sympathies of community, and laws of population, and when the state is to intervene to protect and invoke the rights and liberties of individuals that are vital to securing such processes. Liberalism is also seen as an art of government not only because it is recognized that there are limits to the role of the state but also because of what is determined as falling outside the political sphere is itself necessary to the ends of government. Liberalism in these terms can be understood as the net effect or balance of the art of government situated in temporal dialogical tensions of critique.[5,6]

Social liberalism or welfare state

Social liberalism, a variant of classical liberalism, just outlined, developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to the extreme economic depression of most of the western world.[7] These developments coalesced from the failures of laissez-faire government and unfettered capitalism. Inherent in classic liberalism during this era was a two class society, the exploiter and the exploited. Elements of reform, or more accurately stated, shifts in the art of government centred on acceptance of restrictions in economic affairs, such as anti-trust laws to combat economic oligopolies, and regulatory government such as minimum wage laws, intended to secure economic opportunities for all. A primary shift was the expectation that governments would provide a basic level of welfare or workfare, health and education, supported by progressive taxation. The intent was to enable the best use of talents of the population, perceived as serving the collective public good.

Like classic liberals, social liberals were intent on individual freedom and liberty situated as a central objective for government. What was unique was the belief that the lack of economic opportunity, education, health care, and most importantly equality were considered a threat to these liber-

ties. Humanistic concepts, such as human rights and social justice, informed these perspectives and were held in check through an economy (known during this era as a Keynesian balance in economic terms) that ensured these values, and a state that provided public services to uphold social rights as well as civil liberties.[6] In descriptive terms, government was viewed as a welfare-oriented interventionist state guaranteeing a basic equality for all citizens.

Simultaneously with these mechanisms of social insurance as an inclusive technology of government, was a surveillance of public norms. These norms were set in motion—legitimized by experts, rendered calculable in terms of norms and deviations, judged in terms of their social cost and consequences, and subjected to regimes of education or reformation.[8] The result was implanting techniques of responsible citizenship under the surveillance of experts and in relation to a variety of sanctions and rewards.

The political subject was reconstructed as a citizen with rights to social protection and social education in return for duties of social obligation and social responsibility, while retaining a liberal identity inclusive of democracy, freedom, and privacy.[5]

Neoliberalism

Western world sovereign states in the last thirty years of the twentieth century experienced slow but deliberate changes to the balance of operations of governments and the interacting autonomous spheres of the economy, population and civil society. In the western world, growing economic stagnation, rampant inflation of currencies, and war were the all-consuming realities of that era.[4] The growing argument was that the increasing levels of taxation and public expenditure to sustain social liberal programs of the welfare state were damaging the health of capitalism because of the excessive burden on private profit.[8] A contradiction resulted with those situated on the Left delineating the problem as a ‘crisis’ of government, as opposed to those on the Right who viewed this situation as the growth of an ‘unproductive’ welfare sector that created no wealth at the expense of the ‘productive’ private sector in which all of the national wealth was actually produced.[8 p51]

Dialogue and critique from the civil society sphere reframed the conceptualization of social solidarity inherent in social liberalism as mere techniques (expert knowledge and programs) of the state ‘apparatuses’ to control individual freedom and liberties. Resulting from these tensions was fragmentation of the place of experts and expert knowledge

that were situated as the devices of social government. What emerged was a new formula for the relation between government, expertise, and a new subjectivity (identity) centred on individual choice. Expert pedagogies were replaced by rapid-fire simple solutions outlined in mass media, marketing strategies deployed in commodity advertising, and consumption regimes.[8]

Neoliberalism does not inherently abandon the ‘will to govern or be governed’ but rather maintains a view that failure of government to achieve its objectives can be overcome by inventing new strategies of government that will succeed.[8 p53] Rose[8] outlines three transitions inherent in neoliberalism: first, a new relation between expertise and politics; second, a new pluralism of ‘social’ technologies; and third, a new specification of the subject of government.

Neoliberalism is understood as the extension of the market across and into the social arena as well as the political arena. What results is the blending of previously autonomous distinctions between the economic, social, and the political, resulting in the marketization of the state. The state is no longer independent and outside the market, but is itself now subject to market laws. Economic criteria are now extended into spheres which are not economic and market exchange relations now govern all areas of voluntary exchange among individuals. As a result, the social and political spheres become redefined as economic domains. The government and the public sector will be ‘economized’ to reflect market principles and mechanisms. Thus the economic sphere covers all of society and society is theorized as a form of the economic. The task of the government is to construct and universalize competition to achieve efficiency and invent market systems that meet needs of the population that were formally the domain of the state.

Neoliberal governmentality and higher education

Higher education within neoliberal realities represents an input—output system that can be reduced to an economic production function.[9] Key elements of the evolved public management schema include: flexibility—in relation to organizational use of contracts; clearly defined objectives—organizationally as well as personally; and results orientation—measurement of and managerial responsibility for achievement.[9] Likewise, the new public management application of quasi market or private sector micro-techniques to the management of public sector organizations has replaced the ‘public service ethic’ whereby organizations were governed according to norms and values derived from assumptions about the ‘common good’ or ‘public interest’,

with a new set of contractual norms and rules. Traditional notions of ‘professionalism’, ‘trustee’, or ‘fiduciary’, are reconceived as a ‘principal/agent relationships’.[9 p324]

With respect to higher education within the context of the new public management schema, Olssen and Peters[9] point out a complex and subtle shift with respect to political philosophy. Under liberal governmentality, the ‘professionals’ constitute a mode of institutional organization characterized by the principle of autonomy which characterized a form of power based on ‘delegation’ (or delegated authority) and underpinned by relations of trust.

Under neoliberal governmentality, principal-agent line management chains replace delegated power with hierarchical forms of authoritatively structured relations, which erode, and seek to prohibit, an autonomous space from emerging resulting in a transformation of the academic’s role that is de-professionalized.[9 p325]

The core nature of contractual models involves a specification, which is fundamentally at odds with the notion of professionalism.[9 p325] Professionalism conveys the idea of a subject-directed power based upon the liberal concepts of rights, freedom and autonomy. It conveys the notion of a power given to the subject, and of the subject’s ability to make decisions in the workplace with peer oversight as the corrective control.[9 p325] To that extent the ideas expressed by Kant, with respect to the university as an institutionally autonomous and politically insulated realm where there are traditional commitments to a liberal conception of professional autonomy in keeping with a public service ethic, appear to have little relevance in a neoliberal, global economic order.[9 p326,10]

Knowledge (or is it information) as the new form of capital under neoliberalism

Wilson[11] stipulates that knowledge acquisition involves complex cognitive processes: perception, learning, communication, association, and reasoning. Additionally, the term knowledge is also used to mean the confident understanding of a subject with the ability to use it for a specific purpose as appropriate. Knowledge can be defined as ‘what we know’ and the discrete ‘mental’ applications towards a means to an end.[11 p2] It involves mental processes of comprehension, understanding, and learning that go on in the mind and only in the mind.[11 p2]

When knowledge is used to involve interactions with the world outside the mind, through signifiers such as oral, written, graphic, gestural, or body language, it expressly

constitutes information.[11 p2] Such informational messages do not carry knowledge but are used to assimilate or re-assimilate as knowledge in the knowing mind through interpretation, understanding, comprehension, and associated reasoning which constitutes an incorporated knowledge.[11 p2] These internal structures of knowledge processing are not identical for the person uttering the message and the receiver because each person’s knowledge structures are “biographically determined”. [12] Therefore knowledge built from information can only approximate the knowledge base from which the messages were uttered. The consequence of this sequence is the understanding that everything outside the mind or information can be manipulated for a particular means to an end.[11 p2]

Framed from another perspective, knowledge (as a much broader concept than information or as a corpus of a discipline) can be considered in terms of ‘know-what’ and ‘know-why’, broadly what philosophy calls propositional knowledge (‘knowledge that’) embracing both factual knowledge and scientific knowledge, both of which come closest to being market commodities or economic resources that can be fashioned into production functions. Other types of knowledge, identified as ‘know-how’ and ‘know-who’ are forms of tacit knowledge which are more difficult to codify and measure. Tacit knowledge[13] is the individual skills needed to handle codified knowledge and is more important than ever in future labour markets with education at the centre of the knowledge-based economy.[11]

Marshall suggests that knowledge is superseded in the neoliberal discourse of lifelong learning with information, in the form of skills and learning: “Knowledge has been replaced by skills and learning. Everything which might have been seen as obtaining knowledge—an object of an activity—seems to have moved into an activity mode, where what is important is process”. [14 p269]

In addition, Lambeir observes that “Learning now is the constant striving for extra competencies, and the efficient management of acquired ones. Education has become a tool in the ‘fetishisation of certificates’ and must be continuously relearned, readjusted, and restructured to meet the needs of consumers in the service information industry”. [15 p351]

Lifelong learning as a neoliberal art of government

From Foucault’s[1] perspective, lifelong learning represents a model of governing individuals in their relation to the collective—temporally. More specifically, lifelong learning constitutes a technology of control that is evident in the way practices of economics and discursive patterning of knowl-

edge and learning interact. This technology of control creates a model of human capital where the human individual is defined not in liberal terms that are with intrinsic rights but in terms of classification of skills, knowledge and ability. Unlike other forms of capital, lifelong learned skills cannot be separated from the individual who owns these resources; they nevertheless constitute resources which can be sold in a market. Each person is now an autonomous entrepreneur ontologically responsible for his or her own self, progress and position. The technology of lifelong learning enables the global production of infinitely knowledgeable subjects.[2,9]

Olssen specifies that the emergence of lifelong learning as a technology serves as both cause and effect:

On the one hand, it enables both the individualization of responsibility for education or learning, and on the other it enables the abolition of welfare obligations of states. From this perspective the technology of lifelong learning enables a *downgrading of social rights* within any particular national territory in preference for a global level playing field characterized by equality of opportunity". Additionally, its main strength is that it constitutes a flexible technology in a number of ways. First, it enables businesses and governments to avoid direct responsibility; second, it enables the adaptability of workers in terms of their mobility within the workforce between businesses and countries. It thus enables the ability of workers to move from one job to another within a given overall production process, or within a production process that can switch between products and skills and which itself can be transitory. (emphasis in original). [2 p221]

This 'workforce versatility', of which lifelong learning is a key strategy, enables high levels of job mobility premised on a high level of general and technical training and a ready ability to add new skills in order to make change possible.[2 p221] As such, traditional mechanisms of job security, benefits including retirement accounts, and health coverage are minimized or eliminated. Workforce versatility also propagates an 'expendable work force' due in part to the elimination of the need for principals to retain, invest, and promote development of their own personnel.[2 p221]

Diagnostics: what space for acting differently?

Olssen's normative suppositions for democratic global learning

Olssen[2] posits normative suppositions for knowledge development in a world that regards democracy as the action necessary from a departure to neoliberal capture of education processes, notably the substituting or privileging of information learning over knowledge acquisition. He offers

four normative suppositions advocating for democracy: the concern for equality; the role of the state; the development of civil society; and the role of education. It is my conjecture that Olssen[2] is calling for a return to the era of social liberalism or the welfare state as a departure from our current neoliberal reality. I will subsequently present and critique each of Olssen's normative suppositions, noting or explaining why these approaches are fundamentally flawed given current realities.

The concern for equality. Olssen's first supposition, the concern for equality, reflects the following:

The development of any conception of democratic justice embodying a concept of learning must seek to deal with rather than avoid issues to do with distribution of resources and life changes. Learning as participation in the global community is not possible except where resources and human needs are satisfied. It is important to theorize the implications of a social ontological framework of community for considerations of democratic justice as it pertains to distributional ethics if the learning community is to be a reality. Community in this sense is definable as an all-encompassing arena without fixed borders or unity which comprises an assortment of values, norms, and intuitions that enable life to be lived. Such a conception of community recognizes social ties and shared values, as well as practices of voluntary action and public institutions like education, which constitute the conditions for stability and reproduction of society.[2 p227]

While assertions of concerns for equality are certainly desirable, even essential for learning, the question remains as to how this is possible in our neoliberal era. Historically, during the period of social liberalism or the welfare state, the theme of equality was in the foreground due to the interplay and leveraging of the social with the state. The autonomous state was advocating for its own survival by fulfilling its role in representing the needs of its population which included reining in and regulating the sphere of the economic with regard to exploitive excesses. Social liberals were intent on individual freedom and liberty was situated as a central objective for government. During this era the unique belief that lack of economic opportunity, education, health care, and most importantly equality were considered a threat to these liberties. Humanistic concepts informed these perspectives and were held in check through an economy that ensured these values and a state that provided public services to uphold social rights as well as civil liberties.[6] Equality was not understood as some inalienable right, but rather as: "a condition—not the aim, not a finality to realize, but its ontological assumption".[16 p330]

In neoliberalism, equality is reduced to the Darwinian 'sur-

vival of the fittest' by assertions of individual choice wherein skill sets of individuals are offered as commodities in the open market. The emphasis is not on creation of equality for the opportunity to attain the marketable skills necessary to compete, but rather, concentration is focused on equality for the entrepreneurs who have had the privilege of skill and expertise development. In this schema, gradations of capacity are privileged, leveraging the population against themselves through competitive mechanisms. This is not to assert that competition is not desirable, even necessary, but rather emphasizes that equality has taken a fundamental shift from an ontological assumption for all—to equality among the privileged. In this context, neoliberal reality asserts that social justice and social ethics are possible only if consistent with market justice and market ethics. Clarke makes this expressly clear:

Far from responding to the needs of consumers, capitalism thrives on the constant creation of unsatisfied needs; far from generalizing prosperity, capitalism generalizes want; far from relieving the burden of labour, capitalism constantly intensifies labour, to the extent that a growing proportion of the population—the young, the old, the infirm, those with inadequate skills—are unable to meet the demands of capital and are condemned to destitution. The market is an instrument of 'natural selection' that judges not only on the basis of the individual's ability to contribute to society, but on the basis of the individual's ability to contribute to the production of surplus value and the accumulation of capital. This is the moral law expressed in the platitudes of neoliberalism.[17 p55]

Darwinian competition has become the norm, casting aside any notions of democratic equality, social justice, or social ethic.

The role of the state. Olssen's second supposition juxtaposes the role of the state manifested in current neoliberal realities with past social liberalism or the welfare state. For example:

The role of the state should be concerned with guaranteeing access to education and knowledge, as well as information and skills as a fundamental right. The state's obligation as regards learning involves it in developing opportunities based on people's rights to inclusion and the development of their capacities. This obligation gives the state a role in the provision of social services, health care, and education. In brief, the role for the positively geared state lies in relation to socially directed investment decisions, to provide for the general conditions for all species needs and development, including education and training, and to create and maintain quality infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, parks, and public spaces and learning opportunities.[2 p227]

Following the concerns for curtailed individual equality in neoliberal functioning societies is the state's role in the care

of its populations regarding the enactment of infrastructure such as material necessities of security, food and water safety, housing, education, economic security, and access to primary health care. These infrastructure responsibilities, typically understood as the primary responsibility of sovereign governments during social liberalism or the welfare state era, have been relegated to priority settings based upon reduced available public capital. The reduction in public monies has been due in part to the reconfiguring of a progressive tax structure wherein an egalitarian strategy has been restructured privileging the elite while shifting the burden onto the middle class. This has transpired due to the extension of the markets into all realms of public life: there no longer exist the separate spheres of the economic, the social, and the political; all have been marketized and are required to operate subject to market laws. What has resulted is the privatization of what were formally infrastructure responsibilities of the state. Solutions in this venue result from whatever the market is willing to commodify and has led to a worldwide 'marketplace society'. [18 p.ix]

A steady decline in basic community infrastructures worldwide is evident in first world as well as in third world nations.[19] Increasing entrenchment of markets into sovereign states over the past thirty years has resulted from coordinated efforts among coalitions with financial interests, leading industrialists, traders and exporters, media barons, big landowners, local political chieftains, the top echelons of the civil service and the military, and their intellectual and political proxies.[19 p3] The consequence is a worldwide shift in power relations away from the majority with concentration in the elites. Reversing these entrenched processes will not be easily accomplished, even with democratic deconstruction/reconstruction.

The development of civil society. Olssen's third supposition requires the development of civil society democratically as follows:

Civil society refers to that sector of private associations relatively autonomous from the state and economy, which springs from the everyday lives and activities of communities of interest. It is clearly pivotal for learning. Clearly, one principal of democracy is the idea of deliberation encompassing learning in the arts of dialogue. Another principle of democracy is the right to contest, challenge or oppose. If democracy is rule by the people, the ability, and opportunity to 'speak the truth to power', as Michel Foucault's (20) idea of parrhesia expresses, is itself one of democracy's crucial rights, indeed its very condition.[2 p227]

Apart from Olssen's[2] vision of the social mentioned above, the social as a separate sphere of coalescing interactions for

the purpose of representing causes of the masses to the state has been called into question. Baudrillard[21] diagnosed “the end of the social” depicting that “the sociality of the contract, of the relation of state to civil society, of the dialectic of the social and the individual has been destroyed by the fragmentations of the media, information, computer simulation and the rise of the simulacrum”. [21 p86] (Note: Baudrillard defines simulacrum as the condition that truth assumes: its ‘likeness or similarity’ is not a copy of the real, but becomes a reconfigured truth in its own right—‘the hyperreal’).

Rose[22] following Baudrillard, reminds us ‘the social’ is an invention of history, enhanced by political agendas. It is not an inevitable horizon for our thought or standard for our evaluations. Historically, the social within a limited geographical and temporal field, set the terms for how human intellectual, political, and moral authorities, in certain places and contexts, thought about and acted upon their collective experiences. [22 p329] This social plane of territorialization existed in conjunction with other spatializations with various tensions: blood and territory; race and religion; town, region, and nation. [22] The resulting consequence of these realities was that “political forces would now articulate their demands upon the State *in the name of the social*: the nation must be governed in the interests of social protection, social justice, social rights and social solidarity” (emphases in original). [22 p329]

With the advent of neoliberal strategies for governing populations there has been a fundamental shift away from social solidarity, the similar treatment and opportunity for the collective, to a focus on community “which is highly morally invested and which intersects markets, contracts, and consumption in complex and surprising ways”. [22 p331] The social in this context is giving way to the community as a new territory for the administration of individual and collective existence, a new plane or surface upon which micro-moral relations among persons are conceptualized and administered. [22 p331] Rose[22] outlines three significant features evident in this re-figuring of the territory of government in terms of community. The first is spatial, a ‘de-totalization’ in comparison to social conceptions. The second is a change in ethical character—the social was an order of collective being and collective responsibility and obligations. Third, the social was about identification such as ‘identification projects’: “programmes of mass schooling, of public housing, of public broadcasting, of social insurance...were understood as an image and a goal of the socially identified citizen, the person who above all, understood themselves to be a member of a single integrated national society”. [22 p333-4]

Governing through communities involves an economic life in which a re-coding of dividing practices is realized. These distinctions are between the affiliated and the marginalized. Affiliated are those individuals and families who have the financial, educational, and moral means to “pass” in their role as active citizens in responsible communities. [22 p340] To remain affiliated, one must ‘enterprise oneself’ through active choice, within authoritative terms and limits that have become integrated within the practices of everyday life. On the other hand, the marginal are those who cannot be considered affiliated to such sanctions and civilized cultural communities. Either they are not considered as affiliated to any community by virtue of their incapacity to manage themselves as subjects or they are considered affiliated to some kind of ‘anti-community’ whose morality, lifestyle, or comportment is considered a threat or reproach to public contentment and political order. [22 p340]

Olssen’s[2] contention that a social society is a necessary sphere for democratic opportunities for learning is problematic given the fragmentations of governing through neoliberal community interests. Voice for deliberations as well as resistance is severely compromised. Learning to speak truth to power and developing practices of resistance in our neoliberal world calls into question if democracy is a plausible possibility in our new multidimensional community.

The role of education. Olssen’s fourth supposition includes an essential role for democracy implicit in developing and practicing legitimate knowledge:

The role of education is crucial for learning democracy, as educational institutions, whether compulsory or post-compulsory, intersect with and therefore mediate between institutions like the family and those of the state and economy. Although formal institutions of education have been in the main public institutions, there is an important sense in which they are semi-autonomous from the state. This is not the neoliberal sense where management and administration are devolved to the local school, but the sense in which schools are important as democratic organizations, through the particular way that they are connected to communities, through their ability to empower families and involve minority groups in participatory projects. Education also is crucial as the central agency responsible for the production of democratic norms such as trust and political decision making. [2 p227]

To transition to Olssen’s[2] vision of ‘democratic education’ requires a deliberate acceptance of the multiplicities of knowing characteristic in postmodern thought. Within this context, multiple points of view including resistance are embraced. White cautions us about the potential for exclu-

sion in a “deliberative model of democracy”.[23 p147] This mode of democracy presupposes that participants understand one another, have similar historical appreciations, share premises, cultural meaning, and ways of speaking and evaluating. Young reminds us that in non-deliberative modes of communication, “expressions of passion, anger, depression, fear are often appropriate and necessary to enable people to recognize others in their concreteness”.[24 p129]

Olssen[2] infers that a return to education about democratic processes as well as education that is derived democratically is plausible despite the entrenched sphere of the economy in current neoliberal rationalities surrounding education in the 21st century (9). With this position, Olssen[2] implies a ‘holdout strategy’ in hopes of a short life-cycle propagated by the hopeful failures of neoliberal experiences over time. With this ‘holdout strategy’, resistance and a return for more democratic engagement of the social sphere is contemplated.[2] However, there is evidence that this is increasingly unlikely. Gibbs[25] describes the resistance to neoliberal doctrine in Venezuela under Chavez, which she coined a “post-neoliberal phase”, as less than encouraging. Equipped with substantial oil royalty monies, Chavez is experiencing incredible opposition from the neoliberal elites despite the popularity of his programs, including education for the majority of the population. Increasingly, despite adequate funding, a return to a more democratic society similar to social liberalism is implausible due to entrenchment of the elite’s hegemony in control of capital and natural resources, and its potential to invoke foreign military intervention in the name of security.

Within the context of neoliberal pragmatism, finite resources, market justice and market ethics, a more autonomous democratic education scheme which emphasizes and embraces autonomous knowledge development among the population is increasingly unlikely.

Problematizing the discipline of nursing—is a return to autonomous knowledge possible?

Negative rhetorical exemplars for nursing: critical thinking and evidence based-practice. Over the past fifteen years critical thinking and evidence-based practice for the discipline of nursing have become the touch points for expected scholarship, teaching, and practice. Inherently, these attributes would seem to be highly desirable and sought for sustainable professional practices but it is in the educational operationalization of these coupled actions that a problem unfolds for the discipline. Currently, these attributes represent activities that temporally map out the antecedents for disciplinary expectations for lifelong learning.

First, in nursing academia, critical thinking has been debased from its original intent: purposeful reflective judgment concerning what to believe or through what actions we take. Core critical thinking skills include interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and meta-cognition. Additionally, competent critical thinking includes consideration of evidence, context of judgment, relevant criteria for making the judgment well, applicable methods or techniques for forming the judgment, and applicable theoretical constructs for understanding the problem and the question posed. In addition to possessing strong critical thinking skills, one must be disposed to engage problems and decisions using those skills. Critical thinking employs not only logic but also broad intellectual criteria such as clarity, credibility, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, significance and fairness.[26]

These aforementioned attributes are understood to mature over time most desirably through a broad based liberal arts education that experientially allows space, time, and mentored guidance for these talents to develop. In the discipline of nursing, due to demands of markets for more and more nurses, revolving-door graduates became the expectation. In this scenario, superficial learning through sound-bite strategies of teaching technical skills, specific content, and how to optimize performance on standardized tests has become the norm.[27] One of the performance criteria for these graduates was to be ‘critical thinkers’ with ‘clinical reasoning skills’. What evolved was teaching critical thinking in a linear fashion, derived from discipline specific textbooks that reflected an understanding of critical thinking as desired attributes instead of developing experiential reflective performances.[27-31] The scope of this problem for nursing education cannot be taken lightly. In the United States for example, del Bueno[27] reported that 70% of recent graduates scored ‘unsafe’ on clinical reasoning skills.

This operationalization of information learning in the discipline of nursing exemplifies the contractual model of education outlined by Olssen and Peters[9] involving outcome specification that represents functional imperatives of work world demands that have become the expectation in our neoliberal era. What is missing is the substance or demonstration that knowledge is acquired in the refigured education schema. On closer examination, it becomes apparent that sound-bite information has become the mode of education, leading to little more than rhetoric or a false sense of true knowledge: more succinctly a hyperrealism—an illusory reality that becomes real.

The second neoliberal exemplar taken up by most nurs-

ing academics is the operationalization of evidence-based practice. Kim, Brown, Fields, and Stichler[32] specify that evidence-based practice has now become a ‘mandatory competency’ for all health care professionals. In nursing, this stipulation is not without strong minority opposition. Holmes, Perron, and O’Byrne[49] reveal several crucial concerns for the future that require action.

Privileging types of knowledge based on their methodology instead of their merits runs the risk of excluding or discounting other legitimate ways of knowing that have, over the past forty years, added significant understanding for disciplinary metaparadigm development.[33-43]

The creation and uncritical acceptance of evidence-based nursing exposes, micro-fascist structures[44] that function to restrict and discount the freedom of knowledge development. These micro-fascist structures include financial constraints based on wealth extraction, risk management, and system designs that are expressly in the service (hegemony) of the agendas of the health (illness) care elites.[45-48]

Additionally, nurses must challenge the hyperreality of the singular truth of evidence-based nursing if the discipline of nursing is to be a contender of knowledge, research, and practice in service of our clients and patients in the 21st Century. The discipline of nursing must not, as Homes, Perron, and O’Byrne contend: “passively watch the disappearance of nursing knowledge”. [49 p101]

Critical thinking and evidence-based practice are not to be viewed as inappropriate approaches to means to an end in nursing as a discipline, but rather as instruments in complex power relationships marched out within a ‘pragmatic neoliberal world’. It is the rhetoric or ‘truth speak’ that define this current hyperreality in nursing that must be deconstructed for the purpose of clarifying what is significant and beneficial for disciplinary progress in light of our social contract with our clients, patients, and customers. Is there the capacity and space for pluralistic views?

For the discipline: the return to social liberalism—a ‘false hope’ and ‘faulty reasoning’. The clock has expired on the era of social liberalism. What is essential for nursing is to redesign ourselves within a new set of disciplinary ethics that will be marketable in the 21st century neoliberal world. [47] The concerns for depth and breadth of acquiring knowledge outlined in this paper is evident when examining the acontextual focus usually encountered in literature reviews of nursing practice, research, theorizing, and teaching. Conspicuously absent in such literature reviews are global realities such as the ramifications of neoliberalism.[50] As

a means of raising awareness of this deficit, I offer seven themes that are by no means comprehensive but represent a constellation of topics that are ever-present in the geopolitical-economical world today. These seven themes need to be considered when developing realistic solutions to current and future disciplinary knowledge and knowledge application challenges in nursing.

First, increasingly complex dynamics encompass the explosion of knowledge required to practice nursing—skills have become extremely intricate, time intensive enterprises that are fraught with ethical dilemmas.[51,52] While there is growing nursing theoretical development and expansion in understanding the complexity of nursing practice[53] there is little demonstration of this potential in current practice environments.[54,55]

Second, there is an escalating concentration on chronic illness management or ‘illness care’ at the expense of health preventive and promotion modalities.[47,48,56] Health protection, prevention, and promotion are well established essential antecedents for individual as well as population well being; however, there is little evidence of implementation at all levels.[48,57-59]

Third, aging of populations creates extreme tension on illness care based systems regarding equity, access, ethical practice, and human resources.[60] These tensions will tax all professions but especially nursing given the labour intensive nature of practice with aging populations. Current and projected short-falls in nursing will only amplify these challenges.

Fourth, shrinking resources concurrent with a simultaneous increase in costs for health and illness services are influenced by three primary factors: growing populations requiring complex chronic illness care; the diminishing role of sovereign states as a funding mechanism due to neoliberal rationalities; and increased wealth extraction and profiteering of the health-illness industrial complex.[61-63]

Fifth, there is increasing wealth disparity between the elite versus middle and lower class populations in most western world sovereign states.[64] This condition has resulted from disparity in progressive taxation as well as capture and control of the political machinery by the elite class.[65,66]

Sixth, there is diminished sustainability of the world’s resources necessary to meet the basic demands of exponential population growth worldwide. Current predictions estimate that the world’s human activity is on pace to consume 1.2 times the earth’s ability to replenish current consumption trends. If this growth trend continues, limits to growth will

be reached by 2072.[67] Even estimates from the conservative World Bank Group call for more immediate attention to world resource sustainability.[68]

Seventh, the new world order or globalization has solidified the elites' hegemony in the control of capital, natural resources, and military threat.[69,70] With finite resources, there can no longer be social justice or social ethics.[47,71,72] Globalization mapped out with neoliberal blueprints situates the new reality: there is only room for market justice and market ethics with intense leveraging and competition for 'control of the tangible remains'.

Nursing and resistance. There is little evidence that the heritage of Nightingale's ethical resistance is alive today. Even less clear is what resistance looks like in the neoliberal schema for the discipline of nursing. Foucault suggests that there are a number of ways to resist the exercise of power. He argues that resistance is co-extensive with power; specifically, as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. It is not a question of an ontological opposition between power and resistance, but a matter of specific and changing struggles in space and time.[3,73] There is always the possibility of resistance no matter how oppressive the system. Inherent in resistance is the capacity to rationalize from some standpoint, presumptively from a historically situated knowledge. What I have argued, following Olssen and Peters,[2,9] is that the capacity for knowledge is re-configured in neoliberal realities. Informational learning predominately representing dogma, ideologies, and disciplinary speak (nursing's dominant discourses such as critical thinking and evidence based practice) have supplanted historical metaparadigms of knowledge. Knowledge from this perspective represents space for critique and resistance from multiple philosophical world views. Given these neoliberal realities, what is our disciplinary future? What is our vision for a re-configured ethic?

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