PROJECT MUSE®

The Value of a Communitarian Approach to Public Library
Board Governance: Rejecting Current Neoliberal Practice/La
valeur d'une approche communautariste de la gouvernance du
conseil d'administration d'une bibliothèque publique :
Le rejet de la pratique néolibérale actuelle

Bill Irwin

Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science, Volume 36,
Number 1-2, March/mars, June/juin 2012, pp. 1-15 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ils.2012.0002>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/468805>

The Value of a Communitarian Approach to Public Library Board Governance: Rejecting Current Neoliberal Practice

La valeur d'une approche communautaire de la gouvernance du conseil d'administration d'une bibliothèque publique : Le rejet de la pratique néolibérale actuelle

Bill Irwin

Lecturer, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario
birwin6@uwo.ca

Abstract: Over the last several years, public library boards in Canada, like most public bodies, have adopted a neoliberal marketization approach to their policy and decision-making processes. This approach is at odds with traditional professional practices of librarianship. This paper focuses on two competing approaches to public library board governance: neoliberalism and communitarianism. In the assessing of the discourse between these two models, it is contended that neoliberalism has instilled operational procedures and an organizational culture that are contrary to a spirit of positive public engagement, a spirit that should be the cornerstone of public library boards. In contrast, communitarianism, by providing a set of guiding principles, makes public library boards more accessible within their communities, and can therefore lead to the rediscovery of the public library board's positive spirit of public engagement. Through a search for praxis, recommendations on how public library board trustees can maintain their dual responsibility of professional ethics of librarianship while remaining an integral part of their local community are proffered.

Keywords: governance, public policy, public engagement, neoliberalism, communitarianism

Résumé : Au cours des dernières années, les conseils d'administration des bibliothèques publiques au Canada ont adopté, comme la plupart des organismes publics, une approche de marchandisation néolibérale dans leurs politiques et dans leurs processus décisionnels. Cette approche est en contradiction avec les pratiques professionnelles traditionnelles de la bibliothéconomie. Cet article se concentre sur deux approches concurrentes de la gouvernance des conseils d'administration de bibliothèques publiques : le néolibéralisme et le communautarisme. L'évaluation des discours de ces deux modèles nous mène à soutenir que le néolibéralisme a inculqué des procédures opérationnelles et une culture organisationnelle qui sont contraires à l'esprit d'engagement positif auprès du public, esprit qui devrait être la pierre angulaire de la gouvernance des conseils de bibliothèques publiques. En revanche, le

communautarisme fournit un ensemble de principes directeurs qui rend les conseils des bibliothèques publiques plus accessibles au sein de leurs communautés, et ainsi peut conduire à la redécouverte de l'esprit positif d'engagement public du conseil de bibliothèque publique. Une recherche sur les pratiques possibles nous permet d'offrir des recommandations sur la manière dont les conseillers membres de conseils de bibliothèques publiques peuvent maintenir leur double responsabilité d'éthique professionnelle de la bibliothéconomie, tout en restant partie intégrante de leur communauté locale.

Mots-clés : gouvernance, politique publique, obligation officielle, néo-libéralisme, communautarisme

Introduction: Library board governance “bound”

The purpose of a public library board is to act as the representative of the community's interest. The board as an entity does not in itself possess an absolute power; rather, it acts in trust for the community, demonstrating and responding to the broader community welfare. Members of library boards are also charged with representing the diverse interests and natures of their respective communities. However, it can be argued that many trustees tend to see their role more akin to that of a corporate board of directors than a body designed and dedicated to the community's common good. Pal (2006), in his analysis of policy impacts and their relationship to the broader society, has observed that policy decision making that is created by the values of the decision makers in turn establishes a set of normative standards that have far-reaching consequences. My own 20-year experience working in Ontario for non-profit and public bodies at the community level suggests there is much truth to this claim. During this period, I have observed how the neoliberal metanarrative has dominated the public policy agenda (Stein 2001; Harvey 2005; Pal 2006; Klein 2008). Giroux (2004) describes this metanarrative as a kind of new public pedagogy, a hegemonic discourse of marketization and efficiency, where decision makers naturally place considerations of market above all else. He further describes this phenomenon as a pervasive neoliberal pedagogy, whose language shapes and restricts all:

Neoliberalism not only places capital and market relations in a no-man's-land beyond the reach of compassion, ethics, and decency; it also undermines those basic elements of the social contract and the political and pedagogical relations it presupposes. (124)

From my own management experience in the public sector, including time as a library board trustee and chair, and as a senior administrator within a large public library, I have observed how library boards' decision-making processes can overlook any consideration of public and community interests in their deliberations. For example, discussions on the closing of a branch library can closely reflect a decision process in line with a private-sector retail model rather than a review on what is best for the community. While financial efficiency may be served by such a closing, human, social, and community efficiencies are more than likely not. The adherence to this particular approach to governance by public library board trustees can have a significant impact on the library's

culture and how its staff meets and delivers its professional standards. I have often wondered what personal value system brings individuals to act in such a manner in their roles as participants on a public board. I support the contention made by Stein (2001)¹ that today's dominant metanarrative of public decision making can be seen as "a cult of efficiency," a form of neoliberalism centred on a fiscal-efficiency paradigm, and the contention made by Pal (2006) that the implementation of normative business-focused practices has become a core principle in public policy making. In part, this paper examines how this particular neoliberal paradigm acts as a destructive influence on the governance and spirit of public library boards.

To further the understanding of how the principle of marketization provides a detrimental influence on public decision making—specifically in the context of public library boards—I will explore two competing discourses: neoliberalism and communitarianism. I posit that neoliberalism dominates the current manner in which public library decision making is conducted. Contemporary administrative practice guided by neoliberal hegemony has been described (Giroux 2004) as an ideology and politics buoyed by the spirit of a market fundamentalism that in turn subordinates the art of democratic politics. It favours market values over all else. A neoliberal preference in public library board governance can be seen as both undemocratic and detrimental to the community for which the board is supposed to act in trust, as it reduces all decisions to the simple formula of being a "business decision," and, as such, unapproachable, beyond question, and irreversible. I wish to introduce a counter-narrative—one that emphasizes democratic community conditions as a basis for decision making—in contrast to Stein's (2001) assertion that the current dominant public-policy metanarrative is a form of neoliberalism centred on a fiscal-efficiency paradigm. To ensure that issues of community and what the community values and holds important are given due consideration in the decision-making process, a different narrative is required in public library board governance—one that emphasizes democratic, community-based evaluation.

This paper will explore the potential impact that these opposing narratives have, as well as how, and for whom, a public library board governs. Foucault (Olssen 2009, 58) encourages us to think of power beyond a purely hierarchical exercise; we must widen our understanding of power to include forms of social control in disciplinary institutions. How power is seen and subsequently how it is exercised, in terms of a position of governance, can have an enormous impact on how democratic a public institution is. I assert that currently there is a dangerous disconnect between the stated values and goals of professional librarianship and board governance situations where a neoliberal approach grounds that board's policy and decision-making practices. The danger arises when a neoliberal market-oriented approach hollows out public organizations' *raison d'être*. Such an approach ultimately robs them of community connectedness and context by ascribing policy decisions and organizational practice to purely economic forces, keeping decision making "in line" with a narrow, fiscally scrutinized agenda. This can mutate into a "culture of fear," which creates an environment of

constant budgetary scrambling where staff's energy is expended by frantically focusing on fiscal imperatives rather than on service. In this environment, quantitative measures (e.g., achieving the lowest cost-per-service ratio) drive the agenda, while qualitative measures (e.g., making meaningful impacts on the lives of patrons and communities) are decreasingly important. By examining the impact of values on the design of public library policy, I will demonstrate the relationship between means and ends and, in particular, the correlation between neoliberal values and current library actions and activities.

The narratives defined

Neoliberalism "unbound"

The neoliberal approach to public-sector decision making has received considerable attention (Giroux 2004; Klein 2008; Harvey 2005; Stein 2001) in the recent policy literature. Giroux (2004, 1) describes the devotion shown by many public bodies to the neoliberal agenda as analogous to a new public pedagogy, one focused on a private-market philosophy to the point where its "impact on moral choice (is) reduced to a simplistic worldview of black and white." He further asserts that the conditions of this worldview function to narrow choice, are inflexible, and bring to bear on organizations restrictive parameters that lessen the overall connectedness between the institution and the public. Harvey (2005, 168) perceives the adherence to this course of action as "a race to the bottom—seeking the cheapest way to do everything." In this context, neoliberalism can be defined as an approach that puts the marketplace and issues of economic efficiency above all else. It transforms citizens into consumers and the public into taxpayers. All encounters are valued in terms of monetary measures alone, and the "bottom line" is valued over the community.

When defining neoliberalism, it is useful to chart its historical development. Theobald and Dinkleman (1995, 14) contend that the emergence of the modern Western state brought into being a new perspective of liberal "liberty" that failed to recognize that "in its staunch advocacy of individual rights and liberties, [it] does not adequately take into account the social costs of decisions made by individuals, nor does it promote decision-making that affords a high value to long-term consequences." The free-market approach has emerged as the dominant paradigm of the institutional organization. This paradigm acts in contradiction to the grand role of public institutions, one described by de Assis (2003, 32) as "a humanistic process in which humankind, not the economic system, is the ultimate benefactor." The application of neoliberal free-market principles to public policy is telling. Friedman (1980, 131, 137) a leading force in the marketization of the commons, remarking on the principle of equity as applied to public policy in a market-focused context, observed, "Like personal equality, equality of opportunity is not to be interpreted literally," and, "In the name of the ideal of equity, should the winners be required to repay the losers?" The common good is lost in the name of fiscal efficiency.

In one sense the defining aspect of the effect of neoliberal market principles on public-policy practice can be expressed as a loss of community. These principles remove consideration of community ecology from the policy maker's decision-making process. Focus is shifted to the nucleus of the moment—the act—and not to a holistic universe of which that moment is a part and from which it cannot be inexplicitly divorced, as some communitarians would argue.

Communitarianism “emancipated”

Modern-day communitarianism arose as a response to liberalism's devaluation of community (Bell 1993; Berten, da Silveira, and Pourtois 1997; Mulhall and Swift 1996; Bieling 2006). In part, communitarianism can be traced back to the collapse of the Soviet Union and concern over the unchecked rise of neoliberalism, with its dominant emphasis on marketization. Association is the central tenet of communitarianism. Waltzer (1995, 63) depicts a liberal community as one where a group of people join forces to increase the odds for success in the individual pursuit of self-interest: “Ours has evolved into a society devoid of the very communal dimensions that might bind us together around a conception of common good.” Etzioni (2004), stalwart advocate of communitarian culture in public institutions, best described the underlying principle of this culture as a form of moral ecology.

Second-wave communitarians, such as Etzioni (1996), turned to the emphasis of social responsibility and the promotion of policies to stem the erosion of community and the increasing fragmentation of a market-based society. Communitarianism at this level can be seen as the rebalancing of the public agenda to ensure that other factors beyond the merely monetary are part of the decision-making equation. Capra (1982),² an early proponent of an alternative narrative to a neoliberal worldview, cited the need for decision making with a human face by calling for a “re-examination of economic concepts and models [that] need to deal with the underlying value system and to recognize its relation to the cultural context” (193). Communitarianism affords an alternative governance model with its focus on developing a community-based approach to public policy issues, which emphasizes the human element. A community approach to decision making reflects the paradigm shift that Capra spoke of, a kind of cultural transformation that values “systemic wisdom, [a] complex web of interdependencies, [the] kind of wisdom . . . characteristic of traditional non-literate cultures, sadly neglected in our over-rational and mechanized society” (390).

A starting point in the quest for an alternative policy narrative is provided by Olssen's (2009, 48) design of a community emphasis, one that is decentralized, open, and dynamic. He makes a case for a “thin” community, a place where individuals can flourish in a common life that is publicly constructed and constantly reconstructed. The communitarian discourse provides a striking contrast to that of the neoliberal. Tam (1998, 23) describes communitarian liberty as “a model of power relationships which must be progressively extended to all citizens in society.” Wolfe (1995, 128) describes communitarians as those who think of

themselves as searching for solutions that go beyond both the market and the state.

Etzioni's (2004, 147) stance of recognizing the "difference between citizenship (legal status) and membership (common good)" highlights a key aspect of a people-oriented reflective approach. He asks the question, do we have a higher level of obligation to one's own kind? Given the heightened xenophobia arising from the post-9/11 "War on Terror," he raises a timely concern. He explores this issue from the perspective of the community, the state, and the family. Are we seen as members or citizens of our community? He states that individuals need community to be full-fledged human beings—for what kind of individuals are we without community? If a public institution values community, how can public institutions make decisions without placing the needs of its members first?

The efficiency model: Limits to the current paradigm

The limits of the efficiency model are eloquently demonstrated by Gates (2005) in his description of the consequences of what he sees as a loss of community, which is embraced throughout Western society. He believes that principles of marketization have superseded principles of community. I offer that these principles, as described by Gates, currently supersede all other considerations, and are adhered to at all costs. Gates illustrates the consequences of the practice of rigid observance to a set of principles by likening this position to the Buddhist metaphor of the monkey box (159). By recounting how one entraps a monkey by placing a piece of fruit inside a box with a hole large enough for the monkey to put its hand inside and grasp the fruit, he shares his views on the intractability of the current policy mindset. Once the fruit is grasped, the monkey cannot free itself from the box without letting go of the fruit. This it refuses to do and remains trapped with its hand in the box. The fruit here is analogous to the current blind adherence to marketization principles. Gates counters this position by arguing that there is a need to reinitiate civic conversation and rediscover the commons (141). Policy should be developed through conversation at the commons.

What is at question is the impact on the public library and its professional staff brought about through a culture established by a board endowed wholly in a neoliberal philosophy. In the *Myth of the Machine*, Mumford (1967)³ describes the practices employed when individuals are encouraged to take action contrary to their true nature as "the methods of conditioning used successfully by animal trainers to ensure obedience to orders and to secure the performance of different feats" (280). There is a fundamental disconnect between the standards of professional librarianship and a neoliberal agenda. The consequences of adopting the neoliberal approach in terms of professional librarianship can be dire, especially when private-sector principles drive public-sector practice; in this case, sight of the commons can easily be lost in the pursuit of fiscal efficiency. Communitarianism provides a community focus to organizational culture; it is an option better suited to the mission of the community-minded public library.

At one level, public boards have a choice between “the politics of community” (Frazer 1999, iii) and “the market . . . as the master design for all pedagogical encounters” (Giroux 2004, 103). The former concept, with its emphasis on the communal, provides a cultural backdrop better suited than the latter in terms of an environment for the practice of librarianship, especially given that that practice embraces key principles of working with community (which I will outline shortly). Why then does it seem that library boards, like many other public bodies, adopt an approach that tends to “eliminate democratic politics by making the notion of the social impossible to imagine beyond the isolated consumer and the logic of the market” (Giroux 2004, 107)? This is especially true when public library users are considered to be consumers and not to be citizens (a disturbing trend among public libraries). In these instances, how a library board arrives at its decisions, in terms of democratic transparency, is not seen as important as the decisions made by the board members themselves. Some of my fellow board trustees clearly prefer that their activities occur far away from the public scrutiny of the commons. The closed-door style of decision making is considered to be more efficient: It avoids the “messiness” of civic transparency. Boards in this scenario make the absolute minimum effort to disclose anything to the public. I have experienced the barriers, both implicit and explicit, that are put in place when boards adhere to this mindset: Public board meetings are held at a time of day when interested parties cannot easily attend, or a new delegation policy is designed to limit—not enhance—public access to the board. The implementation of barriers limiting community involvement at the board level becomes normative practice, and in turn this practice filters down to become staff operational behaviour. In terms of library board practices, public consultation procedures may create the appearance of community consultation when, in fact, the process acts as a democratic formality.

Theobald and Dinkelman (1995, 4, 1) call for a communitarian agenda in public institutions, one that “is designed to resurrect a sense of community allegiance and responsibility” and give “the locus of policy-making power back to the community.” Given that library boards hold their positions as a public trust, they indeed should act with a community agenda in mind and set an open, inclusive tone for staff to adopt. A communitarian emphasis is best for a public body, such as a public library board, that holds in trust its authority to make decisions and act, policy in practice, on behalf of a community.

Principles of working with community

The current literature on the act of policy in practice is rich. To begin, Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation needs be noted. It has re-emerged 40 years after its initial introduction and has formed the basis of much of today’s thinking on this subject in the public policy arena. Arnstein’s research focused on the role of the citizen in the policy process. She employed the image of an eight-rung ladder as a means of identifying a continuum of approaches with respect to citizen participation. Arnstein contended that this continuum could be grouped into three main categories: nonparticipation (manipulation and therapy), tokenism

(information, consultation, and placation), and citizen power (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control). Her typology clearly demonstrated that not all participation is of equal value and that, at the time of her original authorship, tokenism dominated as the method through which the majority of citizens most likely participated in the policy process.

Stout (2010) identifies the need to establish participatory practice in local-government policy making on the basis of her own experience as a citizen-participant. She draws upon Arnstein's model to provide an analytical lens, chronicling how citizen-engagement technique "can become tyranny, giving only ritualistic attention to participatory practice in the face of economic pressures and political directives" (45). Stout concludes that in the 40 years since Arnstein developed her model, policy makers have become more sophisticated at appearing to be seeking citizen collaboration, while really promoting tokenism or, worse, non-participation. Similarly, in creating the case for narrative policy analysis as a means of incorporating public involvement in decision making, Hampton (2009) also draws on Arnstein when he asks whether the goal is consultation or participation. Narrative policy analysis is described as a process that consists of identifying and embracing all narratives that describe a policy situation. Hampton contends that when there is a commitment to uphold public preference, a narrative policy approach is of most use as it allows for the juxtaposition of both expert and local knowledge.

Campbell (2010) argues that effective public policy requires policy makers to rely less on technique in terms of the policy mindset and more on the concept of civic engagement. He champions the concept that citizenship needs to be viewed as public work and that promoting citizen-based policy in practice is akin to community barn raising "if citizens are to be co-creators of public work, rather than simply consumers of expert shaped policies" (325). In this observation he cites Arnstein's ladder, highlighting research that demonstrates that, in practice, current policy makers most likely engage citizens in a token fashion to support system legitimacy rather than further meaningful policy participation. Smith (2010) expounds a similar position—namely, that there is need for the policy maker to be more citizen focused—in his exploration of the public administrator as a collaborative citizen. He reviews three approaches to collaborative public policy: critical theory, pragmatism, and virtue-based theories. The common ground of all three approaches, he contends, rests with their ability to assist in integrating theory into practice through building more participatory relationships with citizens. While the approaches vary in terms of the degree of these relationships, Smith contends that all provide a more laudable outcome than current practice.

The theme of greater partnership and participation between the policy makers and the community is also touted by Keevers, Treleven and Sykes (2008). They provide an overview of the current tensions and contradictions between policy design and practice within the context of community organizations. In their study they identify four current policy discourses, which I find useful when thinking about how public library boards should go about their

operations: neoliberalism (top-down engineering to reduce the role of the state), managerialism (expert knowledge is given priority over local knowledge), new paternalism (controlling patterns of behaviour), and network governance (place-based policy making and participatory planning processes). The authors posit that the first three discourses have a penchant for non-participation and tokenism.

The current policy literature questions the efficacy of policy design that is removed from community. Building from Arnstein's model of citizen participation, the themes of collaboration, meaningful engagement, and bottom-up policy development have emerged to dominate the discussion. While approaches vary, there appears to be a developing consensus favouring a move away from the rational-technical method toward a meaningful public participatory approach in policy practice. This can be seen as a move toward a more communitarian approach.

For a public library to work best with its community, I have observed that is desirable for a set of guiding principles to provide an ethical charter that will govern professional behaviour. Public library boards need to look no further than the Canadian Library Association (CLA) and its long-standing code of ethics that guide the relationship between library and community. The code specifies that members of the CLA have the individual and collective responsibility to:

1. support and implement the principles and practices embodied in the current Canadian Library Association Statement on Intellectual Freedom;
2. make every effort to promote and maintain the highest possible range and standards of library service to all segments of Canadian society;
3. facilitate access to any or all sources of information which may be of assistance to library users; and
4. protect the privacy and dignity of library users and staff.

Communitarianism speaks to shared values and moral decision making. Harvey (2006, 206) identifies these types of values as "those of an open democracy dedicated to the achievement of social equity coupled with economic, political, and cultural justice," which creates an environment for ensuring equitable public institutions. It is the board that sets the institutional tenor that infuses the organizational culture with a set of values. This constitutes a key responsibility of the board: the role of cultural landscaper. The board's influence filters throughout the organization, setting both the mood and the context of the professional environment. A board fixated on the efficiency agenda can seriously counter the very core of professional librarianship, especially those principles stated in the CLA code of ethics.

The library board's adoption of a fiscal-efficiency approach can lead to a limiting of democracy and transparency by jeopardizing the choice and range of services provided, principally the broad facilitation of information access and an emphasis on ensuring all voices are heard. An approach that gives voice to the greater community is superior to one that promotes the limiting vocabulary of the marketplace. Stein (2001, 28) cautions against public bodies taking up the efficiency agenda as the principal managerial gauge because "efficiency turned

inward becomes silent about values, neutral about goals, but vocal about means. It became silent about values because what matters is not what I value, but what's good for me." In the efficiency environment, the quantitative analysis trumps the qualitative. Therefore, public library boards tend to value the ratio of head counts (circulation statistics, program attendance, etc.) against dollars expended, rather than measures dedicated to service-quality impacts. Capra (1982, 393) noted almost three decades ago that "one of the main errors in all current schools of economic thought is their insistence on using money as the only variable to measure the efficiency of production and distribution processes." Can we not extricate ourselves from the monkey box?

In the neoliberal administrative model, reflective practice (expressed in questions like, did we make a difference in someone's life today?) are abandoned to further the embrace of expediency. Boards in general appear fixated on the "language of the measurable, the quantitative and the productive" (Stein 2001, 7). This, in turn, diminishes an agenda of true public accountability, which goes to the heart of the relationship between government and citizens, between a library board and its patrons. Management is encouraged to follow an established set of rules, and an outcome is arrived at in a manner akin to the act of "ticking off boxes" on a checklist. This rule-bound emphasis is described by Gregg (2003, 52) as a move away from a reflective to a reactive practice, where "persons are integrated less and less through civic activism that involves the to and fro of discussion and debate among participants and increasingly through economic exchange [imperatives of the market] or administrative power [imperatives of bureaucracy]."

In search of praxis

The question remains: What is the best way to ensure that public library boards contain reflective practitioners that respect both the professional ethics of librarianship and the local community? Giroux (2004, 122) calls for a new public pedagogy, one that "addresses the relationship between politics and agency, knowledge and power, subject positions and values, and learning and social change while always being open to debate, resistance, and a culture of questioning." As stated earlier, Capra (1982, 390) speaks of a paradigm shift, a cultural transformation that values "systemic wisdom, [a] complex web of interdependencies, [the] kind of wisdom is characteristic of traditional non-literate cultures, sadly neglected in our over-rational and mechanized society."

First, there is a need to define what is seen as "efficiency" and what constitutes a "community's unique needs." Stein (2001, 9) clearly demonstrates how out of balance the current system appears: "[There is] more and more public talk about efficiency, accountability and choice and less and less about equity and justice." As Stein notes, efficiency is measured in many situations through the percentage of budget spent on administrative costs; the lower this percentage, the more efficient the organization. No mention is made of the corresponding quality of service (11). Harvey (2005, 165) describes the neoliberal emphasis on efficiency as translating into the "commoditization of everything." In the

library setting, this emphasis has been translated into increased or additional fees for services, programs, room rentals, and, more broadly, everything legislatively allowable. Every “sparrow that falls from the sky” is examined, counted, and checked as a source of additional revenue. Most library boards attribute more effective service delivery as simply producing a smaller budget. What of unique community needs? Like the monkey, once a board grasps the fruit of efficiency, it is not easy to release it. It seems that in many public library boards, neo-liberal efficiency has taken on a cult-like status. In terms of community, “efficiency is silent about values and neutral about goals” (Stein 2001, 32).

Giroux (2004, 119) cites a need to create modes of “individual and social agency that enable rather than shut down democratic values, practices, and social relations.” Library boards have the responsibility to establish the working conditions for the professional expression of this agency among their staff. Exercising this responsibility in the positive will require a new public pedagogy, a new praxis. This pedagogy should reflect both a political and a social practice. Its strength will lie in its relationship to the creation and support of agency. Recognizing and acting upon Etzioni’s view of the difference between citizenship (legal status) and membership (common good) should also contribute to this praxis. Where the political has been dominated by neoliberal fiscal practice, the sense of institutional agency seems not to have community well-being as a primary concern. Renewed community-focused praxis relies on a patron-oriented approach. The pervasiveness of the pedagogy of neoliberalism is such that it appears to be drowning out all other approaches “by absorbing the democratic impulses and practices of the civil society within narrow economic relations” (Giroux 2004, 106). Ralston Saul (2009, 272) contends that, at this time, policy-creating leadership is unable “to begin their thinking with the real lives of their real citizens.” There is a need for a new public pedagogy, one that addresses the relationship between community and agency, an approach that is open to debate and resistance and that supports a culture of questioning. A new narrative, one that openly emphasizes democratic community as a basis for decision making, is sorely required.

For a library board to be relevant, its processes need to be part of such a living, open system. Capra (1982) reminds us of the difference between mechanized and organic systems, and of the need to be cognizant of the cultural difference between stagnant and dynamic board governance models. Belief in an approach such as Olssen’s (2009, 48) emphasis on a community—a place where individuals can flourish in a common life that is publicly constructed and constantly reconstructed, and that is decentralized, open, and dynamic—should provide a starting point for the consideration of library board membership. A board embracing an organic attitude to community would indeed further the organization’s positive cultural environment. It would offer an environment better suited to support professional librarianship, as outlined in the CLA code of ethics, by reinforcing an environment that protects the privacy and dignity of library users, preserves intellectual freedom, and maintains a diverse range of

services. It supports a pedagogy that ensures that the social need is not subservient to the political want and that economic efficiency does not become the sole service measure.

Recommendations for the selection of library board trustees

The library board's policy arena exists in different venues. One venue is through recognizing a need to adhere to a code of ethics (like the CLA code), and another venue resides in the legislation. In Canada, provinces have the responsibility to set out the duties and responsibilities of public libraries. In this sense, public libraries are creatures of the province, and the province regulates how boards are governed. However, the appointment to library boards needs to be a local decision. The local community should maintain its ability to appoint library board trustees. Gates (2005, 150) argues that the notion of community contributes significantly to quality of life, given that "community is the level of social organization where the potential for reform is more likely to occur." He cautions, however, that there needs to be "re-conceptualization of community into a 'community of difference' [that] identifies as crucial the protection of individualistic heterogeneity against the tyranny of collectivistic homogeneity" (152). An unbiased and activist board, rejecting what Gregg (2003, 51)⁴ describes as "parochial forms of localism," best suits what can be described as a thin communitarian approach. This approach is based on a form of communitarianism, a version of social integration that, as Gregg (2003, 3) explains, "depends not on thick norms but on the capacities of citizens to configure and be bound by thin norms."

If the purpose of the board is to ensure that an organic, rather than mechanistic, culture is nurtured, then a "richer texture" to the conditions of board appointments is required to ensure that standards of professional librarianship that support the broadest possible definition (or diversity) of community are addressed. With this purpose in mind, when a board appointment is being considered, the following set of guiding principles (borrowed from Gates' [2005, 165–66] conditions for establishing a Buddhist form of communitarianism) would prove helpful:

1. The individual honours the dignity of each person and desires to see that person enjoy a fully human life.
2. The individual promotes a philosophy that puts forward both freedom and an ethic of care, rejecting any privileged moral framework for compassion.
3. The individual's interaction is initiated from a position more akin to appreciation and acceptance than the reactive stance of intolerance.

These conditions meet the communitarian challenge, set out by Olssen (2009, 68), of "defending issues related to epistemological and moral relativism, liberty, and agency."

Ensuring that public libraries enjoy a positive professional culture would be best facilitated through the adoption of a form of forward-looking communitarianism to be used for the consideration of future board appointees. As stated,

library board trustees set the tone for their organization. Those charged with making the board appointments need to understand the critical impact that board members have on the culture of public libraries, the emphasis of either qualitative or quantitative service-delivery measures, and the focus of professional librarianship as a key support to the organic nature of community. A new praxis is required in terms of governance by trustees, one that values and respects community foremost.

The commons and public library governance

Harvey's (2005) examination from a global context of the pervasiveness of neoliberalism over the past 50 years focuses on the ongoing commoditization of the commons. Over 15 years ago, Wolfe (1995, 127) saw the concept of the commons threatened through neoliberal adherence: "Liberalism's chief social institution, the market, is a forum wanting, for rationally choosing individuals have no incentive to protect the commons." It is the protection and promotion of the commons that lead Wolfe (1995, 127) to liken communitarianism to environmentalism: "The goal is a social theory and a political movement that will inspire respect for things generally taken for granted." For both, it is the concept of a centre—the promotion and protection of the commons—that makes communitarianism a desirable alternative to the current dominant paradigm. Rediscovering the commons will require a civic conversation, "a concomitant willingness to transform one's view so as to sustain the commons" (Gates 2005, 141). Just like in the children's fable *Stone Soup*, in which the estranged villagers came together and created a common feast for all, tomorrow's public library governance requires a collective response, a willingness to share resources, and the ability to put aside individualism. It also requires acceptance of the community's wisdom over individual or institutional wants. This position challenges the accepted public library governance paradigm, but its adoption is necessary for the principles of public librarianship to hold true in the future.

Notes

1. Stein (2001) in *The Cult of Efficiency* documents the public's fixation with efficiency, which she sees as something that has become an end in itself, no longer a means to some other goal. As an end, she argues, it has taken on cult status, more an object of blind religious worship than a tool for developing public policy. Efficiency no longer questions "for what purpose" something is measured, but has a meaning in and of itself. Her work attempts to unravel how efficiency has taken on this stature and the implications it has on political decision making. As a consequence, she states that the impact on what is a public good has been altered. Traditional values and rights are in doubt, and citizens become consumers.
2. Capra challenges us to seek a new paradigm, a vision of the future that rejects the market in favour of a different set of values. Focusing on the negative impacts of a society dedicated to scientific rationalism, Capra lays out his case on how a mechanistic worldview has proven detrimental to the human condition. Drawing heavily on the work of Schumaker and his theory of Buddhist economics (described as decision making with a human face), he calls for a remapping of the economy and profound change in our collective value system.

3. Mumford's classic review of the negative consequences of civilizations throughout the ages cites the consequences of more mechanistic and less organic societies. His work provides valuable insight to the current debate focused on neoliberal definitions of efficiency, productivity, and globalization.
4. Gregg provides an argument for social and political agreement in what he sees as a climate that discourages "sameness." He claims his work is a search for social tolerance, a concept he describes as "thin communitarianism." It is a search for a model where competing worldviews may understand and accommodate each other. In that sense, thin communitarianism can be defined as a practical political communitarianism, a form of thin normative social integration. Gregg defines the public sphere as a place where private goods have public goods as their source.

References

- Arnstein, S. 1969. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (4): 216–24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>.
- Bieling, H. 2006. "Neoliberalism and Communitarianism." In *Neoliberal Hegemony: A Global Critique*, ed. D. Plehwe, B. Walpen, and G. Neunhöffer, 207–221. New York: Routledge.
- Bell, D. 1993. *Communitarianism and its Critics*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Berten, André, Pablo da Silveira, and Hervé Pourtois, eds. 1997. *Libéraux et Communistes*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Campbell, D. 2010. "Democratic Norms to Deliberative Forms: Managing Tools and Tradeoffs in Community-Based Civic Engagement." *Public Administration and Management* 5 (1): 305–42.
- Canadian Library Association. 2011. "Position Statement on Code of Ethics." Canadian Library Association. http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Position_Statements&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=3035.
- Capra, F. 1982. *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- de Assis, S. 2003. *Revolution in Education*. Lanham: Scarecrow.
- Etzioni, A. 1996. *The New Golden Rule*. New York: Basic Books.
- . 2004. *The Common Good*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Friedman, M. 1980. *Free to Choose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Frazer, E. 1999. *The Problems of Communitarian Politics: Unity and Conflict*. London: Oxford University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0198295642.001.0001>.
- Gates, G. 2005. "Awakening to School Community: Buddhist Philosophy for Educational Reform." *Journal of Educational Thought* 39: 149–74.
- Giroux, Henry A. 2004. *The Terror of Neoliberalism*. Boulder, CO.: Paradigm.
- Gregg, B. 2003. *Thick Moralities, Thin Politics: Social Integration across Communities of Belief*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Harvey, D. 2006. *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hampton, G. 2009. "Narrative Policy Analysis and the Integration of Public Involvement in Decision Making." *Policy Sciences* 42 (3): 227–42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11077-009-9087-1>.
- Keevers, L., L. Treleaven, and C. Sykes. 2008. "Partnership and Participation: Contradictions and Tensions in the Social Policy Space." *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 43 (3): 459–79.
- Klein, N. 2008. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Toronto: Random House.
- Mulhall, S., and A. Swift. 1996. *Liberals and Communitarians*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Mumford, L. 1967. *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Olssen, M. 2009. *Toward a Global Thin Community: Nietzsche, Foucault, and the Cosmopolitan Community*. Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm.
- Pal, L. 2006. *Beyond Policy Analysis: Public Issue Management in Turbulent Times*. 3rd ed. Toronto: Nelson.
- Ralston Saul, J. 2009. *The Collapse of Globalism*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Penguin.
- Smith, N. 2010. "The Public Administrator as Collaborative Citizen: Three Conceptions." *Public Administration Quarterly* 34 (2): 238–62.
- Stein, J. G. 2001. *The Cult of Efficiency*. Toronto: Anansi Press.
- Stout, M. 2010. "Climbing the Ladder of Participation: Establishing Local Policies for Participatory Practice." *Public Administration and Management* 5 (1): 45–98.
- Tam, H. 1998. *Communitarianism: A New Agenda for Politics and Citizenship*. London: Macmillan.
- Theobald, P. and T. Dinkleman. 1995. "The Parameters of the Liberal-Communitarian Debate." Opinion paper. <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=ED383504>.
- Waltzer, M. 1995. "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism." In *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities*, ed. A. Etzioni, 52–70. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Wolfe, A. 1995. "Human Nature and the Quest for Community." In *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Virtues, Institutions, and Communities*, ed. A. Etzioni, 126–142. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.