



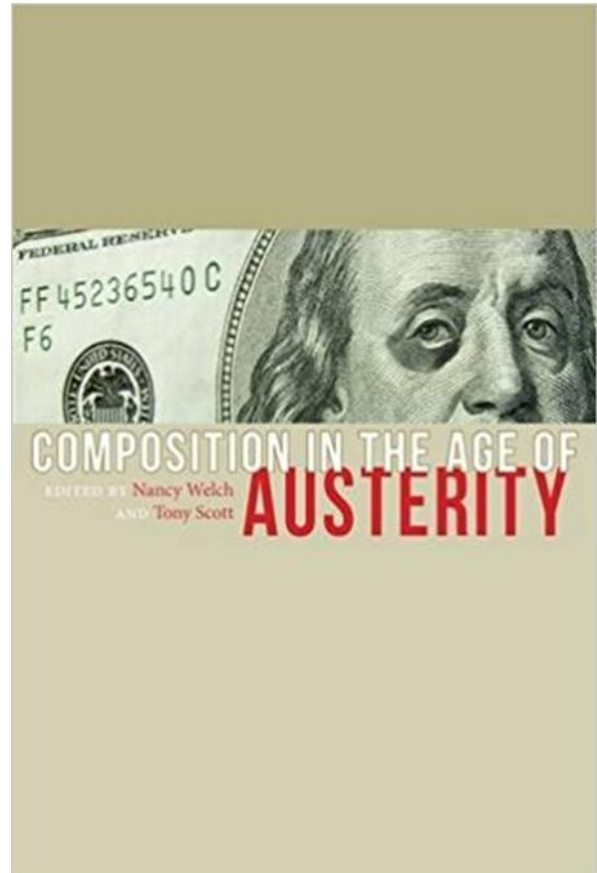
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In their article “Changing Students, Faculty, and Institutions in the Twenty-First Century,” Hainline, Gaines, Long Feather, Padilla, and Terry (2010) describe a transformation in the teaching and learning of college classrooms: “new forms of pedagogy, active learning, self-guided instruction . . . [that] accommodates issues of preparation and outside responsibilities without compromising rigor” (p. 7). These innovations in pedagogy are meant to allow access and flexibility at a lower cost, all while “[taking] advantage of students’ various learning styles as student populations become more ethnically and economically diverse” (Hainline et al., 2010, p. 7). Sounds great, right? Not so fast, warns Tony Scott and Nancy Welch, editors of the 2016 collection, *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Writing specifically about efficiency-minded reforms in college writing programs, the authors of the chapters in this edited volume argue that pedagogical change via technological innovation is a rhetorical bait



and switch by neoliberal policies that actually hurt the marginalized populations they claim to help, as well as all but decimate the professoriate by replacing full time faculty with contingent, part-time teachers.

Education researchers (e.g. Lechuga, 2006; O'Meara & DeCrosta, 2016) agree that the proliferation of adjuncts is an irrevocable trend, as are many other neoliberal changes to teaching and learning in higher education. So what does this mean for the future of writing programs, a field that is almost exclusively staffed with graduate students and contingent faculty with no governing power in their own departments, let alone the institution as a whole? According to the book's editors, Scott and Welch, the battle cry of neoliberalism is quantifiable results and revenue streams, a sentiment that has irreparably altered the culture of education to not only accept but demand justification for revenue expenditures and return on investment. However, composition programs by nature do not generate the same quantifiable results and revenue as STEM departments, making it increasingly difficult to prove their worth to leadership focused on innovation, results, and efficiency. Scott whimsically contends that composition occupies the dark purple spaces on the Monopoly Board of higher education, leading into the questions pondered by every author in this text: What is the future of writing studies? How did this happen? And who is to blame?

The authors of each chapter featured in this book have different answers to these questions, yet all contribute to a single, overarching narrative. They argue that composition as a field is a microcosm of neoliberalism in higher education as a whole: an institution increasingly driven by efficiency-minded technological innovation and assessment, with mostly contingent faculty at the helm. While reading through this book, the reader may feel vindicated, chastised, rallied for battle, or dejected with

defeat, possibly in equal measure. The authors do an excellent job of identifying an enemy, a policy, a system that is oppressive and harmful to faculty and students alike. The authors present arguments that are passionate and well-grounded in literature, yet too focused on the loss of faculty status under neoliberalism rather than student outcomes and overall educational quality. As a former composition faculty member, I identified heavily with the faculty and instruction-focused chapters, but I often wondered about the students on the receiving end of the efficiency and accountability-centered pedagogy wrought by neoliberalism. Some of the volume's contributors do extend the scope beyond the faculty experience to address marginalized student populations beyond the hypothetical (e.g. Isaacs, Haddix and Williams, and Jacobi), and their chapters provide a fascinating perspective of which I wanted more. Nonetheless, the book is effective and cohesive, presenting multifaceted shades of a single argument despite being penned by different authors.

The chapters in the first section, "Neoliberal Deformations," provide the reader with an in-depth, well-researched background in neoliberalism, how it came to be the accepted law of the land in higher education, and how buzzwords like "accountability," "efficiency," "outcomes assessment" and "return on investment" are just that: buzzwords that sound good to a public responding to a manufactured crisis claiming that higher education is spiraling under its faculty-centric instruction model. Chapters like Gallagher's and Mutnick's expertly disassemble the rhetoric of neoliberalism and scrutinize all the ways it reduces "the complex process of teaching and learning to a packaged product used to satisfy the promise of excellence" (Mutnick, 2016, p. 42). The theme of a widespread, ever-growing contingent faculty labor force is widely explored as an unwelcome

byproduct of market demands for cheap and efficient education, creating an exploited class of underpaid faculty and leaving all governance and service work to the ever-dwindling number of full time professors.

These discussions of the roots of composition faculty's heavily adjunct workforce are fascinating and timely, but it is the authors' arguments about the student outcomes under neoliberalism that I personally found most persuasive, as well as potentially most persuasive to non-faculty readers. For example, Gallagher describes the proliferation of technological advances like asynchronous instruction via online coursework and electronic assessment as efficient and cheap, but ultimately not an improvement for marginalized groups of students who "find themselves even more flummoxed and excluded than they had been before" (Gallagher, 2016, p. 29). In her chapter, Isaacs provides one of the most effective arguments against accountability-centered curricular reforms by examining the effectiveness of real-life technological redesigns at three different institutions in terms of actual cost savings in relation to student outcomes. Isaacs finds that these composition redesigns shift substantive, developmentally focused writing instruction to online grammar drills and superficial comprehension exercises with little attention to what students actually want, an argument that will be startling to composition faculty and administrators alike.

These chapters are not without weakness, however. Readers who themselves question the necessity of the traditional, face-to-face college classroom in today's techno-centric world may actually see value in the much-maligned technological advances described in this section. For instance, Gallagher uses the example an "e-portfolio" in which students write a variety of short blog posts rather than a traditional

full-length paper to demonstrate the types of pedagogically tone-deaf curriculum changes wrought by efficiency-minded technological redesigns. However, supporters of the multi-modal writing classroom may actually see the value of such an assignment and be skeptical of Gallagher's swift condemnation of it. After all, a point Gallagher appears to make with this particular anecdote is not that students fail to thrive under such a model, as no student outcomes are presented, but rather that faculty have diminished status in the writing process by being relegated to academic coaches and tutors to largely self-directed students. Despite this, Gallagher and the other authors in "Neoliberal Deformations" do succeed in formulating a single, powerful statement: a curriculum that puts efficiency before humanity, whether students or faculty, violates the very core values of composition, and possibly of higher education in general.

With the turmoil and uncertainty inevitably underpinning my perceptions of American politics in 2017, the chapters in the next section, "Composition in an Austere World" were especially impactful. I found Bernstein's chapter especially heart wrenching and poignant as she describes her job loss at the University of Cincinnati, her struggle to find full-time employment, and her friend's suicide in the wake of his own job loss at a local writing center, all against the backdrop of 2011's Occupy Wall Street Movement. Bernstein's strong narrative voice and engrossing first person point of view make this chapter the most gripping and emotionally evocative in the text. Jacobi's chapter on prison writing programs is similarly effective in its discussion of the power of writing in building voice and identity in marginalized populations, as well as the immense loss when that power is taken away. I found Cain's chapter, in which she tackles the issues of power, privilege, and positionality in education, is a little more

opaque than the rest as she vacillates between first person narration and rich discussion of composition and critical theory. Still, like the other chapters in this section, Cain's chapter successfully deconstructs the unstable crossroads of money and mission in many writing programs, including extra-institutional endeavors like Three Rivers, the Afrocentric cultural education forum discussed in this chapter.

As a powerful combination of emotion, theory, and statistical evidence, I found the chapters in Part II to be the most engrossing of the text. The argument of this section is less that composition faculty have been wronged, as at times appears to be the chief argument of Part I, but that composition studies go beyond the college classroom and the devolution of writing to grammar and assessable skills robs many marginalized populations the voice and power composition education can help them develop.

The final section, titled "Composition at the Crossroads," felt at times like a textual sigh and shrug of the shoulders. In her chapter, Gunner plainly admits that, "The neoliberal regime has imbued composition theories, pedagogies, and administration, inevitably implicating us all in complicity with corporate values, labor problems, and growing social inequity" (p. 149). There is no "but," "however," or "luckily" after this statement. The title of "Crossroads" may imply a chance to reform, but there are few solutions here, and there is blame enough to go around. From an ever-growing administrative faction to tenured faculty complicit in the shift to a largely contingent workforce, the authors swiftly condemn each player in composition's demise, and it is easy to feel chided when reading through these well-researched and expertly delivered arguments.

So what is to be done for composition? It's hard to say. In the final

chapter, Scott argues that students prefer "personal relationships, face-to-face interactions . . . and curriculums that are open-ended and responsive enough to provide opportunity for unanticipated discovery and creative innovation" (p. 216). The factor of student preference is touched on sporadically throughout the book, though by closing with it, Scott places it as a powerful solution to salvaging composition. Neoliberal policies will always place results first, and if students respond negatively to cheaper "post-human" education, whether through decreased enrollment or poor academic outcomes, then administrative powers instituting these policies will have little choice but to take notice.

With the fervor of Parts I and II, I admit I was expecting a rallying cry and instructions for change in the final section. In this way, Part III initially felt like a letdown. After all, many of the chapters felt more like blame passing and less like problem solving. Up to this point, the concept of neoliberalism had been portrayed as more of an overall cultural shift in higher education: a virus that's infected administrators, legislators, and has spread to the general public that has accepted American education is in trouble since the seminal report *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Therefore, continuing to lament its harm to the field without tangible plans for dealing with the damage felt a bit like yelling into a black hole. However, upon further reflection, I was able to move past my immediate desire to solutions. Yes, I was brought to indignation by earlier chapters outlining the various ways neoliberalism had dismantled the field in which I first entered academia. However, as an educator, I understand academia's resistance to revolutionary change and ultimately identify with the exasperated tone of the authors. These voices sound like my colleagues, department chairs, deans, and myself, at times. In this way, "Composition at a

Crossroads” is a realistic summary of what composition looks like today and what real educators can do on the ground right now, even if those actions are little more than coping strategies to weather the inevitable damage.

All in all, *Composition in the Age of Austerity* provides a rich, cogent discussion of neoliberalism through an effective mix of engrossing personal anecdotes and in-depth theoretical analysis through the lens of composition theory and social justice. Its arguments will make faculty feel uneasy and writing program administrators a little guilty, and as the arguments in Larson, Schell, and Welch’s chapters suggest, that’s rather the point. Despite its frequently grim take on the future of composition (see: “Composition’s Dead”), the authors in this book are calling for the reader to relinquish complacency and at minimum acknowledge the plight of the swelling subclass of contingent labor that runs composition programs, and at best, “act now to preserve the instructional base of university education and the opportunity to voice our opinions and visions about the future” (Schell, 2016, p. 189). Admittedly, all of this can feel a little dramatic. After all, higher education has flirted with pedagogical innovations focused on efficiency and independent learning since World War II, with the tides flowing faithfully back to traditional, instructor-led education (McKeachie, 1990). However, as

technology catches up with these decades-old dreams of cheap, professor-less learning, we, as educators, must confront what this really means for the classroom and the future of the professoriate, even if we don’t see immediate changes in our departments now.

To quote Parker Palmer (1998), “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 16). If we accept Palmer’s assertion that good teaching is more than mode of delivery and assignment type, that teaching is “the ability to connect with students,” where does that leave college teaching if the profession is reduced to return on investment and instruction is less connection and more transaction? These are hard questions that span well beyond the field of composition, especially as educational policy becomes more and more uncertain in today’s political landscape. *Composition in the Age of Austerity* confronts these questions head-on in unflinching honesty. Sometimes the reader won’t want to hear it, and sometimes the reader won’t buy any of it at all. Nevertheless, this book is must read for any educator, because while composition is in the title, neoliberalism is an everyday reality for every facet of American education across fields, and that is unlikely to change any time soon.

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