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# Neoliberalism, Universities and the Discourse of Crisis

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Neoliberal ideology has enjoyed tremendous success over the past thirty-five years by discursively suppressing structural dissent among working and middle class citizens of industrialized countries. The general decline in economic conditions faced by contemporary workers, coupled with the 2008 global financial crisis, forced neoliberal advocates to become more aggressive in their defense of prevailing structural policies and precepts. The suppression of public dissent and the related implementation of austerity measures are frequently justified by a discourse of crisis. In this article and using the methodological as well as theoretical tools afforded by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), we trace the rise of this discourse within universities as a mechanism to justify attacks on academic freedom, collegial governance, and democratic discourse. We also offer a SFL-inspired tool that critical language educators might employ to counter the neoliberal attack on universities as sites of democratic dialogue and debate.

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## INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism enjoyed considerable success over the past thirty-five years by discursively suppressing structural dissent among working and middle class citizens of industrialized countries. This objective was achieved by discursively constructing neoliberalism as the only legitimate option for effective social and economic organization. Prior to the global financial collapse of 2008, neoliberalism reached hegemonic status by advancing a misleading rhetoric of crisis to justify harsh austerity measures and market-based educational imperatives (Ramírez, 2008). The decline of global labor market conditions faced by contemporary workers in the last three decades—including the increased rate of exploitation (what workers are paid versus what they produce), the rapidly rising gap between rich and poor citizens, and, most prominently, the 2008 economic collapse—shifted public thinking about the supposed common sense merits of corporate capitalism. The resulting widespread rejection of neoliberalism provoked its political sponsors to adopt more aggressive tactics to defend prevailing structural precepts. These tactics, supported by the discourse of crisis, include an attack on universities as sites of democratic engagement and discussion.

In U.S. education, the neoliberal discourse of crisis became a catalyst for educational change with the publication and dissemination of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission, 1983), a federally mandated report that initially instilled the message of urgency, fear, and

crisis in public opinion. The document suggested the economic problems of the early 1980s could be improved by transforming educational policy. The resulting metrics-motivated, standards-based movement of the 1980s morphed into the high-stakes testing movement of the late 1990s. The competition and accountability measures contained in these movements are now central components of federal and state education policies such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core Standards.

In support of neoliberal ideology more than three decades ago, and coinciding with the release of *A Nation at Risk*, Milton Friedman, the most prominent neoliberal ideologue, summarized the neoliberal strategy of generating “crisis” discourse:

Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (Friedman & Friedman, 1982, p. ix)

The current high stakes testing era and funding formulas for public education institutions now pervasive in every sphere of education were built around the discursive macro-theme (Martin, 1993) of “crisis.” As Luke (1998) explains, the discourse of crisis, such as adopted by *A Nation at Risk*, also provides an effective ideological strategy to divert attention away from the inherent flaws of the socio-economic structure:

The rhetorical tactics are straightforward and remarkably consistent across the U.S., Canada, and Australia: To attribute structural macro-economic problems to a lack of educational productivity (e.g., levels of literacy, technical/scientific expertise), and thereby shift the responsibility for negative aspects of economic restructuring onto teachers, schools and, ultimately, students and communities. (p. 310)

The semiotic field surrounding the discourse of “crisis” and the related austerity measures provide neoliberals with key ideological instruments to launch attacks on universities and to challenge traditional models of collegial governance and academic freedom.

In this article, we trace the development of neoliberalism and its relationship to the discourse of crisis. More centrally, we consider how the discourse of crisis has affected the university by examining three recent cases where austerity measures were used as justification to suppress the democratic voice of university faculty. Two of these cases serve as context and support for the policy discourse analysis of the third case that we analyze in further detail. Then, we examine more fully the discursive ideological tools, including the discourse of “crisis,” that undergird the examples we present. Finally, we offer some suggestions critical educators might employ to counter the neoliberal oppression of academic freedom and collegial governance within universities.

## THE NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT

The 1970s witnessed a major shift in the political and economic context of Western industrialized nations. A series of economic recessions caused by an extended period of rising wages and falling consumer demand for available goods and services created an over supply crisis. In *Das Kapital*, Marx (1933) accurately predicted that capitalism would

inevitably confront recurring crises of over-accumulation resulting in repeated periods of economic decline, or a perpetual boom and bust cycle.

The economic fallout from the over-accumulation crisis of the late 1970s deleteriously impacted working class citizens of the world's industrialized democracies. As industry limited production and the financial sector tightened the reins on available capital, mass layoffs and skyrocketing interest rates led to dramatic increases in personal and small business bankruptcies (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). Many citizens lost jobs, homes, and savings as they struggled to adjust to the new economic structure.

Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2006) suggest the economic crisis of the 1970s, consistent with Milton Friedman's proposed transformation strategy, was at least partially caused by corporate collusion as a means to dismantle welfare state policies. The term *welfare state* describes a political and economic system where the government accepts significant responsibility in ensuring citizens receive necessary levels of basic goods and services that provide a reasonable quality of life. Welfare states commit public funds to promote citizen access to areas such as education, health care, housing, and employment. All of this public investment, funded through progressive taxation, seeks to create equality among citizens by balancing corporate economic growth and profits with social and moral responsibility. In the 1960s, these ideas were so popular that British political theorist T. H. Marshall (1992) optimistically mused, "The modern drive to social equality is the latest phase of an evolution of citizenship which has been in progress for 250 years" (p. 7).

By the 1980s, the social optimism expressed by Marshall was replaced with a cynicism toward workers, unions, and wages. The welfare state policies of the 1960s and 70s threatened corporate wealth by interfering with the supply and demand principles that form the foundation of unregulated capitalism. Welfare state policies forced wages upward and generally pressured corporations to improve working conditions as a means to attract qualified workers. Given their extensive lobbying and political influence, corporations were unwilling to accept such a situation.

Through media coverage, unfounded yet powerful political discourse exalting individualistic values, such as Margaret Thatcher's infamous declaration that, "There is no such thing as society" (Keay, 1987, n.p.), permeated the psyche of the general public who grew increasingly convinced that workers were responsible for the economic recessions of the 1970s. It is the same kind of ideas "lying around" (to return to Friedman's quote above) that made what was politically impossible (to blame education for economic problems) politically inevitable (to support education reform that would treat education as commodity). With conservative, trickle-down economics firmly in place by the 1980s, "overpaid" and "inefficient" workers became easy scapegoats for the economic downturn of the previous decade. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were both enthusiastic supporters of neoliberal reform with its emphasis on removing government from the economic structure, dismantling social safety nets, and praising the merits of corporate wealth and trickle-down economics. It is in this context that *A Nation at Risk* was published and that education became both scapegoat and panacea in the service of neoliberal goals.

## Neoliberalism and Universities

Universities play a foundational role in promoting democratic societies by providing a public forum for discussion, critical analysis, and structural dissent. In offering such a forum,

universities pose a potential threat to the hegemonic forces supporting neoliberalism. Predictably, then, universities, and especially university faculty, increasingly find themselves the target of draconian neoliberal reforms. These reforms typically include the termination of programs that foster social critique and concerted attacks on democratic faculty rights such as academic freedom and collegial governance.

One recent case that illustrates a clear attempt to silence faculty involved a faculty Dean at the University of Saskatchewan who was recently fired for publicly disagreeing with the university's plan to eliminate a number of academic programs without faculty consultation. Dr. Robert Buckingham, Dean of the University of Saskatchewan's School of Public Health, released a letter to the media in which he claimed that faculty members were threatened with dismissal by university President Illene Busch-Vishniac if they spoke against a plan to merge the School of Public Health with the School of Medicine. In response to the letter written by Buckingham, the University of Saskatchewan released a statement attributed to Provost Brett Fairbairn:

The University of Saskatchewan has high expectations of its senior leaders to support the university's directions and to lead their implementation. Top among current priorities are the university's TransformUS initiatives. Leaders have opportunities to express personal opinions in leadership discussions. Once decisions are made, all leaders are expected to support the university's directions. (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014, n.p.)

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (2014) reported that Buckingham, who had served as dean since 2009, was prevented from accessing his office after the dismissal and instead was "escorted" from campus by two security officers. Buckingham reported that a note provided to him by the university indicated his open letter criticizing the administration was the reason behind the firing.

A huge public outpouring of support from faculty and ordinary citizens across North America followed the firing of Dean Buckingham. His tenure was ultimately restored, and he was offered a new position at the university, while both the president and provost responsible for the attempted firing lost their jobs. The disconcerting element in the affair is that the university administration, intoxicated with managerial class power, believed they could squelch the academic freedom of tenured faculty by intimidating them with threats of dismissal. Dean Buckingham not only suffered the indignity of the attempted dismissal, but he was forcefully removed from campus by security forces for simply exercising his democratic right to criticize the university administration.

A second illustrative case occurred in the U.S. at the University of Southern Maine (USM). Consistent with the discourse of "crisis," and in an effort to satisfy the neoliberal imperative of economic austerity within public institutions, USM administrators recently announced arbitrarily decided faculty firings and department cuts. President Theo Kalikow publicized the planned cuts with armed police stationed around the USM conference room where the announcement was made. Dr. Lucinda Cole, an English professor at USM, reported that at the last three faculty meetings she attended, "armed guards hovered outside the door or circulated through the rooms, hands moving to their hip holsters whenever faculty members raised their voices" (Potter, 2014, n.p.). A subsequent student outcry against the USM administration led to a reversal of the decision to serve 12 faculty members with layoff notices. The USM president, who recently decided to step down, ultimately

succumbed to widespread pressure from faculty, students, and the general public by announcing that layoffs were “off the table for now” (DeSantis, 2014, n.p.).

A third case further illustrates the current university trend toward silencing faculty voice. Since the economic collapse of 2008 and in an attempt to limit the public forum for discussion, critical analysis, and structural dissent that the university has traditionally provided, police presence during higher education disputes has increased dramatically. The hiring of strikebreaking thugs—who coerced, filmed, and intimidated striking faculty—followed recent job action taken by the faculty association at the University of New Brunswick (UNB), Canada. Citing a marked decline in collegial governance and academic freedom, it was the first time the faculty association exercised its right to strike during its 57-year history. In response to the university administration’s decision to hire external security forces during the strike, the Association of University of New Brunswick Teachers (AUNBT) issued the following statement:

Our concern today is with the message the UNB administration and Board of Governors is sending by contracting with a company that advertises “union intelligence services” and “supplementary labour” as part of its “comprehensive suite of services” for “image conscious clients” involved in labour disputes. Of particular interest are the services they offer around “evidence and injunctions.” Our members have reported AFIMAC “strike security personnel” taking photographs and approaching picketers and asking for their names and phone numbers. Further, members report that these outside personnel are now offering friendly advice, to the effect that picketers are allowed to impede traffic for up to fifteen minutes, or suggesting that if locked-out members need the washroom facilities, it is alright to enter the campus for that purpose. If we were working the streets instead of walking the line, this might be called entrapment. (AUNBT, 2014, n.p.)

The current Chair of the UNB Board of Governors is Kathryn McCain, a member of the same McCain family who owns New Brunswick-based McCain Foods Ltd., a major international corporate player in the lucrative frozen food business. In spite of a longstanding Canadian university tradition that accepts a responsibility to set an example for democratic discourse by protecting free speech, the right to assembly and strike, and peaceful, reasoned debate, similar police style intimidation is becoming fairly typical.

The three university situations we describe above all differ in some respect, but they also share troubling commonalities. All three cases pitted university administrators pursuing various neoliberal-style austerity measures based on the discourse of “crisis” against university faculty. In each of these situations, the university administration sought to eliminate the right of university faculty to exercise their academic freedom and collegiality on matters of university governance. Finally, in all three cases, police and/or security forces were used not merely to keep the peace, but as an enforcement arm of the university administration.

The current language of neoliberalism is a technocratic discourse *par excellence*. Technocratic discourse employs abundant rhetorical, syntactic, and lexico-grammar to pursue and justify its agenda. It is highly hortatory, or in Bakhtin’s terms, “pre-eminently monological discourse” (Lemke, 1995, p. 60). For example, UNB administrators, most notably President Eddy Campbell, remained strangely silent in the face of criticism over the hiring of external security forces to “police” striking faculty. However, the Vice-President of

Human Resources & Organizational Development, Peter MacDougall, contended the security firm was hired “to monitor the picket line” and to “keep faculty safe.” MacDougall added the university was confident, “the faculty on strike will be professional and respectful, but there is a risk that others may not be” (CHSJ News, 2014, n.p.). There was no clarification from MacDougall whom the “others” he cited as an abstract threat to safety during the strike might include.

Given its transactional nature, transcribed spoken discourse employed by managerial personnel in official communications (e.g., MacDougall) usually does not exhibit the level of agentless passive clause structures that obscure and suppress critique. Nevertheless, it retains its hortatory and monological characteristics embedded within the recurring neoliberal themes of fear, risk, and crisis. At the University of New Brunswick, the administration partially justified the use of strike-breaking security forces by citing the importance of protecting “public” property from some unidentified threat. The mere mention of a “threat,” even without naming its source, is intended to generate fear among members of the general public and justify the presence of security forces.

At the University of Saskatchewan, the president tapped the university provost to explain the firing of Dean Buckingham. Provost Brett Fairbairn argued the university has high expectations of “trust” and “stewardship” from its leaders: “It’s a team, and that’s how organizations work. Everybody is expected to put the good of the whole university ahead of their own interests” (Fairbairn, 2014, n.p.). Contrary to the provost’s justification citing the collective interests of the university, University of Saskatchewan professor and former university council chair Claire Card said Buckingham’s firing was “absolutely” intended to scare other professors from speaking their minds (Hill & French, 2014, n.p.).

The University of Southern Maine administration never directly addressed the firing of its faculty, but the decision to cut faculty and departments was consistent with neoliberal austerity measures justified by the discourse of “crisis.” While austerity is brought to bear on university faculty and the corresponding educational experience of students, two other areas at USM were heavily invested with almost \$54 million spent on new capital projects (Chase, 2012), even as the faculty association and the USM Board of Trustees were engaged in an 18-month standoff over a new labor agreement.

The creation of new buildings and the growth of administration are prototypical patterns in the neoliberal university. Stephan (2014) terms this trend the *mallification* of the university: “In many ways universities in the U.S. have come to resemble high-end shopping malls. They are in the business of building state-of-the art facilities and a reputation that attracts good students, good faculty, and resources” (n.p.). The shopping mall model puts tremendous financial stress on universities, especially in a time of scarce resources since investment in one area typically means cuts in another area. The more money invested in administrative support and building construction, the less money available for faculty support and sustaining quality programs.

University *mallification* is part of the neoliberal response to a phenomenon traceable to the early 1970s. The 8.5 million students enrolled in higher education during the early 1970s practically doubled to 15.9 million by 2001 and grew to 21.0 million by 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, table 221). The demand for higher education credentials was accompanied by increased tuition costs to attend universities. With the unprecedented market for higher education, created by an epoch-changing demand for credentials, both public and private universities responded in ways consistent with neoliberal discourse. In this

way, the short-lived democratization of higher education—notably advanced after World War II when states built world class public institutions that often outperformed the best and oldest private institutions—gave way to the highly classist multi-tiered higher education system of today (Wolff, 2010, p. 27).

A further illustration of *mallification* is the troubling trend in higher education over the last few years regarding “administrative blight.” “Administrative blight” is a term coined by Ginsburg (2011), a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, who points out that U.S. campuses have witnessed far greater increases in the number of administrators (85 percent) and professional staff (240 percent) than faculty (51 percent) between 1975 and 2005. As recently as May 2014, the University of New Brunswick found the necessary funds to staff a \$49,734 - \$64,658 administrative support position for the Office of the President. The new hire’s job responsibilities include building the President’s “brand,” expanding his profile, and managing and developing the President’s website and social media accounts (UNB, 2014).

Ginsburg (2011) argues that such hiring patterns are consistent with a calculated effort by college administrators to achieve neoliberal, profit-based goals such as branding, erasing tenure tracks, reducing political speech, and increasing the focus on student job placement, rather than encouraging critical analysis. Within this environment, the idea that universities are social institutions designed to promote fundamental democratic dispositions by providing public arenas for structural critique is seriously undermined. In a neoliberal university milieu where managerial class administrators are emboldened by state suppression of dissent, we can expect continued attempts to intimidate, coerce, or fire those individuals resisting neoliberal imperatives.

## **SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS: ANALYZING DISCURSIVE PATTERNS OF DECEPTIONS**

In this section of the article we examine how strategies emerging from critical linguistics might address the worrying trends promoted through the discourse of crisis. Unlike traditional formal linguistics dominant in most industrialized countries, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) examines language as a semiotic system in which meaning is based on choices (paradigms) regulated by three major mechanisms: a) ideological assumptions (when speakers/writers communicate their ideas or experiences); b) the genre (the staged, purposeful way in which people go about achieving their purposes using language); and c) the register (context of situation, that is, the topic talked about, the role relations between those involved, and the medium used).

Researchers who work in SFL not only hold the view that language is a social construct, but also maintain that language itself is structured as it is because of what it seeks to accomplish. Implied in this position is the idea that language is dialectical as particular discursive events influence the contexts in which they occur and, in turn, these contexts are influenced by these discursive events. Although not a linguist, Friedman’s position above underscores this very sense of dialectic and the importance of shaping the “ideas lying around” (discourse) so that actions (policies) support the intended purposes. The logic of Friedman’s premise is shared by Functional Linguists. However, we take issue with Friedman (and with neoliberal ideology) that it does not matter if the crisis is real or merely perceived. The notion of crisis from a neoliberal standpoint is paramount to affect change, or to make the politically impossible, politically inevitable.

An important aspect that SFL analysis affords is precisely an analysis of such dialectic operationalized by the identification of recurring and omnipresent themes that intertextually populate neoliberal discourse, which in turn validate its policies and goals. By examining ideational thematic choices—that is, the general way speakers and/or writers associated with specific discourse communities express meaning and ideas and not merely evaluating their accuracy—the critical analyst using SFL tools can identify relationships between the participants, processes, and circumstances inside a text, or what linguist Michael Halliday calls the “ideational metafunction” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, p. 513).

Linguists such as Jay Lemke, who use SFL as their linguistic reference, understand discourses as representations of the world according to the *thematic patterns* (Lemke, 1995). These patterns, or semiotic fields, are peculiar to the historically-constituted worldviews of particular communities (Graham, 2001). SFL theory affords the understanding that revealing as they can be, attention to intratextual features is not enough. In fact, it is intertextual (not intratextual) relationships that further reveal the ways in which discourse is reified by its relationship to similar discourses and by the contexts they help shape. To be clear, analyses that identify Intertextual Thematic Formations (ITF)—or the thematic patterns that recur from text to text with slightly different wording (Lemke, 1995)—reveal common textual patterns regarding a particular theme. When themes from different texts are constructed with the same patterns and/or frequently cite each other, the narrative relies on a “common sense” circular logic to legitimize claims. The hegemonic discourse and the dominant contexts they support legitimize each other and naturalize these thematic formations, thereby making the texts and their assumptions impenetrable to common readers. Through a systematic analysis of these discursive relationships, it is possible to reveal how meanings share a pattern to gain consensus over a specific theme and, thereby, wield power and influence over others.

## PEDAGOGICALLY EXPOSING NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSE

University administrators typically justify their attacks on academic freedom and collegial governance by underscoring the need for austerity in light of a financial crisis. However, the crisis is mostly a mirage, a made-up challenge supported by hortatory technocratic discourse with circular logic that serves and protects managerial interests. The *mallification* of the university focuses available funds on administrative and new building costs while treating education simply as purchasing a credential, without attending to the elements of a critical learning experience. The perceived crisis finds justification in the intertextual mantras reified by neoliberal discourse. Ideology is linguistically-mediated (Young & Harrison, 2004). Since discourse is a product of ideology, the challenge for critical educators is reframing the neoliberal discourse of crisis in a fashion that exposes its socially-constructed nature.

We propose the use of the Critical Reading Sheet (CRS) as a pedagogical tool that critical educators might use to promote critical linguistic analysis with their students (see Appendix A). Formatted through critical questions that outline the salient theoretical underpinnings of SFL, the CRS (adapted from Wallace, 2003, by Ramírez, Harman, and Willett, 2010) seeks to facilitate a simple yet substantial analysis of the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions (Matthiessen & Halliday, 2009, p. 9-12) for the non-SFL specialist. An email written by Kathryn McCain, Chair of the Board of the University of New Brunswick, to the faculty, staff, and students after the labor dispute ended at that university lends itself to SFL



analysis. Since we use the CRS for this analysis, the reader might find it useful to reference the document during the analysis.

McCain (2014) explains some of the actions taken by the university's administration to combat the board's perceived financial crisis during the past six years:

- 1 As has been the case for many other universities, the last six years have
- 2 presented great challenges to UNB. In late 2008 the financial stability of the
- 3 world came into question, leading to one of the most severe economic crises
- 4 in history. In New Brunswick, large provincial deficits brought into question
- 5 the government's ability to continue to maintain its existing support of its
- 6 universities. At the same time, a declining student enrolment base and
- 7 government's mandate to cap tuition fees limited UNB's access to student
- 8 revenue. The university's endowment fund was experiencing substantial
- 9 depreciation in value and the ever-growing deficit in UNB's pension plan
- 10 exposed the University and plan members to significantly higher
- 11 contributions in the future. UNB was on its way to accumulating a \$6 million
- 12 operating deficit and was rapidly losing ground in its ability to maintain its
- 13 teaching facilities to an acceptable standard. (n.p.)

In this brief excerpt, we can recognize several recurring and omnipresent themes that belong to neoliberal discourse but that intertextually make their way, unapologetically, into a letter to the university community. In traditional neoliberal fashion, the discourse of crisis—embodied locally in “many universities” and globally in the “financial stability of the world” (lines 1 and 2)—serves as point of departure from attention on the UNB context. Following the already-mentioned CRS as a guide, the initial strategy for critical educators is to learn to recognize texts like this not as mere texts, but as intertextually constructed instances of the elaborate technocratic discourse seeking to gain consensus over a specific theme and, thereby, wield power and influence over others. The letter written to faculty and students represents a particular construction of social reality that draws upon interdisciplinary discursive constructions to naturalize its position. Neoliberal discourse functions as inter-theme, or a macro-theme, that populates McCain's text interdiscursively, that is, from one discourse (economics/finance) to another (education).

In other words, rhetorically, these so called *inter-themes* (Ramírez, 2008) that in discourse serve as “waves of information” (Martin & Rose, 2007) in the McCain narrative are patterned in a way consistent with the discourse and themes advanced by neoliberalism. The strategy is then to identify and deconstruct them so they can be denaturalized and “contexted” (resisted in context). McCain positions the financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures as external and uncontrollable situations (in this case the 2008 financial crisis as in lines 2 and 3 but other frequent choices include markets, globalization, and competition). After this position is legitimized and supported, the next step is to implement and justify certain reforms seeking to address the problem (see Appendix B). Texts like these invariably position “reformers” as forward thinking or selflessly thinking about the University. In the McCain text, they are positioned as taking actions that are “strategic” and that serve as a “guiding framework for the University over the near future” (line 13). Conversely, opponents are often portrayed as selfish backward thinkers. A critical reader familiar with the patterns of rhetorical authority-building understands the reliance on circular

logic as a weak point. An important responsibility of critical educators, then, is to resist rhetorical impositions and to deconstruct and denaturalize the packaged textual choices.

In a manner similar to other advocates of neoliberal policies, McCain utilizes the macro-theme of “global crisis” as the direct cause of local challenges to UNB (large provincial deficits, declining student enrollment, capping of tuition and fees, depreciation of UNB’s endowment fund, ever-growing deficit in pensions, \$6 million operating deficit in lines 4-12.). In the next part of the letter (displayed in the Appendix B), McCain justifies a strategic plan with “financial resilience and responsibility” (Line 15) and further positions herself and the Board of Governors she chairs in charge of “deficit elimination, generation of additional resources, and improving the condition of the university facilities” (Lines 16-17). McCain again refers to the theme of crisis to express the Board of Governors concern with the future of the university: “As a result, over a period of several years, university administrators—under the leadership of the president—have proceeded to reduce costs, sometimes with great concern, in order to carry out this Board mandate” (Lines 25-27). Up to this point, McCain has dedicated more than half of the letter (4 paragraphs) to the financial crisis, repeated as a mantra, to justify neoliberal reforms. As she explains, “decisions have come at a cost” that “would have potentially been greater had we [the board] postponed difficult decisions into the future” (Lines 49-50).

In familiar technocratic fashion, the text solidifies the authoritative rhetoric previously established through the use of opposing modality (level of inclination of the speaker/writer; see CRS) to those supporting the actions and those opposing them. This strategy is revealed within the sentence, “Although there are those who, in hindsight, *might* have done things differently, cost reduction was *the only real way* we could be certain that our financial position would improve” (Lines 27-28). McCain rejects university alternatives by disassociating such possibilities from past circumstances: “in hindsight” and then further disqualifies possible alternatives by the choice of a low modality “might.” In contrast, a sense of urgency and positive inclination is strongly conveyed through high modality in “the only real way” (line 28), where alternative approaches are disqualified as “unreal” by default.

In the final portion of the letter, McCain, the university’s president, and those on the board are discursively positioned as embracing a future vision “deeply committed to the University’s future success and reputation” and responsible: “We take our responsibilities very seriously” (lines 45-46). Alternatively, skeptics are constructed discursively as the opposite of committed and responsible and are instead portrayed as regressive since they “choose to continue to publicly criticize past choices” (line 51).

It cannot be stressed enough that when reading a text of this nature the critical educator seeks to denaturalize the main thematic formation that forms the basis of the thesis. Indeed, without the assumption of “crisis” reified in the first part of this communication, the entire text collapses when its faulty logic is exposed. An additional strategy that should be considered to complement the CRS tool is to juxtapose the text with an alternative perspective on the same issue. This juxtaposition of texts after conducting an analysis of the kind we presented facilitates critical discussion. For example, a response to McCain’s letter by Miriam Jones (2014), AUNBT President, offers a substantially different account of events around the UNB labor dispute:

At several points your letter mentions that various financial scenarios were presented to the Board in recent years. Adopting repeatedly the worst-case of these scenarios is not a reasonable way to oversee an organization. Many of the potential challenges that your

letter mentions never materialized. The financial crisis of 2008 was used to impose shock doctrine austerity measures at UNB, specifically cutting operating funds for academic programs and positions, in concert with systematic attacks on collegial governance. As we now know, the financial crisis was not severe in Canada, in NB or at UNB in particular, where we enjoyed a relatively quick recovery in university endowments and other investments. However, senior management persuaded the Board to continue austerity measures well into 2014, years after any rationale for a crisis had disappeared. Academic programs were *and continue to be* starved and academic/support staff salaries suppressed in order to stockpile cash in restricted funds. At the same time, faculty complement has declined perilously under an attrition policy of “aggressive vacancy management” with resignations and retirements replaced, if at all, only fractionally or with temporary, non-tenure track term positions. Over the same period, administrative ranks expanded, and continue to expand, and new administrative units continued to be created, while academic programs, departments, and faculties find themselves under constant threat of merger, loss of accreditation, or even suspension of enrollment: in effect termination.

By providing a range of information absent in McCain’s letter, Jones offers the reader an alternative framework to understand the UNB labor dispute. The discourse of global crisis is exposed as overstated and regionally inapplicable. While faculty and staff are subjected to the discourse of crisis and related austerity measures, the *malification* of UNB accelerates in the form of additional administration and building costs. The inclusion of such alternative frameworks by critical educators is essential to expose the monolithic neoliberal text as socially-constructed and logically fallacious.

To recap, the first step for a critical educator is to learn to recognize the discourse used by university officials as supporting the specific ideology and goals of neoliberalism. These motives become the macro-theme for the rest of the discourse and actions to be taken. Once the macro-theme is identified as neoliberal-oriented, the next step is to identify the recurring themes to expose and deconstruct their circular hortatory technocratic nature. The Functional Linguistics perspective and the CRS tool affords the non-SFL specialist a mediated form to make visible the fact that the financial thematic formation “crisis” effectively cuts across without much contestation from the domain of economics to the domain of education, automatically imposing the constraints and logic of one domain onto the other.

## CONCLUSION

The situations we reviewed from the University of Saskatchewan, the University of the Southern Maine, and the University of New Brunswick reflect a common challenge to university faculty and critically-oriented programs. Perhaps the one remaining threat to the neoliberal hegemony is the possibility of a critically-educated population inoculated against the manipulative discursive tactics proposed by Milton Friedman’s discourse of crisis. The chilling neoliberal response to this possibility by managerial class administrators is escalating attacks on the university as a site for democratic discourse and debate. We have demonstrated the possibility of SFL-informed analytic approaches to help teachers and students within higher education unpack the misleading discursive ideological messages conveyed by the discourse of crisis. It is our hope that critical educators work with their

students to reveal such narratives and the semiotic fields they substantiate as nothing more than social constructions of reality serving the interests of neoliberal ideology.

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## Appendix A: CRITICAL READING SHEET

Use this sheet as a guide to conduct your text analysis. Terminology is not as important. What is essential is that your analysis maintains a focus on the **function** of the excerpts of language under analysis.

Context of Ideas	
ASSUMPTIONS	What other implied texts/ideas support the macro-theme of this text? What is the context of production of this text? Who wrote it/published it and why? Who sponsors the publisher or what interests does the author represent (or seems to represent)? What is the function of this particular text in the broader discourse community? (e.g., what is the purpose, for example, of the editorial section of the New York Times?) How does the context of production of the text influence the writer's choice of genre(s)? What underlying assumptions/positionings is the writer making about the reader or intended audience? What underlying assumptions/positionings is the writer making about the subject matter? How could have this text been written differently?

Context of Culture (Genre)	
SOCIAL PURPOSE	What is the social purpose (genre) of the text? (e.g., to describe, explain, instruct, argue, entertain, narrate?). Does the text achieve its purpose? If the purpose is not clear or the text is a mixture of genres, is this deliberate? If so, what is the effect and how does it contribute to the purpose?
TEXT TYPE	What is the text doing? How is this social purpose (process) expressed? (e.g., through a personal description, scientific report, elaboration, account, recipe, discussion, evaluation, personal recount or a combination of many?) Is the text type appropriate for its social purpose? (i.e., a joke-text type is appropriate to entertain).
STRUCTURE	What is the structure of this text? What kind of beginning, middle, and end does it have? What stages does the text go through to accomplish its purpose? Analyze these by the function they seek to fulfill. (e.g., narratives often consist of orientation, events leading to complication, climax, resolution, morale; Explanations begin with a description, continue with an explanatory sequence, and finish with an evaluation or commentary.)

Context of Situation (Register)	
<b>Field of Discourse</b> (Ideational Meanings)	
(The writer's/speaker relationship to the subject matter. What the text is about. The language used to talk about the world. Who did what to whom under which circumstances)	
PARTICIPANTS	WHAT/WHO is talked about? (i.e., what or who are the major participants, what or who are the minor participants what or who are the invisible participants.) What is talked about is a) common sense b) technical and specialized?
PROCESSES	What verbs (in the context of the participants) describe what kind of processes. (i.e., material, mental or other processes?)
CIRCUMSTANCES	How are circumstances indicated? e.g. by adverbs (i.e., suddenly) or prepositional phrases (i.e., after the fact), both?
CAUSATION	How is causation attributed? Is agency always made clear? (e.g., who did what to whom?) Are actors in subject position?

<b>Tenor of Discourse</b> (Interpersonal Meanings)	
(How the writer indicates his/her relationship with the reader and what his/her attitude to the subject matter of the text is? What parts of grammar can be identified as enablers of interaction? Who is taking part?)	
PERSON	What personal pronouns are selected? How does the writer refer to self, subjects and reader? How do these references to self, subjects and reader change as the text progresses? How does this reflect equal or unequal power? How does it reflect occasional or frequent contact?
MOOD	What mood is frequently selected? –declarative (I go), imperative (go!), interrogative (do I go?).
MODALITY	What role does modality play in, for example, expressing a degree of certainty, authority, and agency? (high modality = high certainty i.e., the <i>only real</i> solution- low modality = low certainty i.e., it <i>might</i> happen)
APPRAISAL (affective involvement)	How do certain adjectives, nouns, and adverbs indicate writer's attitude towards subject matter? ("the author <i>demonstrates</i> " = positive and certain attitude – "the author <i>argues</i> " = neutral/objective attitude – "the author <i>underestimates</i> " = negative/critical attitude). How do the choice of particular types of content, amplifying or reducing intensity or quantity, choosing words that are colorful or that have a non-neutral value, the choice of

	tense, modal words, repetition, and even different typographical features show writers' high or low affective involvement?
<b>Mode of Discourse</b> (Textual Meanings)	
(What role is language playing in the interaction? How is the text organized, what kind of text is being made? What is the channel of communication?)	
THEME	What is the point of departure of the message? Does the text begin the text by assuming understanding or consensus of some kind? What information is selected for first position at clause level and at the level of different sections of the text?
COHESION	How does the text build texture? How does it hang together as a text? What kinds of connectors and reference are used?

Adapted from Wallace (2003) by Ramírez, A., Harman, R., & Willett, J. (2010)

### References for the Critical Reading Sheet

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## Appendix B

Dear faculty, staff and students: As has been the case for many other universities, the last six years have presented great challenges to the University of New Brunswick.

In late 2008 the financial stability of the world came into question, leading to one of the most severe economic crises in history. In New Brunswick, large provincial deficits brought into question the government's ability to continue to maintain its existing support of its universities. At the same time, a declining student enrolment base and the government's mandate to cap tuition fees limited UNB's access to student revenue. The university's endowment fund was experiencing substantial depreciation in value and the ever-growing deficit in UNB's pension plan exposed the university and plan members to significantly higher contributions in the future. UNB was on its way to accumulating a \$6 million operating deficit and was rapidly losing ground in its ability to maintain its teaching facilities to an acceptable standard.

Within this context, the university was also undertaking a consultative process to develop a strategic plan that would serve as a guiding framework for the University over the near future. The strategic plan was approved by the Board and Senates. One of the enabling components within the plan was financial resilience and responsibility, with priorities established around deficit elimination, generation of additional resources and improving the condition of the university facilities.

It was in this economic environment that UNB's Board of Governors became concerned that UNB's future was being severely challenged. At that time, the Board instructed the President to come up with a financial plan to address several possible scenarios. After a thorough review, the Board consensus was that UNB was facing a very uncertain future unless strong action was taken. In this context, the Board determined that a significant reduction of UNB's costs was required in order to safeguard UNB against revenue shortfalls and/or cost increase scenarios being modeled.

As a result, over a period of several years, university administrators— under the leadership of the President — have proceeded to reduce costs, sometimes with great concern, in order to carry out this Board mandate. Although there are those who, in hindsight, might have done things differently, cost reduction was the only real way we could be certain that our financial position would improve. We do, however, recognize that greater sensitivity and better communication would have been helpful to the University community in understanding the actions taken.

Since the economic crisis began, UNB has made great strides in protecting and securing itself from several of the scenarios that were presented to the Board.

- Our pension plan has been converted to a shared risk model providing the university and plan members with increased stability and risk management tools for the plan.
- Our endowment funds have recovered from significant depreciation in value.
- Our accumulated operating deficit has been eliminated, placing UNB in compliance with Provincial regulations.
- Internally restricted funds have been set aside to address the additional challenges facing this great institution.

This has continued the long history of fiscal responsibility at UNB. It is time to start rebuilding. UNB is a great university with great people. We, the members of UNB's Board of Governors, are deeply committed to the university's future, success and reputation as a national comprehensive university, and to its role as the research engine of New Brunswick. We take our responsibilities very seriously. We continue to have full confidence in our President, Eddy Campbell, and in the senior administrative team. We hope all members of the UNB community will agree that we need a stable financial environment to enable and support teaching, learning and research.



The decisions made over this period have come at a cost. However, we believe the cost would have potentially been greater had we postponed difficult decisions into the future. While some might choose to continue to publicly criticize past choices, our view is that now is the time to focus on the future of UNB together.

The only way we can move forward is by continuing to discuss important issues with one another and finding shared perspectives. We are encouraging a greater focus on communication and dialogue at UNB. We urge you to engage with the processes of the university to provide input and suggestions regarding future actions. We hope every member of the university community will see the value in working collaboratively to create the best possible future for UNB.

KATHRYN MCCAIN is Chairwoman of the UNB Board of Governors.