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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Rhetorical Literacy and First Year Composition

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Anne Lee Schnarr

June 2018

Dissertation Committee:

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Dr. Deborah Willis

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The Dissertation of Anne Lee Schnarr is approved:

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents, Patricia Vencill Williams and Robert Dale Williams, PhD, who taught me the meaning of hard work, commitment, and love.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Rhetorical Literacy and First Year Composition

by

Anne Lee Schnarr

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, June 2018  
Dr. Rise Axelrod and Dr. Steven Axelrod, Co-Chairpersons

Neoliberalism, as both an economic and a cultural system, diminishes the notion of education as a public good and weakens educational standards in First Year Composition programs. Rhetorical Literacy is delineated as a set of pedagogical practices that can combat the adverse effects of neoliberalism upon Higher Education and the Liberal Arts. Rhetorical Literacy emphasizes immersion in print culture, contextualizing skills, metacognition, and critical thinking. A table of Rhetorical Methods is included as a pedagogical tool. The Community College program “Guided Pathways” is critiqued as a neoliberal effort to lower standards and exclude Rhetorical Literacy from college level general education curriculum.



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## **Introduction**

What constitutes college level literacy in the twenty-first century? What are the cognitive proficiencies and habits of mind that all Americans with a Bachelors degree should possess? Most educators can agree that college level literacy instruction should equip students to be energetically and critically engaged in participatory democracy while also providing them with literacy skills necessary for professional success. There are various and competing ideas about how to best serve college students in this regard, and this project takes a stand amongst them. It maps a specific intervention into the field of Composition Studies by articulating First Year Composition (FYC) students' needs as they can be illuminated from within two frameworks: neoliberal critique and rhetorical theory. I name the college level literacy that meets the needs of students as critical citizens Rhetorical Literacy.

Rhetorical Literacy as I define it is mobilized through (1) immersion in print culture and appreciation for literary reading, (2) respect for the slowness or "timelessness" required for deep reflection, (3) practice using rhetorical methods and analyzing discourse through a variety of lenses (contextualizing), and (4) metacognition. An enriched understanding of rhetoric, I suggest, strengthens students' intellectual curiosity and creative intelligence such that their capacity to challenge the neoliberal order emerges.

Rhetorical Literacy constitutes an ambitious set of objectives for a series of courses that typically take place over the course of a single year, but its skills do not need to be taught separately or only in composition classes. They are mutually reinforcing

skills that undergird excellent performance across disciplines: awareness of the genealogies of rhetorical theory has a symbiotic relationship with metacognition, for example, and deepens knowledge regardless of the subject being studied.

As the succeeding chapters will illuminate, the motivation behind the creation of this literacy is more than affording students the literacies they need to function effectively as professionals, but also to encourage critically-minded citizens who have a questioning attitude towards the discourses, institutions, politics, norms and values around them. While neoliberalism tends to convince us that truth, knowledge, and value are given rather than constructed, neutral rather than discursive, Rhetorical Literacy is post-neoliberal in that it amplifies an important claim put forward by rhetoricians such as Chaim Perelman and Michel Foucault: that no discourse is a-political.

My project is thus a timely and necessary intervention into Composition Studies, for it theorizes and delineates Rhetorical Literacy as a term that reframes the field's pedagogical purpose as a counterweight to the rationalities that leave neoliberal values unexamined and unquestioned. Martha Nussbaum, Susan Searls Giroux, and Christopher Hedges, among others, explain that the university continues to erode as an institution that sustains critical citizenry necessary for democratic participation. This is because institutions of higher education are increasingly adopting market-driven policies and objectives that make universities extensions of the business world—a situation numerous prominent scholars consider nothing short of a crisis. Although it is important to cultivate the literacies students will need for workplace success, teacher-scholars in the field of Composition Studies are also devoted to the democratizing power of literacy education,

thus Rhetorical Literacy affords students awareness of themselves as participating in discourses that are ultimately political and ideological enterprises. While there is no doubt that an education must prepare students for the workforce, the purpose of education must be more than that, and Rhetorical Literacy prevents students from over-identifying as employees and under-identify as citizens of a democracy. In recognizing the need for an anti-neoliberal pedagogy my project maps a way for Composition Studies to retaliate against the notion that higher education is valuable solely as a commodity that functions to provide high grades and easy certification and asks that we reunite in an effort to resist this instrumentalization of what we do.

Moreover, Rhetorical Literacy is a term that not only updates FYC by explaining students' needs as neoliberal subjects, but also, because the capacities it instills are broad-based, it may also serve as an architecture that houses any and all university professionals who play a role in first year student success. It is best implemented across the disciplines, as a goal not only for first year composition classes but also Writing Across the Curriculum programs, for it points to the ways that skills learned in Psych 101, for example, could enrich, complicate, or add to an FYC class and vice-versa. It names a common mission that can build connections where there normally are none, creating a less bewildering environment for first year students, one wherein it feels natural to characterize dynamics between different areas of study and transfer knowledge and skills between courses.

Furthermore, I illustrate that a wide diversity in pedagogical objectives among composition instructors makes for nebulous and often thin standards, especially at

Community Colleges. On the one hand, this ambiguity in the field serves to protect academic freedom for instructors, but I argue that it does not provide an adequate defense system when administrations push for lowered standards (a problem I will explain as an effect of neoliberalism). My contention is that we should not be trying to make the first year of college easier; it should be a challenge, and the rigors of acquiring Rhetorical Literacy work to prevent an overly coddling, noncritical approach to the First Year experiences. I do not mean to imply that first year students be treated harshly, but rather that current trends in education (discussed in chapters one and four) have made it necessary to be clear and consistent about college level standards.

Given this current and nationwide issue of reaching and retaining first year students while also maintaining high standards, I suggest that Rhetorical Literacy act as a tool that both unites composition instructors and aligns composition objectives with the academic goals of First Year Experience programs. Both FYC and First Year Experience programs would benefit from a conversation about Rhetorical Literacy because it details specifically what kinds of intelligences and competencies we want college students to gain during their first year.

It may seem unlikely that such a wide and diverse group as first year educators—or even first year composition instructors—could feel united by something like Rhetorical Literacy; it is a way of imposing structure upon general education, about which there is always tension and flux. Ever since academics decided that general education was important, they have been unable to agree on what it is. Louis Menand, in his book *The Marketplace of Ideas*, captures this dilemma best: “No-one thought that

what students needed to know was self-evident, but most professors felt that whatever it was, the college had an obligation to give it to them” (52). Thus in spite of ongoing disagreement, we have put enormous resources into ensuring that all students get a general education. Harvard has its “Core Program,” Columbia has “Literature Humanities,” many schools have freshman programs (like the University of California Riverside’s CHASS First), and almost all post-secondary institutions have distribution requirements. In my view, this project of negotiating the patterns and shapes of general education is an ongoing adventure that is highly energizing and full of possibility: when we discuss what habits of mind we want to facilitate in our college students we cannot help but engage discourses about democracy and citizenship—for in spite of neoliberal intrusions, academia has managed to carve out and maintain spaces that are committed to justice and equity for their own sakes. Moreover, given the widespread anti-intellectual cultural influences that are currently damaging our democracy, thoughtful attention to how we should best teach our students to be critical citizens is a triumph in itself. Our conception of general education should not exist within the confines of what Louis Althusser would call “the educational state apparatus”—an apparatus that exists mainly to serve neoliberalism. Rather, we can conceive of general education as an ongoing creation filled with potential to be counter-hegemonic, merely because it can require of students that which their hurried, anxious, complicated and indeed often traumatizing lives deny them: namely, reflection, contemplation, questioning, and imagination.

I suggest that using the term that describes college-level literacy and carefully formulating its characteristics creates a foundation from which to debate questions and

honor values that can easily become lost when this or that trend, buzzword, or fashionable craze becomes the hallmark of good educating. Especially as neoliberal market-rationality buys its way into the university, a conversation like this is needed to validate and defend educational goals that underscore the need for critical citizenship in addition to career preparation.

The first chapter begins by synthesizing scholarly perspectives on neoliberal subjectivity, emphasizing the trend towards conceptualizing neoliberalism as the condition under which an alienated and a-political subjectivity is being shaped. Following cultural critics Nick Couldry, Wendy Brown, Lauren Berlant and others, my understanding of neoliberalism goes beyond its definition as a set of economic policies favoring market deregulation and the privatization of public services; for in creating a people that is supportive and amenable to its agenda, neoliberalism manipulates our values, beliefs, and patterns of thinking. The ubiquitous prioritization of speed, productivity, cost-effectiveness and competition has become a naturalized, common-sense way of life, and one that comes at great cost to democratic society. As Brown explains, due to neoliberal culture “citizenship, reduced to self-care, is divested of any orientation toward the common, thereby undermining an already weak investment in an active citizenry and an already thin concept of a public good” (Brown 695).

In line with Brown, therefore, I argue that under the neoliberal order we are pressured to defend an ethic that has little regard for human life or human well-being. We are subtly instructed to be consumers before citizens and therefore to substitute consumer choice for authentic freedom. In general, neoliberal subjects are overworked and

exploited, anxious and alienated. I build from Lauren Berlant's concept of "Cruel Optimism" when providing examples of the way middle class individuals are "responsibilized," and adopt a self-punishing attitude for failing to achieve the media-driven image of the American dream. I expose the weakening of worker's unions—using the exploitation of Walmart workers as a prime example—to illustrate the dangerous disinvestment from the collective we see under neoliberalism. I discuss psychiatrist Lynne Layton's research on the trauma Americans are undergoing as a result of feeling abandoned by their government during the great recession. The affective consequence of living within neoliberalism is an underlying shared sense of weariness, depression and anxiety that numbs us to the urgencies of our political situation. Therefore, speaking to university educators, I ask that we consider the ways in which a more Rhetorically Literate populace might succeed in loosening neoliberalism's grip.

Chapter one also outlines the effects of neoliberalism upon higher education, effects that are further explored in chapter four. Decreased state funding has resulted in the casualization of academic labor, less autonomy and authority for faculty, a focus on University and College brand names, increased partnerships with the corporate sector, and tuition increases. Not enough attention is being given to the price that society is paying for these changes: namely, educational quality and education for democratic citizenship. While there are certainly scholars voicing concerns, they don't receive enough consideration, so I call attention to some of the most powerful critics of higher education who are currently speaking out. I also work on unpacking a book called



*Remaking the American University: Market Smart and Mission Centered*, which claims that academia could be saved if only it made a stronger effort to neoliberalize itself.

The first chapter also explains why today's educational climate is not one that is adequately prioritizing the rhetorical dimension of knowledge and knowing. It unpacks the methods that the *US News and World Report* uses to generate their rankings in order to illustrate how the hypervigilance surrounding this competition adversely affects the academic agenda. This one ranking system alone has done significant damage to the priorities of the university, especially due to the way it encourages an obsession with graduation rates. These ideas are further explored in chapter four, which argues that neoliberalism is particularly damaging in its affects upon Community Colleges.

Chapter two characterizes Rhetorical Literacy as being a literacy that fosters print immersion and attention to the value of slowness. Before I begin to discuss these aspects of Rhetorical Literacy, however, I explain that previous definitions of Rhetorical Literacy created by educators Ed Nagelhout and Stuart Selber are usefully named *Guided Rhetorical Literacy* because they are limited to the rhetorical skills needed for a particular field of study. By comparison, my rendering of Rhetorical Literacy is comprehensive enough to thoroughly address two areas of concern for today's college student: (1) their position as digital natives and their need for what I will call "print immersion" and (2) their need to wrestle with the meaning of concepts such as ideology, equity, and citizenship so as to recognize power relations as constituting important elements of the "conditions of persuasion."

Drawing from recent research, I detail problems in higher education caused by a high-tech, fast-paced culture that makes students easily distracted. I present challenges to the neoliberal idea that faster is always better. Words invite us to consider, deliberate, question, and imagine in a way that images on screens do not. We need to recognize the relevance of insights from Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Marshal McLuhan as we struggle to instruct students who have deep aversion to reading. Reading, I argue, is irreplaceable as an activity that generates a mental disposition characterized by distance and criticism. Students' entrenchment in the digital is also problematic in that it limits them to the rationalizations of presentism, preventing them from the historical sensibility they need to have a holistic appreciation for the current human condition.

One may argue that students in universities today need not be as print literate as previous generations, for they are living in new circumstances. This is true to some extent, but even though the wider culture has uncritically embraced new technologies, the university is likely to remain a bastion for print culture, as it should. And if we at the university refuse to follow the status quo and abandon print culture ourselves, then how can we justify neglecting to pass it on to the next generations?

Chapter two also describes the neoliberal pedagogical trends having a negative impact on print literacy—trends such as the over-use of multiple choice questions on tests, an overly excited and enthusiastic attitude towards new technologies in the classroom, and the idea that using new technology makes students into better critical thinkers. Since love of technology generates profit for big business, it has become common sense to think that incorporating new technology in the classroom enhances

learning. Some teacher training programs assume that the more tech-savvy the instructor and the more high-tech the classroom, the better, and no further discussion on the matter is warranted. High-tech industries like to promote the attitude that lengthy prose documents are pedagogical time-wasters, which results in teachers who imagine they are serving students well by avoiding reading assignments altogether.

Furthermore, I suggest that the term “critical thinking” is used recklessly by some teachers, administrators and politicians. We need to consider what critical thinking is and how deeply it might be tied to students’ comfort level with abstractions, enthusiasm for analysis and synthesis, and the ability to hold multiple and contradictory perspectives to be true simultaneously. These are skills that are best obtained through immersion in print culture. Moreover, reading ought to be pleasurable, and there are ways that educators could do more to make reading appealing to students.

Chapter three establishes contextualization and metacognition as integral aspects of Rhetorical Literacy. Contextualizing is a term used by some Composition Studies scholars to describe the skills students use when they recognize the situation around or behind the scenes from which a text arises. A rhetorically literate student approaches reading and writing with the understanding that texts don’t come out of a vacuum but are socially constructed and motivated.

To further delineate and solidify the meaning of this skill, I argue that a student who can contextualize is one who understands the value of, and can employ, multiple rhetorical methods. I have thus included a table of rhetorical methods in order to illustrate the variety of rhetorical tools at our disposal to use when designing FYC courses.

Metacognition, as I write about it in this chapter, is more than the process of reflecting on one's own cognitive decisions while completing a writing task, but is also the ability to analyze how one's own subject position informs one's perspective. Metacognition is highlighted as a crucial mode of contextualizing.

Critics of FYC sometimes complain that the skills we are teaching in our classrooms don't transfer; they claim that FYC genres are useless because they don't apply anywhere but inside the bubble of the composition classroom. However, if we are teaching students to contextualize and to be metacognitive, then what they learn in our classes is highly transferable. The problem is that teaching students to contextualize is a pedagogical process too often overlooked due to the popularity of what Paolo Friere terms the "banking" model of education. Research suggests that college students are often given material to learn as though it somehow exists a-rhetorically, or in a realm of absolute truth outside human interference. According to some scholars, students don't learn to contextualize what they read and write until graduate school. Here at the University of California Riverside, our undergraduate students often struggle to understand the nuanced ways that writing tasks differ according to situation, purpose, and audience, and have a hard time making inferences about the ideologies and motivations underlying a text they are reading. Research also shows that students may be under the false impression that real knowledge exists outside of the rhetorical realm rather than understanding that most knowledge is rhetorically constructed.

I thus seek to answer the question: how shall we teach students the importance of context and contextualizing? Since there are endless ways to contextualize and re-

contextualize a topic of study, we must necessarily limit the number of rhetorical methods that we teach in FYC; but this limitation need not be a concern. The point is to help students see that different modes of analysis are available, important, and useful to practice. In a good FYC class, students gain experience working with more than one rhetorical method, and are exposed to many, thus learning that contextualization is a highly flexible and ever-expanding skill.

Rhetorical methods are as diverse as rhetoricians. Some see rhetoric as the use of language to persuade and some study language itself as persuasive. Some study rhetoric as an art and some study the conditions that produce certain rhetorics. The table I have included is not exhaustive and is meant as a work in progress—it currently includes twenty-one rhetorical methods devised by rhetoricians of different ethnicities and from different points in history. Furthermore, some rhetorical methods may be more useful and accessible to students than others. The “generic” method (“generic” here means related to genres) is the one we emphasize here at the University of California Riverside’s University Writing Program. It is a highly effective way of teaching contextualizing skills. In our 1ABC series we facilitate awareness of different genres by having students move from one rhetorical situation to another—each with its own set of basic features. The textbook we use, *The St Martins Guide to Writing* by Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper, guides us through this process and also provides metacognitive activities for our students along the way.

Chapter four claims that Rhetorical Literacy is especially threatened by a set of new policies being implemented at Community Colleges in districts across the nation.

This new set of policies is called “Guided Pathways” (also referred to as “Pathways”) and its sources of funding can almost always be traced back to the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation or its affiliates. In my view, Pathways is watering down curriculum and lowering standards at public Community Colleges so that they function more like the for-profit and mostly on-line colleges that have grown rapidly in recent decades—and made headlines for being scams.

My contention is that if we care about Rhetorical Literacy we need to be highly skeptical of Pathways. It is a poorly thought out plan for Community Colleges that may be leading students into a trap: that is, students at Pathways colleges may sacrifice a lot of time and money for a low-quality education that does not develop their Rhetorical Literacy skills and does not prepare them for a four-year institution or a career. I argue that the program is motivated by a neoliberal agenda that renders Community Colleges less effective as institutions furthering critical citizenship and democracy.

Chapter four, therefore, describes the Pathways means of improving retention and graduation rates in detail. In order to implement Pathways, administrators sometimes narrow their agendas quite drastically, making Pathways front and center in their priorities. I explain how this pressure on administration can turn into frustration for faculty who don’t see retention and graduation as the only goals that a college should have.

The research funded by the Gates’s foundation and organized into articles, books, and “how-to” guides is not research that we can trust. After unpacking and examining the studies conducted to “prove” that Pathways is a good idea, I conclude that there is not

enough evidence to justify the Pathways programs. One major study behind Pathways is concerned only with career-technical students and disregards the needs of students who plan on transferring to a four-year college. Other articles supporting Pathways draw heavily from research into what makes corporations effective without fully recognizing and honoring the differences between a private corporation and public educational institution.

Pathways incentivizes a decline in educational standards and encourages Community Colleges to emulate the nefarious practices of troubled for-profit institutions that spend three times the amount of money on marketing and advertising as they do on instruction. Given the overwhelming amount of power they hold, we need to consider whether Bill and Melinda Gates truly have the interests of the public in mind.

Furthermore, I describe the confusion and antagonism Pathways has caused at colleges. Faculty are divided over the issue of Pathways, some believing that the Gates' strategies will work and others harboring suspicion and anger about their program. The Gates' have their own set of educational principles, and Gates-funded research makes it seem as though the Gates dream for education is one of equity and inclusion. I suggest, however, that in fact the Gates program may result in a more divided and inequitable country. Economists such as Paul Krugman maintain that more college graduates will not result in a bigger and stronger middle class, especially if the degrees don't lead to jobs and graduates' lives are weighed down by large amounts of debt.

The chapter also demonstrates how Pathways has caused a great deal of tension between faculty and administrators at Community Colleges. At the City University of

New York (CUNY) that tension is most apparent, so I describe the faculty protest against Pathways there in detail.

Faculty around the country, I suggest, should be as bold as the faculty at CUNY, for administrators seem to be manipulating instructors into compliance and overstepping the bounds of their authority in order to implement the Pathways agenda. Untenured faculty are especially vulnerable to administrative exploitation and manipulation, and tenured faculty can also be persuaded to go along with Pathways. I suggest that the program results in a climate in which administrators are permitted to insult and infantilize faculty.

We need to carefully examine the Pathways solution to inequity and compare it to other proposals for fixing low graduation rates. An alternative to Pathways can be found in Christopher Newfield's book *The Great Mistake: How we wrecked public universities and how we can fix them*. Newfield outlines the steps we can take in order to make our higher education system equitable. The first step is working to change the American attitude into one that understands education as a public and social good rather than an individualized consumerist investment. Along with other scholars and experts in the field of education, Newfield does not imagine that schools themselves are solely responsible for low academic performance among minorities. I too argue that we must address racial segregation and poverty at large in order to get to the root cause of educational inequality. Another problem with the Gates's agenda for education is the way it reduces the college experience to a type of militaristic conditioning rather than honoring it as a place of discovery and becoming.



At the end of the chapter I reiterate why Pathways is a threat to Rhetorical Literacy, especially in its emphasis on quantity and speediness over quality and critical reasoning. I also point out that to fight back against Pathways we ought to find inspiration in our students, in the success at CUNY, in Christopher Newfield's work, and in the group of scholars like myself who are voicing concern about this issue.

Rhetorical Literacy is necessitated by the current sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and affective environments that college students must negotiate. It is a pedagogy that addresses current instructional challenges in FYC as they are situated under the political/social/economic dominance of neoliberal rationalities, temporalities and affects.

Ideally, Rhetorical Literacy would provide a stronger sense of unity and purpose to college composition instructors and provide a meaningful anchor for many of the various programs, services and classes that contribute to first year success.

## **Chapter One: The Neoliberal Context from which Rhetorical Literacy Emerges as Necessary**

This chapter describes the political-economic dominance of the neoliberal paradigm and the type of subjectivity born of it in order to establish the historical and cultural relevance of Rhetorical Literacy as a pedagogical goal for first year college students. I shall explain neoliberalism, neoliberal subjectivity, how they manipulate a divorce between higher education and the ideological awareness needed for civil democracy, and why Rhetorical Literacy is usefully considered in this context.

### **Neoliberalism**

The economic philosophy undergirding neoliberalism is in fact nothing new, but stems from the enlightenment ideal of a self-regulating free-market economy. The most important founder of this paradigm, Adam Smith, professed faith in the market as a self-regulating machine that would naturally keep itself in check as long as self-interested competitors were subject to little governmental supervision and mostly permitted to do business freely.<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith's "classical liberalism" had a long life, but after WWII, the ideas of John Maynard Keynes interfered with positive feelings towards free market capitalism. The Keynesian model, which maintains that the capitalist economy must be regulated by a watchful government, prevailed between the late 1930s and the late

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<sup>1</sup> Smith's ideas are actually less economically extreme than today's neoliberals, who have not heeded his warnings about concentration of wealth and power in the financial sector. In *The Wealth of Nations* Smith warns of "all for ourselves and nothing for other people seems in every age of the world to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind" (418).

1970s—from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Second New Deal until just before Ronald Reagan took office. During this time, efforts were made to distribute wealth more evenly across groups, and workers unions grew in numbers and strength. This created increased security for the American middle class, so much so that the authors of *A Short Introduction to Neoliberalism* refer to these thirty years as “the golden age of controlled capitalism” (7).

However, controlled capitalism became unpopular when politicians in the early eighties blamed “crippling government regulation, exorbitant public spending, and high tariff barriers to international trade” for the poor economic growth in the seventies (Steger and Roy 10). These anti-Keynesians, spearheaded by Milton Friedman’s confidence in the benefits of free enterprise and individual self-interest within a global economy, gave rise to what proponents refer to as the global free market but what critics often call “neoliberalism” (Steger and Roy 10). And as we can see from the definitions of it that follow, neoliberalism is not just a technical term for economists but heavily used by those with concern for the social and political.

Geographer and cultural critic David Harvey describes neoliberalism as

a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (2)

Political economist Robert W. McChesney claims that “neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time—it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of

social life in order to maximize their personal profit” (Intro to Chomsky 7). For sociologist Lisa Duggan, neoliberalism is “a vision of competition, inequality, market ‘discipline,’ public austerity, and ‘law and order’”(x) that constitutes a “wide-ranging political and cultural project—the reconstruction of the everyday life of capitalism, in ways supportive of upward redistribution of a range of resources, and tolerant of widening inequalities of many kinds” (xi).

Neoliberalism is often lambasted for serving the interests of a very few number of wealthy investors rather than the majority. Some of the scholars who have advanced this critique most adamantly include Noam Chomsky, who wrote *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, Naomi Klein, who argues in *Shock Doctrine* that neoliberalism has taken advantage of traumatized peoples unable to fight back, and Lisa Duggan, who says that that neoliberalism—although it purports to be apolitical—“organizes material and political life in terms of race, gender and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion”(3).

So how does neoliberalism continually manufacture a populace that does not think to question it? For Lisa Duggan, neoliberalism is far from just or merely an economic system that invariably benefits all of us, yet it must convince us of its neutrality in order to remain an uncontested world order. She writes:

economic policy [is defined] primarily [as] a matter of neutral, technical expertise...presented as separate from politics and culture and not properly subject to specifically political accountability or cultural critique. Opposition to material inequality is maligned as ‘class warfare’ while race, gender or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial. This *rhetorical* separation for the economic from the political and cultural arenas disguises the upwardly redistributing goals of neoliberalism. (xiv emphasis mine)

I argue that *an absence of Rhetorical Literacy* allows economic policies of neoliberalism, (along with almost all formal procedures, policies and texts) to radiate an aura of untouchable neutrality. Without the ideological awareness fostered by Rhetorical Literacy neoliberalism seems to exist outside of or beyond relations of power between humans. The reification of systematized instruments of control makes it very difficult to imagine alternative actualities unless we have the ability to unearth the rhetorics (as motivated by power relations) at work. It follows then that in teaching Rhetorical Literacy we can create a dialectic that makes neoliberalism porous, unfinished, and open to criticism (as I shall demonstrate with pedagogical examples in chapter four).

Since neoliberalism is the context that renders this dissertation timely, in what follows I clarify how neoliberal economics manifest affectively and ideologically to create neoliberal subjectivity. I offer a few concrete examples of neoliberalism that illustrate it as a way of valuing. I then explain how cultural theorists describe it as public feeling or affect and review what a range of sociologists, psychoanalysts and cultural theorists have to say regarding experiences of self-hood under neoliberalism.

In 2009 Stanley Fish wrote an article for the *New York Times* entitled “Neoliberalism and Higher Education,” an article that does more by way of explanation than argument and provides an accessible and instructive example of neoliberalism as ethic (an ethic which is often obscured behind the complex transactions and jargon of economists, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals). In Fish’s neoliberal scenario the owner of a factory is polluting a stream and killing marine-life. While the loss of life caused by pollution is understood to be a negative consequence of the factory, “if more

wealth is created by [the] factory's operations than is lost as a consequence of their effects" than neoliberal ideology understands the environmental damage to be justified. Due to the organizing principle that always prioritizes "the maximization of wealth and efficiency" the factory need not be ashamed of its mass-killing as long the price it must pay for the right to pollute does not exceed the value produced by the factory (Fish). Ideologically understood, this example represents the widespread acceptance that value ought to be measured only in terms of profit or wealth.

Another excellent example of neoliberal ideology is illustrated in the popular nineties movie "Fight Club." The main character works for a car company. He explains that if this car company produces a car with a defect—and the defect is lethal—this does not necessarily mean the car will be recalled. Instead, if the price of the recall is greater than the price of compensating for the deaths that will be caused by the defective car, the recall is not made. The exact quote from the character in the movie is as follows:

A new car built by my company leaves somewhere traveling at 60 mph. The rear differential locks up. The car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside. Now, should we initiate a recall? Take the number of vehicles in the field, A, multiply by the probable rate of failure, B, multiply by the average out-of-court settlement, C. A times B times C equals X. If X is less than the cost of a recall, we don't do one. (*Fight Club*)

In both these scenarios, what is at stake is the meaning of value: the factory that kills with pollution and the car company that kills with defective parts do so without conscience by calculating value in terms of profit and capital. The question of morality that necessarily arises from putting a price-tag on the "cost" of human and animal life is one that

neoliberalism is able to avoid by keeping its transactions hidden from the public eye. As

Fish puts it,

in the neoliberal universe, ethics reduces to calculations of wealth and productivity....[I]f you and I proceed (as market ethics dictate) to work things out between us — to come to a private agreement — there will be no need for action by either the government or the courts, each of which is likely to...[introduce] distracting moral or philosophical concerns, sometimes referred to as “market distortions.” (Fish)

Questions about whether we ought to desire a type of meaning or purpose that transcends or takes precedence over the value of profit or capital, therefore, lead to splinters or impurities—“market distortions”—in an otherwise absolute devotion to the pursuit of economic wealth and dominance. This is why neoliberalism becomes an organizing ethic or an ideological system: it is not merely the way we naturally or inevitably operate to compete in the global economy, but a collective choice to ignore ways of valuing that are not market-oriented. Neoliberals have faith that the market will spontaneously self-regulate: it will, with “an invisible hand,” provide what is best for everyone. However, as the cases above illustrate, the goodness and virtue of that “invisible hand” of the market cannot always be taken for granted.

### **Neoliberal Subjectivity**

The neoliberal subject is radically individuated and self-governing, a consumer before a citizen, de-politicized, overworked, and perpetually anxious. In what follows, I clarify why this set of terms is a comprehensive way of encapsulating how most people experience neoliberal subjectivity.

As I understand it, neoliberal subjectivity is epiphenomenal: it is an effect or a symptom of the economic theory we call neoliberalism. Although grounded in economic

philosophy rather than philosophy about human nature, neoliberalism ends up adopting certain ideas about the human as an afterthought. It opposes many modern and postmodern ideas about the human in its understanding that the individual agent has inner power to make *free choices* when operating in the ideal free market economy. This idea is debunked by Karl Marx (who points out the ways we are socially determined under capitalism) and Sigmund Freud (who shows us how unconscious forces can determine our choices). Yet neoliberals cling to the idea that global capitalism keeps us free. Their philosophy is that the free market economy is what supports and maintains the freedom of the rational individual. This idea is of course highly debatable, as is the definition of freedom, and what makes many neoliberal critics especially suspicious of neoliberal attachment to the “free” individual in the free economy is that it happens to be highly instrumental in serving the economic interests of the rich.

Unlike the liberal democracy of the eighteenth century, a government that was created to support an idea of human nature that arose from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, neoliberal government was adopted as a necessary structural shift to compete within an emerging global economy. Thus an underlying oddity about neoliberal subjectivity is that even though it is a new system of government (about thirty-five years old) it has no foundation in a new theory of humanness presented by a great philosopher to which we collectively subscribe. Although there are pockets of people who are devoted disciples of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, most people assume a neoliberal identity without actually knowing anything about the economists who helped bring it about. In a way, the neoliberal human is an accident resulting from the economic



motivations of the rich; it is the illusion that we all make choices as rational and autonomous individuals under an economic order that will automatically and naturally take care of us. There is no statement about a person's right to pursue life, liberty and happiness that is the golden rule of neoliberalism; rather, neoliberalism likes people to *believe* their government grants them these rights in order to further the ulterior golden rule: the economic agenda that benefits the rich. Therefore the neoliberal subject is a kind of simulacrum of the subjectivity on which our democracy was originally based, for the neoliberal subject assumes an individual essence that is free to self-realize, but only in the sense of self-realization through consumerism (as I shall soon explain).

### **The Radically Individuated and Self-Governing Neoliberal Subject**

Neoliberalism has atomized the neoliberal subject, making us each believe that we are essentially acting as autonomous individuals amongst competitors, fully responsible for whether we win or lose in a predetermined and immutable world order. The assumption—a subconscious one existing by default—is that the world around us is largely orderly and good, providing us with every opportunity for success, so if we lose out on any part of “the good life,” the loss is our own fault. In her article “Irrational exuberance: Neoliberal subjectivity and the perversion of truth” psychiatrist and social analyst Lynne Layton describes experience under neoliberalism as one in which “we consistently rail against ourselves, when, for example, our small businesses fail or when we are unable to balance career and child care. We imagine that there are stronger, special others who can do it all and that if only we weren't weak, inferior beings, we, too, would succeed” (Layton 312). Neoliberalism convinces us that we choose our own

success in life regardless of socio-economic conditions (conditions that ostensibly create equal opportunity). This causes distraction from the profound connections between socioeconomic inequities and personal failings, so that people blame and hate *themselves* for problems that are not completely—if at all—personal, but generated by the injustices of neoliberalism: “[when] the social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favor of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility... [p]ersonal failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed” (Harvey 76).

According to some cultural critics, the privatization of blame also means that individuals feel unduly personally responsible for their own perceived inadequacy if they are failing to live “the American Dream,” which here may be defined as an idea of ontological normality—being a normal middle class American—an image or fantasy left over from the comfortable middle class suburban life of the post-WWII era. This middle class life is no longer available to most Americans, yet we are collectively in a kind of denial of its deterioration. As Lauren Berlant explains in her book *Cruel Optimism*, neoliberal inequality makes it impossible for most of us to live the safe, pleasant, and “normal” middle class life, but we remain affectively attached, trying tirelessly to achieve proximity to “the dream” through images and commodities. She describes this as “a scene of constant bargaining with normalcy in the face of conditions that can barely support even the memory of the fantasy” (167). The fantasy life includes not only ever-increasing wealth, but also status, health, beauty and familial happiness; it creates “cruel optimism” because most Americans can never acquire it. What we have instead is “so many bad jobs contingently available to so many contingent workers and never enough

money, never enough love, and barely any rest, yet with ruthless fantasy abounding” (Berlant 167). As the fantasy lives on, so does the belief that someday, if one works hard enough, one will achieve that “normal” middle class life—the happy, loving, stable and safe one—that surrounds us in so many advertisements and television shows. For Berlant, neoliberal subjectivity is the “desire of a collective will to imagine oneself as a solitary agent who can and must live the good life promised by capitalist culture” (167). If the dream is not realized, neoliberal subjects blame themselves. Jodi Dean characterizes the self-approbation of the neoliberal subject aptly in this rendition: “I must realize my dreams, I must be fit, I must be stylish—because I can; since everyone wins, not only am I a loser if I am less than fit, successful, fulfilled, but I am not a person at all. I am not a part of everyone” (Dean 14). If any one aspect of the multifaceted dream is imperfect, the neoliberal subject tends to focus on correcting for the perceived lack through self-improvement projects instead of looking for answers as part of a collective.

**Self-Governance:**

*Neoliberalism is a mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising.*

*-Gill and Scharf 5*

According to Michel Foucault, modern society exercises power and governance by isolating subjects and manipulating an internalization of discipline. Obedience appears natural and voluntary because “as power become more anonymous...those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance rather than ceremonies, by observation rather than commemorative accounts,

by comparative measure that have the ‘norm’ as reference...”(193). As Hofmeyr puts it, this type of power “individualizes subjects to survey their bodies, normalize their behavior, and regulate their movements” (32).

A good example of neoliberal self-governance is our punishing self-regulatory response to increasing body fat. That we are increasingly fat is a phenomenon that is popularly termed “the obesity epidemic,” language that in itself suggests mass self-approbation (for a larger body is not necessarily a diseased one). When asked to locate the causes of rising levels of obesity, most of us can point towards the fast food industry, biology, or cultural conditions and habits, yet ultimately we hold the individual responsible: we feel guilty if we are not following the ever-changing rules of health and thinness, and those who are fat receive either pity or scorn. As Guthman and DuPuis argue in “Embodying neoliberalism: economy, culture, and the politics of fat,” largely because of the widespread assumption that a fat person freely chooses their weight, “fat people are subjected to tremendous institutional discrimination and social humiliation, even to rage and disgust” (433). The stigmatization of fatness and obesity makes fat on our bodies something that we are deeply afraid of (regardless of whether that extra fat threatens physical health), and this is how obesity discourses become an insidious form of neoliberal biopower: fatness is interpreted as an unhealthy and lazy personal choice, in spite of the many ways in which our nutritionally depleted environment contributes to it (Guthman and DuPuis 433).

This is not to say that an individual has absolutely no control over their weight (or any other issue perceived as personal). Each person has some agency—but this agency

exists within social, biological, cultural, and economic limits and constraints. And it is these constraints that we neglect to acknowledge as we should due to a radically individuated neoliberal subjectivity. As Guthman and Dupuis argue, “we have all but abandoned notions of citizenship as participation in the public sphere for a more individualized notion of self as the citizen consumer whose contribution to society is mainly to purchase the products of global capitalism” (443). And this brings me to the next aspect of neoliberalism that I wish to discuss: consumerism.

### **Consumerism**

*Neoliberal governmentality makes subjects into consumers to prop up a fragile capitalism. We are told to have all we want, to have as much as we want, and to have things we have not had before, in short, to be utterly acquiescent to being a good consumer. -Guthman and DuPuis 445*

In order to function, capitalism needs good consumers who are willing to accept the commodification of everything. Neoliberal capital must always and endlessly expand (investors will not invest in a company that is not growing), but endless expansion means that there must always be the creation of more markets where none existed before. Our water is now commodified in ways we could not have imagined thirty years ago (now we have vitamin water and electrolyte water). Air, too, is commodified: think of air fresheners, air conditioners, and air cleansers. Even more surprising is that a prison inmate can pay for an upgraded cell, hunters can pay for the right to kill endangered species, and companies can pay for the right to pollute the atmosphere (Sandel location 42-48). As Guthman and DuPuis put it, “[capitalist] expansion crucially depends on

selling more and more goods and services to people whose basic needs (a somewhat ideological term) have already been met” (443).

Therefore neoliberalism must continue to create concerns and problems that consumerism can solve. Ugliness is a great example of such a problem: the neoliberal subject who constantly examines themselves for ugliness has a body that is carefully partitioned and examined minutely—because the flawed, blemished, and imperfect body is what generates the many beauty troubles which can be attended to with a plethora of beauty products from which the consumer can “freely” choose. The quantity of consumer products available to solve just one of “problem” is so enormous that a good consumer could easily spend hours exercising their right to freely choose between products.

Neoliberal consumerism is the illusion of free choice—the freedom to choose between commodities substitutes for a more substantial freedom, such as the freedom to feel beautiful naturally or organically. And a return to the obesity topic is useful here, for it is a site wherein neoliberal consumerism develops a public problem (experienced as personal) and then presents a personalized and purchasable solution to the problem: both the problem and the solution interpellate a consumer-subject who is heavily disciplined while understanding him/herself to be free.

While we normally assume that excessive body fat is an individual responsibility, the food industry, like any other industry under neoliberal capitalism, prioritizes investor’s interests and sales growth over and above all else—this means that the risks of things like genetically modified foods or animal growth hormones are not examined as closely as they should be (Tillotson, 242), nor are the health risks of cheap ingredients

like partially hydrogenated oils or high fructose corn syrup adequately weighed against the increase in profits that these ingredients create for big food companies. Thus economic policies over the past century are responsible for a vast oversupply of nutritionally depleted food that is available everywhere for a very low cost (Tillotson, 244). Furthermore, over-production and over-supply puts food companies under pressure to distribute, and as a result portion sizes increase. Unfortunately, portion sizes affect us unconsciously and we tend to consume more without really realizing that we are overeating when portions are larger (Ledikwe et.al.). To keep the investors happy and the economy growing, neoliberalism needed to create a population that would consume food endlessly.

Paradoxically, however, being a good consumer—a good neoliberal subject—involves *both* getting fat *and* losing weight. At the same time that “eating becomes the embodiment of that which today’s society holds sacred: consumption...we buy and eat to be good subjects,” thinness “effectively becomes a criterion by which one is treated as a subject” (Guthman and DuPuis 443, 445). Neoliberalism has created a weight loss and dieting industry that effectively commodified the solution to the problems it created through cheap, highly accessible, and nutritionally bankrupt food commodities in the first place. Billion dollar industries to help people lose weight are the sister industries of the billion dollar industries that help people gain weight, and neoliberalism profits on both ends. According to Guthman and DuPuis, “This double fix of eating and dieting...is not epiphenomenal, it has become a central piece of the U.S. economy” (441).

Under neoliberalism, wealthy corporations get wealthier, and they often do so by getting the consumer to consume in whatever way possible. To keep the consumer buying increasingly more unneeded goods and services is one of neoliberalism's top priorities, and the human consequences of consumer culture, such as the emotional insecurity and stigmatization attached to obesity or "ugliness" are the side-effects.

### **De-politicized**

*...the conversion of socially, economically, and politically produced problems into consumer items depoliticizes what has been historically produced, and it especially depoliticizes capitalism itself. Moreover, as neoliberal political rationality devolves both political problems and solutions from public to private, it further dissipates political or public life: the project of navigating the social becomes entirely one of discerning, affording, and procuring a personal solution to every socially produced problem. -Wendy Brown, 694*

A radically individuated and responsabilized (self-governing) subjectivity, as described in the previous sections, is both cause and consequence of disengagement from collective welfare. Neoliberalism makes overwhelming demands on the individual through endless directives to carry out ever more projects of self-care and self-improvement, so that more often than not, instead of being concerned for one's community, or the self as it belongs to social class, political party, ethnic identity, gender, or other identity group, the neoliberal subject draws a small box around their personal well-being and spends very little time actively engaged with anything outside of that



box.<sup>2</sup> Hofmeyr explains, “the neoliberal subject is no longer a citizen amongst others empowered to challenge and change the policies governing its existence, but an insular entity merely struggling to survive in a world that is not of its own making” (26). This tendency to retreat into privacy explains why we have not seen more political organizing around economic injustices, and an excellent example of the failure to organize can be found if we look to the weakening of workers unions.

A 2014 study conducted by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) shows that workers unions are not strong enough to combat a global system that seeks to deprive them of basic rights and dignity. According to ITUC,

workers in at least 53 countries have either been dismissed or suspended from their jobs for attempting to negotiate better working conditions. In the vast majority of these cases the national legislation offered either no protection or did not provide dissuasive sanctions in order to hold abusive employers accountable. Indeed, employers and governments are complicit in silencing workers’ voices against exploitation. (5)

The United States is one of the offending countries, described as “systematically violating” workers rights (15). The ITUC uses a scale of one to five (one being good) as a way to rate countries in terms of how well they provide for the rights of workers. The “four” ranking, the one earned by the United States, is described as follows: “The government and or companies are engaged in serious efforts to crush the collective voice of workers putting fundamental rights under continuous threat” (15).

Although the Walmart Corporation was not specifically discussed by the ITUC, the way Walmart treats its workers is a good example of the effort to crush worker’s

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<sup>2</sup> An exception to this might be contributions made to on-line forums, but as I will explain in chapter four, this type of political activity is largely inefficacious.

rights. Walmart is a primary player in the neoliberal economy. It is the biggest private employer in the United States (Hofmeyr 11), and is on par with Exxon, GM, and IBM as one of the largest businesses in the world (Semmens). A documentary by Robert Greenwald called “Walmart: The High Cost of Low Prices” illustrates that, in spite of Walmart’s huge success and substantial profit margin, Walmart employees are denied overtime pay, told to rely on public assistance for health care, and actively prevented from unionizing. During one scene in the film, John Lehman, a Walmart store manager, reports that Walmart executives are “relentless in their search for union activity...to squash it, kill it,” and illustrates his point with an anecdote. One day one of his workers left an anonymous note on a computer screen that simply said “We need to unionize.” Lehman decided to report this incident to upper management, and on that very afternoon, three men flew in on a corporate jet to visit the store, uncover the threat, and eliminate it (Greenwald). In an environment such as this one, wherein a worker can easily get fired for the mere expression of a pro-union feeling, it is no wonder that most people are inclined to prioritize their own individual survival over the socioeconomic group to which they belong. When workers are punished for identifying with and fighting for a collective, “personal benefits [begin] to outweigh collective action, thereby strengthening the position of employers” (Dean, *The Communist...* 62). Walmart wields a frightening degree of coercive power over its employees, and deliberately manipulates them to tolerate abusive working conditions as a matter of course:

[Walmart] manipulates people into working over-time without pay by chronically under-staffing its shops to make their employees work harder, by using part-time labourers who are forced to do more. To make the employees exploit themselves, Wal-Mart uses all the textbook capitalist

tricks: abusing their taking pride in their work – the Protestant work ethic –, playing on their feelings of patriotism, arguing that loads of people would like to do the job in their place or, inversely, complaining that it is difficult to find the right personnel, that business is slacking off. (Hofmeyr 39)

One of the ways that Walmart employers manipulate their workers, as Hofmeyr mentions, is by tapping into their identification with the protestant work ethic. Although it is unlikely that the majority of Walmart employees specifically identify as protestants, most Americans are deeply influence by what can now be called a neoliberal belief in the transcendent agency of individual hard work. This belief often leads people to imagine only one solution to poor working conditions and financial insecurity: the solution is to avail themselves, as individuals, to work harder and longer hours. Even though worker’s rights law affords them the prerogative to organize against an exploitative employer, more often than not, workers like those at Walmart choose acquiescence to injustice over the risk of unemployment. While I do not doubt the virtues of personal dedication to hard work, the cause of public (but privately felt) financial insecurity is much more social and collective than it is personal under neoliberal rule. Since neoliberalism has become the dominant economic model, here is what has happened to average household finances: in the 1970s, average households in America had \$35,143 in disposable income, housing cost \$15,579, health care expenses cost \$1,686, and college cost \$903. Whereas, in 2010, households had \$26,578 of disposable income, housing cost \$21,684, healthcare cost \$7,082, and college cost \$1,833<sup>3</sup> (“Inequality...”). These numbers do not indicate that

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<sup>3</sup> Note that this is a conservative estimate for the cost of college. Attending the University of California in Riverside, for example, costs between 20,000 to 30,000 for the average undergraduate.

Americans are lazier these days and therefore have less money. In fact, we are working harder than we used to: “the salaried middle classes...have seen their yearly working hours increase by 660 hours—20 percent more than twenty-five years ago” (Hunnicutt ix).

Often we arrive at the conclusion that if we were tougher on ourselves—if we worked harder—we would be better off financially and therefore happier. Yet our determination to overextend ourselves at work can be a self-defeating preoccupation, and one that distracts us from the larger political causes of financial insecurity: exorbitant student loan debt, the high cost of health insurance, a minimum wage that can’t sustain a person’s basic needs. Essentially, neoliberal governmentality has made us too busy self-recriminating to take action against a political-economic structure that has all but abandoned the welfare state.

Not only is collective action likely to result in imprisonment, fines, or the loss of work, but joining a collective may also have a stigma attached to it: under neoliberalism, sacrificing for one’s community is often seen as recourse for those who are frail or deficient. Zygmunt Baumann argues that in a highly individualized and (supposedly) meritocratic society, communalism is for the weak: the assumption for many neoliberal elites is that the powerful and strong do not need community. Obligations one must make to the community are perceived as burdensome rather than empowering, and it is desirable for the individual to be “liquid”—uprooted and free-floating—tied to nothing and no-one. Community, Bauman argues, is becoming a phenomenon of the past because global economic modernity has so thoroughly individualized the subject that it has

become shameful to join a community for which one will need to make sacrifices. The successful individual is understood as someone who feels his/her freedom to be hampered by community: “the bubble in which the new cosmopolitan business and culture-industry global elite spend most of their lives is...a community free zone” (57).

Reluctance among academics to challenge a new model of academia, one wherein a competitive business model that has begun to dominate, is an instantiation of anti-communalism that is close to home. As I shall elaborate upon later in this chapter, decreases in public funding and the casualization of academic labor in the form of adjunct positions coupled with an increase in administrative adoption of market-centered strategic plans have altered the space of academia, weakening it as space separate from—and free to critique—neoliberal attitudes and policies.

### **Affective Neoliberalism**

*As the pursuit of material goods quickens into a maddening pace, homo economicus paradoxically becomes increasingly insecure—insecure in the sense that this mad scramble does not safe guard him/her from risk and loss, but instead strips away all forms of assurance. -Hofmeyr 29*

The affective experience of neoliberalism in everyday life is the sense or condition of living in a constant state of precarity and urgency, as subjective experience revolves around the continual reworking of our private or self-interested strategies for survival. If the affective is adequately defined as the “precognitive sensory experience and relation to surroundings” (Cvetkovich 4), then ours is one of anxious struggle, rush and exhaustion mixed perhaps with fleeting moments of escape. For cultural theorists like

Lauren Berlant, Robert McChesney, Jodi Dean, Ann Cvetkovich, or Sherry Turkle, our collective sensory-emotional experience of this cultural juncture creates an affective atmosphere that is anxious, weary, depressed, lonely and often politically numb. Robert McChesney says that we are “an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless” (Intro to Chomsky 11). For Berlant, our affective historical moment, “a stretched-out present,” is marked by what she calls “cruel optimism” (5). Berlant argues that the last three decades of neoliberalism have retracted the American dreams of “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” but we are nevertheless attached to the sites or scenes of these fantasies (3). Cruel optimism, a type of false hope, comes into play when those attachments are actually “fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer;” we keep scrambling to get closer to “the good life” in spite of how it eludes our grasp (51). Adjusting to the loss of the American Dream is characterized by Berlant as an ongoing calamity, a “shared historical sense” that we are living in an extended moment of shock and adjustment wherein a sense of crisis is an affective response to the ordinary (5-6). Following Berlant in her attention to affect and public feeling, Cvetkovich argues that “depression, or alternative accounts of what gets called depression, is thus a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms” (11).

The powerful, unpredictable, rapid and erratic movements of global capital has created this unique affective environment in our country—one of profound insecurity. Millions of lower middle-class Americans live with the persistent fear that at any

moment, the loss of a job or a house could destroy their lives. Berlant describes destabilization under neoliberalism as follows:

neoliberal practices mobilize this instability [the instability of capital] in unprecedented ways. The profit interests of the owners of neoliberal capital are served by the shrinkage of the social welfare state, the privatization of what had once been publicly held utilities and institutions, the increase in state, banking, and corporate pension insecurity, and the ever more flexible practices of contractual reciprocity between owners and workers, ...add to this the global transformation of unions from a force driving forward security and upward mobility to administrative entities managing workers decreasing legitimacy for claims-making on profit and security. (192)

The resulting sense of precarity is not limited to the very poor and is not a fleeting concern, but rather an ongoing daily affect, an underlying experience of instability that has steadily spread into the middle classes. As Berlant explains “across geopolitical and biopolitical locations, the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis” (7).

As social beings, most of us are motivated to feel that we cohabit symbiotically with others; we long to be part of stable institutions that we can depend on to meet our needs and provide us with a sustained sense of belonging. If we have to ask (as many Americans do) whether or not we have these institutions, we feel perpetually shaky, anxious that we will fall through the cracks. For most Americans, there is no real assurance that we will not be abandoned by the government that is supposed to provide for us, and no assurance that we are part of solid communities that we can rely on. Recent cuts to public spending and politicians who threaten to utterly abolish social welfare make those of us who weren't born into privilege feel particularly vulnerable and terrified. Under neoliberalism, it is only the richest who really feel safe, for everyone else

“resources and lives [are] made and unmade according the dictates and whims of the market” (Berlant 192). Prior to neoliberalism, when the Keynesian paradigm prevailed, the middle class felt a base-line sense of protection, but now we are experiencing what psychiatrist Lynne Layton characterizes as the social trauma of governmental abandonment. Layton practices psychiatry with the understanding that that the psychic and the social are intertwined (claiming it is only the neoliberal illusion of privatization that leads us to believe otherwise) (317). Over the past thirty years, Layton says, there has been a “whittling away ...of a sense of safety, security and trust in those who are supposed to be watching out for the public’s welfare” (304). When the government fails in its job to provide us (most of us, anyway) with basic security, Layton says that what results is no less than trauma. Indeed, most middle class Americans feel a deep unease, dubious about whether their futures will be happy, burdened by the heavy consciousness that the jobs, money, and people they rely on for survival cannot be depended on. This excruciating awareness—that our jobs, homes, and lives are marked by fragility and tenuity—makes it very hard to rest in the comfort of being “normal,” which is what creates the neoliberal affect that Berlant repeatedly calls “precarity.”

Since we are far from living in that protected space where self-actualization is a reasonable pursuit, many of us stay optimistic by fantasizing about a life of privilege—a space of rest and comfort—that American Dream which is promised to us but lies just out of reach for the majority. As we fantasize, we tirelessly struggle merely to survive and have the things that we feel normal people have—a car, a phone, a place to live, a computer, enough money to pay for electricity. A recent (2012) documentary directed by



Harry and Joe Gantz called “American Winter” depicts the uncertainty and instability that Berlant describes so well. It shows the heartbreaking sense of abandonment and failure that stubbornly remains the reality underneath the veneer of American Dream fantasies. The film is a realistic look at the struggles of middle class families in Portland, Oregon, as they cope with the financial hardship that afflicted millions these past few years. It illustrates the emotional pain of hanging on desperately to a sense of normality while the things that make a family “normal” are slipping from grasp. In the documentary, middle class families start to fall through the cracks when the father or mother loses a job, then a house, then the means to pay utility bills. These lives are an excruciating barrage of impossible decisions—should I pay the utility bill or take my child to the doctor? Should I put gas in my car or buy groceries? Living like this, and /or knowing someone who does, or knowing that many do, causes the anxiety that surrounds us like fog—we might call this the neoliberal affective environment.

Also contributing to this affect is the way there is so much about contemporary life that cannot be trusted to endure. The dramas of upheaval and change increasingly characterize our jobs, relationships, and homes, so that we cannot expect most things in life to be more than temporary. As Berlant writes “the work of [capitalist] (re)production has been shaped by the increasing demand for flexibility and the increasing expectation that *in love as at work*, one might well be only a temporary employee, without affective or material benefits reliably in the present or the future” (185, my italics). A lack of continuity in personal and professional life causes great emotional strain, and although we long for the stability and comfort of community, we live under conditions that make

such a solidity less and less available. Baumann, who I mentioned earlier, has written an entire book about the loss of community, and his writing captures the affective consequence of this loss:

Gone is the certainty that ‘we will meet again’; that we will be meeting repeatedly and for a very long time to come—and that therefore society can be presumed to have a long memory and what we do to each other today will come to comfort us or grieve us in the future; that what we do to each other has more than episodic significance. (Baumann 48)

Affective neoliberalism is therefore an underlying awareness of loneliness and depression, often marked by a fear of losing what we hold as “normal” middle class life; furthermore, since we are overworked, neoliberal affect might also be described as the persistent bodily experience of exhaustion. Neoliberalism may not feel this way for the top richest one percent, but for most of us, these are hard times. We survive emotionally through fantasy, by buying the goods and services that put us in the scene of this fantasy, but as Berlant says, our fantasizing is driven by “cruel optimism.”

### **Neoliberalism and the Corporate University**

For the higher education system, neoliberal values translate into hiring teachers as cheaply as possible (sometimes this means a faculty consisting entirely of adjuncts), acquiring a brand-name that sells, and generating income through partnerships with the corporate sector. This commodification of the university has occurred due to decreases in funding from the state—a situation which has forced universities to work with the corporate sector in order to generate revenue. Critics of the neoliberal university represent it along the following lines:

rather than defining higher education as the development of critical thinking, the nurturing of civic responsibility, or the pursuit of

knowledge...contemporary colleges and universities see the purpose of education in more practical terms, such as preparing students for jobs....[They] define both knowledge and job preparation as commodities....Increasingly, they also see themselves as a business....Rather than universities being subordinated to the production and transmittal of knowledge, knowledge is now subordinated to the needs of universities for profit and recognition. (Tuchman 11)

The pursuit of profit and recognition are usually prioritized no matter what the cost to traditional values of education for civil democracy. A daring work of muckraking journalism published in 2009 called *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University* by Gaye Tuchman illustrates what a major university looks like under the reign of neoliberalism. She claims that what the university wants and actively pursues is far from a quality education for a more informed citizenry, but rather more money through grants, licensing patents, athletic spectacles, and a competitive brand-name. According to Tuchman, the new structure of power in this university involves a centralized managerial administration that is stripping faculty members of the authority they once had (indeed, Benjamin Ginsberg recently wrote a book entirely about this issue: *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-administrative University*); and in an affront to the ideal of knowledge for its own sake, administrators favor faculty who are good at generating revenue through partnerships with industry. Often the main goal of the neoliberal university is to compete well in the *US News and World Report* rankings: “[I]n the process of chasing a good ranking, colleges and universities transform themselves to conform to the indices that *US News and World Report* employs” (Tuchman 118).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The National Research Council (NRC) also ranks universities, but only doctoral programs.

Unfortunately, this obsession with the *US News and World Report* means that whatever the magazine does not measure (i.e. rhetorical literacy) receives little support or funding. Humanities courses are sidelined because they do not further the objectives of university leaders whose corporate values of short-term profit-making often clash with academic tradition. Indeed, evidence for this clash can be found in a recent book called *Remaking the American University: Market Smart and Mission-Centered* (2005) by Robert Zemsky, Gregory Wegner, William Massy.

Despite their self-proclaimed alliance with academic values, for Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy (all authors who hold leadership positions in higher education) the meaning of “value” is largely shaped by neoliberalism. At the outset of their book they appear to be concerned with “what is lost when universities are shaped almost exclusively by the wants of students seeking educational credentials and business and governmental agencies seeking research outcomes,” and seem to lament the loss of “the idea that knowledge has other than instrumental purposes, that ideas are important whether or not they confer personal advantage” (7). Yet in spite of these sentiments suggesting an alignment with anti-neoliberal voices, their main contention is that the universities ought to privatize—that in fact universities would better serve the public through privatization. They argue that inevitably the majority of funding for the university will continue to come from the corporate sector, so the university ought to shape itself accordingly by becoming “market-smart.” They believe that market-smarts will lead to “more publicly relevant” universities.

To prove their point about the inherent goodness of privatization, Zemsky, Wegner and Massy use the example of the University of Michigan, which used to be financially on par with UC Berkeley but is now wealthier because it privatized its sources of income. They applaud U Michigan's "market-smart" decision to depend upon "market-generated student tuition and fee revenue" instead of state funding, emphasizing that U Michigan now has "core revenues that exceed those of Berkeley by more than \$400 million per year" (8). Zemsky et al. not only think that raising the cost of tuition and fees was a market-smart decision, but also one that did not make U Michigan any less of a public good. Their evidence for this, however, is shaky: they claim that the controversy generated by U Michigan's affirmative action program is proof of the university's value as a public good, yet there is no clear connection between the privatization of U Michigan's revenue sources and the law suit regarding their affirmative action policy. Furthermore, the fact of the law suit (brought to the Supreme Court by Caucasian plaintiffs who believed they were denied admission on the basis of race) is not clear evidence that the university is a public good. An affirmative action policy that favors minorities does not render a university a public good, especially if those minorities are charged exorbitant tuition prices and forced to take multiple loans. What these authors seem to be missing is the contradiction between a traditional academic value (in this case "the public good") and marketplace values. A public good is a service that is non-exclusive and available to everyone, so by increasing the cost of tuition and fees one might argue that U Michigan became less accessible and less of a public good, affirmative action policy or not.

There is also another way that Zemsky et al. manage to side-step an important contradiction between the neoliberal approach to education and the more traditional meaning of higher learning. Many academics understand an educational system to be of quality if it recognizes the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and nurtures alternative or new ideas *whether or not they are tied to competitive advantage or financial gain*. Zemsky et al. confront this traditional ideal when they claim that “the only way in which educational quality will come to matter is when there is a demonstrable, market-based demand for it. Educational quality will have to become a real and tangible advantage in the marketplace” (44). Their support of a reciprocal relationship between educational quality and the marketplace is problematic for those of us who are devoted to academia precisely because it grants us the space to value that which is *not* an advantage in the marketplace. A quality education enables a person to gain distance and perspective; it provides the intellectual skills necessary to be *critical* of mainstream values and to understand our current neoliberal moment historically—thus conceived, educational quality could not become “a real and tangible advantage in the marketplace” unless it ceased to be of quality. Zemsky et al. also argue that educational “quality” would matter more to our society if we “join[ed] in developing consumer information that focused on learning outcomes as a significant measure of educational quality” (44). Yet scores of consumer information on “outcomes” (graduation rates, test scores) already exist and for many educators this focus on outcomes has made “educational quality” worse. If the education system continues to be driven by “outcomes” (often measured only with numbers) the “consumer” will continue to perceive it as a product or commodity rather

than an experience that fosters life-long intellectual flexibility and concern for civil justice—qualities that are perhaps too multiplicitous and amorphous to be measured and priced. The question that Zemsky et al. avoid asking is whether the sole purpose of education should be to serve a given economic system, or whether it also has value as something separate from and critical of that system.

Zemsky, Wegner and Massy also suggest that it is silly to harbor the hope that market forces will someday play a less dominant role in university policy: “No matter how practiced the disaffected become at denouncing the ‘commodification’ of higher education, the conversion of their institutions into market enterprises will proceed apace, if for no other reason than that market income continues to substitute for public appropriation” (7). Yet this position—that corporate invasion is inevitable—is a kind of capitulation to neoliberal values, for it assumes that any attempt to oppose the commodification of education is futile. For Zemsky et al., privatization and corporatization will continue to “proceed apace” whether we like it or not. Yet for faculty and students who do not stand to gain from the privatization of education, such a capitulation to neoliberalism does not make much sense.

Failing to understand this, however, Zemsky et al. perceive academics to be in denial of their jobs as people who operate within a business, provide a service to a consumer, and sell a product—and consequently misrepresent themselves to the public: “higher education often misrepresents to itself and others what it actually produces and which markets it ultimately serves.... [W]hile most believe the task of universities is to supply quality educations at reasonable prices, their real business is to sell competitive

advantage at necessarily high prices” (71). Perhaps Zemsky et al. are correct that universities have become businesses that sell expensive competitive advantage, but their rhetoric also implies that this situation is natural and good. The language they use reifies the “real business” of the university, obfuscating the reality of our institutions as the products of collective imagining and constructing. One might point out that the presentism leading to the unquestioning acceptance of the neoliberal university is another way of being in denial—denial that all of our actualities are historical-cultural constructions, existing within power-relations and ultimately changeable. Certainly, neoliberal policy is beyond *individual* control and is often affectively experienced as beyond human control, but even the global economy, we must acknowledge, is a human creation—and if affectively aware and motivated, we could change the “business” of higher education. The corporate university is not a fixed reality as these authors imply, but a much more complex and changeable network of energies in which human groups do in fact exercise agency. Marc Bousquet, in his book *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, uses an epigraph to draw our attention to this more empowered way of approaching our situation:

though institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices) and so are changeable.... [F]urther, for those of you who think such optimism is politically naïve and hopelessly liberal and romantic, we believe that we (and you too) have to commit to this hypothesis anyway, the alternative—political despair—being worse. (Porter et al. qtd. in Bousquet 157)

I argue that by prioritizing Rhetorical Literacy in undergraduate education, we can begin to exercise more control over how the “business” of education is defined in the public



sphere. If those of us in Rhet/Comp bring a richer and more thoroughly researched definition of “educational quality” to the table, it will become more difficult for administrators to conflate “quality” with “competitive advantage” when evaluating a university.

The problem is that our affective condition makes it all too easy to agree with Zemsky, Wegner and Massy. A passive silence from the majority indicates a sad acquiescence: a general sense that we might as well start to play the corporate game since there is no-one imagining a clear alternative. Borrowing from Cvetkovich, I suggest that political depression as affective response to neoliberalism might be a disease academia is currently battling. Cvetkovich uses the term “political depression” to describe the main affective reaction to the overwhelming invasion of neoliberal policies; and in the university, this manifests as helplessness in the face of corporatization. For why else would we be so ready to believe—in a nation that is so proud of the revolutionary power of its people—that we could not possibly generate the political pressure it would take to change the amount of money our government is willing to invest in education? While neoliberalism continues to try to “reform” education through privatization, many educators stand by and watch—not because we rationally conclude that ingenuity and motivation could not possibly reverse this trend—but perhaps because we are too weary, overworked, and isolated in our own specialty to imagine organizing and fighting back. There is an unyielding pressure upon academics to compete as individuals instead of working with and for the community of intellectuals. Benda Hofmeyr complains that “service to your community of scholars such as the peer review of papers, journal editing,

conference organization or book reviews is rendered a waste of valuable time. What is decisive for favorable performance evaluations and promotions are accredited publications” (24). When they must isolate themselves for concentrated periods of time to get their articles and books written, it is easy for academics to become more self-invested than socio-politically invested. Hofmeyr goes so far as to say that “accomplished university professors cannot but be model neoliberal subjects—too busy getting published, (self)-evaluated and rated to question the new rules of the corporate game” (24).

Moreover, books like the one written by Zemsky et al. allow us to justify our own political inactivity: we rationalize that privatization and corporatization are the only “practical” courses of action and therefore we really have no choice but to accept them. But we must ask: for *whom* is privatization practical? We must acknowledge that while administrators stand to gain from the “practicality” of “market-smarts,” professors and students face increasingly impoverished working and learning conditions as a result of corporatizing trends.

Indeed, the “practicality” of Zemsky, Wegner and Massy’s approach to managing a university is probably most appealing to administrators who gain from market-oriented values. *Bloomberg* reported in 2010 that at the most market-oriented universities (the for-profit ones like The University of Phoenix) CEO’s are making as much as twenty-six times the amount of the highest paid president at a traditional university. *Bloomberg* reports that in 2009, Robert Silberman, CEO of Strayer Education Inc., collected 41.9 million, while Drew Faust, president at Harvard, made around 800,000 (Hechinger &

Lauerman). There can be no doubt that at the higher administrative level, there is much to be gained by running a university like a corporation, and in spite of Zemsky et al.'s claim that they care deeply for educational values, their theories leave no room for skepticism and questioning of our very own historical-cultural moment. At the root of their argument is the reification of market fundamentalism. Their attitude itself is evidence that in creating a people that is supportive, compliant and amenable to its agenda, neoliberalism has successfully manipulated our values, beliefs, patterns of thinking—indeed, our affective condition— and this socio-cultural fallout is what concerns me as I explain how Rhetorical Literacy works to inspire ideological awareness and a sense of political agency.

### **Rhetorical literacy and Undergraduate Education**

One reason I suggest a focus on Rhetorical Literacy in undergraduate education is to counteract a problem within institutionalized power-knowledge systems that neoliberalism only intensifies. Many educational critics—Paulo Freire, Paul Willis, John Guillory, Chris Hedges and Susan Searles Giroux to name a few—criticize our education system for reproducing relations of power that deprive many groups of voice and agency. Our educational institutions and policies work like factories to separate upper classes from lower classes, and this results in the systematic production of two types of people: the “experts” (elites) and the consumers of “expertise” (the masses). This dissertation works to resolve a dangerous consequence of this set-up: that only the experts and only those within their own fields understand that texts “have authors,” “make claims,” and are “acts that can be understood only within a temporal and interpersonal framework”

(Geisler 87). In other words, our system helps to ensure that only a select minority of people ever come to understand texts on a rhetorical level, and among those of that minority, very few can be relied upon to understand the rhetorics operating in fields outside of their own specialty. Cheryl Geisler, author of *Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise*, reports that for most undergraduate students and sometimes for those even in graduate school “knowledge still has no rhetorical dimension,” which means that non-specialists are in the powerless position of believing that texts exist autonomously (or in a neutral space that remains beyond skepticism or question) (87). I believe that this educational problem is lurking behind Lisa Duggan’s observation that “the most successful ruse of neoliberal dominance in both global and domestic affairs is the definition of economic policy as primarily a matter of neutral, technical expertise” (xiv). For neither neoliberalism’s “ruse” (nor any ruse for that matter) would be so successful if our college students were rhetorically literate enough to understand “expertise” as largely a function of rhetorical devices.

If we look to how the university creates its objectives in the historical-cultural moment of neoliberalism it becomes clear why the rhetorical dimension of knowledge is not a priority. Analyzing the means of persuasion or the conditions of persuasion in any given field is a mentally challenging, time-consuming activity, and I argue that the rewards of this type of analysis are not immediately apparent in today’s educational climate.

Although the *US News* rankings, as Frank Donoghue puts it, “appear every year as if carved into stone tablets,” they have only been in existence since 1983 and have

risen in power by feeding off a neoliberal culture obsessed with competition and measurable outcomes. The neoliberal vocabulary of contemporary universities naturalizes a system in which the all-encompassing purpose of the institution is economic growth, and one major way the university creates revenue is by competing with other universities to get a bigger and more prestigious brand-name. A better brand-name increases the cultural capital of an institution and allows it to charge higher tuition; thus a higher position in the rankings put out by the *US News and World Report* has become an extremely important goal for American universities. Zemsky, Wegner and Massy discuss this competition for prestige at length and emphasize the importance of seeing the *US News* rankings from a “market-smart” perspective. They do not object to the way the magazine measures competitive advantage instead of quality education—to the contrary, their main concern is that academics learn to understand the economic urgency of competing well in the *US News* rankings: “The higher the ranking—or conversely, the better the market position—the better the institution is able to attract students, faculty, and revenue.” (41).

Since the *US News* rankings are such a powerful factor in determining the goals of a university, their method of evaluation—which doesn’t include a measurement of anything resembling rhetorical literacy—explains why undergraduate instruction in this area is lacking.

The ranking metrics have changed over the years but not very much. Academic reputation, financial resources, graduation rates and test scores always appear in the top five most important categories (Gater). In 2011 -2012, 22-25% of the score came from

an institutions' *Academic Reputation*, which is a measure that uses a peer-assessment survey to arrive at a score (for national institutions, a survey given to High School counselors also counts for 33%). *Faculty Resources* and *Graduation and Retention Rates* are the second most important categories, each counting for 20% of the total score (although for regional institutions, graduation rate counts for 25% rather than 20%). Included in the category of *Faculty Resources*, in order of importance, are tenure and tenure-track faculty compensation, class sizes under nineteen students, the percentage of faculty with the top terminal degree in their field, class sizes that are above fifty students, the percentage of full time faculty, and student/faculty ratios. The other second most important category is *Graduation and Retention Rate*; 80% of this score comes from the graduation rate and 20% from the freshman retention score. The third most important category, worth 15% of an institutions' score, is called *Student Selectivity*, and is measured by acceptance rate and high school class standing in the top 10% (or top 25% for regional schools)—but the most important measure in this category is the SAT scores of the incoming class, which accounts for 50% of the *Student Selectivity* score. *Financial Resources* account for 10% of the total score, *Alumni Giving* accounts for 5%, and for national schools, *Graduation Rate Performance* accounts for 7.5%. The problematic ethical and philosophical questions behind these methods for arriving at a nation-wide hierarchy for colleges and universities, however, are almost always left unexamined and the list itself is taken as truth (a sign in itself that rhetorical literacy of the average consumer leaves a lot to be desired).

Given the power of this system of measurement—Donoghue claims that “[its] effect is immediate and far-reaching and is considerably more powerful, both inside and outside academia, than any discrete argument could be”—it is safe to assume that university administrators are often establishing goals with the *US News* rankings in mind (116). In fact, according to Donoghue, Tuchman, and Ronald Ehrenberg, universities remake and restructure themselves in precisely the specific ways that will yield better numbers in the measuring system employed by *US News* (Donoghue 119, Tuchman 118, Ehrenberg 30-35). Therefore, understanding the goals of the university as motivated by the rankings can enlighten us as to why Rhetorical Literacy is not a more pronounced concern in undergraduate education. The question I seek to answer here is this: how do institutions work on increasing their scores in those areas measured by *US News* and how does this work undermine the value of Rhetorical Literacy?

Some of the categories of measurement are somewhat beyond the control of administrators. For example, a reputation is an intangible and largely immeasurable thing, yet it is the most important category in the *US News* metric because an institution’s image is so valuable to degree-seeking students, so a survey is used to try to gauge the strength of a university’s reputation. The survey (managed by IPSOS Public Affairs) asks presidents and provosts to vote for peer institutions by evaluating their competitors using criteria such as which schools are doing the best job with academic excellence or which schools have the most dedicated faculty. One major problem with the data collected is that it probably does not even represent the opinions of the majority. In 2012, for example, out of the 4,571 academics who were sent questionnaires, only 44% responded

(Morse and Flanigan). Since the vote is subjective and it is hard to predict who will respond, there is not a lot that universities can do to influence these numbers, even though some places actually try to influence competitors by investing in expecting publicity materials and sending them to prominent administrators at peer institutions (Ehrenberg 31). However, it is hard to evaluate how much influence such publicity has on the rankings, and according to Gaye Tuchman, administrators will focus on the *US News* measurements that they have the most control over (121).

Practices that administrators use to move up in the rankings, like increasing salary for tenure and tenure-track faculty and decreasing pay to lecturers (which increases their *Faculty Compensation* rating) and hiring more adjuncts (which increases their *Student-Faculty Ratio*) are some that influence the corporatization of the university. When the system allows for this type of inequity, the voices and opinions of some of the most dedicated teachers in the university (lecturers and TAs) are silenced. Yet it is these voices that need to be heard, for it is largely adjuncts and TAs that teach freshman and sophomores—the years in which Rhetorical Literacy needs to be acquired (before students advance to more specialized knowledge).

Administrative concern for the *Graduation and Retention Rate* measurement is another problem for Rhetorical Literacy. Zemsky, Wegner and Massy, claim that the graduation rate—which they refer to as the “output measure”—is the most important *US News* measurement because it illustrates how well the school is doing at serving its consumers the product it wants. According to these authors retaining students is also a priority because “a student retained is a student paying tuition” (43). While motivation to



improve graduation rate might have some positive effects on an institution, unfortunately one of easiest ways to improve graduation rate is by relaxing standards. As Ehrenberg points out, *US News* doesn't distinguish between methods the university uses to improve graduation rate (32); so a university that chooses to develop and expand instruction rather than design more lenient courses does not get a higher ranking. While small class sizes and more individual attention for students would be assets in the project of Rhetorical Literacy, these practices cost more than it does to alter courses so they are easier for students to pass. So when colleges cater to undergraduates (especially first year students) they often end up eliminating the more challenging mental exercises that Rhetorical Literacy demands.

Attention to graduation rate also undermines Rhetorical Literacy because it devalues general education. When universities attempt to retain first year students by keeping them happy, they loosen their general education requirements (which first year students might consider a waste of time or "busywork"). For a better graduation rate, one of the things that Zemsky et al. suggest is "more willingness to serve vocational interests during the years traditionally devoted to general education" (43).

Traditionally a comprehensive college education as one that stresses academic reading and writing processes as fostering a variety of ways of thinking about subjectivity, identity, nationality, culture, truth and justice. If we subscribe to the liberal arts tradition we think of college as helping to create adults who are broad-minded and cognitively flexible, who have cultural and rhetorical awareness beyond the college classroom and *across* the narrow confines of any one specific discipline or occupational

specialty, who are discursively aware, critical thinkers. We think of education as serving *both* this role *and* preparing students for success in the workplace. But achieving this balance—between the necessity of responding to the economic agenda of students and teaching them those critical and imaginative thinking skills that aren't necessarily “cost-efficient”—is increasingly difficult for teachers. As instructors are put under pressure to sell their courses to first year students based on student perception of what college is for—a good job—this happy-medium approach is increasingly a fiction.

The widespread consumerist mentality that education should be instrumentalized in the service of vocational knowledge means that first-year students are likely to be in school first and foremost for personal gain. Many of them want their coursework to align directly with their career goals, and they may put very little effort into any “irrelevant” or impractical material that falls under general education requirements. Of course, this attitude towards education doesn't have to be encouraged, but administrators like Zemsky et al. reinforce the idea that college education is largely a tool for neoliberal aims when they suggest less general education for first- year students.

While many aspects of Rhetorical Literacy play a highly important role in training for the professional sphere, not all of them do. For example, whereas training for a specific job involves the internalization of a single specialized rhetoric, rhetorical literacy is a generalized skill involving the ability to unpack the rhetorics behind *all* texts. Rhetorical literacy prevents premature specialization and is broad enough to cover the socio-political issues and general knowledge excluded from vocationally-directed courses. This is why attention to rhetorical literacy would probably decrease the time that

first year students invest in vocational development and why university leaders might complain of its adverse impact on graduation rate.

But herein lies the crucial problem: general education requirements were first put in place at the beginning of the twentieth century in response to over-specialization created in research universities—academic leaders were convinced that education was becoming “too narrow and utilitarian,” so they created “general education” in order to cultivate “values distinct from, or opposed to, those of the professions” (Menand 30-31). But since then college education has lost sight of the meaning and purpose behind general education, and now graduates students who might be prepared for a specific vocation but have little investment in societal issues. We have a few problems: our health care system, education system, banks and prisons; the way we produce and distribute food; racism, sexism and homophobia; technological future-shock; injustices throughout our political system; our collective historical amnesia; our denial of Peak oil and the consequences of environmental damage; the surveillance state; collapsing infrastructure; our irresponsible military actions; the fears and illusions perpetrated by the media in our society, and so on. My argument is that the issues we face as a society concern everyone and their rhetorical dimensions should not *only* be understood by specialists but *also* mobilize the generally educated citizen. Yet without Rhetorical Literacy our problems are too complex for the average person to approach—forty-two percent of college graduates never read another book (Hedges 44). In order to tackle the daunting task of engaging with the world socially and politically, college graduates must be armed with Rhetorical Literacy, i.e. they must be able to consider a problem from differing discursive frameworks and be

able to find, organize, and analyze the information they need not only to “problem solve” but also to *formulate their own problems*. Although rhetorical literacy may in fact contribute to success in the working world, its primary purpose is not about a job; rather it allows perspective on a neoliberal system that leaves so many people without good jobs, and provides the skills necessary to imagine alternatives.

Thus if we can, for a moment, set aside the idea that college education is an individual’s route to economic success and consider how an individual is networked within a society operating under neoliberal values, we may ask: are there certain literacies and habits of mind, certain methods of inquiry or mental attitudes that we have an obligation to foster in all students, regardless of what major they choose or what career they aspire to? As citizens belonging to the public sphere and facing the imperiled future of democracy, in what literacies should all our students be competent? Rhetorical Literacy demands of students that which their fast-paced, heavily mediated, often very anxious and competitive lives deny them: namely, reflection, contemplation, deliberation, and imagination—those very mental attitudes necessary for a future system of government in which people and the needs of the people are valued over a multinationals’ right to acquire wealth.

Rhetorical Literacy also addresses the most urgent pedagogical problems being discussed today among composition instructors and scholars. First, it is a literacy that emphasizes what neoliberal culture does not—that is, the slow, deliberate and critical reading, thinking, imagining and composing tied to print culture; second, it is a literacy that requires students to contextualize what they read and write using a variety of

rhetorical methods from a culturally diverse pool of rhetoricians; third, it is a literacy that encourages the ideological awareness needed to imagine alternatives to neoliberalism; fourth, it empowers students to understand their subject positions as ones that carry effective voice. Each of these aspects of Rhetorical Literacy, and the cultural situations that render them necessary, are explained in the following chapters.

## Chapter Two: Rhetorical Literacy and Print Immersion

Rhetorical Literacy is a term with transformative potential partly because the field of Rhetoric and Composition has not yet thoroughly explored what it means or its benefits; the only definitions so far offered appear within the context of computer and technological literacy.<sup>5</sup> Back in 1999, Ed Nagelhout briefly described the term in an article about the literacy goals for technical writing classes, and Stuart A. Selber's definition in 2004 was created specifically for interface design students. I suggest that these formulations of rhetorical literacy are better described as Guided Rhetorical Literacy and argue that they be sophomore year curriculum and not the focus of first year composition. Nevertheless, Selber's chapter, and to some extent Nagelhout's article, begin to explain how Rhetorical Literacy is fundamental to a student's ability to contextualize—and in this regard, they are useful to my project.

Naghelout's definition of rhetorical literacy which appears in a 1999 volume of *Technical Communication Quarterly*, is the first use of the term I can find. He says that "Rhetorical literacy introduces students to the intricacies of written communication in a wide variety of disciplines, helping them to learn the kinds of skills appropriate for future

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<sup>5</sup> There are scholars, however, who have come close to discussing rhetorical literacy when advocating rhetorical ways of thinking as an important part of education. Paul G. Cook argues that E.D. Hirsch's idea of cultural literacy (a literacy that Hirsch intended to be integral to general education) hinges on "rhetorical ability, familiarity with shifting discursive milieus" (488). For Cook, rhetorical sophistication is the part of cultural literacy that allows for "flexibility, contingency or an attunement to particularity" (492). Shannon Carter, like Cook, does not work specifically with the term "rhetorical literacy," but makes a case for the importance of rhetorical dexterity, which she says is "the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one" (14).

academic and professional endeavors by taking advantage of traditional rhetorical concepts” (289). For Nagelhout, rhetorical literacy in the technical writing classroom consists of the following:

- \*Recognize the differences between fact, inference and opinion
- \*Learn to move from writing in the classroom to professional writing on the job
- \*Develop knowledge of discourse conventions of the major field
- \*Learn to support assertions with valid evidence, which counts as evidence in the major field (291)

Naghelout’s rhetorical literacy is valuable for sophomore level writing instruction because it begins to narrow students’ focus. Rhetorical Literacy as I am formulating it is more broad-based. What Nagelhout calls rhetorical literacy is an important addition to a technical writing class, for it highlights the importance of transfer and brings the dimension of context to what his students learn. However, my formulation of the term is not designed solely for students in technical communication. Furthermore, it takes into account a lack of print literacy in the digital age and offers students ways of thinking that challenge neoliberal rationalities. Nagelhout’s definition does not employ rhetorical methods to the same degree or in the same depth as mine does, but I understand that for the technical writing classroom, knowing the difference between fact, inference and opinion, and surface-level acquaintance with the rhetorical situation (which he describes as writer, reader, text and context) is sufficient. For the purposes of first year composition, however, a broader foundation in rhetoric and a more in-depth study of rhetorical methods is ideal (see the Table of Rhetorical Methods in chapter three).

Nagelhout wants his students to see that “different disciplines have different conventions for disseminating knowledge and...supporting arguments and dispensing information” (289). Indeed this type of disciplinary awareness is crucial, for Rhetorical Literacy involves the ability to analyze discourse conventions and understand that what counts as evidence varies according to disciplinary culture. Yet, in spite of Nagelhout’s implication that Rhetorical Literacy is broad-based and includes “a wide variety of disciplines,” he wants students to analyze “the social, political, economic, and cultural hierarchies in place *in their field*” (289 emphasis mine). At its most basic, rhetoric is the art of speaking or writing persuasively or effectively, which is a simplified version of Aristotle’s delineation of rhetoric: “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (qtd. in Bizzell and Herzberg 181). The idea that Rhetorical Literacy should be confined to a “major field” or “professional writing on the job” is problematic because rhetorical intelligence ought to be much more flexible than that. A rhetorically literate person can observe “the available means of persuasion” in “*any given case*” (Bizzell et al., 181 emphasis mine). Aristotle writes: “rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects” (Bizzell et al., 181). Following Aristotle, Kenneth Burke’s opinion is that all symbolic systems and knowledge systems should be analyzed rhetorically: “rhetorical analysis throws light on...human relations generally” (Bizzell et al., 1325). But Nagelhout’s major goal for his students is not that they have an Aristotelian or Burkian birds-eye-view of language and knowledge systems but rather that



they internalize the rhetorical workings of one major field: the last three items on his list are concerned that his students learn a “special or definite” discourse instead of applying rhetorical skills to “any given case.” A more limited type of Rhetorical Literacy is necessary as students advance into specialization, but this type of Guided Rhetorical Literacy should be postponed until their sophomore year.

Nagelhout’s fourth item, which requires that students understand what type of evidence counts in a discipline, seems rooted in rhetorical theory associated with Stephen Toulmin, for it implies that students will be studying warrants and backings for claims. But while Toulmin looks at a wide variety of arguments, Nagelhout seems more concerned that students are familiar with just those assumptions or premises operating to legitimate certain types of evidence in their own field. In fact, the last three items on the list all accomplish the same thing: that is, the student learns to navigate within what Lloyd Bitzer would call the constraints of a particular specialty or occupation. Although I’m supportive of Nagelhout’s inclusion of Rhetorical Literacy in his technical writing course—it speaks to the importance of rhetoric in undergraduate education—the parameters of the term for my project are more attune to the students’ experiences as digital natives and more carefully and explicitly theorized using a broad-based understanding of rhetoric.

Stuart Selber’s formulation of Rhetorical Literacy in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* is carefully delineated, justified and well-designed for students studying computer interfaces. Selber emphasizes that rhetorically literate students are “producers and not just users of computer-based environments, people who can contribute in unique ways to the

design of literacy technologies” (140). For Selber, there are four skills associated with Rhetorical Literacy: “persuasion, deliberation, reflection, and social action” (139).

Selber’s parameters for Rhetorical Literacy are useful for this project in that they help specify what it means for students to be contextual and metacognitive thinkers—his work is therefore included in the Rhetorical Methods Table in chapter three.

My formulation of Rhetorical Literacy looks to education criticism, cultural studies, rhetorical theory, recent research in Composition Studies, and critical pedagogy for guidance. It is distinguished from other popular literacies—such as multimodal literacy, critical literacy, information literacy or media literacy—in a number of ways. While most newly-named literacies assume that electronic literacies make students smarter and more prepared for their careers, Rhetorical Literacy is devoted to printed texts as necessary for *critical* and *reflective* use of more technologically advanced forms of communication. As this chapter will justify, Rhetorical Literacy emphasizes the necessity of immersing students in print culture. Moreover, unlike other literacies, Rhetorical Literacy explicitly values the theories of rhetoricians from a variety of cultures and ethnicities and has roots in rhetorical methods that facilitate the contextualizing skills and ideological awareness that students need in order to be strong thinkers across disciplines. But perhaps most importantly, it is specially designed as an energetic response to literacy needs of college students as they are situated in the neoliberal era. Rhetorical Literacy leads students to ask *how* a claim (academic or otherwise) becomes valuable or achieves the status of “truth” instead of merely accepting the truth-status of decontextualized content. I suggest Rhetorical Literacy be understood as a foundation

upon which a more print-literate, rhetorically sophisticated, post-neoliberal citizenship can be built. It addresses the following four needs of today's college students:

### **Print Immersion and Slowness**

College students today are often lacking familiarity with and appreciation for print culture. A First Year Composition class concerned with Rhetorical Literacy ensures that students know how to perform a thorough and considered reading of college-level books and articles, and it also makes every effort to facilitate *appreciation* for reading print materials. I suggest that a collective effort in composition studies to teach Rhetorical Literacy would be an antidote to the undervaluing of print culture.

### **Contextualizing & Metacognition (chapter three):**

College students often read and write texts with little awareness of the ways texts are situated, and rarely do they reflect meta-cognitively upon their own reading and writing practices. In order for students to transfer or repurpose skills learned in First Year Composition (FYC), they need to be conscious of texts as rhetorically motivated, and they need to practice reflection and metacognition.

### **Print Immersion as Integral to Rhetorical Literacy**

*I can't get my students to read whole books anymore. -Katherine Hayles  
(qtd. in Carr 9)*

*When we asked college students how they adapted to the tidal wave of new technology, one explained "It's only technology if it happened after you were born." If the technology exists before you were born, it's a fact of life, a given. The question would be equivalent of asking their parents or*

*professors how they adapted to the telephone, radio, or automobile. They didn't have to. These things were just there. -Levine and Dean 20*

The need for educational commitment to print materials is only growing. In recent decades, an ever-accelerating internet culture has made students (and Americans in general) more and more impatient with reading closely and writing carefully. Josh Schwartz, a scientist who works for a firm that analyzes how people use websites, conducted research illustrating that most people will read only fifty percent of an online news article. What his data tells us is that “readers can’t stay focused....When people land on [an online] story, they very rarely make it all the way down the page. A lot of people don’t even make it halfway” (Manjoo 1). Our love for the internet makes us want to believe in its harmlessness. We like to think of it as a benign and highly convenient source of knowledge and entertainment. Although we might have a few nagging concerns about the internet as an addiction or a society bifurcated by the digital divide, in general the world wide web is so much a pleasure that it completely “bulldozes our doubts with its bounties and conveniences”—we adore this affordable, compact technology that we can put in our pockets and carry with us everywhere (Carr 4). Indeed, the internet is better than convenient, for it is also joyous and exciting; it offers endless adventures. It captivates our senses by continuously offering new stimuli. And since we feel in control of it—after all, it is slave to our every whim and demand—we don’t realize the power it has over us. As Nicholas Carr says, “It is so much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master” (4).

Carr, who wrote *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, explores the insidious ways in which the internet assumes control over our brains as we are looking the other way. He admits that his own internet indulgences have led to a certain amount of mental debilitation:

what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a jet Ski. (6-7)

The internet is training us to skim impatiently rather than take the time to observe detail, appreciate nuance, and read deeply with a sensitive eye and ear. Authors of *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Students*, comment that “Digital Media produce a shallow ocean of information and encourage students to gather and sift. Ofcourse, they can go deeper if they wish. But they matriculate into analog universities, populated by academics who are hunters, whose interests and work generally emphasizes depth over breadth” (22). Reading deeply takes a long time and a lot of patience, especially for the digital native.

While impatience towards print did not begin with the advent of the internet, the internet dramatically increased the amount of time we spend with images. And images, especially moving ones, are much more immediately captivating, stimulating, pleasurable—instantly gratifying—than words. Of course, the moving image is not a new phenomenon, and has been “chipping away at [our] capacity for concentration and contemplation” for quite some time now (Carr 6). Two decades ago, English Professor Sven Birkerts wrote a book complaining about his students' lackadaisical attitude

towards reading and literature. In *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, Birkerts worries that his students (those of Generation X) are pretty much incapable of deep contemplation—too engulfed in the fragmented, fleeting temporalities of postmodernism to luxuriate in imaginative or aesthetic contemplation. And now that twenty years have passed, Generation Xers who are now teachers have the exact same worry about the “digital natives” of the millennial generation, which suggests that the magnitude of the problem has doubled or perhaps quadrupled over the past twenty years. Just as Birkerts worried about modern childhood engulfed by television and Disney, those of my generation decry the way that television and Disney, *in addition to* hand held mobile devices and Facebook are creating a culture of distraction that deteriorates the ability to read for longer periods of time. Indeed, a team of researchers from consulting firm “nGenera”<sup>6</sup> recently studied the effects of the internet on digital natives, and one of them wrote that “Digital immersion...has even affected the way they absorb information. They don’t necessarily read a page from left to right and from top to bottom. They might instead skip around, scanning for pertinent information of interest” (qtd. in Carr 9).

Investing in a substantial literary or scholarly book requires a hefty time-commitment that most young people, of their own free will, aren’t willing to make. “Millennials” also referred to as the “net generation,” are living in a temporality created by the digital world, an electronic bubble that breeds “a fragmented sense of time and a loss of the so-called duration experience, that depth-phenomenon we associate with reverie” (Birkerts 27). Their inexperience with slow, careful, contemplative thought is not

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<sup>6</sup> Since Carr wrote his book, the company has changed its name to “Moxiesoft”.

unrelated to the way they write essays that reflect very little creative intellect or critical imagination (not a minor problem when it comes to college level literacy). As Birkerts says, they seem to have “a reduced attention span and a general impatience with sustained inquiry,” and I can only assume the problem is much worse than it was in the nineties when he was writing (27).

Our students’ weakness when it comes to critical capacity is related to their lack of exposure to print culture. Print immersion shapes the type of mind needed for college-level work; but unfortunately, “The [calm, focused, undistracted] linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts” (Carr 10). Even reading books on devices like the Kindle is not exactly like reading the print version: the Kindle carries the distractions of the internet by allowing its users to “read digital newspapers and magazines, scan blogs, perform Google searches, [and] listen to MP3s” in addition to reading books (Carr 101). Due to their envelopment in electronic media, students are accustomed to communication that leaves little room for deep or sustained thinking; they want the materials they read to be instantly comprehensible. In fact, they will dismiss a message that is intricate or mentally demanding by responding to it with the acronym TLDR (too-long-didn’t-read). As Maggie Jackson, author of *Distracted*, points out, “for all their tech fluency, kids show less patience, skepticism, tenacity, and skill than adults in navigating the Web, all while overestimating their own prowess” (18).

Unfortunately, new media embraces the dangerous neoliberal ideology that faster is always better.<sup>7</sup> Neoliberal rationality understands time as a highly limited resource; it is something intimately tied to efficiency, economy, and production. Time is treated as though it were money—we are constantly under the gun to practice better “time-management,” and “budget” our time. But this leads to the idea that learning at the college level is best executed as quickly as possible—which is entirely not true when it comes to reading critically, writing carefully, or searching inward for questions and ideas. Composition professor Jeanne Marie Rose recently published an article entitled “Writing Time: Composing in an Accelerated World” in which she describes a situation for educators and students that is rarely discussed but is at the heart of many teaching and learning struggles. Her article pinpoints how students experience their time in college under neoliberalism: “Socialized within a neoliberal system that values ever-faster production and consumption, today’s students often come to college hoping to expend minimal time to accrue maximum capital—” (46). Rose points out that what neoliberalism demands of students—“flexibility, speed, and ability to keep pace with technological innovation”—interferes with their ability to make time for the writing process, for which most composition instructors require invention activities, multiple drafts and revising (47).

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth pointing out here that I do not blame technological advancements themselves for the reading and writing difficulties students display, nor do I have moral objections or even antipathy towards the iphone, Youtube, Facebook or any other type of new media. My concern is that is that these new media are organized and marketed under neoliberalism in a way that encourages young people to binge on new technologies, feasting themselves and indulging their fascination with it to an unhealthy degree.



To add to Rose's discussion, we might consider that the ability or patience required to read slowly is inextricably tied to the ability or patience required to write slowly (which involves paying careful attention to syntax, word-choice, transitions, etc), and our students have often never read a book at a pace that is slow enough to savor details or observe rhetorical techniques employed. They don't have practice or experience (and don't see the value in) *giving up time* to read a lengthy article or a book. They have perhaps seldom experienced a quiet spell of imaginative reflection inspired by a book, an aesthetic experience reading literature, the satisfaction of having committed to another's point of view by immersing themselves in a book, or a moment of exhilaration following a reading experience that rewarded them with a new and exciting insight. They usually don't have a love of literature or desire to read. As John Briggs points out, "an incipient and correctable deafness to the written and printed page increasingly limits many of our students' prospects" (18). The joy and tranquility of solitude with a book may be an alien idea to many of our students, and a lack of print literacy may ultimately result in less imaginative minds. Indeed, if psychiatrist Anthony Storr is correct that "by far the greater number of new ideas occur during a state of reverie," then we are looking at a future generation significantly less likely to generate new ideas, for reading experiences today mostly take place in a multitask environment where there is no time for reverie (Turkle 272).

**Print Immersion as Noninvolved, Undistracted Thinking:**

As cultural critics like Walter Benjamin (1936) and Theodore Adorno (1944) pointed out long ago, cinematic images are distracting in the sense that they do not give a

viewer time to pause and reflect. They tend to evoke and provoke, titillate and captivate, but rarely do they invite us, as words often do, to consider, deliberate, question, or imagine. While Adorno extensively decried the modern film (he considered movies to be entirely formulaic and unartistic, reducing every individual to a type and convincing the masses to buy into the very ideology that oppressed them) he also commented on the formal characteristics of the medium. Adorno and Max Horkheimer say of films that they

[leave] no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience....They are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts. Even though the effort required for his response is semi-automatic, no scope is left for the imagination. (4)

Benjamin, although considerably different from Adorno in his optimism that mechanical reproductions of art promote equality and democracy, agreed with Adorno that the filmic image creates a distracted viewer. A series of images following each other in quick succession, for Benjamin, create a “shock effect.” In his famous essay “A Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” he writes, “Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway” (11). While Adorno and Benjamin have differing opinions about the political effects of cinema (Adorno was horrified by the way the culture industry created docile automatons while Benjamin thought that new technologies emancipated artistic production—bringing it, for the first

time, to the public), they agreed that the diegetic time-stream has a negative impact on the masses in that it puts the viewer into a distracted state of mind.

Birkerts follows from this Frankfurt school line of thinking when he says that compared to the “static” feeling of print, electronic communication is “evanescent” (122). He explains that when watching television “impression and image take precedence over logic and concept [;] detail and linear sequentiality are sacrificed” (122). This observation, made a generation ago, is only growing more relevant with the advent of the World Wide Web, for televisual experiences now represent only a fraction of our encounters with electronic images.

In *Understanding Media* McLuhan explains that words have uniformity, continuity, and linearity—properties that help us clarify ideas and abstractions. He demonstrates that print technology is related to a world view that is less tactile and more abstract, less ambiguous and more “objective” or distanced. Print culture, for McLuhan, allows for separation between the rational and emotional so that we gain critical perspective and think independently. Images, on the other hand, encourage emotional reactions and increase our affective involvement.<sup>8</sup> One of his examples that illustrates this distinction between word and image especially well is as follows:

Suppose that, instead of displaying the Stars and Stripes, we were to write the words “American Flag” across of piece of cloth and to display that. While the symbols would convey the same meaning, the effect would be quite different. To translate the rich visual mosaic of the Stars and Stripes into written form would be to deprive it of most of its qualities of

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<sup>8</sup> Poetry is an exception to this distinction between word and image. Writing that is ekphrastic crosses over the affective boundary and threatens McLuhan’s argument. However, to explore this problem could result in unnecessarily complicating Rhetorical Literacy.

corporate image and of experience, yet the abstract literal bond would remain much the same. (McLuhan 82)

For McLuhan, the printed word is a technology of “noninvolvement” since we do not react to words on a page with our auditory and tactile senses, but use our visual sense in what he calls “high definition.” In contrast, using the internet—to do something like figure out what kind of dog to get—“involves all of our senses dramatically,” which is perhaps why my efforts to learn about dog breeds online had such a powerful affective consequence for me (McLuhan 77-78). Like the “involved” experience of face-to-face conversation, many internet experiences literally involve more of our bodies than the experience of reading a book—they are simultaneously visual, auditory, and tactile (consider Skyping, for example). Electronic modes of communication involve continuous reactions and corporeal participations, but while reading, there is less room for multiple actions and reactions in quick succession. Reading “tends to be a kind of separate or specialist action in which there is little opportunity or call for reaction” (McLuhan 81). In other words, since we do not use our full sensorium in the process of reading, it is an activity that “enables [intelligence] to move from thing to thing with greater ease and speed and ever less involvement” (McLuhan 79).

Thus the act of reading is much more likely to generate a mental disposition characterized by distance and criticism—while no-one can achieve absolute objectivity, print culture allows for the “non-involved” mental agility that we want to see in our students’ work. Furthermore, the mental disposition that results from surfing the web as opposed to reading is not only relevant during the process of the activity itself—the time we spend on the web starts to shape our perceptions of life and reality. McLuhan might

be far-fetched to say that Nazi Germany was caused by the radio (Hitler's personality, apparently, was one that was highly suited to the radio and would not have been nearly as effective in the age of the television), but we may nevertheless concede that our technologies *do* alter the way we think. Lewis H. Lapham, who wrote the introduction to the 1994 edition of *Understanding Media*, explains:

By eliminating the dimensions of space and time, the electronic forms of communication also eliminate the presumption of cause and effect. Typographic man assumes that A follows B...Graphic Man imagines himself living in the enchanted garden of the eternal now. If all the world can be seen simultaneously, and all of mankind's job and suffering is always and everywhere present...nothing necessarily follows from anything else. Sequence becomes merely additive instead of causative. (Lapham in McLuhan xxii).

While there is nothing inherently inferior about cognitive processing that is more associative or rhizomatic than it is linear, sequential, and causative, the mental agility required for the latter has brought about so many advances for humankind that it would be preposterous to ignore its benefits or neglect the intellectual possibilities facilitated through print immersion. Therefore, I imagine that a well-educated person will continue to be characterized by cognitive skills that demand "sustained, unbroken attention to a single, static object" (Carr 64). While it is true that the electronic age is changing the way we think, it is also unlikely that we can or will, any time in the next few centuries, abandon print culture or forget about the innumerable ways it has improved civilization. In much the same way that print culture did not wholly replace oral culture (important people still make important speeches, poetry is still recited out loud, we still value the skill of memorization, many colleges still require speech classes for all freshman, and we still have formal oral examinations), it is extremist to imagine that we will be entirely

eschewing print culture in our rush of excitement about electronic culture—especially not in universities. Students will therefore need to immerse themselves in print. They will need to practice the quiet, sustained, mindful type of thinking that print immersion encourages. If they do not, they are putting themselves in neurological jeopardy when it comes to succeeding in college.

I employ the scientific term “neurological” because neuroscience has shown us that the types of activities we consistently practice alter our “brain maps.” Carr does an excellent job making complex research on neuroplasticity accessible to the everyday reader in his chapter called “The Vital Paths.” He explains that through experiments with monkeys, neurologist Michael Merzenich was able to demonstrate that after suffering nerve damage to the hand, a monkey’s brain becomes confused as to the location of sensory input—so that if pressure is applied to the lower joint of his finger, his brain might tell him that the sensation was coming from the tip of the finger. However, what astounded Merzenich was the way the neural pathways realigned after a few months. The monkey’s brain corrected for the damage so that the signals they received aligned with what was happening in reality (25). Merzenich had discovered evidence of neuroplasticity, a theory about the mutability of the brain that was further proven by neurologists such as Edward Taub and Alvaro Pascual-Leone who demonstrate that what we practice repeatedly and even what we imagine re-wires are neural pathways (Carr 30-32). Carr summarizes neuroplasticity as follows: “Our ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting, we now know, are not entirely determined by our genes. Nor are they entirely determined by our childhood experiences. We change them through the way we live—

and...through the tools we use” (31). This new research suggests that McLuhan was correct to call our technologies extensions of our nervous system. Neuroscience has now demonstrated that the technologies we use do in fact physically change the circuitry in our brains. This does not mean that our technologies determine us entirely (a theory that McLuhan espouses) but that we adapt ourselves to suit the technologies around us. As we strengthen, for example, the neural pathways that help us surf the internet quickly, other pathways, perhaps the ones that foster deep reading skills, begin to wither and weaken: “Experiments show that just as the brain can build new or stronger circuits through physical or mental practice, those circuits can weaken or dissolve with neglect”(Carr 35)—this suggests that lack of practice reading has physically, at the neurological level, made it very difficult for our students to do well in college.

Moreover, the tools—or technologies—that have the most influence over our minds are those that effect language. In *Orality and Literacy* Walter J. Ong argues that “[t]echnologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word” (81). Therefore although McLuhan may have been extreme in some of his ideas, he is a useful theorist to consider here because his concept of “non-involvement” helps us see the problem that we face today. It is the *non-involvement* of reading that makes it “boring” for young people who are used to communication experiences that are action-packed and highly participatory.

The printed page generates ways of organizing reality that screens do not. It helps us think in sequences instead of simultaneities; it helps us think continuously instead of discontinuously, it pushes us to be mentally active rather than reactive, and fosters

sustained effort in composition rather than encouraging an “off the fly” type improvisation.<sup>9</sup> In short, print culture fosters a type of meaning-making that is unavailable through other mediums—and Rhetorical Literacy is a way to ensure that college students are fully aware of this.

### **A War on Reading in K-12 Schools**

*For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature... literary reading in America is not only declining among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young....Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice. By contrast, most electronic media...make fewer demands on their audiences, and often require no more than passive participation. Even interactive electronic media...foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification. - National Endowment for the Arts, Reading at Risk, 2002.*

*Alliance for Excellent Education says one in four high school students do not understand material in textbooks. -Gallagher, 3*

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<sup>9</sup> For a full list of the dichotomies in McLuhan’s Understanding Media, see Lapham’s introduction (p. xiii).



*American Institutes for Research reports that only 13% of American adults are capable of performing complex literary tasks. -Gallagher, 3*

The above statistics are not surprising for educators; our jobs entail struggling to engage students who have antipathy for reading, and we frequently find numerous cultural influences to blame for this antipathy: for one, leisure reading is seen as a pastime for older people (Oprah has a book club, while younger celebrities like Miley Cyrus do not); on commuter trains, people look down at phones or laptops but not books; “Borders” book store used to be a quiet place for leisure reading, but it recently went out of business; books are mostly associated with work, not leisure. Yet in addition to these cultural issues (over which educators wield virtually no authority) there are also pedagogical trends and changes taking place under the leadership of educational experts that diminish print literacy. These include the pervasion of standardized tests that rely too heavily on multiple choice questions, the overuse of new technologies in classrooms, and a pedagogical “common sense” that falsely ties new technology to critical thinking. I am not the first to suggest that there is much about current K-12 educational strategies that are hurting students’ appreciation for reading. Kelly Gallagher, author of *Readicide* (2009) defines “readicide” as “the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools” (2). I suggest that print immersion is a necessary part of Rhetorical Literacy because if colleges don’t fight for it more adamantly, this “readicide” will continue unabated.

## **A Laptop for Every Student**

If we tailor our materials and delivery to suit the preferences of students who are stimulated by new media but have never experienced the joys and rewards of engaging the printed line, we will only make print literacy worse. Yet this is exactly what is happening due to the way companies like Apple are seducing educational administrators with the promise of improving student learning. Many K-12 schools are spending a disproportionate chunk of their budget equipping classrooms with screen technologies that are supposedly good for test scores, while whether these technologies help or harm print literacy is a question relegated to the obscurity of academic journals. For example, in 2009 the school district of Mooresville, in North Carolina, spent over a million dollars to issue each student a Macbook Air, and since has been praised as a leader in digital education. An article in the New York Times Series entitled “Grading the Digital School” is headlined “Mooresville’s Shining Example...” The article is overwhelmingly positive, suggesting that by firing thirty-seven teachers and making class sizes bigger in order to buy laptops from Apple the district made a brilliant decision that might just be the magic button for fixing education. (According to district officials, since the technology is so good at keeping students managed and engaged, the bigger classes aren’t an issue). The success of the school has been measured by test scores and graduation rates. Proficiency on state tests in reading, math and sciences is up to 88% in 2012 compared to 73% three years ago and graduation is up 91% compared to 80% in 2008. These numbers sound good, but the article doesn’t explain how they were achieved. If “teaching to the test” was the main (or only) pedagogical focus, the students were likely taught to memorize facts

and regurgitate information (as I explain below, multiple-choice testing does not test print immersion or critical thinking very well). Yet whether or not the tests measured the important mental habits and critical reading skills so important for college was not addressed in the article. Rather, the New York Times paints the Mooresville district as a star—touted by the White House as a leader in education and visited by “herds” of educators who want to bring the Macbook Air program to their own schools.

But decisions made by the Mooresville district are troubling, especially from the perspective of college educators who expect students to be both capable of and interested in reading lengthy books. What will happen to Mooresville students when they get to college and are expected to read books that are three hundred pages or more? Even if these books are available as e-books, they won't contain links to interactive games and moving images. Rarely, in college, will students be spoon-fed course materials using mediums that keep them jumping from task to task and visually stimulated. Yet unfortunately, there are very few educators demanding that we pay attention to this problem. There was only one person commenting on the article about Mooresville, a college professor, who had negative things to say about the Macbook Air project. The majority of commenters (some of them students at Mooresville high school) were overwhelmingly congratulatory. In general there seems to be a failure to consider a question that should be at the fore: don't these new media learning tools only increase impatience for sustained thinking and create students who feel increasingly entitled to quick and oversimplified information? This congratulations to Mooresville seems premature and ill-considered.

### **(Neoliberal) Promotion of Educational Technologies:**

As I explained in chapter one, neoliberalism creates a culture and government that values the growth and success of big business over all else. And when school districts agree to buy products from Ed Tech companies, millions of tax dollars become corporate profits. If school districts continue to follow in Mooresville's footsteps, the attitude that technologies are great for learning will continue to be common sense, and therefore "good" teachers will find creative ways of implementing new technologies in their classrooms. Those who voice concerns about how new media leads to a self-indulgent, self-centered, hyper and distracted youth will become less and less audible. Briefly researching the topic of educational technology reveals that both in online news articles and in scholarly articles the most relevant question is not *why* we have embraced educational technologies or *whether* they are beneficial to our pedagogical goals. Instead, the relevant question is almost always *how* we can incorporate new technologies into our teaching strategies. Overwhelmingly, the books and articles that exist on technology in education are about how to integrate new technology—the assumption they carry, of course, is that new technologies improve learning, and if they don't (improve test scores) it is because teachers have not done their job of incorporating it wisely.

Concordia University is a school in Portland, Oregon, that offers online degrees in education at the masters and doctoral level. Their website offers glaring evidence of this ideology about teaching with technology that ultimately serves neoliberal interests over students' education. One blog post on their website celebrates electronic textbooks as follows: "Imagine a history book in which students can watch videos of battles rather

than simply read a description” (“The Education”). Of course, such a textbook is not difficult to imagine, but the blog is suggesting to educators that learning-by-video is a terribly exciting new development. The blog does not ask why or how reading a description of an historic battle might offer students something that watching a video of a battle doesn’t—an especially problematic omission, seeing as this article is on a website meant for training educators. Another article entitled “How one educator uses social media to connect an 18 school district in Pennsylvania” sings the praises of Joe Mazza, the principal and administrator in the district, for leveraging a hashtag on Twitter to make it easier for parents, teachers, and students to collaborate (“How One”). Whether this collaboration through Twitter caused more harm than good, or was substantial and meaningful collaboration in the first place, is not evaluated. Rather, the superficiality of the Twitter collaboration is celebrated by Mr. Mazza: “All of us appreciate brevity when there isn’t enough time to do what you have to do... That’s what makes the self-limiting mediums like Twitter so appealing. People can become more connected without wading through a lengthy email or blog post” (“How One”).

This administrator’s comment about the value of brevity is disappointing, because it highlights that when students are using screens in school they are usually not reading lengthy prose articles on the screen (the whole point of the screen, it seems, is to avoid this). When an educational administrator says that a “lengthy email or blog post” is not brief enough to be appreciated, then what is his attitude towards books? As textbooks for school children continue to be redesigned for the screen, we can’t expect that these redesigns are going to contain lengthy prose, for the point of the e-textbook is that it is

innovative, it captivates students by being visually stimulating and interactive. Even outside of school, reading e-books will probably become less and less like reading printed books, especially if the senior vice president of publisher HarperStudio has anything to do with it. Here is what he said about how e-books should adapt to the market: “E-books should not just be print books delivered electronically...we need to take advantage of the medium and create something dynamic to enhance the experience. I want links and behind the scenes extras and narration and videos and conversation” (qtd. in Carr 103). Companies like Apple would be failing to reach the consumer if the software it produced for students consists of “boring” lines of e-text. Even more devastating is that graduate programs such as the one at Concordia University are endorsing electronic text books as if they are a newer and better version of regular text books.

When teachers are told to “integrate new technology” in creative ways, this often means that the job of the teacher is to keep students distracted from the sustained mental challenge of learning and still get students to absorb course material. This requires elaborate tricks, clever manipulations, and sustained mental gymnastics for teachers, removes critical thinking from the curriculum, and, unfortunately, teaches students that learning should never have to be difficult. Another blog post from Concordia University is called “Students Falling Asleep in Class? Try Facebook.” The post claims that

they [the net generation] become bored very quickly in a class consisting of overhead slides, lectures, and the occasional powerpoint presentation. In order to better reach these students, teachers need to use mediums that are quick and interesting. This is why so many teachers are making efforts to use social media, especially Facebook, in the classroom. (“Students Failing”)

When the onus is on the teacher to reach the student (by figuring out how to make activity on Facebook into a learning experience) then students are not required to stretch their minds in any effort to reach the teacher. Yet the reaching should go both ways: students should experience learning as stretching mental limits and striving for new understandings, but it has become a cultural expectation that the teacher must do all the reaching (and evidently even powerpoints aren't attention-grabbing enough anymore).

I have no doubt that familiarity with new technologies will benefit students, but this familiarity is so easy to obtain, especially for young people, and reading deeply is so hard for them, that it seems ironic to be spending time “teaching” them what is very simple for them anyway. One of the articles in the *New York Times* series I mentioned earlier, called “A Silicon Valley School that Doesn't Compute,” is informative in this regard. Apparently, many executives in high tech companies are sending their kids to Waldorf schools that don't allow computers at all until the eighth grade, and then only rarely. The article reports that 75% of the students at Waldorf schools in Silicon Valley have a parent with a high tech connection. This is especially telling: parents who work in high tech industries—and thus implicitly support society's embrace of new media—are adamant that their own children be kept from new technologies until an appropriate age. One of the high tech executives interviewed by the *Times*, a man who has two children in the Waldorf system, says that learning to use new technologies is ridiculously easy, so he is not worried that his tech-deprived children will be at a disadvantage. He says of technology, “It's super-easy. It's like learning to use toothpaste. At Google and all these places, we make technology as brain-dead easy to use as possible. There's no reason

why kids can't figure it out when they get older." Yet Waldorf schools represent a very small fraction of education; most educators, even if they complain, do not have the political clout to be pushing back against companies like Apple, who are dazzling superintendents with new educational products.

In fact, I should point out that teachers don't necessarily or even usually endorse these new technologies, but are playing along because their jobs are at stake. The fear is that if they don't use the technology, and profess to love it, their jobs will be replaced by those who do (this is what happened at Mooresville). Having been on the job market for a teaching job I can attest to the fact that schools are only interested in hiring people who are both tech-savvy *and* excited about new technological possibilities in education.

Yet teachers who question new educational technologies and risk taking a stand against it need to be honored, for the pedagogical use of new media presents a frustrating contradiction. Teachers are supposed to make learning fun (which often means using technology to trick students into thinking that learning isn't demanding or difficult) but at the same time they are told to encourage critical thinking, which requires exactly the mental challenge from which the integration of new technology often distracts.

### **Critical Thinking and Print Immersion**

Full sensory immersion in new media experience does not facilitate the agility with abstractions, concepts, and perspectives that is required for critical thinking. Yet the contradiction of using new media to teach critical thinking is not receiving enough scholarly criticism. In fact, as I mentioned, powerful politicians and administrators frown upon teachers who don't express enthusiasm for high-tech teaching. And it is especially



frustrating for teachers when those in power don't fully grasp the educational contradictions latent in their demands to embrace high tech teaching. For example, Governor Otter of Idaho said that "putting technology into students' hands is the only way to prepare them for the workforce. Giving them easy access to a wealth of facts and resources online allows them to develop critical thinking skills...which is what employees want the most" ("Teachers Resist"). While it is true that employers want students to have critical thinking skills, clearly the Governor hasn't thought through how a person gains those skills.

The Governor assumes a connection between the internet's wealth of resources and critical thinking, which seems blind-sided to someone with experience in teaching critical thinking and awareness of what this intellectual ability really looks like. In fact, the wealth of information on the internet plays a role in *preventing* critical thinking: when faced with an overwhelming amount of data on the web, students are likely to conduct the most superficial research rather than hunt through thousands of links for more substantial articles. If presented with an assignment requiring them to do research about the legalization of marijuana, for example, most will not have the patience to do more than a cursory search, and they will take their first hits as valid sources. And when they conduct a quick web search, the information they gather "reveal[s] no more than fifteen percent of the highly commercial, poor-quality surface web" (Jackson 163). They are learning *not to learn* about the intricacies and complications involved in the marijuana legalization debates when they use the internet; instead, they learn to take for granted that academic tasks are quick and easy to carry out: after all, it takes google only .26 seconds to gather

7,130,000 websites about the legalization of marijuana. The mere act of putting the internet in front of our students does very little for their minds: they don't know enough or have patience enough to evaluate the sources they find. Access to *more* information often means a *decrease* in quality information, for when using a common search engine the substantial and scholarly articles are a needle in a haystack: "search engines such as Google run on algorithmic formulas that place irrelevant or mediocre sites on a par with expert ones. What's highly linked, or paid for, gets top billing, regardless of merit" (Jackson 163). In order to use the internet to their advantage, students need sharp evaluative skills and the ability to incorporate what they find into their own arguments. Yet one study shows that "students could find and cite sources better than they were able to judge their relevance and authority, and were even less able to use information they gathered to support their arguments" (Jackson 165). It seems to me that the skills that students need to use the internet well are actually skills which are better taught *without* putting them online.

While it might be rather obvious that there is a difference between looking something up on Google (which is easy) and analyzing the results that the web generates (which is time consuming and mentally taxing), the distinction is lost on the Governor. In fact, the *Times* reporter challenged him to address the fact that a lot of internet resources contain unreliable information, and in response he said "There may be a lot of information, but whether right or wrong, it will generate critical thinking for [the students] as they find the truth" ("Teachers Resist..."). Again, the Governor has misunderstood critical thinking. He seems to assume that the internet itself will generate

critical thinking by exposing students to information that is both right and wrong, but it is the student's intellectual agency that must come into play in order to evaluate internet sources. And it is exactly this intellectual agency that we need to be encouraging. According to Jackson, "75 % of Americans with five or more years of online experience say search engines are 'fair and unbiased,'" so it is unlikely that students will "search for truth" but much more likely that they will accept as truth the first thing the search engine spits out (164). Moreover, scholarly studies on critical thinking describe the critical thinker as one who interprets, analyses, evaluates, infers, explains and self-regulates (Rudd)—and this kind of thinking goes beyond the dichotomy of right versus wrong: a critical thinker does not *find* the truth on the internet but *complicates* "truth" on the internet.

The Governor's use of the term critical thinking is symptomatic of an educational culture that continues to embrace the term but has forgotten what it means, or *that* it means. The emptiness of the term is a consequence of throwing it around as a catch-all phrase that indicates a generality so general that it is meaningless: "critical thinking" has come to signify what-we-teach-when-we-teach-well. Yet I argue that we can solidify, or lend some amount of specificity to "critical thinking" by linking it to that which is practiced through print immersion, for the ability to reason creatively with ideas and abstractions is closely tied to facility with written language. As McLuhan indicated with his idea of noninvolvement, and as semiotics teaches us, words on a page are symbols; they do not refer to materiality the same way images do. Rather, words refer to ideas, generalizations, concepts, and abstractions. There is nothing about the word "cat" that is

soft and furry and goes “meow,” because the word represents a mental construct. Critical thinking is the cognitive work we do when arranging dynamics between abstractions and is a type of cognitive exercise facilitated through print immersion because phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters and books do exactly this—they arrange and rearrange abstractions in creative ways to construct meaning. The mental challenge of reading is that it forges sustained attention in the realm of ideas; books make us critical thinkers because they take us away from the immediacy of our senses and facilitate the cognitive athleticism that is required to maneuver among abstractions.

One reason that the term “critical thinking” is such an ambiguous term in education is that we haven’t figured out how to measure it objectively or precisely. After examining concepts of critical thinking from education, philosophy and psychology, Rick D. Rudd defined it as “reasoned, purposive and reflective thinking used to make decisions, solve problems and master concepts,” but it is still hard to pin down what exactly “reasoned, purposive, and reflective thinking” looks like in any given situation (47). Whether or not a student has critically thought or the degree to which they have critically thought remains a subjective decision based on many contingencies, and because a computer can’t really measure critical thinking at all, it is not adequately represented on the standardized tests—tests that have become a matter of life or death for many public schools. Thus teachers are not likely to spend a lot of time considering how to ensure that students are critically thinking when it is not a skill that can be directly, accurately, or objectively tested by a computer. While it is easy to measure whether students have memorized information or acquired facts (computers do this for us),

educators often say that critical thinking is contrasted with “the mere acquisition and retention of information alone because it involves a particular way in which information is sought and treated” (Scriven & Paul). Tim Moore published an article in 2013 that compared ideas about critical thinking across History, Philosophy, and Cultural Studies. He concluded that there are multiple strands of critical thinking: judgment, skepticism, originality, sensitive readings, rationality, activist engagement with knowledge, and self-reflexivity (506-522). Matthew Lipman says that critical thinking “relies upon criteria, is self-correcting, and is sensitive to context” (38). What is clear from these definitions of critical thinking is that it is too amorphous and nuanced, too rich and varied, and a skill too closely tied to particulars and contexts for computers to measure it.

By introducing visual and sonic stimuli (less abstract than words) and making school easier by rendering learning more engaging for the senses, or to use McLuhan’s terminology, more *involved*, we do critical thinking a disservice. Therefore, I suggest that the long-term consequences of giving children iPads more often than books might be more serious than we currently imagine, and that more educators need to be speaking out about the dangers of this decision.

### **The Unpleasure of Reading**

Our students lack appreciation for reading and writing, but a rhetorically literate person can find pleasure in these activities because they see the value of looking inward for stimulation, inspiration, and the generation of new ideas. Reading and writing are painful activities for the millennial generation in part because they do not involve the external rewards that are immediately pleasing to the eye or ear, or the hyperlinking that

promises a shiny and novel excitement around every corner. For someone accustomed to all this stimulation, words on a printed page are plodding, tedious, and bland...they are nothing but little black and white shapes of the same style marching across the page one after the other in straight lines...on and on. If students don't know how to lose themselves in the meanings of the words, the benefits and pleasures of reading a printed book remain out of reach. One of the reasons they may not know how to "lose themselves" is because most of their reading experiences have occurred in an online environment. Sherry Turkle, in her new book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* points out the dangers of too much online reading:

online reading, with its links and hypertext possibilities, often receives a heroic, triumphalist narrative, while the book is disparaged as 'disconnected'....[O]ld reading was linear and exclusionary; the new reading is democratic....[but] there is another story. The book is connected to daydreams and personal associations as readers look within themselves. Online reading—at least for the high school and college students I have studied—always invites you elsewhere. And it is only sometimes interrupted by linking to reference works and associated commentaries. More often, it is broken up by messaging, shopping, Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube. (242)

Printed words on a page are indeed very boring if a person has a hard time turning to inner resources of criticality and imagination but instead needs a full sensorium experience in order to feel engaged.

Another reason for the unpleasure of reading is the complexity and challenge of lengthy prose. Turkle explains that in a world of constant electronic communication, many people receive hundreds of e-mails and texts per day and feel pressure to produce quick responses right away (166). Teenagers expect a response to a text within ten minutes—maximum (265-266). Our students spend hours upon hours texting and

“facebooking,” so for them, a quick note or message characterized by abbreviation, superficiality and flatness is what they come to like and expect from reading and writing experiences—not nuance or complexity. The irony of this is a complicated world in which complexity is shunned as poor communication:

in the technology-induced pressure for volume and velocity, we confront a paradox. We insist that our world is increasingly complex, yet we have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think uninterrupted. As we communicate in ways that ask for almost instantaneous responses, we don’t allow sufficient space to consider complicated problems. (166)

Not only does the activity of reading force a very weak and underused cognitive muscle to exercise, but also, as Gallagher points out, the material or content of reading we assign in K-12 schooling is uninteresting to students. Especially in Junior High and High School, we are not giving students novels that engage them or books on topics they care about—which is tragic—for it is so much easier to take on a new neurological challenge when one is interested and motivated. If we could make reading a means to a desirable end, students might learn to like it more. Yet sadly, schools are not giving teenagers books that interest them because test preparation practice takes precedence over all else, including high-interest reading (Gallagher 4). Teachers give students the reading material that they hope will bear resemblance to the materials on the tests. I have first-hand experience with this as a High School teacher—only the students who were *not* expected to go to college were assigned books that they were really excited to read, like *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton. When the only reading that students ever do is uninteresting to them, they come to assume, not surprisingly, that reading itself in a boring activity. Yet because schools are under such pressure to teach only what is most

likely to help raise test scores, students are not given time in school to read, for example, a book of their own choosing; and since most teenagers do not read for fun, this means that many students will associate books only with boring school work. They will only associate reading with books like *Beowulf* or *Hamlet*. While these great works of literature are very valuable, they are not high interest for most sixteen-year-olds. We need to guide students through these valuable texts *in addition to* providing supervised time wherein which they read a book of their choosing. They need to know what it's like to read a book and love it. Yet this is not happening. Gallagher reports that in his travels as a literacy consultant numerous teachers complained that they are no longer allowed to teach novels because novel-reading does not increase test scores.

This aspect of Rhetorical Literacy—its commitment to print immersion—might not appear to be progressive, new or exciting. It does not embrace the idea that the 21<sup>st</sup> century student is best educated through the digital and virtual worlds. Rather it argues that these types of literacies are only operating at the college level if the student is thinking critically about mediums and forms, not just content. New media tools in education are not a replacement or substitute for what can be gained through immersion in print culture. Many will argue that we should accept the inevitable changes brought about by new media without a fight, that we ought to adapt to the future instead of clinging to the past—I disagree. I imagine that print culture and the critical thinking tied to it will necessarily be part of the future. We didn't give up stoves because microwaves came along, and we didn't stop going to the theatre because we were able to watch films at home. Rhetorical Literacy can be a vision and ambition in higher education so that



future generations maintain the ability to embrace the slowness and noninvolvement of print culture, so they understand it as having its own special virtues that are valuable as distinct from the accelerated and highly participatory landscape of digital media.

Therefore print immersion is something that teachers of college students should be adamant and tenacious about. This does not mean that moving images on screens ought to be vilified or ignored, but that we should maintain cultural spaces and places devoted to print culture. We should recognize and appreciate the value of temporalities and epistemologies that *both* print culture and visual/sonic/digital culture have to offer, but maintain that immersion in print culture as a necessary place from which to analyze and reflect upon other modes of communication. In fact, without the higher order thinking that is mobilized by print-based culture, a critical attitude towards any medium is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Once rhetorically literate, students should be less impatient with print materials, have real appreciation for the rich landscape of print culture, and have aptitude for demonstrating the supportive interplay between printed and digital worlds.

### **Chapter Three: Rhetorical Literacy, Contextualizing, and Metacognition**

An essential component of Rhetorical Literacy is the ability to thoroughly contextualize and re-contextualize what one reads and writes, for this is what ensures the transferability of FYC's coursework. To encourage this contextualizing ability, I suggest incorporating rhetorical methodologies into composition instruction. Guidance provided by the Rhetorical Methods Table in this section will buttress our efforts to teach students that texts—both their own and those authored by others—do not arise in a vacuum, but are manufactured within networks of various relations, values, genres, and conventions. By looking at a text through the lens of more than one activity system or discourse community, and/or by applying several rhetorical methodologies to assigned readings, students learn to see what they read or watch as existing in multiple contexts. This contextualizing ability is integral to college level thinking because it is so important for integrative learning and transfer. Critics of FYC have often pointed out that sometimes students don't seem to carry what they learn in FYC to new contexts, and this problem has sparked a great deal of scholarship on the subject of transfer. I argue that if we want students to be transferring what they learn, we must recognize, as Rebecca Nowacek does, that "A successful act of transfer is a complex rhetorical act" (11). Therefore we must make sure that students have the cognitive flexibility to move between rhetorical methodologies.

The ability to contextualize is a rhetorical skill that is often ignored due to an educational paradigm that is characterized by what Paulo Freire calls "banking." When

the “banking” model is employed, the student’s main task is to “deposit” information into a mental repository for later retrieval. “Banking” is carried out quickly and without debate, so that students perceive the course content they must “deposit” as factual, fixed, indisputable, and arising as if from natural law. As a result, they are often oblivious to the reality of knowledge as constructed and maintained within cultural values and epistemological frameworks.

Yet in spite of Freire’s criticism of the “banking” model over forty years ago, knowledge is still presented as decontextualized. According to Cheryl Geisler, author of *Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise*, college courses that fail to contextualize knowledge amount to “disciplinary indoctrination,” for students remain ignorant of the multiple perspectives that interact in the creation of knowledge and oblivious to the way knowledge consensus is established through persuasion. She claims that much material in our education system is presented “as decontextualized facts divorced from rhetorical processes” (xiii) and as a result students naively believe in “the autonomy of texts” until (hopefully) in upper division undergraduate courses and/or in graduate school they become familiar with the rhetorical processes that shape knowledge. Most college students, Geisler worries, “operate with a more everyday understanding of texts as autonomous repositories of knowledge, completely explicit in their content but utterly opaque in their rhetorical construction” (85). It is only when students reach into the intricacies of their chosen specialty that they start to see the relevance of rhetoric—and this postponement of rhetorical instruction, I argue, is highly problematic: by restricting rhetorical awareness to the narrow space of their major, we prevent students from a

general understanding that should be quite basic: “People write texts not simply to say things, but to do things: to persuade, to argue, to excuse” (Geisler 87).

The tendency for students to ignore context is a problem that first surfaced in Composition Studies when Linda Flower and Christina Haas did a study in 1988 showing that graduate students are better readers than incoming freshmen largely due to their dexterity at contextualizing, or what Flower and Haas call “rhetorical reading” (167). And research today continues to indicate that college students are ill-equipped to adequately contextualize academic materials they encounter and produce, meaning they often don’t consider the social, political, cultural or historical situations informing a text. In the composition classes that I teach, lack of contextual awareness manifests especially when student are called upon to express their opinions. They will often make an argumentative statement as though it constitutes an isolated utterance divorced from any larger political or historical conversation. Yet across the academy a limited awareness of context is problematic. In the fields of electronic and chemical engineering for example, a recent study indicated that a lack of contextualizing skills results in students being unable to evaluate the degree to which they ought to “hedge.” “Hedging,” the author explains, is “modification and toning down of claims,” a rhetorical device that “helps writers present statements with appropriate accuracy and caution” (Kousantoni 23). Hedging is necessary for engineers, she says, due to the uncertainty of science: a scientist must not sound neither too timid nor too bold (Kousantoni 23). Yet the ability to “hedge” appropriately is a skill contingent upon one’s consciousness of context. A writer’s sensitivity to “both

epistemological and social factors” (Kousantoni 23) surrounding the writing task may determine whether an article or thesis succeeds or fails.

In an article criticizing the common misconception that the research paper constitutes a single genre, Kerry Dirk mentions more than a few Composition scholars as concerned that students are failing to analyze the social and discursive contexts of their research paper assignments. She mentions Amy Devitt, Carra Leah Hood, Dan Melzer and David Russell and Arturo Yanez as scholars who demonstrate that students struggle to handle a variety of contexts. She paraphrases Russell and Yanez as saying that “unfortunately, first-year writers often do not grasp how much the context of writing determines what genres are required”. Christine Tardy is another Composition researcher asking that more attention be paid to contextualizing skills. She explains that students must progress from “knowledge-telling” writing, which is mostly a passive activity, into “knowledge-transforming” writing that actively participates in the creation of new ideas—and knowledge-transforming requires that students “grasp the ideologies of the community...a quintessentially rhetorical task” (327). Conclusions from all of these scholars are corroborated by a recent study conducted at UC Irvine on writing assessment illustrating that there is at least one writing problem that is consistent across the disciplines: students are struggling to integrate contextual materials with their own writing (Alexander, U of C Writing Conference 2012). Furthermore, Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick report that students “do not draw sufficient rhetorical expertise from their FYC courses to understand that ‘effective communication’ is a product of more than mechanical correctness” (138). They show that students are lacking in “rhetorical skills,

such as using effective organization for a particular purpose and appropriately addressing particular audiences” (125).

Moreover, Bergmann and Zepernick’s study reveals something of particular interest in terms of contextualizing skills. It shows that students write specifically for the individual grading the paper instead of imagining themselves and their audience as part of a discourse community. Although students are aware that their writing will be judged differently according to which professor they have, their awareness of context doesn’t extend beyond imagined expectations of individual professors, thus they have the impression that they must re-learn the writing process for each instructor (Bergmann and Zepernick 140). One student reported that “the first paper in any course is ‘always a crap shoot,’” and another said “every time you get a new professor [learning how to write] starts over” (qtd. in Bergmann and Zepernick 135). While this attitude does indicate a small amount of contextual awareness (students are at least aware that effective writing caters to audience expectations), I would argue that their awareness of audience is so limited that it in fact suggests a lack of Rhetorical Literacy: they see professors as isolated individuals with personal and idiosyncratic expectations instead of scholars situated within the wider disciplinary discourse. Of course it is true that professors will vary slightly in terms of their expectations, but they generally operate within the confines of the genres and conventions of their disciplines; and if students were rhetorically literate, they would seek to contextualize a writing situation within the relevant field of study. One way we could promote this aspect of Rhetorical Literacy is by teaching

students to understand “Discourse” as James Paul Gee does: (Gee’s version of Discourse Analysis is included in the Rhetorical Methods Table).

Indeed, the study done by Bergmann and Zepernick reveals profound inattention to rhetorical literacy across the curriculum: it indicates that students are dismissive and disrespectful of English class precisely *because* the study of English addresses the rhetorical. Although it wasn’t their focus, Bergmann and Zepernick’s work illustrates a false dichotomy in students’ minds that paints English as a soft, subjective, creative discipline and other disciplines as hard, fact-based, and objective (129-132). It appears that the culture of the university gives students the misconception that rhetorical concerns do not factor into *real* knowledge, creating a widespread perception that English is not “a legitimate discipline” and does not have “anything useful to contribute to their development of disciplinary or work-related writing skills” (129-132). This hierarchy that places “soft” fields of study in a space distinct from, and subordinated to, “hard” disciplines suggests to students that “real” knowledge exists somehow *outside* of the subjective—and by extension the rhetorical—realm; they perceive knowledge itself (outside of soft disciplines like English) to be unadulterated by the rhetorical.

Across disciplines, this misunderstanding of knowledge as a-rhetorical and decontextualized hinders students’ progress as writers. In addition to Kousantoni’s study showing that engineering students need to contextualize, a study focused on academic writing in nursing and midwifery also emphasizes the need for contextualizing skills. The author writes that “attributes such as criticality, evidence and impersonality...are context-sensitive even in disciplines like nursing and midwifery which are apparently quite

similar” (Gimenez 417). Moreover, a collaboration in 2012 between a Writing Center and the disciplines of Political Studies and Law was focused on the need for contextualizing: it had the purpose of making “the disciplinary conventions and expectations around writing more overt and understandable, and to find ways to explicitly teach students to shape their own writing according to these conventions and expectations” (Clarence 128).

Especially in the field of Technical Communication, the importance of contextualizing as a rhetorical skill in which students are lacking is an idea gathering momentum. Jennifer Maher insists that there is a need for more discussion and instruction about the ideologies, politics and cultures surrounding software development and documentation. She is concerned that in conversations about software documentation “instrumental efficacy” is emphasized “at the expense of critical and rhetorical awareness” (369). Stuart Selber, who I discussed in chapter two, also works in Technical Communication, and he devotes much of his book, *Multiliteracies in a Digital Age*, to the importance of contextualization for interface designers.

Selber’s work serves as a preliminary definition of Rhetorical Literacy—his chapter on the subject calls for instruction in rhetorical analysis as a way of ensuring that students are able to understand human-computer interfaces as contextualized within networks of social, political, discursive and technological relationships. His idea is that “students who are rhetorically literate will recognize the persuasive dimensions of human-computer interfaces and the deliberative and reflective aspects of interface design, all of which is not a purely technical endeavor but a form of social action” (140). To emphasize his point that interface design should concern humanists and not just computer



scientists, he spotlights the claim made by computer design professors Daniel Boyarski and Richard Buchanin that “interface design is like a persuasive speech” (145).

Although my own definition of Rhetorical Literacy is much more expansive than Selber’s—I argue for it as a literacy in which all students should be competent before they move to specialize in something like interface design—Selber’s delineation of the term is useful in that it points to specific pathways into rhetorical contextualization that are in fact generalizable across disciplines. Each of Selber’s four parameters of Rhetorical Literacy—persuasion, deliberation, reflection and social action—add specification and clarity to the project of teaching all students (not just those in Computer Science) how to contextualize (see the Table of Rhetorical Methods for details on Selber’s parameters).

### **Table of Rhetorical Methods**

How shall we face the task of teaching students in FYC the importance of context and contextualizing? Moreover, how shall we ensure that they can implement multiple contextual lenses? The ability to contextualize using just one methodology is not enough, for when moving from one discipline to another, students should be able to re-contextualize what they already know using a new activity systems. Therefore we would be wise to keep in mind what Nowacek discovered during her efforts to re-theorize and better understand how transfer works: that is, that “transfer is best understood as an act of re-contextualizing” (Nowacek 8).

One might point out that there are endless ways we might re-contextualize objects or texts (for everything inevitably exist within multiple histories, politics, desires,

cultures, power-structures, and so-on)—we might even say that the complexity of a text is positively correlated with the number of methodologies or pathways of analysis at our disposal, which are presumably infinite in number. This being the case, an FYC course cannot possibly offer instruction in *all* modes of contextualization, so a composition instructor must decide which and how many roads into contextual analysis should be taught. Sonja K. Foss attempts just this in her book *Rhetorical Criticism, Exploration and Practice*, which names nine qualitative rhetorical methods or what she calls “critical approaches,” all of which provide a pathway into context. The nine critical approaches she describes and exemplifies are certainly valuable methodologies—but we might easily problematize the implication of exactly *nine* critical approaches that ought to be universally taught in FYC. For who can say with certainty which modes of rhetorical/contextual analysis are most crucial to present to first year students in college—both now and/or in the future?

It seems to me that instead of giving students the impression that there are a handful of rhetorical methods superior to the rest, our main goals should be to teach them the value of contextualizing, give them practice at it, and make sure they understand that there are conceivably endless ways into a contextual analysis. We can demonstrate to them that through the exercise of employing multiple rhetorical methods, regardless of what those methods are, they are gaining a general cognitive skill—one we call contextualizing ability—that will serve them no matter what their future course of study. Students often become more motivated to succeed in a course if they can fully see its significance, and the importance of contextualizing and re-contextualizing cannot be

understated: not only will it strengthen their ability to read and write across disciplines, but it will also enable them to make connections between disciplines. In presenting the many rhetorical methods, we are teaching students that they can work with a diversity of mental schemas simultaneously, thus ensuring their ability to be what Nowacek calls “agents of integration.” Agents of integration are “those who actively work to perceive and convey connections...[they are] able to act and make change on [their] own behalf, while making [their] own meaning” (Mascle). A comprehensive college education is one that enables connections across disciplines and guides students to independently transfer both knowledge and ways of knowing.

I suggest that we need not arrive at consensus about which methods all composition instructors ought to teach as long as we understand that students should have awareness of multiplicity and diversity among rhetorical methods. In other words, just as an American Literature professor selects texts for a survey course with attention to democratic representation, so must a professor of Rhetorical Literacy choose from rhetorical methods with attention to diversity. While methods employed by Kenneth Burke, Stephen Toulmin, Lloyd Bitzer or Aristotle are important, we need not suggest that these are the only rhetoricians worthy of time and attention, especially seeing as they are all philosophers whose theories may be limited by their white, male, European perspective. We need to take heed of an important point brought to our attention by Foss, Foss and Trapp in *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*: “the work done on rhetorical processes by women, African Americans, and Asians is...not conceptualized as theory” and therefore often excluded from the rhetorical tradition (273).

Most scholarly definitions of rhetoric associate it with the use of language to persuade, manipulate, or make some kind of impact on an audience, and more contemporary theorists suggest that all types of symbolic systems used in communication are rhetorical. Some rhetoricians emphasize that rhetoric leads to real or material action, some emphasize it as an art, and some say that rhetoric should be divided into subgroups or parts, but all understandings of rhetoric involve symbolic systems and human communication. Rhetorical Literacy gives a name to what critical thinking looks like at the college level and gives students the tools they need to contextualize rhetorics used across cultures.

I put forward Rhetorical Literacy as involving agility in *multiple* rhetorical methods of analysis and engaging metacognitive processes that allow for the recognition of differences between methods (I discuss metacognition below). Rather than creating a set list of rhetorical methods required for Rhetorical Literacy, I suggest defining the rhetorically literate student as one who can employ multiple rhetorical methods to analyze a single text and one who is familiar with at least two rhetorical methods which are not part of the white, male, European canon. They should also understand that the many rhetorical methods that *could* be employed as a mode of analysis.

Table 1.1–Rhetorical Methods

Method	Definition	Author Referenced
<p><b>AAHHR (African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric)</b></p>	<p>“risky speech, hidden transcripts, and productive and subjugated knowledges by and for African Americans” (23)</p> <p>“enslaved African and African Americans used the term [hush harbor] and others such as <i>hush arbor</i> and <i>bush arbor</i> to refer to geographies such as the slave quarters, woods, and praise houses where Black folks could speak frankly in Black spaces in front of Black audiences. In these hush harbor spaces, Black rhetors and speakers were free to engage in and deploy otherwise heavily monitored practices, knowledges, and rhetoric disallowed in the public sphere under the disciplining gaze of Whites and Whiteness” (23)</p>	<p>Vorris L. Nunley <i>Keepin’ It Hushed: the Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric</i></p>
<p><b>African Rhetoric</b></p> <p><u>Subterm</u> Afrocentricity</p>	<p>“African philosophy cannot make the distinction of ‘speaker’ and ‘audience’ to the same degree found in rhetorical traditions of Euro-American society...in African society the coherence among persons and things accords, so that music, dance, or nommo must be a collective activity” (66)</p> <p>“Delivery becomes, for the traditional African speaker, an opportunity to engage in a textual as well as a contextual search for harmony” (67)</p> <p><u>Afrocentricity:</u> “Placing African ideas at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior” (6)</p>	<p>Molefi Asante <i>The Afrocentric Idea</i></p>
<p><b>Aristotelian Appeals: Logos, Pathos, Ethos</b></p> <p><b>Aristotelian Canons of Rhetoric</b></p>	<p>“Logical or rational appeals stress the reasonableness of the rhetorician’s argument. Pathetic appeals raise emotions favorable to the rhetorician’s position. Ethical appeals raise emotions favorable to the rhetorician’s moral character” (171)</p> <p>Invention – commonplaces: “definition, comparison, relationship, circumstance, testimony” (xiv). Organization – “state the point, demonstrate it...add an introduction and conclusion” (xv). Style – “injects personality into an argument, bringing it to a whole new level of persuasion” (xv). Memory – “It is true that Aristototle doesn’t mention memory, but...[f]or Augustine, memory means much more than downloading data. Memory is a matter of the soul”(xv). Delivery – “use the voice, eye contact, and gestures, as Aristotle says ‘neither to offend nor to entertain’” (xv).</p>	<p>Aristotle paraphrased in <i>The Rhetorical Tradition</i> Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg</p> <p>Aristotle paraphrased in Alyssan Barnes <i>Rhetoric Alive!</i></p>

<p><b>Aristotelian Kinds of Rhetoric</b></p>	<p>Deliberative Rhetoric – speech that targets the public good/urge to do or urge not to do/congress (xv)</p> <p>Epidictic Rhetoric – honoring virtues and praising the beautiful/praise and censure/weddings and funerals (xv)</p> <p>Judicial Rhetoric – defend and attack/considering morality and justice in both a specific and universal sense/courtroom (xvi)</p>	<p>Aristotle paraphrased in Alyssan Barnes <i>Rhetoric Alive!</i></p>
<p><b>Asian American Rhetoric</b></p>	<p>“Systemic, effective use and development by Asian Americans of symbolic resources, including this new American language, in social, cultural, and political contexts. Because these contexts are regularly imbued with highly asymmetrical relations of power, such rhetoric creates a space for Asian Americans where they can resist social and economic injustice and reassert their discursive agency and authority in the dominant culture” (3)</p> <p>“ a rhetoric that participates in this generative process, yielding an identity that is Asian American and producing a transformative effect that is always occasioned by use” (5)</p>	<p>LuMing Mao and Morris Young <i>Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric</i></p>
<p><b>Discourse Analysis</b></p>	<p>“Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often, reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or ‘kinds of people’ see Hacking 1986,1994) by specific groups, whether one is being a lawyer of a certain sort, a biker of a certain sort, a business person of a certain sort and so on and so forther through a very long list. Discourses are ways of being ‘people like us’. They are ways of being in the world. They are ‘forms of life.’ They are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social products of social histories” (xix).</p>	<p>James Paul Gee <i>Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses</i></p>

<b>Disciplinary Cultures</b>	Knowledge and Culture, by Disciplinary Grouping*			Tony Becher “The disciplinary shaping of the profession” in <i>The Academic Profession: National, Disciplinary and Institutional Settings</i> Ed. Burton R. Clark *Table reproduced from page 278
	Discipline Grouping	Nature of Knowledge	Nature of disciplinary culture	
	Pure sciences 'hard-pure'	Cumulative; atomistic (crystalline/tree-like); concerned with universals, quantities, simplification; resulting in discovery and explanation.	Competitive, gregarious; politically well-organized; high publication rate; task-oriented.	
	Humanities (e.g. history) and pure social science 'soft-pure'	Reiterative; holistic (organic/river-like); concerned with particulars, qualities, complication; resulting in understanding and interpretation	Individualistic, pluralistic; loose structure; low publication rate; person-oriented	
	Technology 'hard-applied'	Purposive; pragmatic (know-how via hard knowledge); concerned with mastery of physical environment; resulting in products/techniques.	Entrepreneurial, cosmopolitan; dominated by professional values; patents substitutable for publications; role-oriented.	
Applied social sciences (e.g. education): 'soft-applied'	Functional; utilitarian (know-how via soft knowledge); concerned with enhancement of [semi-]professional practice; resulting in protocols/procedures	Outward-looking; uncertain in status; dominated by intellectual fashions; publication rates reduced by consultances; power-oriented.		
<b>Dramatistic Pentad</b>  <u>Subterms:</u> act, scene, agent, agency, purpose	“any complete statement about motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (1298)			Kenneth Burke <i>A Grammar of Motives</i> in <i>The Rhetorical Tradition</i> Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg

<p><b>Encoding and Decoding</b></p>	<p>Moment of Encoding: “The Production of texts by encoders with reference to relevant codes” (Chandler 266)  Moment of the Text: “The...symbolic construction, arrangement and perhaps Performance... the form and content of what is published or broadcast” (Chandler 267)  Moment of Decoding: “The comprehension and interpretation of texts by decoders with reference to relevant codes. Most commentators assume that the reader constructs meaning rather than simply extracting it from the text. (Chandler 267)  Types of Decoding:  The Dominant/Hegemonic: ‘When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs program full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (Hall 59)   The Negotiated: “Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules...the negotiated version of the dominant ideology is shot through with contradictions” (Hall 60)   The Oppositional: [detotalizing] the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference (Hall 61)</p>	<p>Stuart Hall  In <i>Culture, Media, Language Eds, Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis.</i>  and Daniel Chandler  <i>Semiotics for Beginners (glossary)</i></p>
<p><b>Feminist Socioforensic Discursive Analysis</b></p>	<p>“Feminist socioforensic discursive analysis provides a critique of the ideologies of argument that permeate both academic and political argumentation about issues of social justice. It is a form of descriptive theory that examines the contours of feminist and antifeminist controversies, treating them symptomatically and diagnostically to reveal how everyday and scholarly deployments of affect function as technologies of power. It connects discursive arenas generally disaggregated by the disciplines to demonstrate the significant costs of our boundary practices: the promiscuous conversation of texts in social life compels any one utterance to function as a node in a broader discursive network. Feminist socioforensic discursive analysis seeks to enhance the work of the disciplines by challenging unacknowledged racialized and gendered ideologies of argument that frame and exclude certain kinds of claims and evidence in specific disciplines. The more fervently conventional practices shut down debate by defending themselves as neutral, the more their political nature is revealed” (4)</p>	<p>Barbara Tomlinson  <i>Feminism and Affect at The Scene of Argument: Beyond the Trope of the Angry Feminist</i></p>



<p><b>Generic Criticism</b></p>	<p>“Generic Criticism is rooted in the assumption that certain types of situations provoke similar needs and expectations among audience and thus call for particular kinds of rhetoric. Rather than seeking to discover how one situation affects one particular rhetorical act, the generic critic seeks to discover commonalities in rhetorical patterns across recurring situations. The purpose of generic criticism is to understand rhetorical practices in different time periods and in different places by discerning the similarities in rhetorical situations and the rhetoric constructed in response to them” (Foss 193)</p> <p>“Genres are not merely a set of textual conventions but encompass an entire constellation of associated social relations, goals, identities, ways of knowing, and even knowledge domains” (Nowacek 19)</p>	<p>Foss, Sonja K. <i>Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice.</i></p> <p>Nowacek, Rebecca S. <i>Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act</i></p>
<p><b>Identification</b></p>	<p>“We form selves or identities through various properties or substances, including physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs, and values. As we ally ourselves with various properties or substances, we share substance with whatever or whomever we associate. Burke uses the term ‘consubstantial’ to describe this association...[and] equates ‘persuasion’ with ‘consubstantiality’ and ‘identification’” (Foss, Foss and Trapp 174)</p> <p>“You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (Burke 174)</p>	<p>Kenneth Burke <i>A Rhetoric of Motives</i> paraphrased and quoted in <i>Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.</i> Eds. Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss and Robert Trapp</p>
<p><b>The Medium is the Message</b></p>	<p>“The ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure” (8)</p> <p>“the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (9)</p>	<p>Marshal McLuhan <i>Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man</i></p>

<p><b>The New Mestiza Consciousness</b></p>	<p>“The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lie in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (102)</p>	<p>Gloria Anzaldua <i>Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza</i></p>										
<p><b>Metacognition</b> *Note that all rhetorical methods involve thinking about thinking. They are all metacognitive in this regard.</p>	<p>“Metacognition is knowing that you know something and being able to inventory and talk about your own knowledge as content and process, that is begin able to talk about what you know...and secondly, about how your thinking operates. The object of cognition about cognition, then, is not only the topic knowledge one possesses, but one’s own thinking processes and strategies” (226)</p>	<p>Linda Flower <i>The Construction of Negotiated Meaning: A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing.</i></p>										
<p><b>Rhetorical Approach to Computer Literacy</b></p>	<table border="1" data-bbox="495 1052 1144 1703"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="495 1052 667 1115">Parameters</th> <th data-bbox="667 1052 1144 1115">Qualities of a Rhetorically Literate Student</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="495 1115 667 1297">Persuasion</td> <td data-bbox="667 1115 1144 1297">A rhetorically literate students understands that persuasion permeates interface design contexts in both implicit and explicit ways and that it always involves larger structures and forces (e.g., use contexts, ideology).</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="495 1297 667 1480">Deliberation</td> <td data-bbox="667 1297 1144 1480">A rhetorically literate student understands that interface design problems are ill-defined problems whose solutions are representational arguments that have been arrived at through various deliberative activities.</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="495 1480 667 1608">Reflection</td> <td data-bbox="667 1480 1144 1608">A rhetorically literate student articulates his or her interface design knowledge at a conscious level and subjects their actions and practices to critical assessment.</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="495 1608 667 1703">Social Action</td> <td data-bbox="667 1608 1144 1703">A rhetorically literate student sees interface design as a form of social versus technical action.</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>*Table reproduced from page 147</p>	Parameters	Qualities of a Rhetorically Literate Student	Persuasion	A rhetorically literate students understands that persuasion permeates interface design contexts in both implicit and explicit ways and that it always involves larger structures and forces (e.g., use contexts, ideology).	Deliberation	A rhetorically literate student understands that interface design problems are ill-defined problems whose solutions are representational arguments that have been arrived at through various deliberative activities.	Reflection	A rhetorically literate student articulates his or her interface design knowledge at a conscious level and subjects their actions and practices to critical assessment.	Social Action	A rhetorically literate student sees interface design as a form of social versus technical action.	<p>Stuart A. Selber <i>Multiliteracies for a Digital Age</i></p>
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<p><b>The Rhetorical Situation</b>  <u>Subterms:</u>  exigence,  audience,  constraints</p>	<p>“a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (6)</p> <p><u>Exigence</u>  “an imperfection marked by urgency” (6)  “An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse” (7)</p> <p><u>Audience</u>  “Properly speaking a rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (8)</p> <p><u>Constraints</u>  “Every rhetorical situation contains a set of constraints made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence. Standard source of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like” (8)</p>	<p>Lloyd Bitzer  “The Rhetorical Situation” in <i>Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1</i></p>
<p><b>Shui (the Chinese word for persuasion)</b></p>	<p>“[refers] primarily to one individual—usually a subordinate—addressing one other person—usually a superior” (Garrett 299)  “When a rhetor attempted to persuade this sort of one-person audience, the situational, psychological, and interpersonal factors often had much more bearing on success than the logical validity of inferences. Consequently, rhetoric became much more the counterpart of psychology than of dialectic” (Garrett 299)</p>	<p>Mary Garrett  “Asian Challenge” in <i>Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition</i>  Eds. Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss and Robert Trapp</p>
<p><b>Signifyin(g)</b></p>	<p>“The general term for several forms of persuasion, insult, boasting or lying all by innuendo or indirection” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1547)  “the black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figure” (Gates 1556)  “Signifyin(g) is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony...and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis...to the list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catechresis, all of which are used in the ritual of Signifyin(g)” (Gates 1557)</p>	<p>Henry Louis Gates Jr.  “The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism”  -paraphrased and quoted in <i>The Rhetorical Tradition</i>  Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg</p>

<b>Terministic Screen</b>	“In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (46)	Kenneth Burke <i>Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method</i>
<b>Heterogeneous Resonance in Chinese American Rhetoric</b>	“the making of Chinese American rhetoric lies in the process of contestation, interrogation, and reflection—or in what [Mao] calls ‘heterogeneous resonance.’ That is to say, while there is no shared essence between these two traditions, there is a great deal of proximity-induced interaction, realignment, and unsettled association” (5)	LuMing Mao <i>Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie: The Making of Chinese American Rhetoric</i>
<b>Toulmin’s Model of Arguments</b>  <u>Subterms</u> Claim, Data, Warrant, Backing, Qualifier, Rebuttal	<u>Claim</u> “conclusion whose merits we are seeking to establish” (1417) <u>Data</u> “the facts we appeal to as a foundation for the claim” (1417) <u>Warrant</u> “general, hypothetical statements, which can act as bridges, and authorize the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us [the step that connects the data to the claim]” (1417) <u>Backing</u> “lends authority to warrants” (1422) and “The kind of backing we must point to if we are to establish its authority will change greatly as we move from one field to another” (1421) <u>Qualifier</u> “explicit reference to the degree of force which our data confer on our claim in virtue of our warrant” (1419) <u>Rebuttal</u> “the exceptional conditions which might be capable of defeating or rebutting the warranted conclusion” (1419)	Stephen Toulmin <i>The Uses of Argument in The Rhetorical Tradition</i> Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg

Even though all the methods included on the Rhetorical Methods Table are valid ways to contextualize, they are not equally popular in FYC courses. Some of the methods I listed have rarely if ever been taught in FYC. The methods more likely to appear in courses are probably Aristotle’s “appeals,” Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation,” Toulmin’s model, and at some institutions, “Signifyin[g]”. But according to Richard Fulkerson’s meta-disciplinary analysis in “Summary and Critique: Composition at the

Turn of the Twenty-First Century," one of the most popular methods taught in FYC is Generic Criticism, meaning that contextual awareness is mobilized through training in a variety of genres (674-676).

Fulkerson distinguishes *The St Martins Guide to Writing*, by Rise B. Axelrod and Charles Cooper, as a "modern classic" of the generic approach (676). *The St Martin's Guide* fosters contextualizing skills by teaching students to abstract rhetorical similarities between essays belonging to the same genre. For every chapter in *Part One*, students must become familiar with the set of conventions, expectations, audiences and discourses of the genre (called the "Basic Features") that constitutes the chapter. When using a textbook like *The St. Martin's Guide*, students learn, as Ken Hyland puts it, "[that] every successful text will display the writer's awareness of its context and the readers who form part of that context" (qtd in Fulkerson 675). Thus working between and among various genres is indeed an excellent introduction to the intellectual activity of contextualizing and re-contextualizing.

### **Metacognition**

The metacognitive exercises in the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* are another of its features that add to its excellence as a textbook for practicing contextualization. Here I argue that metacognition (also referred to as meta-awareness) is a method of contextualization that is crucial to Rhetorical Literacy. When exercising metacognition the context under analysis is the student's own mind. They scrutinize the mental steps they take in writing—such as how they chose a topic, how they brainstormed, how they outlined, and what feelings or stumbling blocks they encountered (Linda Flower's

definition of metacognition is on the Rhetorical Methods Table above). Unlike most other modes of contextualizing, this is an especially inward-looking mode of analysis, and an imperative one. Indeed, my own success in writing a dissertation largely depended on metacognitive analysis. By thinking about my own thinking process, I realized that for the best results I needed to write for brief periods of time every day rather than long periods of time once or twice a week. I also realized that before I start composing I must arm myself with copious notes, for this helps me avoid writer's block. A writer's awareness of their own writing strategies is an important part of their ability to persevere when struggling, learn from mistakes, and ultimately produce quality writing (see Bangert-Drowns, Hurley and Wilkinson for evidence that metacognition has been shown to improve writing across many writing-to-learn programs).

Therefore in emphasizing metacognition, *The St Martin's Guide* represents an effective way of fostering contextualizing skills in FYC. While we might say that all rhetorical methods involve metacognition because they all entail the analysis of thought and communication, it is paramount for success in college to analyze one's own individual writing process, and this is why the metacognitive exercises in *The St. Martin's Guide* are perhaps its best innovation. These exercises foster Rhetorical Literacy because students how not only practice writing, but also learning *about their own writing process and about how and why their writing is persuasive to their audience or not.*

### **Countering an Objection to FYC**

One recent objection to FYC (that is, the practice of requiring entry level writing courses at all) becomes invalid when one considers that good FYC classes directly teach

metacognition and multiple rhetorical methodologies. The objection is that the genres students learn in FYC (such as the opinion paper, the evaluation paper, or the research paper) are not easily taught from within the context of a writing class which is somewhat removed from disciplinary or workplace urgencies and situations: the students are not *actually* writing an opinion about a restaurant for a local paper; they are not *actually* evaluating a website for a company that needs to improve its public image, and they are not *actually* doing research that will eventually be published and impact a field of study. The complaint is that this distance from “real-world” exigencies might make it more difficult for students to immerse themselves in the appropriate discursive situation. Indeed, Elizabeth Wardle recently received a great deal of attention for raising this objection to genre-based writing instruction in FYC; Wardle argues that whether an instructor assigns personal narrative papers, argument papers or evaluation papers, the genres in FYC are artificial in the sense that they may not carry the same exigencies as “real world” writing situations. Although one might point out that since *all* writing is bound by convention and necessarily manufactured, and thus we might describe *all* writing as artificial or artificially constructed, what Wardle claims is that common FYC assignments seem constrained by a separate set of conventions all of their own—conventions unique to FYC classes. Her complaint arouses suspicion that genres learned in FYC are inapplicable outside of the writing class,<sup>10</sup> —but in response to her

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<sup>10</sup> Although it is worth noting that good textbooks will do their best to imitate the genres of the “real world”: *The St Martin’s Guide* chooses genres carefully for their “real world” application—at the beginning of each chapter there is a section explaining where and how the genre is used in college courses, in the community, and in the workplace.

complaints about “mutt genres” (genres that are created within and only maintained by FYC classes) one might argue that it really does not matter whether or not students end up using an FYC genre in later coursework or later in life. Regardless of how important the personal narrative genre turns out to be for practical use in their careers, for example, students have learned invaluable lessons *about* writing and rhetoric from studying and practicing this genre. Rhetorical Literacy is not merely knowledge about common genres (such as the narrative, opinion, or evaluation)—it is much more than that. The rhetorically literate student can look inward to analyze their own writing processes and can think using different blueprints or different rhetorical methodologies—and these are highly transferrable and very valuable cognitive skills no matter what is in store for a student’s future.

If students practice multiple rhetorical methods and metacognition in a first year writing class, they will have to think about thinking, they will have to analyze what makes language persuasive—and this will equip them to handle unfamiliar writing situations they encounter in their futures. In other words, what Wardle fails to emphasize is that the point of learning Generic Criticism—or any other rhetorical method—is not so that students memorize the basic features of each genre they practice (or for that matter so that they will be able to identify and name Burke’s or Toulmin’s terminology five years after the class is over). Rather, the goal is that they practice the general cognitive abilities of contextualizing and re-contextualizing and of thinking metacognitively, for those are skills that need to transfer.



Although I support the teaching of Generic Criticism, what my table clarifies is that there are many other ways to ensure that students are adept at contextualization. Although genre awareness is important in that genres are a “cue” for transfer—when students re-encounter a genre they experienced in FYC they are likely to recall and transfer writing skills learned in FYC—there are other cues for transfer, and we are still learning about the many different ways that transfer takes place. I agree with Nowacek that “ultimately, to the extent that scholars...argue against transfer, it is to challenge limited understandings of transfer—not to argue against its existence” (13). In other words, transfer happens in a variety of unpredictable ways, and just because we cannot see it or measure it does not mean it isn’t happening. And what we do know is that the more practice students get contextualizing and re-contextualizing the better they will be prepared for college work in general.

When we become accustomed to teaching in a particular way, there is a tendency to forget the many pedagogical possibilities available. I hope that this chart can serve as a reminder of the many valid types of rhetorical methods that would be useful to teach in FYC. I hope it will open up possibilities and instigate brainstorming about what new methods (especially those from under-recognized groups) might be useful to incorporate as we continue to update our FYC curriculum to better address the cultural situations facing students of the new millennia.

In closing, metacognitive and contextualizing skills are integral to the formulation of Rhetorical Literacy that I put forward in this chapter.

## Chapter Four: Guided Pathways, Neoliberalism, and Rhetorical

### Literacy

*I am gradually coming to the realization that the combined elements of funding by billionaires and corporations, the narrow agendas of administrators (who have never taught in a classroom) and the allure of the bottom-line business model is, partially through the auspices of Pathways, converting the prep school emphasis (liberal arts) of many community colleges into vocational schools where drones can be trained without the enrichment of such dangerous skills as critical thinking, knowledge of the world and being able to express themselves lucidly in speech (rhetoric) and writing, i.e. Trump voters. This is social Darwinism defined. There are those who would love to create a new Gilded Age of complete corporate control of our society, if they haven't already.*

*-Dunbar*

This chapter illustrates that a recent model for Community College (CC) redesign, Guided Pathways—also called Pathways, ought to be understood as an attempt to impose the privatization strategies of for-profit colleges upon the non-profit sector. We need to consider whether it is only the for-profit sector that is abusing and deceiving both students and tax payers by making false promises and over-charging for low quality programs—for this type of corruption appears to be seeping into public colleges as well. Along with other scholars of a new field called “Critical University Studies,” I maintain that a fraudulent higher education system is the consequence of a neoliberal cultural imaginary that fails to recognize higher education as a public trust and a social good. It is not enough, therefore, to sue the for-profits and/or close them; we also need to change the neoliberal attitudes that are allowing for privatization strategies to encroach upon public institutions.

When a college degree becomes a mere commodity—bought and not earned—higher education loses its position as a socially and politically relevant public good. Although this might seem obvious, our current cultural climate is silencing those who insist that the general education students receive in the first two years of college should primarily be concerned with equity, democracy, and the pursuit of knowledges for their own sakes. Moreover, in a country as wealthy as ours a general education should be free (or close to free) for the individual student—as it was just four decades ago. Pathways, although implemented differently at different colleges, is largely aligned with values that distract higher education policy from what should be its main project: formulating an exit strategy from the neoliberal crisis within which we find ourselves.

“Pathways” is a set of initiatives designed to improve graduation rates at CCs that has largely grown out of research from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) associated with the Teachers College and Columbia University—research that is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It involves structuring and prescribing a sequence of courses for undergraduate education programs so that upon admission students receive a “degree map”. The degree map includes a number of “check points” requiring them to meet with an advisor to chart progress. The Pathways model suggests that colleges force students to choose a program of study as soon as possible during their first year of college and advocates “intrusive advising,” meaning that students are closely supervised to ensure they remain on track. It also recommends that all students take the same bundle of courses in their first quarter—a math class, an English class, and a course about how to succeed in college. Pathways also emphasizes the benefits of placing

underprepared students (who represent two-thirds of CC students) into college level classes while requiring them to take a co-requisite support class. This strategy is said to prevent underprepared students from getting discouraged and dropping out before they reach the point where they are ready for college level courses (Bailey et al. 132-137). Furthermore, the Pathways model includes a vision of a highly collaborative and cooperative institution: blurring the lines, for example, between college level courses, developmental courses, and student services, is said to create a more coherent educational experience for students. The model also suggests that faculty and administrators can work together towards the same goal of “student success” if there is proper communication and trust between these factions. In addition, the Pathways movement supports only some pedagogical strategies and considers others unhelpful, resulting in administrators who believe all teachers across disciplines should use the same pedagogical techniques.

In order to receive Pathways grant money from College Spark Washington in Washington State, a college must agree to the following:

- a. Redesigning and making systemic changes to student intake (assessment, advising, orientation, registration, class scheduling); academic programs; student supports; curriculum; and instruction.
- b. Conducting a critical review of the extent to which the college’s academic programs provide a clear and educationally coherent pathway for students to further their education and/or directly lead to jobs in fields of economic importance to our college’s service area. This work will necessitate the aligning of curriculum and mapping program outcomes to both bachelor’s degrees and the labor market
- c. Requiring students to choose a Program of Study within two quarters of enrollment; providing students with default course enrollment and consistent scheduling, and instituting intrusive advising and student supports that support progression and completion.
- d. Reconfiguring developmental education to ensure students enter their Program of Study as quickly as possible; implementing strategies that allow underprepared students to enroll directly into college-level gate-

keeper courses with additional supports; and, for students who need a prerequisite approach, redesigning developmental education to be a contextualized onramp to Programs of Study.

e. Developing and offering multiple math pathways aligned with Meta Majors and, where possible, contextualized to programs of study.

f. Streamlining curricula, which may result in a reduction of the credit hours students must complete for degree attainment. (This is not intended to reduce staffing levels but rather to align all courses with established Programs of Studies and their related program maps within a Meta Major.). (AACC)

The President of the College must agree to the following I-statements:

2) I understand that pathways reforms will involve more structure and prescription for students.

3) I will oversee implementation of Guided Pathways with support from a senior cabinet officer, who will also serve as the primary institutional contact person for work related to this grant. I will ensure the planning and execution of college-wide engagement in Guided Pathways design and implementation; needed and timely professional development for faculty, staff, and college leaders; and needed and timely technical assistance in the work. I understand successful implementation of Guided Pathways requires broad engagement of staff and faculty in the development, implementation, and refinement of all aspects of Guided Pathways.

4) I will ensure that we participate fully in the initiative evaluation, which will focus on continuous improvement, a learning agenda and measurement of Guided Pathways impact.

5) A team from my college will attend initiative workshops up to four times a year. The appropriate composition of our college team may vary depending on the subject of these meetings. I understand that our team may be asked to take steps to prepare for these workshops and we are committed to doing so.

6) Our college will complete a work plan during the first year of the grant and submit periodic grant reports (not more than 2 per year) from 2017-2021. This reporting will include grant budget reporting, progress reporting on implementation, and an analysis of student outcome metrics that will be provided by SBCTC [State Board of Community and Technical Colleges]. (AACC)

Pathways is making a startling impact on Community Colleges nationwide, and has even found a home at some Universities in Florida, Tennessee and Georgia. It appears to have been successful at institutions like Georgia State University (GSU),

where retention rates from the fall to spring went from 83.4% in 2010 to 89% in 2013 (Renick and Thompson-Sellers). Numbers like these from GSU are often what administrators use to justify the initiative to faculty, but many faculty members remain unconvinced of its benefits. Although the GSU statistics sound promising, the fact is that even with financial aid, a four-year degree at Georgia State costs the average student close to \$150,000, and GSU does not have an open admissions policy (“Compare”). This means that GSU is significantly richer and has a more privileged set of students than CCs, and yet CCs are supposed to be inspired by GSU’s success and attempt to imitate its programs—even without the resources to do so.

It is difficult for administrators to convince faculty members that they should, usually without extra pay, spend time and energy on “Guided Pathways” projects and committees. College professors have devoted their lives to the ways of thinking and knowing associated with their disciplines; they are only secondarily concerned with how students get to the finish line and/or gain employment. Professors, especially those in the humanities, often think of their work and their teaching as valuable—because it is—regardless of what their students might do for a career or where they are going.

Those who disagree with me may reasonably be convinced that the Pathways model is the best we can do to close the achievement gap at this particular cultural/historical moment. It appears, to them, to be better than nothing. I cannot deny that for some CC faculty and staff, perhaps many, Pathways strategies have and will continue to result in a CC culture that is more open to minority populations, more welcoming of diversity of all kinds, and more amenable to closing the achievement gaps.

I think those successes ought to be celebrated, and the critique of Pathways that follows is not to diminish what good comes of it, but to carefully think through what we mean when we say we are being progressive at CCs, and whether Pathways is truly the best we can do.

Even though the Pathways commitment to equity is theoretically aligned with democratic values, and some of its strategies might work well if there were time and resources for them, the movement as a whole, especially when resources do not exist for its proper implementation, can cause more stress, antagonism and exploitation than it is worth, and can produce a workload for faculty and administrators that leaves precious little time for Rhetorical Literacy and other valuable teacher-scholar pursuits.

In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown refers to the educational social imaginary now dominating higher education as “primarily valuable to human capital development, where human capital is what the individual, the business world, and the state seek to enhance in order to maximize competitiveness” (Brown 176). Since Pathways is a fairly new development, there is little empirical evidence to illustrate its effectiveness or ineffectiveness even from within the framework of an education system that prioritizes human capital and competitiveness, yet it is marketable from within a neoliberal value system because it provides a hope that there is a market-based solution to dismal graduation rates.

Pathways therefore has a powerful appeal, and most published material about Pathways narrativizes the model as something that makes an institution stand out among others. Indeed, in the crudest neoliberal sense, Pathways probably does enhance the

perceived value--and therefore the competitive standing of—an institution, but in many real and material ways, the Pathways effect upon students is in fact inimical.

My work here thus fills a gap. While policymakers, administrators, and many faculty leaders, especially at CCs, are eager to see Pathways succeed, I propose that we carefully consider what it would mean for pathways to "work"—even if it does improve graduation rates, does it contribute meaningfully to a more equitable society or a more civil notion of what it means to be educated? Does it offer students breadth and depth in terms of identity exploration? What are the ramifications of accelerated entry-level English classes that sacrifice quality (i.e. Rhetorical Literacy) in the interest of pushing students through the system? What is the culture under which we find ourselves accepting this sort of “solution” to low completion rates and what is the potential damage it could do? Because Pathways further normalizes the neoliberal rationalities that increasingly underlie the way many people understand what it means to educate and be educated, this is an important topic for all two and four-year institutions.

Pathways is rarely described to faculty with any objectivity or critical distance. The institutional sequence of events for implementing the program often follows a pattern like the one at the college I worked for, where administrators adopted Pathways before consulting with faculty about it. By the time faculty understood what was meant by the term “Guided Pathways,” the institution had invested itself financially and was at a point of no return. Thus, the version of Pathways touted by administrators is one that deprives faculty of the whole truth. Charts and graphs about graduation rates at places like GSU suggest that Pathways creates substantial progress, but when we put these improved



graduation rates in the context of the greater neoliberal realities, we begin to suspect that Pathways does not actually represent progress, but rather a degradation of higher learning, a lowering of standards, and a rather fascistically controlled environment for both students and instructors. I propose that our professional responsibility to teach disciplinary skills, global citizenship, bodies of knowledge, and civil discourse suggests that we do what we can to stop or at least slow down Pathways progress.

### **Gates's Research**

According to the Pathways literature, Pathways is based in a solid foundation of scholarly research that demonstrates the effectiveness of strategies like managing and limiting students' program and course choices, imposing intrusive advising, and investing in accelerated learning programs. However, after investigating this research, I don't believe it is extensive or valid enough to justify an overhaul like Pathways.

An examination of the CCRC research into Guided Pathways produces a number of troubling results. Starting in 2009, the Gates Foundation provided the funding to produce reports and studies on "promising but largely untested" ideas for reforms at CCs that would improve "student success" (Bailey, et al. ix). These reports are heavily influenced by Gates Foundation "program officers," (Bailey et al. xi) whose continued employment depends on their loyalty to Gates rather than their obligations to objective scholarship. A search for "Guided Pathways" and "Community Colleges" on the ERIC database produces sixteen results, ten of which are reports—reports funded by Gates. The majority of research supporting Pathways is thus privately produced information that is biased by Gates's neoliberal agenda.

While some of these reports likely contain legitimate research, they are not sufficient in quality or quantity to justify the claims being made about the benefits of Pathways or the urgent call to redesign CC infrastructure within a very short time frame. The quality of the research is undermined by the way much of it comes from the corporate sector and is thus poorly aligned with the public aims and social benefits of higher education. And in terms of quantity, the research appears to be much more substantial than it actually is because there are so many documents referring back to the same few (Gates-funded) studies and authors. Moreover, one of the lessons coming from Pathways literature is that “tweaking” things here and there is not enough: “The Guided Pathways model...entails a systemic redesign of the student experience from initial connection to college through to completion, with changes to program structure, new student intake, instruction, and support services” (Bailey, et al. “What we Know” 2). There is certainly not enough research to justify a deep deconstruction and rebuilding of CC organization and processes.

Given the demands that Pathways initiatives make of an institution, one might wonder why they are appealing to college administrators. Pathways creates costs for an institution. Most colleges, in fact, have to pay the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) \$45,000 a year to be on the official list of Pathways colleges and receive Pathways “coaching” (AACC). And Pathways changes to curriculum require that administrators spend a lot of time either pulling faculty teeth or manipulating them, which is very hard work.

In spite of these drawbacks, however, I imagine that Community College administrative careers themselves may be enhanced through a commitment to Pathways. Their job is to advance and improve their schools, and Pathways gives them a solid plan of action. In addition, it may be that administrators are attracted to Pathways because they believe in its promise about “student success”—but if this is the case, their hope might be misplaced and they may not be thinking through the various and complex meaning of “student success.”

It is telling that the literature supporting Pathways was produced by people who have very little direct involvement with, and no experience teaching, CC students. The most prominent Pathways book, funded by Gates, is called *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*, and is written by Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins. All three authors work at the CCRC. Bailey, who founded the CCRC in 1996, has only ever taught at Columbia University and hasn't taught since 2001. He is the director of many research centers. He also supports for-profit colleges (“Thomas”). Like Bailey, Jaggars doesn't teach, but manages educational research centers and projects. She is interested in online education and student persistence and completion (“Shanna”). Jenkins also leads research projects about how to improve colleges, and is not a teacher. He supports performance-based funding (“Davis”). I don't mean to discredit the expertise of these individuals, but to point out that it is rooted in neoliberalized ideas of what is good or valuable about higher education, and their research is therefore not driven by the types of values and objectives that guide and inspire many faculty members. Another widely read Pathways book,

*Becoming a Student Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success* was written by five administrators, three of whom have no teaching experience and two of whom have very little (McNair et al. xii-xvi). Also, as I mentioned, there are very few substantial peer-reviewed articles undergirding Pathways. Of these articles, two of the most regularly cited are written by individuals who may not have any genuine professional interest in teaching and learning. The first is called “Guided Pathways to Careers: Four Dimensions of Structure in Community College Career-Technical Programs” and is written by five individuals, only one of whom, a doctoral candidate, may have direct contact in the classroom with students; the others are two research associates for the CCRC (including Jenkins), a data analyst, and a director of an Education and Employment Center. The second article, called “Get with the Program...and Finish it: Building Guided Pathways to Accelerate Student Completion,” is by Jenkins (already described) and Sung-Woo Cho, also a researcher at the CCRC.

One glaring problem with the influential article I mentioned above, “Guided Pathways to Careers: Four Dimensions of Structure in Community College Career-Technical Programs,” is that it only concerns career-technical students, ignoring the needs of the majority of CC students who are aiming for a bachelor’s degree (Van-Noy et al.). Yet research like this is used to support the Pathways structure for *all* students.

Another problem is that research supporting Pathways is based in conclusions drawn from studies about what makes corporations effective, and is thus generating notions of effectiveness that should not be so easily applied to educational institutions. For example, the authors of the 2015 research overview “What we Know about Guided

Pathways” gather their insights in part from a book called *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* and an article called “Redesigning Community Colleges for Completion: Lessons from research on higher-performance organizations.” (Bailey et al). The companies in the former and the organizations in the latter bear little resemblance to Community Colleges in terms of the people they serve and their function in society. Companies lauded in *Built to Last* are all brand-name multinationals worth billions, such as Disney, Sony, Boeing, IBM and Walmart (Collins and Porras). The organizations in “Redesigning Community Colleges...” include high-performing ones outside of education, and the article shamelessly uses the words ‘student’ and ‘customer’ interchangeably (Jenkins). Both sources treat educational institutions as subordinate to corporations and encourage those in education to emulate business models and operate according to neoliberal notions of success.

Furthermore, Pathways takes research from behavioral science—research intended to further our understanding of decision-making processes relevant to consumer choice and financial success—and rather recklessly applies it to decision-making in college. Pathways does not consider the difference between what is reasonable when making an educational decision and what is practical when making a consumer choice or financial decision. The conclusions drawn from the behavioral science indicate that too many choices are harmful and that people need to think through options in “manageable sets.” The claim is that people are better off with a “simplified set of options” and “clear information on costs and benefits.” In addition, this behavioral science research tells us that “reminders, assistance, and feedback can increase desired behaviors” (Jenkins and

Cho 32). These ideas, when left unexamined, seem to make sense: if the college experience is simpler and more manageable, students will graduate more efficiently and in greater numbers. However, we need to ask what is healthy to expect from people entering into society as adults who must take responsibility for themselves. I suggest that we consider how the Pathways push for simplification and micro-management might harm students by infantilizing them: deciding on a career path is not simple; making decisions about one's values and identity is hardly a problem that can be contained in a "manageable set" of options. If we operate as though these decisions are not complex and overwhelming, we deprive students of a developmental process that is crucially humanizing. If these larger questions about life and identity have easy answers that can be solved in a half-hour meeting with a educational planner or "navigator" then our students are no more than cogs in a machine.

In looking at this problem of misplaced behavioral science research more closely, we find that one of the CCRC reports uses evidence from research into financial literacy and applies it to the situation CC students face when figuring out their educational plan. The author tries to show that since cognitive overload leads to financial mistakes, offering too many options to CC students will result in their failure to graduate (Scott-Clayton). As I said, it is highly problematic to assume that financial planning and educational planning would be comparable; furthermore, if "cognitive overload" is a problem in both areas, maybe the solution is a college course about coping with "cognitive overload" rather than a wholesale decrease in complexity and difficulty. After all, isn't it fortitude when dealing with cognitive overload that eventually makes a person

successful? The same report also claims that a pre-packaged and structured pathway through college is equally as important to student success as academic preparation or financial support. This is unlikely. A lack of academic preparation can have drastic effects on a person's success in college, as can an inability to pay, whereas confusion over what program to choose or course to take is a minor problem by comparison. Moreover, Scott-Clayton's report offers no evidence to support her claim that a highly structured pathway is just as important as academic preparation and financial means when it comes to completing a degree.

Another Pathways document, a "research overview" called "What We Know About Guided Pathways," is also troubling in many ways. Under a big subheading "Supporting Evidence from Higher Education Research" it says that "no rigorous research to date has been conducted on whether whole-college guided pathways reforms improve student outcomes..." (Bailey et al. "What we Know..."<sup>4</sup>). Then, their first claim, supported by a chart created by yet another CCRC report, is that students who enter into a program during their first year are more likely to complete a degree. They claim studies show that "more than half of students who entered a program in their first year earned a credential or transferred within five years. For students who did not enter a program until their third year, the success rate was around 20 percent" (Bailey et al. "What we Know..."). This statistic is misleading. They took this number from a study (their own, in-fact) showing that the students who entered a program in their first year were also more likely to be younger, white, female, and either not in need of developmental education or only in need of one developmental class (Jenkins and Cho

“Get with the Program: Accelerating Community College entry...” 10). A correlation between choosing a major early and graduating on time was established, but a causal relationship between the two was not. The younger white females with little need for developmental education probably have middle class status upon entering college: it is their middle-class status, not the fact that they chose a major early, that results in higher chances of on-time graduation.

The CCRC research overview also advertises the IBEST Pathway, which is an accelerated learning program that reduces the amount of time a student spends getting a degree. Skills in English and Math are taught together with technical skills to accelerate degree completion:

The Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model was developed by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges to help adult basic skills students enter and complete certificates in career-technical education (CTE) programs. Consistent with the design principles for guided pathways, the program integrates the teaching of foundational basic skills with instruction in college-level technical content and enrolls students in a prescribed, whole-program schedule of courses that are aligned with job requirements in a related field...A CCRC study found that students in I-BEST programs accumulated more college-level credits and were substantially more likely to earn an occupational certificate in three years than similar students not enrolled in the program. (“What we know...” 4).

The study used to support the IBEST model measured whether the students earned credit through the program, but did not measure whether they learned much or not. Researchers did not measure learning outcomes except through a basic skills test, and whether students improved on this test was only one of seven criteria used to determine if IBEST is effective. In other words, IBEST is effective if teachers give high scores, not if students learn:



We examined the effect of the program on seven educational outcome variables: (1) whether a student earned any college credit (of any kind), (2) whether a student earned any occupational college credit, (3) the number of college credits a student earned, (4) the number of occupational college credits a student earned, (5) whether or not a student persisted to the following year after initial enrollment, (6) whether a student earned a certificate or degree, and (7) whether a student achieved point gains on basic skills tests. (Zeidenberg et al. 1)

The basic skills test referred to is CASAS, or “Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System.” This test does not measure critical ability or anything akin to Rhetorical Literacy. Indeed, researchers Hock and Mellard found that the CASAS reading assessment focuses on lower-order skills such as word comprehension and factfinding and includes significantly fewer questions that require higher-order thinking and inferential skill (182-188). Although it is not something that Pathways leaders readily admit, there is plenty of evidence illustrating that the program is intended to make college easier.

### **Gates’ Neoliberal Agenda**

Pathways would be very unpopular, of-course, if its leaders admitted to their goal of making college easier, so the program focuses on improving graduation rates and does not admit to incentivizing a decline in educational quality. Moreover, an investment in improved graduation rates without the accompanying skills and knowledge that a degree represents might be a good one for neoliberal interests. In order to keep neoliberalism as it is, the majority of people need to have low-paying jobs, be good at following orders, and largely uncritical of the system. The jobs they will obtain with their sub-par college degrees (if they do get jobs) will keep them working hard, keep them saddled with student loan debt, and perhaps a little bit hopeful of a better future (so they are not angry

enough to revolt against the system). And then there are the profits that big financial companies like Sallie Mae are making from student loans. We can't assume that a speedier journey through college results in less student loans; in fact, the reverse might be true: Pathways "research" tells us that if the journey through college is faster, students are more likely to be motivated to persist, and if there is a causal link between rapid progress and persistence, then there will be an increase in borrowing, not a decrease. A persisting student is one taking out more loans. And neoliberalism, as was demonstrated in 2008, thrives on bad loans. One wonders what will happen when the student loan bubble bursts.

Another article advancing the Pathways movement is neoliberal in the sense that it is focused on privatizing the public college. This is partially accomplished by limiting the educational choices students have and streamlining them into a specific career from the moment they enroll. The article seeks to correct the supposed problem of overwhelming students with information and not providing them with enough guidance. It makes a comparison between seven public two-year institutions and seven private two-year institutions and concludes that the private ones are better because there are numbers indicating that the private ones have higher completion rates (Person, et al.). The article, however, is misleading: first, the authors don't interview faculty when collecting data, only students and administrators. I suspect their intention is to silence the faculty voices that might object to their conclusions. Second, the comparison made is a poor one: private two-year institutions are significantly different from public CCs in ways that the authors only briefly acknowledge and understate rather dramatically. The authors claim, for example, that the national accreditation used by the private two-year schools is the

same as the regional accreditation used by the public ones. This is not true. In fact, regionally accredited schools often will not accept credits from the nationally accredited institutions because the national accreditation process is not as rigorous. Furthermore, private two-year colleges are sometimes ten times more expensive than Community Colleges—“\$11,000 vs \$1,800”(Scott-Clayton 22)—and are not interested, as Community Colleges often are, in education for well-informed, critical citizenship and/or skills needed for upper-division coursework. Students that attend public CCs are significantly more interested in a Liberal Arts education than those who have decided in advance of attending on a trade or vocation. As Scott-Clayton points out, “because private colleges tend to offer fewer and more focused programs, they may attract individuals who are similarly focused” (22). The point of a Community College is to be accommodating to everyone, including people who are just beginning to explore their identities as adults in the world, people who benefit enormously from a wide variety of course options before deciding on a path. Yet despite the dissimilarities between the types of students these two types of colleges serve and the different roles they play in society, the authors of the article claim that public CCs ought to emulate these private schools (Person, et al. 379).

Perhaps most troubling is that out of the seven private institutions investigated—and then celebrated—by the authors, four of them are the kind of colleges that have been sued for manipulating students into paying extraordinary sums for faux degrees. We should have serious objections to modelling ourselves after these scamming and abusive institutions, yet the researchers credit for-profit colleges with furthering equity (as if they

are actually servicing the students they recruit). While it is probably true that “for-profit degree-granting institutions enroll and graduate greater proportions of the “new” [underprivileged] college students than their public college counterparts” (380), this is because these colleges prey on the population most vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation and spend three times the amount of money on marketing and recruiting than they do on instruction (Halperin 292). According to David Halperin, author of *Stealing America’s Future: How For-Profit Colleges Scam Taxpayers and Ruin Students’ Lives*, for-profit education corporations prey on “veterans, single mothers, immigrants and other low-income and middle-class people striving to build better futures” (location 26). It is first-generation low-income college students who are most likely to believe the lies recruiters tell them about how much debt they will incur and what kind of job they will get upon graduation, and veterans are often among those in this crowd. Indeed, “the top seven recipients of federal G.I. bill education are all for-profit colleges...[and] the results for many service members and vets are often disastrous” (Halperin location 166). These students are left with “a substandard education, heavy student loan debt, non-transferable credits, worthless degrees or no degrees at all” (Halperin location 166). Halperin reported that sources from inside the industry told him that it “uses sophisticated tracking that allows it to...target single women of color with children under six years old” (location 275). He also said that

according to the federal lawsuits, ATI [a for-profit career-training center], had driven to sign up students and cash their federal financial aid checks, looked for recruits in homeless shelters and strip clubs, falsely promising jobs with big salaries. ATI signed up non-English speakers for classes conducted in English. An ATI staffer said, “the ATI culture...was to recruit anyone with a pulse.” (Halperin location 525)

Sadly, for these students, the recruiters at these colleges “are...the only people who seem to care. For a broke single mom or anguished returning veteran, for-profit college recruiters are people listening to them, offering them a chance” (Halperin location 198). Students are sold on the college opportunity because they feel gratified when someone (a recruiter) from a higher social status treats them with warmth and respect, and my experience with the Pathways culture is that this artificial type of “caring” (extended from the middle-class employee of the college to the lower class student) is an unspoken part of a faculty member’s job (I explain this further in the section on “faculty leaders”).

Needless to say, it is disturbing to read scholarly articles lauding institutions that propel inequity by ruining the lives of vulnerable people, and even more disturbing that CCs are taking action to imitate their strategies.

While I cannot presume to understand Gates’ conscious or unconscious motivations, I think it is reasonable to speculate that there could be a number of neoliberal interests at work behind Pathways, thus it is worth describing the Gates foundation in more detail. Evidence illustrates that Gates is politically aligned with the billionaires who are currently traumatizing American democracy. Although Gates is a donor to the Clinton Foundation (which itself is problematic), he neither endorsed Clinton nor opposed Trump during the election campaigns of 2016. Also, since Donald Trump’s election, while the Gates foundation rebuked Trump’s cuts to foreign aid, it is interesting that Gates has largely avoided expressing negativity about the Trump administration, and has said that Trump and he agree on the importance of “innovation” (Olorunnipa). Furthermore, the Washington Times quotes him comparing Trump to JFK:

But in the same way President Kennedy talked about the space mission and got the country behind that — I think that whether it's education or stopping epidemics, other health breakthroughs, finishing Polio, and in this energy space — there can be a very upbeat message that his administration is going to organize things, get rid of regulatory barriers, and have American leadership through innovation. (Chasmar)

This kind of mendacity that coopts heroes of the left (like JFK) and aligns them with someone like Donald Trump is the same manipulation that aligns something like Guided Pathways with the civil rights movement, so that those who identify as left-wing may excitedly jump on board. In reality, however, the Gates' Foundation is not in tune with faculty hopes and dreams for the higher education system. Gates has been attacked by educational analysts like Diane Ravitch, who served as Assistant Secretary of Education under Clinton from 1991-1993 and in the National Assessment Governing Board from 1997-2004, for making ill-informed and irresponsible decisions regarding education: “Sometimes I wonder if anyone at the Gates Foundation has any vision of what good education is.... I wonder if they ever think about their role in demoralizing and destabilizing the education profession” (Strauss). Ravitch further comments that the Gates' want to create an image of themselves as heroic do-gooders, but in reality they are probably doing more harm than good: “I believe that Bill and Melinda Gates want to establish a legacy as people who left the world a better place. But I think their efforts to reform education are woefully mistaken” (Strauss).

The influence of the Gates' foundation is astounding. According to Naomi Klein, the foundation is “worth \$40 billion, making it the largest charitable organization in the world” (location 1756). Thus in spite of Gates' lack of credibility as an educational innovator, “When Bill Gates speaks, the National Governors Association snaps to

attention, awed by his wealth” (Ravitch qtd. in Strauss). On November 3, 2016, Ravitch wrote about how the Gates foundation is attempting to buy Washington State’s supreme court in order to drive the privatization of education: “They are spending another load of money to oust judges on the State Supreme Court, to punish them for daring to deny public funding to privately managed charter schools” (Ravitch “Washington State...”). Gates is also accused of promoting online education for all, a conveniently profitable undertaking for Microsoft (Ohlandt). Moreover, an excellent article called “The Gates Effect,” published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in July of 2013, describes how Gates has partnered with lawmakers and the Obama administration to create a factory-like education system that graduates students cheaply and quickly. The authors of the article worry that higher education experts with views contrary to the Gates-funded initiatives are being ignored:

Most important, some leaders and analysts are uneasy about the future that Gates is buying: a system of education designed for maximum measurability, delivered increasingly through technology, and—these critics say—narrowly focused on equipping students for short-term employability. Private foundations have shaped academe for decades. But Gates and its philanthropic partners, the Lumina and Kresge Foundations, are pioneering an activist approach to higher-education reform, one that emphasizes systemic change and demands quick, measurable results. This new approach has earned praise from some observers, who maintain that strategic, focused grant making is exactly what foundations should be doing. But what if the focus is misguided? "College completion may be the wrong goal," says Stanley N. Katz, who directs the Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies at Princeton University and has written critically about foundations. "There is too much emphasis on getting people through the system, processing them," he says. "That needs to be seen in relation to what students are in fact learning. It's a big problem, and it's getting very little discussion". (Parry et al.)

I am concerned that it is hard to find articles criticizing Gates at this stage of the game, five years after the above article was written, when his agenda for higher education is even more powerful than it was in 2013. His critics seem to be increasingly few and far between. However, as mentioned, there is good reason to remain uncritical of or even feign enthusiasm for the reforms being instituted by Gates; in a world where funding for public education is so minimal, a bit of grant money, no matter where it comes from, is something that faculty have a stake in aggressively pursuing: "... few of those critics [of Gates-driven reforms] speak out in public, and some higher-education leaders, researchers, and lobbyists were reluctant to talk on the record for this article. The reason? They didn't want to scotch their chances of winning Gates grants" (Parry, et al).

Gates is reportedly quite secretive, another reason he should not be trusted. Klein reports that "despite this unprecedented influence, the foundation's inner workings are notoriously secretive, with key decisions made by Bill, his wife Melinda, his father William Gates, and fellow multibillionaire Warren Buffet" (location 1756). And Gates is undeniably part of the oligarchy, a class who, "rather than pay their taxes at a fair rate, publicly [share] their plans to fix the world out of the goodness of their hearts" (location 1772).

It seems irresponsible to adopt policies that are quite likely not initiated by educators who share our values but by billionaires whose primary motivations are probably power, fame, and wealth. Klein also reminds us that:

...in the 1990s, Gates was widely regarded as a corporate villain, known for exploitative employment practices and for building what looked like a predatory software monopoly. Then, with Flash-like speed, he reinvented himself as a global superhero, one who could single-handedly fix the most



intractable of social crises. Never mind whether Gates has any specific expertise in the areas in question, or that many of the Gates Foundation's silver-bullet fixes have backfired badly. (location 1764)

Furthermore, it is not only progressive liberals who attack Gates-backed programs. In one of her articles for the well-known conservative news outlet *Breitbart News*, entitled “Bill Gates’ Deceptive Drive to Continue Common Core will Weaken Public Schools,” Dr. Sandra Stotsky, Professor Emerita of Education and commissioner in the Massachusetts Department of Education, condemns the Gates-backed low standards of the Common Core. She paints him as disingenuous egoist concerned mostly for “his image as an education saint”:

Bill Gates’ scheme for doing an end-run around state legislators, parents, and local school boards was bought hook, line, and sinker by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce as well as by most state commissioners and boards of education—and many governors. Didn’t they wonder why the Gates Foundation still refuses to fund discussions of the actual quality of the standards? And the meaning of college readiness? (Stotsky)

On both sides of the aisle, therefore, there are individuals with enough clout to speak out against Gates, and if ordinary educators were better unionized and inspired by a more collective spirit, we might have more of a voice. Unfortunately, though, we are divided. Some faculty are convinced of Gates’ goodness.

Indeed, winning a Gates-related grant, such as the College Spark grants in Washington State available for implementing Pathways, might initially feel like success, but there are strings attached. Not only does Pathways likely incur more costs than the grants provide for, but as a result of being a Pathways school, the entire institution, including not just administrators and advisors, but faculty, need to shift their focus to persistence and completion and away from teaching and learning. Administrators might

call this shift in focus a shift towards “student success,” which sounds good until we realize that what we are focused on is how to inflate graduation rates at the expense of quality learning and Rhetorical Literacy.

### **Gates’ Educational Principles**

I recognize that my ideas concerning the motivations of the Gates Foundation are speculative, so let us for the moment afford Gates the benefit of the doubt and presume that the Gates Foundation (and its affiliates The Lumina Foundation and The Kresge Foundation) are well-intentioned. Even if good intentions are the case, their ideas about what a public education is for, and what a higher education ought to do for an American, are profoundly different, and in some ways opposed to those of many faculty members, which means that we still have reason to approach Pathways with reservations and resist the initiatives that don’t make sense to us. Pathways grew out of the Gates’-funded

*Completion by Design* initiative, which adheres to the following principles:

- (1) Accelerate entry into coherent programs of study
- (2) Minimize the time required to get college-ready
- (3) Ensure that students know the requirements to succeed
- (4) Customize and contextualize instruction<sup>11</sup>
- (5) Integrate student supports with instruction
- (6) Continually monitor student progress and proactively provide feedback.
- (7) Reward behaviors that contribute to completion
- (8) Leverage technology to improve learning and program delivery  
 (“Completion...”)

While I would like to believe these principles are about helping underprivileged gain education and opportunity, I am suspicious that they ultimately end up exploiting a poor

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<sup>11</sup> Note that “contextualizing” here means narrowing the breadth of instruction; I use the term very differently in chapter three.

and vulnerable lower class by pushing them through a narrow tunnel of training towards a low-level career while taking their money in the form of federal student loans, so that the trajectory of their lives will not give them a moment to stop to develop a critical awareness of the world. They will be deprived of the self-sufficiency and critical thinking skills that might help them advance up the career ladder, and will possibly be paying off student debt until close to retirement.

Furthermore, taken together these Gates principles amount to a great deal of surveillance and management of students, a re-shaping of higher education so that it feels like boot camp: students are trained to follow orders instead of to think freely. The author of an excellent article on the neoliberalization of higher education in Australia, Raewyn Connell, offers us a pithy reminder: “military training is not education” (104). The comparison is apt because the more that faculty adhere to the Gates educational principles, the more numbers-focused and rule-bound they become.

The authors of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* urge us to militarize our students: “To take control of their learning, students need to practice skills such as self-regulation, task planning, time management, note-taking and organizing study time effectively” (84). It is true that students should cultivate those skills to some extent, but college should not resemble military training. Students should not discipline themselves at the expense of intellectual playfulness and the creativity that results from unmanaged time. It is in those moments of timelessness, of joyful exploration, “blue sky research” where brilliant discoveries are made.

I turn to the heuristics of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari here to describe how Pathways is doing damage to the wider cultural imaginary about the shape and meaning of higher education. Education should be rhizomatic in the Deleuzian sense; it should allow for deterritorialized movement. In the same way Deleuze and Guattari suggest reading their book *A Thousand Plateaus* in any order (Best and Kellner 98), a college educational path should include random courses taken for fun and discovery so that intellectual development is authentic, organic, and exploratory. Students should have the opportunity to be curious, to try out unfamiliar and uncomfortable discourses and ideologies:

[Rhizomatics] seeks to extirpate roots and foundations, to thwart unities and break dichotomies, and to spread out roots and branches, thereby pluralizing and disseminating, producing difference and multiplicities, making new connections. Rhizomatics affirms the principles excluded from Western thought and reinterprets reality as dynamic, heterogenous, and non-dichotomous. A rhizome method decenters information into divergent a-centered systems and language into multiple semiotic dimensions (Best and Kellner 99).

In our national concern for undergraduate student retention and completion, we make it less likely that students will experience the rich array of semiotic dimensions that “rhizomatics” offer them and risk leaving them with little opportunity for transformative experiences. Educators at Community Colleges are becoming attached to Pathways as a kind of miracle cure, a way to move lower class people into jobs that will make them the middle-class consumers they think they want to be. But in this effort, what do we sacrifice? How many of our students would reap greater life-long benefits from wandering and roaming through college as they earn a degree? Pathways teaches them that education is a straight line from A to B, rather than an exploratory and creative

journey that encourages becoming-other. If we were to imagine a more networked, rhizomatic educational experience, with innumerable entry and exit points, that students both create and are created by, we offer students a better chance of developing voice and agency. The rhizome is a rejection of an arborescent (tree-like) way of thinking that begins in one place, ends in another, and says that from point A to point B “progress” is made. I propose that education should and *could* be a transformative place for self-discovery and becoming. If we hold their hands and guide them along the well-trodden path telling them to be careful not to fall or get dirty, we prevent them from experiencing the beauty of learning—wonderment, adventure, excitement, creativity. How about setting them free to roam in the woods and encouraging them to imagine their own pathways into being? What Pathways will they make *themselves* if we let them? One might argue that this type of college experience is the privilege of the rich, but if that is the case then our primary task should be to reform the way higher education is financed, for this should be the experience of every college student.

If the Gates foundation really cared about upward mobility, they would stop providing funding for half-baked research studies and reports that make exaggerated claims about ways that colleges can do “more with less” and put their money towards initiatives that would more directly impact CC students. College tuition could be free for the neediest students, or better yet, the neediest students could be paid to go to school. Bill and Melinda Gates could offer free child care for parents attending college; they could award institutions money for more teachers and smaller classes; they could fund tutoring centers at all community colleges; they could provide college students with free

room and board while going to school, they could raise instructor salaries to attract more talent to the profession; they could respect the experience and wisdom of faculty by asking faculty for suggestions on ways to spend invest their money in the public good.

### **Equity**

It is worth noting that Pathways is not entirely unhelpful, especially in the immediate future. At least for occupational and career-technical students, a streamlined journey to a degree may improve persistence and enable them to gain the employment they seek. And if there is enthusiasm for Pathways among faculty, it might be because some faculty members are convinced of its commitment to equity.

However, we need to carefully examine Pathways' claim to equity: while paying lip-service to notions of social justice, the initiatives actually operate as a diversion from substantial efforts towards inclusivity, and in so far as they make public two-year colleges more like private for-profit ones, they only increase the gap between the rich and poor. While more college degrees in the hands of minority populations is a tremendously important objective, this is only true if those degrees are meaningful, and only if those degrees result in a return on investment for the student. We don't know if, in the end, only a small number of students will experience the benefits of Pathways. My main concern is that the initiatives direct our attention away from a *real* crisis in equity: the utterly dysfunctional political economy of 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education.

In the words of University of California Santa Barbara English Professor Christopher Newfield, who wrote *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*, the need for a large and educated middle class

is a cultural, social, political and economic one, the urgency and scale of which necessitates a grand and sweeping change. Newfield says, “We know that no country has a large middle class without mass-scale higher learning, and this in turn depends on minimizing individual cost” (location 367). I couldn’t agree with Newfield more, and we can start minimizing the individual cost of education by rallying people to electing the right politicians. We need to start *feeling* that such a goal is not an impossible one.

In 2016, Bernie Sanders won 43.1% of the popular vote in the democratic primary—nothing to sneeze at—and a prominent aspect of his campaign was his insistence that free college tuition is far from a radical proposal, and he is correct: until the 1980s, for example, the University of California offered free tuition, and in 1965 the City University of New York was tuition-free. Moreover, Newfield outlines steps we can take to return to a system that is mostly if not completely publicly funded in his “Recovery Cycle.” By his own admission, these steps are not as practical as they are visionary (location 5461), but they help us see the root of the problem, which is the need to make higher education a public good.

The “Recovery Cycle” begins and ends with (1) “University recognized as a public good” (location 5485). The other steps are as follows: (2) “Subsidies to partners reduced or ended” (3) “Tuition is capped and reduced toward zero” (4) “Public funding is reset to replace tuition” (5) “Student debt reduced to zero” (6) “Universities retain core educational functions as non-profit” (7) “Equal and higher overall learning across race/class” and (8) “Creative capabilities pressure productivity wage” (location 5485).

The cycle's effectiveness depends upon the first step: that as a society we recognize the university as a public good. In order to fundamentally change the system, we have to start by reforming political affect, for we can only create investment in the university as a public good through massive *affective* momentum. Newfield thus faces the values and beliefs of neoliberalism themselves as his most formidable opponent. He writes:

This book is not only about policy errors but about the framework or paradigm that enables them. The great mistake is not this or that specific surrender, much as the ensemble of these has unjustly deprived important sectors of the population of what their society should provide—and for which, as citizens, they have already paid. The great mistake is the private good framework, which is itself predetermined by that constellation of axioms and practices we call neoliberalism....(location 5448).

Newfield's book is not unique in blaming neoliberalism for the state of higher education, but is original in making a courageous attempt to plot out a rescue mission. Sadly, however, we are called upon to rescue the system at a time when initiatives like Pathways immerse us in a way of valuing that makes reconstruction feel impractical and even impossible.

Pathways is rooted in the idea of higher education as a private investment that produces positive outcomes for the public, and because neoliberalism is naturalized, some would say that this kind of privatization is our reality, pure and simple, and therefore the only viable option. One administrator responded to Newfield's book by saying that he didn't fully address "the reality on the ground" and doesn't offer "a plan he can work with" (location 5416-5427). According to this administrator, there is no getting around the fact that "we don't have the public resources...we can't sustain the public



university investment” (location 5416). He is so convinced of this reality that he compares the inevitability of privatization to “a rule of physics” (location 5416). But is our collective disinvestment in the public good as inevitable as a rule of physics? I think not; rather, it just feels that way. What Newfield’s naysayers forget is the power of affect—the way collective affective experiences make us feel that our current reality is the only one possible.

Newfield explains that there is something more powerful than the neoliberal policies that seem so intractable, something more basic, and that is our alienation from the collective: “a loss of feeling for [collective capability], a sense of attachment to it, or commitment, or a right to it—the loss of common feeling that a complete education to the highest level is part of who we are” (location 5457). What he is describing here is the affective reality of neoliberalism, which is not something abstract, but profoundly material—a law of physics, if you like. Teresa Brennan, author of “the transmission of affect” explains:

The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room’s atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the subject. Physically and biologically, something is present that was not there before...(1)

At the root of our problem, then, is not policy, but a neoliberal culture and the affects in and between our bodies that it produces, affects that alienate us from each other and our collective desire to care about each other and about the public good.

Pathways, for the most part, grows out of this alienation—it is a consequence of a higher education system that has “lost [its] ability to explain [its] social benefits, although these are greater than the private benefits they also confer” (Newfield location 164). Pathways’ commitment to equity is artificial. It is not really an effort to redistribute wealth and will not make a meaningful widespread difference in the widest educational gap, which is the one between rich and poor students. Ravitch reminds us that changing the way we organize and manage educational institutions doesn’t make poverty go away: “The reformer’s belief that fixing schools will fix poverty has no basis in reality, experience, or evidence” (location 1916). In fact, as I mentioned, Pathways poses significant costs to CCs, and if a college doesn’t win enough grant money to cover those costs, then adopting the model makes them poorer. Furthermore, since many CCs don’t have the resources to implement the better ideas in the Pathways model properly, poorly executed initiatives might damage the quality of education, which in turn makes any degree received less valuable.

It is upsetting to see that numbers can be generated and then framed in a way that creates an image of Pathways as a movement that is successfully making higher education more inclusive to minority groups. Georgia State University’s numbers, for example, have accomplished this task. In 2009, GSU awarded 1001 degrees to African Americans, and in 2014, after Pathways, that number increased to 1825. In the same five years, the number of degrees awarded to Hispanics went from 196 to 445 (Renick and Thompson-Sellers). These statistics lend credence to the idea that all CCs should be corporatized by Pathways in the name of closing the racialized achievement gap. Perhaps

this is why Governors like Jerry Brown in CA are easily sold on the Pathways model. In his 2017-18 budget, Brown proposes allocating \$150 million to the implementation of the model (Gordon). But it is highly unlikely that Pathways has, or will, make a significant difference when it comes to the achievement gap.

This is because the reason for the achievement gap is not poorly performing schools. Ravitch tells us, rather, that the culprit is poverty and racial segregation, contending that it is these larger issues that need to be addressed before we can tackle inequity in education. She argues: “most people who study the achievement gap recognize that it cannot be sharply narrowed or closed without addressing the social economic conditions that cause systemic disadvantages” (location 1255). But if wider political problems have caused this gap, then why are schools taking the blame? Ravitch explains that from the perspective of corporate reformers, a focus on fixing schools is cheaper and easier than trying to change poverty:

Our society has grown to accept poverty as an inevitable fact of life, and there seems to be little or no political will to do anything about it. It should also be cheaper to fix schools instead of poverty, because no matter how much it costs to fix schools, it will surely be less than the cost of significantly reducing poverty in a society with great economic inequality like our own. (location 1314)

Ravitch further explains that in pointing the finger at schools instead of poverty, we effectively deny the real problem, running circles around it rather than addressing it: “The problem is that if you don’t really know how to fix schools, if none of your solutions actually improve education, then society ends up neither fixing schools nor doing anything about poverty” (location 1314).

For the moment, however, let us set aside the futility of attempting to close the achievement gap by redesigning and reorganizing CCs with movements like Pathways. Let's presume that more structured paths through college result in more degree completion. Then we must ask, to what extent will degrees from Pathways colleges be useful to the students who earn them? Many argue that as a commodity, college is not worth the cost. Indeed, there can be no doubt that some students are getting swindled, especially those attending for-profit career colleges—which brings us back to the Gates research that insists the Pathways effort aim to make public colleges more like the for-profit ones.

For-profit two-years have been attacked most recently by democratic senators in the Betsy DeVos confirmation hearings: Senator Elizabeth Warren, for example, pointed out to DeVos that Trump University is an example of the “waste, fraud, and abuse” of federal tax dollars and asked DeVos how she would protect against this at similar colleges. DeVos indicated that she would review the rules protecting tax dollars, but did not promise to enforce them (“Elizabeth”). Senator Dick Durbin asked DeVos to think about this: “the most heavily subsidized for-profit companies in America today are for-profit colleges and universities. 80-90% of their revenue comes directly from the federal treasury. These are not just crafty entrepreneurs, they are people who have learned how to game the government.” Durbin also said that 9% of high school graduates go to for-profit colleges and universities, but 35% of student loan defaults belong to students who went to these for-profit institutions. He also reminded us that “The defrauding of students by these schools has been shown over and over again” (“Durbin”). We have to ask why we

are allowing Pathways to usurp our CCs when it is a set of practices utilizing the ideas and strategies of institutions that continue to be in trouble for defrauding students by selling them useless degrees.

Perhaps it is easy to believe administrators when they tell us that Pathways will close the achievement gap and help grow the middle class. After all, it is commonly understood that a college degree leads to a good job and a decent life. Yet if middle class jobs are on the decline and the degrees from Pathways colleges represent a low-quality education, Pathways probably won't produce middle class growth but instead make poor people even poorer by saddling them with student loan debt. I realize that one of the Pathways commitments is to facilitate certification in fields that are in-demand, but unfortunately, Pathways does not entertain the idea that some students would have more upward mobility without a college degree, or that being underemployed with a lot of student debt could lead to downward mobility. Indeed, economist Paul Krugman reports that:

Since 1990 or so the U.S. job market has been characterized not by a general rise in the demand for skill, but by 'hollowing out': both high-wage and low-wage employment has grown rapidly, but medium-wage jobs—the kinds of jobs we count on to support a strong middle class—have lagged behind. And the hole in the middle has been getting wider: many of the high-wage occupations that grew rapidly in the 1990s have seen much slower growth recently, even as growth in low-wage employment has accelerated (Krugman)

Krugman claims that we are lying to ourselves if we pretend that “putting more kids through college can restore the middle-class society we used to have.” College education, he says, might be “no more than tickets to jobs that don't exist or don't pay middle-class wages.” Not surprisingly, Krugman's ideas were absent from the many Pathways

discussions and workshops I attended, and not included in the materials and literature promoting it.

In fact, at the college where I worked, administrators worked on blending the idea of social justice and critical literacy education into Pathways, not only by emphasizing “Inclusive Pedagogy,” but also by announcing that coursework in critical thinking and social justice would eventually be part of every Pathway. Of-course I very much like this idea—it is a silver lining promising that at least some Pathways energy will be directed against neoliberalism. However, it is important to note that critical literacy and social justice have always been important goals for CC educators, and much emphasis has been placed on them for decades. It is reasonable to ask whether they will be more or less emphasized after the implementation of Pathways. Even if, for example, every student were required to take a “Social Justice 101” course, wouldn’t the Pathways ideology render that course one that is watered down and completed quickly and “efficiently”? Interweaving some type of “social justice” into every Pathway seems like a mediocre type of fix—a band-aid on a gaping wound—especially since “social justice” education can be so dumbed-down that it merely constitutes a competition to see who best knows how to be politically correct.

In *Becoming a Student Ready College* McNair et al. briefly try to argue against academics like me who imagine that social justice education cannot be balanced with the marketization of academia. They claim that those of us who see a clash between marketization and the goals/values of higher education are close-minded and failing to

give the mixture a chance. Contending that “academic capitalism” can be balanced with an ethos of teaching and learning (21-22), they write that

academic capitalism becomes a tool or strategy that drives resource generation, leads to opportunities for faculty collaboration and development, leverages institutional partnerships, and most important, creates pathways and support structures that benefit students....In reality, the most responsible market solution for achieving long term financial and learning outcomes is to be a student-ready college (22-23).

This statement is misleading. In fact, academic capitalism is what produced our current secretary of education—DeVos—and it only temporarily and superficially solves any problems. To claim that academic capitalism “drives resource generation and leads to opportunities for faculty collaboration and development” becomes a bold-faced lie when we look at the DeVos budget proposal, which constitutes a \$9.2 billion dollar (or 13%) cut to public education, including “cuts of 2.1 billion from state grants for effective instruction investments and an entire program eliminated that provides support for professional development for our teachers and school leaders” (“Sen Murray”). One might argue that the authors of *Becoming a Student-Ready College* are not supporting the same kind of academic capitalism that DeVos represents, but if this is the case, they fail to make a distinction between their own version of marketization and the version of marketization that people supporting DeVos have been advocating for years.

The heightened focus on degree completion, “the completion agenda,” as it is called, is an agenda very unpopular with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) because it caters to and is consistent with what they call “Austerity Education,” the direct result of the fact that “in the past 20 years, state funding for public colleges and universities has been catastrophically cut, on average by 26 percent since 1990, as states

have adopted the neoliberal policy of reducing taxes for corporations and the highest earners while cutting and privatizing public services” (AFT). With DeVos as Secretary of Education, it doesn’t look like the situation is improving.

### **Lowered Standards**

A philosophy professor at Aurora Community College in Colorado, in fact, did have the audacity to speak out against the lowered standards resulting from “the completion agenda” in the Fall of 2016. And this is what happened: he was fired. Nathaniel Bork, who had worked for the college for six years, was fired after drafting a letter to the Higher Education Commission (the accrediting agency for Aurora Community College) complaining that new curriculum designed to improve pass rates forced him to make his course too easy. Bork was told that he had to change his philosophy course by

[reducing] course content by twenty percent, [ensuring] a ‘success rate’ (passing rate) of eighty percent for all students and for students of different racial, ethnic, and gender groups, [setting] aside five class sessions for helping students with writing skills and learning how to write an essay, and [limiting] papers assigned to two to four pages, or a single six-eight page paper (Jaschick).

The AAUP investigated the situation and officially “censured” the college for retaliating against Bork and thereby violating the principles of academic freedom (Brown).

Students, however, do not escape unscathed when standards are lowered. While they might rejoice in the short term to have easier coursework, in the long run they will realize that they have been conned, for they will not receive the education they paid for. Furthermore, students do not respond well to being infantilized and treated as though they



are more fragile than they are; it is offensive and demeaning, and they don't invest as much effort into courses they don't take seriously.

### **Grade Inflation**

Reducing course requirements or watering down assignments is one way of lowering standards. Inflating grades is another. Grade inflation becomes a problem when it is more than a certain teacher's style or personality that might make them seem more lenient: grade inflation, as I am thinking about it, is more than a question of whether the teacher is "nice," but whether they are responding to the administrative demand to pass students who really are not served well by being passed along.

At the CC where I worked, the prevailing administratively-driven culture demanded that the value of academic rigor be loudly proclaimed while at the same time it was tacitly understood that pushing students too hard was to be carefully avoided. Professors perceived as demanding were admonished by administration. Ironically, insisting on critical literacy standards, in some situations, was equated with being classist or racist. The teachers with standards were perceived by some administrators and faculty leaders to be the ones "building a wall" to keep underprivileged students out of the middle class (as though the real wall between underprivileged students and middle-class life isn't the cost of college, but politically incorrect teachers). This misconception that the CC itself or the CC teacher is to blame for low-performing minorities is wide-spread. A recent article in *The Atlantic* is called "The Community College Segregation Machine" and blames CC placement policies and too many remedial classes for poor graduation results among African Americans and Hispanics. The article recognizes the many faculty

who disagree that the policies and classes are problematic, but in general portrays the CC as rather bullying to minorities, as though it is the inner workings of the CC—not any other social condition—that creates racial inequity in post-secondary education. Although it might be true that a few individual teachers have prejudices, the idea that CC teachers—many of whom seek out a job at a CC through a desire to help minority populations—are creating an achievement gap because they are bigots, is a distortion of the truth, and one that happens to be convenient for corporate reformers because it disparages teachers whose high expectations might result in less graduates. I hope I can defend CC educators and say that it is rarely the case that those with standards have a bias against minorities; rather, they are professionals trying to do their jobs with integrity sometimes from within a CC environment that expects them to misrepresent students' achievements. Unfortunately, given the push to improve graduation rates, the accusation of bigotry is being used to manipulate teachers with standards into lowering them in the name of equity.

Furthermore, it is hard to maintain quality of education when one has much to gain and nothing to lose by making assignments easier and inflating grades. If we notice that coursework is too easy and students are earning passing grades without much effort, the safe thing to do is look the other way. Repercussions for demanding too much from students, as Bork's story illustrates, can result in serious administrative retaliation, so choosing to be in denial of lowered standards is a reasonable—and evidently common—course of action: according to Schutz, Drake and Lessner, who conducted a study concerning perceptions of rigor among over two thousand CC faculty, “both community

college faculty groups [full-timers and part-timers] reported upholding rigorous teaching standards despite sometimes raising grades higher than what a student earned” (59). A culture of denial regarding lowered standards is all too convenient, and the Pathways model only intensifies such a culture.

Faculty at the CC where I worked were tacitly encouraged to lower standards in part due to how they were evaluated. Those in supervisory positions did not spend time analyzing quality of assignments. Instead, they worried about how high the numbers were on student evaluations and what kinds of comments teachers received on student opinionnaires. They also looked at the number of students who persisted in a teacher’s class and the number of students who passed that class. These are the metrics by which teaching effectiveness was judged—not how much or how well students learned. Research into the grade inflation problem has suggested it is at least partially a result of instructors’ perception that higher grades and better numbers on student evaluations are positively correlated (Hubbell 85). The numbers that the administrative supervisors at this college cared about were the ones that improved when curriculum was watered-down and grades were inflated.

Sometimes, however, a lowering of standards is not an attempt to please administrators but a well-intentioned effort to help students. CC teachers will often lower standards out of concern for students’ well-being. As policy analyst Norton Grubb describes, students in developmental classes may be treated as though they are too fragile to handle college-level rigor:

To be sure, the concern for students in...virtually all the basic skills classes we observed, has a dark side as well. Out of concern for students

and the busy conditions of their lives, many instructors place very few demands on them. Most writing assignments are one page long; much of the reading consists of a few paragraphs, or one or two pages. Aware of how busy many students are, many instructors arrange their classes so all of the work – problems to solve, reading, essays to write—can be done in class so there is virtually no homework. They also appear to feel that students are fragile, only weakly connected to the educational enterprise, and that imposing too many requirements would cause them to drop out. Unfortunately, instructors with these low levels of demand are not preparing students for college-level work, and certainly not for transfer to four-year colleges. One of the enduring problems in remedial classes, therefore, is how to impose adequate demands on students while simultaneously providing the right amount of moral and academic support so that they will continue. (Grubb 20)

### **Empirical evidence of grade inflation at Community Colleges**

Since there are no serious guards against grade inflation at some CCs, and not enough funds for the intensive moral and academic support Grubb mentions, it is reasonable to worry that many students who transfer to four-year schools from CCs carry an inflated sense of their capabilities along with their poor writing skills. I asked several University Writing Program directors in the University of California system about their opinion on the matter, and they all reported that they were aware of anecdotal evidence suggesting that transfer students from some CCs face great difficulty with writing after they transfer. Unfortunately, however, no quantitative studies yet exist that specifically measure whether English Composition classes at CCs are adequately preparing students for upper division writing work at four-year universities—and we sorely need this type of research, for hard evidence that transfer students from CCs arrive unprepared would encourage CC English departments to take standards more seriously. At the college where I worked, a lack of communication and/or agreement regarding standards resulted

in an “anything goes” environment, which was confusing for faculty and damaging to student’s perception of what it means to write at the college level.

While there is not nearly enough empirical data on the damage done to students as a result of grade inflation at CC’s or the watering down of curriculum at CC’s, (indeed, it is not the type of research that is encouraged in neoliberal institutions invested in lowered standards) there is one very interesting study that supports my perspective. In response to the *Complete College of Tennessee Act of 2010*, which uses a new funding formula to incentivize public colleges and universities to focus on degree completion, Friedl, Pittenger and Sherman undertook a project to determine whether “grades earned by students in community colleges and by students in four-year universities reflect comparable measures of academic achievement and preparation” (528). Their concern was partly that the Act mandates a seamless transition from CCs to universities and encourages students to begin their degree path at a two-year college. Through a comparative analysis they found that while CC students earned higher grades in algebra classes at their CCs, their performance in subsequent math classes was substantially poorer than that of the students who had taken the same course at the four-year institution. The researchers thus warn that “if differences in academic standards are not reconciled, students will continue to matriculate from two-year to four-year institutions inadequately prepared to perform at the level currently required to earn a bachelor’s degree” (531). These researchers did college students a favor in generating this evidence concerning differences in mathematical academic standards, and now we need to do the same kind of research in English, for experience and anecdotal evidence suggests that

English courses at CCs suffer from the same lowered standards as the Math classes studied.

### **Solution to Grade Inflation**

Imposing standardized tests (beyond the ones we already use) on college students is likely ill-advised, largely because these types of tests easily create more problems than they solve. We do, however, need methods of ensuring that our expectations of college students remain rigorous. Sadly, in a neoliberal environment, it is dangerous to trust schools themselves to maintain standards out of duty and professionalism. In fact, DeVos would prefer that charter schools are not held accountable the same way that public schools are, illustrating how corporate reformers are more interested in marketization than they are in educational quality (“Betsy Devos...”). We need to put some sort of measurement in place so that these corporate reformers are kept in check. Hopefully, public opinion of for-profit colleges will remain low and get worse, causing them to eventually go out of business. In the meantime, however, especially at institutions where administrators are imposing programs like Pathways, we are called upon to keep each other in check through processes such as “norming”—getting together and deciding on appropriate standards—and having clear learning outcomes and grading rubrics that are frequently discussed and re-clarified for incoming instructors.

At one liberal arts college where grade inflation had become a problem, a set of researchers interfered by disseminating information on grading practices, forming a committee and conducting a survey about the issue, and creating opportunities for discussion about it (Barriga et.al. 203). They concluded that “institutional dialogue and

exchange of information can counteract an established grade inflation trend” (207).

Without these conversations, there is little external motivation for a teacher, especially at a Pathways CC, to demand much from their students; in the era of the student-consumer, requiring students to stretch their minds and grow is risky because causing a customer any discomfort is bad for business.

### **City University of New York: Pathways Protest**

My concerns are shared by faculty at CUNY, 92 % of whom voted “No Confidence in Pathways” in 2013 because they collectively agreed that it undermines quality education. While administrators at CUNY claimed that Pathways would help students transfer smoothly from two-year to four-year institutions, faculty argued that “the real goal of Pathways...is to improve CUNY’s graduation statistics without requiring additional public investment” (“92%...”). It stands to reason that a smooth transfer from a CC to a four-year college or university requires that students are adequately prepared for upper division classes when they exit CCs, and the vote of No Confidence tells us that improved graduation statistics amount to an agenda that weakens preparedness. Furthermore, a vote of No Confidence is a serious stamp of disapproval; we would be remiss not to recognize its gravity:

Traditionally used to confront profound failures of university leadership, a vote of No Confidence is the most serious expression of opposition that a faculty governance body can make. The CUNY vote is exceptional because it involved thousands of faculty—far more than would usually vote on a resolution of No Confidence. The result is a stunning rebuke to the Pathways curriculum, which faculty say reduces the quality of a CUNY education. (“92%...”)

Pathways is a recent example of the ways in which neoliberal beliefs about education encroach upon faculty autonomy, and the anti-Pathways pushback from CUNY illustrates this. When CUNY decided to adopt Pathways, there was quite an outcry over the threat to shared governance. There were two lawsuits filed against CUNY's administration for attacking shared governance and academic freedom. One "[contested] the original Pathways resolution passed the Board of Trustees in 2011" and the other "[charged] that the University violated the state's Open Meetings Law in the implementation of Pathways" ("Timeline..."). Unfortunately, judges dismissed both suits, but the fact that CUNY felt strongly enough to file them is significant. Furthermore, for the first time in decades, the entire full-time faculty at Brooklyn College passed a resolution at a special college-wide meeting on April 8, 2014 to demand that the Brooklyn College and CUNY administrations respect the faculty's historic role in designing courses, general education programs, and degree requirements. The resolution passed by a vote of 298 in favor, 9 against and 18 abstentions. The resolution also states that the faculty have "no confidence" in the CUNY Board of Trustees to make curricular decisions ("Timeline...").

It is faculty passion and expertise that should be behind curricular decisions, not administrative agendas, and when faculty members don't have the autonomy they should, both instructors and students end up alienated from learning experiences. A slew of books about loss of faculty autonomy and academic freedom have been published in the past decade. As I pointed out in Chapter One, authors such as Ellen Schrekcer, Jennifer Washburn, Frank Donoghue, Larry Gerber, Benjamin Ginsberg, Martha Nussbaum,



Henry Giroux and others have detailed the ways a corporatization of higher education are causing faculty to be increasingly alienated from decision-making. When teachers are just the delivery method for a pre-prepared course, the alienation experienced—in a true Marxist sense—ultimately leads to classrooms that are lacking in joy and spontaneity for both student and teacher.

Yet if there is one positive outcome of Pathways, it is the way CUNY faculty responded to it. At CUNY, retaliation against Pathways generated some inspiring anti-neoliberal articles. Heather Cottin, for example, an adjunct at CUNY, wrote “Pathways is supported by such institutions as Goldman Sachs, Clear Channel, General Electric, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IBM, the Helmsley group, Walmart and a score of other capital management groups, corporations and private foundations. It is part of a “Master Plan” developed by CUNY management in 2012” (Cottin). This professor at CUNY was able to illustrate the larger problems from which Pathways emerges by naming corporations who are already known to be guilty of exploitation and lying.

Unfortunately I must point out that in spite of faculty protests the board at CUNY remained determined about Pathways, and now what CUNY calls the “Common Core” (their version of Pathways) is fully underway; interestingly, however, it has not resulted in any impressive educational gains. A report from the Vice Chancellor at CUNY from September 2016 relates information gathered from a committee that convened to evaluate Pathways after two full years of implementation. The results did not make any sort of splash: retention remains the same, average GPA remains the same, and average credits accumulated remains the same. While it does “appear” that transfers to four-year

universities increased, the committee concluded that there was not enough data to demonstrate that “any of the changes are the result of adoption of the Pathways curricular framework” (Rabinowitz). The committee also stated that “it is too early to answer key long-term questions about the Pathways Initiative” (Rabinowitz). None of this is surprising, seeing as root causes of low GPA, low retention, and poor credit accumulation are not addressed by the Guided Pathways initiative—indeed they are beyond the control of community colleges and require strong governmental policies that fight larger issues such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness, poor health care, and racial segregation. It is also not surprising that key long-term questions cannot yet be answered, but good to know that faculty at CUNY are persisting in asking them.

### **Administration Versus Faculty**

The effects of neoliberalism upon education are both overt and covert. In terms of economic and political policy, neoliberalism’s impact in education is clear: there is a strong movement to privatize K-12 schooling with charter schools and higher education with rising tuition costs and for-profit colleges. However, as I have explained, it is a mistake to think of neoliberalism as limited to policies like these; as an epistemology and ontology, neoliberalism does a lot of damage to interpersonal relationships, and the interpersonal dynamic I want to examine in this section is the one between administrators and faculty members. Neoliberalism creates a gulf between administrative agendas and faculty priorities, creating lies, manipulation, distrust, anger, and confusion. We might characterize this consequence of neoliberalism as a covert one because it is not so obvious to the general public, and for teachers who have wholly adopted neoliberal

attitudes, the rift between administration and faculty may not be very dramatic or obvious. However, for most faculty, the neoliberal trends growing out of “the completion agenda” at CCs—such as the anti-intellectual prioritization of speed and efficiency, lowered standards, and the marketing of a completely consumerist approach to education—drives them to understand administration as the enemy.

In spite of the reality of that rift and that antagonism, however, CUNY is the only school that (so far) demanded that the public wake up and notice the problems with Pathways. One reason that Pathways is infrequently challenged, is that liberally-minded or left-wing faculty allow themselves to deny what is going on right in front of them and locate the “real” neoliberal enemy in the more obvious places, like in Betsy DeVos, for example, or for-profit colleges, or charter schools.

### **Shock Doctrine**

This “forgetting” and denial is probably something that administrators hope for and to some extent work on manufacturing. One strategy used in this manipulation can be called “shock doctrine”. “Shock doctrine” is a concept that was popularized by Naomi Klein in her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine: The rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Klein argues that the globalization of free market fundamentalism came into being not because well-informed voters in democracies actively sought after it, but because people were shocked and stunned into compliance: “The term ‘shock doctrine’ describes the quite brutal tactic of systematically using the public’s disorientation following a collective shock—wards, coups, terrorist attacks, market crashes, or natural disasters—to push

through radical pro-corporate measures” (Klein 2). Neoliberal politics, according to Klein, take hold when the masses are numbed or distracted.

While CC institutional redesign is a minor neoliberal effort compared to the ones Klein discusses, it is surprising that faculty around the country (with the exception of CUNY) cooperate with it, and perhaps they cooperate in part because they are experiencing something of a disaster in the workplace. When administrators at the college I worked for, through Pathways, imposed massive changes at once and in a hurry, faculty who would normally resist did not because their schools were in a chaotic place of uncertainty and limbo. Distracted by work-overload and too many policy changes to process at once, faculty don’t have much time to analyze the lies they are being told. Faculty awareness that Pathways is *not* the saving grace, *not* the only solution, and *not* the way towards equity becomes repressed due to the need to function day to day in a working environment that is unfamiliar and confusing.

I have explained why some of the ideas behind Pathways are misleading: it is not true, for example, that more Americans with college degrees will necessarily contribute to middle-class growth, especially given the student debt crisis, nor is it true that old pedagogical techniques are bad while new ones are good, nor is it true that students need less choices and more hand holding, nor is it true that low graduation rates are an immediate or pressing crisis—(they are a symptom of larger societal problems, not so much problems in themselves).

One article concerning Pathways justifies the need for it as follows:

Six years ago, Front Range Community College President Andy Dorsey sat down with his team and looked at the college’s completion and

graduation rates. Like a lot of colleges, they were in for a shock. It's not that they had expected to see 80 percent completion rates. But they certainly weren't expecting to see only 43 percent of their students graduating or completing in three years. Nor did they expect to see the composition of the students who were dropping out. "It became clear that we were losing lots of students, and, specifically losing students who were more likely to be Pell [grant] eligible, in developmental education, and students of color," Dorsey says. "That bothered all of us. In many respects, that's the group of students community colleges were set up to provide opportunity for. (Boerner)

Although the information about dropouts is presented as a calamity, it is hardly surprising information, and I doubt anyone at Front Range CC saw anything unexpected. High dropout rates at CCs have been receiving attention as a problem for at least the past two decades (see Schneider (1999) and Rosenbaum (2001) qtd in Levinson 134). Moreover, most all CC professors surely understand that we live in a world in which poor students and students of color are oppressed and underserved. It would be far more surprising if this college had *high* graduation rates and minority populations succeeding *on par* with more privileged students. The article, though, frames the numbers as though they constitute a horrifying new revelation, so that we believe we must start acting differently immediately—as though CCs have not always acted to make the world a better place for minorities.

The truth is that since their inception, CCs have been an important anchor in American democracy. According to an educational historian David Levinson they were conceived of and built throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to “embody a unique egalitarian commitment to educating all. Their inclusiveness reflects an all-embracing quality...” (Levinson 24). Yet once a college has been thrown into a tornado of new Pathways policies, faculty have a hard time pulling together in a united effort to voice concern

about what doesn't make sense; it is easier to believe the lies and go along with the changes.

I risk sounding overdramatic, but I want to point out that the same shock doctrine strategy of control is being used by the current White House—another shocking scandal appears in the media on a daily basis, so that today's shock overwhelms yesterday's shock, and we have a hard time remembering what happened last month or even last week. While citizens are experiencing collective emotional paralysis, the Trump administration can get away with outrageous lies and implement policy changes that a rational public would never agree to. Klein writes: "Trump's gang has a long wish list of policies that do not lend themselves to normal times" (175). We should ask whether administrators at Pathways colleges create abnormal and/or chaotic times so that they can, behind the backs of faculty, push through exploitative changes.

### **Manufactured Consent**

More vulnerable faculty, i.e. adjuncts or those who don't have tenure, are more easily manipulated. They are more likely to do what they are told without questioning or complaining, and they are more likely to respond to false flattery. At the college where I worked, administrators were focused on purging the more experienced faculty while isolating and praising the new ones. There were a great deal of early retirement deals; new faces in the hallway outnumbered the old. The new faculty (I was one) were, upon arrival, greeted with much fanfare and attention from administrators. Before we had had substantial opportunity to get to know members of our various departments, we were told disparaging stories about them and about the college in general. We were told that the

college was in a drastic state of disrepair and that many of the more experienced faculty were bad teachers. On a few occasions, certain older faculty were demeaned by administrators as being racist, elitist, and abusive to students. On one occasion, an administrator suggested that “RateMyProfessor.com” was what provided evidence of this. The “old guard” was demonized as close-minded and ineffective in order to make the new faculty believe in the need for change and to groom them into self-congratulatory “faculty leaders” (of Pathways). These conversations took place at retreats or events, often in the more relaxed atmospheres of restaurants or bars, where all faculty present were recent hires. The new faculty were told that we were “the future of the college” and were hand-selected very carefully for their extraordinary capabilities. In fact, there was nothing special about the bunch of us except that we were all former adjuncts, many of us had moved across the country for a tenure-track job, and we were all rather nervous and anxious to get tenure. Never the less, it was nice to believe that we were especially brilliant. We were told that if all the professors at the college were like us, the school would be one of the best in the country. We were told that we were leaders and given privileges we didn’t earn. We were put in charge of faculty who were much more experienced than we were, and when they treated us with disdain as a result, we were told it was because they were horrible people. We were given the impression that we would be protected by administration no matter what, and we needn’t worry if faculty in our departments or our tenure review committees didn’t like what we were doing. And what we were doing, of-course, was implementing Pathways.

## Faculty Leaders

Some of the new faculty where I worked internalized the supposed “social justice” cause behind Pathways, which made them ripe for exploitation. These faculty—the easily exploited—are named in *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*: Bailey et. al. call them “faculty leaders,” but they are better described as faculty whose identification with liberal and progressive values have made them susceptible to a misguided commitment to Pathways. Wendy Brown notes in her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* that “younger faculty, raised on neoliberal careerism, are generally unaware that there could be alternative academic purposes and practices to those organized by a neoliberal table of values” (location 2921).

Indeed, faculty leaders at the CC where I worked felt—or pretended to feel—a daily optimism and enthusiasm for Pathways, to recognize that although implementing change is hard, the results of our efforts will be positive ones for all students, especially underprivileged students. From an administrative point of view, the best faculty members are those who place enormous hope and faith in Pathways as a new system that may finally throw wide open the doorway for minority student success. These faculty have bought into the idea of Pathways as an opportunity to be wholly and meaningfully connected to a cause—equity—which they believe to be a shiny and *new* mission for CCs. Once emotionally invested, faculty will work on Pathways projects without pay, and thereby become especially valuable to administration. Noble campaigns to change the world are exhilarating, especially for CC faculty, who often choose to work at a CC out of a desire to make a difference. But in the context of Pathways, this leads to an



alienated type of affective labor which is best described in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* by Arlie Hochschild.

Summarizing C. Wright Mills, Hochschild describes affective labor as follows: “in the course of selling goods or services we engage in a seriously self-estranging process, one that is increasingly common among workers in advanced capitalist societies” (ix). And then she adds to Mills. She says that there is also a “sense of the active emotional labor involved in the selling. This labor, it seemed to me, might be one part of a distinctly patterned yet invisible emotional system—a system composed of individual acts of ‘emotion work,’ social ‘feeling rules’” (ix-x). At the CC I worked for, the ‘emotion work’ often meant providing students with the emotional therapy they needed. While it is healthy to have good rapport with students, most faculty are not trained to help students with personal issues. Furthermore,

There is a cost to emotion work: it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel...when the transmutation of the private use of feeling is successfully accomplished—when we succeed in lending our feelings to the organizational engineers of worker-customer relations—we may pay a cost in how we hear our feelings and a cost in what, for better or worse, they tell us about ourselves. (Hochschild 21)

Administrators at the college where I worked were responding to the research suggesting that retention improves when students feel connected to individuals on campus in a personal way. They could not afford to hire enough personnel to provide all the “wrap around” support that students needed, so they wanted faculty to spend extra time “reaching out.” There was also a guilt trip involved. We were told that reaching out to students personally was everyone’s responsibility, and if we didn’t care enough to go this

extra mile, we were not genuinely devoted to the social justice cause of CC teaching. It was apparent that from the administrative perspective, the truly good teachers had intimate knowledge of students' personal lives and were providing support to students in ways that violate normal boundaries between teacher/student. Indeed, the teachers receiving the most accolades were the ones that bought food for hungry students or spent their own personal money to help students pay for fees or other materials.

That said, teaching does involve and *is* a type of caring, and it is important that teaching remain a *human* activity. As the Australian educator, Raewyn Connell, articulates:

To say that education involves nurture is important. Education involves encounter between persons and that encounter involves care. Learning from a computer is not education; the machine does not care. Learning from a person behaving like a machine is not education; that person's capacity for care is being suppressed. (104)

I agree with Connell that human caring is an indispensable element of teaching, but confusion and exhaustion arises when teachers become caretakers in realms of a student's life that are best left in a category of life-problems that are none of a teacher's business, and when students pay tuition with the expectation/hope of receiving this kind of extended care, the notion of the super-caring teacher is commodified. Indeed, the notion of a healthy mentorship is jeopardized when a gesture of caring becomes a transaction between the customer-student and the teacher-provider-therapist. When this type of care-taking is part of what is expected from teacher performance, something for which they are being paid, a teacher's capacity to care is commodified. This alienates teacher and student alike.

I imagine that in general, corporate reformers of public education have an easier time working with new teachers. But they must also deal with more confident faculty, those who are not so easily convinced of the need for Pathways, and in order to rationalize Pathways to these faculty, two arguments in pro-Pathways literature are often used. First, administrators emphasize repeatedly that the college is performing extremely poorly and in need of great change, and second, faculty are told that recent changes in the economy mean that a college credential (distinct from a Liberal Arts education) for *everyone* has become a necessity.

One way that Pathways promoters illustrate a crisis in CC performance is by presenting charts and graphs illustrating poor graduation rates (which have always existed at CCs), all the “excess” credits students take in college, how long it takes them to get through, and the debt they incur when they take such a long time. But the crisis here is not excess credits or length of time spent in college. “Excess” credits no doubt constitute classes students took that expanded their minds and improved their thinking – the problem, as I already discussed, is that a college education is too expensive. If college tuition were free for students, excess credits and length of time spent in college would not be an issue. All in all, what the half-truths meant is that we the faculty had to focus on graduating more students, no matter how much it went against our instincts to simplify the coursework and lower our expectations.

Unfortunately our neoliberal government is allowing these types of administrative tactics to occur in public schools everywhere, not just CCs. Ravitch explains that in fact there has not been a recent crisis in public education performance

and that a trustworthy set of data from NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) shows that at the K-12 level our reading and math scores have been improving over the past few decades. The data illustrates that

beyond question...test scores in reading and math have improved for almost every group of students over the past two decades: slowly and steadily in the case of reading, dramatically in the case of mathematics. Students know more and can do more in these two basic skills subjects now than they could twenty or forty years ago (Ravitch location 1156).

But this is information that is not often repeated to educators because it does not work for reformers who want to argue that deep structural changes are necessary. In order to justify charter schools and voucher systems at the K-12 system, corporate reformers need to illustrate that public schools—the strategies their teachers use, their curriculum, and their philosophies—are in a disastrous state of disrepair. In much the same way, for Pathways to be implemented, senior CC faculty need to be convinced that their pedagogies and curricula, no matter how tried and true, don't work.

### **Blaming Teachers**

While faculty leaders might feel important and special (and overworked), other faculty at the college I worked for were made to feel that their practices were in need of change and improvement. Indeed, at the corporate CC, it is important to keep most teachers feeling sufficiently bad about themselves. As long as teachers understand that their schools are operating poorly because they need to improve their practice, administrators can justify instigating changes (changes that in fact do little for teacher effectiveness, by the way, but do serve the function of beefing up administrative resumes). The message from administration at the CC where I worked was that if the

achievement gap was high then teachers must blame themselves; if students don't persist, teachers must blame themselves, if graduation rates are low, teachers must blame themselves.

I don't doubt that some institutions have been implementing Pathways without the gross exploitation of "faculty leaders," who are merely the faculty who allow themselves to be convinced by the Gates narrative, but I also expect that a widespread and unfair disparagement of teachers is common across Pathways institutions, for the language scapegoating teachers is in the books that are being endorsed and used by Pathways administrators across the country. In the first chapter of *Becoming a Student Ready College*, the authors say that we have a problem of searching for the ideal student instead of inclusively teaching all students. Even though CCs are open access institutions and instructors who apply to work there are fully aware of this; even though most CC teachers have chosen to work at a CC because they honor the inclusive ideals that gave rise to CCs in the first place; the authors of this book claim that "faculty and administrators sometimes lament the challenges of educating today's students and are nostalgic for a prior era in American higher education when students were (seemingly) different" (10). This makes teachers seem like a bunch of whiners.

The authors proceed to claim that "too many of us are either solemn in our quest to find the ideal college student or too constrained by external forces and demands to think outside the box" (10). This is a rather insulting description of teachers. I have not noticed a solemn quest (among teachers anyway) for an ideal student. In fact, at a Pathways professional development workshop, I was part of a group of faculty tasked

with writing down the characteristics of the ideal student on a large piece of paper with colorful markers. This exercise was supposed to make us aware of our fantasy students and stop wishing for them. It was an irritating exercise because all of us were experienced enough to know that it is best to expect the unexpected in the CC classroom, and that when working at an open-access college, there will always be a hodge-podge of very different students, some of whom will be difficult to reach for some reason or another. Someone pointed out that “ideal students are awake and sober,” but beyond that, the group didn’t really have much to say and completed the task resentfully and reluctantly, trying to fill up the paper with what we imagined administrators wanted to hear. As for thinking outside the box, the “awake and sober” comment is proof enough for me that faculty have plenty of creative intelligence.

It is ultimately patronizing and presumptuous for the authors of *Becoming a Student-ready College* to explain that the ideal student is actually just a myth. They approach teachers like a bunch of children who need to be told in a gentle manner that Santa Clause is not for real. The authors also insult faculty intelligence by urging us to take full responsibility for the poor performances of our students:

In our present-day quest for the ideal student, we miss opportunities to transform our institutions and teaching practices in support of today’s students. Instead, too many of us are beginning to absolve ourselves from responsibility associated with poor student outcomes. We place the blame on either the individual student, the K-12 system, or broader societal challenges, such as poverty. (13)

Teachers rarely blame individual students for poor academic performance; they are not usually so cruel—but teachers do, and they should, blame the life-circumstances that individual students find themselves in, a K-12 system that is clearly inequitable, and the

broader social issues resulting from a neoliberal government. Many of them, however, are doing the best they can given these circumstances, but are not so blind as to agree with the absurd implication that they are behaving selfishly or immorally if they fail to take the problems of the whole world onto their own shoulders.

*Redesigning America's Community Colleges* also suggests repeatedly that instructors don't know what they are doing. The authors claim that instructors assume all students will learn the same way (85), that they don't know how to teach critical thinking (85) and that "most professors spend the bulk of classroom time lecturing, and when they ask the class a question, it tends to be a low-level question that requires repeating facts, rather than translating, associating, synthesizing, or judging facts or ideas" (86). In addition, instructors are accused of being afraid to take the pedagogical risk of including critical thinking in their lessons (89) and that they rarely talk to each other about teaching and learning (90). These statements are so false as to sound absurd to the ears of most teachers.

And that is not all. One of the most important aspects of Pathways, as I have mentioned, is accelerated learning, and articles about accelerated learning also inform faculty that they need to improve their pedagogy.<sup>12</sup> One article suggests providing "scaffolding and support," "determining evidence to confirm that desired results have occurred," and "[designing] activities that will facilitate the desired results" (Walker 17).

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<sup>12</sup> Accelerated learning is defined by Eric Booth as "an increasingly popular strategy for students who are underprepared. It is defined as a process by which 'college student with academic weaknesses...simultaneously receive academic enrichment and support as they are enrolled in college-level courses and keep pace with other students towards degree completion.'" (Booth 4).

This advice is insulting because these strategies are so elementary and obvious to anyone who teaches. It would be impossible for any teacher, even one with very little experience, to teach without having goals in mind, without providing scaffolding, without determining what evidence should be used for assessment, and without designing activities that facilitate results. Another important aspect of accelerated learning pedagogy, and one that is said to “fundamentally rethink instructional strategies” is “[promoting] high expectations, depth of understanding and knowledge transfer to new settings” (Walker 17). The problem with this kind of language is that it seems to presume that faculty have never heard of high expectations, depth of understanding, and knowledge transfer—or if they have, they don’t hold these elements of pedagogy to be very important, because they need to “fundamentally rethink” their strategies. It is aggravating to be told that one’s teaching strategies are poor, and then listen to a long explanation of a “new” strategy that is in fact just a re-naming and re-packaging of a technique long understood and regularly practiced.

In addition to disparaging teachers, administration can also degrade them by imposing unfair shame and punishment. At the college where I worked, instructors were made to feel guilty of poor pedagogical practice if too many students dropped out of their classes. Administrators manufacture this guilt through an unfair evaluation method that passes judgement on teacher effectiveness using the retention rates in their classes. The assumption is that if the teacher is a good one, the customer-student will be pleased and will stick around. The reality is that there are many reasons a CC student might not stay in a class: they may drop the course because they decide there is too much reading to be



done or too many pages to write; they may hear that there is another teacher whose class is an “easy A;” they may decide that they would prefer to take the course online. There are also the complicated lives that CC students live: their child might become ill, which forces them to miss so many classes and assignments that they decide to drop; for financial reasons they may have to drop the class so they can work; they may be working full time and in school full time and decide to drop a class because they are overwhelmed; they may drop the class because it is late at night or early in the morning; if it is a developmental level class, students are more likely to have life-problems that cause them to drop. However, when administrators are looking at how many students remain in and complete a certain instructor’s class, they do not see or hear about the reasons that students might have dropped. If a teacher is unlucky enough to receive a number of classes in a row scheduled at times that are bad for students, and/or a number of which are in the developmental levels, and/or has high standards, or is just plain unlucky, their low retention rate may cause them to lose classes, be put to shame, or both. The resulting anxiety among teachers leads to easier classes and teachers who coddle and pander. At a WA state orientation for new full-time faculty, this burden of responsibility for dropouts was conveyed through an activity using cheerios and straws. Using the straws, we were told to blow the cheerios across the table. If a cheerio fell off the table, we lost points. Needless to say, being told that keeping cheerios on a table with a straw is the main goal of one’s job—when instructors want to believe they have been hired to pass on valuable ways of thinking and knowing related to their area of expertise—is dehumanizing and insulting.

## **Pathways as a Threat to Rhetorical Literacy**

Are Pathways program assessments going to eventually highlight the question of how much students have learned and what kind of learning has taken place? If so, how are they going to measure it? There are so many types of intelligences and different modes of learning that those measurements will be nearly impossible to make. There is no way to accurately measure Rhetorical Literacy, what it does, and/or what it might do in the future, which means that if Pathways is deemed a success, it will not be a result of enhanced Rhetorical Literacy.

I concede that to some extent, for some students, and depending especially on to what extent resources are invested in the Completion by Design principle number five, “integrat[ing] student supports with instruction,” Pathways may help some students obtain what they want from their investment in Community College. Unfortunately, it will also result in an educational culture overly invested in speed, efficiency, and product (credits toward graduation and high grades) and this results in students who don’t slow down enough to imagine, reflect and think deeply.

### **Slowness**

The value of slowness is explored in chapter two and is worth re-iterating here in the context of Pathways: we need a more balanced approach to higher education that remains firm in its challenge to the corporate demand for speed. Pathways lends a great deal of credence to the received notion that faster is better, and it is easy to forget that deep learning, the type that leads to habits of mind necessary for engaged democracy, does not happen quickly. A delightfully counter-cultural book written by two English

Professors wishing to change the high-stress and time-impoverished way of life among academics, has recently brought the slow food movement to higher education in the book *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. These professors' "Slow Professor Manifesto" reminds us that the corporatization of academe doesn't increase the pace of what we do without sacrifice; in fact, we lose something essential to our work—what they call "timelessness"—when we are overscheduled: timelessness is the experience of being so engaged and focused in the present that one loses track of time. Timelessness is a type of joy and a place where immense cognitive growth takes place. Furthermore, it is an integral aspect of higher education: "Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what we do" (Berg and Seeber x). The Pathways focus on completion contributes to the gradual elimination of this essential ingredient—timelessness—that is necessary for the survival of perspective on and critical awareness of the world.

Moreover, Pathways' endorsement of accelerated learning results in teachers who must fit course content the size of a museum into a slice of time the size of a storage closet—we are compelled to dispose of vast amounts of knowledge that refuses to be crammed in. For monetary reasons, it makes sense to both colleges and students that a shorter amount of time to a degree is desirable, but the intense pursuit of this objective results in a lack of attention to the destruction it causes. Teachers are not necessarily given smaller classes or extra time with students in accelerated classes, resulting in a pressure to finagle ways to cut corners in terms of course material—and as the pressure to pass more students in shorter time periods increases, those cuts get deeper and deeper.

Rhetorical Literacy requires that students learn to take time to examine the same object of study from multiple angles, time to share and develop an idea through discussion and collaboration, time to imagine alternatives to the path of least resistance, time for the “rhizomatics” described earlier: when time is not available, it is exactly the slower type of learning that gets brushed aside. For example, the quickest and easiest way for students to write a paper is to present the ideas that are most familiar and least complicated to them; when challenged to provide evidence for their perspective, incorporate scholarly sources, or facilitate an opposing perspective, progress to the final draft is slowed. Thus the best way to speed up student “learning” is by eliminating more challenging aspects of assignments and accepting work of lesser quality.

Moreover, since students have different types of intelligences, some will take longer than others to develop the necessary schema and patterns of thinking, so it would not be surprising if accelerated learning did not work for all students, especially if class sizes aren’t made smaller to accommodate for the more demanding students. The results of a Texas study into Developmental Education programs failed to demonstrate that accelerating student progress is a good idea. The study assessed Developmental Education programs at five community colleges and four universities over the course of two years. Researchers wanted to determine which aspects of these accelerated programs were helpful. Regarding acceleration, they concluded that “it is apparent that the accelerated options do not work for students who lack a higher level of commitment and motivation” (Booth 4).

It is important to point out that acceleration was just one part of a larger plan to improve Developmental Education; this change took place alongside other important changes to supportive instructional and advising strategies much like the Pathways ones. After two years of Pathways strategies, in other words, some developmental programs in Texas showed improvement, but others did not, suggesting that results were rather inconclusive. Of the nine sites studied, Pathways changes were correlated with negative consequences (in terms of course completion) at three schools. At Texas A&M University Corpus Christie the success rate went down by three percent, at El Paso Community College the success rate went down by thirteen percent, and at University of Texas Austin it went down by nineteen percent. At Alamo, Lonestar and Tarrant Community Colleges, the changes only resulted in an improvement of less than 5%, which means that there were three out of nine colleges, San Jacinto CC, Texas State, and University of Texas Pan-American, that made real gains. This doesn't really illustrate that Pathways strategies are effective; nevertheless, the authors imply that they are needed and necessary (Booth et al. 10).

Early adopters of Pathways, as noted, have illustrated with graduation data that it works—assuming that regardless of what or how students learn, they are successful if they get degrees. While it might seem perfectly clear that improved persistence and graduation rates are a good goal, I argue that *if* they come at the expense of Rhetorical Literacy, then they are not a worthy goal. It is unlikely, I realize, that a college graduate not gain *any* exposure to Rhetorical Literacy. There are too many professors who care about academic rigor and the freedom that comes with critical consciousness for a college

education to be utterly without it. Therefore, perhaps our reality is not as though we *either* have Guided Pathways *or* Rhetorical Literacy, but rather our reality is that we are compelled to have both at the same time. The question is, *how much* Rhetorical Literacy can we manage to fight for while also struggling to rearrange the college for Pathways? With Pathways at the front and center of the conversation, Rhetorical Literacy fades to the periphery. The question is whether or not, under Pathways, teachers like me will have the autonomy and freedom to infuse *enough* Rhetorical Literacy into the curriculum to sustain enthusiasm and hope that our careers are part of maintaining what is meaningful and substantial about a college education.

### **Final Thoughts on Guided Pathways**

This dissertation argues that Rhetorical Literacy needs to be infused into first year curriculum as a primary aim, and that First Year Composition classes and First Year Experiences are practical places to start building curriculum that explicitly holds this literacy to be an important learning outcome. The fact that Rhetorical Literacy is not center stage for many CC leaders is disappointing, but even more disappointing is their failure to point out and discuss openly the contradictions we must embrace if we are trying to put this type of literacy front and center while implementing a model of CC education that prioritizes student persistence and completion.

An article written by Pathways leader Dr. Rob Johnstone claims that “guided pathways represents an institution’s best chance to move past innovating on the margins for a small number of students to fundamentally transforming the learner experience” (2). He seems content in allowing “fundamental transformation” to mean that students will

have clearer goals and that those goals will be met more quickly and efficiently. This is hardly “transformation” in my view, especially since students’ conscious goals are usually associated with becoming a more marketable piece of human capital. They do not know enough to formulate identities and dreams that might liberate them from merely existing as vehicles for neoliberal values. If our students are to have meaningful lives in which they flourish, Pathways doesn’t do them much good.

Community College students desperately need a way out of neoliberal narratives that have convinced them of their unworthiness. They are often single parents with two jobs who can’t afford the internet and must skip class to stay home if their child becomes ill. They are often veteran students with PTSD. Some students are homeless; many are food-insecure. They look up to their teachers as people blessed with privilege and dignity, and don’t imagine that they themselves will ever be worthy of such status. They might be described as “lost”. Or, to use Judith Butler’s language, the “social dimension of normativity” has deprived them of the ability to “[recognize themselves] as fully human because sometimes the very terms that confer humanness on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human” (qtd. in Anwaruddin).

Transformative learning experiences, from my perspective, teach students that their voices matter, that they have a right to dignity, that life is about more than merely treading water just above the poverty line while always reaching for a bit more proximity to the middle class American dream.

## **Fighting Back**

We need to re-evaluate the purpose of college and place more emphasis on higher learning as having a crucial role in facilitating a healthy democracy, but I also recognize that such a cultural shift in thinking will take time to materialize when Pathways arguments are repeated so often and so aggressively that they have become normalized. Pathways is supposedly a way that CCs can “do more with less” (meaning less money); and as we scramble to figure out how they will have enough money to meet students’ endless needs, we ignore the fact that they could be actively organizing a movement instead—a movement, for example, to obtain free public education through grade fourteen, and/or a state-issued monthly stipend for full time college students. Yet unfortunately, there is a knee-jerk reaction to this sort of idealism; most of us view a force like the Gates foundation too powerful to battle. I insist, though, if another system and a better set of conditions for college students seems outrageous or impossible, we need to read authors like Newfield, or look to countries like Denmark where norms and values are in place to produce this kind of support for college students (Alleem). My point is not that we can become just like the Danes (we certainly can’t) but what is achieved through a comparison is the understanding that reification has skewed our vision of what is possible: if the system we are now in is socially constructed it is not an immovable mountain but rather a building that can be torn down and re-built. To put things on a scale that may seem more feasible, CC leadership, instead of focusing on Pathways, could work on educating the public about the value of political voice. We cannot deny, after all, that a voting public could, under the right conditions, endorse a



politician who would implement a policy of free child care and textbooks for all CC students.

It might be best to think of a fight against Pathways as one we must fight not to win but to maintain integrity. Some will argue that there is no good reason to fight a losing battle; a glorious victory will never come to pass because the forces against us are too powerful. I suggest, on the other hand, that the alternative—capitulating—is suicidal. If we allow a system that has such little regard for the humanities and for Rhetorical Literacy to simply bulldoze over us, we will live in misery and alienation—every small resistance that we might be able to muster is a self-affirming one, and a good reason to carry on. Our task is to choose battles wisely, not without courage but also with an eye to what is reasonable and practical.

It seems to me that there is much revolutionary hope to be found in community college students in our country. Research shows that college students today are disgusted by income inequality. Arthur Levine and Diane Dean, who wrote *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student*, claim that undergraduate surveys demonstrate that college students today “overwhelmingly believe that private corporations are too concerned with profits and not enough with public responsibility and CEOs do not deserve the high salaries they receive” (25). My experience supports this finding; I have found that most young people have a powerful sense of justice. Moreover, when they are presented with an authority figure that honors and respects their life-experiences and voices, CC students become exhilarated to learn, express themselves, and be part of something larger than their own individual pursuit of economic gain.

Reactionary movements like Pathways are a type of presentism; they endorse transferrable skills for jobs, but this does students a disservice. Students need the well-rounded full range of critical and creative problem-solving skills that allow them to reorient to the ever-changing conditions in our world. A static set of skills will leave them high and dry when their job is replaced by automated technological developments that substitute machine labor for human labor. They will then have to return to college for another degree that offers another short-term solution. This is a system that shouldn't be called higher education but is better characterized as a manipulative and exploitative industry organized around the buying and selling of credentials—credentials that carry with them a planned obsolescence.

Pathways is not only a capitulation to neoliberalism, but is an affront to critical thinking, contributes to the erosion of an American college degree, is infantilizing to students, insulting to faculty, and has co-opted leftist language of equity so that followers can claim—and indeed often believe—that they are acting in the name of social justice when in reality they are doing nothing to address the real causes of inequity.

Supporters of Pathways argue that it prevents the bewilderment, confusion and frustration that may lead students to drop out. I suggest that Pathways further mechanizes and instrumentalizes an education system that is already robbing students of inspiration, creativity and free thought. The Guided Pathways effort, while helpful for the survival for the neoliberal subject, fails to question whether striving for neoliberal subjectivity is a worthy goal in the first place. Furthermore, it threatens to be an all-consuming effort. It involves increased managerialism, increased exploitation of teachers, the imposition of an

assumption that if it is a type of learning that we aren't measuring—because it is too hard to measure—then it doesn't count, and an overly prescribed and managed “pathway” through college for students that does not afford them the time to develop as citizens or consider alternative ways of being and knowing.

## Conclusion

Rhetorical Literacy arises from the pedagogical motivation to make rhetorical instruments of neoliberal control legible to students. Cultural Studies scholars characterize neoliberalism as “the seizure of...knowledge, language, images, and affects” (Dean 120), and I have created a format for college-level literacy that affords students the ability to see and critique neoliberal manipulations of knowledge, language, images and affects. I suggest that without the critical tools of Rhetorical Literacy students could easily graduate from college having failed to develop a healthy skepticism towards the world around them. As Chris Hedges so aptly puts it, many people accept that “the reality of the world is whatever the latest cable news show, political leader, advertiser, or loan officer says is reality” (47). Thus I put forward a literacy that empowers students to see ideology as a product of various cultural persuasions rather than an inevitability of nature.

It is worth noting that although the application of rhetorical methodologies teaches students to deconstruct neoliberal rationalities, Rhetorical Literacy does not dictate or demand an anti-neoliberal point of view; it is not a pedagogy that rewards students for adopting a particular political stance. It simply provides students with critical dexterity. Students learn to recognize the frameworks that lend neoliberal discourses their authority. The visibility of these frameworks is what empowers students to then approach the conditions of our world as socially constructed and changeable, as conditions that they can either support or take action against.

Rhetorical Literacy is also a response to and defense against the erosion of the Liberal Arts: Wendy Brown reminds us that “The survival of Liberal Arts education

depends on broad recognition of its value for democracy. The survival of democracy depends upon a people educated for it, which entails resisting neoliberalization of their institutions and themselves” (Brown location 2956). As I explained in chapter four, when we recognize the neoliberalism behind educational movements like Pathways, the urgency of Brown’s words becomes clear. Pathways obviates strong methods of resistance from critically minded faculty and students, for in promoting a more accelerated and efficient journey through college, it results in the condemnation of “specialty” courses in areas of study like Art, Ethnic Studies, History, Philosophy, or Literature. Proponents of Pathways refer to these courses as mistakes because they regard any course in the humanities outside of a distribution requirement as a waste of time. A specialized course, like a wonderful one I took as an undergraduate entitled “Authority and Subversion in Shakespearean Drama,” is in danger of falling into extinction, especially at the Community College level. Furthermore, there is a push from administration at Community Colleges to design distribution courses in the humanities that cater specifically to students’ chosen fields. In other words, instead of receiving an authentic “Introduction to Literature,” students will take a course like “Introduction to Literature in Nursing.” This narrowing of the curriculum might appeal to the consumer-student, but it represents a degradation of our field and profession and gives those of us who prioritize Rhetorical Literacy less time for it.

In addition to being valuable in and of themselves, humanities courses are important to defend because their place and status at the university confirms a narrative about education that many of us cherish. Sandy Shugart, president of Valencia

Community College in Florida, outlines this narrative about education in his article “The Challenge of Deep Change: A Brief Cultural History of Higher Education.” The article is usefully considered in the context of this dissertation because in addition to explaining the model of education behind the Liberal Arts—which he calls the Monastic model—Shugart also outlines three other cultural narratives about education, all of which, in my view, do little to support Rhetorical Literacy and in some cases work against it. These other models are the Polytechnic model, the Industrial model and the Retail model. I build on Shugart’s work here by re-framing these models from within the architecture I have built that places Rhetorical Literacy in opposition to neoliberalism. The Polytechnic, Industrial and Retail models of education, in my view, are neoliberal, whereas the Monastic model is a place where Rhetorical Literacy can find a home.

For those of us passionate about the post-secondary learning in the humanities, the erosion of the Liberal Arts seems to be occurring all too quickly, especially among the middle and working classes; however, the Monastic model of education from which it derives is actually still very powerful. This is the model of education claiming that “the purpose of the [educational] institution [is] the preservation and transmission of culture [s]” (Shugart 10). Our K-12 schools are still set up to preserve and transmit cultures, and we still consider reading and writing to be an integral aspect of schooling. Although we also transmit knowledge and values through images and spoken words, dedication to print literacy, at least at in the K-12 system, is still considered an indispensable aspect of cultural preservation. In the words of Stephen Greenblatt, it was the monastic “compulsion” to read “that through centuries of chaos, helped to salvage the

achievements of ancient thought” and would ultimately influence not only the Renaissance but the revolutions of modernity (25). Like the monks, those of us in the humanities consider the act of honoring human heritage, wisdom, diversity, art, knowledge, history and accomplishment by reading the written word paramount to what we do. My project claims that to continue this Liberal Arts/Monastic tradition as the college level means teaching Rhetorical Literacy.

Unfortunately, however, tension between the Monastic model and the other models occurs because from the perspective of the Polytechnic, Industrial, or Retail formulation, aspects of the Monastic model are no longer relevant to students once they are finished secondary school. For example, I might express the value of college level poetry to an administrator, and that administrator might nod her head politely but then proceed to illustrate—with numbers that she perceives to be the “real” story—why students do not benefit from a poetry class. The “real” story, as it is narrated to many of today’s administrators, is not about the preservation of culture but about training students to serve the competitive needs of the economic nation-state, processing greater numbers of students through the system more efficiently, and/or increasing revenue streams.

These neoliberal attitudes that surround us in Higher Education are coming from the less inspiring and perhaps even disturbing educational paradigms Shugart outlines. The Polytechnic model of education takes as its purpose “the development of new knowledge and new technologies and their practical application to industry, warfare, and other state priorities” (12). A thorough training in the humanities will make one skeptical of state priorities—especially warfare. Yet some would say that educational objectives

not falling squarely within the practical uses as defined by the state are not worth pursuing. The Industrial model of education makes the core mission of higher education one of “scale—to enroll and serve as large a student population as possible at the lowest cost possible” (11). This model results in a factory-like system, teachers being the assembly line workers that take “raw material” (students) and either scrap them (fail them) or transform them into human capital as quickly as possible. The Pathways program exemplifies this model because it creates a number of tracks—picture five different types of potato coming down five different chutes in a potato factory—that it rapidly sorts and disposes. It is a processing plant. No matter how efficient a factory may be at ignoring the unique attributes of the potato inputted in order to deliver standard, uniform potato chips at output, this factory vision of post-secondary education is not inspiring to professors (or students), especially, perhaps, those in the humanities who feel a certain revulsion towards the alienated labor that characterizes factory work.

The Retail Model of education is also one that neoliberalism embraces, and it is yet another narrative about education that leaves a sour taste, for most educators do not want to think of their students as consumers. In the Retail Model “the mission of the college is its own success...essentially to grow its brand” (Shugart 12). At Community Colleges, Guided Pathways is becoming like a brand name that an institution can sew onto itself like a badge of honor. The reward for obtaining this badge is the resulting consumer-student perception that it is meant to deliver. The Pathways sales-pitch is that *this* college, the Pathways-branded one, will give student-consumers plenty of emotional and practical assistance as it quickly and efficiently delivers them a degree that will result



in a middle-class job. The inflated Pathways claim students are meant to believe is that the job they obtain after their “pathway” will bring them middle-class earnings and career satisfaction. The Pathways brand sells the consumer-student more than an education—it also sells them a sense that they will earn an identity as someone living the middle class American Dream life.

What Guided Pathways is selling to the consumer-student, however, and what it will actually deliver, are two very different things. Since educators are likely to see this gap, it is reasonable for them to protest Pathways on the grounds of false advertising alone. While all of us are necessarily consumers to some extent, many educators have a certain distance from the manipulation of advertisers and the endless empty promises of consumerism. This gap between what Pathways advertises (transformation resulting in the American Dream) and what it delivers (a lot of debt and the possibility of very few prospects for employment) produces in students what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism”. Berlant writes that “optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which the person or people risks striving” (2). The neoliberal community college experience is aptly described as a source of cruel optimism because without Rhetorical Literacy, the journey through undergraduate education does very little to encourage the “expansive transformation for which [we] risk striving,” but instead leads students more deeply into alienation and debt.

This dissertation illustrates how neoliberalism presents a threat to Rhetorical Literacy. It does so not to eschew the Polytechnic, Industrial and Retail models of

education completely (there are ways in which they are necessary and sometimes useful) but to emphasize the need for our continued commitment to the alternative ways of thinking that facilitate social change. If we must work in a factory, so be it, but we can create a factory that contains the seeds of its own undoing.

In fact, as laborers seeking to undo the very institution that supports us, we are living in a contradiction. We work for institutions that both save us and create conditions for our resistance to them. On the one hand, what would we do without the university, which offers us a home in a world that scoffs at the uselessness of our ideas and passions? It is somewhat surprising that we earn money for reading books and writing books that really don't hold up to a cost-benefit analysis. The world might have offered us far less. On the other hand, the university is as corrupted by neoliberalism as any other space. Especially in the humanities, we are hobbling along rather than thriving. Sometimes we are given a place to stand, but we also find ourselves feeling alienated, annoyed, and belligerent. Fred Moten and Steven Harney characterize our position as follows:

In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university. (101).

In a way, the fact that the university contains a refugee colony is a spectacular surprise. We are fortunate enough to have our colony. As subversive intellectuals, however, we are not merely taking cover in the university, but also using it as a fortress from which we can fight back against a neoliberal world we find difficult to bear. As part of our struggle

we are inventing rubrics like “Critical University Studies” to strike back at the very institution that provides for us. Political theorist Wendy Brown says of this paradox that

there is probably no place that we see this [reality] more vividly than with our graduate students, who often arrive passionate about the particular subject they’ve come to study with us or in our programs. And in no time at all, because of the tremendous scarcity in a future professoriate and in the world they wish to enter, learn how to entrepreneurialize themselves, enhance their capital value, game and scheme and so forth, and feel miserable about it as they do it because they literally go from that moment of raw intellectual passion about the work to recognizing what its going to take to produce themselves, build their resumes....(Brown, “Forum 22”)

And so our relation to the university becomes one of both gratitude and hate. Our greatest asset as humanities scholars in this regard is perhaps our ability to embrace the many layers of affective contradiction within our position. It is remarkable that critiques of higher education like mine are increasingly appearing in English departments. Brown articulates our talent for not only remaining within but also reveling in spaces of contradiction as follows:

some people have more of a stomach for...being both subject and object of the problem at once, being able to have a certain reflexivity and critical engagement with [the university] and look for possibilities to experiment, to transform, to resist, even while knowing it’s never going to be pure...it’s never going to be deeply and totally satisfying....Some people have more of a stomach for that than others. Some people really hate cognitive dissonance, but other people, and here I think the humanities are actually one of our best substantive and deep allies in this work right now, I feel like the humanities are... where an art of thinking and learning and knowing these kinds of tensions are often nourished rather than suppressed. So maybe that’s a space to think into....” (Brown, “Forum 22”)

Hopefully we will take Brown’s words of support and run with them, for she is probably correct that we in the humanities are in the best position to critique and challenge the neoliberal university.

Moten and Harvey characterize our paradoxical relation to the university in another and more poetic way. Speaking of the subversive intellectual they say, "The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings." The use of the feminine pronoun here serves to validate the way female bodies in the university, along with all the many types of minority bodies, can have a subversive presence that is repellent to those who prefer the comforts of the old boy's network over the intriguing yet daunting unfamiliar and new. At the same time, the university, on principle and also out of genuine generosity, reaches out to accept those dangerous bodies.

I have shown what it means for neoliberal hegemony to dominate our culture and described how the engine of our political economy runs on a crudely self-centered subjectivity that is alienated from the collective. Building upon the work of Ed Nagelhout and Stuart Selber, I have repurposed Rhetorical Literacy as a necessary pedagogical intervention for First Year students that responds to this neoliberalization. Moreover, my work emphasizes rhetorical literacy as a flexible skill that is not specific to a single discipline or situation: I illustrate it as not only necessary to combat presentism, but as needed for success across the disciplines and for practicing the slow, deliberate, critical reading, thinking, and imagining that work to combat neoliberal rationalities.

I have described the adverse effects of neoliberalism upon higher education's purpose of fostering critically aware, participatory citizenship to illustrate the value of Rhetorical Literacy. Neoliberalism encourages a subjectivity that finds compassion difficult, but Rhetorical Literacy fosters the ability to see the world from another's perspective. Neoliberalism promotes a commercialized affect that only feigns a caring

attitude towards the suffering of others and our planet, but Rhetorical Literacy tackles this problem of alienation and searches for solutions. We need Rhetorical Literacy, in short, because we are not responding with enough resistance to the current neoliberal global order. David Harvey, one of the most insightful critics of neoliberalism, argues that we need to

identify, confront, and overcome the many forms of alienation produced by the economic engine of capital and to channel the pent-up energy, the anger, and the frustrations they produce into a coherent anti-capitalist opposition. Dare we hope for an un-alienated (or at-least a less alienated and more humanely) acceptable relation to each other, to the work we do and to the way we live and love? (4188)

We do.

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