

# Introduction

BOONE SHEAR AND SUSAN BRIN HYATT

The aim of this Special Issue of *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* is to analyse the impacts of neoliberal restructuring on higher education and to explore ways of raising students' critical awareness of these changes in their own environment. This Special Issue developed out of a symposium that was held at the University of Massachusetts in Spring 2008. Both Susan B. Hyatt and Vincent Lyon-Callos presented earlier drafts of their articles on that occasion, as did Dana-Ain Davis, whose article will appear in a future issue of *LATISS*. Shear and Zontine were the primary organisers of the symposium, along with other students and faculty at the University of Massachusetts, and in their article, they reflect on the collaborative, year-long reading group project on neoliberalism from which the symposium emerged. We invited John Clarke to join us in writing for this issue to provide an international perspective on these issues as they are currently playing out in the U.K.

Both the symposium and this Special Issue were motivated by our concern about the multiple ways in which the values and practices associated with neoliberalism are reshaping higher education in the U.S.A. and in the U.K., as well as elsewhere: as corporate interests increasingly penetrate academic environments, the logic and discourse of competitive 'free' markets is determining budgetary and policy decisions. This has created several outcomes: universities are casualising faculty and staff labour, raising students' tuition fees, and directing more of their resources towards developing so-called 'public-private partnerships', thereby creating new alignments between academia and private capital.

While these trends are disturbing, none of the contributors advocates a return to an idealised past associated with the expansion of higher education from post-World War II to the 1970s. In the following articles, we



show the multiple and often contradictory effects of neoliberal restructuring on-the-ground and in specific times and places. We not only illuminate 'what is currently being instilled, produced and valorised', as Shear and Zontine put it, but also point tentatively towards possible alternatives.

We suggest that ethnography, with its emphasis on lived experience, can be an effective tool to help us to capture the local manifestations of larger processes as well as to uncover areas of slippage, discontinuity and surprise between the global and the local, between structure and agency and between theory and practice. Each of the articles in this Special Issue relies on the use of ethnographic methods, including participant-observation, qualitative interviews and reflexive analysis, to help us think through how our own beliefs and practices at the university are shaped and structured through changing conditions that are explicitly linked to dominant class interests. Our hope is that by calling attention to these agendas, we will all be challenged to work for potential transformations, most particularly through our teaching.

In her article, Hyatt considers the implications of the changing role that universities, particularly those located in cities, have come to play as engines for local economic development. Hyatt arrived at many of her insights through an ethnographic methods class she taught in 2003, in which students carried out research projects in the primarily African-American neighbourhood surrounding Temple University's main campus, located in North Central Philadelphia. Hyatt describes how her students' engagement with local residents allowed them to see how Temple's adoption of strategies for re-making and marketing the campus and community to attract upscale, predominantly white and middle-class students affected the local resident population. The resulting gentrification, a key feature of the neoliberal economic development model, was threatening to accelerate long-term trends towards displacing African-American community members. They discovered that actions taken by the university itself had helped to produce the very symptoms of decline that new redevelopment projects now purported to remedy.



Shear and Zontine, both currently postgraduate students in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, reflect on their own engaged research project, a departmental reading group intended to investigate and respond to changing conditions at the University. Drawing on the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, Shear and Zontine urge us to approach our studies using what Gibson-Graham call 'weak theory'. In their conceptualisation, 'weak theory' is a way of avoiding the totalising and often politically disabling effects of such 'strong' concepts as 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism', by seeing the world as instead inherently unstable and rife with contingencies and possibilities. As they put it, 'By exploring the unknown, rather than extending and exploring the known ... weak theory can be strong politics: it opens up social options that would be inaccessible to a theorist intent on eliminating surprise' (Gibson-Graham 2006: 205 n. 15: as cited by Shear and Zontine, this issue). Shear and Zontine document and analyse the struggles that the reading group faced in responding to rapidly changing conditions at their institution.

This emphasis on the role that global economic processes play in contouring American public education is taken up by Vincent Lyon-Callo in his discussion of how parents of primary and secondary school pupils and university students alike see their futures in the global economy as bound up with the need to emphasise individual achievement over collective action. Lyon-Callo's work draws on his own participation in these debates in his home state of Michigan, a state with an economy that has been decimated by the collapse of the U.S. car industry. Lyon-Callo shows how in reaction to a newly urgent sense of economic insecurity, parents and college students consistently embrace strategies that reinscribe the values of competition and consumerism despite a lack of evidence that these tactics will effectively counter the negative impacts of economic restructuring. He explains how this reaction 'makes sense' to the very people who have been most disadvantaged by economic restructuring, arguing for a kind of dialogic teaching and ethnographic practice as a route towards fostering alternative understandings among community members and university students.

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Lastly, John Clarke illustrates the concrete effects of modernisation and managerialism in British universities. Clark presents higher education as a governable system, configured through logics and practices of competition. These logics provide direction to university operations and academic practice, which can then be more easily managed and assessed in relation to external, strategic objectives. Following Shear and Zontine and Lyon-Callo, Clarke also looks for the fissures and contradictions in people's responses to these changes that might open up a space for, as he puts it, 'alternative ways of making communities'. Clarke describes his article as 'a sort of participant ethnography, reflecting the experience of working in, and talking about the higher education sector in the U.K.' Like the other contributors, Clarke's analysis is clearly rooted in the messiness of the everyday and commonplace, and he also sees in this messiness possibilities for resistance and for shaping a future that moves beyond a simple nostalgia for a romanticised past.

All of us see higher education as severely encumbered by the incursions of market logics and managerialism. We all agree that the increase in systems for oversight and surveillance – what Clarke (2005 and this issue) and Shore and Wright (1999), among others, have described as 'audit culture' – are discursively circumscribing academic practices. We are also troubled by how these changes move beyond commoditising logics. Specifically, we are concerned with the ways in which these new policies and practices are serving to bolster, to mask, and ultimately to amplify long-standing inequalities along axes of race and class. As Clarke, in his article in this issue, puts it: 'The image of the "academic community" ... shares the characteristic concealments of the discourse of community: rendering power, hierarchy, inequality and injustice invisible, or at least treating them as secondary and exogenous misfortunes'. In the U.S.A., the links between academic reforms and their consequences for reinvigorating white privilege are unmistakable and alarming and beg to be interrogated as features that are ineluctably, if covertly, bound to market mechanisms. In her forthcoming article, Dana-Ain Davis will deal explicitly with the racialised and racist agendas that have been facilitated by neoliberal reforms.



Taken together, these articles begin to situate schools and universities as increasingly important sites of hegemonic struggle. As capital restructures, education becomes a critical front in the war to reestablish the economic dominance of the West and to shore up elite interests more broadly. Educational policies and practices are instrumentalised as technologies intended to produce particular kinds of knowledge and particular sorts of student and faculty workers, who are to contribute to the mission of furthering success in a competitive global marketplace. These manoeuvres are leading to the deterioration of labour conditions in academia: are increasing costs through relying on the private sector to deliver certain services; and are restricting access to universities for students (and faculty) who do not enjoy the privileges conferred by middle-class status and whiteness.

This Special Issue not only documents and analyses these shifts but also proposes new political strategies and pedagogical approaches that disrupt these processes and help us begin to imagine alternative possibilities. We have been honoured to serve as the guest editors of this Special Issue and we thank the other authors for their contributions. Most particularly, we thank journal editors Sue Wright and Penny Welch for support and guidance that went well beyond the call of duty, and that demonstrated to us the fact that the values of collegiality and cooperation are still alive and well in academic settings despite all of the challenges discussed in this introduction and in the following articles.

## References

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