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Teaching in the Corporate University: Assessment as a Labor Issue

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When, in response to a call for papers for the 2008 conference of the Modern Language Association, I began to formulate an argument concerning the relationship between assessment and the corporate university, I assumed that writing such an analysis would be (and I hope I will be forgiven this admittedly masculinist simile) like “shooting fish in a barrel.” My intention was in fact to concentrate on something less obvious: assessment as a labor issue, and the ways the drive toward assessment is both explicitly and implicitly an attack on academic freedom. Imagine my surprise, then, when I read the spring 2008 President’s Column of the *MLA Newsletter*, with its defense of assessment (Graff 2008).

Since Gerald Graff’s call for the faculty to embrace assessment initiatives, others have followed, one of the most recent examples being Stanley N. Katz’s “Beyond Crude Measurement and Consumerism” (2010). Rather than review the growing body of literature on assessment, in this essay, I analyze these two defenses of assessment as symptomatic of

neoliberal accommodations to the corporate university. I suggest that such accommodations are “reactionary” in the precise sense that they implicitly reject one of the premises of a great deal of work in the humanities of the last forty years or so: that the goal of a liberal arts education is to teach students that “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (Adorno 1978, 39). That is, what a liberal arts education ideally provides that no amount of vocational training can is an interrogation of the history and historicity of knowledge itself, and a fostering of the life-long attempt to interrogate, understand, and be unsettled by the limitations of one’s own thinking. It assumes that the object of education is not a set of contents or even a skill but rather a praxis that cannot be measured by any test.

The goal of measuring learning outcomes contradicts the very premise of a liberal arts education in that it grants to someone or something outside the student the authority to determine what constitutes genuine learning. For ultimately what an education in the humanities in particular should foster and cultivate is a relationship of the self to itself—what we might call a relation of critical interiority. Outcome assessment is potentially more disabling than one of the current ways we have of measuring student learning—the grade—as it risks nominating as a failure not only a single paper or an exam but a person or even group of people, whether they be teachers or students. The obligation to develop outcome assessments is an attack on academic freedom—both the teacher’s and the student’s—and a clear attempt to further discipline faculty members who resist the model of the corporate university.

To illustrate just some of the specific labor issues involved in assessment, I will later offer the example of my own university’s attempts to implement assessment initiatives. In defenses of assessment like Graff’s and Katz’s, there is both a tendency to treat assessment as if it were an isolated “local” phenomenon and a tacit refusal to locate it within a series of recent attempts by the corporate university and its allies to direct and control faculty labor and undermine academic freedom. In an effort to provide some of the enabling context of assessment, then, I will also refer briefly to other recent administrative initiatives at my university.

If our experience is in any way emblematic, it suggests that the latest global recession in the

capitalist cycle of “boom and bust” provided only a temporary distraction from the issue of assessment. As the liberal state scrambles to cope with the contradictions of capitalism and find a scapegoat to blame for the collapse of US economic hegemony, calls for “greater accountability” on the part of universities will increase as economic support for higher education dwindles; given the Republican electoral gains this past November, the “politics of punishment” will only continue. My argument is that what is ultimately at stake in the assessment debates is the role of the humanities in the increasingly corporatized university and our abilities as individual faculty members to sustain, through some measure of control over our own labor, the humanities as a praxis of critique.

To summarize my position concerning assessment: the corporate university by definition strives to take up a role conducive to capitalism (Readings 1997). To that end, it attempts to guarantee its graduates jobs and to reformulate its teaching mission in light of this guarantee. In developing assessment outcomes, programs are being encouraged to treat employment in particular as evidence of learning. The academic freedom of individual faculty members is eroded by the imperative to reshape course content in light of the demands of the job market. Simultaneously, the principals of shared governance are compromised when administrators play too great a part in controlling course content, as, in their roles as corporate fund-raisers, their positions in the academic division of labor—and thus, their interests—are sometimes at odds with those of faculty members.

“Teaching to the job market” is a familiar characteristic of the corporate university (Champagne 2007; Schwartz 2008). What is new, however, is the tacit acceptance of this understanding of teaching by humanities accrediting agencies, professional organizations, and some faculty members. Ignoring the humanities’ historic role of critique, champions of assessment often implicitly embrace neoliberalist corporate rhetoric, arguing that self-regulation is more economically and politically advantageous than government intervention (Wells 2008; Graff 2008; Katz 2010).

Meanwhile, the state increasingly scapegoats the university, infantilizing students as if they

have no agency whatsoever in the learning process and deflecting criticism of social inequities by blaming the university for everything from the failed economic policies of Washington to the fact that students must increasingly work several jobs while going to school (Schwartz 2008). At the same time, the state further proletarianizes the professoriate, subjecting it to increasing surveillance and regulating in greater detail how its work time is spent. Instructors who refuse to imagine learning as equivalent to securing a job now face being dismissed not simply as insufficiently accountable to the corporate university and its allies but as “bad” teachers.

In his spring 2008 column, Gerald Graff dismisses Michael Bennett’s critique of assessment as “remarkably complacent in its suggestion that nothing in our house needs to change” (4). This gross misreading of Bennett—who in fact argues for *numerous* ways in which “our house” needs to change, several of which Graff himself cites—is made possible by Graff’s faith in bourgeois humanism. Specifically, Graff calls us to be “team players who collaborate with our colleagues to produce a genuine program” (3). In Graff’s account, “our house” is composed of happy family members who all share the same vision of what an education in English entails. Any ideological conflicts can apparently be solved by reminding recalcitrant colleagues that it is our “obligation to correlate and align our courses to prevent students from being bombarded with confusing disjunctions and mixed messages” (3).

Graff’s (2008, 3) apology for assessment is in fact rife with contradictions. He critiques “the romanticized picture of teaching as virtuoso performance by soloists,” for example, without recognizing the way his own call for assessment implicitly romanticizes the role of the teacher as a savior who somehow manages to overcome in his students the alienating effects of late capitalism and gives them the necessary tools to succeed in its illusory meritocracy. Apparently no longer in favor of “teaching the conflicts,” Graff calls for a kind of teaching that would magically make coherent on a programmatic level the contradictions of capitalism. Of course, Graff undoubtedly sees the “confusing disjunctions and mixed messages” (3) to which our students are exposed not as the product of current class struggles and power imbalances but rather as a result of “our own pedagogical and curricular practices” (4). Bourgeois humanism

by definition understands contradiction, incoherence, and confusion as resulting from “our” failure to do our duty rather than from structural contradictions within the capitalist economy.

Such a defense of assessment is corporatist in that it implicitly assumes that administrators should take on the role of “managing” their faculty so as to keep any messy disagreements concerning what ought to be taught and how behind closed doors and out of the classroom. During my tenure as chair of an English program, then, I was somehow supposed to transform my discipline from a site of struggle, disagreement, and contestation to a coherent, agreed upon and measurable set of learning outcomes. Apparently, Graff himself is in the throes of a return to the “Great-Teacher Fetish” he critiques – this time, and significantly in light of the corporatization of the university, in the guise of the great administrator. That the then president of the MLA could offer such an apology for assessment is ample evidence that the corporate university has colonized the humanities.

Nearly everyone is “for” assessment, just as nearly everyone is “for” world peace, human decency, and an end to tooth decay. Only a fossil or layabout would suggest that it was not valuable for the faculty to review periodically the requirements of the major, find a way of determining if in fact the recommended sequence of courses is producing the results we seek, and adjusting course content, pedagogy, and program offerings accordingly. But as humanists we know that the production of knowledge about institutions like the university is never disinterested. The fact that the *requirement* to develop “measurable” learning outcomes is coming not from faculty members but from administrators and accrediting bodies should alert us to certain conflicts of interest we ignore at our peril.

Graff (2008, 4) offers the following rebuttal to the criticism that the call for learning outcomes assessment is recent, politically motivated, and driven by conservatives: “The truth is that assessment originated from within the educational community itself in the 1990s, well before conservative efforts to co-opt it. I recall attending my first assessment conference in 1991 and noting the considerable buzz about assessment at meetings of organizations like the American Association of Colleges and Universities [*sic*].” This rejoinder ignores that

neoliberalism flourished under the presidencies of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. In other words, Graff does not seem to recognize that Clintonian centrism could from a Marxist perspective be described precisely as “a [recent] conservative dodge designed to distract everyone from structural inequality.” President Barack Obama’s recent capitulation to Republican demands to extend tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans reminds us that, Tea Party delusions to the contrary, the current president is not and has never been a socialist but is rather a centrist like Clinton. Also absent from Graff’s analysis is any mention of the fact that assessment projects like the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)’s VALUE-Plus are funded by the US Department of Education. (Clearly it is no coincidence that the home page of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education features a “No Child Left Behind” logo.) Past supporters of AAC&U assessment initiatives include the Carnegie Corporation (for the program titled “Greater Expectations Project on Accreditation and Assessment”) and the State Farm Companies Foundation (for “VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education”). Whether such corporately funded projects can accurately be said to originate “from within the educational community itself” is of course a matter of debate.

Additionally, it is significant that models for assessment are often culled from disciplines that are accredited by professional organizations, disciplines like business that have an obvious stake in denying their role in maintaining what Bennett terms “an inequitable and violent socioeconomic system” (cited in Graff 2008, 4). And that assessment is first and foremost a labor issue is ignored by apologists such as Graff (2008), Susan Wells (2008), Katz (2010), and Alan Meyers (2008), as it is increasingly in their interests as administrators to extract more labor from the faculty and staff they oversee—and at no additional cost to the corporate university.

Katz’s recent defense of assessment is arguably more subtle than Graff’s, no doubt in part because of the kind of objections faculty members, in particular, have raised in the intervening years. In some respects, however, it is even more contradictory. For example, Katz grants that there is merit to the charge that some calls for assessment come from politicians and

bureaucrats who promote the corporatist model of student-as-consumer. Yet he largely dismisses this fact with the claim that “this sort of crude consumerism [in which cost is a major criterion in the assessment by students and their parents of the value of an education] is not in itself a threat to the autonomy of individual colleges or their faculty.” Perhaps not at Katz’s home institution or for someone of his rank. But in fact many faculty members currently find themselves in the position of having to justify the “value” their courses “add” to their students’ educational experiences—if not to students or parents directly, then to administrators. Classes with low enrollments or those in specialized areas of research are currently trivialized by administrators as “boutique” courses, despite the fact that, at least at my institution, any new course proposal undergoes an extensive and multileveled faculty review of content prior to adoption and thus can be assumed to have been judged valuable by the people in the best position to know. Professors who want to offer courses in emerging disciplines or courses that challenge students’ expectations do in fact have to spend part of their work time “drumming up business,” given that apparently neither students nor some administrators recognize the possibilities for learning such courses may present. Not coincidentally, the charge of being a “boutique” course is lodged primarily against courses in the humanities, as external accrediting bodies ensure that courses such as “Supply Chain Management” or “Applied Computational Fluid Dynamics” are granted de facto legitimacy. At the same time that it trumpets global initiatives, the corporate university guts or slashes altogether traditional foreign language departments. Following the logic of the market, Chinese and Arabic, while clearly worthy of study, today *take the place* of French and Italian, administrators apparently concluding that the purpose of learning a foreign language is to conduct either business or espionage. If calls for the development of measurable learning outcomes were accompanied by promises of resources allocated to curricular innovation, faculty members might be more willing to believe administrators when the latter insist that the goal of assessment really is to improve students’ educational experiences. But the fact that the clamor for assessment coincides with the “downsizing” of the humanities in particular suggests that what is at stake is not the

improvement of teaching and learning but rather justification for eliminating whole disciplines deemed irrelevant to the customers of the corporate university.

Contrary to Katz's claims, student demands around questions of cost in particular today undermine in any number of ways standards, faculty autonomy, and academic freedom. Despite my university's own stated policies, there is no mechanism, for example, to stop those students who simply wish to get college "over with" as quickly as possible from registering for more than one intensive summer course simultaneously. It is no surprise, then, that customers who spend six hours a summer day in class chafe at the idea that they might actually have to do something as inconvenient as homework. (The same resistance to doing any work whatsoever outside of class is true of the increasing number of students who register each term for more credits than they can realistically manage.) And in light of recent student demand, some universities have begun to offer half-semester intensive classes to serve students who realize midterm that they are failing a course but cannot withdraw from it without dropping below the twelve credits required to retain full-time status (and financial aid). Faculty members who try to maintain some sort of academic standards in these minicourses risk both low course enrollments (with resulting cancellations) and negative student evaluations. Clearly, Katz's suggestion that the "comparison shopping" model of assessment poses little threat to academic freedom and autonomy does not square with the experience of those of us currently teaching in the corporate university.

Acknowledging the dangers of crude measures of assessment like the number of jobs secured by graduates, Katz is particularly interested in assessment instruments that measure "the entirety of students' collegiate learning." He cites in particular the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which "attempts to measure critical thinking, analytical reasoning, written communication, and problem solving through the use of 'performance tasks' and 'analytical writing tasks,'" a description that suggests (at least to me) that this new test is a dressed-up version of the Graduate Records Exam (Katz 2010). (On the CLA, see "CLA: Return to Learning" 2011d.) The CLA is a project of the Council for Aid to Education (CAE), a nonprofit

organization that, according to its website, was “initially established in 1952 to advance corporate support of education and to conduct policy research on higher education” (CAE 2011a). Today it receives funds from major private foundations, including Johnson and Johnson and the Carnegie Corporation. A virtual poster child for Corporate U, its board is composed chiefly of university presidents and business executives from companies such as Johnson and Johnson, the RAND Corporation, and Citigroup (CAE 2011c). On a web page devoted to its history, the CEA (2011b) reminds us of these words of one of its founding members, Alfred P. Sloane Jr., former chairman of General Motors: “When the annals of our time are recorded, it will most likely be found that the two greatest contributions of our time have been the U.S. university and the U.S. corporation; both mighty forces, both uniquely American. If these two forces can go forward together in understanding and cooperation, there is perhaps no problem beyond their joint power for resolution.”

While Katz (2010) acknowledges that the “new instruments for institution-wide student outcome assessment” like the CLA are expensive, he does not linger over how the market might shape these new instruments and the successes and failures they allegedly measure. In characteristic neoliberal fashion, we are invited to forget that capitalist production is based on profit and not, say, human need; as a result of this amnesia, we fail to interrogate whose financial interests will benefit from the scramble to develop these new learning assessment tools.

Were his faith in empiricism not sufficient to give one pause, one might still wonder at Katz’s apparent casual dismissal of some forty years of work in the humanities around the problematic of what precisely constitutes knowledge. Specifically, Katz (2010) calls for a form of assessment that goes beyond even the individual discipline to what he calls “the entire range of [students’] learning. Simply put, we should try to learn what the students know that they did not know when they entered college—and what they can do, intellectually, that they could not do when they completed high school.” Such an account of learning, whatever its claims to the contrary, is reductive in that it suggests that knowledge is a set of contents and skills that can be

measured empirically—as if in fact no serious intellectual debate has ever occurred around, for example, the conflicting ways different disciplines construct their objects of study, or the possible ways what counts as knowledge might be gendered, or the history of the concept of the true.

Perhaps most troubling of all is the utter naiveté—or perhaps willful forgetting—with which Katz and Graff approach the question of what it means to learn, a question to which the intellectual labor of teaching requires us to return again and again for the rest of our careers as teachers. It is highly ironic that writers who would pose critical thinking as the outcome of education cannot seem to think critically about the relationship between power and knowledge, a relationship that critical theorists have been interrogating since at least the end of the Second World War. The critique of instrumental reason; the insight that “there is never interpretation, understanding, and then knowledge where there is no interest” (Said 1997, 165); the suggestion that there is something named the unconscious that might interrupt our best efforts to produce knowledge of the social world in particular; the realization that any mode of cultural explanation necessarily silences alternative explanations, and that it is crucial to contemplate the itinerary of this silencing (Pierre Macherey, cited in Spivak 1990, 32); the proposition that truth, knowledge, and power are intertwined in ways we have an ethical obligation to try and understand (Foucault 1990); the claim that capitalist relations of exploitation overdetermine what counts as the truth; all of these admittedly complicated and contentious problematics are required to disappear when we take up the seemingly commonsense task of developing measurable learning outcomes. What measuring device exists that will tell us the degree to which a student has learned not to be at home in her home? What test will help us determine how sufficiently a student has interrogated the assumptions he carried with him to class that very first day?

I am not suggesting that it is impossible to evaluate student learning. I am suggesting that we already have careful, admittedly labor-intensive ways of doing so, ways that would be highly effective were we given sufficient resources to adopt them adequately. Like Katz, I

believe that “conscientious faculty members should feel an obligation to find out whether their students are learning what they are teaching—or learning anything at all.” But I don’t need another assessment tool to do this. I already have at least two that the corporate university, if it were seriously committed to the improvement of education, would allow me to use more effectively. One are the daily response papers I assign in many of my classes, papers that allow me to have an extended, semester-long conversation with my students about what they are reading, thinking about, and learning. Another is the daily classroom conversations I have with these same students. Nothing can take the place of this kind of human interaction, wherein what Gayatri Spivak (1992, 5) has called “the meditative tempo of the classroom” at least holds out the possibility for us to interrupt together, even if only temporarily, our established ways of understanding. Were the corporate university sincerely dedicated to improving student learning—and to granting me the academic freedom that is alleged to accompany tenure—it would place a cap on class size and reduce my course load so that I could devote more time and energy to the employment of these very effective, if decidedly low-tech, tools. And if students truly do not desire or are not emotionally ready to learn, there is very little we can do in response. But rather than make the difficult financial decisions that might allow for greater faculty-student interaction, the corporate university seeks instead more “efficient” ways to mask the gap between the ideals of democracy we espouse and the reality of economic exploitation we live.

As my reading of Katz demonstrates, “we” in the university have competing and sometimes contradictory understandings of what it means to teach and learn. Sometimes this is the result of our different disciplinary formations. But sometimes, even within a discipline, we may disagree passionately about what constitutes instruction and learning. I largely reject, for example, the model of teaching as the scheduled delivery of a specific quantity and type of information determined in advance of the course. Yes, I use a syllabus so that we all come to class prepared to discuss the same texts. But as a teacher of reading and writing, I do not usually arrive with a preordained sense of what we will specifically discuss that day, beyond a

particular text. Instead, I try whenever possible to work with my students toward a real conversation about what we have read, with all the detours, pauses, questions, and repetitions that dialogue usually entails. I realize, however, that my way is not the only way, and I have trouble imagining a form of assessment that might take into account the varied forms of instruction students receive today.

Furthermore, the university as it is currently organized does not make it possible for us to forge even a tenuous collective sense of what it is we think we are doing when we teach, either within or across disciplines. For this would require more work time than the corporate university is willing to provide compensation for. Instead, at best, we are offered three or so one-hour “workshops” per semester on such topics as dealing with plagiarism and managing new learning technologies. I am not in any way trivializing these resources. They are particularly helpful to those junior faculty members who did not have sufficient opportunities to teach in graduate school. But it seems a bit illogical to be offering workshops in how to teach in advance of any collective sense of what it means to teach. Without a sustained commitment of resources to the development of an ongoing dialogue on what constitutes teaching and learning, a commitment that includes paying people (or providing them release time from other job responsibilities) for their labor, assessment cannot but fail. In the best-case scenario, it will provide us with an extra meeting or two during which we begin to discuss what it is we think we are doing when we teach. In the current political climate, however, what it is more likely to produce is a further erosion of shared governance, academic freedom, and serious intellectual inquiry.

To turn now to assessment efforts at my home institution: as the Penn State Assessment of Student Learning home page tells us, “Beginning with the 2005 Self-Study for Middle States Accreditation, Penn State embarked on developing a systematic process for assessing student learning” (Penn State 2009). In fact, the sole recommendation made in a Middle States Accreditation Team Report dated April 30, 2005, was that “the institution should develop a comprehensive and integrated assessment plan drawing in large part on the various assessment

resources already in place” (Evaluation Team 2005, 15). Following the self-study, our provost established the Coordinating Committee on University Assessment. In March 2006, that committee released a draft of its plan. Whatever may have been occurring behind the scenes, it was not until December 2007 that some faculty members—including me in my role as chair of our local faculty council—received notice that, by March 15, 2008, we were to identify program goals and review the syllabi for a handful of our required courses. By May, we were to delineate approaches to measuring outcomes. By June 1, we were to “close the loop” by making improvements to our plans—plans that we clearly had no time to test. Finally, also by June 1, we were to communicate our assessment plans in our undergraduate bulletin. (Admittedly, these were target goals, though we did in fact post our assessment plans on the web in the fall of 2008.)

In other words, we were basically given a few months to develop our assessment strategies. Training for assessment consisted of an example handed out by one of our associate deans, a second handout, from the Coordinating Committee on University Assessment, and a college-wide two-hour workshop with an assessment expert who explained to us the difference between goals, objectives, and outcomes—a difference that everyone involved with assessment seems to have difficulty keeping straight, and one with which even an amateur deconstructionist might have a field day (Penn State 2009). Since the June deadline, the university has held at least two follow-up programs to help us implement our plans, and the university assessment web page contains useful links for instructors who have few qualms about jumping on the assessment bandwagon.

The specific organizational structure of Penn State requires some explanation, as it necessarily complicates our assessment efforts. Technically, we are “one university geographically dispersed.” But Penn State Erie, the Behrend College is, as its name suggests, a separate, stand-alone college within the Penn State system. We thus have our own chancellor, our own associate deans, and our own faculty council, as well as representatives to the larger Penn State University faculty senate. Most pertinent for this discussion is the fact that we have

our own English major that differs from the one offered at some of the other Penn State campuses. However, any course in the Penn State course bulletin can be offered by any campus of Penn State—we have a single and not multiple bulletins—and students taking lower-level courses (some of which fulfill general education requirements) in particular should find the content of these courses roughly the same across the whole system, should they decide to move to another campus.

What this means is that at least two separate assessment plans need to be formulated—one for the University Park or Center County (we never say “main”) campus’s English program and one for our own. However, those two majors also share many courses. Who is responsible for formulating assessment plans for these courses is still up in the air. Thus it is likely that, at least in some cases, the same course might have two different sets of goals, objectives, and outcomes—one formulated by the University Park faculty, the other by the faculty at Behrend. And, given the differences in the two majors, this is not *necessarily* a bad thing. But while representatives from Middle States visit some of the various campuses, Middle States does not accredit the individual colleges of Penn State but rather the university as a whole. What Middle States will make of the fact that the same course can have different outcomes, depending on where it is given, we can only guess. Additionally, for reasons I will explain shortly, the assessment effort is likely to be treated more seriously at Behrend than at University Park, as we do not have the luxury of considering ourselves “research” faculty members who can delegate to others the labor involved in assessment.

In terms of my own former position, I was a program chair—not a department head. While I handled such things as hiring and scheduling of faculty members, program development, and other issues related to the major, I had no real budgetary responsibilities. In compensation for my work, I received a course reduction and a slightly larger research budget than some of my colleagues at Behrend who are not program chairs. That made my typical teaching load 2/3. In the worst-case scenario, then, “one university geographically dispersed” means that someone in my position teaches more, is held to the same expectations in terms of research productivity,

and is paid less than his counterpart at the University Park campus. (I eventually resigned as program chair when I felt that I was being asked increasingly to take on work more appropriate to a department chair, and for no additional compensation.)

While our associate dean had in fact worked seriously, diligently, and in the interest of saving faculty time to produce a number of extremely helpful and reasonable sample learning outcomes for key courses (actually, if my understanding of the nomenclature is correct, he provided us with sample objectives rather than outcomes), the speed with which we were being asked to complete the project suggested to most faculty members that assessment was just another dog-and-pony show, like the one-credit first-year seminar, the multiple-choice English composition placement test we give our incoming students, and the numerically based student-satisfaction surveys we are required to distribute for every course—transparent attempts by the university to offer simple solutions to what are in fact complicated, contentious problems.

When I specifically asked, at a university-wide meeting of the English faculty, if any extra compensation would be forthcoming for the work involved in assessment, the presiding dean skillfully responded that we should not develop methods of assessment that would overly tax our already limited resources and time. As one might imagine, although we are one university geographically dispersed, our resources are not shared equally. For example, there is no such thing as an English Program staff at Behrend; rather, we share our staff with the whole of the School of the Humanities and Social Sciences. As a result, assessment efforts at our campus are likely to be conducted exclusively by members of the English faculty. At this same meeting, we were presented with a proposal that treated assessment primarily as a compiling of figures: how many students studied abroad, how many students were accepted into graduate programs, how many students found employment after graduation, and so forth. While such a plan seems to me to fly in the face of the real goals of assessment, even it would tax our resources, as no one currently is available to perform this work of compiling figures.

When I raised the issue of compensation again at a meeting of Behrend's Faculty Council, I was told by one of my colleagues in the business school that this was the kind of work I should

already be doing as program chair. I then reminded him that not all of us are compensated equally for our work: while business faculty members in particular nearly always make higher salaries than professors in the humanities, the disparity at my college between the two is excessive even in comparison to the other Penn State campuses—at which point my accountant friend deferred to our chancellor (who has since retired). (As a sidebar we might note that, while the corporate university justifies the disparity in salaries between, say, English and finance faculty members by arguing that, in order to retain the latter, we must compete with the private sector, when the market goes bust and jobs in business dry up, there is no suggestion that perhaps overinflated salaries should be frozen, let alone adjusted down. Clearly, we do not all share equally in the benefits of the good times; why then should we be expected to share equally in the bad?)

As a labor issue, assessment represents an instance of the further proletarianization of the professoriate. Both Alex Callinicos (1987) and John Frow (1995) have summarized debates in Marxism concerning the class position of what is variously called the professional managerial class, the knowledge class, professional service workers, or the “new middle class,” of which professors are members. Callinicos argues that different strata within the new middle class shade variously into the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Concerning university professors, Callinicos (1987, 35) writes, “Here is a group of wage-labourers who depend on the continuous sale of their labour-power. However, they are not subject to continuous surveillance and control at work. How they teach their courses, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, what they teach, is a matter for them to decide. Moreover, long vacations and short teaching hours . . . gives them plenty of time to pursue their own research” (32–33). It is, then, their status as “semi-autonomous employees” that positions university professors in contradictory class locations.

Interestingly, if Callinicos is correct, the more university professors are subject to surveillance and control, the more they share interests with the proletariat. Given a variety of factors, we increasingly find ourselves “closer” to the workers than to the owning class. These factors include the increasing policing of the content of our teaching and research by the Right;

the surveillance that accompanies the tenure process; mandatory posttenure reviews; the ease with which administrators can fire nontenured instructors; state-mandated forms of surveillance (working in a state-supported institution, I am obliged every semester to fill out a document indicating the actual hours per week I have worked; if these hours exceed some magic number dictated by our administration, I am required to reduce the reported numbers, regardless); anonymous student evaluations of one's teaching, their potential to be misused by disgruntled "customers," and the way this potential can negatively influence one's commitment to challenging students' ideas; a litigious culture that encourages students to threaten lawsuits when they are not happy with their grades; the increasing calls by both accrediting and government agencies for learning outcomes assessment and "accountability"; the push for service learning—an attempt to assist entrepreneurs by transferring the obligation to provide basic necessities from the (post-)welfare state to private individuals and charitable foundations, thus freeing up tax monies for corporate bailouts; and the increased burden on faculty members to recruit and retain students.

Given the fact that we sign contracts that are at best vague in outlining our specific job responsibilities—even our teaching loads are currently unspecified—we are often faced with a situation in which increased "service" obligations are placed on us at the discretion of administrators. These additional demands placed on our work time frequently occur midyear, as they did in the case of Penn State's assessment drive. Yet there is often no way to reflect this increased demand on our work time in our annual salary reviews. "Service" is to account for a certain percentage of one's work time. Once that percentage has been realized, there is nothing more to be done. Of course, what generally happens is that time is taken away from one's research and teaching. So much for Callinicos's fantasy of a faculty with "plenty of time to pursue their own research."

At Behrend, requests from faculty members to reevaluate the presumed distribution of their work time between research, teaching, and service in light of new demands like the development of assessment plans—so that those who had decided to take seriously the

challenges faced in developing and implementing such plans would not be penalized on their annual reviews for not making sufficient progress on research in particular—were flatly denied. We were told that we couldn't possibly renegotiate such matters in midyear—despite the fact that administrators were free to assign new job responsibilities to us at will. Apparently, the corporate university asks us simply to rely on the benevolence of administrators when it comes time to compensate us fairly for our work.

When I began my job as a new member of a nonunionized faculty, I was startled to discover that administrators could at any time whatsoever change the job responsibilities of faculty members—clearly demonstrating that faculty members have much less control over their own labor conditions than the myth of shared governance suggests. What particularly shocked me, however, was the lack of resistance on the part of the faculty members whose labor was being redirected. If in fact one's place in the division of labor is determined in part by the degree to which one is "free" to choose how to spend one's work time, the increasing service demands placed on faculty time necessarily shift the interests of faculty members in the direction of the working class, with the ideology of a "free" faculty obscuring our real working conditions.

Historically, this has always been the dilemma faced by the professional class fraction. As members of the "free" professions, we (mis)perceive our interests as "closer" to the owners' than the workers'. Or perhaps a better way of formulating this problem is that, at least since the early twentieth century, when laissez-faire capitalism began to give way to Taylorism, Fordism, and then post-Fordist capitalism, the role of the professional class fraction in mediating conflicts between owners and workers has increased. In particular historical moments, owners have been well aware of the role the intellectual class might play in the securing of hegemony and consensus, and so it is in their interest to promote the illusion that our interests are shared.

For example, as Vittoria de Grazia (1981) has argued, the Italian fascists used *dopolavoro* (after-work) recreation programs to provide Italy's emerging professional class fraction with cultural capital—in the form of, for example, performances of theater and opera. These goodies performed several functions simultaneously: taking the place of socialist after-work programs

destroyed by black-shirt squadrist violence, they substituted cultural capital for real wage increases, bound artists in particular to the regime, encouraged the “limited” consumption demanded by the wartime economy in particular, and created the illusion that the emerging class of bureaucrats—many of whom had been trained as intellectuals but were unable to find work equivalent to their education (as, say, university professors)—shared interests with the owning class. (To this end, fascists created different kinds of after-work recreation programs for different kinds of workers in an attempt to insure that the emerging professional class perceived its interests as different from, say, those who engaged in more physical forms of labor.) This example from history suggests the continuing necessity of analyzing the concrete ways owners of capital manipulate the professional class fraction, which is so heterogeneous—including at one end, for example, low-level bureaucratic positions, and at the other, lawyers—that we cannot theorize in general terms its position in the contemporary division of labor.

In thinking about the demands made upon our labor by assessment today, we also might want to consider the individual institutions where we are employed. Do the labor conditions at different kinds of schools—public, private, research, teaching, religiously affiliated, community-oriented, and so forth—position us differently in the division of labor to the extent that we are subject to varying levels of surveillance? Can we make pronouncements on the “good” of assessment efforts without taking such differences into consideration? Clearly, someone teaching in excess of three courses per semester is not as “free” to pursue her research—or develop and implement assessment measures—as someone with a one-course load and a coterie of graduate students to assist in grading. Labor-intensive courses such as composition, staffed predominantly by female instructors, clearly place different demands on instructors’ time than lecture courses (Watkins 1989). There is much lamentation in the 2008 ADE report on staffing of English courses about the development of a multitiered faculty roughly divided between those with, as Callinicos has it, “plenty of time to pursue their own research,” and those whose primary responsibility is teaching. Clearly, the latter have less time to devote to assessment. Yet the report notes—accurately, I think—how freezing permanent non-tenure-track faculty

members out of both research and assessment efforts threatens their careers, making it impossible for them to move into tenure-track positions, should they become available, and further fragments the class interests of the faculty as a whole.

A related question: Do some (and only some) universities “own” the means of production? (Callinicos [1987, 27] argues that “ownership” in this instance “does not mean legal title but *effective possession*,” which includes the ability to exercise power over the labor of others.) Those who argue “for” assessment sometimes admit that “if the goals and the rubrics for [assessment] have been worked out by faculty members, some other group of people can do ratings: teaching assistants, tutors in the writing center, undergraduate honors students” (Wells 2008, 15). Not all of us have the ability or desire to direct the labor of others in this way. This is particularly true of places like Behrend, where both tenured/tenure-track and non-tenure-track permanent English faculty members are expected to do research; teach everything from first-year composition, to general education, to upper-level courses for the major; design—and implement—assessment programs; serve on annual review and what have recently become virtually yearly job search committees; and so forth. As the ADE report notes, lately, we simply do not have enough tenured faculty members to cover all of the kinds of courses we are required to teach (ADE Ad Hoc Committee 2008, 10). The worst-case scenario is someone on a one-year contract asked to teach a required course for the English major. While such an instructor might be more than qualified to teach such a course, the practice of hiring one-year appointments to teach required courses clouds Graff’s rosy picture of faculty members creating a coherent curriculum simply by working together.

If we understand capitalism as a system riddled with contradictions, a system where one’s interests as a member of a class often do not coincide with one’s individual interests, then we have to recognize class as a historically shifting pattern of relationships produced by the structural conflicts of capitalism—conflicts that are necessarily ongoing. A reluctance to jump on the assessment bandwagon might signify an attempt to resist the further commodification of one’s labor rather than simply a failure of vision concerning the value of learning outcomes.

Our Coordinating Committee on University Assessment provided us with an “Example Assessment Plan Summary” dated January 17, 2008. This document identified three sample learning objectives: “Oral communication, Analyze and Interpret Data, Employment Relevant Field” (apparently none of the committee members are familiar with the concept of parallel structure). Some of my colleagues undoubtedly assumed I was being paranoid when I suggested that these sample objectives were hardly innocently chosen but rather made crystal clear the connection between assessment and Corporate U. But being the docile bodies that we are, the English faculty has begun the work of following through on our assessment plan. To this end, we have developed a rubric for our required senior thesis and are currently discussing the core courses, which include an introductory course in critical reading, a senior Shakespeare requirement, a course in the canon debates, a course in literary and cultural theory, and a course in issues of globalization and literature. Our current plan is to read sample final papers from the critical reading course and sample exams from the globalization course. As predicted, our plan is far more labor intensive than the one for our higher-paid colleagues at University Park. While they, too, will be evaluating their capstone projects, their other efforts will include tabulating the numbers of students who complete the honors program or career-related internships, as well as assessing the results of senior exit surveys. (How the latter will measure student learning rather than student satisfaction is currently unclear to me.) In the meantime, we are trying to come up with a collective sense of what our core courses should accomplish and their relationship to one another.

Given, however, that we are a small department with a heavy reliance on nontenured faculty members on one- to three-year contracts, it is difficult to forge any kind of meaningful and sustained collective vision. Additionally, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of sequenced courses when the sequencing is not enforceable. Very few Penn State English courses have prerequisites; as a result, students will often wait until their senior years to take the 200-level introduction to critical reading, for example.

At a recent English Program meeting in which I suggested that it was impossible to teach

postcolonial literature without an accompanying critique of capitalism, a colleague asked if I was requiring everyone who teaches the course to promote “a single ideology.” I jokingly reminded my colleague that Marxism was a science and not an ideology. In a situation where the majority of instructors are either graduate students or nonpermanent faculty members, it is relatively easy to impose the coherent vision Graff advocates. But in departments where, for example, associate professors are acting as chairs and thus supervising their senior colleagues—many of whom have opted, in light of recent economic events, to defer retirement—it is less easy to require attendance at meetings, let alone convince faculty members to undertake arduous programmatic revisions for which they will receive no additional compensation.

My attitude toward teaching has in fact always been strategic: I do not subscribe to a bogus sense of “balance”—as if students arrive in our class as blank slates or already having received “equal access” to all forms of knowledge—but seek instead to expose my students to ways of knowing they may not encounter in my colleagues’ classes (or outside the university). I assume that my colleagues are also offering our students their sincere sense of what it means to teach. Undoubtedly I disagree with some of their approaches. But I am not quite ready to impose my way of knowing on them. While this perhaps makes our program “incoherent” in the eyes of the assessment gurus, it ensures that students encounter a variety of perspectives.

In the seventeen years that I have been in my position as a member of the English faculty at Behrend, I have been trying to orchestrate a conversation concerning why we continue to retain our Shakespeare requirement—the sole single-author course all English students must take. Obviously, a variety of different cases can be presented for retaining this required course, and, before any decision can be made concerning whether or not we retain a requirement, we have to have some sense of the perhaps conflicting reasons we as a faculty might advocate for (or against) it. The difficulty of beginning—let alone sustaining—such a conversation reminds me that institutions are extremely resistant to change, and that this resistance cannot simply be written off as the result of a collective failure to live up to our obligations.

At Penn State, we now face a new assessment deadline. By the end of the school year, we

must demonstrate progress toward our assessment goals. At the same time, according to one of the requirements of our most recent strategic plans, we are in the process of developing transparent workload policies (at the individual college level) that we hope will provide people with more flexibility in determining how their job responsibilities will be divided between research, teaching, outreach, and service. It is possible that this might result in faculty members' exerting more control over our own work time. But given the current political climate, in which there is increasing pressure on faculty members, in the liberal arts in particular, to demonstrate their "worth" (and, given the downturn in the academic book market, fewer opportunities to publish scholarly monographs), there is some concern that people whose research agenda is deemed insufficiently productive will be "punished" with a higher teaching load.

One of the many contradictions of today's corporate university is that the concern over workload policy is expressed as a concern with equity, as in "It is not fair that some tenured faculty members do not do a sufficient amount of research and yet teach the same number of courses as those who do." What has not been much discussed, however, is either lowering anyone's teaching load as a reward for research, or the notion of equal pay for equal work. Clearly, the new workload policy may result in even less faculty autonomy. What constitutes "high" research productivity is potentially a moving target, and in the years I have been in my position, I have seen more rather than fewer demands placed on faculty members. A few years ago, for example, we started hearing increasingly that a sabbatical is "a privilege rather than a right," and promotion to full professor, formerly based on the totality of one's research career, now apparently has shifted to "What have you done for us lately?"

What was particularly disconcerting about the workload discussion was the fact that some administrators were planning on increasing people's teaching loads prior even to the development of the workload policy. This suggested that what constitutes research productivity had been decided in advance and that faculty consultation was perfunctory. Our new chancellor has made a concerted effort to seek out real faculty input, but the extent of his own autonomy within the Penn State system is yet to be determined.

Obviously, as the effect of material, structural imbalances, power differentials, and ideological struggles, our own interests as a faculty are divided and contradictory. In the corporate university, such divisions are masked by neoliberalism, which explicitly assumes that “the critical reading and thinking competencies we stand for” are indispensable to both “the workplace and democratic citizenship” (Graff 2008, 3). Were I free to construct my own learning outcomes, I would argue that a liberal education ought to require students to contemplate the ways the demands of the workplace and those of democracy are currently irreconcilable, the claims of the university to excellence notwithstanding. But these days, as I joked recently with my students, trying even to seriously discuss alternatives to capitalism is akin to contemplating Satan worship. In any case, given the current political climate, as well as the witch hunts conducted by the likes of David Horowitz, I fear that assessment will ultimately provide the corporate university with another alibi for silencing dissent, subjecting faculty members to increasing surveillance, and eroding faculty rights.

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