

Spring 2017

Composition in the Age of Austerity

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Recommended Citation

Buck, Rachel. "Composition in the Age of Austerity." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp. 84-88. doi:10.25148/clj.11.2.009138.

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Composition in the Age of Austerity

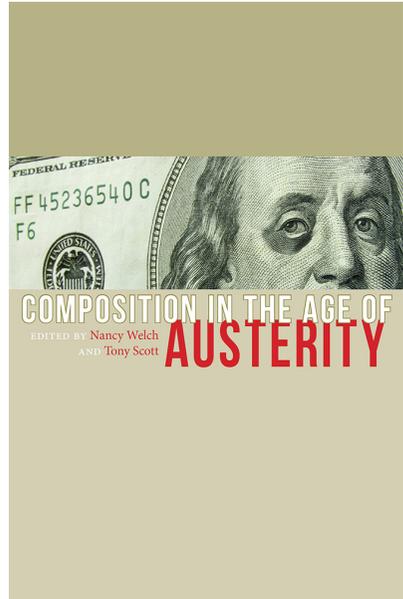
Nancy Welch and Tony Scott (Eds.)

Logan: Utah State UP, 2016. 235 pp.

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Austerity measures have affected many of us in education and non-profits. Corporate interests have influenced funding opportunities for nonprofits, textbook purchases, assessment issues, curricula, and labor and equity issues. Readers of the *Community Literacy Journal* will be drawn to different sections of this collection, as it is timely and brings together voices to show complex ways that global and national neoliberal formations impact local institutions.

Part I begins with Chris W. Gallagher's discussion of e-portfolios used for accreditation purposes in "Our Trojan Horse: Outcomes Assessment and the Resurrection of Competency-Based Education." Gallagher makes the claim that e-portfolios are part of the neoliberal agenda toward competency-based education (CBE) and that by accepting outcomes assessment, compositionists have "unknowingly invited CBE" (23). Gallagher is critical of private foundations that fund CBE such as the Bill and Linda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and Nellie Mae. One of the problems with CBE, as Gallagher states, is that "CBE today imagines writing not as a means of participating in social and civic contexts, but rather as a means of producing material to be evaluated" (29). This is contrasted with how Gallagher imagines writing classes with teachers as "expert shapers of educative experiences . . . who offer a kind and quality of experience—in courses and curricula, and in and through writing—that cannot be replicated or by-passed by vendors" (31). Gallagher ends by giving suggestions for Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) in assisting to get corporate interests out of education reform. Colleges should be places "where people gather to learn together" (32). Gallagher draws a harsh distinction between corporate interests and learning goals, but he does not define what "real" learning might look like or why the two ideas of learning and CBE are mutually exclusive. WPAs are often in a difficult position vying for funding, and may be wary of being called "complicit" in allowing CBE. But there are no quick fixes to educational reforms, and calling on educators and politicians to consider this is an important step.



Deborah Mutnick continues the assessment conversation in Chapter 2: “Confessions of an Assessment Fellow.” She is critical of government reform programs such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Obama’s Race to the Top and College Scorecard programs. Programs like these have “pitted students and parents against teachers in the name of educational equality and blamed underfunded, high poverty schools, particularly teachers, for academic failure” instead of focusing on fundamental societal issues of racism and poverty (37). For Mutnick, outcomes assessment reduces the “complex process of teaching and learning to a packaged product used to satisfy the promise of excellence, a floating signifier united to any concrete, tangible content, whose meaning we think we know but can never name” (42). As with Gallagher, the term ‘learning’ is used but not defined contextually. Mutnick claims that many assessments such as standardized tests and rubrics “rarely if at all correlate with what and how students learn” (39). Instead of these assessments, Mutnick would like us to imagine what an assessment would look like that emphasized “students’ well-being instead of relying on their performance on tests and rubrics . . .” (48).

In Chapter 3, Emily J. Isaacs discusses MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) in “First-Year Composition Course Redesigns: Pedagogical Innovation or Solution to the ‘Cost Disease?’” She analyzes four course redesigns in first-year composition sponsored by Carol Twigg’s non-profit National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT). She admits that Course Redesign as a movement has inspired compositionists’ best and worst work—pedagogical work inspired by technological possibilities, but also the work of cost-saving. She concludes through her analysis that redesign efforts include many variables, many of which are often overlooked in assessments, and states, “Beyond an increase in adjuncts and class size, what we see in the ‘redesign’ of composition is an untheorized and untested return to grammar instruction . . .” (60).

Marcelle M. Haddix and Brandi Williams end Part I with “Who’s Coming to the Composition Classroom?: K-12 Writing In and Outside the Context of Common Core State Standards” in which they compare the writing students are asked to do with CCSS and the writing in a local writing project for urban youth called Writing Our Lives. In their words, the participants in this program get to “interact with the academic writing genres in more authentic ways because they are being asked to produce their own self-sanctioned writing and connect it with their community and events that are important in their lives, as opposed to being assigned a topic by a third party and being asked to write in a manner that may not reflect the student as a writer, but more as a trained student” (69). One of the dangers of the CCSS is that students may think that a form of writing that is not sanctioned by the standards is not considered writing. Their identity as a writer may be formed by these specific standards.

The authors in this section are critical of both private and government funding that is based on outcomes assessments; however, they use undefined terms such as learning, genuine learning, and authentic experiences, but don’t unpack those definitions. Their arguments are complicated by their use of undefined terms, but they do bring up challenges about how to assess student learning and the purposes of writing.

Part II moves from funding within the college to funding challenges both inside and outside the college. Each author offers a different perspective and position within their respective organizations and therefore each offers a unique insight into how neoliberal policies impact their material realities and the ideological struggles they face daily. Tom Fox and Elyse Eidman-Aadahl discuss a complicated funding challenge in “The National Writing Project in the Age of Austerity.” Based on legislative measures that cut earmarks from the budget in 2011, the NWP’s budget went from \$25 million to \$0 leaving the organization to “reposition itself rhetorically in relation to funding opportunities, emphasizing, for instance, expertise in rural education, science writing, technology, or civic education” (83). Fox and Eidman-Aadahl discuss educator participation in nation-wide conversations, for instance using MOOCs and other maker events that thousands attend, but also discuss how a competition-focused culture creates ideological challenges when applying for grants.

Susan Naomi Bernstein continues this section with “Occupy Basic Writing: Pedagogy in the Wake of Austerity.” Because of a lack of funding, many Basic Writing programs have been cut at universities, and with that, many instructors’ positions. Bernstein discusses how her own professional identity was closely tied to Basic Writing and the loss of this identity along with programs. Her participation with Occupy Wall Street “offered the material reality of what happens when everyday people not only bear witness to suffering but also work together to attempt to ameliorate suffering” (97). Basic Writing programs are necessary, and she suggests a revised epistemology for Basic Writing based on the material realities of everyday life.

Tobi Jacobi writes “Austerity Behind Bars: The ‘Cost’ of Prison College Programs” making the claim that until “universities agree to divest corporate ties (to prison profiteers and predatory distance learning programs) and reinvest through committed college programs, the austere life that many experience behind bars and upon reentry will be unlikely to change” (109). Jacobi highlights several prison college programs and literacy initiatives to demonstrate how these programs have responded to the austerity crisis and to show the urgent need for these programs in prisons. Jacobi urges readers to “tactfully resist the urge to serve as pawns—willing or silent—of institutions beguiled by the promise of entrepreneurial survivalism” (116).

In “Buskerfest: The Struggle for Space in Public Rhetorical Education,” Mary Ann Cain discusses a service learning course in which she shows students “how public space can level hierarchical social relations and foster creative expression within and between diverse social groups, but also the challenges of partnering with local non-profits that are struggling financially” (121).

Nancy Welch discusses the lack of resources at her institution for the first-year writing program in “First-Year Writing and the Angels of Austerity: A Re-Domesticated Drama.” Within neoliberal culture, the “work of education is to be carried out by angels in austerity’s architecture, shepherding programs without monetary support and formal workload recognition” (137). Welch worries that this restructuring of first-year composition leads to the “increasingly widespread and naturalized expectation that writing programs can endure without provision, can endlessly adapt to terms of increasingly lean social reproduction” (138).

Many readers will be able to relate in some way to the experiences of the authors in this section, both in writing programs, in local non-profits, and instructors working with students of diverse populations. Each discusses the tensions of working in an environment where the consequences of financial struggles are a reality, but also show that funding is not simply a problem for universities. Neoliberal policies and privatization impact universities, but also the university's ties to public programs. Programs that connect the university with communities allow access to advanced education and address the needs of the public. But many authors also acknowledge the reality of working in a system run by neoliberal policies, and the tension that arises from trying to combat this mentality, while living in the system. There are no easy answers, but Jacobi urges readers to contribute to a "regime of collective care for all people" (117).

Jeanne Gunner opens Part III with ways that those in the system can dissent in "What Happens When Ideological Narratives Lose Their Force?" She begins with strong language for compositionists: "The neoliberal regime has imbued composition theories, pedagogies, and administration, inevitably implicating us all in complicity with corporate values, labor problems, and growing social inequality" (149). But she offers a sort of hope by telling readers that consent as resistance provides a way to fight *against* from *within*. For example, Sid Dobrin's *Postcomposition*, Jeff Rice's *The Rhetoric of Cool*, and the Educ-factory Collective's *Toward a Global Autonomous University*, all find ways to consent while also disrupting by offering alternative ways of thinking and potential new paths. Although Gunner's examples are aimed at a university audience, the idea that consent "can take a creatively disruptive form of complicity, and indirectly consenting to comply with an austerity agenda might open up a space for change" (154) can be a theoretical tool for many institutions and community members who often feel frustrated working *within* austerity measures. This discussion could continue with thoughts of how academics and community literacy practitioners might decide when they can or should *resist* and when they can or should *consent*. This seems a complicated part of Gunner's discussion as conditions will inevitably vary by location, but this approach offers an alternative to hegemonic narratives.

Anne Larson makes the claim in "Composition's Dead" that all levels of education are being "restructured according to capitalism's drive to consolidate power and wealth in the hands of a miniscule percentage of the population at the expense of everyone else" (163). She discusses specifically the labor exploitation in English Departments and questions claims that composition is a living field, claiming, "Composition in particular must stop perceiving itself as having a special, democratic role within the academy. It doesn't" (174). She calls for solidarity, and suggests the "radical step" of focusing energies outside the academy and suggests "collectively withholding teaching and administrative labor, forging coalitions with low-wage workers outside academia, and creating and supporting alternative educational spaces informed by democratic values" (173).

Eileen E. Schell continues the discussion of labor issues and the disparities between higher administration and contingent faculty members in "Austerity, Contingency, and Administrative Bloat: Writing Programs and Universities in an Age

of Feast and Famine.” She examines the rising administrative costs, precarious faculty ranks, and the rise of student debt. There is an urgency in her conclusion: If we do not have shared governance at our institutions, “we miss the opportunity to preserve what most of believe in despite rank and position: the right of faculty of all ranks to shape higher education curricula and innovative pedagogies and research, the right for higher education instructors to be adequately compensated and fairly treated, and the right for our students to access an affordable, high quality education” (189).

In “Beyond Marketability: Locating Teacher Agency in the Neoliberal University,” Shari Stenberg takes up the issue of which teachers count as a “good investment.” She discusses various teachers’ located agency in repurposing identity categories and shows how embodied locations can be “engaged to challenge, rather than affirm, fixed identity categories” (201).

Tony Scott concludes this section with “Animated by the Entrepreneurial Spirit: Austerity, Dispossession, and Composition’s Last Living Act.” In this chapter, Scott criticizes the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) conference call and theme of “Risk and Reward.” The conference call is one way that the spirit of entrepreneurialism contributes to the “field’s dissolution and full absorption into the ‘free’ market” (207). This “entrepreneurial turn” in academia includes tuition hikes, textbook company partnerships, curricular technologies, food service contractors, sports apparel companies, and other university schemes.

This collection is in no way exhaustive of the many issues that colleges and universities are facing, but it is a useful starting point in many ways. Economic problems exist on global, national, and local levels, but the way they impact local institutions varies. This collection offers insights for university educators and administrators, WPAs, and non-profit organizations, many of whom are in uniquely difficult decision-making positions. One notable absence in the collection was the mention of increasing numbers of international students at US institutions, many of whom pay full tuition and receive no financial aid. Although many of these issues are local and colleges and universities might discuss them differently, this collection offers valuable insight with regard to growing concerns that affect the material realities of faculty, students, non-profit staff, and administrators, much of which will resonate with *Community Literacy Journal* readers.