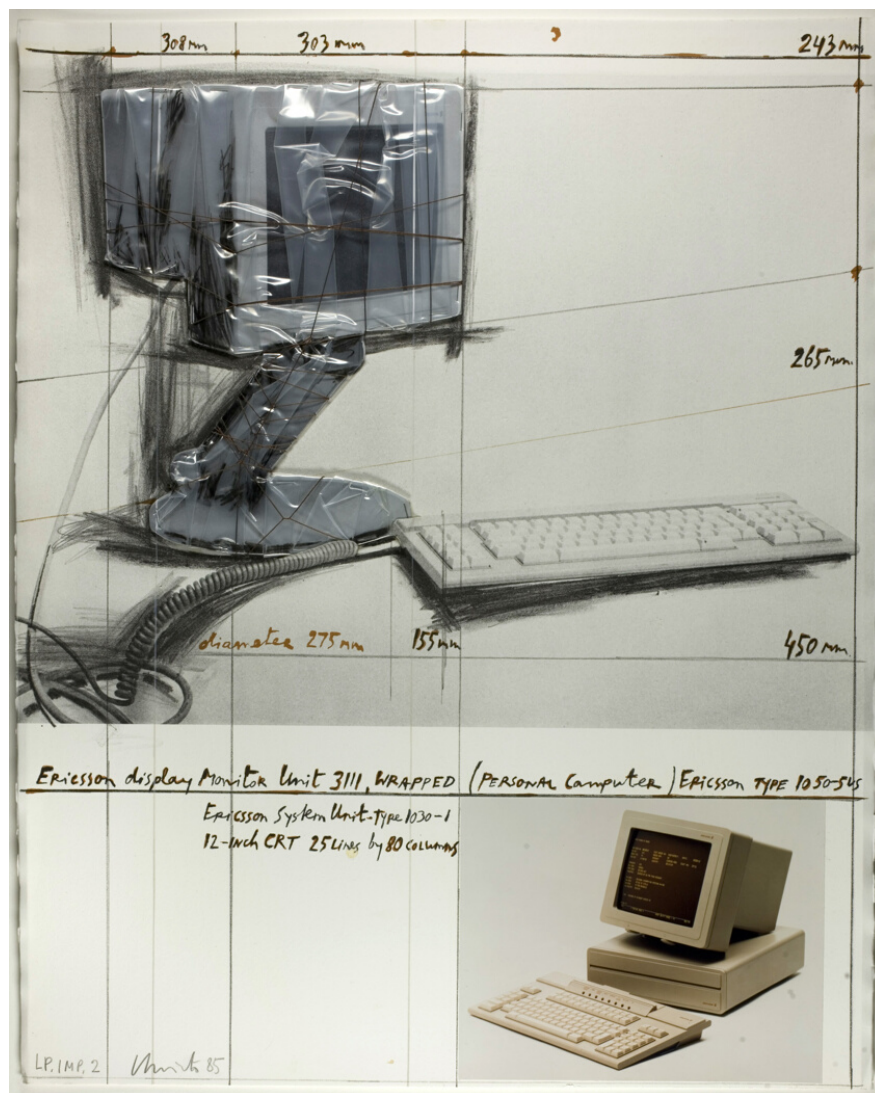# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Can There be a Feminist Pedagogy within the e-Learning Industrial Complex?

by Michael J. Illuzzi and Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem

ERICSSON DISPLAY MONITOR UNIT 3111, WRAPPED, PROJECT FOR PERSONAL COMPUTER. 1985 BY
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Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented, chaotic situation for almost everyone. The root of this chaos extends far beyond the pandemic's timeline or extent. On the one hand, the preexisting lack of protective socioeconomic structures, which Elora Chowdhury aptly describes as "the precarity of preexisting conditions," worsened the impact of the chaos for feminized, racialized, and minoritized communities (Chowdhury 2020). On the other hand, as Naomi Klein points out, cataclysmic changes like the COVID-19 pandemic can act as a catalyst for showering aids (such as no-strings-attached corporate bailouts) on the most privileged groups while ignoring the interests of working-class and minoritized communities. Nevertheless, the same moment of what Klein describes as "coronavirus capitalism" can inspire a wider recognition of the necessity of a functioning safety net and grassroots organizing for suspending evictions, defending workers' rights, and claiming otherwise seemingly impossible transformative changes (Klein 2020).

Utilizing Klein's framing of coronavirus capitalism, we argue that the chaos created by the pandemic is a carefully crafted one that capitalizes on a moment of catastrophic change. Powerful institutions in our societies use the pandemic to distract workers and advance questionable policies that would have been hard to implement at another time. The pandemic can also serve as a portal that opens unexpected scopes for developing praxes and pathways of resistance to achieve an egalitarian society. As Arundhati Roy evocatively says:

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. This is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it (Roy 2020).

In response to the chaos of the pandemic, neoliberal universities took a series of drastic measures, including, but not limited to, the emergency shifting to e-Learning, furloughing and laying off workers, downsizing, restructuring, and cutting budgets. Neoliberal universities have been actively trying to advance some of these initiatives for a long time (Maisuria and Helmes 2019; Chatterjee and Maira 2014; Taylor and Lahad 2018; Bulaitis 2020; Kezar et al. 2019). The pandemic-induced chaos gave these institutions a timely justification for implementing all the changes and cuts they had long tried to accomplish. These adjustments have substantially affected how feminist scholars and practitioners engage with feminist pedagogies in neoliberal universities.

According to Shrewsbury, "Feminist pedagogy is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes" (Shrewsbury 1987, 166). Feminist pedagogy has been widely recognized as a tool to challenge power relations and dominant ways of knowing, recognize the agential subject position of students, and subvert the growing corporatization of universities in an age of neoliberal globalization (Light et al. 2015; Crabtree et al. 2009; Feigenbaum 2007). Nevertheless, feminist pedagogy can lose its radical potential when it is treated as an "individualized practice that instructors can enact" and not supported by the institutional mechanisms of the university (Potvin and Dority 2022). The institutional mechanisms of neoliberal universities are antithetical to any critical pedagogy, including feminist pedagogy. A creative subversion would require a continuing commitment to grassroots political organizing, which goes beyond the extensive focus on individualized education (Busse et al. 2021).

One sector where the pandemic significantly affected feminist pedagogies and practices is e-Learning. Sangrà et al. describe e-Learning as "an approach to teaching and learning….that is based on the use of electronic media and devices as tools for improving access to training, communication and interaction" (Sangrà et al. 2012). Since the pandemic began in 2020, e-Learning became increasingly a norm rather than an exception. Feminist instructors recognize that switching to e-Learning is not a power-neutral act and that the digital learning space is not necessarily a neutral equalizer (Denial 2021). There has been an intense focus on how to nurture feminist pedagogy within the virtual classroom space (Daniel 2021). For example, FemTechNet, an activated network of feminist scholars, students, and artists working in the broad areas of Gender, Science, Art, and Technology Studies, published a list of things they have learned about digital learning through their international network as well as things feminist instructors should consider as they move to teach online (FemTechNet 2020). Some feminist instructors demonstrated how they could manifest bell hook's engaged pedagogy without physical bodies and classrooms. Pedagogical practices, such as using an opening/centering practice to settle into formal Zoom classes, checking in at the beginning and checking out at the end of Zoom classes to recognize that students and faculty are human beings with everyday struggles, establishing group norms, or incorporating co-teaching, guest speakers, and shared instructional leadership with students, can create a sense of community and foster solidarity online (Dhala and Johnson 2021).

Other feminist instructors went beyond the classroom interaction-focused feminist "best practices." They argued that the lines between the university and society got blurred, specifically during what LaToya Eaves evocatively calls "the twin pandemic" of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism. They called for a revolutionary feminist approach that goes beyond the boundaries of classroom interactions (Eaves 2021). Some recognized the need for organizing around structural factors shaping the experiences of students, staff, faculty, third-party contracted workers, and other workers of neoliberal universities. They called for an ethics of care, kindness, and compassion in e-

Learning environments to recognize that students were struggling with illness, food and housing insecurity, job loss, caregiving responsibilities, and various other difficulties. They worked with multiple university offices and local communities to ensure access to technology, food, and housing for students during the pandemic. Some appreciated the value of asynchronous learning, ungrading practices, audio- and video-based assignments instead of assignments solely based on written words, and organizing with workers who keep the university running (Denial 2021). Others acknowledged that feminist instructors themselves were overburdened workers in neoliberal universities, suffering from personal, professional, financial, and social losses and negotiating inequitable gendered and caregiving responsibilities in their everyday lives (Daniel 2021).

Against this backdrop, this article is inspired by the contributions of feminist practitioners who use insights from feminist pedagogies and negotiate the pandemic-induced chaos in neoliberal universities in myriad ways. It specifically focuses on the practice of feminist community engagement, which incorporates feminist praxis in the curriculum, and elaborates on how feminist praxis was affected by the pandemic. Drawing on our experience of incorporating feminist community engagement in the Honors curriculum of Lesley University – a small liberal arts college in Cambridge, Massachusetts – during the pandemic, we offer a conceptualization of the e-Learning industrial complex and how that engulfs feminist pedagogies and practices in neoliberal universities. We ask: can there be a feminist pedagogy in online classrooms when the online transition itself is part of a questionable collaboration between neoliberal universities and a billion-dollar e-Learning industry prioritizing profit over learning? What do transformative feminist pedagogies and praxes look like that can contest the e-Learning-industrial complex and create new pathways for navigating our ongoing state of precarity?

University-Community Engagement and its Decolonial Feminist Critiques

Universities have broadly packaged university-community engagement as "service learning" or "civic engagement" in North America. Many community-engaged programs have a problematic neoliberal hyperfocus on offering "professional skills" and "real-world exposure" to students while enhancing the university brand value and encouraging students to "do good" and "give back" without being critically reflective and reflexive about their power, privileges, and vulnerabilities. Institutionalized service-learning promotes an illusion of "reciprocity" and "mutual benefits" as the university and the community engage with each other. While doing so, it constructs the university as a site of privilege and the community as "unprivileged Others." The question of who the "we" is in the university and the community and whether that "we" includes not-so-privileged Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and working-class students remain unresolved (Dean 2019; Luhmann et al. 2019; Stoecker 2016; Kwon and Nguyen 2016; Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022).

Feminist, Indigenous, and decolonial critiques of university-community engagement question the quantifiable and outcome-oriented institutionalized service learning that trains students as model neoliberal citizens to sustain intersecting systems of oppression instead of challenging the oppressive regimes. They demonstrate the limitations of the requirement of completing a certain number of community engagement "hours" or "credits" as students use those hours or credits to boost their resumes and engage in "poverty tourism." Feminist, Indigenous, and decolonial critiques of university-community engagement also challenge the mainstream way to conduct service-learning projects in collaboration with apolitical nonprofit organizations that provide services and can't engage in political lobbying and advocacy due to requirements imposed by the International Revenue Service (IRS) (Dean 2019; Kwon and Nguyen 2016; Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022).

The Turn to e-Service Learning during the Pandemic

Due to the pandemic, many universities and other educational institutions issued COVID-19 guidelines for service-learning, restricted direct exposure to the community, encouraged distant engagements that relied on research, advocacy, or virtual communications, and provided resources on best practices for teaching courses involving digital service-learning components (University of Central Arkansas, n.d.; The Edward Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning; Albanesi et al., n.d.). An emerging trend of scholarships examines the possibilities, limitations, impacts, and best practices of what many have described as "e-Service learning" during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schmidt 2021; Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown 2022; Hassett 2021; Adkins-Jablonsky et al. 2021; Shek et al. 2022; Wong and Lau 2022; Huang 2022; Kehl et al. 2022). For example, scholars have argued that e-Service learning can offer communities access to cutting-edge research that takes place in universities. It can foster collaboration between students and community organizations in geographically distant places domestically and internationally (Krasny 2020). It can also create scopes for human-centric and innovative digital activism-oriented projects led by students, even when they live in physical isolation resulting from the pandemic or other reasons (Brooks 2020). Therefore, e-Service learning presents possibilities for re-imagining community-engaged learning and the connection between not only faculty and students but also between distant institutions and communities (Veyvoda Michelle A. and Van Cleave Thomas J. 2020).

Decolonial feminist critiques of e-Service learning, which go beyond examining impacts or outlining best practices and offer a systemic critical overview of e-Service learning during the pandemic, are yet to emerge. While the digital turn undeniably provides many possibilities, it is essential to situate it against what we conceptualize as the "e-Learning industrial complex" elsewhere. On the one hand, the emergency turn to e-Learning ensured the safety and security of students,

faculty, staff, and other university workers during the global pandemic. On the other hand, university administrators used this crisis to justify the neoliberal venture of turning to more and more online and hybrid classes, which many universities have been trying to implement for a long time. While we recognize the value of e-Service learning, we question e-Service learning's uncritical compliance with the e-Learning industrial complex and offer a critique from decolonial feminist perspectives (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

Conceptualizing the e-Learning Industrial Complex

We argue that an increasingly robust e-Learning industrial complex is taking hold in the U.S. higher education system. The idea of an industrial complex came from Dwight Eisenhower, who warned that the intertwined interests of the military and the war production industries were driving military procurement decisions and insulating themselves to the detriment of all other interests, sectors, and ideas (Gilmore 2016). We define the e-Learning industrial complex in higher education as the symbiotic relationship among university administrators, Board of Trustees, consultants, e-Learning technology and service providers, think tanks, foundations, government regulatory offices, and banks who pursue their interests in tailoring higher education to neo-liberal goals and objectives to the detriment of students, staff, faculty, and other workers - including third party contracted workers, parents, and other university community members.[1]

The e-Learning industrial complex stakeholders have a shared interest that is at odds with the interests of university community members. One reason for this is how the U.S. government helps fund higher education. Unlike many wealthy industrialized countries, the U.S. federal government does not directly fund higher education but instead supports education through government-backed loans. The National Defense Act first initiated a government-supported loan program for education in response to the U.S.S.R.'s launching of Sputnik in 1957. The Lyndon Johnson administration expanded the program in 1965 with guaranteed government-backed loans. Afterward, in the 1970s, the Nixon administration introduced a government-backed private company called Sallie Mae, providing loans to students. While trustees appointed partly by the Congress and the White House made up Sallie Mae's board, its shareholders (i.e., those who owned and profited from its operation) were banks and universities. The more loans banks and universities handed out to students, the more money they made (Abdelfatah and Arablouei 2022). The banks and universities are also interconnected with a host of other entities in the promotion of e-Learning, which involves shifting to a heavy focus on virtual learning and virtual student engagement, recruitment of highly paid administrators with the experience of transitioning to online learning, outsourcing of instructional services to low-cost third-party online course providers, and creating revenue-generating partnerships with other aligned nonprofit and for-profit entities.

The e-Learning industrial complex helps explain a paradox in the contemporary higher education sector. On the one hand, the costs of college tuition and fees from 2000-2021 have increased rapidly, much faster than inflation, primarily driven by a decline in state funding of public universities, but also - to a smaller extent - by a rise in the number of top-level higher-ed administrators (Hiltonsmith 2015). The increased costs put a tremendous extra burden on students and anyone who assumes the responsibility of paying tuition and fees. On the other hand, despite criticisms from tuition payers, as well as scholars of critical university studies, about the rising costs that have diverted resources away from the university's core academic and civic mission, the root causes of the decline of state funding have not been addressed. At the same time, the adoption of neoliberal practices, such as top-down leadership, destruction of faculty governance, emphasis on short-term balancing of budget over ensuring long-term retention of faculty, staff, and students and supporting intellectual growth and knowledge production, defunding of liberal arts and humanities-focused departments and programs, gradual abolishment of tenure-track and tenured faculty lines, increasing reliance on poorly compensated contingent faculty, and outsourcing jobs to sub-contractors with few protections for workers, continues unabated (Marcus 2021; Desierto and Maio 2020).

We argue that while the existing literature does a good job of diving deeper into the mechanics of the neoliberal transformation of higher education, there is a dearth of literature looking beyond the process and inquiring about what makes it extremely challenging for students, faculty, staff, workers, parents, and community members to build meaningful resistance against the neoliberal takeover, especially when this takeover hurts the quality of educational experience and working conditions in the long run. We also argue that one of the major challenges for community mobilization against neoliberal universities involves the insulation that the e-Learning industrial complex extends to the top-level administrators – and specifically to the Board of Trustees (BoT) decision-makers - from the consequences of their decisions. BoT members and top-level administrators, who are supposed to look out for the interests of students, faculty, staff, and other workers of neoliberal universities, often operate in alliance with various financial sector representatives whose interests are aligned with and part of the e-Learning industrial complex. In this way, various actors of the e-Learning industrial complex exist and operate within a symbiotic relationship with one another.

BoT members also spend relatively little time - 16 to 37 hours per quarter - on their tasks as Board members. Furthermore, the majority of that time is spent in administrative meetings rather than other tasks that would prepare them to bring accountability, such as "learning about industry disruptors, higher education governance and board leadership, and the drivers of student success" (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges 2020). Recent research on why trustees do not reign in college costs cites that BOT members function on a part-time basis and are primarily from outside academia.

As a result, this powerful body with a tremendous level of authority over decision-making mostly remains disconnected from on-campus operations and the needs and priorities of students, faculty, staff, and other workers. Their activities often prioritize the interests of financial stakeholders rather than promoting growth and staying accountable to students, faculty, staff, and other workers of neoliberal universities (Schalin 2021). BoT, in conjunction with upper-level university administrators, have a long history of shifting resources away from instruction and toward administration. As Paul Weinstein eloquently points out, this shift happened because of:

> ….greater student demand for services, the growing number of accreditors, government regulations, and the natural tendency for administrators to solve most problems with—you guessed it—more administrators….With no market or regulatory forces to contain the reckless spending behavior of colleges and universities, school presidents have focused on fundraising, not good management (Weinstein Jr. 2023).

The Normalization of the e-Learning Industrial Complex during the Pandemic[2]

As we argued elsewhere, e-Learning offers a viable option to a student population who cannot afford to be full-time and the "traditional" students who need flexible and self-paced learning opportunities (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020). During the academic year 2019-20, 51.8 percent of college students took at least one online course (Smalley 2021). With the advent of virtual collaboration and work-from-home culture, e-Learning has become more and more relevant to students' personal and professional needs. The global e-Learning market, worth USD 107 billion in 2015 and USD 299.67 billion in 2024, is forecasted to reach USD 842.64 billion by 2030 (McCue 2018; Grand View Research 2024). During the height of the pandemic, Christina Paxson, the President of Brown University, argued that the tuition-dependent "business model" of most colleges and universities in the United States would be severely disrupted if they had remained closed in the Fall of 2020. In Paxson's words, "It's not a question of whether institutions will be forced to permanently close, it's how many" (Paxson 2020). In a country where the idea of "tuition-free college" often faces severe backlashes, where the $1.6 trillion student-loan industry (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2023) has clear incentives to keep higher education unaffordable, and where universities tend to make up for the lost federal and state funding through tuition hikes, it was inevitable that colleges - especially the ones with lesser resources – would face an unprecedented financial crisis during a global pandemic.

The pandemic-induced chaos normalized the e-Learning market and collaboration with corporate profit-making ventures as a survival mechanism for struggling universities. DeVaney et al. frame this strategy as "risk mitigation" that, according to them, was projected to be helpful not just during the COVID-19 pandemic but also during a future calamity (DeVaney et al. 2020). This risk mitigation strategy offered a lucrative, easy fix for universities undergoing a financial crisis that only worsened in the later phases of the pandemic. Many struggling universities have increasingly moved toward the model of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), which Professor Gabriel Kahn aptly describes as "The Amazon of Higher Education" (Kahn 2014).

SNHU reverted from its near demise by rapidly expanding its online division, offering 200+ career-focused online degree programs. It unapologetically refers to its students as "customers" and claims to provide high-quality "customer service." SNHU pays as little as $2200 per 8-week undergraduate course and $2500 per 10-week graduate course to adjuncts who mostly deliver the content and have little control over designing the materials and learning experience (Southern New Hampshire University, n.d.; Kahn 2014). The growing popularity of the SNHU model during the pandemic offers strong incentives for abolishing full-time and tenure-track lines which is likely to worsen the existing situation. Forty years ago, 70 percent of all faculty members and academic employees were either tenured or on the tenure-track. In contrast, now 68 percent of faculty and academic employees hold positions that are not eligible for tenure, and 48 percent hold positions that are not even "contingent" (e.g., on enrollment, funding or some similar arrangements). Therefore, more than two-thirds of faculty members and academic employees are currently low-paid with little to no job security and benefits (American Federation of Teachers 2023).

The e-Learning Industrial Complex and Its Appropriation of the Social Justice Language of "Accessibility" and "Affordability"[3]

Neoliberal universities often justify the e-Learning industrial complex by exploiting the social justice language of making higher education "accessible" and "affordable" for all students (Zalaznick 2020; Sohail 2022; India Today 2019). These institutions appear to utilize scholarly studies that, perhaps inadvertently, create an opportunity for them to rationalize their neoliberal ventures using social justice vocabularies. For example, in a widely cited study, Kalantzis and Cope argue that universities should embrace e-Learning because post-secondary education needs to become cheaper and more efficient, not only by "reducing the need for expensive infrastructure" but also by being more flexible, making it "possible for all workers and all those with domestic caring responsibilities to access higher education without having to leave their communities, jobs and homes." (Kalantzis and Cope 2020, 52). Such an uncritical celebration of e-Learning has twofold ramifications. First, an exclusive hyper-focus on pedagogical factors detaches students from their social-economic-cultural-political context and assumes that pedagogical interventions alone are universally sufficient to create an inclusive and accessible learning experience

for all. Sandy Baum eloquently points out that underprepared and disadvantaged students often underperform and experience poor outcomes in e-Learning environments, as gaps in educational attainment across socioeconomic groups are even larger in online programs than in traditional coursework. They further argue that "online education has failed to improve affordability, frequently costs more, and does not produce a positive return on investment" (*Does Online Education Live Up to Its Promise? A Look at the Evidence* 2020). Second, the uncritical celebration of e-Learning inadvertently caters to the needs of neoliberal academic institutions, which collaborate with profit-driven e-Learning platforms, and offers these institutions the much-needed social justice vocabularies that eventually help perpetuate the e-Learning industrial complex. Therefore, the disconnect between the needs and priorities of students, staff, and faculty who experience the learning and the administrators, BoT, and consultants who make decisions regarding learning at neoliberal universities eventually results in continuous institutional compliance with the e-Learning industrial complex.

For example, students can take popular online courses on the "StraighterLine" web platform for as low as $79/course with a membership fee of $99/month.. More than 180 partner schools accept credits from StraighterLine (StraighterLine, n.d.-b). As we elaborated elsewhere, a quick search of the course catalog did not return any courses including keywords such as "women," "gender," or "sexuality." We reviewed the POLS101: American Government syllabus from StraighterLine (StraighterLine, n.d.-a). The syllabus borrows all course contents and lesson plans from the textbook "We the People: An Introduction to American Politics" published by McGraw Hill (2024). The course assessment methods rely heavily on the vast bank of multiple-choice and other test questions from the textbook. The lesson plans offer no opportunity to engage in direct or live intellectual exchanges with instructors. There is little scope for students to reflect critically on the digested information and participate in dialogues and debates with their peers (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

StraighterLine claims on its website that it offers "affordable, self-paced college courses – meaning you can take classes required for your degree without worrying about timelines or deadlines, and without breaking the bank" (StraighterLine, n.d.-c). As we argued elsewhere, online platforms like StraighterLine provide questionable quality of e-Learning to students in need in the name of ensuring "accessibility" and "affordability." In contrast, students with privileged backgrounds continue to pay exorbitant tuition fees and attend top-notch higher education offering more face-to-face interactions. The turn to e-Learning creates a tiered higher education system and exacerbates the growing inequities in the United States. Creating accessible and affordable higher education requires challenging coronavirus capitalism that has severely infected the U.S. higher education system. Band-aid solutions offered by the e-Learning industrial complex only aggravate the current crisis. Radical transformative measures and structural reforms, such as introducing a wealth tax that can pay for tuition-free public college education or abolishing student debts, are desperately needed to ensure access to higher education for everyone (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

Reflections from the Field: Feminist Community Engagement within the e-Learning Industrial Complex at a Small Liberal Arts College

Michael Illuzzi and Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem co-designed and co-taught a feminist community-engagement-focused Honors First Year Seminar titled "Doing Good or Looking Good: Decolonizing Community Engagement" at Lesley University from Fall 2019 to Fall 2021. As we described elsewhere, we did not just work as co-instructors but also collaborated as the Director and the Assistant Director of the critical community engagement-focused Honors program that we developed from scratch, as union organizers, and as mobilizers of a series of collective actions resisting the pandemic-induced austerity and budget cuts on campus. Despite our differences in gender, race, ethnicity, religion, academic training, and socio-cultural background, we continuously learned from each other's stories, acknowledged different power positions that we occupied or did not occupy, and unlearned our biases (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022, 105–6).

As we approached the Fall of 2020, during the height of the pandemic, we started planning our community engagement projects for our feminist community engagement-focused Honors First Year Seminar. We engaged in conversations with the grassroots community organizations with whom we had partnered for the semester: Sunrise Movement Boston, Matahari, Real Food Challenge, New England United for Justice, and an on-campus student-led group called Lesley Votes. When the pandemic hit, we were pleasantly surprised by how smoothly the community partners and students adjusted to online projects on the fly. For example, the group working with Sunrise Movement Boston focused on advocating for climate justice training, which was mindful of racialized, classed, and gendered experiences of communities, to be included in the first-year orientation. Their efforts included attending Zoom meetings with Lesley administrators, crafting an online petition that gathered more than 100 signatures, weekly Instagram posts, and other forms of digital outreach to students and the broader Lesley community. Students working with Real Food Challenge (RFC) gathered information on the university's purchasing practices to update RFC's database of big seafood distributors in an effort to make unethical fishing practices public. A student who took our First Year Seminar in the previous year and created the student group "Lesley Votes" worked as a Course Assistant and organized students to engage in a series of outreach actions that implemented what they described as "relational organizing" using digital means, having students do voter outreach to their contacts within the Lesley community. The students in the Matahari group

assisted the organization by taking notes at meetings and doing phone banking.

The inability to be in physical proximity to others amplified the difficulty of addressing core and structural causes of harm in short, semester-long, credit-bearing projects (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2022; Dean 2019; Stoecker 2016; Kwon and Nguyen 2016). Yet, students also thought, as noted in their evaluations, that the interactions with group members on their projects were among the few experiences that allowed them to form meaningful relationships. Furthermore, we realized that an unexpected benefit of the transition to online community engagement projects was that this relieved the extra burden on those students who were commuters and/or struggled to afford the cost or time to travel back and forth to the university – a problem that disproportionately affected students from marginalized and minoritized communities.

Despite the privilege we had as full-time faculty to navigate feminist pedagogies within our classroom and build relationships with partner community organizations, coronavirus capitalism affected our ability to pursue meaningful feminist community engagement and e-Learning. The university requested that the faculty union accept cuts to core faculty benefits as a cost-saving measure, which the union rejected. The President then announced a series of cost-saving measures, including the creation of a Voluntary Separation Incentive Program, the elimination of departmental budgetary discretion, the requirement of approval for every expenditure from upper-level administrators, and the elimination of course releases for program directors across the university. Fifty-five faculty and staff (9 faculty and 46 staff) left the university as part of the Voluntary Separation Incentive Plan, and a disproportionate number of those who had left were people of color. Most of the newly vacant positions remained unfilled for an extended period, increasing the workload for existing faculty and staff. Staff members reported feeling especially vulnerable because they were not unionized, unlike faculty. During the pandemic, all the sub-contracted staff for dining services, who were low-paid and had fewer benefits, had their employment terminated, as did most of the cleaning staff. The budgetary expenditures at Lesley University during the pandemic shed light on the consequences of insulating decision-makers from accountability and the prioritization of e-Learning. As cuts in staff, faculty, and other workers mentioned above took hold, the university simultaneously spent resources on building an e-Learning technological infrastructure. It upgraded its Learning Management System from standard Blackboard to Blackboard Ultra. It also purchased sophisticated Logitech Rally Bar conference cameras with built-in mics and speakers, as well as 65" monitors, for most classrooms to ensure that nearly every classroom across campus was hyflex-capable of integrating face-to-face and online learning. Furthermore, during the Summer of 2020, after the voluntary separation, adjunct and core faculty were invited to attend a "Summer Institute," where participants would be trained on implementing hyflex teaching in the classroom with a stipend of $1000/person for participation. While relatively few faculty ended up taking up the opportunity for the training, the existence of the new technology in every classroom and the lack of maintenance of older technologies meant that many faculty began using the new technology, whether or not they adopted a hyflex modality. The presence of the hyflex equipment in almost every classroom threatened the legal standard for a "past practice" as defined in the Collective Bargaining Agreement for both core and adjunct faculty. Past practice refers to any long-standing, frequent practice accepted and known by the union and management. With so many students requesting instructors to add them over Zoom via the monitors and conference cameras used for Hyflex and many faculty accepting these requests, it raised the prospect that hyflex was becoming a past practice that faculty might then have more difficulty in being legally able to refuse in the future.

Universities have used the crisis to reshape their structures and conform more to the neo-liberal principles of the e-Learning industrial complex. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lesley University closed the Office of Community Service after the office coordinator left. The Office of Community Service used to be one of the few radical spaces for transformative dialogues and campus organizing. It ran monthly teach-ins on grassroots community organizing on Zoom, a student-led event series called "Art for Change" that invited the community to "reflect upon, learn about, and create art" that could develop "our vision of liberation," and a Community Leadership Education and Action Program that created "a community of social justice-focused, action-oriented Lesley undergraduate and graduate students" among other programs ("Community Service, Lesley University," n.d.).

As Lesley University eliminated the Office of Community Service, we lost our much-needed logistical and political support for developing our feminist community engagement-focused course. The university appropriated the language of "community partnership," where partnerships mostly involved eliminating in-house offices and staff members and outsourcing the services to local nonprofits and corporations. The opening of the Riverside Outpatient Center on Lesley University's campus in 2023 illustrated the model of these new partnerships. During the pandemic, the university got rid of its in-house health center, leaving students without access to accessible and affordable healthcare for months. The university started generating revenue by renting its real estate to an independently operated, licensed behavioral health center that, in turn, offered Lesley students healthcare services that were paid for by their insurance.

Lesley University did not stop capitalizing on the pandemic-induced crisis to continue the neoliberal transition of the institution even when the pandemic subsided. In October 2023, it abruptly announced mid-semester that it would cut 20 percent of the core faculty. It disproportionately targeted faculty who taught liberal arts courses, who were senior and – as a result - more expensive, and who were union organizers. The average age of fired faculty was 60. Over half of the core faculty union stewards were fired. In addition, the Honors program we directed and co-directed, with its emphasis on

critical community engagement, was slated for "transformation." Michael Illuzzi, the Director of the Honors program, was fired. Nafisa Nipun Tanjeem – the Assistant Director – left Lesley University a year before, anticipating the upcoming massive budget cuts. As a result, the critical and feminist community engagement-based focus of the Honors program disappeared. In November 2023, massive staff cuts were enacted that further decimated student support services.

Lesley University's exhibition of the e-Learning industrial complex may be more extreme than other universities, but it reflects a much broader trend. The public higher education system in Wisconsin is a good example of the process across a whole range of higher education institutions in a state. Wisconsin administrators and legislators used the crisis exacerbated by the

pandemic to make massive austerity cuts. Neil Krauss notes how this took place:

In 2021, the Republican-controlled Wisconsin State Senate's Committee on Universities and Technical Colleges followed up with an excruciatingly detailed version of the Blueprint in the form of the Roth Report, which again assumed permanent austerity, and advocated significantly increasing online education while shrinking campuses by forcing them to specialize (Kraus 2024).

Many branch campuses were closed, and faculty and staff were cut while funding for online education was increased. The result was the growth of a two-tiered education system:

…online education within a narrowed curriculum will become understood as 'just how higher education is now' for working-class and lower-income students. Meanwhile, face-to-face education in a broad array of fields will always be available to the more privileged students who attend flagship universities and private schools (Kraus 2024).

Turning the Chaos of the Pandemic into a Portal: Organizing Resistance to the e-Learning Industrial Complex

At Lesley University, we had a history of grassroots organizing of faculty, staff, students, and community members against the e-Learning industrial complex. In December 2020, a top administrator verbally abused two faculty members in a faculty assembly meeting as they raised their concerns about the university's policy of transferring an unlimited number of credits from StraighterLine, Study.com, and other similar online platforms. The two faculty members filed a complaint to Human Resources (HR). To express solidarity with the two faculty fighting against a problematic manifestation of the e-Learning industrial complex, more than ten faculty members, who witnessed the interaction at the faculty assembly, reported the maltreatment of faculty by a top administrator to the Bias Education and Response Team (BERT). The faculty union and informal networks of faculty extended their support and created a community of care as the two faculty were navigating the HR investigation process. Their actions involved providing emotional support, issuing a statement that questioned the problematic construction of

PHOTO 1 AND 2: IN FALL 2023 AND SPRING 2024, LESLEY STUDENTS, ALUMNI, FACULTY, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS ORGANIZED A SERIES OF PROTESTS IN RESPONSE TO MASSIVE FACULTY AND PROGRAM CUTS. THESE PHOTOS ARE FROM ONE OF THOSE PROTESTS THAT STUDENT AND ALUMNI ORGANIZERS HELD DURING AN OPEN HOUSE FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS ON OCTOBER 15, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT: IAN DICKERMAN.

the call for "civility" by the top administration and analyzed the racial, gender, and power dynamics in the exchange between the two faculty members and the top administrator during faculty assembly, and collective strategizing for the next steps. However, this kind of solidarity building among faculty and the larger community became more and more difficult as campus leaders started to hold most of the academic and service-related meetings online, and fewer faculty had face-to-face interactions with each other.

When the university community returned to campus after being online for over a year, the prioritization of e-Learning created significant disruptions. As we mentioned before, the university made it a priority to invest in developing and upgrading the e-Learning structures. However, the material infrastructure that nurtures students and the larger community fell apart. After students returned to campus in the Fall of 2021, they found out that some dorms lacked clean drinking water, laundry facilities, and adequate heat, and had leaks in ceilings. Some campuses had insufficient hours for dining services, and the campus food service served spoiled or expired food. More than 100 Lesley University students and a handful of faculty members gathered to protest the lack of progress on fixing the infrastructure. Their protest was a glowing example of how a sophisticated e-Learning infrastructure is inadequate for sustaining a care ethic and economy for the university community. The protests of students and faculty resisting the failing physical infrastructure and the lack of shared governance went on through Fall 2022 and Spring 2023. In Spring 2023, the faculty voted overwhelmingly for the second time that they had no confidence in the President of Lesley University and the Board of Trustees (Fox et al. 2023). In Spring 2024, the Lesley President received a third vote of no confidence from the University's faculty assembly after mass-firing of faculty and massive program cuts (Giordano 2024). The President was still in charge until the publication of this article.

Some student organizers who participated in a series of protests at Lesley University were students in our feminist community engagement-focused Honors First Year Seminar, where they learned about intersecting systems of oppression and the significance of grassroots community organizing. As their past instructors, we had the invaluable privilege of observing how some of our students turned out to be dedicated student activists and community organizers whose work went beyond the hour- and semester-restricted and credit-bearing feminist community engagement projects. They took the spirit, ethics, and politics of decolonial feminist grassroots organizing from the classroom to everyday grounded struggles impacting the lives of their community members.

Conclusion

We would like to emphasize that resisting the e-Learning industrial complex is different from resisting e-Learning. E-Learning can offer access to higher education to people with restricted personal or work schedules, people with disability, single parents, and many others who need flexible and self-paced learning opportunities. The e-Learning industrial complex appropriates the social justice language of "accessibility" and "affordability," capitalizes on the particular need for e-Learning specifically for vulnerable communities, and turns e-Learning into a profit-making venture for neoliberal universities and the e-Learning industry, sidestepping the need for transformative learning for students and ensuring sustainable working conditions for faculty, staff, and other workers.

In response to the initial questions we raised at the beginning of this article, we argue that instructors should not confine feminist pedagogy to face-to-face or virtual classrooms. Feminist pedagogy is about resisting the principles of neoliberal capitalism, challenging hierarchies, and nurturing care ethics and care economies. As such, we need to zoom out from the classroom, as the focus on it is too narrow and individualistic. Efforts to incorporate feminist pedagogies in an e-Learning environment remain incomplete without examining the larger institutional structures against which feminist pedagogies and everyone involved are situated.

We propose a conceptualization of the e-Learning industrial complex and show how the chaos created by the pandemic incentivizes struggling universities to succumb to the e-Learning industrial complex as an easy "fix" for the ongoing budgetary crisis. Drawing on our example of incorporating feminist community engagement in the Honors curriculum of Lesley University, we demonstrate that the turn to e-Learning, on the one hand, was a "success" given that our community partners could engage our students in some meaningful community organizing campaigns. The digital turn also removed the burden of commuting to campus for marginalized and minoritized students. On the other hand, we reveal that the apparent "success" of our e-community engagement projects does not reflect the profound damage the e-Learning industrial complex inflicted on our community members' living and working conditions.

Nevertheless, we suggest that the pandemic did not just create a carefully crafted "chaos." It also holds the possibility of turning into a "portal," as described by Roy (Roy 2020), to come out of the chaos through collective struggles and move towards a vision for a more egalitarian world. The small-scale, albeit meaningful, resistance against the e-Learning industrial complex, which the students, faculty, staff, and members of the Lesley community engaged in, highlights the fact that feminist pedagogy can start making transformative changes as we take the spirit, ethics, and politics of feminist community engagement outside of the classroom and engage with the broader community.

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Notes

1. This definition is an adaptation of Picciano and Spring's definition of the broader educational-industrial complex (Picciano and Spring 2013).

2. An earlier version of the part of the section titled "The Normalization of the e-Learning Industrial Complex during the Pandemic" was published in an opinion piece co-written by the authors (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).

3. An earlier version of part of the section titled "The e-Learning Industrial Complex and Its Appropriation of the Social Justice Language of 'Accessibility' and 'Affordability'" was published in an opinion piece co-written by the authors (Tanjeem and Illuzzi 2020).