

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Instructor or Customer Service Representative?: Reflections on Teaching in a For-Profit College

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Introduction

A few years ago at a meeting of the National Women's Studies Association, I found myself describing to a colleague my experiences as an instructor at a for-profit educational institution in Austin, Texas. "Remind me," she said, "What is the name of the college where you teach?" "Virginia College," I replied. Not as widely known as some of its peer institutions—including the University of Phoenix, a larger chain—I was prepared to explain how students of Virginia College earn associate's degrees and diploma certificates in a range of vocational fields. But Virginia College was familiar to my colleague, a resident of Georgia, since the college has twenty-seven campuses located throughout the southeastern states, apart from its one campus in Virginia. "Oh yes! They recently opened a campus in my town," she exclaimed in recognition. "They moved in to occupy the space that K-Mart vacated." Hearing this detail, I knew she had it right. This location resembled its strategies elsewhere: the building where I taught had, likewise, previously housed a big-box store selling jewelry, furniture, and electronics. Indeed this spatial location of the college symbolized its presence within the community and its intentions as a for-profit educational institution.

Several months before this conversation, I had responded to an employment announcement circulated by Virginia College. The institution was hiring an Adjunct Instructor of Sociology and sought qualified applicants. The job announcement—which was posted to the classified advertisements website "Craigslist"—explicitly stated what it required of competitive applicants: a Master of Arts and excellent skills in customer service. I therefore arrived for the interview prepared to discuss the short-term jobs held during college and graduate school that were now "paying off" in making me a more desirable candidate for a teaching job. It was my hope that the teaching job would contribute to my preparedness for additional doctoral work. I also arrived attuned to the college's relationship with the processes of knowledge commodification; I knew that my willingness and ability to participate in that process would determine my experience there.

What I did not expect is how little my actual qualifications mattered. I was hired to teach Introduction to Sociology but also taught psychology and college preparation during my one year there; I was even told to consider responsibilities in more remote subjects such as mathematics. Despite my lack of graduate education in these areas, simply having undergraduate courses and prior general work experience under my belt were determined sufficient qualifications; the college sought to extract from me an array of services well beyond the scope of my MA training. A new instructor's openness to teaching multiple subject areas is lucrative for such colleges. My flexibility, like that of other new instructors, arose out of financial constraints, but it benefited the college enormously: new instructors are compensated less per credit hour than instructors with a long tenure there.

Indeed, in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* news report, Goldie Blumenstyk quotes William A. Darity's

observation that scholarly attention to for-profit higher education is "long overdue, given the sector's growth, its cost, and the high proportion of low-income and minority students who enroll in the colleges."¹ The Institute for Higher Education Policy, a research organization located in Washington, D.C., explains that students in the for-profit sector are more likely than those in the non-profit sector to be "older, female, non-White, independent, and first in their family to attend college."² Given the demographic of students affected by for-profit education, it is especially imperative to turn a critical, feminist, and antiracist eye to this sector. Students are treated as consumers of a degree that promises employment, but this promise frequently goes unfulfilled. Almost all students in the for-profit sector use federal loans, and they comprise about 47% of those who default on those loans.³

The promise of employment is often not realized, and on top of that, tuition is particularly high. At the Austin location of Virginia College, students earn associate degrees and diploma certificates. To give a sense of the range of fees, a student there can expect to pay \$14,482 for a diploma certificate in customer service, \$24,070 for a diploma certificate in medical billing and coding, \$38,452 for an associate degree in paralegal studies, \$38,472 for an associate degree in business administration, and \$39,172 for an associate degree in surgical technologies. Students at other locations that offer bachelor's degrees would pay, for instance, \$73,360 for a bachelor's in Network Management. Similarly, a bachelor's degree earned online in Health Service Management costs \$73,700.⁴

In this essay, I offer a critical retrospective engagement with my experience teaching for that one year at Virginia College. I look back at my classroom experiences and I offer a theorization of what I term a "customer service orientation" in for-profit institutions—both a distinctive expectation the college has about how instructors interact with their students, as well as a skill instructors are asked to foster in students.⁵ It is an orientation that not only refers to the expectation that instructors serve students, as others have noted, but in this context also references the college's intention to teach students how to serve customers in their promised future jobs. In the introduction to the *Radical Teacher* cluster on commercialization, Richard Ohmann identifies decreased support for public higher education as causing significant changes—faculty furloughs and online courses among them—that together can be summarized as "commercialization."⁶ The customer service orientation I identify is undoubtedly a form of commercialization. In this essay, I present an analysis of two aspects of the for-profit educational experience: 1) the classroom experience within a generic sociology course, where students and I worked against the customer service orientation; and 2) a close reading of a course textbook assigned to all incoming students, which reveals most clearly the dual operations of neoliberal individualism and a customer service orientation. Much of this essay is autoethnographic: I use my experience at Virginia College to reflect on current conversations shaping the field of Critical University Studies.

Analyzing the racial, class, and gendered coordinates of for-profit higher education is critical. Despite being the instructor, I was almost always the youngest person in my Virginia College classroom. Nonetheless I had the highest level of education and my authority was reinforced by my whiteness and class identity. I recognized the predatory nature of the college, and I tried to align my goals with my students'. I worked to "teach outside my race" and subvert prescribed syllabi whenever possible in order to sharpen critical thinking skills.⁷ In the *Radical Teacher* cluster on commercialization of education, Joe Berry and Helena Worthen explain that teachers and students will benefit from organizing for common interests that oftentimes conflict with those of "owners and managers." They note that most instructors in for-profit settings are working class and have "much in common" with their students.⁸ This kind of solidarity is what I strove to achieve. On a related note, Brenna Ryan shares her experiences teaching English at a for-profit college in order to relieve the "guilt" she experiences as a result of "capitalizing on the misfortune of those [she] purport[s] to help."⁹ The for-profit sector is responding to and profiting from wider conditions of job insecurity and structural inequalities, and I echo a statement made by Tressie McMillan Cottom about this sector: "We built this. All of us, we built this."¹⁰

For-profit institutions may in fact be an ideal setting to examine incipient kinds of neoliberal subject formation that are also found in public sector institutions. The classroom scenes detailed in this essay depict complex and calculated negotiations with academic capitalism.

Scholars of academic capitalism highlight the contradiction between the stated goals of universities as non-profits and the profit motives that undergird them. Unlike those scholars of academic capitalism who focus their critique on public research universities and consider the increasing privatization of non-profit institutions, I attend here to the sector of education that is already privatized.¹¹ My work on for-profit settings—where there may not be a contradiction between the institution's stated goals and undergirding motives, and where students' debt and financial constraints are neither new nor startling—contributes to understanding logics that inform both non-profit and for-profit sectors. My focus on the sector that is already privatized could indeed serve as a critical lens to reexamine the non-profit sector. I seek to *not* position for-profit institutions as the force against which traditional colleges and universities should work to resist academic capitalism and neoliberalism. Instead, I believe the resemblances between the two sectors are greater than we suspect. At public institutions, faculty and staff are at once positioned within and outside the public sector and frequently function, as Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie assert, as "state-subsidized entrepreneurs."¹² At for-profit institutions, instructors and students are prompted to

understand themselves as entrepreneurial subjects and to view this entrepreneurialism not as a contradiction to their roles but rather as a brand and an advantage. For-profit institutions may in fact be an ideal setting to examine incipient kinds of neoliberal subject formation that are also found in public sector institutions. The classroom scenes detailed in this essay depict complex and calculated negotiations with academic capitalism. In effect, my work contributes to the vein of Critical University Studies scholarship that emphasizes the ideological and institutional facets of neoliberalism, that "master narrative" of our time.¹³

Physical Space and Customer Service

During the job interview at Virginia College and again during all subsequent visits of the following year's employment, I experienced the physical design of the institution as akin to a gated community. Arriving for the interview at a two-story building located next to a Volvo dealership and across from a competitor for-profit institution, there were few signs of a campus or college. After all, as Ohmann says about the better-known University of Phoenix, "shaded walks" and "well-stocked libraries" do not make profit.¹⁴ At Virginia College, walking through the expansive and open parking lot, I first noticed that the building has no exterior windows and only one entrance. It is at that entrance that a uniformed police officer sits during all hours of operation, leading me to wonder what the officer's presence signaled to students. Students of color are, both on and off the campus, in danger of police violence. No one enters the building without successfully unlocking the door with their identification card, and the responsibility for directing visitors to the front desk falls to the officer. The parking lot, I would learn, is a place where students enjoy socializing after classes. They quickly shed the uniforms they are required to wear when in the building—scrubs for students studying the medical fields and business attire for all others—and the outdoor space becomes lively. The officer presides over this social space as well, alert to unwelcome presences: one scholar studying for-profit colleges reports that an officer even threatened her with arrest when she tried to interview students in the parking lot.¹⁵

Before my interview, like all visitors, I got a nametag in exchange for scanning my driver's license, and then I waited in the lobby watching the college's televised commercials that run on repeat. It was only after I was hired that I was able to gain physical access to the rest of the institution. I would learn the building's classrooms, designed for lecture and lab instruction, as well as its faculty spaces. On the walls of the faculty kitchen and copy rooms, motivational posters encourage teaching relationships characterized by customer service, prescribing that we "always give more than is expected." Other posters displayed in the hallways connecting the classrooms also offer motivational advice, although their messages are intended to appeal to audiences of prospective and current students. Career counseling information is positioned alongside these posters. During

campus tours, enrollment officers prompt prospective students to take note of the visual materials displayed throughout the hallways. The importance of the visual cues in this setting cannot be understated. They are a medium through which current and prospective students are instructed to visualize their futures.

Featuring individuals at work in their fields of study, or in the process of earning a degree, the motivational posters are intended to represent the perspectives of satisfied students and alumni. Through image and text, they are telling their personal stories of success, as realized via their educational achievement. For instance, in one image, a student smiles into the camera as she confirms new employment through a handshake with her future employer. "To me," she says, "success is my first day in my new career..." Her employer reaches across the desk to shake her hand, while her own gaze is directed backward, at the camera, where she invites the viewer into the scene. She seems to say: "This is my new life and it can be yours, too." In a second image, a student stands at the entrance to a classroom while behind her the instructor dictates. "Success to me," she says, "is learning what it takes to thrive in a new career..." There is a direct relationship, the images suggest, between the learning that happens in the classroom and what is achieved in one's career. The posters depict ways that Virginia College supposedly grants individuals the freedom to define success for themselves and then achieve it. The images are intended to motivate and inspire, but they also make demands on the personal. If viewers can work to visualize and define success for themselves, the images assert, they may attain it.

The motivational posters are familiar to most of us and their content is widely applicable rather than particular. In fact, in the for-profit setting, the college self-preservation when it ensures that *everyone* can recognize themselves in the images and their narratives. While each motivational poster does include a Virginia College logo, it is actually their lack of specificity—and their general and customizable definition of "success"—that implies, coercively, that all current and prospective students are responsible for defining and achieving "better" and more secure futures. As the above examples make clear, the posters position the educational institution as facilitating future success in the market. To do so, like the literature of the self-help genre, they implicitly reference alleged past failures. A poster that represents a graduate's "success story" might presume a past self that has struggled—and in ways not unlike that of its presumed audience. The problem is constructed as one of the self, and specifically a poorly managed self. This is a message intended to be widely applicable and to allow current and prospective students to identify with former students, who seem to tell them: "My new life can be yours, too."

A View from a Classroom

The motivational posters, which we might usefully recognize as simultaneous producers and products of neoliberal individualism, are deeply entrenched in Virginia College's customer-service orientation. I was able to more

fully understand the posters' implications for students once I entered the classroom. The first introductory sociology class I taught was a component of the limited general education curriculum, and the only liberal arts course many students would be required to complete. Introduction to Women's Studies is also listed in the corporate course catalog, although the administration did not make the course available.¹⁶ Since my training was in this interdiscipline, I assigned reading materials from women's studies and structured my course to support critical discussion and student engagement. By the end of the course, students understood several important theories and methodologies of the field.

These pedagogical choices were possible despite severely limited academic freedom. As the literature I received during New Instructor Training phrased it, "You have academic freedom and may teach the course material any way you choose to as long as you follow the syllabus."¹⁷ In addition to requiring a standardized syllabus produced by the educational corporation, the college mandated, in accordance with their agreement with Pearson Publishing, that a particular sociology textbook be prioritized. Students were required to purchase new editions directly from Virginia College as part of their tuition. In addition, the standardized syllabus requested that students be graded on their performance of "professionalism"—a concept that I will explore through thick description of my classroom experiences.

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Even while maintaining the curricular frame of the sociology course, I intended to help students "steal what they can," as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney say.¹⁸ The decisions I made when structuring and choosing content for the class supported this, but the biggest departure I made from the standardized curriculum was my intention to position students as knowers rather than consumers—an effort itself supported by our course content and design. For instance, as I will discuss through reference to student experiences, I recognized and rewarded a different definition of "professionalism" than Virginia College intended. I also worked to position students as knowers when I met with them individually to have conferences. Only administrators have office space at Virginia College, so these "office hours" were held in an empty classroom and scheduled during our regular class meeting. Students and I met to discuss their work and progress and I was especially compelled to offer encouragement and to recognize strengths in creative and critical thinking. During our classroom discussions, students were often unsure about their knowledge and I wanted the conferences to be a way to provide feedback, and to explicitly mark and support their intellectual undertakings. During the

meetings, I noted a student's ability to ask questions of the assigned material, to place seemingly unrelated texts in conversation, or relate what they were learning about systems and structures to their own experiences.

At the level of course content, Virginia College required me to prioritize the Pearson textbook, but I supplemented it with a bounty of articles and films. For instance, we used the textbook to define terms including "class system" and "caste system," but then read significant excerpts from Barbara Ehrenreich's study of low-wage work, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*.¹⁹ We discussed these excerpted chapters, like all assigned materials, in a structured seminar-style format. I began by contextualizing the text and its author, and I commented on how it "fits" within the syllabus—building our understanding of what came before and preparing us for what would follow. I asked students to consider Ehrenreich's audience. Who does she seem to be writing for? People who are low-wage workers? People who are unfamiliar with low-wage work although they might benefit from these forms of labor? We noted how the text has circulated and how it has been received. Students commented on Ehrenreich's no-nonsense writing style, the relationships she cultivated with co-workers, and the research decisions she made in the field. Students discussed their own experiences in low-wage jobs, and one student noted that her work as a migrant agricultural farmer could not be represented by Ehrenreich. We discussed not just how class and caste systems differ, as the textbook prompted, but also how these structures of power are racialized, gendered, and intersecting with immigration and other systems. The comments I received on the end-of-quarter course evaluations affirmed the choices I made regarding course structure and content, and administrative management monitored my sociology classes increasingly less with each passing term.

Near the end of my time at Virginia College, I taught a course on the topic of college preparation titled "Learning Framework," which required a tightly standardized and regulated curriculum. This course revealed most clearly the dual operations of neoliberal individualism and a customer service orientation; it was also taught primarily by women. All incoming students of Virginia College are required to complete the course during their first term of study—a mandate motivated at least in part by the course's perceived role in retaining students, which is of obvious financial interest to the college. Described as a course that teaches learning frameworks particular to adult education and personalized to individual need, the course also intends to facilitate "life skills" important to educational and career success.²⁰ Furthermore, the course's required textbook, titled *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, is a sign of the college's intention to influence the ways students *think* about their prior struggles in both classroom and workplace, as well as the college's proclaimed ability to lead students to success.²¹ As the school's posters suggest, students are purportedly free to define "success" as they desire; moreover, they are constructed as responsible for doing so. And as the text's title indicates, individual "thought patterns" are positioned as ultimately accountable

for either success or failure, thus placing notions of individual responsibility at the forefront.

In these classroom spaces, I found that the college intends relationships characterized by customer service to define the exchange that occurs between instructors and students. Students are constructed as buying a degree that will lead to advancement in a vocation, whereas instructors provide the degree on behalf of the college, and are coached to do so according to the tenets of excellence in customer service. For instance, the literature I received during New Instructor Orientation told new hires to say to students "Thank you, and come back."²² Yet within the sociology classroom, where students engaged materials from the field of women's studies and were supported in developing knowledge of structural and systematic inequalities, we challenged the college's "customer service" orientation and its exclusive emphasis on "job getting" rather than knowledge acquisition. As a result, the sociology classroom was at first fraught with conflicting expectations. Over the duration of the term, the students and I had reason to work together to create new models, and specifically ones that were in agreement with our supplemental course materials. This radical work was not possible in the "Learning Framework" classroom, where administration controlled the curriculum.

The unusual content and structure of the sociology course, in contrast to the college's emphasis on customer service and individualism, prompted some anxious students to ask how the course would apply to their future success in the workforce. After all, a student studying towards an associate's degree in an area such as surgical technologies might perceive sociology and women's studies course materials as extraneous, unlike coursework on medical terminologies, which is a predictable step in access to that vocation. In the context of the for-profit college, I undoubtedly found sociology and women's studies course materials to occupy a complex place. I repeatedly advocated for their relevance and their ability to challenge students, aiding their ability to think critically and carefully, and I did this especially as it existed in tension with the college's greater profit-driven purposes. For me, within the unique space of the sociology or women's studies classroom, where the skills students are learning include those of critical thinking and an ability to engage in respectful dialogue, the role of the feminist instructor needed renegotiation. The role of "instructor" and "mentor" is distinct from "customer service representative," and the clarification was my responsibility to make. Importantly, however, these new models had to be made in collaboration with the students.

Student Experiences at Virginia College

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam argues on behalf of an academy characterized by antidisciplinary knowledges, explaining that "the areas beside academia rather than within it, the intellectual worlds conjured by losers, failures, dropouts and refuseniks, often serve as the launching pad for alternatives precisely when the university cannot."²³ I likewise think it is necessary to look to the spaces in between—to the gaps, fissures, and seams. I

have taught at two traditional state-funded research universities and a private elite research university, apart from teaching for one year at Virginia College, and it is undoubtedly the case that many of my students at Virginia College are among the best critical thinkers I have encountered. This is not the kind of student-subject the for-profit college intends to produce, however. In this setting, where the focus is on job-getting rather than the production of knowledge, students found reasons for intellectual curiosity and engagement. In the section that follows, I will share examples of three students I met who illustrate the contrast between the visions of success that the college upheld and my own standards of success.

An especially wise student, Lawrence (not his real name), became invested in a selection from *The Miner's Canary* that I assigned to the introductory sociology class.²⁴ Always very quietly and eagerly engaged, he found many ways to participate in the class meeting, and, as he sometimes did, he stayed after class to discuss *The Miner's Canary* further. It was in our after-class conversation that Lawrence told me that he had taken the assigned excerpt from *The Miner's Canary* to Port Aransas, Texas, where he and his family were vacationing. He told me that he "read it out loud in the car all the way to Port Aransas." It took almost the entire four-hour drive to read and discuss, he explained, in part because he and his partner worked to translate it into Spanish for his mother-in-law. He and his family wanted to know where the complete text could be purchased. This anecdote is useful for numerous reasons, only one of which is its focus on the students of for-profit institutions. I point to it here because the institutional structure did not accurately measure or aptly reward Lawrence's knowledge or that of many other students, and his engagement and critical thinking were not represented by a testing regime that valued memorization and repetition. Amidst pressures to be otherwise, he found reason for creative thinking and critical analysis. I guided him the best I could by offering additional resources and time. I wanted him to see that his knowledge was not only different from what the college rewarded (something he knew all too well) but also strong. It should be taken very seriously. The experience of teaching Lawrence was one of the most rewarding of my career so far.

In contrast, I faced a different challenge with another student called Matthew (not his real name). Even though he had "varying experiences with attending college in the past,"²⁵ as the Virginia College website implies is common among their student population, Matthew felt enthusiastic and hopeful about education and the new career that the institution would purportedly facilitate. In my introductory sociology classroom, he was excited to share his ideas and experiences, and he readily participated in discussion and exhibited a visible enthusiasm for the material. However, although speaking came easily to him, listening was a challenge and his participation was regularly inappropriate and offensive. He insulted other students when he disagreed with their ideas and stormed out of the classroom in grand displays. He was known for this behavior among students as well as instructors, and my interviewer even warned me in advance that Matthew would enroll in my class.

The institution framed Matthew's issue as one of "professionalism," which was a skill they expected him to imbibe through courses. All standardized syllabi, including our sociology syllabus, required that at least 20% of the final course grade be earned through the performance of professionalism, and administrators explained to Matthew the need to exhibit professionalism in the classroom because his future success in the workplace would be determined by his ability to master the skill. Matthew was undoubtedly aware of the requirement of "professionalism," and he attempted to exhibit the attribute through other means. For instance, he never attended class wearing anything less formal than a necktie, and he greeted his instructors with handshakes. His demeanor was, in fact, often charismatic. The instructors and administrators I met invested in his "success"—which was positioned as something the college would bestow, while his struggles were framed as personal failings. Matthew was offered leadership opportunities and called upon to accompany prospective students and other campus visitors. In those leadership spaces that rewarded a particular definition of "professionalism," his confidence carried him. In the classroom, by contrast, his disregard for his peers and the course material led others to regard him with a kind of nervous animosity. My sense was that he wanted to be taught how to participate appropriately in classroom discussion; had he fully known how to achieve those expectations he would have chosen to succeed by the institution's standards of "professionalism."

Rather than teach him to succeed to be professional by the institution's standards, which would supposedly lead to career success, I worked to frame our classroom challenges in the terms of the course content. I prioritized learning material. For instance, when his response to a peer's comment was inappropriate and offensive, he and I talked about the kind of learning space we wanted to create. We agreed that the course material certainly inspires passion and disagreement among students. We asked: Can that happen alongside learning or does disagreement preclude learning? What's best for the class? Matthew was intrigued by these conversations, which he found intellectually fascinating. He not only wanted to succeed by the institution's standards, but he also wanted to succeed by mine.

When Matthew did succeed by the institution's standards, rather than mine, he was held up as a leader and as a positive success story. Virginia College administrators invested in correcting what was positioned as personal shortcomings—such as his "temper" that led him to storm out of the classroom—through reference to professionalism and his future employability. After their interventions, administrators regarded him as a kind of archetypical student. Other students likewise worked to follow the rules of the institution and were rewarded. For instance, at the end of the term, each instructor was asked to present two members of the class with "Best Student" awards. The criteria might be interpreted according to the institution's definition of "professionalism," which included the ability of students to attend all classes, arrive on time, wear uniforms, and complete all formal requirements. These were the students who, like Matthew, became most

visible to the administrators responsible for placing students in internships and writing recommendation letters. They were students who performed behaviors—like “perfect attendance”—that supported retention efforts; in fact, they might even recruit others to attend. This was, in fact, the case for Matthew; he successfully recruited Lawrence. He was a student at Virginia College before recruiting Lawrence, a relative. For Virginia College and all for-profit companies, retention is a necessary concern. Students including Matthew are prompted to recruit their friends and family. In fact, the end-of-quarter student evaluations asked students whether they were likely to recommend the college to their friends and relatives. The school regularly sought to measure the satisfaction of their student-customers, and events like “Student Appreciation Day” were intended to support retention.

Recruiting practices were rewarded alongside other behaviors that reflected the school’s definition of “professionalism”—and also, in turn, served retention efforts—but many *actual* “Best Students” were uninterested in sharing the institution’s values. These were students who dissented and were inclined to offer critique, and even shunned the ranking system. Some students were unable to share the values of the college—even if they wanted to—because work or family responsibilities made it difficult to be disciplined by the institution. I decided to appoint Pam (not her real name) as a “Best Student” because she asked pointed questions and was intellectually curious. Many of her peers arrived early and with their textbooks highlighted and papers typed (which were among the standards used by the institution for judging students as “good”), but I judged Pam’s careful and well-considered critical thinking skills more deserving. During a lesson on environmental sociology, for instance, she engaged deeply with the theory. While completing group work, she insisted on considering the lived impacts of environmental harms. She explored ideas fully and invested little in performing well on standardized tests. I suspect that although some of Pam’s peers might have more easily gained admission to a traditional institution, Pam would have been highly likely to succeed in an upper-level seminar on topics such as feminist theories, for instance. Virginia College would neither readily recognize nor reward such kinds of performance. Again, like Lawrence, she was not the particular subject the school intended to fashion.

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An important complex feature of for-profit colleges such as mine was that the “customer service orientation” it expected of instructors sat alongside a strain of authoritarianism. In my experience, instructors were coached to practice an authoritarian form of power even as they were asked to model customer service.²⁶ For instance,

the literature I received during New Instructor Orientation told faculty: “The students do not rule the class, you do.” In addition, the literature coached instructors to avoid allowing students to “see any fear or insecurities on your face or in your actions.”²⁷ (Such advice may have been important in order to establish their branding as reputable educational institutions.) The authoritarianism is, however, crafted in ways that are compatible with a model of customer service. For instance, the for-profit vision presents faculty as those who are authoritarian in style but also who, as previously noted, “always give more than is expected.” As Arlie Hochschild explains, when “emotional labor” occurs in commerce, the motive of profit is “slipped in under acts of emotion management, under the rules that govern them.”²⁸ Within the for-profit education system, students who respect authority are rewarded—including those who respond to learning models that emphasize passive absorption and memorization. In my sociology classroom, I worked against such models to instead support critical thinking and intellectual curiosity. As the anecdotes about Lawrence, Matthew, and Pam reveal, the position of students as knowers rather than consumers was central to my intentions. As a result, our teaching and mentoring relationships were transformed, as were our collective conceptions of “education” and “knowledge.”

“Thought Patterns” and the Neoliberal Principle of Individualism

Despite severely limited academic freedom in the sociology classroom, students and I had great reason to craft new models that contrasted the college’s “customer service orientation.” Our supplemental course materials required this of us. Importantly, while students including Lawrence and Pam were not the student-subjects the college intended to fashion, my hopes for Matthew were also quite contrary to the goals the institution set for him. Who and what, then, did Virginia College intend to cultivate? The textbook titled *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career* gives us a good example of the kind of student-subject Virginia College intended to produce and reward. As previously noted, the institution required all incoming students to participate in “Learning Framework,” a class on the topic of college preparation, for which *Thought Patterns* was the required text. The course served retention efforts—keeping students in school, purchasing classes—and the textbook therefore intended to influence the ways students understood their educational and workplace struggles, as well as the college’s self-declared ability to lead them to more positive experiences. The course tried to create a satisfied and hopeful affect among students, which then supported the college’s need to retain students.

Perhaps the most insidious feature of the curriculum in the for-profit institution was its message that students could participate more freely in the market by changing their innermost cognitive and emotional orientations. *Thought Patterns* exemplifies this process. Before analyzing the contents of the textbook, however, it is first necessary to describe its features. The book functions much like a workbook in that the student is guided through lessons in

which they are told to “apply themselves” by participating in reading and writing exercises that may be accompanied by video discussions led by Lou Tice, co-founder of The Pacific Institute, a consultancy organization and non-standard press.²⁹ Tice’s biography refers to his “singular style of teaching” and his ability to be “remarkably successful at empowering individuals to achieve their full potential.”³⁰ When administrative management gave me the instructional materials along with the standardized syllabus, my supervisor described Tice as a “timid lion.” The descriptor speaks to an affect that is intended to be at once caring, inspirational, and authoritative. In these videos, we find Tice at the front of a classroom full of attentive students. As he explains the contents of each unit, he draws images and writes text on a whiteboard in a way reminiscent of his days as a football coach. As a teacher and personal-coach of “Learning Framework,” his videos and textbook stand in for the work of an actual instructor. In fact, Virginia College’s commitment to The Pacific Institute’s specific curriculum meant that I did very little teaching for that course. That curriculum was central to the school’s conception of “Learning Framework” and a departure or outright challenge would cause alarm. In addition, my own education prepared me to design a sociology course but not one on the topics of adult learning and “life skills.”

The table of contents lists the titles of the 21 units that comprise the text. The units include “What’s Holding Me Back,” “Leaning in the Right Direction,” “My Future is Up to Me,” and “If It’s to Be, It’s Up to Me.”³¹ As the titles show, the textbook resembles the genre of self-help. Even beyond the similarities in rhetoric, I judge both its corporate model of business, as well as its intentions to individualize and pathologize, to converge with some of the field’s popular literature. Each unit of the textbook includes an overview and bulleted lists of objectives and key concepts. For the lesson on “What’s Holding Me Back,” the key concepts include: conditioning, capable, smart, and stuck.³² The student is then prompted to answer “reflective questions” before reading a 2- to 3-page essay that functions as a “lesson learned.” In some cases, it is an inspirational story narrated by Tice, while in others it is more overtly instructional. Finally, each unit provides the student with blank pages where they are encouraged to keep a journal.

Within the textbook, we see an aggressive emphasis on individual responsibility to think in a particular way. The Pacific Institute understands individuals as “responsible for their own actions,” as the text makes clear. The introductory pages proclaim: “*Thought Patterns for a Successful Career* is designed to build your understanding, with a structured process, of how your mind works, and how you can control the way you think to achieve success—in any part of your life.”³³ All one needs to do, it seems, is think in a particular way and market-based reward will flow freely without regard to structural and systematic determinants. It is our *responsibility*, the text says, to abide by particular thought patterns. “By applying yourself to this program,” the text instructs, “by giving it your own reflective input, you will see that most barriers to personal growth and development are self-imposed.”³⁴

Again, the individual is responsible for applying themselves, and for abiding by those “thought patterns” prescribed by the textbook, which are guaranteed to lead to productivity.

In addition to the textbook, students purchase notecards that function as “pocket affirmations” as well as audio materials narrated by Tice. These supplemental materials are intended for use outside of the classroom, although their message complements that of the videos and textbook. The affirmations apply to classroom participation and workplace success, but also to the student’s personal life. For instance, one reads: “Because I sincerely care about myself and the quality of my life, I am financially responsible.” A second statement reads: “I assume the full responsibility for achieving a workable level of understanding in my communications with others.” The audio materials likewise reinforce the work of the videos and textbook when, for instance, Tice claims that lack of dream, lack of idea, and lack of aspiration serve as barriers to success rather than lack of resources.³⁵ Tice invokes the rhetoric of self-care and quality of life, buttressing his mandate to act responsibly. The various ingredients of the curriculum are designed to be followed step-by-step in order to produce a product/subject that fills a void that, they are told by the institution, is self-generated.

As a whole, the curriculum describes itself as a process and one intended for application rather than passive absorption. The student is a co-author with The Pacific Institute and Tice, according to the text. “Like you,” the introductory remarks claim, “[the text] is a work in progress.”³⁶ Yet, the text is undoubtedly prescriptive. It naturalizes its own politics—constructing its claims as reasonable and “common sense.” In addition, the alleged correlation between an individual’s thoughts and their market-based achievements are framed in terms of personal responsibility. For instance, in the instructional unit titled “If It’s to Be, It’s Up to Me,” the student reads about forethought and the process by which we mentally construct something before it materializes. The text gives the example of preparing dinner from a recipe, since the recipe propels one’s mind forward, into a future product that has yet been created. “Forethought is using your imagination to create the future before it happens,” the text explains, “and you do it so easily. It is important to know that it’s ordinary.”³⁷ Here again, the text is attempting to revolutionize individual thought patterns even as it constructs its claims as ordinary. In truth, the events of our futures are not created according to a formulaic recipe. Structural and systemic determinants and inequalities determine our life chances. For people whose lives are subject to constant unpredictability and insecurity, such a claim is abusive, and not entirely unlike other forms of abuse. Students who are vulnerable are made to feel that their future success in the market is dependent on the institution. That institution has set itself up as the remedy to the past struggles the student has endured because of supposedly personal rather than structural failings; students are blamed for their own suffering. In addition, the textbook’s assertion that a recipe is a useful comparison point is indicative, I judge, of its more general tendency to conceive of an individual’s productivity in the

market in terms of standardized and simplistic inputs and outputs, thus reflecting the operations of neoliberalism.

Later in the same unit, the textbook asks students to consider the process by which their mentors have helped them to envision their goals—seeing in them great potential even before they could see it in themselves. While the text seems to support mentorship, it also tells students that individuals need to mentor themselves, and to be responsible for self-improvement. The text says: “You need to mentor yourself, otherwise you’re hoping that some mentor will come along and turn you from a frog to a prince or a princess. You need to turn yourself from the frog to the princess or the prince.”³⁸ One’s present state is presumed to be the place of the frog, and The Pacific Institute claims to be the intervention that will facilitate our individual progress, a process that is paradoxically judged to be self-determined. In the context of a for-profit college, this process is always tied to upward progression within the market economy, and the emphasis on individual responsibility suggests that the market is open and waiting for participation. It is as easy as following a recipe, according to the institute.

My experience underscores the generative potential of teachers using classroom strategies that encourage divergences, inconsistencies, and ambiguities.

The attributes of *Thought Patterns* also characterize other projects of The Pacific Institute.³⁹ Another curriculum worth discussing is titled *STEPS—A Guide to Self-Sufficiency*. It targets those who are unemployed and, according to the website, combines “proven mental technology skills” with skills related to locating and maintaining a job. Moreover, the program “provides the mental and emotional boost to successfully transition from unemployment to employment, allowing individuals to be fully accountable for their personal and financial futures.”⁴⁰ There is an explicit emphasis on the supposed power of thoughts or “mental technology skills”⁴¹ to lead to success within the market, as well as an emphasis on personal accountability or individual responsibility for productivity.

Conclusion

It is useful to ask: what kind of student does Virginia College intend to produce? Those intentions—exemplified by the *Thought Patterns* textbook—are not exclusive to the realm of for-profit education, but rather must be connected to other projects and to greater structures. The hallmark of neoliberalism is to generate subjects who, through particular attitudes and efforts to be productive in the market economy, also serve the interests of neoliberalism itself. In fact, the processes of neoliberalism are usefully glimpsed through a description of particular subjectivities. The for-profit institution I taught at clearly tried to shape its students’ thoughts and values and redirect critical critique and political dissent.⁴² From the physical space to

the kinds of students who were rewarded to the textbooks assigned, the institution created an intensely neoliberal environment, which it presented to students as the outside world they would need to negotiate. However, it was not always successful and I saw this especially clearly in the sociology classroom.

This analysis might serve us as we work to anticipate, on a more generalizable scale, both increasing and new forms of corporatization. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and President Trump, who has recently settled the lawsuit against Trump University, will champion corporatization. Trump University, a real estate program, was neither accredited nor degree-granting, despite its misleading characterization as a university. In the upcoming years, what new forms of corporatized education will we contend with? For those of us invested in traditional colleges and universities, for-profit schools like Virginia College or the recently-defunct ITT Technical Institute might be positioned as the force against which we should fight; but as previously noted, I do not think this strategy is wise. Not only does it misidentify the source of problems we all face, it also harms the large numbers of underserved and vulnerable students who fill the halls of such institutions. Instead, I hope my analysis—and our collectively-produced work in the upcoming years—can benefit more students at for-profit colleges such as the one I described. As we critique the for-profit sector, we must also critique ideologies that create “winners” and “losers” or “deserving” and “undeserving” in all settings.

My experience underscores the generative potential of teachers using classroom strategies that encourage divergences, inconsistencies, and ambiguities. Instead of attempting to “rule the class” while performing a controlled authoritarianism in conjunction with a “customer service orientation,” as the literature produced by Virginia College instructed, I sought pedagogical strategies that could productively “break” the standardized form in order to facilitate new intellectual and emotional connections.⁴³ Such efforts to “break form” are what I think should be the main recourse of instructors teaching in for-profit colleges, in order to remain responsible and accountable to students experiencing the ravages of academic capitalism.

Notes

¹ Goldie Blumenstyk, “Conference Brings Together For-Profit Colleges and Scholars Who Study Them.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 September 2012), para. 6.

² “A New Classification Scheme for For-Profit Institutions.” Institute for Higher Education Policy, July 2012. Accessed 15 June 2013. Available from World Wide Web: <[http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/a-f/\(Report\)_For-Profits_Classification_July_2012.pdf](http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/a-f/(Report)_For-Profits_Classification_July_2012.pdf)>, 2. The report produced by the Institute for Higher Education Policy was financed by USA Funds, a lending corporation.

³ Andrew Ross, *Creditocracy and the Case for Debt Refusal* (New York: OR Books, 2013), 118. Ross cites Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, US

Senate, For-Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success (July 30, 2010). 96% of students in the for-profit sector use federal loans.

⁴ "Consumer Information." Virginia College. Accessed 13 June 2016. Available from World Wide Web: <<https://consumerinfo.vc.edu/>>.

⁵ Henry A. Giroux is among the scholars who, like me, are concerned that students are regarded as consumers. See Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

⁶ Richard Ohmann, "Introduction: College for Dollars?" *Radical Teacher* 93 (Spring 2012), 9.

⁷ Bree Picower explains the importance of advocates and mentors in an essay about "teaching outside one's race" in an Oakland elementary school. She cites the work of Jacqueline Jordon-Irvine, who explains that teachers who are mentors and advocates are "willing to exercise resistance by questioning and defying rules and regulations that are not in the best interest of their students." See Bree Picower, "Teaching Outside One's Race: The Story of an Oakland Teacher." *Radical Teacher* 100 (Fall 2014), 119. Picower quotes Jacqueline Jordon-Irvine, *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Seeing With a Cultural Eye* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 8.

⁸ Joe Berry and Helena Worthen, "Why We Should Support Organizing in the For-Profits" *Radical Teacher* 93 (Spring 2012), 36.

⁹ Brenna Ryan, "Learners and a Teacher, For Profit." *Radical Teacher* 93 (Spring 2012), 34.

¹⁰ Tressie McMillan Cottom, "How 'Admissions' Works Differently at For-Profit Colleges: Sorting and Signaling." *Some of Us Are Brave* (blog), 8 March 2013. Accessed 15 June 2013. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://wp.me/p28iGT-ki>>, para. 52.

¹¹ See Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

¹² Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 9.

¹³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 184. Mohanty utilizes, in her analysis, the work of Henry A. Giroux, "Vocationalizing Higher Education: Schooling and the Politics of Corporate Culture," *Beyond the Corporate University: Culture and Pedagogy in the New Millennium* Ed. Henry A. Giroux and Kostas Myrsiades (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 30. My work contributes to the vein of scholarship that emphasizes the ideological and institutional facets of neoliberalism. This

includes work by Sandra K. Soto, Chandan Reddy, and Aihwa Ong. See Sandra K. Soto, "Wearing Out Arizona." Rapoport Center Human Rights Working Paper Series, April 2011. Accessed 15 June 2013. Available from World Wide Web:

<http://blogs.utexas.edu/rapoportcenterwps/files/2011/06/4-2011-Soto-WearingOutArizona.pdf>, Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), and Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Ohmann, "Introduction." *Radical Teacher* 93 (Spring 2012), 7.

¹⁵ Tressie McMillan Cottom, "Access, Competition, and For-Profit Higher Education." Conference of the Duke University Research Network on Racial and Ethnic Inequality, Durham, NC, 22 September 2012.

¹⁶ Virginia College at Austin, "Catalog," Vol. 14 (February 2012), 47.

¹⁷ The quotation is included on the document titled "Control of Your Class," which was distributed at New Instructor Training held during the 2010 summer term.

¹⁸ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

¹⁹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

²⁰ Virginia College at Austin, "Catalog," 41.

²¹ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career* (Seattle: The Pacific Institute, 2005).

²² The quotation is included on the document titled "Earn Your Stripes: Build Graduates Employers Will Want to Hire," which was distributed at New Instructor Training held during the 2010 summer term.

²³ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

²⁴ Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁵ Virginia College, "Why Choose Virginia College?" Accessed 16 December 2012. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.vc.edu/about-virginia-college/why-choose.cfm>>, para. 5.

²⁶ Cottom references her experience as an enrollment counselor when she describes the "benevolent authority" of administrators. See Cottom, "How 'Admissions' Works Differently at For-Profit Colleges," para. 39.

²⁷ The quotations are included on the document titled "Control of Your Class," which was distributed at New Instructor Training held during the 2010 summer term.

²⁸ Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 9.

²⁹ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, ix.

³⁰ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, v.

³¹ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, xi.

³² The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, 10.

³³ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, 5.

³⁴ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, ix.

³⁵ The Pacific Institute, "What's Good Enough?" audio materials.

³⁶ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, viii.

³⁷ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, 144.

³⁸ The Pacific Institute, *Thought Patterns for a Successful Career*, 146.

³⁹ The materials produced by the institute include "educational solutions" as well as "corporate solutions" and "social solutions."

⁴⁰ The Pacific Institute, "Workforce Development." Accessed 13 May 2012. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.thepacificinstitute.us/v2/index.php?name=social_workforce>.

⁴¹ The Pacific Institute, "Workforce Development." Accessed 13 May 2012. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.thepacificinstitute.us/v2/index.php?name=social_workforce>.

⁴² Soto, "Wearing Out Arizona," 3.

⁴³ The quotation is included on the document titled "Control of Your Class," which was distributed at New Instructor Training held during the 2010 summer term.



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