



# **Making Space for Critical Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University: Struggles and Possibilities**

**The University of Kentucky  
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## Abstract

The neoliberalization of university education requires transformative approaches to teaching and learning. This article, which emerged out of a panel on critical pedagogy at the 2013 Association of American Geographers annual meeting in Los Angeles, brings together four contributed ‘tales’ that demonstrate how pedagogy-as-resistance opens up political possibilities both inside and outside of the higher education classroom. Drawing upon key themes within the tales, we explore possible strategies to intervene in and disrupt various forms of oppression that play out through the neoliberalization of higher education. We suggest that geographers should contest, rather than accommodate, the encroachment of neoliberalism into our classrooms. This article concludes with a discussion of the benefits of incorporating a caring and critical pedagogy into higher education.

## Introduction

By now, those of us in higher education are familiar with changes happening in colleges and universities throughout North America, Europe, and many other places: slashed budgets, larger class sizes, and a precaritization of the workforce through increased reliance on graduate student labor, lecturers, and part-time instructors. Further, there has been a shift toward students-as-consumers and an increase in public-private partnerships amid the expectation that colleges, departments, and individuals cultivate an entrepreneurial ethic (Mohanty, 2003; The SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). Though many of us have already been resisting these changes through our research and teaching, geographers in academic institutions everywhere must now navigate a new political economy of the university (Castree, et al., 2008). As individuals based in the US university system, we understand that these phenomena are being experienced in different ways in educational systems worldwide (Brenner, et al., 2010). Our focus here, however, is on how processes of neoliberalization are enacted in universities throughout the United States and the ways in which we can resist such things through our pedagogical praxis.

As educators<sup>3</sup>, we can certainly point to egregious economic policies and practices that are fundamentally altering higher education within our institutions. The University of Kentucky— located in a state that in recent years has both elected Rand Paul to the United States Senate and become a model for the enactment of President Obama’s health care reform— has arguably been late to the game in terms of the neoliberalization of higher education. While many American public universities have struggled with state budget cuts and reductions in full-time faculty for many years now, the University of Kentucky *seemed* until recently to be withstanding the recession and all of the associated reforms that are carried out in

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<sup>3</sup> By ‘educators’ we refer to people who are designated as such by the hierarchical structures of the university system - professors, instructors, and teaching assistants. We recognize that concepts such as “teacher” or “student” are mutable categories with much transference between them.

the name of austerity.<sup>4</sup> In actuality however, a long list of ongoing neoliberal projects are being carried out at the university level that impact our ability to teach effectively. In recent years we have seen such changes as: an increasing reliance on funds from the coal industry; ever deepening public-private partnerships, including the private management of campus housing and the privatization of university dining services; a strategic plan that largely disregards the teaching and research responsibility of graduate students (despite UK's status as a Research 1 university); the implementation of an "entrepreneurial and values-based" budget model; expanded use of surveillance technologies; and increased reliance on part-time lecturers and new teaching post-docs (Blackford, 2012; UK Board of Trustees, 2012, 2014). All of this is occurring on a campus without a legitimate teacher or student union in a "right to work" state. For educators and students, these changes can feel impossible to counteract, especially as one is also working toward a degree.

It is within this context that the University of Kentucky Critical Pedagogy Working Group (UKCPWG) was formed in 2011 by geography graduate students interested in critical, liberatory, and transformative approaches to education. The group emerged out of frequent graduate student conversations about how to be both meaningful educators and successful graduate students in an increasingly alienating educational system. More broadly, we believe that embracing a critical pedagogy holds tremendous potential for challenging the neoliberalizing processes that permeate the university classroom. We are convinced that such processes are good for neither teacher, nor student. We adamantly believe in students' capacity to critically engage with their world in order to create more just and equitable futures. The neoliberalization of the landscape of higher education—and of American life more broadly—requires transformative approaches to teaching and learning, which emphasize critical thinking about our own roles in perpetuating systems of oppression. Education for social change necessitates a disruption of the "hegemonic ways of seeing through which subjects make themselves dominant" (Razack, 2001: 10), an approach that requires analyses of oppression both within our classrooms as well as throughout the university system more broadly.

Since the group's inception, we have sought to collectively educate ourselves about radical pedagogical approaches and to support each other as we develop our skills as educators, activists, and academics. Our vision has been to engage with the possibilities of the classroom and to avoid fatalistic thinking about the state of undergraduate education. While we try to be realistic about the limits of our own time and energy, we actively counter claims that teaching is a less important aspect of our work at the university than the production of knowledge through research.

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<sup>4</sup> Reportedly, Mark Twain once said, "When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Kentucky, because everything there happens 20 years after it happens anywhere else."

UKCPWG's efforts are rooted in the work of Paulo Freire and incorporate more recent pedagogical developments by feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial scholar-activists (Dowler, 2002; Kishimoto and Mwangi, 2009; Nast, 1999; Peake, 1985; Peake and Kobaysahi, 2002; Razack, 1998; Webber, 2006). We initially set out to develop our knowledge about critical approaches to education by reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire saw the potential of education to challenge the oppressive myths and ideologies dominant in post-colonial life and encourage the possibility of freedom through critical thinking and transformation of the self. His approach to the classroom emphasized praxis, where ideas are put into thoughtful, reflective practice to achieve social change. Education for the relatively privileged students in American higher education today may seem a far cry from that advocated for in Freire's Brazil. However, as we negotiate our combined roles as students, educators, and activists teaching about capitalism, state power, imperialism, inequality, and oppression, we frequently find ourselves returning to Freirean critical pedagogy to guide our practice in the classroom. As bell hooks reminds us, Freire never said that "conscientization [was] an end itself" but that it should always be connected to "meaningful praxis" (hooks, 1994: 47).

It is crucial that we steer the spirit of critique within our classrooms toward the neoliberal university system. Just as we encourage our students to consider oppressive forces at play in the world outside, so too should we show how the university is itself a site of inequity that emerged from the very systems of oppression that we hope to counter through pedagogical practice, such as white supremacy and colonialism (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Said, 1981). Mohanty points out that because we lack a truly democratic civil society in the United States, this necessitates increased attention on "the hegemony of corporate cultures in the academy" (Mohanty, 2003: 185). Additionally, she argues that we must connect our classroom pedagogies and curricula to the fact that the university itself is a site of injustice that perpetuates alienation.

Within the academic institution, particular ways of being and interacting are normalized, seen through the ways that white supremacy, Amer-Eurocentrism, and heteronormativity are widespread and remain generally unquestioned throughout the university system. Such oppressive forces serve to prohibit many people from receiving the benefits of higher education or from participating in academic knowledge production. Feminism, decolonial thought, and anti-racism certainly have their place in the academy. However, it is a marginalized place, safely tucked away within particular theoretical discourses that too often remain separated from "their materialist moorings", such that it is often unclear how theory might be translated into praxis (Mohanty, 2013: 972).

In discussing processes of neoliberalization we aim to provide opportunities for our students to reflect on their own privileges and positions along various axes of oppression. Finding ways to introduce topics of injustice oriented around such intersecting themes as race, class, gender, religious difference, and sexuality (Monk, 2011; Kobayashi, 1999; Skelton, 1997) to undergraduate students is a

recurring difficulty, which we attempt to problem-solve collectively. We also strive to transform the classroom into a place of pleasure and excitement—an act of resistance which, hooks writes, counters “the overwhelming boredom, uninterest, and apathy that so often characterize the way professors and students feel about teaching and learning” (hooks, 1994: 10).

While our bi-weekly conversations as the UKCPWG were meaningful and certainly informed our individual practices as educators, we all craved transformative examples that would give us hope as we struggled to find our place as educators in a dizzying educational landscape. This article is the outcome of a session titled “Tales from the Neoliberal University” that UKCPWG organized at the 2013 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Los Angeles. The discussion was organized around brief 1000 word ‘tales’ from four educators who were all attempting to think differently about classroom practice, though not necessarily from a Freirian perspective. These vignettes brought very real experience from university classrooms alive and served to spark thoughtful conversation from participants in the room. We imagined the panel as a place to think creatively, positively, and productively about strategies for addressing the limitations imposed upon our teaching by neoliberalizing university systems. Here, we bring together these four descriptive tales as examples of the potential for a broadly defined critical pedagogy to be a transformative practice. More than simply ‘managing’ the classroom or ‘surviving’ in the neoliberalizing university, these stories highlight everyday incidences of pedagogy-as-resistance and help us envision the classroom as a transformative space of educational possibility.

In each tale, the author offers her own creative strategy for supporting undergraduate students as they think through social problems. In the first, R.L. takes a constructivist approach to encourage her students to think about the environment by encouraging them to critically consider capitalism and its role in their everyday lives. Next, Sandra Zupan shows the power of experiential learning through a project requiring students to challenge their assumptions about homelessness by asking her students to productively engage with the local homeless population. Carrie Mott shares her experience getting to know each of her students as individuals in what could be an otherwise impersonal introductory human geography course, using brief meetings as a way to subvert the usual distance imposed on relations between teacher and student. Lastly, Anne-Marie Debbané discusses how she encouraged her undergraduates to relate to student protest movements in Quebec and Chile, bringing home phenomena of public dissent, which are too often abstract and unimaginable for undergraduates in the United States. UKCPWG and our contributors offer this piece as a way for readers to think through and create opportunities to resist processes of neoliberalization and other forms of oppression in their own classrooms. These tales will no doubt resonate with readers in different ways, and we see them as a starting point for discussion and a potential source of inspiration.

Academic institutions replicate white supremacist settler colonial regimes of power, and this understanding forms the backdrop of much of our analysis here, as well as in our classroom praxis. However, the aim of these tales was to reflect upon challenges encountered in the neoliberal classroom, in particular the difficulties faced when trying to mobilize social critique through our pedagogy. Each author was limited to around 1000 words, and the tales were originally given in a relatively informal conference setting. Consequently, the tales do not necessarily address the full depth of problematic legacies of colonial and racialized violence at work in today's system of higher education. There is certainly room for more work drawing connections between the discipline of geography, geographic education, and the legacy of colonialism. We hope that this article serves as a stepping stone toward that end.

Following the four tales, we offer some discussion of the various strategies employed by our contributors, and then conclude with thoughts on how the key themes in these four experiences open up political possibilities both inside and outside of the classroom.

### **What is Capitalism? (R.L.)**

I teach at a large Midwestern university whose student body is largely white, middle class, and almost reflexively politically moderate. Although I often have students from the left or right, the vast majority respond to radical statements of any flavor by trying to bat the conversation back towards center. They have never heard of Eugene V. Debs, the Grange Movement, or any other landmarks of the Midwest's radical history, and they are certain Karl Marx was an asshole. They believe firmly that life is fair, you get what you deserve, and that success is entirely and only a product of hard work. My task each semester is to demonstrate that life is not fair, that the vast majority of people suffer fates they did nothing to deserve, and that students' success has more to do with hidden subsidies than with merit.

I learned quickly to conceal these existential wolves in sheep's clothing. I give my courses unobjectionable, moderate names like "Human/Environment Interactions" and "Environmental Conservation." Nor is there anything obviously radical on my syllabi, no indication that "the social implications of mining" is actually "the nightmare legacy of colonialism in the Congo," or that "naturalizing difference" will be a scathing critique of Social Darwinism. People do drop my courses occasionally, but not for their radical content. I make a surprisingly convincing sheep.

Camouflage is just the first step. The next is letting others speak the hard truths for me. I use documentaries to evil effect. One of the best compliments I have ever received was from a student who said, "I've come to dread movie days in your class, since I know they will destroy more of my faith in the basic goodness of the world." But it is most effective messaging when students speak for themselves. In this age of carbon trading, habitat banking, and stream credits, capitalism is the

invisible elephant in all of my courses. But how to get Midwestern moderates to rethink what is effectively the national religion they have been steeped in since kindergarten? Is it possible to get fish to think critically about the water they swim in? The answer, given to me by my colleague Jason Strange, is deceptively simple: ask them.

So on “Introduction to sustainable development” day, I begin with the following question: “What is capitalism?” This semester, as always, my students stare at me in shock. They have not been assigned a reading on capitalism, and I never throw curve balls like that. How can I ask them to speak in front of 89 other students without preparing them first? Once they get over the initial shock, however, I see them jotting notes. 45 seconds later, they have at least a few basic characteristics of capitalism to share with a partner. 60 seconds after that I stand at the board, chalk-poised and wait. We get off to a shaky start this year. “Money,” says a bright woman in the 3<sup>rd</sup> row. “Yes,” I say, and write it on the board, “but many different economic systems use some form of money, too. What characteristics are *specific* to capitalism?” And then the answers start to come in a rush. My many business and accounting students excel at this part: “competition,” “free markets,” “profit,” “entrepreneurialism,” “global system,” “financialization.” In two minutes we have a list on the board that the whole room admires for its obvious goodness.

Then I walk to the other half of the enormous blackboard, and say, “Ok, what is not capitalism? What parts of your lives do not operate according to the logic of the list we just made?” Dead silence, uncomfortable rustlings, averted eyes. This is always the hard part. This year, as usual, one of the more conservative students in the room yells out: “the bailout!” “Subsidies,” follow quickly. Then a long, long pause. I smile encouragingly and wait. The next to come is government services – “public education,” “social security,” “medicare” – leading to a discussion of the ways in which those things can also be seen as contributing to capitalism by allowing employers to pay lower wages. But everything goes on the board; affirmation is one of my pedagogical signatures.

Then there is another lengthy pause, although this time the students are looking at me or the board. Discomfort has been overcome by curiosity: why is this discussion not over yet? What can I be reaching for here? Eventually non-profits, volunteering, and churches are called out. Someone finally thinks of barter and communes. And then there is another long baffled pause. Finally I say, tapping the capitalism side of the board, “Think about the last 24 hours of your life. What part of it was not guided by this logic?” And then, at last, friends and family make it on the list. “You bet!” I say. “When you left for college did your parents present you with a bill for changing 3,000 diapers, 200 days lost from work staying home with you when you were sick, not to mention clothes, braces, and athletic gear?” Everyone cracks up. Humor is the great educational lubricant. If I can make them laugh I can get them to rethink damn near anything.

Then I walk to the center of the board and say, “Ok, now how is this logic (I tap the capitalism side of the board) spreading over here (the not-capitalism side)?” This is easier: the Facebook and Twitter IPOs have everyone thinking about businesses plans for social media. Someone uses the word “encroaching.”

Then the final question, framing the discussion for the next few weeks: “Which side of the board do you want the environment on?” And all of a sudden the formerly obvious rightness of neoliberal environmental management starts to look suspect, even a little radical in their eyes.

### **Challenging the Neoliberal University and Society: Homelessness and Experiential Learning (Sandra Zupan)**

This tale demonstrates the potential for challenging the neoliberal university by engaging students outside of the classroom setting. Moreover, by focusing on the multiple dimensions associated with homelessness, this engaged learning project also explores and challenges dominant societal stereotypes, approaches and consequences of homelessness, many of which are produced and exacerbated by neoliberalism. Nonetheless, in spite of the pedagogical and broader societal benefits associated with experiential learning (focused on social justice issues), this tale also briefly reflects on particular challenges that the neoliberal university imposes for engaged pedagogy.

I first taught “Concepts and Methods in Geography” at the University of Kentucky in 2011. While this 200-level course is required for geography majors, students mostly considered it “sort of dry” and “unnecessary [for their careers]”. In an attempt to make the new semester a more engaging and meaningful experience for the students, I decided to experiment. In the Fall of 2012 I designed a new project which built upon my community service and research on homelessness with the Catholic Action Center (CAC). Founded in 2000 on the principles of the Catholic Worker Movement, CAC is a house of hospitality in Lexington, KY that has provided homeless veterans, mentally ill, vulnerable women, former offenders and other guests in free, volunteer-donated and run services with no strings attached.<sup>5</sup> The project incorporated a reading on homelessness (Mitchell, 2011), visits to local shelters, making short videos as part of a local homelessness awareness campaign organized by CAC, followed by classroom presentations of students’ videos and discussions on students’ pre-existing and newly gained

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<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Worker Movement was founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933. The movement’s underlying principle was social justice change that included a complete rejection of capitalism, as well as public welfare system and government assistance. The Movement – influenced by Roman Catholic traditions, Peter Kropotkin, Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Jefferson and the Industrial Workers of the World, lacks a uniform identity and authority and is currently comprised of over 200 autonomous communities which directly respond to local unmet needs (Boehrer, 2001; The Catholic Worker Movement, 2014).



perspectives on homelessness. In what follows I analyze and summarize reflections that students provided in the final exam.<sup>6</sup>

Overwhelmingly, students enjoyed the project and acknowledged multiple values of experiential learning. First, the project facilitated comprehensive learning and the opportunity to reflect on complex processes and consequences surrounding homelessness in the United States, including economic and employment shifts, cost of living, housing, mental illness and increasingly punitive laws. In particular, the assigned reading by Don Mitchell: “was superb in shedding light on just why homelessness has increased since the 1980’s... In reality, we learn, homelessness is the product of a capitalistic society, plus, the criminalization of the homeless that has been put in effect makes it even harder for homeless people to survive in urban settings” (Andrew), and that “... there is no way to completely eliminate homelessness because in order for that to happen there has to be a set of major economic, political and social changes” (Stephen)<sup>7</sup>.

Second, students appreciated visits to local shelters, as this direct engagement “helped to literally put a face on homelessness” and increase awareness of, especially, homeless veterans and mental illnesses (Holly). Students found the visits and interviews of homeless individuals and service providers invaluable for gaining first-hand insights, reflecting and reconsidering their own preconceived biases, namely the belief that homelessness is solely a personal choice and a consequence of poor choices, flaws and unwillingness to work: “Prior to this class I very much believed that homeless people are just lazy and they were doing absolutely nothing to help themselves to a better life” (Olivia). Nearly all students in the class admitted having similar stereotypes of homeless people as being shaped by socio-cultural and political values, namely individual responsibility and opportunities that inevitably result from hard work. Students additionally recognized that their mainly rural upbringing in Kentucky, along with media, further perpetuated the stereotypes of homeless as “lazy, bums and drunks” (Aaron). Finally, this project pushed students “out of their comfort zone, to think outside the box” (Jason), thereby enabling a “deeper understanding of society, not only through books and in a classroom” (John) and also “increased compassion and sense of civic duty” (Erin).

I found this project effective in challenging discourses and practices of neoliberalism in three ways. First, widespread perceptions and portrayals of homelessness as both a failure and responsibility of an individual were deemed false as, instead, students learned about policies that exacerbated homelessness yet

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<sup>6</sup> I sought students’ consent to use portions of their final exam. All student names have been changed.

<sup>7</sup> All visits were arranged and supervised by the CAC’s co-founder who also closely interacts with CAC’s guests on a daily basis. Interactions occurred only in the case of a prior consent, while students underwent a classroom-based preparation to ensure sensible conduct.

reduced social spending, increased criminalization of homelessness and pushed service provision to the hands of underfunded nonprofits which cannot keep up with the growing societal needs. Second, the video/awareness campaign component took this project beyond enhancing students' awareness of the complexities of contemporary homelessness towards fostering engagement to alleviate contemporary injustices. Third, this project significantly departed from an increasingly large, impersonal and standardized, multiple-choice focused university classroom. Instead, the project facilitated students' personal journey, reflection and growth. It also created a creative and enriching space in which classroom and out-of-classroom activities synergistically shaped critical and engaged learning. Further, the project put a human face to students and their backgrounds, which enhanced meaningful student-instructor interactions.

However, although engaged learning can deliver multiple learning and societal benefits, I also wish to emphasize that the neoliberal university severely hinders such efforts, especially due to the now prevalent non-tenure-track faculty trends. The temporary, uncertain, underpaid and otherwise discouraging nature of non-tenure-track positions notably undermines engaged pedagogy. Such approaches require additional time and commitment, including building relationships and trust with local organizations.

### **Preparing the environment: conversations to establish connection (Carrie Mott)**

Seventy-two students took my Fall, 2012 course on the geography of cities in the United States. My background in anarchist organizing and Montessori education means that I'm always looking to create some sense of community in my classroom, to lessen the intimidation that undergraduates often feel towards instructors and professors, and to decenter my role as authority. The majority of those enrolled were non-major first and second year students, who were fulfilling a university requirement. I struggled to envision a scenario where I felt connected to such a large and likely disinterested group of students, particularly since the previous semester I'd taught a class with only 20 students, the majority of whom I got to know fairly well as the semester progressed, simply through the intimacy of class discussions.

I decided to experiment with my large class. I based 5% of the semester grade on the requirement that each student meet with me individually for 10 minutes early in the semester. The goal of these meetings was simple: to get to know each other a bit, establish some common ground, and (hopefully) create a classroom climate in which my students were willing to invest in me and the course because they believed I was invested in them. I estimated that if I met with 2 or 3 a day, I could have them done in the first six weeks of the term without it adding too much to my workload. There was a hectic week of meetings in mid-September, but for the most part I was able to keep these encounters limited to two or three days a

week, and I rarely had more than 2 or 3 in a day. In the end, I met with all but one of my seventy-two students.

I tried to keep the meetings as private as possible, although this was difficult as a graduate student instructor with a shared office. Instead of meeting in my office, I found a rarely used conference room and had students meet me there. Occasionally, the conference room would be busy and so we would go sit outside, or try to find some other quiet place. Each meeting began the same way: I explained that they really were just a chance for us to get to know each other, no secret geography quiz or anything like that. I would say something like, “We are here in this huge university where teachers don’t usually know students and students don’t really talk to their teachers, and these meetings are my way of trying to do things differently.” Many commented that this was the first time they had ever met with one of their instructors or professors and that they had never had an instructor or professor require students to meet with them. Several said that they really appreciated it because it made me seem much less intimidating (funny because I had been so concerned with my own feelings of intimidation teaching in a large lecture hall for the first time!). A few looked like they just wanted it over with—but these were a minority and most warmed up to me as the semester continued.

I started each meeting by explaining the reason behind it, then asking the student to tell me where they were from, their year in school, and what they were studying. Then I would tell them a bit about me—that I was also a student, I do research on the United States/Mexico border, I’m from a small place in eastern Washington that is nothing like Seattle. Many wanted to know why I came to the University of Kentucky and what I thought of life in that part of the country. After the introductions, the flow of conversation was unique to each student. I turned the focus toward their interests. I tried to gain a sense of what their lives and backgrounds were like. I wanted to know what was important to them.

I was motivated to do these meetings because of what I thought it would do for my students. Basically, I hoped to convey that I cared about who they were *as individuals* to set the stage for better discussion and class participation throughout the rest of the semester. In actuality, these meetings did much more for me than I ever dreamed. They alleviated anxiety about things that really would have bothered me in the past and gave context for behaviors that I would previously have just written off as rude. It helped me to understand that undergraduates at a giant anonymizing university like ours are interested, diverse, busy people with complex lives. Too often, I’ve heard undergraduate educators speak disparagingly about their students, following a disturbingly common trope that “they” don’t care, aren’t interested in learning, or are just too apathetic to bother with.

The meetings were incredibly revealing and I learned a great deal about the people who were enrolled in the class. I learned that the guy that looked so checked-out everyday had a baby daughter who was born the first week of classes

and that he was juggling nascent fatherhood with his final year of school and trying to graduate. I learned that the fellow in the back who stepped out a lot to answer his phone had started a landscaping business during his first year to earn a little cash. Unexpectedly it had taken off, demanding a lot of his time and frequently interrupting his school day. I learned that the woman who sat up front and always had the quickest response to my open ended questions was a military veteran, that she had a daughter, that she was periodically homeless as a child, and that she was the first in her family ever to go to college. I learned that the two guys who kept a running under-their-breath conversation throughout my lectures were first year students, hometown best friends and room-mates, and best of all, they very respectfully responded to my request that they stop talking during my lectures when I spoke to one of them about it in our meeting. I learned that the young man who often kept his ear-buds in during lecture had just transferred in from a community college in another state, and moved to Kentucky to get away from difficulties in a home neighborhood with a culture of drugs and violence.

These meetings were my attempt to counter the alienation that has become a standard part of education in the neoliberal university. The resulting personal connection meant that my students and I remained human to one another, diverse people with complex lives and stories. In the end, I considered the experiment a great success. Through course reviews that semester, many of my students reported that they felt that I really cared about them, and that I really wanted them there—comments I had never seen before on teaching evaluations. More importantly, the meetings helped me to view students in a much more positive light and face some of my own anxieties about teaching. Neoliberalizing universities do present significant barriers to a relationship-based teaching approach. However, it is possible to chip away at these barriers if we think creatively and are open to experimentation in our teaching praxis.

### **Lessons from the Quebec student movement (Anne-Marie Debbané)**

Now more than ever before in our nation, we need education to make schools places where the conditions for democratic consciousness can be established and flourish (hooks, 2009: 16).

In February 2012, university and college students across Quebec embarked on what became a six-month strike to oppose the provincial government's proposed 75% tuition fee hike. At its peak, the strike generated mass mobilizations and demonstrations that reached upward of 300,000 people. In May, the government passed repressive "anti-protest" legislation that undermined the students' ability to organize spontaneous protests, imposed strict geographical limits for public demonstrations, and carried the threat of stiff fines (*The Globe and Mail*, May 18, 2012). It was a hardline attempt to crush the student movement – but in fact created the exact opposite effect. Swelling numbers of ordinary citizens had joined the students to march every night in the streets of Montreal, banging pots and pans (the "casseroles" protests) in great acts of solidarity, defying what was widely viewed

as the government's attack on basic constitutional rights. By September, the students could finally claim a huge (but partial) victory when the newly elected government repealed the planned tuition hike.

Having grown up and gone to school in Montreal, I could not help but feel a powerful connection to the Quebec student movement as I followed the unfolding drama with a strong sense of pride, awe, and excitement. What was so remarkable about the movement was not only that it posed a direct challenge to the Quebec government's neoliberal project for higher education, but it also became one of the most important victories against neoliberal trajectories in Canada. Even more, as Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois – the former spokesperson for CLASSE (Coalition large de l'association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante), the leading student organization of the movement – declared earlier on, the student movement had “already won for the fact that a whole generation” had become “politicized”, having learned “what is power, what is repression and what is social justice” (*The Guardian*, May 30, 2012).

It is with this in mind that I was motivated to incorporate the topic of student movements into my curriculum for my World Regional Geography course, which I teach at San Diego State University. I hoped to strike a chord with students by creating course content that would speak directly to their personal experiences, and encourage them to problematize how they become enrolled in neoliberalized landscapes of education (Neary, 2012). I was especially interested in demonstrating ways in which student struggles within the university are embedded in broader political and economic processes of neoliberal restructuring. My goal was to cast light on the idea of the university as a “terrain for debate, contestation of institutional politics, [and] re-appropriation of resources,” and thus a key site in which wider social struggles are played out – and sometimes even won (Caffentzis and Federici, 2007).

From North America to Europe, to Central and Latin America, to Africa and Asia, we explored student struggles in different places around the world.<sup>8</sup> It is on the recent struggles in Quebec, however, that we spent the most time and effort. There were various components that made up this part of the curriculum, including lectures, class and online discussions, assigned readings, and a short research paper. The purpose of the lecture was to situate the recent Quebec student movement within a longer history of socio-cultural and political struggles against

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<sup>8</sup> Quite serendipitously, a campus forum held early in the semester brought together student leaders from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Chile, and Quebec, and thus provided an excellent opportunity to extend our discussions beyond the classroom. The event was organized by *Reclaim San Diego*, a campus-based student organization working to stop tuition fee increases. I had offered extra-credit to students who attended the event and wrote reflection papers. While I recognize that this makes me (even more) complicit in perpetuating the fetishism of grades (see Canally: <http://antipodefoundation.org/2012/03/30/intervention-wheres-our-agency-the-role-of-grading-in-the-neoliberalization-of-public-universities/>), and was initially strongly opposed to the culture of extra-credit that seemed so prevalent on my campus, I am now more open to the idea of resorting to the use of neoliberal incentives toward achieving progressive ends.

the domination of the Catholic Church and English capital; examine the neoliberal context of education reforms; and demonstrate the different ways in which the student movement built solidarity networks with labor, environmental, indigenous, and civic movements.

For the following class, I had organized for Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois to join us as a guest lecturer by way of a Skype video call. Prior to this, I had given assigned readings (as recommended by Nadeau-Dubois), which students discussed in groups, as well as prepared questions. Having Nadeau-Dubois join us in the classroom via Skype was definitely a highlight as it gave the students the opportunity to interact directly with a student activist who played a prominent role in one of the largest social movements in Quebec and even Canadian history (Garland 2012; Solty 2012). Key themes that Nadeau-Dubois discussed included the corporatization of the university, student unionism, direct democracy, engaged citizenship, and the concept of education as a universal right and public good.

Students had the opportunity to continue class discussions with each other through online discussion forums that I created on the course's Blackboard site. My intention was to allow students to draw contrasts and comparisons between the student struggles in Quebec and the crisis of higher education in California, pointing out that tuition fees for state universities had increased by almost 300% over the last ten years. In order to further promote student voices, I also posted articles about the Occupy Student Debt movement in the United States, and a translated transcript of a speech made by Camila Vallejo, a prominent leader from the Chilean student movement. What I found particularly provocative about Vallejo's speech was that she not only addressed problems around access to education, she also raised critical questions about how Chile's model of education has served the material and ideological reproduction of an unjust and unequal social order.

Strikingly, the subject of student struggles generated the greatest interest out of all the online discussions that took place over the semester. Students overwhelmingly demonstrated strong admiration for the Quebec and Chilean student movements, while also recognizing that the creeping privatization of state universities in California was cause for alarm. Many expressed their frustration at how rising tuition fees and student debt appeared to have become normalized, leading to general complacency among students.<sup>9</sup> As one student declared, "We need to follow the example of students in Quebec where rising tuition wasn't taken seriously in politics until the student made it a serious issue." Others lamented that

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that there have been large student mobilizations on campuses across California around issues of tuition and student debt. Student activism at San Diego State has been comparatively weak. In a different space it would certainly be worth exploring reasons why this seems to be the case.

students already had overburdened schedules from studying and working full-time and didn't have time to protest.

The last point offers perhaps one of the more important insights that I gained from teaching about student movements. I have come to realize that the value in teaching about student movements lies not in its potential to inspire student activism, which it did not, as desirable as this would have been. Rather, the focus needs to be on the way it provides a key opportunity for students to connect their knowledge to their own personal circumstances, and to understand how those circumstances are articulated with a broader politics of social struggle (Di-Mauro, 2012; hooks, 1994). And hopefully to also recognize that they too have the power to make history. That said, let me end with the gratifying words of one student:

Camila's speech had me think in ways I hadn't before. I attend school simply to become a skilled worker, and learn what I need to do. I now realize that being a real student takes more than that. Our education should be inspiring us to be concerned with social change in the world. We should want more than just what's in the textbooks - we need to look further. All of these student movements are really inspiring to me. So much community and unity, striving to change what isn't right...With what we are facing right now, we should all take a lesson in this.

## Discussion

These tales provide examples of how educators can contest processes of neoliberalization in the university classroom through our praxis. While each story exhibits distinct pedagogical methods, struggles, and learning outcomes, we wish to highlight shared themes from each of the tales in order to explore the political potential that critical pedagogy provides within the changing university environment. First, the tales offer strategies that disrupt neoliberalizing processes and their effects, especially through a focus on the notion of alienation—both between students and teachers, as well as between the classroom and the world outside. Second, the tales call for recognition of students as producers of knowledge within the classroom, highlighting students' personal perspectives, and decentering the role of the instructor as the authority. Third, the tales show the importance of experimental practice as a way of opening new spaces of possibility in higher education. We conclude this discussion with a call for the incorporation of a critical pedagogy into our efforts as educators of geography and spatial thinking.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> There were many other relevant questions brought up through the tales and our discussions, such as the viability of implementing anarchist strategies into hierarchized and institutionalized universities, the ethical challenges of community based academic projects, and the obstacles faced in the implementation of the methods discussed in each tale. Such topics, however, were unfortunately outside the scope of our focus on the dynamics of neoliberalism and critical pedagogy in higher education in the United States. Each of these topics could certainly be an article in its own right and we hope that others utilize this paper as a springboard to continue conversations about how we might more effectively challenge the oppressive structures of the university from within.

Each of the tales presented here confronts the problem of alienation—the distancing and anonymizing relationship between the university, educators, and students, which characterizes our present moment in undergraduate education. Geographers have discussed how variegated processes of neoliberalization have increasingly instrumentalized the purposes of education towards equipping students to become competitive and entrepreneurial in the global marketplace. Meanwhile, institutions of higher education have been increasingly subject to close financial oversight and curriculum management (Castree and Sparke, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Kitchin and Sidaway, 2006; Radice, 2013). Furthermore, Mitchell (2003) shows how students are taught in the neoliberal university how to be “globally oriented state subjects” who are governable, patriotic, and entrepreneurial in the context of capitalist globalization. It is in this context of neoliberalizing education that alienation – from one another, from the joy of learning, from creative interventions in the world – fosters indifference in students (Russo, 2004) and it is here that we see the vital importance of embracing a caring and critical pedagogy.

As class sizes, workloads for instructors, and the prevalence of online communication in lieu of face-to-face interaction increase, there is less time for students and teachers to interact with one another. It is crucial that we work to bridge the distance between students and subject matter, as well as between teacher and student. Mott’s tale directly illustrates how personal encounters can allow our understanding of students to move beyond prevalent tropes of apathy and disinterest. Meanwhile, Debbane’ shows the power of bringing American undergraduates into conversation with other students through the shared experience of student debt, enabling students to connect resistance efforts in Montreal to their own situations in the United States. Geographers have a unique opportunity to counter the alienating environment of the neoliberal university by introducing our students to spatial thinking, assisting in the development of an ability to frame critical questions about how our world is produced while also fostering a desire to change it for the better through a politics of solidarity (Russo, 2004; Kitchin and Sidaway, 2006; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012). Such interactions allow us to better understand the questions, concerns, needs, and demands of our undergraduate students, while also recognizing their individual creative capacities to produce valuable knowledge within the classroom.

In order to challenge these processes of alienation, we must strategize ways to “intervene, alter, even disrupt” the conventional university classroom (hooks 1994: 7). We can do this by shifting emphasis away from standardized outcomes and towards supporting and challenging our students. For us, that means framing the classroom as a space of possibility, knowledge creation, and excitement (hooks, 1994). Rather than viewing our students as passive bodies “receiving” knowledge, we should instead see them as individuals who are actively involved and contributing to the learning process. As we see in the tales, this can take place through personal experiences, class discussions, or individual reflections.



Incorporating the knowledge that students bring with them is one way to encourage a critique of a world they already know, but from a new and unfamiliar vantage point. Using a model of open-ended questioning to explore capitalism, R.L. emphasizes that student contributions are valid and valued as she enables them to come to their own understandings through strategic guidance. There may be initial discomfort when students are asked to think critically about concepts as deceptively normalized as capitalism. Ultimately, however, this pedagogical process facilitates student engagement and makes it possible for students to challenge previously held convictions that can then be scrambled and set anew.

Another way instructors can engage students' assumptions about the world is through experiential learning that encourages work across boundaries of social difference. By putting her class into conversation with homeless individuals, Sandra Zupan encouraged her students to reflect on their own privileges and positionalities as student researchers. Such off-campus engagement can enable students to develop the kind of intimate knowledge and empathy that meaningfully challenges prevalent stereotypes. Throughout the course of the semester, Zupan's students were able to see that homelessness is connected to the same phenomena that jeopardize university education—rising costs, privatization, and the capitalistic “boot-straps” model of everyday life. As the comments from her students reveal, their attitudes and understandings of homelessness changed dramatically as a result of this experience. Experiential learning projects such as this can be powerful, so long as we are purposeful and conscious about how they are employed. We must be able to negotiate educational experiences with community members in such a way that avoids ‘poverty tourism’ while also having conversations with students about the dominant societal myths about houselessness and the politically important distinctions between charity and solidarity, as well as pity and empathy.

As the corporate model of university education becomes increasingly standardized, it is crucial that we continue to teach outside of this restrictive paradigm, in whatever ways we can. Pedagogical experimentation is an important way in which we can challenge commonplace “one-size-fits-all” approaches to education. Rather than relying on standards of success that do little to reflect student engagement and learning, experimentation in the classroom offers the opportunity to create educational experiences that encourage our students to interact critically with the world around them in new and more thoughtful ways. These tales call into question the myths of ‘best practices,’ recognizing that each instructor and each set of students can draw upon their respective and combined strengths to create a more interactive, inventive, and rewarding classroom experience.

Finding ways to lessen the distance between educators and students can be a powerful asset in the pedagogical development of a more critical political consciousness. For example, Carrie Mott's meetings facilitated an interpersonal connection that contributed to a deeper intimacy in class discussions and lectures. The comfort between teacher and student enabled meaningful and honest

discussion of topics which, due to their sensitivity, are often avoided in introductory courses. Something as deceptively mundane as a 10-15 minute conversation between teacher and student brings with it great potential to shift the relations of power that dominate the typical lecture hall. While such an attempt certainly does not subvert the institutional hierarchy (her students were, after all, meeting with her as a course requirement) the endeavor worked to bridge the vast distance that often separates university students from educators and vice versa. Mott's experiment nurtured a caring and mutual investment in one another that is not typically experienced in the neoliberal university classroom, something that was ultimately as valuable for the instructor as it was for her students.

Debbané's experiment was both a social and a technological one. Bringing a student strike organizer to her classroom via Skype enabled her to incorporate an unfolding protest movement in real time. As she points out, there is often a desire on the part of an instructor to teach social movements with the hope of inspiring students to action. While such effects are difficult to measure, we do see students' personal connections to the material, revealing the success of Debbané's intervention. As her students' comments show, the experience of learning about social movements and engaging through Skype enabled them to connect their own knowledge of economic hardship with student protests in other parts of the world. Debbané incorporated technology, not just for technology's sake, but to increase the interaction between her students and others with whom they shared similar concerns.

We can more meaningfully guide our students through the process of critically evaluating the world around them by embracing a pedagogy oriented around valuing students' unique knowledges alongside a view of the classroom as a space of possibility. The transformative potential of the classroom lies in the openness of instructors to creative alternatives to the standard lecture format of the university classroom. This means rethinking the ways in which we welcome students into our classrooms, the ways that we engage them with material, as well as reconsidering our own positionality as instructors. As we work to expand our students' understandings of the ways in which spaces are produced and how this matters for people's lives within them, it is important to also recognize the space of the classroom as a place of transformation, connection, and potential.

### **Tomorrow's Classroom**

We see the university as an increasingly challenging, but vitally important site of political struggle. Using the four tales as our point of departure, the purpose of this article has been to illustrate how everyday moments in the classroom are indeed politically transformative and give us reason to be hopeful in otherwise trying times. We argue that there are positive, innovative, and instructive moments arising despite, or even *because of*, the challenges posed by the neoliberalization of the university. Such moments carry with them the potential to incorporate a caring

and critical pedagogy that meaningfully engages both teacher and student in cultivating an understanding of our own places in systems of oppression.

A classroom praxis oriented toward liberatory education certainly comes with challenges and experimentation necessarily yields new questions, such as: How can we cultivate critical reflection outside of the classroom as well as within it? How does one teach about difficulties facing people who are somehow Othered, in ways that encourage solidarity? Within a restrictive educational structure and with limited time and resources, how can we actually challenge the hierarchies between educator and student? Is it possible to motivate relatively privileged young people to take action in support of political movements that challenge the hegemony of capitalism and other systems of oppression from which these students may benefit?

While our intention here has been to think creatively and constructively about how we can continue to bring radical perspectives into an increasingly corporatized university environment, we also realize that the difficulties are real. Our optimism does not change the fact that universities in the United States are founded in the very systems that we seek to contest—racism, imperialism, classism, sexism, and otherwise oppressive relations of power. Nor do the practices of academics, despite our awareness and good intentions, exist in a vacuum within this institutional setting. We are certainly all implicated in the perpetuation of unjust systems (Razack, 2001). Our goal however, as educators concerned with social justice, is to overturn these oppressive forces as much as we are able through anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-sexist practices in the classroom that variously counter the current neoliberal ethic in higher education.

By confronting alienation in new and inspiring ways, these tales demonstrate that the classroom can be a space of connection, empathy, and shared struggle. By relating to our students as knowledge producers in their own right, we embrace the classroom as a transformative space, reclaiming the political potential of the university from its problematic past and reigniting our hopes for the future of education. Though the most important sites of education (and praxis and transformation) in the future may have nothing at all to do with the university, we see the immediate importance of challenging and reclaiming the university classroom from the inside. We agree with Foucault and others interested in the relationship between space, power, and resistance that social space embodies the potential both for oppression and resistance in equal measure: “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1978: 95). We see the potential to fundamentally challenge the traditional higher education classroom from the inside, which is at once an extension of capitalist, masculinist, white supremacist, and colonial nation-states—and is simultaneously a primary space in which to resist those very systems.

As geographers with an ongoing disciplinary history of radical dissent, which may have emerged precisely *because of* our problematic past and complicity in racist and colonial practices, we are uniquely positioned to address oppressive

systems and structures through a critical investigation of space and place. In other words, if we agree space is something produced through social interactions, which are themselves imbued with unequal power relations, then it is up to us to counter the production and maintenance of oppressive spaces with the development of liberatory spaces to open the possibility for more just and equitable futures. Neoliberalism is just another iteration of an economic system based in inequitable social relations—relations that have real, material consequences for people's lives. Though it may seem daunting, this gives us hope because all social relations can be countered through the everyday practices of those who are committed to social change. We must continue to challenge ourselves and each other to contest, rather than accommodate, the oppressive systems within which we operate. These tales, and the many other experiences playing out on the frontlines of the neoliberalizing university, remind us that there is still hope for higher education. We just have to make it happen.

### **Acknowledgements**

We are very grateful to our anonymous reviewers, whose suggestions contributed to a much stronger paper. Thoughtful and insightful conversations with members of the 2012-2013 University of Kentucky Critical Pedagogy Working Group were the impetus for this article. We are indebted to all who were present for our panel discussion, *Tales from the Neoliberal University*, at the Los Angeles AAG in 2013. We appreciate Lawrence Berg for encouraging us to create a paper out of the panel, and we are very thankful for Levi Gahman's support throughout the submission process.

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