

Student Evaluations, Neoliberal Managerialism, and Networks of Mistrust

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Cyrus Duffleman, the beaten-down, adjunct professor protagonist of Alex Kudera's *Fight for Your Long Day* (2010), experiences any number of daily humiliations that convince him of his worthlessness—low pay, no benefits, little if any respect from his tenured colleagues and bosses. Perhaps the most direct humiliation, though, comes from his own students, who describe him on their student evaluations as “a ‘wannabe,’ ‘a fake who fails to inspire,’ with a ‘voice worse than screeching chalk,’” assessments with which he often agrees (Kudera 237). Such abusive sentiments are not uncommon on student evaluations. In a recent piece for *Slate*, Rebecca Schuman reproduced colleagues' student comments, and found an “overwhelmingly depressing and depressingly unsurprising” list of judgements about hair, clothing, body shape, and attractiveness, along with demeaning comments about female intelligence or teachers' race or political beliefs (“Needs Improvement”). None of the comments discussed the actual act of teaching itself. This should be surprising—they are student evaluations of teaching—but it is distressingly common, and it points to the main problem with student evaluations: they do not evaluate teaching.

Student evaluations are an unpleasant end-of-the-semester ritual for many, a chance (supposedly) to see what the students really thought of you that, more often than not, opens a window onto bilious rejoinders to poor grades or perceived slights. They constitute one part of the vast river of information that modern higher education devotes itself to collecting, and while they are often unpleasant, their increasing omnipresence across disciplines, schools, and levels has a tendency to render them innocuous in most eyes despite their widely-reported flaws. Teachers almost always scorn evaluations when they are mentioned, deriding them as customer satisfaction surveys, popularity contests, or opportunities for cowards to take anonymous potshots, but they rarely mention the much more troubling consequences of evaluations' institutional support and presence. Even ignoring student evaluations' failure to provide meaningful data because of real methodological limitations (chief among them that evaluations tend to quantify traits that are irrelevant to their stated objective of measuring teaching effectiveness), repeated studies suggest that student evaluations are biased against females, for example, a pretty damning charge when, according to the National Centre for Education Statistics, as of 2013 females made up 48.8% of all instructional faculty (53.6% of all part-time faculty) and 47.3% of all grad assistants.¹ Given the prominent (and, in some cases, exclusive) role that student evaluations play in performance reviews of graduate students, adjuncts, and non-tenure-track faculty and promotion and tenure reviews of tenure-track faculty, these well known flaws take on a much more disturbing import.

Though student evaluations and their flaws have been much commented on lately—in addition to recent coverage in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Slate*, and NPR’s education blog, major newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have also devoted coverage to this issue—there has been little attention paid to student evaluations’ place and function in the larger ideological framework of contemporary higher education. That is, the flaws of student evaluations are not isolated from the larger issues threatening higher education today, but rather are symptoms of the way neoliberal policies have reshaped the university and the roles of teachers and students within it over the past three decades. By virtue of its position as “a hub institution of our time,” higher education has come to serve as a prime venue for neo-liberalization in American society (Williams “Deconstructing” B7). In particular, student evaluations function as a tool in the restructuring of higher education into a service industry that offers a saleable commodity (the “college experience”) with a recognizable brand (Harvard or Princeton, for example) to student-consumers who are in the process repackaged as branded advertisements to entice future student-consumers. Faculty in this model are less teachers than experience managers, acting according to the stated preferences, qualities, and characteristics of the brand. In order to fully implement this model, though, education must be standardized and homogenized and quality control monitoring must take the place of assessment. Student evaluations, then, represent one arm of the proliferation of easily quantifiable (and thus comparable) data points within the “responsible” and “accountable” neoliberal university. This shift in function has been accompanied by a shift in governance away from faculty and students and toward an administration convinced of the value of student evaluations, and the overall effect of this change has been the creation of networks of mistrust between teachers and students, teachers and other teachers, and teachers and themselves. Ultimately, challenges to (and proposed reforms of) student evaluations can be successful only if they are framed as challenges to the vision of higher education to which student evaluations belong.

Neoliberal Managerialism: Neoliberalism Meets Managerial Democracy

I want to locate the significance of student evaluations within the shifting understanding of the goals and purpose of higher education and the roles of faculty and students in the post-Golden Age (1945-75) university. As part of the broader postwar economic boom driven by a Fordist-Keynesian welfare state, the Golden Age university massively expanded, with enrollment increasing by almost 400% (from 2.3 to 11.2 million) between 1950 and 1975 and faculty enjoying the steadiest growth rate for full-time positions of the postwar period. After initially coming under attack during the late 1960s, the combination of stagflation caused by the Nixon Shock, the end of the Bretton Woods system, and the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 all “broke the back of the Keynesian orthodoxy—as both a generative theory and as a system of government” (Peck 5). This marked the end of the postwar boom, and the Golden Age of higher education would not last the decade, either. After 1975, enrollment growth rates would drop, not returning to the double digit growth figures regularly seen during the preceding 25 years until the twenty-first century (aside from a brief resurgence in the second half of the 1980s), and academic employment was subjected to increasingly severe casualization that reduced full-time employment from almost 80% of all faculty positions in 1970 to just 50% in 2011.

The replacement of a Fordist Keynesianism with a post-Fordist neoliberalism following the crises of capitalism of the 1970s changed the environment in which higher education existed during the Golden Age by subsuming the state and civic life to the market and changing

the dominant forms of labour and employment. During the “great convulsion of world capitalism” of the 1970s and the “period of major restructuring” of the 1980s, neoliberalism consolidated itself “as the new dominant common sense, the paradigm shaping all policies,” achieving hegemony in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western nations like Chile (Gamble 21, 25).² Conceived of, at least in part, as the alternative to Keynesianism (and all other managed and interventionist systems, like socialism), neoliberalism argued for “monetarist economics [that] provided readily presentable, if ultimately flawed, ‘solutions’” to the crises of Keynesianism (Peck 5). In contrast to the Keynesian welfare state, neoliberalism is “an articulation of state, market, and citizenship that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second on the third,” repurposing the state as a guarantor of free markets and unfettered competition and civic participation as engagement with the market and its practices (Wacquant 71). At the same time, the rigidity of Fordism, with its emphasis on mass production of standardized products on a national scale, gave way to what David Harvey calls “flexible accumulation,” which favoured smaller production runs and more specialized or niche products and patterns of consumption (147). Even as neoliberalism stripped the Keynesian state of its social functions, post-Fordism rendered the nation-state largely obsolete, other than as guarantor of market freedom, privileging the multinational corporations that dominate the service, telecommunication, and financial industries. Industrial capitalism gave way to “Semiocapitalism,” or immaterial labour, which “takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value” (Berardi 21).³ The rhetoric of flexibility that characterised this shift into post-Fordism, though, masked a widespread casualization that offered security and prosperity for the elite and precariousness and continued re(or de-) skilling for a much larger segment of the population in place of the Fordist-Keynesian goal of full employment.

Eventually, during the 1980s, declining levels of state and federal funding, coupled with policy initiatives that promoted competition for sources of revenue, brought neoliberalism to the university, necessitating structural changes that shifted higher education’s mission and self-understanding. In its efforts to repurpose the state, neoliberalism emphasized a twin operation of privatization and marketization, both of which were (and continue to be) applied to higher education.⁴ The former can be seen in public institutions’ increasing reliance on tuition and fees to generate revenue as state funding has declined. In 1980-81, state funds accounted for 45.6% of all revenue for public institutions, compared to 12.9% for tuition and fees. In 2012-13, state funds accounted for just 21.1% of all revenue, while tuition and fees accounted for 20.8%.⁵ Accompanying this privatization has been an intensification of the competitive, market-based relationships between institutions of higher education that has been ongoing since the 1970s. The Nixon administration initiated widespread marketization of higher education by reformatting student aid policies, “g[iving] aid to students rather than institutions, thus making students consumers in the tertiary education market” and tying funding to schools’ abilities “to attract students and their Pell grants” (Slaughter and Leslie 44). The passage of the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980 furthered this marketization by granting schools the right to patent research developed with federal money in the hopes of actively encouraging corporate partnerships. By the 1990s, accommodating this new, market-based approach to higher education was more a survival mechanism than anything else.⁶

As institutions felt the need to secure new sources of revenue to a greater degree than during the Golden Age and higher education decision making was increasingly rooted in

financial considerations, governance structures changed, as did the role of faculty and students within the university. Following the Second World War, faculty had won the right to “determine the shape of the curriculum, the content of particular courses, or the use of particular books” largely without interference, and had a significant say in the hiring of faculty and administrators (Jencks and Riesman 15). At the same time, though, administrative power was also increasing as boards of trustees were “more likely than they once were to delegate authority to the college administration, either de jure or de facto,” particularly with regard to business, budgetary, and fundraising matters from which faculty were largely excluded from participating (Jencks and Riesman 16). As casualization of the faculty accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, the administrative presence increased, a development predicted by figures like Clark Kerr and Jacques Barzun, who saw this as natural given that “as the institution becomes more complex, the role of administration becomes more central in integrating it” (Kerr 28).⁷ Casualization made for an increasingly fragmented faculty who began to lose their ability to influence areas like the curriculum and hiring in the face of an administrative culture “becoming ever more internally consistent and cohesive” (Bousquet 11). As the elements of higher education over which administrators had gained oversight in the postwar period (like the budget) came to exert more influence over the structure and mission of institutions, the opinion of groups vested in the educational mission, like faculty, declined in institutional importance.

The rise of administration had a rather drastic impact on governance in higher education, paving the way for new management philosophies imported from the corporate world that accelerated the effects of neoliberalism and promoted new understandings of faculty and student roles. During the height of faculty and student power in the 1960s and 1970s, the dominant form of university governance was what Christopher Newfield has termed “managerial democracy,” in which “major decisions affecting one level of the institution are made by levels above it, but usually with at least formal rights of consultation and participation” (“What Was” 111). As early as the 1960s, though, the understanding of the university began to shift away from an institution tasked with fulfilling its educational mission toward a brand, or “a certain standard of performance, a certain degree of respect, a certain historical legacy, a characteristic quality of spirit” that was being sold to students and their future employers (Kerr 19). The chief goal of faculty and administrators, then—which, viewed by an administration with “the power and, crucially, the intention to remake competing campus cultures in its own image,” were increasingly synonymous—became the “[p]rotection and enhancement of the [brand’s] prestige” (Bousquet 11; Kerr 20).⁸ Acting in part under the influence of a resurgent financial sector that held profits to be the sole determining criterion of quality, higher education turned to a financially-based understanding of its own performance and prestige. Students became consumers and higher education a product to be sold to them (one part credentialing service, another part life experience) in this model. The relative autonomy that faculty had won in the immediate postwar years, in which they found increasing influence over university affairs, began to disappear as those aspects they influenced most directly became less central to the university’s purpose.

As managerial democracy became less effective and protecting and advancing the university’s brand assumed increasing importance in a field of commodified higher education, Total Quality Management (TQM) became the dominant administrative paradigm. Starting from the premise that “quality is achieved by improvement of the process,” TQM stresses efficiency above all else, using statistical analyses of production processes to reduce errors and waste

that limit output and value (Deming 12). In its academic manifestation, TQM supported an emerging rhetoric of “responsibility” and “accountability” that made “[f]inance . . . the privileged language of reality,” as “[h]ow the institution was doing was first and foremost a question of its economic situation” (Newfield Unmaking 169). This reinforced public perception that higher education (like all services) should be run as a business, an attitude that Mark Fisher calls “business ontology” (17). This view, however, is a fundamental misunderstanding of higher education’s role as a social institution, one that “exists to spend money on making . . . what is sometimes called ‘human capital’” (Newfield Unmaking 169). Though TQM’s emphasis on financial responsibility provided faculty with more information about the budget, it neither increased their formal powers nor gave them a larger voice in governance. Instead, under the guise of efficiency and accountability, administrators (with the aid of outside study groups or task forces) challenged faculty control over curricular issues that provide “faculty [with] a privileged claim on university resources and decision-making priorities” (Ginsberg 10-11). Taking over, then, and putting in place accountability mandates that make teachers responsible to administrators (and, ultimately, financial benchmarks) reduces the possibility of faculty self-governance and the educational mission’s competing claim with the bottom line as the dominant public understanding of the university’s function. As with the neoliberal subject, the neoliberal university exercises its freedoms in terms of the market. Faculty are free to research and teach with full university support as long as their activities can be packaged as part of the branded commodity for sale. It is the operations of student evaluations within this regime of privatization and marketization (and their contributions to its solidification and perpetuation) to which I now turn.

Networks of Mistrust in Commodified Higher Education

Student evaluations work within the neoliberal managerialism described above through their creation of overlapping networks of mistrust, which pit teachers against students, other teachers, and themselves. This mistrust serves a powerful political end, eroding the ability of universities to serve as sites of the development of class consciousness, solidarity, and collective action. Without the ability of teachers and students to work together (and amongst each other) in a spirit of trust, no meaningful collaboration that might increase the agency of these groups within higher education can take place. As a result, higher education jettisons its ability to support a truly enfranchised citizenry, offering in its place a supposedly lifestyle-enhancing commodity that prepares students to live in a state whose strengths and abilities are at once defined and curtailed by neoliberal policies. Today, the state “no longer needs to offer the middle classes this ideological sense of belonging” and offers in its place consumerism, with its limited horizons in which “no benefit exterior to the system can be imagined, no benefit that would not be subject to cost-benefit analysis” (Readings 52, 48).⁹ Yet this shift to consumerism offers no replacement for the development of an inner life and a civic attitude that education traditionally has been tasked with providing. In the past, access to higher education was “interwoven with the mainstream and politically powerful ideal that [graduates] w[ere] to have interesting work, economic security, and the ability to lead satisfying and insightful lives in which personal and collective social development advanced side by side” (Newfield Unmaking 3). Commodified higher education decouples the university from these possibilities and, far from the claims of those who see elevating business concerns above all else as the university finally facing up to and entering the “real world,” these changes remove higher education from its central place in the public sphere. Despite the supposed pragmatism of this “realism,” its continued

attempt to locate the value of higher education outside of the educational mission ultimately reveals the hollowness of neoliberalism's notion of society and its inability to address even those needs and desires that it promotes in students. That student evaluations disempower students and teachers from making meaningful decisions about what higher education has a duty to provide demonstrates the need for reform, if for no other reason than students deserve a better product for their money.

Student evaluations foster mistrust between teachers and students by challenging teachers' authority in the classroom, affirming administrative control over higher education, and encouraging students to see as natural the processes of management needed for a society that replaces inner life with work. The challenge student evaluations pose to teacher authority comes out of the asymmetric relationship between evaluations and the classroom space, the one location above all others in which teachers should be able to exert their institutional knowledge and experience in a governance situation. Student evaluations are not a regular part of the classroom structure, but have a discrete existence from classroom time—either a specific period is set aside for them or they are done on university webspace. This gap suggests that the teacher's authority is conditional, probationary, and granted only at the discretion of the administration. In turn, student evaluations encourage students to identify with the administrative vision of commodified higher education, in which they are consumers who rate teachers based on their ability to deliver the experience for which they have paid. This experience is not expected to entail hard work (and especially not hard work accompanied by tough grading), so despite student evaluations couching themselves in the rhetoric of learning, teachers who create situations in which actual learning takes place are rarely rewarded with positive evaluation scores.¹⁰

In this environment of mistrust, students are quick to accept the ideas of financial accountability and responsibility advanced by administration that subsume teaching effectiveness to the customer satisfaction on which they depend. Students ostensibly pay for their teachers, in this argument, who therefore must be evaluated in order to make sure that they are facilitating courses in a way that is best for the bottom line. Given the widespread acceptance that financial health is the key sign of an institution's overall quality and excellence, when students are told to consider higher education as an investment (in their future, in themselves, etc.) they begin to see philosophies like TQM not just as forms of management, but also as the content of higher education itself. The university's prestige is, in this case, something like the guarantor of the student's investment, and students have a vested interest in ensuring the satisfaction of future customers in order to maintain that prestige. However, that the chief method for them to do so is student evaluations naturalizes surveillance and self-surveillance, both of which are necessary in TQMlike systems. Student evaluations are framed as opportunities for teachers to get feedback on their teaching and to develop professionally by adapting their teaching practices in response to it. Students see, then, that a professional career is one of continuous evaluation and understand that they are in competition not only with other students, but also with the evaluative data that accompanies their completed purchase of a particular educational brand. The end result is a system of higher education designed for "triggering a 'chain reaction' by producing 'enterprising subjects' who in turn will reproduce, expand, and reinforce competitive relations between themselves" (Dardot and Laval). However, with no other way to recognise quality or growth, students expect their higher education investment to provide them with the materials for professional success, as "labor [i]s the most essential part in [our] lives, the most specific and personalized," the sphere in which we "invest [our] specific competences, [our]

creative, innovative and communicative energies . . . the best part of [our] intellectual capacities” (Berardi 76, 78).¹¹ Students are encouraged to desire this because it is what a commodified higher education, one that sells a brand, can provide; and mistrust between students and teachers means that students discipline teachers who do not directly provide them with what the brand guarantees.

Beyond this disciplining student evaluations also foster mistrust between teachers through their quantified nature, which contributes to the competitive atmosphere of higher education. Evaluations facilitate easier comparison and ranking of teachers and further fragmenting a population whose power and influence on campus has declined through casualization and the solidification of administrative tactics. When teachers receive their student evaluation results, they are often formatted as an explicit comparison between teachers and the rest of their department, school, or university, with average scores right next to the teacher’s own score. By making a direct comparison, these evaluation results reinforce the validity of student satisfaction as the gauge of teacher effectiveness and offer specific data points to which the administration can hold teachers accountable. At the same time, the data necessarily inflects other modes of teaching evaluation, like peer observations, which must use the idea of teaching that results in high evaluation scores as some kind of assumed base of good teaching because that kind of teaching is recognized by the administration. Tenure and promotion, hiring, and contract extension increasingly rely on demonstrations of teaching effectiveness, for which student evaluation scores serve as a shorthand that allows candidates to be ranked, sorted, and dealt with appropriately. That is, the quantified nature of student evaluations combines with the finance-based understanding of higher education as a whole to elevate improving one’s scores to level of a responsibility for all teachers. As neoliberal managerialism has spread throughout higher education, teachers have come to be permanently “on the market,” in the sense that professional success and advancement occur in an increasingly competitive environment even after one has secured a job both because that job is increasingly likely to be part-time, and a competitive, market-based approach is deemed to be the most effective way of determining value and worth. This environment renders teachers unable to meaningfully engage with each other through discussions on teaching that might come out of peer observations and thus unable to increase their power within higher education as a whole. Like students, teachers come to realize that they are engaged in a competition amongst themselves and with the data that is produced about them.

Teachers come to expect it, and to shape their own practices to work within, this competitive environment early on, with the spectre of an oversupplied and ultra-competitive job market pushing graduate students into an ever earlier regime of professionalization in the hopes of succeeding at what seems to be a zero-sum game. Once out of graduate school, the competition ramps up, as “[t]he faculty workforce often voluntarily competes with each other for funding, raises, course relief, and so forth and tends to view competition— even competition for wage increases lower than the cost of living— as ‘natural’” (Bousquet 107). For the increasing majority of precariously employed academics, competition is simply part of the ambient experience of life in academe. Solidarity is, in this environment, a difficult process, particularly given the uneven levels of significance attached to each semester’s evaluations: tenured faculty are free largely to ignore them, while non-tenured faculty (particularly those who are precariously employed) cannot ignore any evaluation if they hope to keep their jobs. Where Richard Ohmann could once frame teachers’ objections to evaluations of their teaching by students or peers in terms of the norms of professionalism, neoliberal managerialism’s

elevation of competition and accountability to guiding principles for higher education has turned observation of teaching into a particularly alienating process.¹² Though most teachers use observations to initiate conversations about pedagogy and to encourage collaboration on teaching across and between members of the department, under neoliberal managerialism teaching must always be seen to be exceptional lest the teacher lose some sort of competitive advantage. This has the effect of squelching the very developments that observations are intended to foster, because observations rarely focus on, and teachers rarely admit to, failures, despite a frank discussion of a failure or missed opportunity in the classroom often serving as the springboard for real teaching breakthroughs. Instead, teachers maximize their chances in the competitive environment by representing themselves in the classroom and to their peers as just that ideal representation of the teacher created by student evaluations and the commodified higher education to which they are tied, particularly since this kind of teaching is most likely to garner recognition. Trapped in a never-ending cycle of competition, teachers reinforce the administrative agenda by reifying these representations and eliding the distance between them and reality.

Perhaps most significantly, though, student evaluations foster mistrust between teachers and themselves by enforcing unstated norms and expectations that challenge teachers' identities and ultimately estrange them from the work they do as teachers. This estrangement stems from the competition between teachers and data outlined above. In a phenomenon endemic to contemporary capitalism, this competition leads "not [to] a direct comparison of workers' performance or output, but [to] a comparison between the audited representation of that performance and output," a distinction that shifts teachers' roles "towards the generation and massaging of representations rather than to the official goals of the work itself" (Fisher 42). Teaching belongs to the realm of emotional labor, "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display . . . that produces the proper state of mind in others," a system that necessarily privileges representations and expectations (Hochschild *Managed* 7). Student evaluations produce a certain model of an effective teacher that replaces any notion of furthering the educational mission as the definition of quality teaching. In essence, to the extent that they tacitly reward certain behaviours (fewer lectures, easier grading) and dispositions (bright, funny, charming, sexy) and punish others, student evaluations help to establish norms for teaching that, while not officially recorded anywhere, become a requirement for continued professional advancement. What is more, these expectations often proceed from sexist, ethno-, and heterocentric assumptions that render the behaviours of straight, white males as the model and put instructors who do not (and cannot) conform to this model in impossible positions.

The estrangement teachers feel in this scenario results from the need for them to identify (and be identified with) these representations that deny the realities facing most teachers today in the interests of the institution's brand, which is a process of self-exploitation. In general, higher education treats difference as do most corporations: it is "encouraged so long as basic rules and values circulate through the corporation's every subculture without impediment" (Newfield "What Was" 127). Managed diversity, accomplished through the imposition of unstated expectations and norms like those communicated through student evaluations, acts like a subtle attack on teachers' identities to prevent the expression of uncontrolled difference that might disturb or undermine the college experience that a particular educational brand seeks to provide. With the rise of immaterial labour, "[y]ou are forced, weirdly, to be yourself:" management cultivates difference in order to bring the human touch to the emotional labour of teaching, with student-consumers paying top dollar for the "non-exploited, non-controlled and

freely expressed” (Cederström and Fleming 16). As customer satisfaction surveys, student evaluations provide a measurement for the extent to which any distinct identity characteristic belonging to a teacher adds value to the brand and should be encouraged or fails to add value and should be disciplined. Thus, despite the fact that “the typical faculty member . . . [is] a female, nontenurable part-timer earning a few thousand dollars a year without health benefits,” she is forced to comport herself as if she were otherwise, as if she were the classic college professor—witty, intelligent, inspiring, and in no way overworked or overburdened (Bousquet 6). This performance amounts to self-exploitation, or the use of one’s personality to sell a representation of teaching that convinces students that the education they are paying for is a boutique product rather than mass produced. Given consumers’ widespread suspicion of affective performances “because companies now advertise spontaneous warmth, too,” students will never prove to be fully satisfied customers, and the performance required of teachers must come to seem ever more real, more genuine, more the actual personality of the teacher (Hochschild Managed 5).

As the distance between the representation and the reality increases, so too does the effort involved in performing the self that conforms to all norms and meets all unstated expectations. Eventually, it becomes easier simply to be that self.

Ultimately, this estrangement reveals teachers’ lack of agency within higher education and underscores the need for reform of student evaluations as a first step in a larger reform of education more generally. Though teachers often speak about their love of their work or their sense of vocation, these are the first qualities that teachers find themselves alienated from by their self-exploitation. Instead of an expression of one’s self, one’s passions and commitments, teaching becomes a shtick designed to appeal to the widest number of consumers. That self or those passions might still exist within the performance, but they are constrained and shaped by the performance. However, performing to these expectations also limits teachers’ pedagogical choices. Course content is superseded in this model by presentation and delivery, homogenizing courses across disciplines and schools. Students expect interactivity and entertainment, and so all information must be delivered in ways that are interactive or that entertain, regardless of the pedagogical effectiveness of available strategies to do so. Here again, student evaluations set up and police these norms, managing teachers’ pedagogy in case they are unable to frame it within the expectations of the brand they represent. In this way, student evaluations make visible the idea that teachers no longer own their teaching because they no longer have control over the environment in which they teach, nor over the demands the environment makes on them. To regain control and ownership, then, requires addressing those aspects of student evaluations that contribute most directly to neoliberal managerialism’s vision of higher education by perpetuating these networks of mistrust. Only by regaining this control will actual collaborating between empowered teachers and students become possible.

The Problem of “True” Education

Despite their flaws, student evaluations start from a laudable goal: students should have some say in their education, both in terms of its content and the environment in which it is delivered. There should be conversations about teaching between teachers and students, and those conversations should be opportunities for collaboration that are supported by formal, institutional power for both groups in deciding on the shape and content of education. There are obstacles to the realization of this vision, though, not the least of which is student evaluations

themselves. Mark Fisher highlights education as a key area of possible resistance and calls for “the strategic withdrawal of forms of labour which will only be noticed by management: all the machineries of self-surveillance that have no effect whatsoever on the delivery of education, but which managerialism could not exist without” (Fisher 79-80). It is in this spirit that I offer the following suggestions for how to remake and repurpose student evaluations to best advance a more teacher and student-friendly vision of education. At the outset, I agree with Rebecca Schuman that we should:

Combine peer evaluative measures (of lesson plans and assignments, not just classroom charisma or test scores) with student evaluations—but make the students leave their names on the evals. . . . Actual constructive criticism can be delivered as it ought to be: to our faces. Any legitimate, substantive complaints can go to the chair or dean. There is no reason for anonymity. (“Needs Improvement”)

I think that there are other necessary reforms that are equally simple and that can have far-reaching effects, though. These are not endpoints, but they serve as useful beginnings that highlight the flaws of student evaluations and demonstrate the necessity of more widespread, systemic reform.

My first suggestion is to massively de-quantify student evaluations and combine the more holistic methods Schuman describes with evaluative narratives. While quantification is not inherently a bad thing, it proves less than effective with student evaluations, offering a false sense of objectivity and accuracy about a topic (teaching effectiveness) that lacks concreteness. The difference between scoring a 4.6 or 4.9 on email communication with students is virtually meaningless, despite the appearance of precision implied by the decimal point.¹³ Beyond this issue, though, the real problem with quantification and student evaluations is the loss of context in which judgements are made. Student evaluations separate students’ opinions about their courses from their views on education by transforming those opinions into a number in response to generic questions that refer to a preconceived idea about education. Instead of allowing students to articulate their sense of their education’s purpose, the specific course’s role in that purpose, and its ability to fulfill that role through the teacher’s instructional methods, quantification skips past this valuable framing work. In so doing, quantification removes the impetus for the kinds of conversation that would make students more active agents in the design of their own education. While a comments section appended to the quantified survey is common on student evaluations, these comments are typically offered in response to specific questions or prompts designed to reinforce the rest of the survey. This tends to position the information that teachers receive from student evaluations as antagonistically oppositional or blandly complimentary. Nuance is lost and students miss out on a chance to engage with their professors, who continue to be forced to conflate the pre-set idea of education provided by student evaluations with actual student needs and desires.

Rather than focus on creating an unnecessary set of numbers intended to provide in toto the portrait of a teacher’s effectiveness, then, I propose that student evaluations should take the form of evaluative narratives, with a heavy emphasis on the framing information that the current survey approach strips away. Writing student evaluations as evaluative narratives will require of students a certain selfconsciousness with regard to their education and will make clear the

distinction between teaching quality and effectiveness (which student evaluations do not measure) and student satisfaction (which they can measure quite easily), along with the relative value of student satisfaction when framed appropriately. While it will still be possible to dash off an unengaged response to a course or to use the evaluation as a venue for revenge or personal attacks, I believe this approach will reduce both issues. Knowing that there is a more substantive portion of the evaluation dedicated to explaining, in their own words, their educational needs in relation to the course they just took and its ability to satisfy those needs, students are more likely to see a chance for real conversation on the structural and institutional aspects shaping their education. Though some students might lack the vocabulary usually used to describe educational or pedagogical practices, student evaluations could help develop that vocabulary or, equally effective, they might discover a vocabulary more conducive to the discussion of their own visions of education. Also, narratives would serve to short-circuit the links between student evaluations, the rhetoric of accountability, and the financialization of higher education more generally. While it is still possible to argue for a vision of education in terms of the bottom line with a narrative, the faux-objectivity and easy comparability of student evaluations in their quantified form makes it much easier to transform teachers and courses into assets and products in a market, with student evaluations as a key performance index. Indeed, the chief benefit of student evaluations in their current form is their relatively low cost and the ease with which they offer readymade data and conclusions about teachers. In narrative form, they would encourage a much more holistic approach to the evaluations of teachers' effectiveness and a more serious consideration of the need for students and teachers to have formal power in designing and implementing the curriculum to serve the educational mission.

My second suggestion is to strip norming language from student evaluations, reducing their ability to set up and enforce unstated expectations. Though the shift away from a quantified approach will accomplish some of this, the prompts for students and the context in which student evaluations are presented to them will also need to be addressed. I do not mean by this simple language policing or the substitution of PC-friendly euphemisms in the service of some vague sense of liberal tolerance, but rather a system for framing evaluations that does not tie authority and agency to a particular set of racial, gendered, or sexual characteristics. Student evaluations, to be productive, must constitute an actual dialogue between teachers and students. The terms of that dialogue should be set in advance by the teacher in consultation with the students so that it will not challenge the teacher to perform according to norms that would estrange him/her from his/her self. In a system that provides students and teachers with real institutional agency to design and supervise the curriculum, this would not be an unusual set of circumstances. The teacher should not be forced to teach to the norms that will be enforced at the end of the semester by the evaluation (and that have been set up by previous semesters' evaluations); rather, through conversation with students, evaluation should start from a recognition of that teacher's identity and abilities as valuable and valid outside of any external, commodified norms. While this might seem to shield the teacher from any kind of meaningful critique, when combined with a more holistic approach to evaluating teacher effectiveness that includes observations, discussions on pedagogical strategies, and teaching portfolios, I believe this would produce a stronger sense of teachers' strengths and weaknesses and an environment more conducive to discussing teaching without enforcing norms that might challenge a teacher's identity.

My final suggestion is to use the reform of student evaluations as a stepping stone to increase the agency of students and teachers in the design and management of higher education and advance higher education's ability to promote true needs and eliminate false consciousness more generally. To the extent that confronting student evaluations in the proper context requires an acknowledgement that they are inefficient, produce bad data, and fail to measure what they are supposed to measure—despite the claims of administrators who base their expanding power on their privileged role in the cult of efficiency of neoliberal managerialism—any meaningful conversation about student evaluations should lead to proposals for increased agency of students and teachers. What is crucial, though, is directing these calls into strategies for new forms of governance or opportunities for collaboration that do not further the managed self-governance on which neoliberal managerialism is predicated. To do so requires a reclamation of the educational mission, a rearticulation of higher education's role in the public sphere, and a rededication to higher education's responsibility to aid in the development of enlightened citizens. Addressing the well-known issues with student evaluations will make the current system much more pleasant, though it will not eliminate the environment that allowed those issues to help shape higher education. Indeed, in order for student evaluation reform or even the replacement of student evaluations with more holistic methods of evaluation to matter, they must be accompanied by a reevaluation of the role and purpose of teachers and students.

Student evaluations do more than hurt feelings or replace constructive feedback with abuse; through the mistrust that they foster, they present the neoliberal subject not just as the paragon of success, but as the only figure capable of fully navigating the current environment. Building personal brands, monetizing hobbies and passions, extending the horizons of work, and managing personal and professional networks are the activities of subjects who root all human activities in competition and financial transactions. Commodified higher education peddles this to students, who come to believe that they need to adopt these attitudes to be successful (in part because all definitions of success available to students are economic). This is a false need, though, “superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression . . . [to] perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice” (Marcuse 5). It is the substitution of competition for meaningful interaction, and it constitutes the political basis of “the dreariness of late capitalist culture:” the increased atomization and alienation, the resigned hopelessness, and the fleeting pleasures meant to distract from it (Dean and Fisher 32). This dreariness prevents the emergence of any kind of class consciousness that might enable students (and people more generally) to see this offered culture as incompatible with or even irrelevant to their real needs. One part of a reclamation of the educational mission, then, is an education in how “to relinquish the compensatory desires and intoxications we have developed in order to make the present livable,” one that would challenge the substitution of civic life with consumerism (Jameson 384). The other part, which is much more difficult, requires that students and faculty have real power to shape higher education, as they must collaborate on a form that addresses those needs that neoliberalism evokes but cannot fulfil. If reforming student evaluations can forge networks of trust to replace the mistrust that makes such collaboration impossible in the current university, then there will be a real opportunity to remake higher education as an institution that promotes justice, equality, and growth, rather than simply toil and misery.

Notes

¹ For some recent research on the failure of student evaluations to measure teaching effectiveness (and the specific methodological limitations that cause this failure), see Philip B. Stark and Richard Freishtat's "An Evaluation of Course Evaluations," Michela Braga, Marco Paccagnella, and Michelle Pellizzari's "Evaluating Students' Evaluations of Professors," Laura Langbein's "Management by Results: Student Evaluation of Faculty Teaching and the Mis-measurement of Performance," Robert Sproule's "The Underdetermination of Instructor Performance by Data from the Student Evaluation of Teaching," and Mark Shevlin et al.'s "The Validity of Student Evaluation of Teaching in Higher Education: Love Me, Love My Lecture?" On gender bias in student evaluations, see Lillian MacNell, Adam Driscoll, and Andrea N. Hunt's "What's in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Ratings of Teaching" and Susan A. Basow's "Student Evaluations of College Professors: When Gender Matters."

² Histories of neoliberalism tend to mark the 1970s as the start of its ascendance to political and economic hegemony, with the economic reforms instituted by Augusto Pinochet after his takeover in Chile in 1973, based on advice from his "Chicago Boys," as an early milestone. As Jamie Peck points out, though, "airbrushing out many of the tangled prehistories" of neoliberalism prior to the 1970s, especially during the long years between the 1930s and 1960s when the movement coalesced around various nodes (mainly the University of Chicago and the Mont Pèlerin Society), makes understanding the inconsistent and often contradictory neoliberal program difficult (5). For a fuller account of neoliberalism's complicated history and its rise to prominence, see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe's *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (2009), Peck's *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (2010), and Daniel Stedman Jones' *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (2012).

³ For more ethnographic explorations of this concept, see Andrew Ross' *No-collar: The Hidden Cost of the Humane Workplace* (2003), Rob Lucas' "Dreaming in Code," Ivor Southwood's *Non-Stop Inertia* (2011), Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming's *Dead Man Working* (2012), and Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013).

⁴ Recent comments by Steven Long, Vice Chairman of the Academic Planning Committee of the Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina system confirm that this process is ongoing. Justifying the cutting of 46 degree programs across the UNC system, Long described the board members as "capitalists, and we have to look at what the demand is, and we have to respond to the demand" (Schaefer).

⁵ Though already privatized to a much greater degree than public institutions, private, non-profit institutions similarly saw federal funding decline during this period, from 18.8% of revenue in 1980-81 to 11.7% in 2012-13, as tuition prices rose by 156% during the same period.

⁶ Increasing recognition and accommodation of a more diverse national and student population was another major factor in structural shifts in higher education following the 1970s, though it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss diversity's role in this process. For a cogent discussion of this, see Walter Benn Michaels' *The Trouble with Diversity*.

⁷ As Benjamin Ginsberg points out, perhaps the best gauge of the increasing power and prominence of administration in university affairs is the federal employment category of "other professionals," who, though not administrators *per se*, "work for the administration and serve

as its arms, legs, eyes, ears, and mouthpieces. . . . This army of professional staffers is the bulwark of administrative power in the contemporary university” (25). Based on information from the National Center for Education Statistics, between 1976 and 2011 the growth rate for executive, administrative, and managerial employees (a little less than 135%) was roughly in line with that of the faculty (a little over 140%). However, the growth rate for administrative staffers and other professional employees was almost 350% over the same period.

⁸ For a fuller treatment of prestige management and its role in higher education governance, see Frank Donoghue’s *The Last Professors*, especially Chapter 5, “Prestige and Prestige Envy.”

⁹ Mark Fisher terms this inability to imagine alternatives capitalist realism, “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it,” and labels this the paradoxically utopian and deflating ideology of neoliberal society (2).

¹⁰ In their “Evaluating Students’ Evaluations of Professors,” Michela Braga, Marco Paccagnella, and Michele Pellizzari conclude that “teachers who are associated with better subsequent performance receive [the] worst evaluations from their students” (72). In general, “students evaluate teachers on the basis of their enjoyment of the course,” which means that because “[g]ood teachers—those who provide their students with knowledge that is useful in future learning—presumably require their students to exert effort by paying attention and being concentrated in class and by doing demanding homework,” none of which corresponds to high levels of enjoyment for students, “it is very possible that good teachers are badly evaluated by their students” (Braga et al 84). At the same time, knowing that students rate courses based on their enjoyment of them, “faculty have the ability to ‘buy’ higher evaluations by lowering their grading standards” (Krautmann and Sander 61).

¹¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild dubs this phenomenon “when work becomes home and home becomes work.” As management philosophies like TQM or Tom Peters’ “liberation management” have taken hold and seemed to return autonomy and creativity to employees (at least on a limited basis) while offering the chance for public recognition of a job well done, employees have been encouraged to locate personal growth and fulfillment in the success that their labour brings to the company. At the same time, as “the cult of efficiency, once centered in the workplace, is allowed to set up shop and make itself comfortable at home,” domestic life becomes more harried and less fulfilling, a place of never-ending hard work for which there is little recognition (Hochschild “When” 90).

¹² In his *English in America* (1976), Ohmann observed that “many teachers object to student rating” on the grounds that “[t]he professional knows better than his client what the client needs; student ratings challenge a basic right of the teacher,” while peer observations were regarded as tantamount to “an illegitimate exercise of power” (239-40).

¹³ This is, strictly speaking, not true, but the meaning that such distinctions have is different than what is probably intended. As Laura Langbein points out, “the impact of a unit increase in the expected grade (say, from B to A, which contains most of the observations) would raise the instructor’s rating by an average of nearly 0.6 on a 6-point scale. In a rank order system, this is not irrelevant; on a percentage basis, each additional 0.6 of a point is a 10% higher ranking. Over time, the effect of an additional 0.6 in the SET on an increase in a merit pay ranking could be considerable” (424).

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