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The Tyranny of Work: Employability and the Neoliberal Assault on Education

Jeff Noonan¹ and Mireille Coral²

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the ways in which neoliberal schooling is threatening education. We define education as the development of cognitive and imaginative capacities for understanding of and critical engagement with social reality. Education opens horizons of possibility for collective and individual life-experience and activity by exposing the one-sidedness and contradictions of ruling-value systems. Schooling, by contrast, subordinates thought and imagination to the reproduction of the ruling money-value system, narrowing horizons of possibility for collective and individual life to service to the prevailing structure of power. Our paper draws on our overlapping experiences as educators, one in the university system, the other in the adult education system. In both systems, students' life-requirement for education is subordinated to the capitalist need for compliant wage-labourers and consumers. In opposition to this instrumentalization we will present an interpretation of "real world education" as a unique form of collective work through which teachers and students construct alternatives that can serve as the guiding ideas for new projects for social and political transformation.

KEYWORDS: Education, Schooling, Neoliberalism, Life-Requirements, Capitalism

Neoliberal demands for school reform have emphasised the supreme social importance of education even as they have threatened the ability of school institutions to educate. These demands bring to the fore a contradiction between the liberatory implications of *education* and the ideological effects of *schooling*. Schools both enable students to develop and expand their capacities to imagine and think beyond the established limits of what ruling classes define as good, just, meaningful, and true, and at the same time try to produce citizens who confine their thinking and imagination to the ideological meaning of those norms. Education builds critical consciousness and political agency, while schooling aims to keep students' horizons confined to the given world, its class, racial, sexual, and gender hierarchies, its reward systems. Education enables students to expose social contradictions, schooling tries to keep people blind to their

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existence. Neoliberalism has intervened in an openly partisan way on behalf of schooling against education. As we will reveal, neoliberalism has been actively attacking the educational mission of schools at all levels of the education system, but especially secondary and post-secondary. If the neoliberal agenda were to be realised, the primary role of schools would be reduced to preparing students for a life as little but complacent alienated workers, quietly content with the ephemeral pleasures of consumer society.

There are, fortunately, both political and philosophical barriers to the success of this project. Politically, there are the manifold forms of resistance that students and teachers are capable of mounting. The last three years in Canada have witnessed intensified struggles against the neoliberal schooling agenda. In Quebec, post-secondary students organized a massive, months long strike, ostensibly against tuition hikes but in reality against the neoliberal attempt to further commodify and instrumentalize education. In 2012 in Ontario, tens of thousands of teachers, along with many student supporters, waged a brave campaign against draconian legislation designed to not only undermine their bargaining rights but to make them compliant executors of an educational policy imposed by government. In the spring of 2014, teachers in British Columbia struck to defend their working conditions and the educational integrity of their schools.³ Philosophically, schooling presupposes the development of cognitive capacities that once awoken, by their very nature, cannot be limited in their exercise to providing unthinking support for any prescribed, ideological agenda. Schooling of even the most narrow and

³ It is not our purpose to provide a careful political analysis of these various struggles. For cogent and concise commentary, see, (Nesbitt, 2012); (Cooke, 2013); (Camfield, 2012); (Brett and Mehreen, 2012). “Just the Beginning: Beyond the Quebec Student Strike,” *The Bulletin*, No. 711, October 10th, 2012). Information on the settlement agreed to by the British Columbia teachers can be found at the website of the British Columbia Teacher’s Federation: <https://www.bctf.ca/>.

instrumental sort must teach students to read and write and critically evaluate claims. The development of the capacities for politically engaged social self-conscious agency cannot be avoided, no matter how narrow and instrumental the scope of schooling. Hence, there is always space within schools – bureaucratic and authoritarian as they are already at the primary and secondary level and as they are becoming at the post-secondary level – to educate. Educating, we will demonstrate, frees students from intellectual subservience to established norms and structures, not by dogmatic imposition of a radical oppositional agenda, but simply by enabling them to question, think, evaluate, and communicate.

Our argument will be developed in three steps. In the first, we will elaborate upon the contradiction between schooling and education. In the second, we will examine the recent history of neoliberal school reforms in the Ontario secondary school and university systems, concentrating on the way in which the “employability agenda” is an attack on the educational mission of schools. Unlike some critics of schooling (most famously, Ivan Illich) we do not argue that schools should be abandoned in favour of the emancipatory possibilities of popular education. Instead, we will argue that the contradictory nature of schools means that there is a space to import and adapt popular education methods into the institution. In the concluding section, we will provide an example of how we were able to use the adult educational classroom as a space for the development of a project in which students, through their own efforts, transformed their experience of school from an oppressive system of imposed rules to a free space for the development of critical consciousness, political agency, and non-alienated labour.

Schooling and Educating

Our argument proceeds from a contradiction in school institutions. The contradiction is between the socially reproductive demands governments and business leaders try to impose upon them and their educational mission. Education frees cognitive and imaginative capacities from subservience to the established social reality, while schooling seeks to conform expectations, imagination, and thought to the given reality, with all of its tensions, hierarchies, and injustices accepted as normal and natural. One might say, following Gramsci, that schooling is a set of practices through which the ruling class tries to extend its hegemony over new generations, while education is always at least implicitly a set of practices that enables students to develop the critical consciousness and political agency that allow them to contest hegemony (Gramsci, 1971, 26-43). Let us examine both sides of this contradiction in more detail.

Schooling is a politically motivated socialisation process through which the ruling powers hope to ensure conflict-free social reproduction by masking the roles power, force and domination play in establishing and maintaining the given social reality. This socialization process involves the inculcation of basic forms of self-discipline (learning to conform one's demands to the established structure of rules in the various public and private spaces that constitute society), the development of deferential attitudes towards authorities, the cultivation of basic inter-personal skills needed to get along more or less peacefully with others, and the acquisition of basic intellectual skills required for productive functioning in social and economic life. Above all else, the schooling process transmits the ruling value system of the society it serves to younger generations. As Erich Fromm argues, the purpose of schooling is to "qualify the individual to function in the role he is to play later on in society...to mould his character in such a way that...his desires

coincide with the necessities of his social order.”(Fromm, 1969, 284). The ruling value system of any society justifies the prevailing structure of power and wealth and the rewards and sanctions it makes available and imposes as supremely good, the only sound and sane basis for the formation of individual goals and life plans. To the extent that young people internalise the ruling value system, they bend their efforts to finding a place within the existing structure of power, challenging it only in terms of its failure to provide in practice what is promised in theory, but never in terms of its overall coherence or the substance of the values it affirms. In other words, if the ruling value system is in fact internalised, the capacity for social criticism is dampened, because the political imagination is prevented from exploring different possibilities of social life-organization. If the political imagination is thus hampered in its exercise, the political intellect refuses to accept the real possibility of radically different and better ways of living and instead confines itself to working within the established social reality. Thus, confined, it cannot discover the structural contradictions that stand in the way of realizing the values of freedom, equity, justice, and democracy that liberal-capitalist order claims to serve but cannot coherently realize.

Before students are subjected to alienated capitalist work conditions, schools, in the words of Ivan Illich (1970, 46), “pre-alienate” young people:

Young people are pre-alienated by schools that isolate them while they pretend to be both producers and consumers of their own knowledge, which is conceived of as a commodity put on the market in school. School makes alienation preparatory for life, thus depriving education of reality and life of activity. School prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life by teaching the need to be taught. Once this lesson is learned, people...close themselves off to the surprises life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional deformation.”

Of all the alienating effects school produces, none is more damaging to the formation of individual and collective agency than the belief that making oneself marketable to potential employers is both a primary duty of social life and a natural necessity. Once that idea has been instilled, fear of compromising one's marketability to potential employers strongly impedes the formation of desires for fundamental social changes necessary to abolish alienated labour.

While we agree with Illich's critique of schooling, and while we believe that education can and should be pursued outside the walls of school institutions through a variety of experiments in popular education, we do not agree with his "de-schooling" agenda.⁴ Schools, as we have emphasised, are contradictory institutions. All people are thinking beings, and thinking beings cannot be *schooled* without at the same time having their imaginative and cognitive capacities developed and extended. Since students are educated at the same time as they are schooled, their capacity for transformative political agency can developed within their walls, the "pre-alienating" intentions of school authorities notwithstanding. Schools are therefore sites of struggle between authorities who want to limit them to purposes of social reproduction and the reality-transforming implications of education. Schools are politically essential because they create intellectual space and time free from the very social forces whose demands students are being prepared to accept. One cannot prepare students for life in the contemporary world without cultivating in them basic literacy and numeracy skills, without enabling them to

⁴ Both authors have been involved, individually and together, with a variety of popular education initiatives and projects. Popular education allows for freedom from institutional formalities, bureaucratic administration, and government interference, but also faces challenges reaching wide numbers of people. The authors conclude that the struggle for education against schooling needs to be pursued both outside and inside the institutional walls.

distinguish causes from effects, without developing in them basic communication skills and the ability to negotiate diverse and unfamiliar environments, and without discussing values like freedom, equality, democracy, and human rights. Even if the later values are defined operationally in terms of the norms of liberal-capitalist democracies, and even if all the basic intellectual skills listed above are taught in the most narrow and instrumental manner, once they have been developed, they cannot be controlled by external authorities. If one can read, one can read anything readable; once one can perform basic mathematical operations, one can apply them beyond the narrow range of examples used to teach them; once one can talk and communicate with others, one can discover other perspectives and goals, and once one learns the meaning of democracy, one can begin to ask whether its current instantiation is adequate to the idea. These basic intellectual capacities, therefore, are the basis of the educational mission of schools.

Education is the process whereby the cognitive and imaginative capacities of human beings are developed beyond their given range and depth, freed from subservience to the ruling value system, for the sake of enabling more comprehensive understanding of what there is to be known. Education and freedom are related in two ways. First, the development of cognitive and imaginative capacities is freed from programmed service to ruling value systems. Second, educated people become free to think for themselves in continually expanding scope and critical depth. Once education has drawn out the latent imaginative and cognitive capacities of the human brain, the subsequent development of those capacities can no longer in principle be programmed by institutional authority, because to become educated means to become aware of the freedom of thought in relation to its object.

What we mean can be illustrated by unpacking the implications of the colloquial phrase, “I’ll think it over.” Rather than just accede to whatever request has been made, the person transforms the request from an externally imposed demand to an internally constituted object of thought. As a thought-object the request is submitted to the critical inspection of the thinker’s mind, which can consider its legitimacy in various dimensions and weigh its value against alternative considerations. The person who thinks something over does not simply do what he or she has been told to do; rather, he or she explores the reasons behind the request and the reasons supporting compliance or refusal. That which she ultimately does is her decision, not the external authority’s and she can account for what she does on the basis of the reasons she herself determines. This capacity to think critically presupposes understanding of the language in which the request has been made, the ability to weigh consequences, the capacity to judge the request against a life-value standard, and the ability to understand the effects of compliance on the natural and social worlds of which one is a dependent and interdependent member. These are generic capacities, but they have potentially profound social and political implications – by unhinging thought from service to imposed system-requirements, education frees peoples mindless subservience to social power.

The specific values of critical consciousness and political agency affirmed and cultivated by the traditions of popular education are built into the very nature of education, even when it takes place in school institutions. Although *schooling* tries to exclude these values, *schools* cannot, because schooling presupposes some degree of education and education is always subversive of mechanical incorporation of ruling ideologies into students’ minds. As Apple understands, “counter hegemonic activities [are possible]

in...schools [as well as] communities.” (Apple, 2001, 231). He reminds educators that society is not a place of happy cooperation, but a site of struggle and contestation where working people fight for advancements. (Apple, 1990, 96). Teachers who take their role as educators seriously recognise that, as the great popular educators Paulo Freire and Myles Horton argued, neutrality in education is not possible (Horton and Freire,1990). Educators take sides, but not for one party as against another in any narrow and dogmatic way, but against the attempts of ideological schooling to present social life as fixed, its hierarchies natural. Once students understand that social life is historical, that the ways things are is the way they have been made to be by various struggles, they can work out for themselves in whose interests these hierarchies are maintained. At that point, they can insert themselves into the on-going history of struggle without needing to be told on which side their interests lie. Education is thus political but not in a way that “silences in the name of orthodoxy [or] imposes itself on students while undermining dialogue, deliberation and critical engagement.” (Giroux, 2012). Education, popular or institutional, opens students to dialogue about a reality that schooling presents as beyond discussion

Dialogue is essential to any genuine educational process, for it is only through dialogue that the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student – the form of relationship that makes students resent teachers and impedes the educational process – is broken down. As Horton explains, “I think that any kind of dialogue...means that you don’t have inferiors and superiors all in the same conversation...But you respect each other’s experiences and you aren’t trying to use that dialogue to hornswoggle people into accepting your views, because you think it’s good for people. It’s a bottoms-up operation instead of a top-down operation. And it’s everybody on the same level trying to come up

together.” (Horton, 2003, 274-275). Although school institutions militate against dialogue, the classroom remains a space shielded from the prying eyes of administrators. Therefore, as Cunningham (1989) and Quigley (2006) note, the classroom can subvert, to some extent, the aim of schooling to simply reproduce oppressive social and cultural relationships. Because the teacher is alone with her students in the classroom she can, if she chooses, embed effective popular education practices – basing the curriculum in the life experience of the learners, respecting for the knowledge people bring to the classroom, opening dialogue among equals, and recognizing that education is always political and always on the side of freeing people from oppressive hierarchies.

To sum up, any genuine educational process, whether within schools or outside of them, enables students to transform their self-understanding. From thinking of themselves as objects of power, educated people learn to think of themselves as subjects, as people capable of intervening, as individuals or as members of social movements, in the determination of the social reality they inhabit. Education, (as opposed to schooling) thus always threatens unjust value systems and institutions. Even in the institutionalized classroom educators can put into practice the legacy of one of the great popular education movements of Canadian history, the Antigonish movement. As both Alexander (1997) and Lotz (2005) remind teachers, that legacy is one of encouraging critical thinking about established structures of oppression and alternatives to them and never acquiescing in mere training and adaptation to the system. That sort of education, of course, is a potential threat to liberal-capitalist reality. The aim of neoliberal educational “reforms,” to which we now turn, is thus above all to eliminate as much education from schools as possible.

Neoliberal Schooling and the Tyranny of Work

The historical origins of neoliberalism tell us much of relevance about its educational reform agenda. Neoliberalism is a set of prescriptions for managing capitalism that emerged in the 1970's as a response to the "stagflation" crisis. The cause of the crisis was attributed to the failure of labour markets to adequately discipline labour and control its costs. Unions were judged too strong, welfare state support for the unemployed too generous, and public services and state enterprises too inefficient. Attacking all three became central to the neoliberal project. Referring to its first systematic elaboration in Thatcher's England, Harvey lists its core goals as "confronting trade union power, attacking all forms of social solidarity that hindered competitive flexibility, the privatization of public enterprises, reducing taxes, encouraging entrepreneurial initiative, and creating a favourable business climate."(Harvey, 2005, 23). The intended effect of this package of reforms was to make individual workers more dependent upon market forces and thus more willing to accept terms of employment (lower wages, less benefits, less control over the nature and pace of work) favourable to the owners. As Albo, Gindin, and Panitch argue, neoliberal changes to labour laws, combined with the material pressure exerted by public and private austerity, have "compelled workers to become more dependent on the market as individuals so as to limit their ability to contest the social relations of the capitalist market as a class." (Albo, Gindin and Panitch, 2011, 90). Neoliberal educational reforms, at the secondary and post-secondary level, extend these goals into school institutions. There are external and internal drivers of this agenda.

Externally, financial pressure and market forces are used to squeeze institutions so as to encourage or force compliance with the internal transformations necessary. For

example, the Harris government, elected in 1995 and the first Ontario government to pursue an openly neoliberal agenda, slashed the education budget by \$400 million (MacLellan, 2009, 60). In the Canadian university sector, public funding as a proportion of operating revenue has been going down and tuition going up (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2012). In order to meet higher tuition costs more and more students must borrow to finance their education (Canadian Federation of Students, 2013). The deep debt students find themselves in gives them an understandable interest in prioritising future employment over the development of critical consciousness. Of course, there is no mechanical relationship between debt and the internalization of neoliberal ideology about employability, but it would be naive for educators to ignore the real economic pressures students face.

Neoliberal reformers do not, of course, aim to abolish schools or even eliminate all public funding, but to transform expectations about the place and purpose of public institutions. Neoliberalism has facilitated a move towards what Slaughter and Rhoades call “academic capitalism.” “Academic capitalism” does not necessarily involve privatization, but works more by “a redefinition of public space and of appropriate activity in that space. The configuration of state resources has changed, providing colleges and universities with fewer unrestricted public revenues and encouraging them to seek out and generate alternative sources of revenue.”(Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, 306). The new private revenue sources schools and universities are forced to seek come at the price of conformity of curriculum and pedagogy to labour and commodity market demands. Instead of educating people for the sake of the free development of imaginative and cognitive capacities, schools are encouraged to produce compliant employees happy

to have whatever job is made available. Let us now examine the details of the effects neoliberal school reform has had on Ontario secondary schools and universities.

The Neoliberal Agenda and Ontario's Elementary and Secondary Schools

For our purposes the neoliberal assault on public education in Ontario begins with the Mike Harris government's "Common Sense Revolution." Ironically, although premised on the neoliberal credo of less government, it actually mandated more government interference in schools. The Harris government "reconstituted school governance, standardized and centralized testing, [imposed] massive curricular reform, strict systems of accountability, and the intru[ded]...market goals into public schooling" (MacLellan, 2009, 66). The Common Sense Revolution was a political assault on the power of schools to educate.

Instead of education, the Harris reforms attempted to make hegemonic a very narrow conception of schooling as training. As Sears (2003, 11) points out, the "agenda for education reform seeks to reorient schooling so that the individual develops a self in relation to the market rather than the state." A case in point is the 1998 Science and Technology curriculum for elementary students, which saw the inclusion of skills described as important for the workplace. These skills are often learned by rote and are easily tested, thus having the effect of standardizing the curriculum and exerting tighter control over the work of teachers, making teachers "accountable" to government rather than students' life-requirement for education (MacLellan, 2009; McNay, 2000). Under Harris, highly standardized curriculum framed students as nothing more than job seekers motivated only to become aware of the fixed social realities to which they must conform.

Schools were reconceptualised as manufacturing facilities making future employees: “the key to the meal ticket of the nation.”(Bouchard, 2006, 165).

While the Liberal government, first elected in 2002, increased spending on education 24 percent between 2003 and 2008, they did nothing substantial to reverse the assault on the educational mission of schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Standardized testing continues in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10, administered through the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), mirrored at the post-secondary level by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (HEQAC). The future employability of students remains the core educational objective as outlined in the Ministry document *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* (2010). Arguing that developing the “learning skills and work habits needed to succeed in school and in life begins early in a child’s schooling,” and that these work habits and learning skills may be “strengthened through the achievement of the curriculum expectations” of Grades 1 through 12 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, 12), the document goes on to provide a list of employability skills as defined by the Conference Board of Canada. These skills focus on “personal management skills that facilitate growth....and teamwork skills that enhance productivity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, 12). Sample behaviours include being responsible, adaptable, and able to work in teams while completing assigned projects. A more complex list of competencies as outlined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is also cited in the Ministry document as necessary for student success. This list is prefaced with an acknowledgement of the complex demands of living in a globalized and modern economy, the need to make sense of rapidly changing technologies, as well as the need to make

decisions that represent collective challenges: for example, “the need to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability and prosperity with social equity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, 13).

The sample behaviours associated with these skills are organized into three “categories of competency,”: “Using Tools Interactively,” “Interacting in Heterogeneous Groups,” and “Acting Autonomously” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, 13). The subordination of education to schooling for the sake of employability might seem to be contradicted by the inclusion of the ability “to defend and assert rights, limits, interests, and needs.” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, 13). Despite appearances, this invocation of rights, limits, interests, and needs has nothing to do with developing the capacity of students to identify ways in which existing structures and value systems undermine rights and freedoms. The defense and assertion of rights and interests is framed as the acts of lone individuals content with the existing value system and institutions, not as political subjects motivated to overcome the structural injustices of liberal-capitalism.

This emphasis on employability is repeated in the adult education sector of the secondary school system. Unschooling adults who became injured or unemployed and who looked to the public school system for an opportunity to earn a high school diploma did not fare well under the Harris reforms. According to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), the Harris government cut funding to adult day schools by 70 percent; as a result, 85 percent of the student population disappeared between 1995 and 1997, with a net loss of 70,957 students between 1994 and 2001 (OSSTF, 2014). Many of these people, particularly injured workers, were sent to private business

colleges to earn diplomas of questionable value quickly (Social Policy in Ontario, 2010). Although this practice has been stopped, adult education in Ontario remains in need of a “home,” in the words of Kathleen Wynne, then-Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education (Ministry of Education, 2005, 1). In the case of secondary education, courses taught in an adult high school use the same curriculum guidelines as those taught in any other high school, despite the great differences in age and life-experience between adult and adolescent learners. In the case of adult education, then, the curriculum that reproduces the neoliberal values is being imposed on the very people – unemployed and injured workers – whose lives have been most painfully disrupted by neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism and the University

When we turn our attention from secondary schools to universities, changes in the internal governance and administration take on a significance they do not have in the secondary schools. Given the fact that universities traditionally have greater autonomy from government policy than secondary schools, and thus have had greater latitude for the cultivation of socially critical dispositions and capacities, aligning university education with neoliberal objectives requires governance changes that compromise institutional autonomy and academic freedom. One can learn a great deal about the goals of neoliberal reform by examining changes in the administrations that are expected to impose them.

The first noticeable change in administration is its growing size. Noam Chomsky, speaking to a group of unionized adjunct faculty in Pittsburgh, described the process: “In the past 30 to 40 years there has been a very sharp increase in the proportion of administrators to faculty and students...[who are] very highly paid. This includes

professional administrators like deans...who used to be faculty members that took a couple of years off and then go back to faculty; now they're mostly professional, who then have to hire sub-deans, secretaries, etc." (Chomsky, 2014, 2). More important than the growing size of the administration, is the way in which the professionalization Chomsky notes increasingly alienates them from the faculty and students. As senior administrators become more professionalized and more highly paid, they begin to change their sense of mission, from providing academic leadership to managing finances and promoting institutional growth (in student numbers, in the value of research grants and other income, in the architectural footprint of the institution). One mid-level administrator interviewed by a research team in the UK studying the effects of "New Managerialism" in the university system describes the change she felt in herself: "Very often when I go to work I have to pinch myself and say 'Look, I'm sure I originally was an academic, but gosh now I feel like an accountant, I spend all my time...talking about issues about money...the academics and the quasi-managers are at logger heads with the real, full-time managers who have a different career structure and a different career path.'" (Deem et. al., 2007, 179).

These changes to the structure of management are not driven solely by forces endogenous to the university, but have been encouraged by government policies that openly challenge the capacity of universities to govern themselves according to their founding mission – the creation and dissemination of knowledge that serves the public good. Universities have been mostly compliant with these demands, rushing to undertake costly and time wasting program reviews to prove their worthiness for government funding. The recently announced "Differentiation Strategy" for Ontario universities and

colleges forces every university and college in the province to submit a “Strategic Mandate Agreement” detailing the ways in which the institution is aligning its objectives and strengths with government priorities. The Government of Ontario (2013, 10) report asserts:

“differentiation strengthens alignment between regional development needs and defined institutional mandates. This will advance innovative partnerships and programs that serve the distinct Ontario communities to which institutions are connected, as well as broader provincial needs. This alignment will ensure that students graduate with skills that respond to local and provincial labour market needs and contribute to social development. In areas that align with institutional capacity, these partnerships may be global in scope.”

The real implications are clear: only those programs and institutions which can demonstrate a commitment to government policy can be assured of future funding. The overall objective is to contain costs by eliminating duplication in the system, forcing universities to specialise on narrow bands of expertise in contradiction to the very nature of a university. The Differentiation Policy follows directly from the 2011 Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services (the Drummond Report) which explicitly recommended “differentiation” as a means of using resources efficiently and “encouraging and rewarding quality” as a means of ensuring compliance with government imposed-objectives (Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services, 2012, Ch.7).

In order to tie the goals of schooling more tightly to labour market demand, the traditional rights of professors must also be challenged. The attack on academic labour takes a number of forms. Tenure track positions are on the decline or, as in England since 1988, no longer available. In the United States in 2007 the percentage of tenured and tenure-track professors had declined to 31 percent, while precarious part time academic

labour had increased to 50.3 percent (Wilson, 2010, 1). As in the private sector, employees without job security are more easily managed. By subjecting faculty to the discipline of academic labour markets, in which supply always far exceeds demand, their willingness and ability to develop in their students the capacity to understand and critique the social forces driving neoliberal reforms (threatening the student's future as well) is undermined.

Every proposed change, from centralizing control over the university in senior administrative hands to raising enrolments through on-line courses is justified the same way: better preparing students for the real world of tough competition. As Alan Sears (2014) has recently argued, "Ultimately, the goal of this transformation is a university system that, along with certain skills and knowledge, teaches students: "You are entitled to nothing. You have no right to anything you cannot afford, and you will only be able to afford things through a life of constant hustle." In other words, students are being prepared for a life in which their personal freedom is reduced to forced self-reinvention at the behest of labour market demand. Free choice of life-project remains as a justifying slogan, but is excoriated as irrational if it is exercised to choose courses of study for which there is no market demand. In the neoliberal universe interest and enjoyment count for nothing; life is about making rational investments in oneself, the good of life is maximizing returns on investments. A recent study of the employment outcomes of Canadian university graduates by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce makes this point clear: "Another important driver of the relatively low return on education is field of study. For students shelling out thousands in higher-learning costs, a university degree can be viewed as an investment with upfront expenses, and a stream of future benefits."

(Benjamin and Eneajor, 2013). Although it purports to concern itself with graduates' income, its real concern, since it is studying labour in a capitalist economy, is how much money-value employees create (wages and salaries track labour productivity, such that one can be paid more only if one is producing more for the firm).

Thus we arrive at the real truth of neoliberal educational reforms at the secondary and post-secondary level – their mandate is to produce productive and compliant workers that will produce more money-value for appropriation by the ruling class, at the expense of understanding the real dynamics and contradictions of this process and their capacity to change it. The real target of these reforms is not any particular subject or discipline, but the time and space that education requires. To conclude, we will examine how education itself is an example of non-alienated work, and thus itself a momentary liberation from the coercive objectifications to which labour markets subject people.

Education as an Example of Non-Alienated Work

If neoliberal education reformers are to be believed, the primary interest of young people is to allow their life-horizons to be determined by the changing demands of labour markets. Satisfying labour market demand becomes a moral imperative that overrides the openness to the future and freedom from imposed routine that, in propitious social circumstances, generates the feelings of freedom associated with youth. The neoliberal school speaks the language of goals, opportunities, and self-realization, but defines these values in terms of finding paid employment – and then being “flexible” enough to start all over again when market conditions change. In this way, neoliberal schooling confuses being a free subject with being an object of labour markets.

Our point is not that students can afford to be nonchalant about their future in a society where basic life-necessities are priced commodities. Rather, our point is that education enables people to understand the contradiction between the labour on offer in capitalist labour markets and the human life-requirements for meaningful, socially valuable, non-alienated labour. Not only does education help people grasp this contradiction, it is itself a form of non-alienated. Non-alienated labour, for Marx, is essentially a labour of self-creation through world transformation, undertaken freely, that is, without the compulsion of natural or social necessity (Marx, 1975, 274). Through non-alienated labour processes, human capacities are developed for their own sake and the contribution their realization makes to others' ability to satisfy their own life-requirements. When educational institutions and students are adequately funded, when the life-values of cognitive and imaginative development govern the organization of the institutions, and when the pedagogical methods are collaborative and interactive, education is a non-alienated labour process through which learners and teachers together transform themselves by expanding their capacities for understanding, imagining new social relations and criticising the impediments that stand in the way of the realization of those relations. Both transform themselves by meeting and overcoming the limitations that defined their initial levels of understanding. At the same time, not only their own development as individuals, but their willingness and capacity to contribute to social well-being only fully develops when educational activity is experienced as free, un-coerced, non-alienated labour. To illustrate our point we want to share an example of a collaborative project we were involved in with adult learners.

As teachers of adults in a city that is experiencing the painful fallout of neoliberal policies, especially unemployment as a result of deindustrialization, we looked for a way to break the reproductive processes at work in schooling. To this end, Coral, a teacher in an adult high school, carved out a space within a course the Ontario Social Sciences curriculum mandated her to teach – Canadian Politics and Citizenship – for a critical discussion of neoliberalism. The class studied the hallmarks of neoliberalism: tax breaks for the wealthy, upward redistribution of income, governments consequently starved of revenue for social programmes, downward social mobility and the weakening of unions and workers' organizations as a function of the globalization of capital. Interest in this list of hallmarks led to a request by the class for a more systematic historical and theoretical discussion of neoliberalism and its implications for people in their situation. Noonan, a professor at the University of Windsor, was invited to speak to the class. He led a collective discussion about neoliberalism that revealed it to be the ideology shaping the economy and public policy of Windsor. The discussion spurred the students to begin to think differently about their own social situations. Thus were the aims and methods of popular education brought into the school institution. Instead of being "instructed" the students were engaged in a back and forth conversation in which their own experience enabled them to make sense of the historical and theoretical points under discussion. With the new knowledge of the world they were developing they fashioned a new self-understanding. They began to abandon the sense of victimhood inculcated in them for a sense of their own political agency.

The day of the lecture ended with Noonan and Coral inviting the class to tell their stories of what it means to live under neoliberalism. This ending proved in fact to be the

beginning of a new project in which students discovered that education is not synonymous with schooling and work is not identical to alienated paid labour. The students decided that they would take up our invitation and tell their stories of life under neoliberalism and that this would become the major assignment for the semester. In other words, they ceased to rely on the teacher-authorities to tell them what to do to pass the course and instead took the future direction of the course into their own hands, working with Coral rather than just listening to her. Students wrote about their life experiences: factory closures, unemployment, accessing dwindling social services for themselves and for loved ones with special needs, living on meagre social services, and the deterioration of neighbourhoods. The undertaking and completion of this assignment – writing the stories and reading each other's stories – was itself a counter-hegemonic process. Decisions regarding how the stories would be organized, illustrated, bound, categorized, and titled were collectively made, as was the initial decision to write the book for the major assignment. In the end, as a class, we decided how the assignment would be marked, collectively creating a marking rubric.

The generic intellectual capacities cultivated through education *enabled* the students to not only re-describe their own experience, understand its causes more clearly, and begin to think of themselves as subjects capable of doing something about it, but also to look upon education as a process in which they are active subjects and not just the objects of administrative power. At one point in the book-making process, the students, in a deep discussion about how to organize the stories while Coral typed, looked over at her and laughingly commented that the roles had reversed: the teacher had

become the typist and the students were making all the decisions. “Don’t worry,” they reassured me. “We’ve got this under control.”

As we emphasised in Section Two, this project was not about imposing upon students our own beliefs about neoliberalism. Instead, it incorporated the popular education practice of co-exploration of a problem, using classroom space and time as a matrix within which students could develop their own critical attitudes towards neoliberalism’s effects on their lives. We understood that adult students are not children – they are living on a daily basis in a social order where their wages are falling, their livelihoods are being exported to other countries for socio-economic reasons they did not initially understand – and that their life experiences had a place in the classroom, connecting the curriculum to the actual lives of the students and empowering the students to speak openly about what they know best: their own life experience. As a result, the classroom became a place where this hegemony could be critically examined and contested. As the course progressed, students began to request classes in “how to vote,” more specifically, how to make sense of the differences between parties, how to make sense of election campaigns, and how to critically examine campaign promises. One man asked to stay after school to talk about how he could “get more involved.” Later that week, he walked to the local workers’ action centre to sign up as a volunteer. A student who had been unemployed for a while and had shared with the class the humiliation he experienced applying for welfare, made a comment one day that resonated around the room: “This is making me feel better. It’s good to know I’m not a loser.” It also motivated the foundation, by Coral and Noonan and some of the most active students, to found the

Windsor Peoples School, a popular education experiment housed in the Windsor Workers' Action Centre.

The project we undertook in the adult high school classroom challenged the reduction of education to schooling. In doing so, students discovered the class structures and ruling value systems underlying as social causes the challenges they faced every day in their own lives. Our educational objectives had less to do with employability and more to do with living in this historical moment. Our concern as teachers was for engaging students in a form of educational labour that enabled them to transform themselves from passive objects to active political subjects, not because we told them to do so, but because their new knowledge spurred a hunger for solutions to the social and economic problems they faced. One man's comment on his experience in the class was most telling: "Finally, I'm learning something in school that I can use to live my life!" That seemed a most appropriate educational objective for a high school curriculum.

This new critical insight was achieved within a school designed almost explicitly to reprogram adults for labour markets. Yet, their own experience, combined with the basic imaginative and cognitive capacities their classes enabled them to develop, led them to an investigation of the causes of their situations, which transformed their self-understanding. Formerly, they thought of themselves as objects, whether of bad luck, bad choices, or bad circumstances; subsequently they thought of themselves as individual and collective subjects whose value as human beings demanded social changes. As they became clearer about the causes of their objective situation, these students – often decried as lazy immigrants, as criminal, as addicts, developed a tremendous capacity and appetite for work, just because in their book project they could both "contemplate

themselves in a world they had created” and feel themselves as capable of making a (small but real) contribution to solving the problems of the community which affected them as individuals (Marx, 1975, 276).

It might be objected that this exercise achieved no practical result; the problems that the students faced before the class they faced after, the ‘real world’ was still there and the limited range of opportunities they faced was still limited. They would have been better served by job-specific retraining or apprenticeships that focused on real skills. Aside from the obvious rejoinder that there is no contradiction between becoming educated and skilled, the deeper point that must be made in response is that the objection assimilates the entire value of human life to being valued as a commodity by a potential employer. This collapse of the difference between the life-value of experience, activity, and interaction and the money-value of skills that you can sell to an employer is precisely the “tyranny of work” under capitalist society. That these students learned to take initiative when they had been told to obey authority their whole lives, that they learned to cooperate when the instinct of many when confronted with a different idea than their own was to fight, and that they *enjoyed*, for the first time in their lives, learning something because they could feel it making a difference in their lives is essentially relevant to the future course of their lives.

Moreover, it is obviously not the case that learning to understand society as a field of problems (as opposed to fixed commands to which one must comply), to cooperate with others to understand those problems, to learn to communicate and convince others (and be convinced in turn by them), and to think about concrete solutions that go beyond the established structures of power and ruling value system, are *useless*. *These are the*

capacities by which human history is developed. The neoliberal subordination of education to schooling says, in effect, there was once history, but now that our class has achieved ascendancy, not only must history stop, *no one is to be enabled to understand even that there once was history.* Neoliberalism conflates agency with acquiescence, student life-requirements with passive compliance with system demands, life-value with the production of money-value for the delectation of the appropriating class, and the “real-world” with the circuits of labour and commodity markets. What is on offer with neoliberal educational reforms is not, therefore, education for the real-world, but the attempt to permanently impede people, save for the select few chosen to rule, from understanding reality.

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