Composition in the Age of Austerity

Outside my university office shared by six TAs is a placard sponsored by our union—the Teaching Assistants’ Association—whose motto reads, “The university works because we do.” This is a slogan that the authors in Nancy Welch and Tony Scott’s collection Composition in the Age of Austerity know all too well. Through a variety of case studies and narratives, the collection addresses how the forces of austerity have come to define how we labor in the teaching of composition—as well as how the never-ending sense of crisis in neoliberal society has fundamentally reordered our “available vocabulary and our available ideas for talking together about the work we do” (12). Indeed, neoliberal and market-driven logics have become, Welch and Scott argue, “the taken-for-granted center of what we are—of how we think and act as writing professionals” (6). Starting from this premise, their collection lays out both the material realities that constrain instructors—particularly those at two-year colleges—and strategies for resistance in the face of such totalizing forces.

Welch and Scott are quick to acknowledge in their introduction that composition studies “still lacks a developed understanding of how labor conditions shape pedagogy, scholarship, and the production of literacy and students” (6). This reality animates the scholarship within the collection, as authors grapple with both high-level theories of neoliberalism (which Welch and Scott define as the commodification and privatization of formerly public resources and institutions for the capitalist class to profit from) and on-the-ground stories of austerity practices implemented from on high by administrators. It is a collection that is essential and vital in understanding the conditions and ideologies under which we labor so as to change them.

Despite the heady language within, the collection is largely accessible. Part 1, “Neoliberal Deformations,” examines the various neoliberal reform efforts in higher education imposed by administrators and by private corporations looking to fill the gap left by receding state aid. As neoliberal logic goes, the push toward (and acceptance of) outcomes assessment has atomized composition into prepackaged skills that, once acquired, can serve the writer for the rest of his or her born life. This, we know, is a gross simplification of the matter.

Part 2, “Composition in an Austere World,” addresses the programmatic impact of austerity measures. Basic writing, the National Writing Project, prison college programs—nothing is untouched by “neoliberal creep.” As a result of the fiscal unprofitability of
these extracurricular literacy programs, they are largely relegated by private interests to the status of volunteer or service labor with budgets stripped or defunded altogether. When this happens, such programs must compete for scant grant dollars, forcing them to capitulate to the assessable metrics set forth by their grantors. And so, according to Welch, neoliberalism and austerity continue—one feeding the other until we unwittingly find ourselves beholden to the “increasingly widespread and naturalized expectation that writing programs can . . . endlessly adapt to terms of increasingly lean social reproduction” (138). This belief is precisely what Welch and Scott warn us of in their introduction—that a transformation of consciousness proceeds from the changing material realities of our labor.

Part 3, “Composition at the Crossroads,” looks inward at composition’s complicity in neoliberal notions of merit and outward at paths of collective resistance. One of the harshest critiques of the field comes from Ann Larson’s “Composition’s Dead,” which calls out full-time composition faculty members—“an arriviste class focused on attaining professional legitimacy in hierarchical institutions” (168)—who conflate their own anger at the field’s lack of legitimacy with the rightly earned anger of contingent composition instructors, many of whom labor in two-year colleges. Larson’s critique, laying bare that which divides composition instructors, is one that demands to be dealt with, especially given composition’s history as a site of low-wage, often invisible work.

Though light on actionable steps in the face of severely undermined labor rights and bargaining power, Composition in the Age of Austerity ultimately calls for a reaffirmation of disciplinary expertise in a time when neoliberal wisdom sees writing instruction as expendable, as commodifiable, as insignificant enough to be outsourced. We must, writes Chris Gallagher, “insist that we [are] offering particular kinds of experiences that could not be attained elsewhere” (24). Articulating that the labor of classroom instruction necessary for learning is nothing new—in the May 2017 of TETYC, Michael Kuhne writes, “Any community college writing instructor knows this to the marrow of one’s bones: teaching writing and learning to write well is work, plain and simple.” And yet, unless we own this knowledge, our labor conditions will continue to suffer. Welch and Scott carry the torch of a more historicized, class-conscious approach to our labor initiated by Eileen Schell, Bruce Horner, Steve Parks, and Donna Strickland. They bring material realities and political economies to bear on the labor of composition, and it is a move in the field that we would be wise to follow.

Works Cited


Jonathan Isaac
University of Wisconsin–Madison