

ATD Reviews

A Review of Composition in the Age of Austerity

Nancy Welch and Tony Scott, 2016. *Composition in the Age of Austerity*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press. [ISBN 978-1-60732-444-7. 235 pages, including index. \$27.95 USD (soft cover).]

Reviewed by Leslie R. Anglesey
University of Nevada, Reno

In the wake of the 2008-2009 economic crisis, faculty involved in writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines programs have increasingly grappled with decreased resources and simultaneous requests to add further responsibilities to already full workloads. This is, as Nancy Welch and Tony Scott argue, a result of the Age of Austerity in higher education, a product of neoliberal political and economic ideologies that have been privatizing and reorganizing higher education for some time. Nancy Welch and Tony Scott's *Composition in the Age of Austerity* makes a compelling argument for increased awareness and scholarly attention to the ramifications of austerity politics in higher education. The collection gathers pieces that engage the reader through theoretical inquiry, case study, and reflection to argue that the field of writing studies' expertise is continually undercut by austerity measures in higher education.

The collection as a whole functions as a call, as Lil Brannon states in her *Afterword*, to "[reclaim] our embodied locations" in order to establish a new way of working with(in) higher education" (p. 225). The collection is ideally suited for WAC/WID program administrators and faculty due to its clear and comprehensive discussion about how austerity can be resisted in order to establish sustainable writing programs and writing instruction in an increasingly defunded world. Welch and Scott organize the collection into three sections: the first section teases out composition's complicated relationship with assessment and outcomes in the neoliberal university; the second reports and reflects upon how writing programs and their advocates and practitioners are trying to resist and redefine themselves in the wake of austerity measures; and the third section probes the possibilities and potential embodiments of writing programs today and in the future.

In the first section, Chris Gallagher, Deborah Mutnick, Emily Isaacs, and Marcelle Haddix and Brandi Williams implicate composition as a field in the culture(s) that gave rise to the neoliberal university. Gallagher's critique reconsiders how outcomes assessment "has functioned as our Trojan horse: through our acceptance of it, we've unknowingly invited [competency-based education] into our programs" (p. 23). Gallagher, along with Deborah Mutnick, argues that assessments are not, contrary to popular belief, neutral

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tools; they are inscribed with the values of a neoliberal machine. Mutnick's argument re-situates assessment as a strategic move that primarily benefits private donors, lobbyists, political offices, and transnational publishing companies and their efforts to determine (and so profit from) how student learning is best achieved (p. 41). Marcelle Haddix and Brandi Williams observe that the pedagogical implications of initiatives like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) result in the reification of certain genres (such as argumentative, informative/explanatory, and narrative) to the exclusion of other genres that allow for more creative expression and are more aligned with the kinds of writing students do outside of school spaces. And, considering the programmatic ramifications of these efforts, Emily Isaacs explores different institutional responses to "cost-saving" assessment tools, such as publisher manufactured online assessment programs, revealing that these tools de-emphasize the individual in ways that are counter to the field's state ethos.

After establishing the major conversations within composition about the impact of neoliberalism, the second section of the book presents case studies of writing program and group survival within neoliberal contexts. Tobi Jacobi and Tom Fox and Elyse Eidman-Aadahl look at the complex ramifications of austerity measures for US Prison College programs and the National Writing Project, respectively. Jacobi's critical investigation into the backwards use of funds to continue to support incarceration while reducing funding to prison college programs that could reduce recidivism is enlightening. By revealing how prison funding is spent, Jacobi demonstrates the backwards logic of the prison system. Rather than investing funds into programs that could help inmates avoid recidivism, money is diverted to other prison systems that have demonstrated an inability to reduce recidivism. Fox and Eidman-Aadah and Susan Naomi Bernstein's painful accounts of what austerity looks like on an individual level further develop a thread from the first section of the text: Austerity in a neoliberal world ultimately reduces humans to be either consumers or consumable workers. When this happens, individuals—writing faculty, administrators, and student writers—are denied their individual identities and reconstituted as nameless institutional workers. Nancy Welch extends this argument by arguing that a neoliberal culture will not prove the death of composition programs, but rather reframes compositions and its experts and practitioners as a tax on the university machine. The burden of the work of composition, in this framework, shifts composition from a university citizen to a type of "extra-market" labor (p. 139). She likens the neoliberal university model to the larger goal of neoliberalism, which is to increase profit "by reassigning caretaking and provisioning obligations from the state back to family, volunteer, and other unwaged realms" (p. 139).

In the final section of the collection, Jeanne Gunner, Ann Larson, Eileen Schell, Shari Stenberg, and Tony Scott give readers glimpses into the effects of austerity. The writers demonstrate how workers, faculty, and WAC/WID programs can resist neoliberal constructions of humanity and work. The authors utilize Marxist and feminist critiques to their fullest extent and call for a re-location of writing programs at our local sites. As Shari Stenberg argues, "in a time when neoliberal discourses fetishize standardization and deny local contexts, it is crucial that we emphasize...embodiment, social spaces...and the relations that animate them" (p.195). For Eileen Schell, austerity has changed the body of the university; where universities used to enjoy a higher ratio of faculty to students, we now live in a world of "administrative" bloat where increased administrators often enjoy swollen salaries as well. Tony Scott extends the discussion of embodiment to the manifestation of neoliberalism's "entrepreneurial spirit" within composition scholarship. His warning to

practitioners is that we must be more cautious of the entrepreneurial strategies that are presented to us; failure to do so may result in our territorialization by the neoliberal university. Scott's existential question to composition echoes Jeanne Gunner's censure of composition for finding "ourselves the victim of our own habitus...we have been seeking a berth in a sinking ship" (pp. 152-153). Gunner claims this has produced an "ideology fatigue" within the field, which might create the conditions for finding new ways to resist neoliberalism.

One of the strengths of this collection is in the ways in which it reads neoliberalism as more than a simple imperialist force on the university. It provides concrete forms of resistance, negotiation, and questioning that others in composition and WAC/WID have called for. While Bruce Horner has called elsewhere for practitioners to pay attention to the "exchange values within certain economies," his critique does not provide ideas for accomplishing the ends he calls for. Similarly, Paul G. Cook's "Notes from the Margins: WAC, WID, and the Institutional Politics of Place(ment)" suggests that "Rather than shrinking from this sizeable responsibility or allowing ourselves to be ushered out of our own decision-making processes, as faculty we have a duty to our students to seize upon *thit*ime, our own era, as a time that is ripe for setting ourselves to the enormous, and enormously important, task of reshaping our institutions to meet the needs of changing students in mercurial times." Cook, like Horner has not yet imagined how WAC/WID specialists can accomplish this daunting task.

The value of *Composition in the Age of Austerity* is that it explores the possibilities of maintaining autonomy and known best practices within systems that increasingly demand "mass literacy instruction" delivered in profitable ways (p. 15). The collection provides readers with opportunities to theorize and enact agency in new ways that challenge neoliberal initiatives. This work is an excellent resource for WAC/WID programs and faculty because it offers a multifaceted understanding of our changing material landscape. Because WAC/WID programs are situated within unique institutional nexuses, the articles in this collection may enable them to orient themselves "differently in relation to neoliberal austerity measures and [build] coalitions with others in our communities" (Brannon, p. 235).

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Contact Information

Leslie R. Anglesey
Department of English
University of Nevada, Reno
Reno, NV 89557
Email: langlesey@unr.edu

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