

**“Neoliberal Policies, the Demise of Higher Education, and the Evisceration of the
Public Citizen:
A New Way into the Conversation and the New Information Literacy”**

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While the paper raises some of the main repercussions of neoliberal policies on higher education, the main purpose of this provocation is to generate debate around pursuing new tactics of intervention into the those conversations and new strategies of cultivating a curriculum which can arm are students with the tools that appear to arm the neoliberal army with foot soldiers but instead start cultivating a generation of its betrayals.

- I. The Main Question
- II. Neoliberal Policies and Market Fundamentalism
- III. Three of the Many Factors
- IV. An Unlikely Point of Purchase
- V. The Turn to Information Literacy

I. How has the implementation of neoliberal policies affected the organization, structure, function, and curriculum of institutions of higher education in the United States? What do these changes tell us about the population of trained professionals that enter into the workforce/civil society that confronts the U.S. in the 21st century?

When we think about the capacities and abilities that allow people to grapple with social issues in all their abstraction and complexity, we find those aptitudes with the curriculum of the liberal arts and social sciences. Here we are trained to evaluate evidence, judge the logic and weigh the merits of an argument, decipher fact from fiction, and establish the context within which evidence is established and marshaled. All of these abilities come with the implied expectation that one will take them with them as they enter into the public arena and practice them dutifully as an educated citizen. Whether through Philosophy or Poetry, History, or Sociology, or some combination therein, whether explicitly through pedagogical design or implicitly or through a particular “reading” the collective tools somehow find their way into the box and the social contract finds itself renewed even if positivists and deconstructionists can’t agreed if the coffee “is” in the cup.

II. Neoliberal policies and market fundamentalism have turned U.S. universities into seats of corporate sponsorship and coffers of private interest turning educational credential credentials and research outcomes into commodities. To make up for the decrease in state focused educational funding (Levin, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004),

colleges and universities have prioritized the generation of revenue. Ever increasingly, this has taken the form of privatized investors happy to contribute for the right symbolic compensation (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).¹ No longer a public good, higher education has become dominated, controlled, and monopolized by those with the economic, cultural, and social capital to do so. As a result, universities become entangled in the private sector for funding, corporations sponsor sports teams, corporate donors operate laboratories for their own patenting laws, or for their own form of symbolic capital as their “discoveries” come tethered to the same institutions that Nobel laureates once made discoveries independent of such benefactors.

A second major factor: the multiple roles that students play in the circuits of neoliberal higher education. With the rise of privatization to offset costs comes the increase in student fees as a complementary measure to increase revenue. Raising student fees through the deferred loan system or pay-as-you-go programs turns students into concerned consumers who now see their course of study heading in a vocational direction. In addition, the marketing and enrollment of ever higher numbers of students who are citizens outside the country who will pay bigger fees, allows universities and colleges further strategies to subsidize, and therefore allows them to operate more like global businesses than educational non-profits. Neoliberal shifts are not structural alone, they come from the opposite direction as students have made explicit choices in focusing on the extrinsic outcomes of higher education, such as financial compensation (Astin, 1998, Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Saunders, 2007) and decreasing intrinsic rewards of the college experience such as meaningful philosophy of life (Astin, 1998). In general, a college education has increasingly been viewed as a private good to be purchased by the customer (Chaffee, 1998; Swagler, 1978; Wellen, 2005). This full on customer service model appears to be no different than any other traditional business, in fact, as many scholars have argued, all of these developments are the direct results of individuals and institutions using neoliberal policies and neoliberal rationality to make educational decisions, including attempts to treat and govern the university just like any traditional business, its faculty as traditional workers, and its students as customers (Lohmann, 2004; Winston, 1999).

The third factor described here is the desire to drive down costs for facility operations by reducing the number of full-time faculty and professors through replacing them with part-time workers over time with short-term contracts. Revenue generation coupled with economic efficiency, provides rationale to use more and more part-time and adjunct faculty wherever they can be allocated across the university (Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2005; McLaren, 2005; Rhoades, 2004). In addition, cuts to curriculum, decreasing requirement length to graduation degree time, the creation of specialized degree programs, customized degrees, more distance learning and the number of online degrees, all have allowed universities to absorb countless students in order to turn a profit.

¹ Working draft for conference. Full references available upon request.

² Any number of issues could be folded in here for our discussion.

³ Another macro issue would be linking neoliberalism to social trust and collective faith in institutions more generally. The breakdown in education is one indicator, which

III. While these are just three of the many factors one could point to in the neoliberal malaise that has been reorganizing higher education (the commodification of knowledge, the rise of private for-profit colleges, the ever increasing matriculation of part-time and/or full-time working students, are amongst several others that need to be addressed in order to flesh out this picture in greater detail)², the response to the neoliberal changes taking place consistently takes on the advocacy of the traditional humanistic stance of defending the core values of the humanities and social sciences. As described above, the values of defending civil society, of critical thinking, of the deep rooted Enlightenment attitude which anchors the foundation of higher education, the intrinsic merit of these founding principles of a liberal arts education, is to many (or at least many occupied within the humanities and social sciences) sacrosanct and beyond question. Here, the ultimate battleground, the bare minimum, of what is to be won or lost in terms of thinking about student as future citizens, as future participants in our democratic society, who no matter what course of life they choose, will be competent, intelligent, capable, responsible citizens, endowed with the aptitudes and capacities of being good upstanding citizens able to take responsibility and use their critical skills when called upon doing so. The ultimate goal of preserving the core of the liberal arts education is not to reproduce the professoriate, as some on the right wing of the political spectrum might think, rather it serves to defend civil society from threats that a liberally educated person could critically discern were a danger to close off that sphere of critical debate and civic engagement.

While this line of defense is time-honored and the old guard of the “good fight,” it has all but run out of steam in today’s world. This division between fighting for the time honored values of the liberal arts education- the intrinsic good—the values in themselves—of free thought, critical thinking, open-mindedness, creativity, self-expression, and others that can be added to this list, have now become frivolous endeavors, tantamount to dropping out of the mainstream economy and becoming poets or artists. While comical to reflect on here, it is anything but comical to see how these words have become defined out of discussion of the core concerns of educational policies today.

And since discourse is always intertwined with practice, these ideas are also defined outside the bounds of discourse, outside the terms in which curriculum decisions are conducted, new programs are cultivated, budget cuts are enacted, resources allocated, tenure lines granted, or even more generally in terms of what division of labor different colleges will take on within their universities and at what pay rates, to name just a few local level manifestations of decisions made at mid level instantiations. In each of these cases, decisions are not made to shape the overall character and development of the students capacities and abilities, rather to provide the student with the proper training he or she desires and align them with the proper labor market niche that aligns with their designated area of specialization. The debates around “values” and “core mission” of the liberal arts are now dead as far as those with the power money and resources to shape higher education are concerned today; they may still be heard in the background, but they are no longer acknowledged let alone listed to in any way. Key concerns now are “skill

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sets” “employment opportunities” and other phrases, with an eye that will bear out high profile statistics in terms of job placements as recruiting tools for future students, and as legitimization tools for administrators to keep their positions and be rewarded for their efforts, as well as to entice donors and private interests that the university is a sound “investment” for their capital. None of these metrics measure the critical abilities of students, their critical capacities, their competencies in assessing and processing information, their ability to reason, to weigh evidence, to make sound judgments, and instead simply their ability to perform the narrow skill set they have been trained to do and fit into the market niche into which they have been groomed.

The power of the discourse of neoliberalism to exclude these terms from even entering into the conversation anymore, let alone standing against these shifts to higher education has caused not only a massive erosion on the advocacy front, it has swept through with a dispiriting force undermining most hope in finding any sort of new footing against what seems to be the inevitable slide into oblivion.³

IV. An Unlikely Point of Purchase is to be found in the revival of a debate that happened several years ago between two computer titans Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, which has gained a second wind of circulation this past year in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Inside Higher Ed and The New York Times amongst other places. The crux of the issue starts with Gates giving a speech to the nation's governors in 2011 in which he expressed a strikingly narrow vision for the role of higher education. He argued that that educational funding policies needed to emphasize

categories [of courses] that help fill jobs and drive [one's] state economy in the future...education investment should be aimed at academic disciplines and departments well-correlated to areas that actually produce jobs.

Piecing together this speech and other related pieces (see D5 transcript and NYT 2015a, 2016a,b, c), Gates envisions optimizing education by promoting greater efficiency and effective learning environments, creating sophisticated metrics to measure best practices, implementing technology to facilitate information delivery, and shared data to maximize information and minimize costs...in short, “to raise performance without spending a lot more.” Ultimately it seems that Gates wants to maximize scarce resources to best prepare the workforce, through the prism of scientific study.

Not soon after Gates spoke, Jobs introduced the new iPad where Jobs argued:

"It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough -- it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing and nowhere is that more true than in these post-PC devices."

³ Another macro issue would be linking neoliberalism to social trust and collective faith in institutions more generally. The breakdown in education is one indicator, which reflects and refracts the breakdown of trust in others (see PEW).

This led to a firestorm of partisanship, side-taking, commentary and word by word Talmudic exegesis as to what the prophets ultimately meant. Jobs, whose comment above is almost always followed by the following from 2005, nevertheless, it is worth quoting at length:

(when asked about what advice he would give about making someone[‘s company more successful....)

Steve: Yeah. People say you have to have a lot of passion for what you’re doing and it’s totally true. And the reason is because it’s so hard that if you don’t, any rational person would give up. It’s really hard. And you have to do it over a sustained period of time. So if you don’t love it, if you’re not having fun doing it, you don’t really love it, you’re going to give up. And that’s what happens to most people, actually. If you really look at the ones that ended up, you know, being “successful” in the eyes of society and the ones that didn’t, oftentimes, it’s the ones [who] were successful loved what they did so they could persevere, you know, when it got really tough. And the ones that didn’t love it quit because they’re sane, right? Who would want to put up with this stuff if you don’t love it?

Here we see Jobs offering a vision that is much less systematic and more free flowing in terms of what people pursue and most importantly **WHY** they pursue why they pursue it. **HERE** is where **WE** dovetail we Jobs in terms of finding common ground with our Knight in Silicon Armor. Jobs champions individuality, free will, passion and desire, all of which are cornerstones to critical, independent thinking.

V. The Turn to Information Literacy

While not exactly the go to case for a discussion of the repercussion of Neoliberal policies on higher education, the Gates-Jobs discussion offers three key strategic points for intervention.

- 1) Both Gates and Jobs are central to the Neoliberal economy and whatever moves they make will always attract attention (even posthumous Jobs memes seem to work).
- 2) Jobs offers, unknowing, the ideal rhetoric on which to capitalize—a language of neoliberal innovation, entrepreneurial, ingenuity, yet tied just enough to old school traditions of passion, creativity, that it provides the Trojan horse of discourses through which to enter back into the conversation without relying on the old values vs. jobs dichotomy. I am not simply arguing that we “need to use the master’s tools against the master” or some other awful cliché that conflates truth, power, knowledge, and a host of other issues into a meaningless statement. What I am arguing is that Jobs’s words open up a way to speak the language of neoliberalism in a way that the mechanisms of neoliberalism understand and respond to with attention. The discourse alone is not sufficient; surely, the enonciative speaker, Steve Jobs, plays more than a small role in making such statements profound utterances and not whimsical daydreams. The discourse provides both the form and the content within which to gain point of entry and within which to operate on already established ground.

- 3) Both 1 and 2 tie to the issues of expertise, but specifically to the nexus of issues that surround the fetishization of “skill-set” orientations, market-driven curriculum, the fundamental utility and integration of technology, and what I will argue is the most fundamental issue of all---the evaluation, manipulation, and transformation of information. The issues of information, most widely construed, plays itself out across multiple fields on multiple levels, whether in terms of the information-technology industry, information-economy, social media-information platforms, to the point the word is redundant. Yet, its redundancy is crucial to understanding what is at stake in investing in this particular point of attack.
- a. Moving beyond the taken for granted understandings of “literacy” in media literacy and other forms of literacy, the challenge is to take this as an opportunity to rethink how notions of “literacy” are played out at their most fundamental and taken for granted levels—for what they are 1) currently presupposing; 2) currently lacking; 3) need to be reconstructed to do in order to be effective tools to effectively engage the contemporary world within which we live as critically engaged citizens.⁴

Let me return to the Gates-Jobs discussion in order to illuminate exactly why this may have some greater resonance than may appear in the abstract.

What is it that Gates says that connects to the major Neoliberal trends outlined in the beginning of the paper? While Gates appeals to more straightforward concepts that attach to neoliberal mechanisms, Jobs is no less tethered to the machinery, he may claim he needs the humanities, but he needs technology to make billions of dollars as well. Convenient. What I am after is this: what is we return to thinking about what it means to work with information at any job whatsoever. Where would we start? How would the liberal arts education begin with someone who “doesn’t need it” and work backwards to prove us wrong?

Consider this example. A trained computer scientist is hired at a company to program code and create a computer program for that company to record and store data. The programmer is excellent with vast amounts of classroom experience and a number of lab hours on campus. They have taken numerous electives related to programming and as a result of their almost laser like focus edged out other candidates due to their “developed skill set” coming into the job. Problem: the program, unbeknownst to the programmer gathers one more piece of data than the programmer anticipated and is open to hacking (as is everything). The programmer knows this but thinks little of this since the program is not for anything classified, sensitive or confidential. Data is hacked. Programmer doesn’t understand why the program went wrong, nor why the fallout is so severe. To make light of this, a poetry class would have illustrated that anything created is beyond any one individual, a sociology course would have described infrastructure and networks of relations, a philosophy class in ethics would have provided background in explaining confidentiality, the sharing of information,

⁴ This must simultaneously battle the post-fact, post-truth, alternative-fact world that many claim we are now living in, fro the far right-wing, to the far-left wing agendas in the political sphere to the presence of these issues in all spheres of life.

etc...Moral of the story is to get at how ALL occupations in todays world, no matter the skill set are vectors-they cut across domains that no one set of skills can handle on their own. Everyone must be able to think critically across domains, to have at least a minimal aptitude to understand how information is weighed, the consequences of using it for one reason or another, etc...

This will require taking a long list of taken-for-granted premises and making them not disciplinary specific, but pan-disciplinary specific. In a post-post-modern world, can we return to have some sort of semi-universal, historically grounded semi-universally accepted procedures by which truth claims can be established? Only when we have some foundation, can we proceed by which evidence/information can be evaluated, validated, vetted, authorized, and legitimated. If so, then all of the preceding words will need to be unpacked in regard to their definition, function, process, and place within the economy and circulation of knowledge. (The details of what this new information literacy will entail are beyond the scope of what can be filled in here).

Only if we start here, from our example of the computer scientist, working from reverse order and demonstrate how what we do is create, through poetry, structural analyses, chronological documentation, ethical implication, is all the same, then the ability to provide the essential building blocks through which critical thinking is founded can be re-established as the center of what education is. This project can then be undertaken not by having the market dictate what skill sets which we need to align ourselves with, rather by defining the goods and services that will be for sale in any market where buying, selling, or trading can go on in the first place.

This is not a return to the old days whereby the training of public citizens was the primary task of our civil institutions. Without a change of course, perhaps it will be the last.