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How to Get a Life Humanities Education in the Age of Neoliberal Exhaustion

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Abstract

Increasingly, over the past few years, my students have claimed that they are overworked and that they don't have a life. They are worried about their grades, their ability to find a job after graduation and repay their student loans. In this article, I grapple with this growing anxiety and stress that I have witnessed among my students. I explore the correlation between the neoliberalization of education, the ideology of human capital and student states of panic and anxiety. I argue that the neoliberal education reform has intensified overwork and exhaustion, as students have internalized the logic that they are human capital, constantly needing to compete and increase their value on the market. I further call upon the humanities to question the neoliberal work ethic and fight for a higher education whose ultimate objective is not the creation of human capital.



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In the Fall of 2019, I spent many hours after my *Introduction to Francophone Studies* class, talking to students who were dealing with anxiety and depression. Students expressed feeling stressed, panicked – about their upcoming assignments but also the future in general. They were unsure who to confide in, since counseling services were understaffed and unable to handle the large quantity of requested appointments. This wasn't the first semester that I was hearing this, and I had a sense that the levels of stress and anxiety were getting worse every year. I am not going to write here about any individual meetings or reveal any personal conversations, but I do want to explore the relation I see between student stress, overwork and the neoliberal theory of human capital that has permeated higher education over the past few decades. I want to suggest that the neoliberal education reform has intensified overwork and exhaustion and that we need pedagogies that will question the neoliberal work ethic.

Another recent encounter convinced me that it was necessary to write about these issues. A student emailed me because she wanted to talk to me, but she couldn't make it to my office hours, because, as she said, her schedule was crazy. She emailed me the said schedule, which, in fact, was crazy. Every day was filled from 6 am to 8 pm, even activities like eating an apple or taking a shower were carefully scheduled (usually in 15 min slots). This was not the first time that a student had shown me a schedule of this kind, and every time I see this, I am disturbed by the over-structuredness, the utmost regimentation, the lack of space and time left for the unexpected or the unknown. Every slot is filled with an activity, no time is left unplanned. It is better to be busy, I often hear students say, than to have nothing to do.

In this case, my student said that, yes, she currently did not have a life, but that it was ok, it was all going to be worth it, when in the future she gets a job that she loves (in this case within the field of medicine). The current states of anxiety and exhaustion were justified as an investment into a future when she will finally have a life. No pain, no gain, the story goes. Not having a life was here understood as a lack of social life and a lack of time to do anything that wouldn't help her build her CV. The argument wasn't necessarily that in the future, once she graduated, she would have time for a social life. It was, rather, that in the future she will acquire a life in the form of paid work that she loved. She would still have no free time, but it went without saying that was a worthy sacrifice for having a job that one loved. One couldn't possibly have a career and free time, that would just be ludicrous.

These experiences raised several questions for me: notably, how did students come to accept that stress, anxiety, and overwork were reasonable things to experience daily? How did they normalize the idea that to have a decent future, they needed to sacrifice their time and mental health? The phrases that they didn't currently have a life but that that was ok, kept resonating with me. How did it become normal to not have a life? Of course, to a certain extent, youth is always a preparation for adulthood and school a preparation for one's future job. There is always an anticipation of adult life and what it may bring. In that sense, "real" life hasn't started yet. But the idea that college is meant to be all work and that liberation is supposed to come when one joined the workforce, seemed very bizarre to me. There was a religious, Protestant undertone to it, except that here, it wasn't the afterlife that was the release from the suffering that was life; instead, entering professional life was supposed to be the reward for the stress and anxiety during college. Which, again, didn't necessarily mean that stress and anxiety were going to dissipate once one had a job. Rather, their purpose would become evident once one had a job they were passionate about. I didn't want to spoil this vision of the future by suggesting that many working people are still

stressed and anxious and are looking forward to retirement as a form of liberation (well, at least those who are able to retire). For them as well, the present is sacrificed for a future where life will finally be enjoyable. The logic internalized by my students, unfortunately, doesn't end after college.

But to return to my college students, I began to wonder how 20-year olds internalized the idea that life = work. This was very different from the idea of college I had, where one also put life on pause, but because one was not paying bills, didn't have children and had enough time to hang out with friends, do drugs, and experiment with the world. College, to many of my students, it seemed like, still meant life was on pause but now it was so because one didn't have time for any of those activities. This whole situation was a bit of a conundrum for me, because over the years I have been diluting my syllabi: texts that I have taught a few years ago are now too difficult for students, I'm assigning fewer and fewer pages every year, and introducing more and more visual materials. I hear the same from my colleagues: on the one hand students are learning less, on the other, they are more and more exhausted, overworked, their schedules are getting crazier and crazier. What's the catch? I want to suggest that this shift that has happened is connected to two founding and related concepts of the neoliberal university: the idea of return on investment and that of human capital.¹

Over the past few decades, under the umbrella of neoliberalism, we have seen continuous privatization of different spheres of life, cuts in public services, never-ending austerity measures, increases in student debt and a replacement of stable, full time jobs with temporary or part-time ones, leading to a "hustle culture." As Wendy Brown (2015) explains "neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities — even where money is not at issue — and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus" (p.31). Market values are extended to every part of our lives and efficiency, productivity, and competition are the supreme values. In an atmosphere of increasing precarity, it is up to the individual to make sure that they are competitive enough on the job market.

The students that I teach today, their crazy schedules, stress, anxiety and depression are strongly influenced by the interiorization of the idea that they're human capital. This kind of pressure creates anxious and exhausted subjects (in fact, the number of students I have on anti-anxiety and anti-depression medications seems to increase every semester). I am not a psychiatrist, nor am I interested in diagnosing my students (nor am I implying that there aren't other factors involved, though I would argue that many of them are linked to neoliberalism). However, I am ultimately writing this because I believe that the humanities need to challenge the idea that the primary goal of higher education is the production of human capital.

What is happening? Well, neoliberalism is happening.

Lately, the term neoliberalism has become widespread when describing the current organization of society. Though theorists have described neoliberalism in different ways, most agree that neoliberals strive to extend market principles to all social spheres (Harvey, 2010; Brown,

¹ I should mention that I teach at the University of Miami, a private institution with many privileged students. UM is somewhat specific though. Like the city of Miami, it is very ethnically and racially diverse (less so in terms of class). There is a large international student population, from Latin America of course, but also from sub-Saharan and North Africa. A certain percentage of students, many of whom are local, also receive scholarships.

2015; Spence, 2016). The government, within this logic, would be at its most efficient if run like a corporation as CEOs are supposedly more reliable than politicians. The public sector thus needs to be privatized as businesses are better (and again, more efficient) than the government at providing services. I will not go here into the history of how neoliberalism moved from the political fringes into the mainstream, though I have written about it elsewhere (Perisic, 2019). Suffice it to say that stagflation in the U.S. in the 1970s, the OPEC oil crisis, and the election of Ronald Reagan to presidency in 1980, created the conditions for the spread of neoliberal ideology.

Given that the government should be run like a corporation, its priorities should also be those of a corporation: efficiency, productivity, and growth. All other values including equality, equity and social justice, are relegated to second place. As Brown (2015) notes: “‘social responsibility,’ which must itself be entrepreneurialized, is part of what attracts consumers and investors” (p. 27). Social responsibility is thus not completely erased from neoliberal discourse, yet it is pursued only if it attracts investors and contributes to economic growth.

To give an example, a few years ago, at the beginning of the year orientation at the university where I teach, we had a workshop on empathy. It was not the worst workshop one could attend (especially since it was followed by active shooter response training), yet it completely exemplified the neoliberal logic. How, you might wonder, is it possible to instrumentalize empathy? The argument was that we should practice empathy and being nice to each other. Nothing wrong with that. The issue was with the justification. We should practice empathy and understanding toward each other because it has been proven that workers who work in an empathic environment are more productive. The problem here is that empathy is displaced as a value in itself and positioned as a means toward other ends: productivity and efficiency. Moreover, whereas empathy is merely a means, productivity and efficiency are never questioned as the ultimate values. In a neoliberal society, these are the only values that require no justification and could not possibly be questioned. Who could possibly say that productive and efficient workers are not a good thing? Empathy, on the other hand, it seems, does need a justification and is promoted not for its own sake, not because we want to live in an empathetic society, but because it enhances productivity.

Neoliberal values have also come to shape the university. When talking about the neoliberal university, scholars underline the decline of faculty governance and the disproportionate expansion of the university administration. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2000) thus speak of academic capitalism and managed professionals. The former term refers to the fact that “public colleges and universities act like capitalist enterprises, investing in business ventures such as startup companies spun off from faculty research and in research parks and auxiliary units such as residence halls” (p.73), whereas the latter describes increase oversight of faculty by professional managers. The neoliberal structure of the university is also meant to make the production of human capital more efficient. Students are thus seen both as sources of revenue and as products to be offered to the corporate class upon graduation. In fact, there is a correspondence between the larger political economy, the structure of the university, and the role of the students.

Because, if the government should only be concerned with productivity, efficiency and growth, so should the individual. The individual, like the government, needs to become more entrepreneurial. Neoliberals emphasize the importance of freedom and choice, yet both are primarily understood within the context of the market, where the individual has the “choice” to make oneself more or less competitive. The concept of choice is thus mobilized to shift social responsibility to individual responsibility. There is no longer any social responsibility towards reducing inequality or assuring that everyone can fulfill their basic needs, poverty is ultimately the

result of an individual's choice not to increase their competitive advantage on the free market. Given the fact that neoliberals insist that competition is the natural inclination of human beings, not doing everything in one's capacity to become more entrepreneurial and increase one's value on the market is presented as completely "unnatural" behavior that deserves to be sanctioned. The macro and the micro here are intertwined: justifying the privatization of public resources and services and the transformation of rights into privileges is only possible if individuals are no longer citizens with rights, but human capital freely exchanged according to the laws of the market. The idea of human capital has been crucial in the spread of neoliberalism and particularly in the neoliberalization of education. Because, what are the mechanisms through which a person can increase their competitive advantage on the market? An important one (though not the only one) is education. Education, in this context, becomes an investment that is supposed to yield a return in the form of a high-paying job.

From Human to Human Capital

Whereas the idea of human capital already appears in the work of Adam Smith (1776), economists Gary Becker (1964), Jacob Mincer (1958), and Theodore Schultz (1961) are often credited for its modern usage. In his work on human capital, Becker argues that since capital is an "asset that yields income," it extends beyond cash, stocks, or shares. In fact, all individual knowledge, skills and values should be considered capital, given that they allow people to have higher earnings. This is *human* capital because "people cannot be separated from their knowledge, skills, health, or values in the way they can be separated from their financial and physical assets" (n.p.). Education, in this context, is no longer seen as a right but as a way to invest in one's human capital. According to Becker, the logic is quite simple: studies have shown that people with higher education degrees earn higher incomes. Naturally wanting higher incomes, individuals will want to invest in their education. This logic is then easily used to justify rising tuition costs, because this is the sacrifice that individuals need to make to later be able to collect their return on invest. And if individuals make "a choice" not to invest in themselves, well, then they cannot complain when there is no return. As Lester Spence (2016) argues: "The idea of human capital theorized by the late Chicago economist Gary Becker...transforms labor from a simple unit you plug into an economic equation (so many units of labor translate into so much profit for the company when combined with so many units of equipment) into something human beings can themselves transform through skill development, education, creativity, and perhaps most important of all choice" (p.18). This logic has further sustained the highly racialized "cultures of poverty" argument, which claims that higher rates of poverty in Black and Brown communities are the result of a lack of entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to invest in human capital. Poverty is thus not a structural issue but ultimately a choice (Spence, 2016). It has also entirely tied education to the market, shifting the debate from whether education should be thought of as return on investment to whether students are receiving the adequate return on their investment.

"A Nation at Risk," a report of the U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education under Ronald Reagan (1983) was another important contribution to the theory of human capital. The report portrays the United States as a nation at risk, losing its prominence in the domains of commerce, industry, technology, and science. The United States' downfall, the report argues, is due to the mediocrity of its education system. The report proceeds to link education to business and technology: the primary goal of education should be to restore U.S. dominance as an economic power. "A Nation at Risk" in fact explicitly uses the language of human capital:

The risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than Americans and have government subsidies for development and export. It is not just that the South Koreans recently built the world's most efficient steel mill, or that American machine tools, once the pride of the world, are being displaced by German products. It is also that these developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe. Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce and are today spreading throughout the world as vigorously as miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did earlier. If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all--old and young alike, affluent and poor, majority and minority. Learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the "information age" we are entering (p. 10).

The priorities are very clearly set, human capital is the main natural resource of the knowledge economy. America's newest and best product are its people, cultivated according to and for the demands of the international market. This is no longer merely a question of labor (in terms of units of labor), but one of knowledge. There is something deeply disconcerting about comparing knowledge and skills to raw materials. Namely, the underlining assumption is that both should be exploited as high-priced commodities to be exchanged on the market. But the implication is also that the knowledge and skills prioritized will be those that respond to the demands of the transnational market. The Commission does mention its interest in the spiritual development of citizens, and the importance of educated citizens in a democratic society. Yet, both the structure and the language of the report indicate that this has become an afterthought, remnants of an older system of values.

The ideology of human capital has come to dominate education over the past few decades, leading to the prioritization of STEM learning, a strong defunding of the humanities, and a subservience of higher education to the needs of the market. Students are buying their education, but this purchase is also an investment in their own profit generating power. And just like any business investment, investing in education comes with a risk. In other words, the only responsibility of the state is to give students access to information and different options. It is then up to the students to make rational choices about how to best maximize their income-earning potential. Within this context, the public disparaging of humanities is not surprising. If anyone is crazy enough to "invest" in a humanities degree, and somehow think that this would give them a competitive advantage on the market, then they deserve to be saddled with large amounts of student debt that they will never be able to repay. Because, why on earth would they invest in such a useless degree? Structural issues like skyrocketing tuition and the defunding of public education are erased as all responsibility is laid on individuals who have made "irrational decisions." Like businesses when they make a bad investment, individuals who make irrational decisions deserve to be reprimanded and spend their lives repaying large amounts of debt. After all, how could an MFA in poetry possibly help the United States compete with South Korean steel mills?

To increase their value on the market, students are forced to compete. Useful degrees like business or medicine are no longer enough; they need to find additional ways to increase their human capital. Again, just like businesses. To remain in the "game," ahead of their competitors, businesses need to continuously invest in new technologies, place new products on the market and expand. As Hadas Thier (2020) explains, "market competition acts as a disciplining force, which

compels capitalists to constantly ‘accumulate’: to transform profits into further investments” (n.p.). Similarly, students can never stop raising their value on the market. In addition to investing in a “useful” degree, they need to accumulate internships, extracurricular activities, sports, student clubs, sororities/fraternities, etc. This also explains the paradox of students being more and more overworked while I’m teaching less and less: education has ultimately become about accumulating things that will give one a competitive edge on the market. One cannot spend too much time on any one of these particular activities because that would be a waste of time. When filling up one’s CV, quantity takes precedence over process and quality.

To sum up, having internalized the message that they’re human capital, students are filling their schedules and CVs with multiple majors, minors, unpaid internships (which have become normalized), and extracurricular activities. And because of rising tuition costs and accruing debts they also need paid work. This burden is also unevenly spread across race and gender: on average, Black and Brown students are incumbered with higher amounts of student debt (Scott-Clayton and Li, 2016) and are more often responsible for their family’s finances (Kreighbaum, 2019). In other words, whereas investing in one’s capital is presented as a “choice,” structural conditions give white and upper-class students an advantage on the market.

Yet this is still not the full equation for me. If one believes that every moment of one’s life should be used to increase one’s competitive advantage and that one has no other role in society except to maximize their market value, then working all the time does make sense. Particularly if one is feeling competition from all sides, I can understand how any moment spent doing “nothing” could be perceived as a waste of time. Time is money after all, this is an old platitude. Yet the part that still requires some elucidation has to do with passion. Gary Becker assumes that a high paying job is incentive enough. Everyone should want to invest in their human capital because everyone wants a high paying job. But somehow this is not enough. Which is not to say that students don’t think about their future salaries. With rising student debt, getting a job that pays enough to be able to pay back the loans has become more important than ever. But to go back to my student examples from the introduction, I am particularly interested in students who claim that not having a life will be worth it once they get a job that they are passionate about. Of course, this is a very middle-class aspiration. Most working-class people have long ago given up on the possibility of doing something that they love and are merely looking for anything that will allow them to survive. But there is something particularly intriguing to me in this combination of the discourse of human capital and one of passion. Obviously, it is not bad to be doing something that one is passionate about. It is certainly better than spending one’s life doing something that one hates. The problem is that “passion” is used to support the ideology of human capital, convince us that we should be working all the time, and that it is normal (in fact, recommended) to not have a life.

Searching for Passion and Finding Burnout

Recently, an article entitled “How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation,” went viral on social media. The author, Anne Helen Peterson, wonders why she is unable to accomplish the most basic things in her life like mailing packages or buying groceries. Her answer is burnout. Why? Because she has internalized the idea that she should be working all the time. The author, who is also a teacher, explains that students (herself included) internalize the need to find employment that both their parents and peers will approve of (well-paid with room for advancement but also “cool” and interesting). This type of employment is meant to be the endpoint of a process that she calls “childhood optimization.”

It was graduate school in particular that instilled in Peterson the habit of working all the time: “Things that should’ve felt good (leisure, not working) felt bad because I felt guilty for not working; things that should’ve felt “bad” (working all the time) felt good because I was doing what I thought I should and needed to be doing in order to succeed.” Working all the time is the supposed key to success.

The problem is, Peterson continues, this vision is increasingly out of sync with reality. People’s undying commitment to work, the willingness to work long hours, to think of vacation and retirement as privileges and not rights, are not leading to the desired result. In fact, quite the opposite. The more people are willing to put up with, the more they are willing to sacrifice, the more they are asked to sacrifice. Millennials’ eagerness to satisfy their bosses has not turned them into more valued workers; it has simply facilitated their exploitation. Yet millennials remain in companies that treat them poorly because they don’t see an alternative. They keep on striving hard, believing that respect and compensation are proportionate to the effort they put in.

Peterson describes her students in a manner that I absolutely recognized:

There were still obnoxious frat boys and fancy sorority girls, but they were far more studious than my peers had been. They skipped fewer classes. They religiously attended office hours. They emailed at all hours. But they were also anxious grade grubbers, paralyzed at the thought of graduating, and regularly stymied by assignments that called for creativity. They’d been guided closely all their lives, and they wanted me to guide them as well. They were, in a word, *scared*.

After the BuzzFeed article, a New York Times article, “Why Are Young People Pretending to Love Work,” followed. The author argues that “performative workaholism” has become a lifestyle as evidenced by the proliferation of #hustle and #ThankGodItsMonday hashtags. In other words, it is not enough to be overworked, one needs to also simultaneously brag and complain about it on social media as a way of underlining one’s dedication and sacrifice.

This work ethic of course has a long history. David Graeber, in *Bullshit Jobs*, traces the Protestant origins of the American work ethic, as he argues that “the belief that what ultimately motivates human beings has always been, and must always be, the pursuit of wealth, power, comforts, and pleasure, has always and must always be complemented by a doctrine of work as self-sacrifice, as valuable precisely *because* it is the place of misery, sadness, emptiness, and despair” (p.244). The rewards of work are only acceptable if they are obtained through misery and suffering. Nowadays, misery and suffering are also increasingly used to justify inequality. We frequently hear about dedicated CEOs who work 80-hour weeks (Pullen, 2015). I often joke with my students that the neoliberal elite is the worst one in history. As least 17th and 18th century French and English aristocrats played polo and organized lavish balls while the commoners worked. The neoliberal elite seems to be working themselves and other people to death. As if to say, the poor aren’t the only miserable ones, so are the rich, and if the rich get some rewards for their misery, well it’s just that they are better at building their human capital.

When it comes to my students, it seems that the Protestant work ethic, the theory of human capital and the desire to pursue one’s passion, produce one very packed schedule. There is the justification of constant work as a moral obligation; refusal of work is tantamount to laziness and people who don’t want to work all the time, deserve to be poor. But there’s also the justification of work in terms of passion. One achieves self-realization through work and so in terms of choosing a career, one should follow their passion. In other words, one should just do what they

love and get remunerated for it, it's a win-win combination. Of course, in reality, most people are not pursuing their passions, but are working the jobs that they were able to get. But this argument is additionally dangerous because it is used to justify overwork and poor working conditions. If one does what one loves, then work really does not feel like work, so it is fine to be doing it all the time. Doing what you love will make up for 80h work weeks, lack of paid vacation, maternity leave, or the possibility of retirement.

This discourse about pursuing one's love/passion/interest (most of the time used interchangeably), goes beyond career choice. I also often hear from students that they didn't like something that they had to read for class because they were simply not interested in the topic. Interest is here often presented as a natural proclivity, almost biological, that one simply does or does not have. What tends to be missing from this equation is that interests are created based on what one is exposed to. I recently taught a class about Caribbean immigration, where the students worked with two social justice organizations in Miami's neighborhood of Little Haiti. One organization had an afterschool program for children, the other was working on an anti-gentrification campaign. One of the students who was assigned the anti-gentrification campaign, asked me what they were supposed to do if this was not their passion, if their passion was a different social issue. I found this statement perplexing because while I hoped that the students would learn from the work they were doing, to me the work was ultimately about fulfilling the community's needs, not the students'.

On the one hand, the "pursue your passion" discourse and the self-valorization through work are used to justify overwork and exploitation. But also, these are extremely individualistic discourses that are moving us away from the question of social responsibility- one should do what one loves and that's it. The problem is, as I tried to explain to my student, I don't think anyone is particularly passionate about gentrification (except probably developers). Then I realized that the way students talk about their interests/passions is equivalent to the market of ideas. The same way that one buys a pair of jeans, based on what one likes the most, one picks their interests and involvements from an array of options, without any concern for those that one is not attracted to. This was particularly jarring when it came to social issues like gentrification. The argument was, yet again, that one has the right to just pick the issue that they're the most passionate about, without feeling particularly responsible for the problems that do not align with their interests. Or those that ultimately will not enhance their human capital. The question of social responsibility was yet again replaced with the idea of choice, where the picking of a "cause" was merely another investment, one whose return needed to be evaluated and anticipated.

The remaining question is: what is and could be the role of the humanities in all of this? Frequently, people teaching humanities courses try to justify their existence by proving that they can help students increase their human capital. Understanding foreign cultures, developing communication skills and an awareness of (past and present) social issues, the argument goes, will help students become better doctors, lawyers, or engineers. This is how the humanities have become the "second" major; they cannot by themselves provide an adequate return on investment, but they can be that extra thing on students' CV's that will give them a competitive edge on the market. This has thus far been a losing argument, given the fact that humanities majors are decreasing at most universities. So maybe it is time to stop trying to prove the usefulness of the humanities within the framework of human capital and instead begin to question and move beyond it. In other words, the humanities in the age of neoliberal exhaustion should question the neoliberal work ethic and the neoliberal transformation of humans into capital. Instead of justifying the

humanities as useful when students are trying to get a job, could we justify it as useful when students are trying to get a life?

A fight against the logic of human capital is a fight for time. It is a fight for not every moment of our lives being used to increase productivity and efficiency. It is a fight for time that is unstructured, what back in the day we used to call leisure. This should not be a privilege, it should be a right. Challenging the logic of human capital implies a democratization of free time, which requires a redistribution of resources, because everyone needs to be able to afford free time. This cannot be the equivalent of the “self-care” culture, which is but a very individualistic solution.

Of course, this is not necessarily a new idea. Autonomist Marxists have already in the 70s and 80s argued that works’ refusal is necessary in the struggle against capitalism. According to Harry Cleaver (1993), capitalism does not just exploit people through work, it furthermore “subordinates all of life to work and by so doing alienates those it forces to work and prevents them from developing their own paths of self-realization. The subordination of life to work means not only are we forced to work long hours--such long hours that we have little energy left over for other activities--but that those other activities tend to be reduced to the mere recreation of life as labor power- the willingness and ability to work.” In *The Post-Work Manifesto*, Stanley Aronowitz, Dawn Esposito, William DiFazio, and Margaret Yard similarly argue that in the auto industry, workers are fighting not only for higher wages but also for better staffing and less overtime: “The auto workers’ demands are obviously unreasonable: they want to get a life” (p.37). The workers’ assertion that they want to get a life resonated with my students’ claim that they didn’t have a life.

Instead of accepting the idea that no one should have a life, maybe the humanities need to ask what it means to have a life. This is a huge query, one that I do not intend to resolve here but the answer begins by dissociating life from work, and dissociating humans from capital. To begin responding to this question, we need to, as Kathi Weeks (2011) explains, defamiliarize the work ethic. Weeks argues that “challenging the present organization of work requires not only that we confront its reification and depoliticization but also its normativity and moralization. Work is not just defended on grounds of economic necessity and social duty; it is widely understood as an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation” (p.11). This is not to say that work is completely without value. But we need to question the reduction of life to work and the idea that free time is a luxury one needs to feel guilty about. Humanities education could precisely allow students to find the time to reflect, write, feel, and change outside of the logic of the market. Well, you’ll tell me, we already do this. And we do, to an extent. But we should use humanities courses to explain to students the political stakes of doing this in the age of neoliberal exhaustion. We should underline the fact that we’re reflecting, writing and feeling not in order to be more competitive on the job market, but so that we can, perhaps, relate to one another outside of the framework of human capital.

The issue, however, is that while we can question the work ethic, we are doing this in a university setting. Regardless of the content we teach, we thus have the issue of the “hidden curriculum.” I can teach texts on leisure, or *flânerie* or post-work but through the organization of education at the university I am still teaching students to normalize fatigue and busy-ness. My courses are still part of a pre-set schedule, the papers and exams in my classes are causes of anxiety and the readings I assign- when combined with the readings for all their other courses and all their extracurriculars- leave very little time for anything else. Whether I like it or not, I am teaching my students to work under stress (and if they can’t, to medicate their anxiety), to multitask, to

constantly be competing (whether I personally believe in competition or not, the grades I assign are part of a cumulative GPA that is used to rank them). Fully challenging the “work ethic” thus requires a major restructuring of higher education. This cannot be accomplished by any single individual, but only by a strong social movement organizing against the neoliberalization of education. Still, while we work on building this movement, there are some things that we can do in our classrooms. I would thus like to end this article by mentioning a few concrete activities that I have experimented with. But I want to reiterate that while I believe these to be important, they are ultimately inefficient if not part of a larger, collective effort to rethink higher education.

I’ve started, at the suggestion of students, to allow for some unstructured time during my classes. In the middle of class, we take a 5 min break (we stay in the classroom, otherwise students leave and spend the entire time on their phones), during which we can all just be with each other. Sometimes conversation revolves around issues raised in the class and sometimes it doesn’t (food is often involved). The purpose here is to create at least a small rupture in the high level of regimentation that students are accustomed to and to show them that interesting ideas can arise during unstructured time and activities (in fact, that they necessitate unstructured time). There is occasionally some awkwardness and lack of comfort at not being given a controlled activity to engage in. Yet, these are quickly overcome, and I find it beneficial for students to engage with their classmates in a setting (however short it may be) where their interaction is not meant to lead to a predetermined objective or goal.

I let the class collectively decide on due dates for assignments. I do this to allow for some flexibility in the students’ highly structured and planned weeks and semesters. But this flexibility must be in the service of the collective, not the individual. Every semester, I receive plenty of pleas from students for extensions, because they are stressed, overworked, and have too many exams or assignments due at the same time. I don’t like to give personal extensions because this is an individual solution, one which doesn’t take into account other students who might be in a similar situation and which doesn’t envision the possibility for structural change. By allowing students to collectively decide on due dates, I strive to shift the focus from myself as the holder of power and provider of solutions, toward the collective. If the students need an extension, they need to talk to the rest of the class and then collectively come up with an alternative due date. In my experience, students have rarely refused to postpone the due date when someone needed extra time (I should say that I generally teach small groups, which facilitates this type of interaction). This is a small attempt to get students to share and think about their collective circumstances and not immediately resort to solutions that only benefit them individually. The collectively chosen dates need to, however, be respected; students must be accountable to one another and to the group by making sure that all the assignments are handed in when agreed. By doing this, my goal is to shift our conversations and practices from an individualistic framework of personal utility, personal benefits and competition. The flexible due dates are furthermore meant to give some flexibility within a sea of fixed deadlines. But this flexibility and freedom are negotiated collectively to serve the largest number of students possible (and sometimes, in fact, the deadline chosen will not be the most convenient for each individual student).

I try to establish parameters and directions for assignments together with students as a way to decrease the amount of guidance necessary and make students more comfortable with uncertainty and lack of specificity. To reiterate Peterson’s description, the students I teach are increasingly “anxious grade grubbers, paralyzed at the thought of graduating, and regularly stymied by assignments that called for creativity.” Because their focus is primarily on the grade,

a lack of very specific guidelines and parameters tend to be anxiety-inducing. Students want to know exactly what they need to do to receive a high grade. While many of my colleagues are giving more and more guidelines, opportunities for rewrites, study guides and thorough explanations of assignments, I don't think this is necessarily helpful in the long-term. My worry is that we're teaching students to religiously follow rules, and to focus primarily on obeying authority in order to receive the holy grail- an A. My students are often scared of open-ended and creative assignments because they are terrified of making a mistake that could lead to a lower GPA. By collectively deciding on assignment guidelines, I try to encourage students to think of education as a process and not merely a fulfillment of predetermined goals and objectives.

I try to give a lot of non-graded feedback. I also allow students to propose a grade to me and enter into a process of negotiation. Grades are one of the biggest sources of stress and anxiety for my students. Within an atmosphere of increased competitiveness, even a single bad grade is perceived as having a lasting effect on one's career prospects. Grades are also one of the important ways in which education is turned into capital, by giving students a quantified assessment of their value, which will then be compared to other students'. In my decision to allow students to negotiate their grades, I've been greatly influenced by David Backer's (2018) writings on socialist grading. As Backer notes: "Grades subject student activity—the embodied forms of their educational labor—to a general equivalent, which—once assigned, like a price—places out of sight the most enriching and meaningful aspects of our time together" (p.103). Grades alienate students from the process of learning as the focus shifts from "what have I learned or what would I like to learn" to "what do I need to do to obtain a better grade." Following Backer's method, at various points in the semester, I send students a series of questions, asking them to evaluate their work in the course. I then meet with each student individually to discuss their responses and explain my agreement or disagreement with the proposed grade. We then collectively decide on a final grade. I do this to take some weight off the grade as the final objective of all learning. This exercise is also meant to give students a bit of a sense of freedom from constant evaluation, supervision, and assessment.

As more of my undergraduate and graduate students are dealing with anxiety and exhaustion, I have been wondering about how to mobilize the humanities to dismantle the framework of human capital, productivity, and efficiency. My ultimate belief is that we desperately need spaces of collective thinking and feeling where students can develop their potentiality for its own sake and not for the sake of the market. This will require mass mobilization and an organized collective effort to extract higher education from the grasp of neoliberalism. In the meantime, we can create little crevices in our classrooms, dedicated to imagining and practicing alternative ways of living in this world.

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