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Exploited by Universities: Part-time Workers as Victims

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The imposition of managerial practices that have re-organized or at least subdued workers in other spheres is being attempted in education, in part through re-designing work to attract more part-time and contract employees who have less invested, professionally or financially, in the soul of the institution. (Robertson, 2002 cited in Froese-Germain, 2003, p. 24)

Before we started working for universities we admit to having the naïve notion that universities were socially just institutions interested in academic excellence and student success. The more familiar we are becoming with the workings of the institutions, the more we are recognizing that universities are part of the big business corporate ideology. Part of this ideology is the focus on worker exploitation and victimization in the name of efficiency and increased profits. Increasingly, universities are relying on part-time faculty, teaching assistants, and markers to accomplish this. According to a Statistics Canada report on the hiring of part-time faculty, between 1990-1991 and 1997-1998, the use of part-time university faculty increased in Canadian universities by 10% (Omiecinski, 2003, p. 10). In Ontario, while the use of part-time faculty increased in 1997-1998, it decreased from 1990-1991 to 1996-1997. However, this decline in part-time faculty needs to be considered in relation

to the 13% drop in full-time faculty during that same period (Omiecinski, 2003, p.10). To add to the connection with the corporate ideology, this reduction in part-time and full-time faculty was coupled by an increase of over 1% in student enrolment during this same period (Omiecinski, 2003, p.10). We have tried to get more updated information from 1998 until the present; unfortunately, due to budget cuts the Centre for Education Statistics at Statistics Canada has suspended the Annual Part-Time University and College Academic Staff Survey which gathers information on part-time teaching staff. So the most recent information we have is from 1998. However, we do have anecdotal evidence from several university administrators that indeed the hiring of part-time staff is on the increase.

As well, in a recent article published in York University's student newspaper, *Excalibur*, Bohr (2005) cites that over two thirds of university faculty

are part-time. He goes on to discuss a shortage of tenure-track or full-time professors and relates this to the corporatization of the university; increasing numbers of students lead to decreasing academic integrity, thus, the increase in part-time faculty is not pedagogical but economic. The Toronto Star similarly reported that universities and colleges are increasingly hiring part-time faculty instead of full-time faculty in order to balance their budgets (Kalinowski, 2005). Ontario ranks lowest in per student government funding among the universities in Canada. In order for universities to operate, administrators need to think of creative ways to save money. Since salaries are such a large expense, it makes sense from a numerical perspective to try and find ways to reduce them. For example, if someone were hired to teach our full-time course loads on a part-time basis, the university would save over 50% in salary. What follows is a personal qualitative research piece where Berger will share her personal experience working as a marker, teaching assistant, and part-time instructor and Ricci will share his experience as a part-time instructor. Berger will also share her experience as a full-time faculty member supervising markers and teaching assistants. Ricci will discuss his experience as a full-time faculty member supervising a marker. In doing this, we are hoping that these personal narratives will lead to a better understanding of how universities are exploiting workers, and that it will result in mobilization and ultimately transformation. Part-time workers should not be viewed as cheap labour, but human beings that need to be treated with dignity and respect. They need to be fairly compensated for their work.

The status quo may make economic sense in a sick and practical way, but it does not make compassionate sense.

In this article we use auto/biography, auto/ethnography and narrative inquiry to expose the abuses that administrators place on markers, teaching assistants, and part-time faculty. In his book titled *Auto/Biography and Auto/Ethnography: Praxis of Research Method* Roth (2005) writes,

The stories ethnographers create are as much a reflection of their own cultural positioning as they are a description of the positioning of others. Making these historically constituted positions clear to the reader, that is, writing auto/biography and auto/ethnography is one way of understanding and incorporating our prejudices into our practices and into what we produce. Making sense and use of representations of some Other involves our own positioning in relation to what we are seeing as much as any meaning inherent in the images themselves; autobiography is one of the central means of making this position salient. (p. 14)

Roth (2005) argues that we need to remain embodied and not become merely talking heads who disappear in our research in the name of pretentious claims for an illusive objectivity.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) share how “Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities” (p. xxvi). And Bateson (1994) says, “Our species

thinks in metaphors and learns through stories” (p. 11). These visionaries have helped legitimate stories and given us the confidence to share our stories. For example, Leggo (2005) reminds us how although much research in education is empirical, we must ruminate on possibilities for research (pp. 443-4). Carl Leggo (2005) writes:

A significant part of my ongoing research program is autobiographical remembering and writing about my own experiences of years of study to be a teacher, and years of work as a teacher....I am convinced that by writing about our experiences, and ruminating on those experiences, and interpreting those experiences, we can become more effective teachers, as well as teachers motivated by more joy and hope. (Leggo, p. 441)

Like Leggo, we are convinced that writing, ruminating and interpreting our experiences is a legitimate, valuable and necessary activity. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) add to the legitimating by emphasizing how “Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical (p. 121).

Shields (2005) writes, “There is also another important aspect in sharing stories that inform and connect us across time and place, and that involves restructuring stories from the past in the light of present knowledge” (p. 180).

For Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (p. 20). Narrative inquiry needs to include argument, description and narrative (p. 155); however, there is flexibility. They say that, “It is always a

matter of experimentation with narrative form (p. 166). And they go on to say the following:

As we tell our stories as inquirers, it is experience, not narrative, that is the driving impulse. We came to narrative inquiry as a way to study experience. For us, narrative inquiry is the closest we can come to experience. Because experience is our concern, we find ourselves trying to avoid strategies, tactics, rules, and techniques that flow out of theoretical considerations of narrative. Our guiding principle in an inquiry is to focus on experience and to follow where it leads. (p.188)

So, while we draw inspiration and support from these revolutionary thinkers we continue to explore other possibilities. We will use critical methods along with subjectivity to “bring about a maximum of intersubjectivity, that is, understanding the Self to understand the Other” (Roth, 2005, p. 15) and to deal with the potential dangers of delusion and illusion (p. 19).

Markers

Berger: *When I was in my third and fourth years of undergraduate university, I and a fellow student were hired as markers for a first year course. After being offered these marking positions, I recall how my classmate and I discussed feeling excited and honoured; furthermore, I recall how anxious we were to share this news with family and friends. In fact, I remember thinking that even if the position came*

without any pay, I would still have accepted it because of the prestige connected to being a university marker. At the time, because I was so excited and honoured, and because of the status connected to working for a university in a position as a “privileged” marker, I did not feel exploited.

As full-time faculty looking back on our experience, we are now in a better position to understand the level of exploitation we and others endure. We have both hired markers to help with our workload. At the institution where we teach, the markers are entitled to \$7.56 an hour for less complex marking (e.g. marking multiple choice and short answer exams) and \$10.56 an hour for more complex marking (e.g. marking essays).

Ricci: In my faculty, professors are each given a certain amount of money that they can use to pay for student markers. Not all faculty members hire markers, so the money is pooled and whatever money is left can be given to those who need it.

Berger: In my faculty, I was told to estimate how many marking hours I would need for my classes (depending on class size and assignment complexity) and was allocated a budget accordingly. However, the number of hours that the marker takes to mark may not correspond with the original estimate. For example, last year I initially underestimated the number of hours and applied for more marking money, and since there was more money in the department’s marking budget, I was allocated additional funds.

When there are no additional funds, either the marker marks for less or the professor takes on the marking and thereby increases his or her workload. We have heard of cases where workers

work significantly beyond what is expected based on their pay. Marking is a very time-consuming, tedious, and strenuous task. The compensation that the markers receive for this is tokenistic to say the least.

Ricci: My marker works as a teacher during the day. Since she is not on campus she has to make frequent trips to the university to drop off and pick up assignments.

Berger: One of my markers is a fourth year student at the university. Two other markers are students who had previously taken classes with me. The fourth marker supply teaches and works at the university as a research assistant, teaching assistant, and marker for several professors to supplement her income. She is a single parent supporting three dependants.

Teaching Assistants

Berger: As mentioned above, one of my markers, who is also my teaching assistant, is a single mother with three dependants who works at the university to supplement her income. Many students are unaware of how little monetary remuneration she gets as a teaching assistant. They assume that because she is working in a university she must be earning a decent salary. Many are shocked to find out that as a tutorial leader she only earns \$10.56 an hour. When she leads the tutorial for my class, she has to pay bus fare to and from campus in order to teach for one hour. This expense further diminishes her income.

At the school where I was doing my graduate work, most students are given a position as a paid teaching assistant or research assistant. Once they start in the program, students are matched up with professors teaching

courses in the student's area of interest. Teaching assistants and research assistants get paid a set amount of money for the academic year (\$6000 in 1999-2000). By the end of the school year, students are expected to work what averages out to 10 hours a week. There are several conditions tied to this university position. One condition is that students are not permitted to work more than 10 hours a week both inside and outside of the university. This forces students who, for financial reasons needed to work outside of the university, to keep it a secret from others. Even in cases where students were gaining valuable experience in research or teaching positions, they had to exclude this information from their CV's for fear that they might lose their funding. Eventually, these stipulations were amended and teaching assistants were able to work either outside of the university, or they were able to apply for permission to work more than the 10 hours inside the university. For example, during one year of my PhD, while working as a research assistant inside of the university, I was also teaching a course outside of the university at another institution. I was then offered a position to teach a course in the university where I was doing my graduate work. However, in order to teach this course, I needed to apply for special permission to work on top of the 10 hours I was already working inside the university as a research assistant. I did so and was granted this special permission with the condition that I do not work outside of the university. To complicate things, by the time I was granted this permission, the semester had already started and I had started teaching both courses; as a result, I felt forced to hide my work outside of the

university. This was a common occurrence among fellow graduate students.

Ricci: I also had to work while completing my graduate work. I was newly married and I and my partner had a mortgage, tuition fees, and other expenses to pay. So, while working full-time as a teacher during the day I would also work on my graduate studies in the evening and over the summer. As with many universities, PhD students are not allowed to enroll part-time, so I had to pay full-time fees.

These practices could result in unfairly excluding many who have to work. As well, paying people so little and denying them the opportunity to supplement their income, forces people to hide their work and results in unnecessary stress and hardships. Controlling how much people can work and therefore earn, unfairly positions those who are less wealthy. The university needs to rethink the mistaken belief that students cannot sufficiently complete graduate work if they have to work – it is ideal in theory, but not an option for many in practice.

Part-Time Faculty

Both Ricci and Berger have experienced teaching as part-time faculty or sessionals.

Ricci: I taught a course at a university where the part-time faculty were not unionized. While I was there, a movement was started to unionize the workers. One of the conditions we were seeking was job protection. What that meant was that if a professor taught a course one year it would be guaranteed that he or she would be asked to teach the course the next time the opportunity arose, and that before anyone else taught the course she or he would have

to turn it down. As mentioned, my current workload could be replaced by a part-time staff member for less than 50% of the cost the university is paying for us. While working full-time as a teacher and completing my PhD, I was also teaching as a sessional in the evenings. In my case, since sessional workers had no tenure and no job guarantee, the university could simply not rehire me: Because of this, I felt anxious and pressured to conform and follow all of the university's requirements, even if the I disagreed with the policies. For example, if I did not follow their norm-referenced, bell-curved marking policy, the university could choose to not hire me again (Ricci, 2007). Since my course was in the evening there was little opportunity to interact with other faculty because none of them would be at school during those times. Sessionals make little money and get little support in comparison to full-time staff. As a sessional, I earned about \$5,000. This is a fraction of what full-time faculty earn.

Berger: I have also experienced teaching courses part-time and have had many similar experiences with respect to low wages, job insecurity, and lack of support. In addition, I taught two courses online as a sessional instructor. At the university I taught at, the policy for teaching online courses caused instructors to be punished through no fault of our own. For example, when the university was not able to recruit enough students for the course I would have to take a salary cut. If there were fewer than 16 students registered in the course I no longer received the standard sessional rate of approximately \$3500, but instead would receive a \$500 flat rate plus \$100 per student enrolled in the course. If there were only eight students registered in the course, as was

the case for me in one instance, the instructor would only receive \$1300 for teaching a course. Similar to my first experience as a marker, I was happy to be gaining valuable work experience and thus I accepted this job irrespective of the low wages. However, it soon became clear that having fewer students is not automatically equated with having a correspondingly reduced workload. I still had to prepare readings, class notes, discussion questions, and assignments for the class whether there was one student or 20 students. Perhaps I spent less time marking for the class, but that does not make up for the amount of money that I lost out on, again through no fault of my own. In addition to course preparation and marking, as an online sessional, I was also told that I needed to check my course email on a daily basis, including weekends. Further, it was my responsibility to ensure that I responded to student emails within 24 hours. In many ways, the demands of teaching online are even more than traditional classroom teaching, yet the financial compensation, particularly for sessional instructors could be substantially less.

One part-time worker we spoke with shared the following narrative: In 2002 I started off as a sessional instructor where I taught just a couple of classes. My preparation time was so monstrous compared to the salary I earned. It took a long time before I even found out what the pay would be, and was shocked at how low it was when I finally found out. I accepted the position hoping that it would be an entry point into the university for me. I moved my family which was a large financial expense. As well, I was making over \$100,000 before accepting this position and so it cost a lot – financially and

emotionally – for me to be here. Despite the expense and uncertainty, I was motivated by wanting to work in a university. Now, three years later, I am currently approaching the end of another one year appointment, and I am getting ready to compete for my job. It is now only two months before my contract is up and I am still unsure of where I will be next year.

This narrative clearly highlights the stress and sacrifices that people do and are willing to make.

Ageism

We recognize that part-time teaching is not only dominated by new instructors, but some may choose to or are forced to work part-time throughout their teaching career. Interestingly, retired faculty members find themselves in similar situations. In fact, the use of mandatory retirement in universities across Ontario (in existence at the time this article was written) forces many faculty to retire at their 65th birthday. Then, those who want or need to work can do so part-time earning a sessional instructor's rate (between \$9,000 and \$10,000 per course at one university) and being forced to relocate to small offices in inconvenient locations (Ferguson, 2005; Tamburri, 2003). This sessional rate is only a small fraction of their pre-retirement income.

One recently retired professor that we spoke to explained her feelings after being forced to retire: *I didn't begin my academic career until my late 30s. Perhaps because I got a late start, I was at best ambivalent about retiring. I wasn't fully ready to leave academia at age 65. More precisely, I was ready to leave - or seriously reduce - teaching and administrative work, but not research. Ideally, I would have liked to*

have a choice as to whether to retire, or to move to a reduced load, rather than being forced to retire. I have been able to keep my office so far but having an office in the future is far from certain. This concerns me because it would be hard to maintain an active research program without an office. Being retired but remaining active in the university is a somewhat ambiguous status. As a result, the rights and obligations that go with that status are also ambiguous. If "academically active retiree" is a role, I feel I'm making it up as I go along. (That's not necessarily bad, of course, as it leaves lots of room for shaping things as I like). I think my status would be a bit more clear if I had a paid connection to the institution through teaching. Teaching, however, is something I can comfortably leave behind. It takes a lot of time (and there are lots of other demands on my time at this point in my life) and the pay hardly compensates. I think the pay issue is not specific to retirees. Everyone who does sessional teaching gets paid the same low rate per course. I don't think retirees should be paid more than non-retirees, but I do think the pay is too low for the work involved.

The Ontario government finally ended mandatory retirement in 2006 along with most other provinces. This is more than likely due to the impending labour shortage and the power of the baby boomers – not issues of human rights. That this ageist practice has been allowed to occur for decades, especially in places of higher learning, speaks to the corporatization of the university system. While the exploitation of retired faculty may be somewhat rectified with the elimination of mandatory retirement, there are many faculty who may choose to retire and then decide to re-enter the

workforce years later for personal or financial reasons. Having given up their tenure-track positions, these faculty members would now return to sessional teaching. As a consequence, this exploitation would continue.

In sharing these personal narratives, our intention is to contribute to a better understanding of how universities are exploiting their academic workers. We hope that this will result in mobilization, and ultimately transformation. Part-time workers should not be viewed as cheap labour, but human beings that need to be treated with dignity and respect. They need to be fairly compensated for their work. The status quo may make economic sense in a sick and practical way, but it does not make compassionate sense. Universities should be spaces of social justice. They should be taking the lead in championing the fight against

exploitation and for fair wages for all its employees. Instead, they are joining the mass exploitation, abuse, and victimization of workers.

In the name of efficiency, cutbacks are made and people suffer. This is why we believe it is so important for us to share our stories. Our stories should serve as the inspiration for betterment. Victimizing people is not good enough, it is not acceptable; actually, it is reprehensible. In a holistic sense, we are all responsible for the condition we are in. The gap between rich and poor is growing at an increasingly unacceptable rate. To save money in the name of efficiency by exploiting people is indicative of a sick society. We need to be respectful of a person's body, mind, and spirit; not crush them. We cannot see them as a means and abuse them.

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