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How to Subvert the Banking Concept of Education in Neoliberal Times

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After over a year of pandemic teaching, a memory from my childhood of playing with a classic shape sorter toy kept resurfacing. Others will surely know the one I have in mind with its distinctive blue and red halves that snap together, punctured with openings to fill its interior with yellow squares, circles, triangles, stars, and other shapes. Once duly sorted and collected inside, the plastic parts transform the toy into an oversized rattle, which seeks to engage the senses with sight, sound, and touch. Called the Shape-O® Toy, this product is marketed to parents as capable of teaching toddlers the skills of coordination, dexterity, recognition, and counting.[1] I can't help but think the reason this somewhat unremarkable toy would feature in my reflections on pandemic teaching is that it might prove a fitting analogue to what it has been like to instruct using online modalities. Looking back on the courses I built for my students to take using our learning-management system, I wonder if they were—despite themselves—little more than academic versions of the Shape-O® Toy.

These were asynchronous courses, which I designed with the best of intentions regarding the pandemic learning conditions students might be facing. In developing assignments, instructional activities, and workload expectations, I aimed to be mindful of erratic schedules due to childcare or eldercare responsibilities potentially balanced with remote work, poor access to internet or internet-capable devices, and the long-term stress of living and working while exposed to a disease that could result in disability or death.

Knowing that asynchronicity, while allowing students a modicum of control regarding how to fit schooling into their upended lives, would also require a high degree of personal responsibility, I endeavored to apply best practices for actively engaging students in such learning environments. I employed, for instance, a modular design, breaking courses into weekly sets of tasks, and created interactive spaces using tools available within and outside the university's learning-management system (see Riggs and Linder 2016). Lastly, one of the boons of being a specialist in American literatures and cultures is how this field's core texts and competencies prove imminently adaptable to giving students the critical tools for thinking through and writing about the meaning of epidemics, protests, insurrection, racial equity, memorialization, gender and labor, access to basic necessities, and other societal issues underscored during the coronavirus pandemic. All these topics and more receive treatment in the annals of American literature regularly taught in our curriculum. Content, design, and deliverables in these courses were therefore all striving toward the kind of educational experience in which students become empowered to enact meaningful change in their realities, even during a public health catastrophe.

And yet, none of these efforts changed the fact that these courses tend to be labeled as, according to one of my students, "Blackboard courses." It matters that students see asynchronous courses this way rather than as rich, diverse environments or beautifully designed, interactive architectures. Students are attuned to a reality that learning-management systems and other online learning tools can morph even courses heavily invested in teaching critique into potentially mindless consumerism. The neoliberalization of higher education has proven evident in an increased valuation of data, metrics, and rankings; the pursuit of ever-more efficient delivery of educational products; and the approach to students as consumers and the university as operating best when subject to market forces.[2] The way in which asynchronous courses require constant posting or assignment submission to indicate everything from presence and participation to facility with content and achievement of learning outcomes inscribes neoliberal logics within the anatomy of the online classroom. Critical learning may be taking place, but its grammar is data and efficiency. No wonder I hear plasticky echoes rattling in the distance when I open the grade center to check in assignments for the week or answer student emails about whether they are missing anything they were supposed to submit. Along with many others, I worry that what they are missing, in fact, is the whole point of a college education.

Considering the coronavirus pandemic precipitated an unprece-

dented shift of literature courses to online modalities, this worry becomes a field-level issue rather than a matter of individual or a specific programmatic concern. Taking an extended view of literary study's centuries-long history, it is only in recent decades that the literature classroom has become precisely that kind of site for what Paulo Freire (2005: 83) describes as a "problem-posing education," which allows students to "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation." Discussion-based pedagogies unfolding in relatively un-surveilled physical spaces of typical face-to-face classrooms have helped make possible what we often take for granted as literature's ability to help people adopt a critical view of the world and interrogate their place within it. Instead of being safe spaces in which to engage in difficult dialogues on socially relevant topics and test out new ideas with diverse interlocutors, virtual literature classrooms seem more like digitized panopticons in which one continuously submits work while fearing penalties for overlooking an essential assignment.

The pandemic has demonstrated that literature courses are not immune to neoliberal encroachments seeking to reinstate the banking concept of education at the expense of posing problems for critical engagement. Under the banking paradigm, Freire explains, students are perceived as containers to be filled by the teacher, and "the scope of action allowed" to them "extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (72). Learning-management systems, as a matter of course, reinvent this depository paradigm as a modality of control. Rather than disciplining each individual student to retain the same deposits to declare them educated, these systems regulate perpetual depositing, thereby training subjects to be invested in life-long learning (see Deleuze 1992: 3–7). Blackboard offers, for instance, the ability to create blogs, journals, wikis, post to discussion boards, work in groups, take tests, and submit formal assignments. Students can upload a range of texts to the system, from papers and images to videos and mul-timodal projects. Through Mashups, the system can interface with other depository tools, such as YouTube, Flickr, and Mediasite. It is a technological structure that equates learning with depositing something somewhere.

This excessive emphasis on making deposits has the particularly insidious effect of infecting learning itself with neoliberal logics. Mark Fisher (2009: 23–24) once argued that student boredom arose from the obstacles reading and critical thought placed in the way of hedonistic consumption.[3] He reflected on how "some students want Nietzsche in the same way that they

want a hamburger; they fail to grasp—and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension—that the indigestibility, the difficulty *is* Nietzsche" (24). At least in this case, boredom proved a kind of antidote to rampant consumerism and learning stood in opposition to it. Now, the misapprehension that learning is like ordering a hamburger becomes further extended by our reliance on technological prostheses, which encourage students to deposit, deposit, deposit to be legible as having taken a course. Even in the case that asynchronous courses never become a widespread norm for literary studies, a depository mindset is becoming increasingly difficult to escape.

Some will argue that the solution to this problem is to simply refuse the shift to online modalities, a position that, while laudable, has become a nonstarter in pandemic contexts—and remains unavailable to the large swaths of contingent faculty enduring precarious employment regardless of the current state of public health (Keehn, Anderson, and Boyles 2018: 60). Rather, as I see it, the task before us involves injecting a certain kind of boredom into how we navigate a higher education beset with technocracy. It is unlikely to be boredom exactly as Fisher (2009: 24) defined it: "To be bored simply means to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand." A variety of online teaching aids, from learning-management systems and products aimed at engaging students, such as iClicker or Hypothesis, to cloud-based resources, such as Google Drive, has allowed the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix to tighten its hold on college classes, making removal from them difficult as a first step. In other words, even if we find subversive potential in the definition of boredom that arises from Fisher's critique of neoliberalism's effect on students, we must confront the fact that what is at stake is more than being subject to a desire for "sugary gratification on demand." Humanity's very capacity to be bored is being foreclosed. It is in this regard that we need to reimagine boredom not as a pernicious side effect of a consumer culture incapable of hard intellectual work but as a postcapitalist potentiality, which should be preserved.

Rather than seeking ascetism as the only viable response to a communicative sensation-stimulus matrix that increasingly controls higher education, might we search instead for how technology-assisted learning interrupts its own privileging of constant gratification? In other words, is there something like an autoimmune response present within our increasingly hyper-technologized practice of college-level learning—something that might serve

as a site of postcapitalist boredom where in place of gratuitous depositing we find the possibility of thoughtful critique? Anyone who has tried to use a discussion board in Blackboard or an equivalent tool in another learning-management system as a part of a course will likely recognize the precise kind of autoimmune potential about which I am curious.

Discussion boards are notoriously antithetical to the flow of conversation essential to a problem-posing pedagogy. It is especially true if students become inured to a common structure in which the professor poses questions and requires students to post an answer of a certain word length as well as reply to a certain number of their peers' posts. This mockery of discussion draws more attention to its failures than it contributes to the illusion that education has happened because deposits have been duly made. As a result, this tool invites creative reinterpretation on the part of instructors, who imagine ways to employ it for anything but discussion. For example, Shannon A. Riggs and Kathryn E. Linder (2016: 7–8) have explored how discussion boards can be used as presentation, work, gallery, and reflection spaces. Their suggestions focus on a kind of active learning, which tasks students with making something to demonstrate their engagement with the course content, such as a video presentation, a meme, or a gallery of images. Often, a reflection component is part of these instructional activities, which allows other members of the course to see fellow students' thinking both in the digital object created and in their elaboration of how they made it and why it is relevant to what is being learned in the course. Such activities create some potential for students to divest from rote participation in the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix that increasingly defines their college experience.

This repurposing of the discussion board contra the vision of its software engineers provides a clear example of what Michel Foucault (2007: 201) called "counter-conduct" and, in that sense, offers a certain degree of revolutionary capability to inspire postcapitalist boredom. In contrast to Riggs and Linder's (2016: 7) argument that a shift in nomenclature to "Interactive Space" or "Engagement Forum" would help instructors rethink how they are using it and, therefore, "make the most of this promising LMS tool," reframing our technological prostheses as apparatuses that normalize "the way in which one conducts oneself" and "lets oneself be conducted" in the pedagogical milieu uncovers the extent to which these tools (and the companies that sell them to our institutions) are trying to make the most (money) of (off) us (Foucault 2007: 193). On the one hand, then, opting to use a discussion board for anything but discussion performs a revolt of conduct (194). Doing so teaches students to engage in a "struggle against the processes implemented

for conducting others" (201). A discussion board tool is designed in such a way as to get its users to conduct their discussions in highly regimented ways, which privilege segmentation, organization, and gradeability. It provides processes for posting, dictated by an elaborate set of rules instructors set to govern how the discussion board will work, and thereby transforms messy, challenging critical conversation into a sterile collection of threads. When we use such tools in contraindicated ways, we draw attention to how we do not want our learning to be conducted in this fashion.

On the other hand, such revolts of educational conduct encounter limits in their ability to challenge depository paradigms. Using discussion boards as spaces for students to post their presentations or share reflective writing on what they are learning may restore a certain amount of agency to learners such that "they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world" and will therefore "feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire 2005: 81). Nevertheless, it still relies on problem-posing learning inhabiting—and being conducted by—structures benefitting a neoliberal, surveillant, technocratic approach to education. As the marketplace for online learning resources continues to expand, more than counter-conduct is needed to achieve post-capitalist boredom and to restore to higher education its full capacity to pose problems to students to which they are obliged to respond.

In this regard, an example from my own noncompliant use of the discussion board came to mind as a means to reflect on how to get beyond the depository paradigm and its attendant technocratic impulses. Out of all the creative ways I tried to use discussion forums to promote active, engaged learning, the example of which I am thinking was the crudest, pandering to the lowest common denominator. While preparing to read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," students learned about the rest cure to which the author was subjected by her physician S. Weir Mitchell, and which provided the inspiration for her now-classic feminist story. The task was to read the following description of the rest cure and then post an emoji reaction to a subsequent discussion board:

The rest cure was highly regimented. Mitchell strove for an atmosphere of "order and control" that would serve as "moral medication" for coddled or selfish invalids (*Fat and Blood* 41). Typically, the patient was not allowed to read, write, sew, feed herself, or have contact with friends or family. She had to lie down in bed for six weeks to two months. During this time, she needed the doctor's permission to sit up in bed or turn over without assistance. Massage and electrical stimulation were

used to ensure that her muscles did not atrophy from lying in bed day after day. But perhaps the most daunting aspect of the rest cure was the amount of food consumed. A typical daily menu was enormous, including "a light breakfast . . . a mutton chop as a midday dinner . . . bread and butter thrice a day," and "three or four pints of milk, which are given at and after meals." To this might be added iron supplements, doses of strychnine, arsenic, and cod liver oil, as well as "one pound of beef, in the form of raw soup. This is made by chopping up one pound of raw beef, placing it in a bottle with one pint of water and five drops of strong chlorohydric acid" (*Fat and Blood* 78–9). Women who refused this heavy diet might be force-fed through the nose or rectum, or, in rare cases, whipped to ensure obedience (Poirier 23). (Stiles n.d.)

Students had fun with their emoji responses, and it came close to the kind of collective experience they have when we read this passage together in a face-to-face setting where there are inevitable outbreaks of disgust, surprise, laughter, and groans. Because we could not do the lively close reading of the passage, which typically emerged from and built on the reactions student heard across the room, it is tempting to dismiss this particular activity's pedagogical relevance. However, on reflection, it is possible to discern some significance beyond its limited attempt to introduce some levity and human connection into our asynchronous course.

What stands out to me now about this activity is how it decenters, unintentionally, the value learning-management systems place on depositing, data collection, and assessment. For a brief moment, students were simply allowed to exist in the course as human beings reacting to a startling, yet surprisingly germane past. No rubric was going to assess their work—if we can even call it that. Proper emoji use in academic settings was not going to surface in a final exam. It made me realize that as an instructor entangled in online modalities one of my priorities should be to find more ways through-out a course to disrupt the story our learning-management systems were telling our students about their education. In that regard, there is no theorist whose work is more relevant to how to undertake such a project than Saidiya Hartman.

Hartman (2008) has trenchantly observed that hegemonic interpreta-tions of the world prevail precisely because they dictate what are considered to be the basic elements and logical order of an authoritative narrative. To tell the stories of enslaved people and their descendants using archives built by and for those in power, as Hartman has been doing her entire career, requires a means to call into question those authoritative structures and the ostensible truths they normalized. Hartman refers to her method as critical fabulation

and describes it as follows: "By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (11). For Hartman, overcoming the limits of the archive and its inseparability from the violence toward and silencing of oppressed, marginalized peoples means drawing attention to sites of contestation and divergence. It is the story conspicuously reordered that allows us "to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity" (12).

Such a critical praxis enables us to engage in a couple of ways the issue of preserving problem-posing learning in the literature classroom amid increasing neoliberal, technocratic pressures to create a hyper-convenient, hyper-commodified, banking-style education. First, it challenges us to recognize how learning-management systems and other tools participate in authorizing only very specific paradigms of education—much like archives tend to authorize only certain ways of doing history. The insidiousness of online education arises from its ability to obscure or even foreclose divergent and contested ways of learning. For instance, at many institutions, all courses, regardless of disciplinary differences, are attached to the same learning-management system shells—and the coronavirus pandemic made their usage even more widespread. Rather than adapting online learning resources to our needs, we find ourselves adapting our fields of knowledge and pedagogies to them. In doing so, we are not simply acquiescing to neutral technological advancements. Instead, we are becoming the precise "adaptable, manageable beings," whom Freire (2005: 73) saw produced by the banking concept of education and who remained susceptible to accepting the "world as it is and . . . the fragmented view of reality deposited in them." If there is an authorized account of higher education we need to consider how to jeopardize, it is this managerial propensity arising from the depository paradigm.

Second, we can become alert to how the basic elements of learning are being arranged by technocratic forces. The traditional face-to-face classroom engaged in a discussion-based praxis seeks to achieve the Freirean ideal of "authentic thinking . . . that is concerned with *reality*" and takes place not "in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (77). This model privileges an arrangement of reading, reflection, dialoguing, and writing such that students learn to articulate their thought to themselves and to others about the world in which they live. In contrast, depository, online-facilitated, neo-banking models tend to arrange those very same building blocks of learning

into devotionals at the altar of consumption. The difference in arrangement can be seen clearly in the example of how PowerPoint presentations can work in a face-to-face classroom versus in an asynchronous classroom. In the face-to-face classroom, PowerPoint slides facilitate opportunities for communication and authentic thinking by being a technology employed in the service of discussion, self-reflective writing activities, and small group work. It provides a structure to those activities by presenting information to spur dialogue, by prompting open-ended writing, and by giving instructions that allow classmates and teachers to interact with one another. In contrast, the exigencies of the pandemic drove many instructors to take those very same slides and make recorded presentations to upload to their courses. A technology-enhanced opportunity for discussion becomes a consumable object to which students would likely only respond with more consumables in the form of, for example, discussion board posts or their own presentations, often requiring a column in the gradebook to hold them accountable to the work.[4]

If we are aiming to preserve boredom as a postcapitalist potentiality and if we also presume that asceticism fails to be a viable option to achieve it, then what we learn from a Hartmanian approach is how to deny the illusory power of sugary flows of constant gratification within a communicative sensation-stimulus matrix, which pretend to be the fullness of our reality. The boredom we seek is not unplugging from the matrix; instead, we are aiming to hack it. Hartman (2019) emphasizes our ability, as scholars and educators, to play with and rearrange the basic elements of a story to reveal hegemonic domination while also making visible and valorizing ways of living, which experiment with alternatives to capitalist regimes that would have us consume or be consumed. For Freire, the question was how to rethink education to empower the people. For Fisher, it was how to challenge capitalism as the only realistic political-economic system. What Hartman helps us see is that, for us, these questions have become one and the same—and that the remedy lies in seizing opportunities to arrange the basic elements of education to postcapitalist ends.

No doubt there lurks within our courses (across their varying degrees of online-ness) examples of efforts to rethink education that are also challenges to capitalism—and no doubt the rapid shifts in modalities during the pandemic introduced many such attempts whether or not we were consciously aware of them. When I reflect on my own courses in hopes of finding some instances of thwarting, rather than abetting, neo-banking models of education, I find myself thinking the most about activities that encouraged students to take time away from their learning-management systems, even

if, ultimately, they were required to submit posts to Blackboard proving they had indeed completed them. For example, to teach students about Kyla Wazana Tompkins's (2012) examination of racialization in American eating cultures, which framed our reading of William Bradford's depiction of the first Thanksgiving, I asked them to look at the foods they kept in the house and how those foods were branded or marketed to them. The point of the activity was to make a space for them to reflect on to what extent how they ate corresponded to a national ideal of "eating American." Obviously, the content of this lesson has certain postcapitalist valences. More importantly, it situated students as learning precisely because they were not participating, however briefly, in the capitalist networks controlling both their food and their education. They were simply standing in front of a fridge or with the cupboard door hanging open in order to think about "*the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" (Freire 2005: 83).

It might be odd to think that one of the advantages of asynchronous online learning may be how it takes place in student's personal spaces rather than institutional settings.[5] We're used to grappling with the challenges associated with *not* having our students in a classroom at the same time. However, in relation to creating a learning experience in which students are reminded that the purpose of their education is to be equipped to interrogate the way they exist in the world, asynchronous modalities offer ways to experiment with how to restore that connection between college and reality. Far from being courses that require students to be fully immersed in learning-management systems or related depository tools, asynchronous modalities invite strategies for moving away from hyper-technologization of the virtual classroom. For instance, knowing that my students would be enduring high levels of screen time while enrolled in courses during the pandemic, I had them record their responses to instructional activities in a notebook rather than asking them to post on a discussion board or submit typed assignments. At the end of a week, they took pictures or made scans of their notebook pages and submitted them for participation credit. Knowing that my literature students were missing opportunities to discuss, these mostly private ways of engaging with the course material through writing were paired in one course on race and ethnicity with small group discussions over text message with other classmates, whom they first met in video call meetings. Both the notebooks and the text message chains created an alternative discursive space for learning to take place. This other space, albeit also mediated by technology, was much less subject to panoptic surveillance and privileged

self-reflection and communication over depositing deliverables to receive points in a grade center.

I suspect these examples will be familiar to other instructors, who likely have given similar or identical assignments to their students, and my purpose is to underscore their larger significance beyond any one teacher's classroom. The more we develop pedagogical strategies that render peripheral technological dimensions of modern higher education despite their seeming ubiquity, the easier it is for the basic elements of learning to be able to be arranged in such a way that they continue to engage problem posing as the object of a university education. My hope is that what will come out of the pandemic is a generation of literary faculty ready and equipped to resist the emergence of neo-banking concepts of education precisely because they became adept online teachers under the most exigent of public health circumstances.

Notes

1. See https://www.tupperware.com/shape-o-toy/ (accessed July 30, 2021).
2. Some helpful recent publications on this topic, especially pertaining to educational technologies, include Selwyn and Facer 2013; Keehn, Anderson, and Boyles 2018; Cruickshank and Abbinett 2019; Jones 2019; and Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020.
3. My thanks to my colleague Dale Pattison for alerting me to the relevance of this text.
4. This example provides one instance of what Freire saw as the necessity of using new technologies in a critical way to subvert their oppressive dimensions. See Kahn and Kellner (2007: 437).
5. See Williamson, Eynon, and Potter (2020: 111) on how remote learning colonized home spaces during the pandemic.

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