What Can We Do? The Challenge of Being New Academics in Neoliberal Universities

The SIGJ2 Writing Collective

Introduction

In the summer of 2011, one of our writing collective received notice from university management that their department “lacked research strength” and therefore would be closed. Yet, this “lack of research strength” resulted directly from the university’s under-investment in faculty research. Teaching loads had been increased while time for research withered. Given university restructuring under neoliberalism, it is obvious to us that such occurrences are likely to become more common. We therefore question how to conduct ourselves in these crisis-plagued times and in our neoliberal-plagued universities.

We are a group of new academics that value political engagement. We are troubled that activities that venture beyond the university—such as public lectures, workshops in activism, performing collaborative plays, mentoring immigrants, and even writing activist trade publications—do not “count” as serious scholarship. We argue that by fostering and encouraging such activities we can challenge the neoliberal (and our own) reproduction of the distinction between the “inside” and the “outside” of the university. In so doing, we can open spaces for progressive change. However, we are particularly aware of how our status as new academics makes our position precarious and limits our ability to change the system from within. Nevertheless, we are determined to find ways to be the change we want to see in academia. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the institutions of academia as well as collective imaginings of an alternative future.

The current onslaught of neoliberal restructurings in academia represents the culmination of years of insidious reforms. This has whittled away scholarly independence and made us complicit in the extension of neoliberal thinking. Our administrative duties (eg evaluating the impact of research), professional activities (eg defending the relevance of geography, as the 2012 RGS-IBG Conference theme seems to imply) and teaching (eg competing for students, domestic and overseas) force us to embody these neoliberal pressures. It is this embodiment that we wish to contemplate in this intervention. We must understand and challenge how we, as members of broader scholarly communities and diverse social relationships, have become the individualized site, strategy and mechanism for neoliberal ascendancy in the academy.
Competitive Pressures in the Neoliberal Academy

What do we mean by this claim that we have become the individualized site, strategy and mechanism for neoliberal ascendancy in the academy? Within academia pressures abound to prove the relevance of one’s work and secure one’s future. There is considerable personal investment in building a body of work, a reputation, as well as maintaining social and professional relationships across time and space. The pressure to publish in defined journals shapes the kind of work we do and the way we re-present it. These pressures lead us to buy into the concept of “relevant” research and other performance criteria that are integral to the governmentality of neoliberal academic institutions.

To use Tennyson’s poetic phrase, at this phase in our academic lives we find ourselves red in tooth and claw measured by a narrow set of criteria. We find ourselves pitted against each other in a never-ending competition. We are forced to compete against one another for jobs and for funding; we are forced to pursue publication strategies based on particular (and peculiar) assessments of worth (eg citation counts); we are forced to compete from within our collective generation of knowledge and learning; we are constantly forced to compete as individuals in the academic labour market. These processes are implicated in a much larger scalar configuration of universities competing against each other for funding, students and reputation.

Scholarly competition is ingrained in the construction of a particular embodied (and often economistic) “rationalism” we adopt as we are socialized as academics. Such competitiveness is not conducive to collaboration or the collective pursuit of knowledge and practice. What we want to do here is something positive: we want to highlight some of the ways to challenge and even subvert these competitive pressures, especially as emerging academics.

New Academics: What Can We Do?

Our starting point is not necessarily a happy one. We have to confront the question of whether we can actually challenge or change our institutional environments or our relationships with one another. What is evident to us is the need for collective action in order to reduce individualized competition. There are several radical (and everyday) actions we can take and, as always, there are hopeful examples to draw on, such as the work of Geraldine Pratt and Diana Mitlin who have pushed the boundaries of “conventional” neoliberal academia.

Our first idea is motivated by an egalitarian politics; it supports the notion that all knowledge is a collective enterprise, which belongs to the “commons” and should be freely available. We find hope in the promotion and encouragement of collective ways to publish, as we have done here and many others have done in the past (eg the Trapedese Collective, Gibson-Graham, etc). However, rather than being a one-off exercise, we challenge ourselves to consider how we could do this more often, more systematically, and with more influence. We could, for example, establish writing collectives comprising people of similar interests, as mrs c kinpaisby(hill) have done. We could publish under a collective name like the 283 Collective (in Antipode) and the Spacetime Research Collective (in Human Geography). We could
stop citation counting by referring to individual scholars rather than texts. And we could publish our papers freely online as part of writing collectives rather than in profit-driven journals (one example is the recent boycott against publishing with Elsevier). Working in this collective manner would not make peer review obsolete. Rather, we would be able to maintain rigor in our work while contributing ideas without fear of losing our “edge” over each other. Such a strategy would have dramatic implications for existing institutional performance criteria such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK, the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the tenure process in North America. It is unlikely that our careers could be assessed in the same way as before if we pursued this collective endeavor. However, the major impediment to this strategy is our own, often insecure, positions as junior scholars in a university system that pits us against one another. It would be difficult to stop ourselves claiming “individual” authorship of “our” work. Here, then, we not only have to work against the neoliberal university, we also have to work against our own embodied expectations about what it means to have an academic career. What we could do easily, however, would be to place credit on collective writing in our resumes and at job interviews.

Second, we have to be optimistic and hopeful about the opportunities we have as academics. We must remember that it is not simply a question of whether or not we have academic freedom but how we use what we do have. The increasing standardization of academia no doubt raises concerns about the loss of independence and autonomy in the pursuit of “science”. At the same time we have to remember that “standards” are not problematic, in and of themselves. What matters is how we decide on those standards, how we assess those standards, and how we reach consensus on what those standards are. As scholars we assess each other’s work, each other’s grant applications, and each other’s teaching practice. It would therefore seem a simple task to ignore or subvert the question of “impact” or “quality” when we come to assessing those same grant applications, journal submissions, teaching reports. There is nothing forcing us as reviewers to live by the standards set by national research councils; especially considering that we contribute our time for free and with little return. Next time, just say “excellent impact statement” in referee reports, or when it comes to assessing the suitability of someone for a particular appointment, let’s place as much weight on “activism” and community engagement beyond the university as publication records and action within it.

A third idea—inspired by several presenters at the SIGJ such as Paul Chatterton, Nik Heynen and Gerry Pratt—is the combination of scholarship with activism. Specific examples include Chatterton’s establishment of the CommonPlace autonomous radical social centre in Leeds; Heynen’s work with food activism in Athens; and Pratt’s involvement with Filipina domestic workers and testimonial theatre in Vancouver and Berlin. In working towards critiques of inequalities, oppression and injustice, we also have to identify and valorize examples and formations of diversities, equalities and, ultimately, egalitarianism that can provide visions for alternative worlds. What can we do, then, to move beyond the walls or the tower (or whatever structural metaphor is appropriate) in order to challenge the disjuncture between the university and the community? We challenge ourselves to build upon the
innovation of other scholar-activists and to imagine new ways of creating and sharing knowledge that does not reinforce the neoliberal institutions in which we are embedded.

**Conclusion**

As new scholars, we have opportunities to engage in radical forms of teaching, research and activism. We would encourage all new academics to take the first step and realize that we are not necessarily going to be castigated for undertaking any of these. We would also, simultaneously, encourage all established academics to accept new forms of scholarship and recognize them officially when it comes to appointments, funding applications, editorial decisions, etc. Both academics and institutions need to change. Obviously, the extent of our engagement will be limited by our workloads and requirements for tenure, but this does not mean that we cannot pursue radical or critical thinking or actions. Integrating radical or critical thinking and actions into our workloads would seem to be the sensible option. We therefore challenge ourselves to look for small, everyday ways to challenge the neoliberalized university and construct the type of scholarly community that we want to be a part of.

**Endnotes**

1 The second *Antipode* Summer Institute for the Geographies of Justice was held on 18–22 May 2009 in Manchester, UK (see http://antipodefoundation.org/institute-for-the-geographies-of-justice/). Writers of this article in alphabetical order include: Kean Birch (corresponding author: kean@yorku.ca), Sophie Bond, Tina Harris, Dawn Hoogeveen, Nicole Laliberte, and Marit Rosol. The article is based on statements from the following authors listed in alphabetical order: Melinda Alexander, Jason Beery, John Paul Catungal, Nathan Clough, Sean Gillon, Vanessa Lamb, Kyja Noack-Lundberg, Nina Martin, Andre Pusey, and Omar Salamanca. These participants were active in adding provocative commentary that shaped the paper. We received two rounds of feedback from the 11 participants. Though these participants did not contribute as writers, they were active in the process. Special thanks to Punam Khosla who provided the guiding questions for the submitted statements upon which this paper builds. One person who submitted a statement wished not to be affiliated with the paper.

2 http://www.trapese.org/

3 http://thecostofknowledge.com/