

*On Schoolwork and the Struggle Against It**

As a student, and then as a professor, I have spent most of my life working within the institutions of education in the United States. Today, as a university professor, I work with students, with other professors, with non-teaching staff and with university administrators. All of these working relationships are shaped by the politics of higher education and of the capitalist system of which universities are an integral part.

Several hours a week, in class and in office hours, my work involves direct interaction with students. More intermittently I work with other professors in department committees (e.g., admissions, faculty hiring) or university-level gatherings (e.g., Faculty Council). Also intermittently I work with non-teaching staff (e.g., from secretaries and computer systems operators to custodial workers).

According to a tradition that comes down to us from the Middle Ages, we all live and work in an environment of scholarly collegiality and cooperation. That tradition is constantly reinforced by an ever-renewed myth of community and the rituals of school spirit. Within this context most of us try to deal with each other with mutual respect. Unfortunately, all too systematically our efforts are sabotaged by educational structures and administrative rules, regulations and policies that impose so much division, hierarchy and competition as to breed wealth and poverty, snobbery and envy, arbitrary power and fear, secrecy and alienation, sycophancy and rebellion.

I first confronted these problems as a student in the 1960s and early 1970s when the history and theory I was being taught failed to help me understand the events of those times - events in which I was sometimes a participant and always an observer: the Civil Rights Movement, radical movements on campus, the urban uprisings in places like Watts, Newark and Detroit, the anti-Vietnam War Movement, the Sixties' "cultural revolution" and so on. In search of understanding I reached beyond the courses that were available to me and took up the informal study of what was then called revisionist history and critical social theory. That study revealed the hidden histories of racism, imperialism and cultural manipulation that were absent from my textbooks. It also provided alternative perspectives and theoretical paradigms for confronting those histories and their legacies of repression and rebellion.

In this study I couldn't avoid noticing how virtually every critical theory I came across either drew upon the writings of Karl Marx, or juxtaposed its theory to his. Marx had been mentioned in one or two of my courses but for the

most part the content of his work had been reduced to a few "prophesies" that were cursorily critiqued and quickly dismissed. Only in a graduate course in the history of economic thought had a substantive critique been offered and that had been limited to the standard objection that the labor theory of value couldn't provide the basis for a useful set of relative prices - something no real economist, we were told, could do without. Despite such well-worn arguments, the press of events and need for a theoretical basis for my doctoral dissertation goaded me into exploring Marx's own writings to see if there was, or was not as my professors claimed, anything there of use for understanding social conflict.

One result of those studies was that as a professor I wound up teaching Marx because I did find, and continue to find, that the fundamentals of his analysis, although laid out long ago (1840s-1880s), and repeatedly distorted for vile political ends (by state capitalist, Soviet-style regimes and Marxist-Leninist parties), are still very useful in understanding and coping with today's world and its conflicts - from wars and battles over race, gender and the environment to school and the work of students and professors. Therefore, as one might expect, I have come to bring some elements of Marx's analysis to bear, not only on larger social issues but also on my own, and my students', day-to-day work and struggles.

My reading of Marxist theory has helped me make some sense of my own personal experience and of the history of American education. I have found that it helps in understanding why and how the educational structures and administrative rules, regulations and policies that undermine collegiality and community within universities - and schools more generally - derive at least partially from higher education being structured as an industry and the university being structured and managed as a factory. Indeed, the university-as-factory is only one component in an even larger social factory. The whole of society can be viewed as a factory because its institutions, including those of education, have been shaped by businessmen and government policy makers to produce and reproduce the social relations of capitalism.

Since the last version of this essay I have begun teaching a course on "The Political Economy of Education" - a direct result of being asked by student activists to teach such a course. Putting together that course - starting with those activists' suggestions for reading - and then teaching it has taught me much about the history of education and about the ideas of its more renowned theoreticians. In what follows I will, from time to time, fold in, amongst observations and analyses based on my own experiences of recent decades, some of what I have learned from that history that I judge to be of continuing relevance today.

For one thing, early recognition and condemnation of the subordination of universities to the state and to business can be found as early as the 18th and 19th Century writings of continental philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant and Frederick Nietzsche. In his *Conflict of the Faculties* (1794), while responding to a formal reprimand and royal command from King Frederick William II to write no

* This essay began as part of a response to a critique of my book *Reading Capital Politically* by the editors of *Aufheben*, an English Marxist journal. I decided to detach it from that response and make it an open-ended document to which I add observations from time to time. When those additions are substantial a new dated copy is created and added to my website.

more on religion, Kant delineated the facts and rationale behind the state's control over the "higher" faculties of law, theology and medicine. But at the same time he condemned any attempt to silence critiques of the ideas of those faculties by professors working in the "lower" faculties of philosophy, science and mathematics. At the time, the Prussian monarchy was not only trying to maintain its traditional dominance but was pursuing policies of capitalist industrialization designed to catch up and compete with more advanced capitalist countries like England. All in all, Kant's arguments were relatively gentle ones; he accepted the legitimacy of the state's control over the higher faculties and even his argument for the freedom of speech in the lower faculties was couched in terms of the search for truth and the utility to the state of such critiques for purposes of finding better policies.

Nietzsche's attack on the subordination of the educational system to the state and to business, penned almost 100 years later in 1872, is considerably more aggressive. In his essay "The Future of our Educational Institutions" not only did he condemn the "exploitation of youth by the State, for its own purposes", i.e., to "rear useful officials as quickly as possible and guarantee their unconditional obedience to it by means of excessively severe examinations" but he also excoriated a similar exploitation by business. He blasted the increasingly common approach to education which sought only to train as many students as possible for future "pecuniary gain". "What is required above all," he wrote "is 'rapid education,' so that a money-earning creature may be produced with all speed; there is even a desire to make this education so thorough that a creature may be reared that will be able to earn a great deal of money. Men are allowed only the precise amount of culture which is compatible with the interests of gain."

Twenty years later this very language echoed across the Atlantic, through the pages of Thorstein Veblen's book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). There, in Chapter 14, "The Higher Learning as an Expression of the Pecuniary Order," the economist and astute social critic recognized and analyzed how businessmen – quite directly now and less through the state – were building and shaping universities in their own image, for their own ends – and in the process dramatically reducing and poisoning the space for free inquiry.

A few years later in his book *The Higher Learning in America* (1918), Veblen drew on his personal experience at the University of Chicago (recently established by the capitalist tycoon John D. Rockefeller) and on observation of similar experiences elsewhere to elaborate his analysis of the ways in which American universities were being shaped by and for big business. As a whole series of historical studies have since demonstrated the processes that Veblen observed were continued and intensified as the 20th Century unfolded.¹ Again and again business

strategies in the sphere of industry and wage labor – including, most notoriously Taylorism or so-called scientific management – were applied to schools at every level. So complete was this transference of objectives and methods that it was increasingly easy for muckrakers to transfer analyses that had been honed on the crimes of big business in industry to the schools they had created or shaped.²

School-as-factory is designed to produce what Marx called "labor power" – the willingness and ability to work – and also, at the university level, research results of direct use to private industry and government. Despite long standing ideological claims that schools aim at personal enlightenment and the crafting of citizens capable of taking part in the democratic governance of society, the reality is quite the contrary. From Kindergarten to post-graduate studies, schools are structured and curriculum are shaped to transform human beings into workers - narrowly trained people who are disciplined to do what they are told, the way they are told to do it, for the rest of their lives and to believe they are living in the best way possible. Naturally, many resist. Therefore the school-as-factory is like other factories: a terrain of struggle and Marxist analysis is helpful in understand those struggles and in deciding how to participate in them.

In what follows, I focus on the work of professors and students and their interactions. I first describe and analyze what I and other professors are supposed to do, what students are supposed to do, what our relationship is supposed to be and some of the negative consequences that we suffer. In other words, as Marx does in *Capital*, I lay out the nature and dynamics of work according to the logic of capital that dominates the way the university is set up and structured to operate. Afterwards I discuss how that logic can be, and often is, ruptured, as we – professors and students – struggle against it, struggle to craft alternative uses of our time and energy and struggle not to lose, or to create, our freedom and autonomy.

Professors at Work

University professors work for their wage, or salary, in several ways: teaching, doing research, writing and publishing, and carrying out administrative tasks. I want to begin with teaching because it is touted as our most central and important kind of work. After all if we didn't teach we'd hardly deserve to be called "professors" would we?

"Teaching", or Professors and Students

Both university "professors" and school "teachers" generally pretend to "teach" and administrators pretend to be able to differentiate "good" teachers from "bad" teachers. All three groups thus embrace an illusion. But while that illusion may be functional for administrators dedicated to dividing, dominating and managing their

¹ See especially: Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School*, New York, 1961, Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces that have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, and Joel H. Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.

² See for example, two books by Upton Sinclair, an author who had become famous with his book *The Jungle* (1906) that had exposed the horrors of Chicago meatpacking industry: *The Goose-step: A Study of American Education* (1922) and *The Goslings: A Study of American Schools* (1924),.

“teaching” staff and students, it is deadly for those of us who actually try to teach. For in reality no one can teach, the best that a university professor or schoolteacher can do is to help students learn. We can raise issues in lectures, provide materials on various topics, ask open-ended questions and generally try to create an atmosphere in which inquiry, analysis and alternative approaches are encouraged, but whether or not students learn anything from those lectures and materials depends on students’ own attitudes and efforts – and those attitudes and efforts are often as crippled by the institutional structures as our own.

Many of the frustrations of “teaching” derive from this illusion. Professors gather materials, prepare a syllabus and present lectures and are then appalled at how unresponsive students are and how poorly they do on tests. As a result some professors believe they are failures and take their frustrations out on themselves in the form of self-doubt and low self-esteem; others, probably most, blame students and take their frustrations out on them in the form of impatience and contempt.

For learning to take place, students (just like the rest of us) must integrate new knowledge and understandings into their existing fabric of knowledge and understanding. They must take what is new and see if it fits with what they already believe they know and understand. If it fits, they must figure out how it fits – metaphorically it is a bit like fitting new pieces into an evolving jigsaw puzzle. If it doesn’t fit then they must figure out what needs to be adjusted: what they thought they knew or understood, or what they have just discovered.

In one-on-one situations, say individual tutoring, those presenting new information, ideas, approaches, etc., can, with experience and care, craft their presentations in the light of what they understand about the individual student’s knowledge and understanding.³ Even so, ultimately, only the student can do the comparing, contrasting, evaluating and integrating necessary for the new knowledge or understanding to become part of their grasp of the world.

But in the large classes so common to contemporary schools and universities it is impossible for any “teacher” to do this. We can evaluate our “audience” and try to gauge our lectures to it, but most of the time we will be presenting things using words and in ways that do not fit with the particular needs of most individuals. Schools are not organized to take this situation into account; on the contrary, they are organized in ways that undermine any effort on the part of professors to help students learn and whatever efforts students make to learn.

Having repeatedly found myself in just such impossible situations, I have been forced to ask, “Leaving aside ideology, and given the actual structures that have been

created for education, just what – really – am I and other professors supposed to be doing vis-à-vis students?”

Well, given the “teaching” framework within which I am expected to operate, I have become acutely, and uncomfortably, aware that the most fundamental aspect of the job that I am paid to do vis-à-vis students is not at all “helping them to learn” but rather imposing work and its discipline on them. The immediate forms of that imposition include things like: class room discipline, study assignments, research projects, papers and tests.

Fortunately, at the university level “class room discipline” is not usually a problem – at least not the kind of problem it is in elementary and secondary schools where students can be, and often are, spontaneously or intentionally disruptive. In those cases, teachers and administrators often resort to everything from reprimands through detention to corporeal violence to deter or punish any lack of discipline. On the other hand, many university professors, aware of the many ways their students avoid classroom discipline by skipping classes or by doing something besides listening while in class, e.g., studying for another class, browsing the internet with computers ostensibly brought for note-taking or text-messaging, seek to impose discipline by taking attendance, banning cell-phones and having teaching assistances spy on student computer use. Such professors demand, and seek to enforce, at least the semblance of student presence and attention: all bodies accounted for and all eyes on the lecturer.

Study assignments, research projects and papers, of course, involve the imposition of work outside the classroom and a combination of quantity and quality measures are imposed to enforce that work. In the case of quantity measures we find things like: a specified number of pages to be read, a minimum number of research sources to be found and utilized, a minimum number of pages to be written for a passing grade. Even the demand for “quality” is often formulated in quantitative terms, e.g., judgment of the quality of writing is inversely related to the number of grammatical errors.

Now in the case of tests, whether crafted to the individual course or standardized the ostensible objective is to measure what students have learned, how much knowledge they have gained from their school work. We are far here from the kind of testing that Plato imagined for the “guardians” of his Republic – tests designed to evaluate steadfastness and honor of individuals and their dedication to the public good.⁴ We are far too from the conception of Confucius of the good student who, having learned, repeatedly applies what has been learned, not in tests but in the practice of everyday life.⁵ No, we are, for the most part, in a capitalist world where testing is almost

³ This advantage of individual tutoring has been recognized for a very long time. John Locke, for instance, writing in the late 17th Century about the education of his gentlemen friends’ children argued again and again that among the general principles of education teaching should be adapted to the specific preoccupations and characteristics of individual children. See: John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 1693.

⁴ See the [section](#) on the selection of rulers in Plato’s *Republic*.

⁵ See Confucius, *The Analects (Lun yü)*, translated by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., New York: Ballantine Books, Random House, 1998 – my preferred translation that has stripped away the religious connotations inserted by earlier Christian translators. Those colleges essentially devoted to job training, such as engineering and nursing, will of course protest that their students are being taught so that they can practice their trade. But the kind of practice that concerned Confucius was ethical, social and political, not that involved in earning an income or practicing a trade.

entirely the imposition of discipline, where what students are tested over has been memorized and will be quickly forgotten and the only thing their test results will reveal is the degree to which they have been willing to do the work of memorization and submit to the discipline of test-taking. No where is this more obvious than in the increasingly pervasive use of multiple choice, machine graded tests that demand merely a quantity of memorized information or methods. Such are generally characteristic not only of tests given in courses from elementary school through universities but also of the multiplying number of standardized tests imposed on more and more children and young people by federal and state legislatures, e.g., the infamous "No Child Left Behind" program of US President George Walker Bush.⁶

But the ultimate vehicle for this imposition of work, in all these cases, is grades. The expectation of university officials is that I give high grades to students who work hard and low grades to students who don't, including failing those who refuse a substantial portion of the work they are asked to do. In the language of Marx, as a professor I am supposed to produce and reproduce labor power – my students' ability and willingness to work.

In the language of George Caffentzis' essay on "[The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse](#)" I am expected to play the role of "Maxwell's Daemon": measuring, indirectly through testing, the degree to which students have been willing to allow their energy to be channeled into work, i.e., measuring their "entropy", and sorting low from high entropy students – giving high grades to the former because they have demonstrated their willingness and ability to make their energy available for the work they are assigned and giving low grades to the latter who either can't or won't. Grades are indirect measures of work performed that allow a hierarchical ordering students by their willingness to work, whether the scale be numerical or alphabetical (A, B, C, D, F). My provision of this information about their levels of entropy is the final, end-of-semester element of the work that I am expected to do vis-à-vis each set of students in each course I "teach".

Although it happens that grades can be based to some degree on class participation, for the most part they are based on the performance of specific tasks, e.g., papers and tests, but that performance reflects the amount of prior work done without any direct supervision or evaluation (study, research). Ultimately, the same is true for class participation, for without prior work students are usually at a loss about what questions to ask, what answers to offer or any original thought on the issues at hand. The same is even truer in the case of participation via such contemporary high tech vehicles as internet discussion listservs or web discussion forums or blogs. While an ill-informed comment may be quickly forgotten in the heat of in-class discussion, a posted message remains behind for others to pick apart or critique.

Because the imposition of potentially punitive evaluation and grades is absolutely unavoidable – in the sense that if I refuse to give grades I lose my job – I do this. But at the same time, I am acutely aware of how this key component of my work – and much that follows from it – gives this work traits characteristic of what Marx called "alienated" or "estranged" labor. In the [section on estranged labor](#) in his *1844 Manuscripts*, he outlined four kinds of alienation, all of which are present in my "teaching": the alienation of workers from their work, the alienation of worker from worker, the alienation of worker from their product and the alienation of workers from their "species-being."

With respect to the *first of these*, I am alienated from my work to the degree that its form and content are imposed on me. With respect to teaching – I'll discuss other aspects of professors' work shortly – there are two obvious impositions: first, the imposition of curriculum or the particular sequence of material and courses to be taught, and second, the imposition of grading.

Although professors as a group, in each college or department, have ostensible control over curriculum and are confided the job of crafting "degree programs" made up of particular course sequences, such crafting is actually subject to two important constraints: the habit of intervention by higher authorities – including boards of regents and even legislators for state universities – to impose a general set of course requirements on undergraduate curriculum around which we must work, and the competitive pressure to take the curriculum practices of higher ranked schools as models.

The general requirements imposed on the undergraduate curriculum include such courses as those in the basic structures of government that are deemed necessary for students to function as "citizens," i.e., to have enough of a understanding of the stage and actors of the spectacle of formal, professional politics to play their proper role as observers, kibitzers and, from time to time, voters. While the imposition of such courses is aimed at students, it is also an imposition on professors; what students have to study, professors have to teach. Obviously, such requirements fall more directly on some professors than others. If basic courses in, let's say, English, history and government must be taught then the task will fall principally to professors in those academic fields. Professors in all fields, however, must subtract the time that students must devote to such courses from the time students will have available for other studies.

In the design of "degree programs" competitive pressures almost invariably force professors to reproduce what are generally viewed as the standard "core" courses and sequences in their fields. As a result, with a few and scattered exceptions, the core courses of curriculum formalized in degree programs become almost everywhere the same and individual professors find themselves forced to teach one or more of such courses regardless of the degree to which they agree with the content. The same forces shape most of the more specialized or applied courses that make up sub-fields within each department.

⁶ The counter-productivity of standardized testing – at least as far as learning is concerned – has been extensively analyzed by the group [Fair Test](#): the National Center for Fair and Open Testing. See, in particular, their report "[Failing Our Children: How 'No Child Left Behind' Undermines Quality and Equity in Education.](#)"

Their content too has also tended to become standardized across universities. As a result although professors can usually teach one or more courses within their own chosen specialty and are “free” to design their courses according to their own proclivities, in reality here too the forces of competition shape the usual content and sequencing of materials.

This said, it is important to recognize that the processes of competition and resultant standardization that occurs across programs and schools – and that shape the work of professors – are not simply spontaneous byproducts of free intellectual activity. They are not the result of “academic freedom” in the “market place of ideas.” On the contrary, they are heavily shaped by state and business control over money that buys research and creates whole programs or institutions capable of influencing the direction of academic work in particular fields and thus of evolution of curriculum.

Within the framework of these exterior (though often interiorized) constraints, professors, if they have enough initiative, are sometimes permitted to craft unique courses entirely of their own conception. In such cases, the degree of alienation from their teaching is obviously substantially reduced. Not surprisingly such courses are often taught with more creativity and gusto than more standardized ones.

The second major imposition on my teaching – testing and grading – contaminates everything that occurs in my relationship with students. Here, as in the case of imposed curriculum, I am not engaged in a self-determined activity. As with most other workers I am not only told what to do (teach such and such material), but how to do it (impose requirements like tests or papers that can be evaluated to produce grades). Although I am left some leeway in deciding the details of “how” to grade, grade I must – upon pain of being fired. This is, of course, better than the situation of some professors who teach one of a series of standardized courses and must give standardized tests. Yet it is still an alienating imposition.

With respect to the *second form of alienation* – that of worker from worker – I am being pitted against my students from a superior position in an artificially created power hierarchy. Despite the mythology of the “academic community of scholars” the grades I must impose gives me considerable power over students’ academic standing and thus their future. Regardless of the pressures on me (with respect to the courses I teach and their content), from the students’ point of view I determine the makeup of the syllabus. I choose the books and articles they are required to read. I assign the topics for papers and draft the questions for tests. And, above all, I decide their individual grades and where they will fall within the grade hierarchy of the class. They know these things, and, naturally, many resent my power and their powerlessness. I discuss various aspects and implications of this alienation below.

The *third form of alienation* – that of workers from their product – might seem, at first glance, irrelevant to teaching. Yet the university-as-factory is structured in

such a manner that our teaching is actually supposed to produce a “product”: the labor power of our students. We “process” students in ways that resemble the processing that goes on along an assembly line. (The movie version of Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, has a marvelous scene where students are symbolically processed on a conveyor belt that feeds them into a meat grinder.) There is no actual, physical assembly line, of course, students walk from class to class, exam to exam, but the paths they walk are carefully specified, they are increasingly hurried along and at each work site we are supposed to impose work and test their ability and willingness to perform that work. At the end of this process, if we judge that they have done enough work, they “graduate” with a certification of just that willingness and ability to work. THAT is our (and their) “product”. But is it really “ours,” or “theirs” for that matter? No, because within capitalism labor power is neither for us, nor for our students. It is for capital. It is something that they will sell to capital, to their employers who will make use of it by putting them to work. Thus business’ systematic interventions into education to make sure that we do our work properly – for their benefit.

Most professors, hopefully, don’t think about their teaching as “processing” but rather as helping young scholars along their way. Sometimes they may be quite proud of their students’ accomplishments. They feel they have taught well and as a result of their teaching their students have gone on to achieve great things. The professors who supervise graduate student dissertations, for example, may take pride in one of their protégés getting a good job in a “highly ranked” university. But that pride is, all too often, the pride of a craftsman. It reveals precisely how they believe, consciously or not, that they have had a hand in crafting a successful “product” that is now selling well, in a good market, at a high price.

Fortunately for professors, the contemporary convention that graduating Ph.D.’s should not be employed at the school from which they receive their degrees means that this “product” will not be used, immediately and directly, as a competitor for the proud supervisor’s own job! Down the road, of course, if the “product” proves as successful as expected, it may indeed emerge as a competitor – either in the university where it was produced or in the same job market as its producer.

As professors, we sometimes have other “products”, such as research results and publications that I will discuss below, but when it comes to teaching, our students-cum-workers are our principal product and they are definitely alienated from us. They are alienated in a dual sense: first, they go from us to prostitute their time and energy in the job market just as we have done, and second, their labor power, that we have helped create, will be used by business to create further products that will be used against us, just as they are used against other workers. Used against us? By putting a price on products business forces us to work for it to gain the money to buy the things that we have collectively produced. Moreover, those same products have been shaped, by the shaping of the work that produced them, in ways that help them to

structure and control our lives. There is a considerable literature analyzing these relationships.

Finally, in the case of *alienation from species-being*, Marx was talking about the subordination of workers' wills to capital and the way that disrupts the free interaction of our wills. (He believed that what makes the human species distinct is the presence of a will.) As professors we experience both of these things, the former most obviously in the alienation from our work. The very impositions described above that have been imposed by business on the university circumscribe our ability to think, to desire, to freely exercise our will as human beings. In the latter case most obvious are the resultant impossibilities of free interaction with each other and with our students. Competing professors do not have "free" interactions. Hierarchical power between professors and students poisons their meetings of wills. In both cases our ability to realize this dimension of our human being is sharply curtailed.⁷

In all these kinds of alienations associated with grading there is a further component that for me is more important than it was for Marx (for whom one's *attitude* toward alienating work was a secondary consideration): I would never choose to grade my students; I don't like it and I resent having to do it. Further, I know that some students also resent the situation and that resentment stands between us. Therefore, I experience these alienations psychologically quite negatively. They not only poison my life, they poison how I feel about my life.

Now I am well aware that some professors have no objection to grading. Indeed some revel in it. In such cases they do not feel these alienations as a poisoning of their lives. That is to say they are neither repelled nor resentful of these impositions. Indeed, they embrace them and rationalize them to themselves and to others.

Among those rationales are the following. One well-intentioned argument reasons that evaluation can help students in discovering what they have learned and what they have yet to learn. Another, more common and "practical" argument evoked in this age of neoliberal capitalism points out that grades are necessary to facilitate student entry into the labor market. A degree from a school that doesn't give grades, some say, would be meaningless to the average employer. (The argument ignores, of course, the way their grading also guarantees failure for some in that same market.) In some crass cases, professors who defend grading argue like fraternity brothers or sorority sisters talking about hazing: "I was graded, therefore they must be graded." I have even heard such an "argument" trotted out to defend a particular kind of grading: the imposition of comprehensive exams at the graduate level – exams that I consider a case of double jeopardy in as much as students have already been graded once in their courses. A few derive a kind of sadistic joy from wielding the power of domination it conveys – whether that domination takes the form of psychological or sexual abuse.

Once again Pink Floyd's "The Happiest Days of Our Lives" in the album *The Wall* comes to mind:

When we grew up and went to school
There were certain teachers who would
Hurt the children in any way they could

"OOF!" [someone being hit]

By pouring their derision
Upon anything we did
And exposing every weakness
However carefully hidden by the kids

But in the town, it was well known
When they got home at night, their fat and
Psychopathic wives would thrash them
Within inches of their lives.

While it might take considerable psychotherapeutic work to discover why these individual professors so willingly embrace this alienating character of their work – obviously an appeal to fat and psychopathic wives won't do – the fact that they are so willing makes them partners with the administration in its continuation.

Because I am acutely aware of all of these things, I am as up front and as clear with my students about the class politics of the imposition of work and of grades as I can be. I discuss with them this key element of the work I am supposed to be doing and the problems that it poses both for them and for me.

Along the way to the periodic evaluations that produce grades, I am also expected to impose work in an ongoing manner. The main vehicles for doing this are the imposition of work in the classroom and the assignment of material to be studied outside the classroom. These involve for both professors and students the alienations of the classroom and for students the prolongation of the working day beyond the classroom.

The classroom is the primary place where we collectively interact; it is a space (a work site) and a set of behaviors (work) on which I dwell with my students.

The typical university classroom has two important features shaped to structure the imposition of work on both professors and students: first, its physical layout – most often rigidly fixed to create and maintain a hierarchical and antagonistic division of power between the professor and the students, and secondly, the size of classes – also shaped to the same end. The physical layout is almost invariably designed around the assumption that the professors will lecture and students will listen. Although professors may or may not have a physical stage and a podium, we almost always have what amounts to a stage upon which we can speak and move freely. Students, by contrast, are organized by chairs and desks, usually screwed into the floor and immovable, to be passive listeners. The typically large number of students assigned to each classroom (mostly varying at the

⁷ One does not have to agree with Marx's speciocentric notion that *only* humans have wills to recognize the validity of his critique of how capitalism limits that aspect of human being.

undergraduate level from 50 to 500) is designed for, and almost always leads to, active professor lectures and passive student listening being the dominant overt behaviors.⁸ As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche complained in 1874:

One speaking mouth, with many ears, and half as many writing hands – there you have to all appearances, the external academical apparatus; the university engine of culture set in motion.

Even if we want to break these patterns, say by reorganizing a class into smaller discussion groups, the rigidity of the physical lay-out of the classroom often makes this very difficult and awkward. With all chairs bolted into position and facing the lectern, it is hard for even a small group to sit facing each other.

Such structures have, not surprisingly, been frequently critiqued over time, especially at the elementary school level where the spontaneity and energy of children has not yet been disciplined to immobility. As a result many schools have created more flexible classrooms where chairs and tables can be reorganized as seems best for whatever task is at hand. Such flexibility is generally reduced at high school level and virtually disappears in universities where students have been admitted based, in part, on (grade) evidence of their willingness to accept such physical, and hence, psychological, discipline. An exception are special rooms for seminars, sometimes at the undergraduate, sometimes at the graduate level where students and the professor can sit around a table and, in principle, do their work in a less rigid, hierarchal manner.

While at the level of elementary and secondary school an essential day-to-day aspect of a teacher's work is the imposition of order (forcing students to be still, to keep quiet unless granted the momentary right to speak, to request permission to go to the bathroom, and so on), at the university level such order in the classroom is assumed and the primary forms of the imposition of work is the confining of students to a mostly passive listening via lecturing and strictly limited questioning. Within the constraints that I have already mentioned, the lectures are, in turn, organized and ordered by the professor so the content and presentations that the students have to listen to is imposed on them.

The size of classes, the organization of the classroom, and the necessity of imposing work and grades all tend – as indicated above – to reduce professors' "teaching" to lecturing, to what is essentially a performance, a spectacle, designed at worst to test the limits of student tolerance for abuse and at best to inspire. While a few questions may be tolerated or even solicited, the vast bulk of the time in class is taken up delivering organized lectures on the topic of the day to students who sit quietly, listening, taking notes and wondering what of the material covered, if any, will be on the next test.

The modernization of classrooms these days primarily involves equipping the lecturer's podium with more and more electronic gadgetry to facilitate more multimedia presentations: power point slide projections, audio playback, VHS and DVD movies, original document or object projections and so on. In short, as the pressures on students have increased in recent years, we are being provided with more and more sophisticated means of keeping them entertained – and not thinking about those mounting pressures. (I am reminded of the stories of orchestras of prisoners who played as their fellows were marched into labor camps or to their deaths.) Obviously, extensive preparation of such entertainment, e.g., the preparation of slides, requires us to do a lot of extra work beyond mastering our subject and figuring out how to present it in a comprehensible fashion.

I walk into a classroom at the beginning of a semester and find all kinds of students: those who are there because they are sincerely interested in the subjects to be covered, those who wish they could be absolutely anywhere else, those who are ready and willing to get as much out of the course as possible, those who will do the absolutely minimum amount of work to get whatever grade they deem acceptable and those who, because of work or personal pressures, are barely able to muster the time and energy to be there, regardless of their attitudes toward the subject matter. But regardless of their attitudes or energy levels I know that the relationship of the active lecturer-test-giver-grader to the passive listeners-test-takers-graded is structured to create antagonism: I must impose work and grades and students suffer from that imposition whether it be willingly or resentfully, whether I successfully entertain them or not.

While the classroom provides the primary space of collective interaction between my students and myself, the institution of "office hours" – usually a minimum of four a week – provides an opportunity for more intimate one-on-one, or small group interaction between us, a chance to discuss issues or ideas generated mostly by *their* learning processes and only partially by *my* lectures. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons – ranging from indifference to fear – relatively few students take advantage of these hours.

While indifference can derive from any number of sources – not least of which is the character of schooling to which they have been subjected for years – fear seems an almost inevitable by-product of the hierarchical power relationships of schools. As bosses can brow beat or intimidate, raise or lower wages, promote or demote, sexually harass or even assault their employees according to their whims (in the absence of unions with enough power to effectively contest such arbitrariness), so too are students aware that professors can give higher or lower grades, pass or fail, sexually harass or even assault them behind the closed doors of their offices (in the absence of student organizations and legal teams with enough clout to effectively challenge such abuses).

As a result, when students do come, professors who are sensitive to such fears – and aware of the very real grounds upon which they are based – have the extra

⁸ It can also be argued that the large size of classrooms is at least partly a function of the cost minimizing practices of administrations and, in the case of public schools, of state legislatures. It is cheaper to have fewer professors teach more students than it is to hire more professors and have smaller classes.

burden of allaying them, of finding ways of minimizing them. But let us be clear, it is *impossible* to allay them completely because within the rules of the game, quite legally and beyond almost all appeal professors do have the power to assign grades and students are constantly reminded of the importance of those grades for their futures.

Even when a particular professor's conduct in the classroom has suggested that the individual student need fear no such actions, long years of imposed passivity and crushed initiative leave a great many students too timid and with too little self-esteem to feel confident enough to "impose" their own agenda on their professor. Far too many will come to office hours driven only by a desperation produced by low grades on previous tests and with the sole goal of improving those grades – a blighted ground for any intellectual encounter.

Further complicating such interactions is the issue of "authority." In the 1950s Hannah Arendt attributed much of the cause of what was then being called a "crisis" in education to a decline in the authority of teachers in the United States that she saw as a particular case of a more general breakdown in all kinds of traditional authority, including that of the state, of the church, of parents and so on throughout the Western world. Although Arendt was careful to differentiate the kind of authority whose disappearance she lamented from 1) authoritarian relations based on power and violence, and 2) the power of persuasion (a relation between equals), she nevertheless saw authority as a relationship of hierarchy between one who commands obedience and one who obeys – with both sides recognizing and accepting the legitimacy of the hierarchy. For her, education was the natural domain of such relationships (unlike politics where relationships among equals are more reasonable) because of the responsibility of adults (who know the world) to prepare children (who don't know the world, and must learn about it) for full participation in society. Teachers' authority, therefore, derived from their greater expertise and knowledge and students, taught to recognize and appreciate that superiority, should obey, learn, and be prepared for adulthood (and citizenship, etc.).

In her characterization of American education in the 1950s Arendt is remarkably blind to both its authoritarian and violent structure. In a period when arbitrary and even corporal punishment was still commonplace and frequent, it is outrageous to find her mocking any view of students as being victims of "oppression".

Arendt's preferred educational model, although derived from the ancient Greek and Roman perspectives on the importance of tradition and authority, was a very capitalist one, quite appropriate to the modern American school-as-factory: education as a kind of productive process in which adults/teachers (active) who "know more and can do more" responsibly command children/students (passive) who willingly obey and who are gradually transformed from (playful) beings into (serious) workers fitted to function in a "pre-established" (capitalist) society.

In this model students are viewed quite explicitly as "not-yet-finished" beings who are in need of being transformed by what, logically, we must call "finished" adults. Although Arendt recognizes that "learning" can continue throughout life, "education" comes to an end with graduation and the induction of the now "finished" students into the labor market.

In contrast to this vision, the best of us would love to have an unfettered, free exchange of ideas with our students, an exchange untainted by any difference in power between us but one enriched by the differences in our experiences and knowledge. We would love to be able to meet with individual students as whole human beings engaged freely in intersecting quests for knowledge and understanding in which the only "authority" recognized is that of superior understanding – whether of teacher or student. Unfortunately, the structure of modern education makes the realization of such freedom impossible.

In terms of ongoing homework, testing and evaluation, the work dynamics can be usefully understood in terms of Marx's analysis of piece wages. Grades, students come to realize, are effectively IOU's on future income/wages (the higher your grades the more scholarships, better certification and higher paying jobs you can get later on). Moreover grades are not awarded according to the hours of work put in (like time wages) but according to the production of pieces (e.g., tests, papers). In schools, as in factories, professors play the role not merely of taskmaster but of quality control inspector.

As Marx points out in chapter 21 of Volume I of *Capital* on piece wages their beauty for capitalists lies in the ways they hide exploitation and are conducive to competition while requiring only quality control rather than constant supervision. By keeping piece rates low (whether monetary pay per unit of commodity produced or grades per test, paper or course) workers/students are coerced into imposing work on themselves. Just as the managers of factories prefer piece wages to instill discipline cheaply, forcing workers to work hard and long to produce enough pieces to earn a livable wage, so the managers of universities find grades a fine vehicle for forcing students to work hard and long on their own, far from any direct supervision (say at home or in libraries or laboratories) to get high enough grades to pass a course or earn a degree.

I know, for example, that the most effective way to impose more work is to give students research papers and take-home tests with virtually no time or page limit. Some will spend an extraordinary number of hours crafting the paper or test to get a good grade. Making them take tests in a class period (limited say to one hour) will mean much less work - even though they may spend time before the test preparing for it.

I also know that the university monitors me (and other professors) to determine just how much work we impose. It does this casually by keeping an eye on course syllabi and it does it methodically by keeping track of how we award grades. Every semester at the university where I work, the university computers record the grades that

each professor gives for each course and generate summary statistics about how many “A’s,” how many “B’s” and so on. When the time comes to consider promotion the university committee that makes such decisions hauls out a black binder that contains these statistics for each professor being considered for promotion and examines it to see if the professor is imposing enough work.

They measure the amount of work being imposed by the distribution of grades - the more “A’s” and fewer “F’s” the less discipline a professor is assumed to maintain. If over time an increase in the percentage of higher grades can be identified, then the professor is branded a “grade inflator” (that professor’s “A’s” are deemed to be declining in value, like currency during a period of inflation, but in this case those “A’s” are seen as declining in their value as measures of work performed - by both students *and* the professor). On the other hand, if a professor is seen to be giving fewer and fewer high-level grades, then that professor is deemed a “grade deflator”. One year, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts awarded permanent \$1,000 wage increases to a handful of professors that this process identified as “grade deflators.” Such practices, obviously, put pressure on professors to be hardnosed disciplinarians, to impose lots of work on their students. The result, also obviously, is an intensification of the antagonism between students and professors.

Within such contexts it never surprises me that some students go “postal” and kill their professors, nor that so many professors hold so much contempt for students (which rationalizes their own otherwise unpleasant tasks of selection, reward and punishment).

To the above standard working conditions should be added the additional work for those who try to teach against the stream, to provide students with materials and opportunities for critical thinking and discussion about the limitations of, and alternatives to, capitalism.

One way to *minimize* the amount of time and energy you put into your job is to just “teach the text book” - however boring it may be for students. (Especially at the introductory or intermediary level there are very few significant differences in textbooks because their commercial editors demand that they be written for the largest possible market.) But teaching the textbook means, for the most part, teaching a set of ideas designed to produce and reproduce the kind of labor power desired by capital.

Teaching “outside” the textbook involves at the very least the extra work of providing a systematic critique of the book itself and more usually the extra work of seeking out, sorting and sifting through texts and other resources to find materials that will provide points of view different from, and critical of, those provided in standardized textbooks. For survey courses a similar process applied to the ferreting out and making available of original texts and primary materials instead of some one textbook author’s interpretation can also require vast amounts of extra work. Some of us, of course, willingly undertake

such extra work, partly because it is intellectually more interesting and partly because we believe that by organizing our courses in this way we can facilitate and deepen the learning of some students. It thus helps us overcome, to some degree, at least on the psychological level, the alienation between us and our work and between us and our students.

For professors working in universities whose administrators pride themselves on being CEO’s of “research” universities - and I am employed by one - promotion and wages/salaries are awarded overwhelmingly on the basis of research and publication, not teaching. This has serious consequences for every aspect of our work.

One consequence for those of us who do teach (and not all those with the title “professor” do) is a constant monetary pressure to divert our energies away from teaching to research, to getting research grants, to writing and to publishing. Concretely this means pressure to devote less time to preparing course materials and lectures, less energy to lecturing, fewer office hours and to find ways to shift the burden of work onto students - all of which increases the alienation and antagonism between students and professors. Students taking courses with professors who are driven by the rules of promotion to focus on their research to the neglect of pedagogy will not only find lectures less interesting but office hours more likely to be unhelpful. Such students will be forced to compensate for the professor’s lack of effort by increasing their own.