

**Introducing Lived Interventions:  
Located Agency and Teacher-Scholar-Activism as Responses to Neoliberalism**Darin Jensen and Emily Suh

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What do we mean by located agency? When we say agency, we mean “action or intervention producing a particular effect” (“Agency”). When we say located, we mean situated within a particular place and/or context. So, located agency is action or intervention within a particular place or context meant to produce a particular effect. A recent example of located agency might be the March for Our Lives on March 24, 2018 in Washington D.C. Nearly a million people came together in a particular place--the U.S. Capitol--to effect change in governmental policies so that fewer children would be murdered with firearms in our schools. Another example from the national consciousness is the Moral Monday movement. The Moral Monday movement began in North Carolina in 2013 as a series of protests against new legislative policies which protesters felt had economic and racist consequences harmful to the people of North Carolina (Purdy).

As basic writing and developmental education teacher-scholar-activists, we see a clear connection between state and national protests like these and faculty/staff resistance to the instrumentalization of education—that is, marketization and commodification as a means of training and preparing workers while lessening the traditional aims of humanistic education-- that happens in our local contexts. There are tremendous pressures in education right now. Much of it comes from what Linda Adler-Kassner identifies as the Education Industrial Complex or the Education Intelligence Complex (EIC). She describes the epicenter of this complex as containing a “collection of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), granting agencies, businesses, consulting firms, policy institutes, actions, and actors” (320). She goes on to say that the story these organizations tell is “the problem with American Education and How to Fix it” (320). Underlying Adler-Kassner’s narrative is an implicit acceptance of the business metaphor for higher education, which blurs the role of students into one of both product and consumer. This larger narrative of higher education as a business--and a struggling one in terms of developmental

education--is compelling because it is supported by money and amplified by speech which, repeated often enough, gains the force of reality (see for example the influence of Complete College America in shaping developmental education legislature in Texas). Adler-Kassner warns against the larger neoliberal values currently controlling the narrative of what works in higher education. This educational neoliberalism prizes production, competition and efficiency over other values (Welch and Scott; Stenberg).

Recent voices from two-year college writing studies have called for reconceptualizing and making sustainable faculty identities as teacher-scholar-activists (see Andelora; Sullivan; Griffiths and Jensen) to resist the enactment of neoliberal ideologies and preserve the democratic function of education. The teacher-scholar-activist identity in local communities of practice can provide models for resisting the instrumentalization of education witnessed in the over-reliance on data-driven decisions, inauthentic and unequitable placement measures, adjunctification of labor, lack of professionalism/deprofessionalization, lack of shared governance and more. However, the theorization of the teacher-scholar-activist model requires reporting of on-the-ground efforts to form networks of locally situated teacher-scholar-activism (Lee and Kahn).

We came to this special issue as basic writing and developmental education teacher-scholar-activists: as an English faculty member at a two-year college and a former adult ESL and developmental English instructor who is now faculty in a Developmental Education department at a large state university. These institutional contexts, as well as our various professional experiences, are part of the impetus behind our motivation to edit a special issue of the *Basic Writing eJournal*. The second part of our motivation began with the Nebraska Developmental Education Consortium ([NDEC](#)). NDEC, founded by Phip Ross at Southeast Community College in Lincoln, Nebraska and initially funded through a Partnership for Innovation grant, had as its goal the bringing together of Nebraska's five community colleges and one tribal college to discuss promising practices in developmental education. Attendees of the first NDEC meeting, including Darin, were looking for solidarity across 430 miles and diverse instructional contexts. Each institution and sometimes each campus or center of those respective colleges

faced pressure in their developmental education programs. The colleges came together to exert what we view as NDEC's located agency in response to reductive notions of education.

The story about developmental education circulating in Nebraska, and throughout the nation, was the story that developmental education doesn't work. It's a chapter in the story Adler-Kassner outlined above. The EIC Adler-Kassner identifies has employed resources including large research centers with corporate underwriting (for example, Columbia University's Community College Research Center or MDRC) to create a single, reductive narrative about developmental education. This narrative has been so effective that in many instances state legislatures have adopted it. But we know that this single story about developmental education isn't the only one. If we look to the University of Minnesota's General College, we know that historically, developmental education has provided "at-promise" linguistically and culturally diverse students educational access to an R1 university system. From Mike Rose, we know that education, including developmental education, can constitute an important second chance. And we know from Mary Soliday that attacks on developmental education aren't new, that they are instead part of cycles of enrollment and who counts. If we take Soliday's argument in the *Politics of Remediation* and apply it to this current attack, it's pretty easy to see that as enrollments decline, the chorus for acceleration and completion and persistence pick up steam.

But there is an important difference and addition we might make to Soliday's cycle: we are in a time of continuing educational instrumentalism in which the dominant view of education focuses on preparing students to be employees (see Dougherty; Welch and Scott). It is a narrow conception. And when we reduce education to preparation of human capital for markets, we have succumbed to neo-liberal logics. We present the articles in this special issue as evidence of faculty and staff's located agency. The articles illuminate the perspectives of what Griffiths refers to as "autonomous teacher advocates," who "engage in scholarship and call on that scholarship to articulate their teaching philosophies, and to enact interventions to improve the outcomes for their developmental writers" (60). The connection between scholarship, activism, and teaching is shared throughout the following seven essays, one vignette on

classroom practice, and a book review which we view as evidence of English faculty's continued engagement and professionalization in the face of austerity and neoliberal logics.

The articles in this issue add a multiplicity of voices to the story of basic writing within the larger framework of developmental education. As Lee and Kahn so aptly note, the theorization of the teacher-scholar-activist model requires practitioner reporting of their on-the-ground efforts of locally-situated teacher-scholar-activism. This special issue begins with a reminder of the power of student voices and the need for basic writing professionals to center our work around the students we serve. Patrick Sullivan, in "Meet My English 93 Class," stakes out an important claim--arguing that the current "theoretical model" of developmental education "privileges numbers and statistics" and "not people or students, not individual citizens embedded in unique communities and family circumstances" (Sullivan). Sullivan goes on to argue,

Were we able to bring these contingencies into view, they would significantly complicate any understanding of 'success' at the two-year college (Parisi; Sullivan "Measuring").

As advocates for our students, as champions of basic writing programs, and as activists for social justice, we must fashion creative new ways to communicate this important information to stakeholders, civic leaders, politicians, legislators, scholars, and a broader public audience.

For Sullivan, located agency happens in the classroom by gathering his students' voices and words in activism that takes what we know *from* and experience *in* the classroom, allying with student voices to tell the story of developmental education in a nuanced manner. We see Sullivan's work as more than merely replacing quantitative measures with qualitative ones--the inclusion of the local and the personal becomes resistance and activism. The project he describes is one that we believe has powerful potential.

In "Getting Thorny: Elizabeth McPherson and the Activist Tradition of Two-Year College English," Christie Toth presents a historic look at the field of two-year college faculty activism by critically examining Elizabeth McPherson's history and accomplishments. In so doing, Toth presents an

incisive look McPherson's career as a teacher-scholar-activist who advocated for *Students' Right to Their Own Language*, argued against the labeling and denigrating of two-year college students, and worked for professionalizing two-year college faculty. Toth presents a compelling look at the possibilities of activism and engagement, while making sure to point out McPherson's blind spots.

Cheri Lemieux-Spiegel does important work to complicate the professional identities we adopt in "Viva La-Revolution-ish." As she eloquently argues,

The fact is that teacher-scholar-activist is an aspirational title. It is an ambitious way of seeing the work of literacy studies and/or writing studies practitioners, particularly those situated within two-year contexts or basic writing programs in a wide variety of institutional situations. When we adopt this term, it helps us take a stance and define who we aspire to be within the landscape of our local contexts. Yet if I allow myself to fixate too readily upon my vision for who the teacher-scholar-activist needs to be, on the great work she is called to do, then I can easily find myself in a position of burnout, anxiety, and ire. (123)

Lemieux-Spiegel uses the concept of guerrilla as a metaphor for how faculty might productively organize their work and identities. She sees the guerrilla orientation as one that lends itself well to local contexts while allowing for what is possible rather than ideal, thus pushing back against professional identities that burn us out.

In "Reform as Access, Reform as Exclusion: Making Space for Critical Approaches to the Neoliberal Moment," Higgins and Warnke describe a critical framework for engaging with basic writing at the two-year college. The authors examine how reform both constrains and promotes access for and within basic writing programs. In their summary of recent developmental education reforms, Higgins and Warnke warn against the dangers of efforts that reduce barriers while simultaneously forcing students to resources located outside of the college. They further call into question the recommendations by some (see Bailey et al.) to better integrate adjunct faculty into the college's reform efforts without

corresponding increases to their pay. The authors “believe the social justice validity of doing progressive work requires moving outside of market-oriented metrics that fixate on outcomes rather than engaging with the laborers whose work makes the achievement of those outcomes possible” (Higgins and Warnke). The attention they draw to adjunct labor conditions echoes the concerns and frustrations of other contributors to this issue (James et al.; Stone and Austin).

Through critical reform, Warnke and Higgins establish a “Thirdspace” (Soja and Chouinard) to improve practice and problematize the status quo. The authors seek to repurpose neoliberal initiatives to make space for the progressive aims of basic writing within the current and historic capitalist ideals of the community college. To advance this aim, Warnke and Higgins created the Accelerated Learning Institute, a professional development institute for adjunct faculty framed as a series of conversations based on seminal readings and participants’ experiences teaching basic reading and writing. The authors end their piece with materials from the Accelerated Learning Institute and reflections on their experiences facilitating the institute.

In the following essay, Hubrig and Goss describe a partnership between a high school composition class and a land-grant university composition course, which facilitated the writer identity among students from both classes. In “When Students Don’t Identify as Writers,” Hubrig and Goss challenge readers to see how basic writing is part of the work of high schools and four-year institutions. They explain,

We agree with Hassel and Giordano that basic writing should be determined by local contexts, identifying those students who might test out of developmental coursework but still ‘occupy a misty netherland where they are neither basic writers nor proficient college-level writers’ (‘Transfer’ 25) and to build an understanding of basic writing that accounts for students beyond those ‘who place specifically into non-credit college courses’ (36).

The authors further call attention to the neoliberal assumptions perpetuated within their respective institutions and how located agency through a community partnership “can serve as a site of intervention

and bolster the rhetorical agency of basic writers whose literacy skills are often described through deficit models” (Hubrig & Goss).

In “Writing as Commodity: How Neoliberalism Renders the Postsecondary Online Writing Classroom Transactional and Ways Faculty Can Regain Agency,” Stone and Austin use autoethnography and case study to explore the ways in which neoliberalism has recreated the online writing classroom as a transactional space. In their roles as adjunct faculty member and contingent course designer, the authors discuss course design and teaching within fixed pedagogical frameworks and standardized curricula and assessments. Stone describes the struggle she faced as a contingent course designer contributing to the reduction of her fellow adjuncts’ agency and her intentional acts of resistance to instrumentalization, such as establishing a professional development space which valued instructor autonomy. Last, they present solutions for working within neoliberal structures of higher education “in the hopes that as purveyors and participants this system, we can regain agency and advocate for authentic student learning with a focus on process rather than product” (Stone and Austin).

The final essay in this issue is Isabella and McGovern’s “Reviving the *Administrative Amnesiac*: Basic Writing Faculty *Looking and Responding Rhetorically* in the Neoliberal University.” This essay examines how faculty resist neoliberal institutional structures through rhetorical seeing to look behind, around, and through. The authors outline ways to determine how to resist and respond to *administrative amnesia*. Through examples of how basic writing faculty at their institution responded rhetorically to local issues of shared governance, sexual assault, and rapid expansion of the university’s basic writing program, Isabella and McGovern offer advice on being resilient.

In our Classroom Practice section, Ian James, William F. Martin, Meghan Kelsey, and Susan Naomi Bernstein present an archive of a Halloween Write-In event. The authors describe creating a space for basic writers, former students of basic writing and adjunct faculty that responds to the human needs of both. The authors describe how the Stretch Halloween Write-In responded directly to student concerns, including food scarcity, community building, and opportunities for peer and faculty mentoring. The event

also provided adjunct faculty a sense of hope and meaning in their increasingly disheartening working conditions as contingent laborers.

The final item in this special issue is James Dyer's book review of Patrick Sullivan's *Economic Inequality, Neoliberalism, and the American Community College*. Sullivan's text offers one of the best explanations of neoliberalism in higher education and presents an important counternarrative as well as its own interventions, many of which are echoed in the other pieces in this special issue. Dyer's review captures the essence of this important text.

In sum, these pieces of writing are a snapshot of faculty responding to this moment in developmental education. The authors here value students and their voices; they privilege the co-construction of rhetorical awareness of students in basic writing classes, and they show a savvy awareness and resilient spirit in engaging with higher education narratives which currently see students as mere cogs in a system and faculty as facilitators. The emergent themes of located agency are partnership and solidarity--across institutions and between faculty and students. Sullivan discusses the outward facing activism needed to create an effective counternarrative. We hope these examples of located agency--whether they be in the form of programmatic interventions, institutional resistance, or making visible our foremothers, will provide examples that help faculty create and engage in resilient, inclusive activism that serves our students and their lives well.

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