

## Manifestations of Neoliberal Discourses Within a Local Job-Training Program

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of conducting this study was to understand how neoliberal discourses manifest within the local context of a short-term, job-training program offered at a two-year college in the USA. Ethnographic data were collected at the local site through interviews, observations and document analysis. We then situated these data within a global context represented by a corpus of purposively selected national and international policy texts. Focusing on three components of discourse as social action—genres, representations and identities—the data analysis illuminated three interrelated themes relating to how institutional actors translated neoliberal discourses available at the global scale into practice. The ideological consequences for learners as well as examples of counter-hegemonic resistance are discussed.

### **Article:**

#### MANIFESTATIONS OF NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSES WITHIN A LOCAL JOB-TRAINING PROGRAM

A central feature of the current economic and social milieu is the ascendancy of neoliberalism, a political economic program in which individual property rights, deregulated markets and free trade are seen as fundamental to human well-being (Harvey 2005). Quite distinct from the Keynesian, mixed-market capitalism of the mid-twentieth century, the current political economic order has been referred to as the new capitalism (Fairclough 1995), and within this program cities, states, nations and regions compete fiercely to attract global capital as a means of advancing a certain variety of economic growth. Consequently, governments at various levels become preoccupied with advancing an institutional framework that establishes a favourable business climate, and goals of international economic competitiveness are assumed to serve the common good.

The neoliberal discourse of international economic competitiveness as serving the common good makes it possible for public officials to court transnational corporations with promises of customized job-training programs offered through publicly supported institutions of postsecondary education. This practice has often resulted in coalitions of public colleges, local governments and profit-based enterprises, each purported to benefit in its own way. First, given that public colleges are largely dependent upon county and state resources, the political and fiscal benefits of providing job-training programs are not lost on educational leaders. Second, elected officials who help attract business and industry to their locale stand to benefit in the form of political capital, particularly if employment rates increase. Third, profit-based enterprises

benefit in the form of customized job-training at reduced to no cost. Such coalitions often take the form of public-private partnerships (Longanecker 2005).

Within the Western neoliberal hegemony public-private partnerships are widely understood to promote economic development and to enable the unemployed to gain opportunities for work. With the exception of few cases, this view is rarely disputed at national political levels. Critics of the new capitalism, on the other hand, have associated neoliberalism with the exploitation of labour, rising inequality, acute economic strife for all but the wealthiest individuals and the disappearance of all things public (Bourdieu 1998, Spring 1998, Aronowitz 2001, Aune 2001, Fairclough 2001b, Giroux 2004, Harvey 2005, Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005). These critics raise moral and ethical questions that bear directly upon public-private partnerships, particularly when such partnerships involve institutions with missions to serve the public good on one hand and for-profit enterprises with a legal mandate to increase private gain on the other (see Dodge v. Ford Motor Co. 1919). In light of these controversies, it becomes important to understand the processes of the new capitalism as they play out within local contexts and in the lives of institutional actors.

While many scholars have offered critiques of neoliberalism as an ideology and as a policy paradigm, few have documented empirically its translation into practice within a local context. This gap in the literature seems conspicuous given Kjaer and Pedersen's (2001), claim that neoliberal ideas gain meaning only as they are translated within particular discursive and institutional contexts. In order to address this gap in the literature, we strategically situated an ethnographic field study within a public-private partnership as described above, which allowed an opportunity to observe the translation of neoliberal ideas into the planning, design and implementation of a job-training program offered at a suburban community college in the south-eastern USA. As a means of establishing the broader discursive-institutional context, we analyzed a small corpus of policy texts available at the global scale. In this article, we identify themes among discursive practices at both global and local scales. Findings related to counter-hegemonic resistance are also discussed. First, however, we define neoliberalism as a fragmented ideology and then explain how our study was informed by the theory and method of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989, 1995, Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Gee 1999, 2001, Wodak and Meyer 2001, Fairclough, 2003).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is a political economic program in which individual property rights, deregulated markets and free trade are seen as fundamental to human well-being (Harvey 2005). Peck and Tickell (2002) have identified three distinct phases in the development of neoliberalism. The first phase, proto-neoliberalism, existed primarily as intellectual resistance to Keynesianism and the welfare state of the 1960s and 1970s. Protagonists of this period include Friedrich von Hayek (for example 1944) and Milton Friedman (for example 1962), who revitalized Adam Smith's classical liberal economics, albeit in a modified form. Whereas Adam Smith advocated for a laissez-faire governmental stance toward market activity, these economists argued that a primary function of government is to promote a certain variety of economic growth by cultivating private enterprise (Spring 1998). Consequently, classical liberal economics morphed into an ideology which came to be known—at least by its critics—as neoliberalism.

Peck and Tickell (2000) refer to the second phase in the development of the neoliberal ideology as roll-back neoliberalism. Having become more than an intellectual endeavour, neoliberalism in this phase informed the economic policies of President Ronald Reagan in the USA and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK. These administrations implemented roll-back neoliberalism through deregulation of industry, reduction in government through privatization, structural adjustment policies and deliberate weakening of labour organization.

The late 1980s marked the beginning of a more overtly aggressive form of neoliberalism, referred to as roll-out neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2000). Currently in effect, this period involves unambiguous state intervention in support of capital. Peck and Tickell assert that with roll-out neoliberalism, the state builds the framework for a neoliberalised society through a reconfiguration of institutions. By building new institutional forms and then charging technocratic managers therein with implementing reforms, government leaders effectively depoliticize decision-making processes and devolve judgment to institution-level technocracy.

Peck and Tickell's (2000) work challenges the standing view of neoliberalism as a monolithic ideology and suggests instead that neoliberal ideas have been translated into policy in different ways at different points in history. This understanding of neoliberalism as a fragmented ideology is supported by Kjaer and Pedersen (2001: 220), who contend that neoliberal ideology manifests differently in varied social contexts; Neoliberal ideology takes on meaning through 'a process whereby concepts and conceptions from different social contexts come into contact with each other and trigger a shift in the existing order of interpretation and action in a particular context'. Kjaer and Pedersen (2001: 219) refer to this process of meaning-making as translation, whereby institutional actors '*select* various relevant neoliberal concepts and conceptions from ideas available to them and use them in ways that *displace* the existing order of interpretation and action and *trigger* a shift in...opportunities for political action' [emphasis in original]. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate such a translation process at the local scale, to demonstrate thematic connections with translations at more global scales, to critique the ideological outcomes of the consequent language practices and to illuminate possibilities for resistance.

### *Theory and method of critical discourse analysis*

Because ideology is ontologically discursive, Kjaer and Pedersen (2001) assert that neoliberalism should be analyzed in its discursive aspect. For this reason we chose the discourse of neoliberalism as the object of our study. For the purposes of this study, we adopt Kjaer and Pedersen's (2001: 220) definition of discourse: 'Discourse is a system of meaning that orders the production of conceptions and interpretations of the social world in a particular context'. Two key elements of discourse merit elaboration. First, discourse is a system of meaning. When used as a count noun, a discourse is a particular way of making sense of and representing aspects of the world which entails its own logics and rationalities (Fairclough 2003). Second, because discourse constructs the world from a particular worldview, all discourse functions ideologically. Discourse constructs social relations, problems, solutions and identities (Gee 2001, Wetherell et al. 2001). Language, then, is a means of achieving socio-political ends (Halliday 1978, Fairclough 1989, Halliday and Hasan 1989). Because language is ideological, it is of interest to political regimes, particularly in socially and economically heterogeneous societies. In short,

discourse is not simply a neutral medium through which social processes are communicated, rather it is social action in and of itself. For this reason, discourse has attracted the interest of critical social theorists, precipitating the development of critical discourse studies.

**Critical discourse analysis:** Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is based on an understanding of language use as a force of dominance and ideology but also as a source of resistance and liberation (Habermas 1984). It applies linguistic and semiotic analysis toward a social problem such as structures of dominance and oppression (Fairclough 1995). Critical discourse analysts assert that powerful regimes produce discourses that shape the meanings of social and material processes in such a way as to secure their own interests. CDA offers a way of illuminating these language practices and critiquing their ideological consequences. In this sense, CDA is an approach to analyzing 'opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak and Meyer 2001: 2). In the present analysis, we selected CDA as our analytical method because it enabled us to illuminate the manifestations of neoliberal discourse, to critique its ideological consequences, and to identify possibilities for counter-hegemonic resistance.

**Discourse and institutions:** Central to an understanding of discourse theory are social institutions, which may be thought of as socially sanctioned speech communities. Fairclough (1995) positions social institutions at the nexus of two levels of social structuring. The highest and most abstract level of social structuring is that of the social formation, which includes language and economic systems as well as national political systems. The most concrete level of social structuring is the particular social event or action. Fairclough contends that social institutions and their discourses are fundamentally determined by the social formation, although it must be noted that this determination may occur dialectically. Given their intermediary position between the social formation and social action, institutions figure prominently in the ordering of discourse. For this reason, Fairclough (2003: 25) refers to institutions in their language aspect as orders of discourse:

An order of discourse is a network of social practices in its language aspect. The elements of orders of discourse are not things like nouns and sentences..., but discourses, genres and styles ... These elements select certain possibilities defined by languages and exclude others—they control linguistic variability for particular areas of social life. So orders of discourse can be seen as the social organization and control of linguistic variation.

In other words, institutions shape to a great extent what can and what cannot be said within their domain. Because discourses are largely determined by higher levels of social structuring and are mediated by institutional practices, texts are not created entirely by individuals. Instead, individual producers of text can only choose among the discursive options available at higher levels of social structuring.

To the degree that powerful groups act upon discourses at various levels of social structuring, their ideologies and world views gain authority. The result is a hegemony in which certain discourses dominate. Marshall (1998: 272) explains that hegemony 'involves the production of ways of thinking and seeing, and of excluding alternative visions and discourses'. As such, dominant discourses cease to be arbitrary perspectives and instead become commonsense understandings of social life. In fact, McKenna (2004: 13) notes that 'it is the facility of taken-

for-granted 'common sense' that provides ideology with its strongest ideological effect'. Noting the invasion of market discourses into non-economic social practices (Deetz 1992, Ray and Sayer 1999), McKenna (2004: 17) claims that 'the neoliberal hegemony in Western culture is very close to absolute'; hence, neoliberalism as a discourse achieves top-of-the-mind status among social actors. Furthermore, although no ideology is monolithic and multiple discourses exist and are available to producers of text, hegemony tends to obscure alternative discourses; hence, resistance often emerges at grassroots levels, if at all. Accordingly, educators are apt to draw upon neoliberal assumptions in the planning, design and implementation of educational programs.

**Discourse as social action:** The functional aspects of language have been studied intensely by systemic functional linguists (see Halliday 1978, Halliday and Hasan, 1989), who have identified ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of language. Fairclough (2003) builds upon this literature and has established three ways that discourse functions as social action. First, discourse constitutes social action as genres, or ways of acting discursively. For example, politicians commonly act discursively through speeches and debates, and educators often act discursively through lectures and curriculum documents. As Fairclough points out, it is often easy to identify a genre with a particular institution, so genres may be thought of as institutionally sanctioned ways of using language. Second, discourse constitutes social action as representations,<sup>1</sup> or ways of representing the world. As stated above, a discourse entails a system of meaning in which social problems are defined in particular ways. These ways of representing the world are not neutral framings of reality but instead are political viewpoints which pre-determine rational solutions. Third, language constitutes social action as identities,<sup>2</sup> or ways of being. Identities are often constructed in terms of the ways individuals function within an institution. Gee (2001) offers that institutional identities are constructed by authorities with institutionally sanctioned power. In sum, discourse functions as social action in three ways: genres, representations and identities.

## METHODS

The purpose of conducting this study was to understand how neoliberal discourses are translated into practice within the context of a short-term, job-training program offered at a suburban community college in the south-eastern USA. Our research methodology involved an ethnographic field study. In order to draw connections between local manifestations of neoliberal discourse and the discourses available at more global scales, we situated the ethnographic data within a global policy context represented by a corpus of purposively selected policy documents.

### *Data sources*

**The local ethnographic field site:** At the local ethnographic site, we analyzed discursive data collected during a larger and ongoing field study of the cultural manifestations and implications of the new capitalism in the USA. The site for this larger study was a locally designed and implemented job-training program in a metropolitan area in the south-eastern USA. This metropolitan area had undergone a deep and rapid transformation, particularly since 2000, as tens of thousands of people had lost manufacturing and related jobs. Moreover, median household incomes and wages within this metropolitan area, as with much of the nation, had remained stagnant and declined, respectively.

In late 2003, sparked by the severe and persistent layoffs in the region's manufacturing sector, a coalition of public and non-profit agency leaders announced their intention to help the community and individuals respond to the new economic conditions. The assistance took the form of a job-training program referred to herein with the pseudonym 'New Skill'. Coalition members provided the start-up funds necessary for the program's design and implementation and assisted with program planning. This public-private partnership resulted in a hybrid job-training model that differed from traditional job-training programs in three key ways. First, the program was designed specifically for those who had lost their jobs in traditional industries and who needed to re-enter the workforce quickly, presumably in a new industry, due to financial pressures. Second, the program goal was to re-train participants in no more than 90 days. Third, the training program was designed to prepare learners for jobs in industries with expanding workforces in the local economy.

The first courses began in early 2004. Shortly thereafter more than 1000 people overwhelmed New Skill staff at a public information session. At the time of the study, courses ranged from automotive repair to certified nursing assistant to certified manufacturing technician to welder. Course fees typically were roughly US\$100, with some students receiving state and federal assistance through various workforce adjustment programs. Time spent in a particular course ranged from about 100 hours to more than 300 hours. Approximately 30 courses had been developed at the time of the study, although New Skill administrators had set a goal of as many as 60, depending on industry demand.

One component of the New Skill program was a certified manufacturing technician (CMT) course. This course was portrayed as a job-training program for the high-tech manufacturing industry, and one newly arrived corporation in particular. It was also developed expressly for the state community college system by a private manufacturing firm. As such, the CMT course was the result of a network of practices as described above. Finally, participants in the CMT course included underemployed or recently unemployed men and women who were representative of the working class and racially and ethnically heterogeneous.

**Data collection:** Our data collection methods at the local site included (a) formal interviews with 11 coalition organization leaders who participated in the planning phase of the broader New Skill program; (b) formal and informal interviews with six key New Skill staff members; (c) formal and informal interviews with 19 participants enrolled in the CMT course; (d) more than 80 hours of observation of instructional and class activities, including lectures, video explanations, exams, discussion and hands-on activities in the CMT course; and (e) analysis of locally produced documents such as promotional materials and curriculum materials related to New Skill and the CMT course. All formal interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data from informal interviews were recorded in field notes. We also took detailed field notes during class observations. Our database therefore included discursive data such as transcripts, field notes and archival data.

**The global policy context:** At more global scales, our data consisted of seven exemplar policy-related texts, which were selected for three reasons: Each text (a) was available to global audiences; (b) made the case for a neoliberal policy agenda relating to postsecondary education, the community college in particular; and (c) encouraged a network of practices in which the

community college was charged with hybrid practices consistent with neoliberal political economy. Six of these texts were produced by the George W. Bush administration and include the following:

1. Fact sheet: Jobs for the twenty-first century (Office of the Press Secretary 2004a);
2. President discusses job training and the economy in Ohio (Office of the Press Secretary 2004b);
3. President unveils tech initiatives for energy, health care, internet (Office of the Press Secretary 2004c);
4. State of the Union Address (State of the Union Home Page 2004);
5. The third Bush-Kerry debate (Commission on Presidential Debates 2004); and
6. President participates in job training and education conversation (Office of the Press Secretary 2005).

We sought to include current texts in our corpus, so the Bush administration produced each presidential text that we analyzed. It is not our intent to portray the current president as unique in his stance toward educational policy.

The remaining text (Bassanini 2004) was an excerpt from a report published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD is an intergovernmental organization of 30 member nations and 70 affiliated, non-member nations. This organization frequently publishes policy reports, many of which relate directly to human capital development. This text appears as a boxed insert within one such policy document titled 'Improving Skills for More and Better Jobs: Does Training Make a Difference?' It offers an example of a community-college-based, job-training program as a discursive strategy of connecting the document's discussion of education policy with a specific educational event.

### *Data analysis*

Through a synthesis of Fairclough (2003), Gee (1999, 2001) and Halliday and Hasan (1989), we identified three ways that discourse functions as social action, expressly genres, representations and identities. We subjected both global and local discursive data to an iterative and recursive coding process, focusing in particular on discourses related to neoliberalism. Our understanding of genres, representations, and identities led us to ask the following questions while coding both local and global texts:

1. Genres: How are neoliberal discourses realized in language practice and by whom?
2. Representations: How are social and material processes represented and framed?
3. Identities: How are the identities of individuals or groups constructed; and how does this construction of identity position individuals in relation to others?

Throughout the coding process we also searched for rival explanations and counter-themes as a quality check (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Only those themes consistent across the global policy texts and the ethnographic data were considered salient. These salient themes offer a rich understanding of neoliberal discourses as they circulate across the global and the local.

## FINDINGS

Peck and Tickell (2002) assert that within the new capitalism one role of the state is to construct an institutional framework that supports a neoliberal political economic paradigm. Fairclough (2003: 32) adds that we ‘can think of such institutions as interlocking elements in the governance of society...’ and that the actions of their members manifest as genres, or ways of acting discursively. He explains furthermore that genres are ‘important in sustaining the institutional structure of contemporary society’. The findings of this study explain how institutional genres open possibilities for proponents of neoliberal ideology to trigger changes in institutional activities—specifically educational programs—without actually being present during their implementation. Our findings demonstrate how genres order the neoliberal discursive options made available to institutional actors and describe how individuals select from among these discourses to produce hybrid genres, that is, generic forms unique to the local context.

A complete accounting of institutional genres within the ethnographic field site is neither helpful nor feasible here. It is important, however, to identify the predominate genres produced by educators and other stakeholders at the field site. With respect to the planning phase of the New Skill program, we arrived to the ethnographic site *ex post facto*. Interviews revealed, however, that coalition members had interacted through conversational genres, including discussions during meetings and phone conversations. Also, promotional genres such as New Skill program advertisements and information sessions targeted a certain type of program participant, which functioned ideologically in that only socially and economically marginalized individuals were hailed to participate in the course. This recognition relates directly to the construction of learner identities (see also Fairclough 1995, Gee 1999, 2001, Fairclough 2003).

Major genres during the CMT program implementation included digital slide presentations, a course handbook which stipulated course content and procedures, pre-assessment and assessment materials and class activities and handouts such as case studies and projects—all prepared by the manufacturing firm that designed the CMT program. These materials were delivered to the instructor prior to course implementation; however, the instructor took the liberty of modifying them on occasion. Additionally, the instructor supplemented these materials with instructional handouts that he designed himself. Most importantly, perhaps, the instructor offered frequent personal narratives based on his extensive management and consulting experience in the manufacturing industry.

Time and again, genres carried representations of the social and economic milieu that were framed within the logics of neoliberalism. One ideological consequence of these representations involved the recognition of certain aspects of learners and the denial of others, which Gee (1999, 2001) understands as a discursive imposition of identities. Most prominently, discursive practices reduced learners to their economic aspect: Learners were recognized only in terms of their potential contribution to production and their ability to raise profits for investors. Although such impositions of identity were resisted on a few occasions, we found multiple instances where learners had enacted such identities. For example, one learner defined success in terms of making profits for the company. Another described herself as part of the productive capacity of the manufacturing site.

In short, the three types of meaning—genres, representations and identities—manifest within the educational program worked in concert to promote a neoliberal worldview. These complex interactions among genres, representations and identities were captured as salient themes and are described below. The themes are not discrete and conceptually intersect somewhat. We understand this conceptual overlap as a feature typical of discourses that emerge from a single ideological worldview.

**‘Employers make the world go around’:** Neoliberalism involves the idea that social problems are best alleviated through market activity. The predominant finding across the local and global discursive data is a direct consequence of this worldview. It is summarized by the following quote from a CMT instructor: ‘Employers make the world go around’. This worldview emerged as an overarching finding: The interests of the private sector were universalized, or represented as the interests of society as a whole. From this perspective, the best way to alleviate societal problems is to ensure that the markets flourish and private enterprise prospers. At the more global levels, this discourse manifested as advocacy for public expenditures on public-private partnerships, as evidenced by the following statement by President Bush during a conversation on job-training and education:

When you’ve got a growing economy in the twenty-first century, there’s a certain skill set that’s needed to fill the jobs. And what we’re talking about today is how to fill those jobs. One of the things we’ve done in the last couple of years through the Department of Labor was to encourage public-private partnerships. And we’ll continue—going to do that over the next four years. That’s—those are fancy words for saying, look, we’re going to help employers and community colleges match up needs—demands with supply....Last year, I called upon Congress to pass a \$250-million initiative to support our community colleges and to fund partnerships between community colleges and local employers. (Office of the Press Secretary 2005)

This discourse of public-private partnerships garners support for institutional hierarchies within which educational institutions become clients of private enterprise. In one case, the composition of public-private partnerships is described by the OECD and proposed as a solution to difficulties the textile manufacturing industry had experienced in recruiting high-skill, low-wage labour:

...the partnership among multiple stakeholders allowed pooling of resources and ideas, which consequently leads to efficient and quality training service delivery. Indeed, an ambitious co-operation programme was put in place between the HTC [Hosiery Technology Centre], the North Carolina community college system, individual firms within the industry, suppliers, the regional industry trade association and the State government. (Bassanini 2004)

Within such an institutional framework, learners are not recognized as stakeholders nor are individuals considered to have unique needs: It is assumed that the needs of learners are consistent with those of business and industry. Furthermore, the local community is not involved in educational planning. Instead, it is assumed that private enterprise is keen to the needs of local communities and can meet those needs through political liaisons with state-level politicians and members of the educational bureaucracy.

Within the context of the New Skill program, one member of a coalition organization discussed the role of his organization in ensuring that a newly arrived high-tech manufacturing corporation had an adequate workforce:

The Department of Commerce..., they go get [the corporation], the Employment Security Commission staffs [it]. We make sure that the university and community college system have educated the people that we are staffing [the corporation] with that Commerce went and got.

This text fragment explains one view of how public agencies function within public-private partnerships. It positions the public agency as an intermediary between private enterprise and the educational system. The direction of authority is clear: Colleges and universities are subject to the demands and expectations of economically-oriented public agencies, and these public agencies answer to capital. Accordingly, discourses of economic fields exercise dominion over those of learning and development.

This dominance of neoliberal discourse within the field site triggered a hybrid practice within the organizational structure of the college. The administrator ultimately responsible for the New Skill program held the title 'Dean of Business and Industry,' and his entire unit was devoted to the needs of private enterprise. One administrator within this unit described its mission as follows:

We seek to produce prepared and productive workers in [the county] by providing access to quality education and training directly and through partnerships with businesses, community groups, professional organizations and other learning institutions. That's our mission. So, businesses that is the customer. Community groups, professional organizations, and other learning institutions should have the same goal that we have and if they do, they're potential partners.

This text fragment positions education as a service provided by the state to business and industry. Businesses are explicitly identified as the customer, and any unique needs of learners are overlooked. 'Prepared and productive workers' are reduced to objects produced by the college, that is, to human capital formed by the educational institution and delivered to employers according to the requirements of production. Furthermore, it is proposed that other organizations should have the mission of producing human capital for consumption by businesses, which once again universalizes the interests of capital.

This universalisation of the interests of private, for-profit enterprise was also evident through the planning phase of the New Skill program. For example, during the program planning phase, college leaders sought input from a coalition of organizations such as the state employment agency, the local office of the Employment Security Commission, various chambers of commerce and representatives from business and industry. Membership in this coalition was not limited to these organizations, however; various human service agencies as well as private foundations also provided input to the planning of the New Skill program. The interests of the human services organizations were relatively broad and included non-economic assistance not only for the recently unemployed but also for their families. Concerned about massive layoffs in the region, one leader of a human services agency asked rhetorically during an interview: 'Is

there anything we can do to help these people?’ His tone of voice demonstrated sincere concern for those marginalized by recent economic processes.

Despite this genuine concern, this discourse of human service was diminished in the face of the neoliberal discourse of economic development, as one member of a human services agency explained:

The piece that I am less clear about that I think may have gotten lost...is... providing support to families of people during the transition. But I think what happened is when we were doing it, we were a human services organization. We were focused on that as well as the job-training piece. I don't know whether that same sense of priority carried forward when it went over to [the college].

This same individual pointed out that at least one member of the coalition ‘was under a lot of criticism for being concerned about the economic but not the human condition’. In the end, the membership of this human services organization in the coalition turned out to be short lived. The interests of the economic development organizations thus displaced other, perhaps competing, interests during the New Skill program planning process.

Along the same lines, the official curriculum of the CMT program was developed entirely by a manufacturing firm. Accordingly, genres such as curriculum documents, electronic slide presentations, texts, video presentations, class policies and learning assessments were prepared by the industry, thereby enabling the industry to act at a distance (Fairclough 2003) in order to secure its own interests. The following text fragment, taken from the CMT curriculum master document, illustrates the exclusive involvement of the industry in developing the program: The program ‘was developed utilizing industry-based skill standards and national certification programs, manufacturing skill surveys and interview feedback from representatives of leading [state] manufacturing companies’. Thus, once again, within this public-private partnership the interests of private enterprise came to represent the interests of all program stakeholders, including students, thereby reinforcing a certain hegemony of discourse.

**‘We work for the business community’:** When market activity is seen as the only legitimate organizing principle in society, as is the case within neoliberal ideology, social problems are routinely framed from the perspective of for-profit enterprise. This semiotic process is enabled by the neoliberal assumption that what is good for business is good for the rest of society, as discussed above. Following this logic, it makes sense for the state to create the conditions that ensure that private, profit-based enterprise flourishes. The result is a privileging of the perspective of employers, as the following text fragment from President Bush demonstrates:

Today, I want to talk about education. Education, making sure we've got an educated work force, is a vital part of making sure this economy of ours continues to grow. I've talked to a lot of employers around and say, what is the biggest concern you have? And one of the biggest concerns they have is the fact that they don't have workers with the skill sets necessary to fill the jobs of the twenty-first century. (Office of the Press Secretary 2005)

With the second sentence of this text fragment, President Bush reduces education to a human capital development service proffered to capital by the state. Within this discourse, education is

not represented as a means of ensuring that citizens are richly engaged in community leadership, the democratic governance of our nation or personal development. Instead, it is defined as 'making sure we've got an educated work force,' a privileging of the interests of private enterprise. In the second sentence, President Bush positions employers as those with the solution to the problem. Their responses to him then become a policy goal. With joblessness represented from the view of the employer, the problem is framed as a deficit on behalf of workers and quite possibly a failure on behalf of the educational system. By construing labour market conditions from the perspective of employers, the President also avoids conjuring images of joblessness. Although private enterprise is privileged, the economy is represented as a common interest: It is described by the President as 'our economy'.

The perspective of employers was also privileged within the local context of the New Skill program. For example, during an interview, a member of a coalition organization explained his involvement as follows: 'We work for the business community. That's who we represent when we're at the table....We aid the profitability of our members'. Within the context of the CMT course, such representation of the business community along with the previous marginalization of other interests resulted in curriculum materials and course procedures that addressed the labour force needs of capital. Course procedures mimicked workplace management practices, which positioned the CMT course as a screening device for the manufacturing industry (Stiglitz 1975, Spence 1981). Specific course policies such as attendance requirements and performance standards on written assessments ensured that only those learners who could meet the expectations of employers would receive credentials. According to the curriculum document, '[t]o successfully complete the Fundamentals program and receive recognition of successful completion, a participant must complete all four core modules and two of the four electives with an 80% assessment score or higher'. Within this text fragment, the emphasis is placed on recognition of completion rather than actual task performance, which implies that the educational credential functions primarily as a signalling device to potential employers. Following signalling theory (Spence 1973, Bills 2003), this scarce information about the productive potential of job candidates facilitates efficient and cost-wise hiring processes, which ultimately affects the bottom line of the employer.

Another example of how curriculum genres imported workplace practices into programs emerged during a New Skill planning meeting involving potential employers. A college administrator explained that New Skill required '100% attendance and punctuality'. This statement was made as a selling point to the employers. Course attendance was viewed as a proxy for workplace attendance. This emphasis was repeated in the CMT course, which required 95% attendance. This policy was once contested by a student who missed a class because, as he claimed, he already knew the content being covered that day. To defend the rationale of the attendance policy, the instructor cited that absenteeism in industry was 2.3% and that the course attendance policy was roughly a doubling of this absenteeism rate.

On this occasion, a class discussion related to productivity ensued, and various course participants along with the instructor represented the importance of being present at work in terms of productivity for the employer. During this conversation, the instructor noted, 'you're part of their capacity...they plan their entire production process around you'. A course participant agreed: 'They want you to be productive'. During this discussion, emphasis was

given to attendance—once again a proxy for consistent workplace productivity—rather than on knowledge and skills or helping course participants improve their quality of life through learning. There was no recognition on behalf of students or the instructor that one might be absent from work or class for legitimate reasons. The discourse of productivity was prominent within the discussion—a direct privileging of employer views on absenteeism. Of course, equating mere presence with productivity seems antiquated given the great concern for fostering and harnessing higher levels of skill, intellect, and creativity to achieve economic success (Florida 2002).

That excessive absences would result in dismissal from the course paralleled job dismissal, a workplace practice that was frequently represented as unexceptional and customary. In fact, threats to job security arose repeatedly during the CMT course. One example involved an instructor narrative recalling a specific failure in the bottling industry. The instructor stated that, because of the mistake, ‘somebody should get fired’. By the same token, the curriculum document for one course module titled ‘The Business of Manufacturing’ was introduced by the following text:

Bluntly speaking, no quality means no sales, no sales means no profits, and no profits means no jobs. The ultimate goal of any manufacturing company is to make a profit, which leads to jobs for employees and returns for stockholders.

This text fragment demonstrates a strategic use of language that obfuscates the competing interests of labour and capital as well as the role of labour in profit. Most crucially, labour produces surplus value or profit (Marx 1995). Even if the claim as stated may always be true, the converse is not: Quality, sales and profits do not necessarily lead to jobs. In fact, the drive for profits may compel corporate managers to move production overseas to cheaper labour markets. Within this discourse, a veiled threat of job dismissal obscures employees’ interests and coerces them to accommodate the demands of employers.

Course participants in general accepted the representation of job dismissal as commonplace and frequent. Data from related discussions and interviews demonstrated how such a representation was consistent with the workplace experience of course participants. As such, recurring discourses construed employment as a privilege and reflected an unquestioning accommodation of a post-Fordist ideology of contingent labour. Within this discourse, workers were beholden to capital and expected to comply with management expectations or to suffer joblessness. One egregious manifestation of this discourse appeared in a list of employability skills which were to be taught to all students at the college. Among these was ‘accept authority,’ which we interpreted as a privileging of the viewpoints of capital and managers—the desire for a compliant workforce in particular.

This view of employment was not limited to course participants. In fact, one New Skill administrator, having been dismissed recently from a job in the private sector, discussed his personal experiences with post-Fordist labour practices. He explained the movement toward contingent labour as a change in the social contract between employer and employee:

So how is the employment contract changed? Well, you guys [are so young]...you probably don't even recognize this, but there has been an employment contract change. People of the baby boomer generation, i.e. me, we started working with the presumption that we would probably be working for one company all our lives. We might have different jobs and different responsibilities in the company, in fact, working like crap to get the top job, right? But we kind of expected to have one career for life. Uh, 19, I'd say late 80s and early 90s came along and that employment contract changed dramatically.

This administrator never stopped to question the processes that resulted in his dismissal from various jobs in the private sector. In his view, the dependence of employment upon market activity was a recent development but one that was an unavoidable consequence of a natural, ahistorical and agentless phenomenon (Fairclough 1995, 2001a). That this view was predominant among the participants in our study indicated to us a powerful hegemony of discourse related to employment and joblessness—more importantly, this hegemony secured the interests of capital in a flexible labour force.

**'Let's train people for a different industry from the one that died on them':** If joblessness is an unavoidable consequence of market activity, as is assumed within the neoliberal paradigm, then the solution to massive layoffs is to prepare the unemployed for work in growing industries. This discourse was prevalent within globally available policy texts such as the 'Jobs for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' fact sheet (Office of the Press Secretary 2004a), which states the following: 'The President's plan will expand opportunities for workers to access post-secondary [*sic*] education to get the job training and skills to compete in a changing and dynamic economy and fill jobs in emerging industries....' Inherent in this view is that within constantly churning market conditions, workers are expected to accommodate ever-changing employer demands by continuously pursuing new educational credentials. President Bush affirmed this expectation when asked what he would say to a US citizen who recently lost his job due to low-wage labour markets overseas. To this question, Bush responded:

I'd say, Bob, I've got policies to continue to grow our economy and create the jobs of the 21st century. And here's some help for you to go get an education. Here's some help for you to go to a community college...We've expanded trade adjustment assistance. We want to help pay for you to gain the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century.... You know, there's a lot of talk about how to keep the economy growing. We talk about fiscal matters. But perhaps the best way to keep jobs here in America and to keep this economy growing is to make sure our education system works.

With these comments, the government becomes responsible for ameliorating unemployment only through its involvement in education, thought of as job training. According to Wilson (1999: 85), this discourse of continual or life-long learning masks the working of power relations and supports 'various national economic efforts to enhance global competitiveness by drawing upon the 'resource' of 'flexible' or 'sculpted' workforces'. Wilson adds that this discourse is 'intended to soften or disguise the ever-heating engines of global capitalism, in which the transnational movement of capital itself is now the central 'product' of post-Fordist economies'.

The discourse of continual learning emerged at the local scale with similar effects. One leader in a coalition organization explained the goal of New Skill this way: ‘Let’s train people for a different industry from the one that died on them’. The death metaphor recognized the loss of those dismissed from the workplace, but it also portrays the outcomes of post-Fordist labour practices as inevitable, thereby signalling the birth of a new era. As within the globally available texts, education at the local scale was proposed as the solution to unemployment, and the social practice responsible for ameliorating unemployment was the education sector in partnership with for-profit enterprise. A New Skill promotional flyer offered an explanation for unemployment with the following: ‘Are you tired of being turned down for jobs because your skills are not up-to-date or you are not certified?’ This hailing of potential program participants imposes the assumption that an educational deficit on behalf of the unemployed is the explanation for their economic marginalization (Sandlin and Wilson 2003, Sandlin 2004). Ironically, three course participants already held bachelor’s degrees from state universities, yet they ascribed to the deficit view that was made available to them.

**Counter-hegemonic resistance:** Our ethnographic data indicate that although neoliberal discourses seem pervasive, they are not impenetrable. Counter-hegemonic discourses were performed by administrators, instructors and trainees. For example, one administrator with responsibilities in the job-training program criticized its overbearing emphasis on ‘getting a job’ and not on learning. This administrator recognized that trainees had responsibilities and obligations to extra-economic institutions such as family and that the job-training program as aligned with the needs of employers did not take such obligations into consideration. With this discourse, the administrator voiced solidarity with learners and expressed an interest in helping them to prevail over a broad range of struggles in their lives. This administrator also expressed disgust that the graduates of the job-training program who found employment were ‘considered part of the machinery’ by the employers. This discourse construes alternative meanings of human capital development programming in that it recognizes that employees may be reduced to human forms of capital and therefore become no more than components of the production process. We witnessed frequent turnover among administrative personnel, and various data points indicated that at least one cause of this turnover was a conflict between economic values and educational values (Levin *et al.* 2006). Specifically, one New Skill administrator with a longstanding career in education chose to leave—or was forced to leave—her post within months of the program’s implementation. This administrator’s successor also enjoyed a short tenure in the post and was promptly replaced by an administrator with a career background in the private sector.

Instructional personnel also enacted counter-hegemonic discourses. One instructor, who had considerable management experience in the manufacturing industry, drew heavily on narrative genres in his classroom practice. These narratives often related to his experiences with workplace injustice. In one of these narratives, for example, the instructor recounted a scenario in which corporate managers had decided to shut down a manufacturing facility in the near future, and consequently these managers refused to invest in plant maintenance. Within this narrative, workplace safety issues emerged as a result of disinvestment in the local manufacturing site, but the corporate managers demonstrated a lack of concern. According to the instructor, the goal of the corporation was to ‘milk a plant for all it’s worth.’ Through this narrative the instructor illuminated the drive for profit even if it meant diminished levels of workplace safety for employees. More importantly, however, this discourse exposed mutually exclusive goals of labor

and capital and invited ideological contestation of the universalisation of the needs of capital. Finally, it should be noted that this instructor whole-heartedly embraced capitalism, but he demonstrated animosity toward its neoliberal variety.

Finally, trainees demonstrated counter-hegemonic discursive practices mostly within the safety of interviews but also occasionally through in-class interaction. As one example, when one chronically under-employed trainee described what she wanted her future to look like, she assigned priority to job stability. To her, increased earnings were less important than finding permanent work and avoiding the uncertainty of contingent work. This preference was endorsed by a fellow trainee who was also present for the interview. As both interview participants recounted their workplace experiences they co-constructed a reality in which the reliance on disposable or 'temporary' labor was incongruent with their own needs and interests. Though such instances of counter-hegemonic resistance were relatively rare during this field study, they do, nonetheless, demonstrate the contradictions inherent in the neoliberal policy paradigm. These examples of counter-hegemony are important to understand, in part, because they demonstrate the struggle over the translation of an abstract ideology at the local level. The New Skill program was designed, perhaps, to benefit students; however, its implementation illuminated various inconsistencies in the logics of neoliberalism. Such nuances at the micro level, we suggest, are not recognized through macro-level analyses.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current economic and social milieu has been recognized as a neoliberal hegemony in which a market-fundamentalist worldview not only permeates various levels of social structuring but also informs the way we reason about social problems and their solutions. First among these logics is the assumption that education will correspond with the demands of political economy (see Bowles and Gintis 2002). As a consequence, postsecondary educational institutions occupy key positions of translation in the state's neoliberal institutional framework. The present analysis demonstrates how neoliberal assumptions manifest as a discourse which has ceased to be recognized as a partisan agenda and instead is perceived to reflect objective economic realities (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Bourdieu 2001, Fairclough 2001a, Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005). Within this hegemony of discourse, uncompromising goals of economic competitiveness are represented as serving the common good, and neoliberal ideology translates directly into educational practice.

The public-private partnership studied herein enabled business and industry to mobilize neoliberal discourses in such a way as to shape educational practice—that is, to exert action at a distance (Fairclough 2003)—in the forms of planning and classroom genres. The neoliberal discourses embedded in these genres emerged at the local scale in three main ways. First, the interests of the private sector were universalized, or represented as the common good. Second, learning was reduced to the knowledge and dispositions that were valued by capital, educational credentials were mere indicators of productive capacity, and narrow identities of labour were offered to program participants. Moreover, many program participants enthusiastically ascribed to these identities. Third, employment stability and the social contract between employer and employee were eschewed as out of date and impractical. Accordingly, labour market elasticity and the attendant post-Fordist labour practices were accommodated, rarely challenged, and understood as a natural consequence of market activity. This discourse included a constant but

veiled threat of job dismissal, which once again was viewed as common by most program participants.

Indeed, lifelong education can reproduce the ideological consequences of the new capitalism, but it can also provide opportunities to question the assumed universality of the interests of capital. Instances of counter-hegemonic resistance on behalf of learners and educators revealed the power of reflection in illuminating the contradictions inherent in neoliberal assumptions. Accordingly, we propose that within the practice of postsecondary education, learners' life experiences be problematized and become a focus of critical reflection and examination (Mezirow and Associates 2000). A possibility for resistance to the perhaps unintended ideological consequences of the new capitalism, therefore, may involve principles of social constructivist and problem-posing (Freire 2000) pedagogies in which the learning experience opens a forum for learners to explore the social and economic milieu and to construct personally meaningful understandings of the world and their place in it.

## NOTES

1. Fairclough uses the term 'discourses', in this case a count noun, which we avoid in order to prevent confusion with the term 'discourse' which is used as an abstract noun.
2. Fairclough uses the term 'styles'.

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