Caring About the Dismal Science

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Everything is, in the last analysis, economic.

This variation on Fredric Jameson's well-known dictum might serve to describe the work of Evan Watkins, who taught us almost twenty years ago in his classic *Work Time* that, yes, academic departments are workplaces and, more recently, that our daily practices link us to and support economic beliefs and systems. However, the point of Watkins' work isn't to return us to some form of vulgar Marxist determinism. Far from it: his 1998 book *Everyday Exchanges: Marketwork and Capitalist Common Sense*, while still drawing from Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy, works to move beyond a Marxist hermeneutic in which "anything you see . . . that doesn't look like part of a historical development through a distinctively capitalist economics will appear as a now-'residual' pocket of a still surviving economic organization from the past" (24). This inexorable outcome of much Marxist criticism, for Watkins, "lends itself to that now familiar image of a completely successful global totalization of capital, eradicating the last remaining vestiges of precapitalist formation" (24). While a capitalist economy may not be totally determining, Watkins does see economic relations as generative of an "everyday economic common sense, and historically that common sense has been shaped in the United States by the designation of economic relations as 'capitalist'" (7). In other words, the economy may not itself be totalizing, but the beliefs and practices in relation to it often are.

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Those common sense beliefs and practices are what Watkins hopes to bring to students’ attention in the case for a counter economic literacy that he develops in “Just Choose: Derivative Literacy as Economic Education.” Extending the project of *Everyday Exchanges*, Watkins argues for teaching students to recognize the daily workings of capitalism in their lives by focusing on the simple concept of choice. “Choice” becomes the vehicle for investigating economic common sense because of the significant contradiction in its presumed range. As Watkins puts it, “With regards to the economy dominant economic literacy would seem to have established parameters suggesting that choices can and should be made everywhere—except about the fundamentally separate operations of the economy itself” (592). Using a survey, Watkins asks students to rate their level of agreement with (or attraction to) a list of items ranging from clothing stores to stock derivatives, a process that students at first consider to be a matter of “individual feelings and decisions” (591). However, by attending to “the ways in which [student texts] are caught up within the relations between ensembles of work and competition,” he hopes students come to see how the ideology of “the autonomy of individual choice” is made possible by “those production processes that function as the prior set of conditions on which choice depends” (599).

By focusing on “the texts students produce,” Watkins might seem to take a productivist turn, a turn that has become familiar in composition studies (see, for example, Miller; Sirc), since many scholars have argued for moving students away from simply consuming/analyzing cultural texts to actually producing them (599). But to emphasize the fact of production might tend toward a productivity model that, Watkins argues in *Everyday Exchanges*, underwrites capitalist common sense. His interest lies rather in the circumstances of production.

In focusing on students’ texts, then, Watkins wishes to move beyond asking students to search literary and cultural texts for signs of capitalist influence. Such an analysis, Watkins asserts, may incline some students to criticize capitalism but, with the focus on texts written in times and places removed from the contemporary space/time of the classroom, continues to make economics seem to be in a realm beyond. For, despite “several decades of claims to be more rigorously historical and materialist in our classroom practices,” humanities students rarely consider
If students consider economics "bad shit to be avoided," it's difficult not to notice the affective stance suggested by that phrase. Avoidance is spurred by disgust or contempt: we avoid things like "bad shit" as a result of negative emotional reactions. And while Watkins is surely right in asserting that "individual feelings" aren't enough to account for choices, feelings must count for something. In fact, to see feelings as simply individual possessions and therefore irrelevant to cultural analysis certainly also supports capitalist common sense. Watkins never exactly dismisses emotion, but he nonetheless focuses on meaning and ideology more than on affect, with the goal being "the recognition of how like any other survey the first answer it [the survey] supplies will always be the assertion of primacy to individual choice" (600). However, if, as Lynn Worsham asserts, "a change of heart does not follow, naturally or simply, from a change of mind," then it is essential to spend more time with the ways that economics is culturally linked to particular emotions (216). For the rest of my response, then, I want to shift the focus, to consider the necessary connection between affect and economics.

After all, bad feelings in response to economics have a rather long history. Economics has been infamously known as "the dismal science" since Thomas Carlyle used the phrase in 1849 to describe the "science of supply and demand" that spurned government oversight. The dismal science moniker distinguished economics as a life-depleting study, in contrast to what were popularly known as creative, life-enhancing "gay sciences." Nietzsche popularized the phrase "gay science" for generations to come, exuberantly describing his book by that name as proceeding out of "a reawakened faith in a tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, of a sudden sense and anticipation of a future, of impending adventures, of seas that are open again, of goals that are permitted again, believed
again” (32). If a gay science, as in Nietzsche’s formulation, offers hope for the future, economics, the dismal science, seems rather a matter of accepting what is, of learning to live with the inevitable.

Must it be this way? Part of Watkins’ project is indeed to provoke students to recognize the impact of economics on their lives, to see economics, in the words of Paulo Freire, as part of their “existential experience” and thus subject to human intervention (Freire 71). And yet, to see economics as constraint seems unlikely to disrupt the emotions associated with economics: in its effects on students’ work, economics may continue to feel like a waste.

I’m by no means dismissing the significance of critique, of analysis that probes the limits and effects of thought. In fact, Yanis Varoufakis, an economist committed to restoring passion to economics, considers the best reason “for studying economics” to be the one “given by Joan Robinson (Professor of Economics at Cambridge University in the 1960s and 1970s), ‘The purpose of studying economics is to learn how not to be deceived by economists’” (39). In order not to be deceived, a person must be critical.

But without attention to the affective, being critical simply doesn’t do much. For Varoufakis, analysis without emotion is dead (read: dismal, not forward-moving, not life-enhancing):

> For my part I feel that taking emotion and controversy out of economics is responsible for losing a great deal of analytical power. The greatest thinkers to have tackled economics were motivated by debates so passionate that their emotions were stirred until new ways of understanding economic relations emerged. . . . The future generation of economics graduates runs the risk of leaving university with a large box of tools and the motivation of a gravedigger. Perhaps the time has come to give these old emotions another stir. (viii)

To care about economics, in sum, requires motivation. In what follows, then, I want to consider both the obstacles to and the possibilities for stirring up those “old emotions” about economics, especially for students and scholars of rhetoric and composition studies. I will begin that inquiry with what might at first appear to be a diversion: I will highlight some of the qualities that economics shares with an emotionally charged topic familiar to writing teachers—namely, grammar.
Pedagogies of Passivity

If students experience economics as a dismal realm disconnected from their everyday lives, they also, certainly, see grammar so. While reading Watkins’ essay, I was struck by the similarities between economic pedagogies and grammatical ones. Indeed, just as no students in Watkins’ classes have ever been able to define the economic term “derivatives,” I suspect students would have similar difficulty with a grammatical term like “nominative absolute.” Ilene Crawford and I have argued elsewhere that an affective shift that is performed bodily is necessary to teach grammar in a way that potentially disrupts oppressive norms (see Strickland and Crawford). It follows, I would say, that just as attitudes toward grammar shift only with new affective performances, so economic action and pedagogy will shift only with the same movement.

The dominant performance in response to standardized pedagogy and dominant economics tends to be one of passivity, brought about by the apparent inevitability and dominance of both. After examining the content standards developed by the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE), Watkins concludes that “perhaps the most significant lesson” the standards provide is precisely the lesson of passivity. The underlying message of the content standards, according to Watkins, is one of acceptance: “[The economy] will run itself fine if left alone, uncontaminated by exogenous factors or interference of any kind, and your job is to learn to make good choices within the terms laid down” (589). Like standardized pedagogical grammar, then, the dominant pedagogy of economics offers itself up as a pedagogy of correctness that needs to be followed rather than a living field that is constantly changing. The NCEE’s content standards would seem to have their grammatical parallel in the hundreds of handbooks that are adopted each semester by composition programs and teachers, in the hopes that students may reference them to learn to write correctly. Just as the NCEE standards focus on giving just enough information to spur correct action, so handbooks provide students with prescriptive rules more often than a broad introduction to how languages work.

Yet, free market economics brings with it a bit of a conundrum. It militates against a command economy that would regulate the function of economic actors; however, it does depend upon economic actors making
"correct" choices. As Watkins writes in response to the NCEE initiative: "It seems that we're not living in a 'command economy,' so that those who know the correct answers can't just impose them on everyone. But they can pour a considerable amount of money and communication time into the attempt to educate us all about what is correct" (589).

Writing teachers face a related dilemma. While some writing teachers (and teachers in other disciplines) may not hesitate to insist that students write with "correct," standardized English, doing so does conflict with the more liberal approach outlined in the 1974 CCC resolution, "Students' Right to their Own Language." The resolution recognizes that students may need to learn standardized English (here referred to as Edited American English, or EAE) in order to succeed in occupations that require formal writing, but it nevertheless holds that learning EAE should be a choice, that first and foremost students should learn to feel good about their writing:

Students who want to write EAE will have to learn the forms identified with that dialect as additional options to the forms they already control. We should begin our work in composition with them by making them feel confident that their writing, in whatever dialect, makes sense and is important to us, that we read it and are interested in the ideas and person that the writing reveals. Then students will be in a much stronger position to consider the rhetorical choices that lead to statements written in EAE. (Conference, emphasis added)

A liberal response to correctness in grammar, similar to a (neo)liberal response to economics, places the emphasis on choice, just as Watkins argues. But choice, Watkins concedes, isn't a bad thing; it just needs to "be dislodged and reinvented in order to do other kinds of necessary work without trailing that whole ensemble of economic relations behind it" (593). This effort to dislodge and reinvent echoes Worsham's call to recognize that while "our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion," this reeducation must go beyond "mapping a new regime of meaning onto an old way of feeling" (216). If choice is to become an action that can move us away from the everyday individuality of capitalism, it must feel differently; it must inhabit our bodies in new ways.
Consequently, to eschew choice doesn't seem to be the answer, either. Scholars in composition and English education have argued for at least the last couple of decades that “correct” grammar is best taught in the context of students' writing. In that way, student writers learn to appreciate the way grammar works in their own writing rather than learning grammar by rote, as a system disconnected from their own language. Students still must learn correctness (they don’t, it seems, have a choice); however, the idea is that focusing on their own work will motivate them and help to concretize abstract rules.

Students' own productions, for Watkins, similarly provide the way to bridge students' distance from economics. By bringing attention to the “production processes that function as the prior set of conditions on which choice depends,” Watkins hopes to prompt students to notice the ways in which economic thought is part of their everyday existence, beginning with their classroom production (599). So, while “dominant literacy works to extend and reinforce the idea that the economy operates best when it operates independently,” Watkins argues that we “do what we can to teach a counter literacy where students understand and act on the awareness that economic relations are already right here” (590, 91).

I’m drawn to Watkins’ emphasis on the immanence of economics. Recognizing the inescapability of economic relations—of relations of production, consumption, and distribution—certainly must be one step toward caring about them. At the same time, although I can’t say how effective Watkins’ strategy may be, I find myself doubting that simply involving students in an economic study of their own productions will sufficiently dislodge passivity toward economics. In fact, I’m inclined to think that a focus on “production processes that function as the prior set of conditions” (599) may only lock passivity in place. By reiterating the ways in which their own productions are conditioned by prior processes that seem beyond their control, students may feel incapable of looking for alternatives. Crawford and I argue that, in relation to grammar, emotion changes through the body, by sensing into the ways that our everyday performances support one grammar over another and then by taking on new ways of performing. How, then, does one perform a different economics, a different way of feeling toward economic possibility?
Economic Affect Across the Curriculum

With his focus on the constraints of capitalist production processes, Watkins appears to enact what Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson (two feminist economic geographers who write together under the pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham) call "capitalocentrism":

When we say that most economic discourse is "capitalocentric," we mean that other forms of economy (not to mention noneconomic aspects of social life) are often understood primarily with reference to capitalism: as being fundamentally the same as (or modeled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism’s space or orbit. (End 6)

Even as I'm suggesting that his discourse performs a kind of capitalocentrism, I nonetheless recognize that by moving away from a totalizing theory of capitalism, Watkins shares a fundamental impulse with Gibson-Graham. In *Everyday Exchanges*, Watkins similarly exorcises the "slippage" whereby economic discourse always refers back to "capitalism": "Rather than an admitted idealization of what in actuality must be understood as a diverse, ‘mixed’ economic field, the discourse of ‘the market’ has begun instead to accomplish a metonymic condensation of field slippage" (26). However, by sticking with a hermeneutically based pedagogy that understands common sense to always point toward capitalist social relations, Watkins does seem to risk reinforcing the strong cultural feeling of passivity in the face of capitalism. The risk of a pedagogy that leads to one outcome—the repeated recognition that "choice . . . is . . . a derivative instrument for the financing of a contemporary capitalism"—is that "capitalism becomes the everything everywhere of contemporary cultural representation" (Watkins, "Just" 600; Gibson-Graham, End 9).

For Gibson-Graham the unrelenting, if sometimes unconscious, repetition of capitalism’s pervasiveness keeps the left in a kind of stasis, frozen in melancholia, "in which attachment to a past political analysis or identity is stronger than the interest in present possibilities for mobilization, alliance, or transformation" (*Postcapitalist 5*). While Watkins
certainly seems interested in possibilities for mobilization, his pedagogy may not lead to the same feelings in his students. Rather, they may feel the paralysis, the passivity of what may seem to be an unrelenting economic system.

To counter this paralysis, Gibson-Graham draw inspiration from second-wave feminism, a movement in which “feminism linked feminists emotionally and semiotically rather than primarily through organizational ties” (*Postcapitalist* xxiii). This loose network of diverse practices made possible “social transformation at... an unprecedented scale” as the proliferation of “local paths and strategies” brought about “global coverage without having to create global institutions” (xxiv). The success of second-wave feminism’s loose networks based on difference and local strategies moves Gibson-Graham to offer a new theory of economic politics:

[Feminism’s] practice of seeing and speaking differently encourages us to make visible the hidden and alternative economic activities that *everywhere* abound, and to connect them through a language of economic difference. If we can begin to see noncapitalist activities as prevalent and viable, we may be encouraged here and now to actively build on them to transform our local economies.

(xxiv)

To “begin to see noncapitalist activities as prevalent and viable”—Watkins shares this desire, asserting that “representations of alternative economic relations” may help to do the work of dislodging the articulation of choice with capitalism (593). But as the above passage makes clear, Gibson-Graham are after more than the recognition of alternative economies: they want to move from recognition to local action.

Local action, then, seems to be a way of performing economics differently. And by local action I don’t mean protesting the existing economics (although that may at times be called for). Gibson-Graham see in local economic action a stance based in hopefulness, an affective stance that values connections and openings rather than being paralyzed by closure and despair (1).

Ultimately, this eschewing of closure and despair is Watkins’ goal, too. In *Everyday Exchanges*, Watkins argues that a problem with much cultural criticism, and a problem I see in some work associated with the
social turn in rhetoric and composition studies, is the assumption that there is no outside to capitalism. He cites Laclau and Mouffe, who, he claims, though denouncing economic essentialism, “sound pretty defeatist when it looms into view” (1).

Leftist academics can also sound “pretty defeatist” these days. The corporate university looms large in the collective imaginary as it takes away funding from instruction in order to support money-making research endeavors. But that’s a general statement. “The” corporate university doesn’t exist, but hundreds of local universities, often straining under the heavy fund-raising duties bequeathed to them by states whose own revenues are falling, do exist. “The” corporate university seems almost invincible. My local university, on the other hand, seems potentially understandable. I care about my local university. I care about the quality of instruction. I care about the salaries paid to faculty and staff. I care about the fair treatment of all workers on campus.

If writing across the curriculum has (ideally) helped faculty in the disciplines to discover that writing involves much more than mastering a set of grammatical standards, then a passionate attention to economics across the curriculum should help faculty overcome what often appears to be a learned helplessness toward the corporate university. What I really want to know, and what I hope I might persuade you that you need to know, is how my and your local universities work. Where does the money come from? Where does it go? As rhetors, understanding the economic networks that are currently shaping diverse corporate universities might allow us to form additional connections for bringing alternate economic relations into existence. As rhetors, we might trace the discourse that reinforces paralysis toward economics, and we might engage in activist research that seeks to uncover the mysteries of the local university’s finances in order to make better arguments for alternatives.

My attention, as you may have noticed, has moved away from students and toward their teachers. Watkins admits that when he first began asking students to take his surveys he “had to spend considerable time trying to get an idea of just how derivatives work” (586). If students need an alternative economic education, most of their teachers do as well. And, because many of us in rhetoric and composition studies will do or
have done administrative work, we in particular need an economic education. We need that education in order to face the cutting of budgets and the increased hiring of part-time faculty at low wages with something other than acceptance or despair. We need to perform economics with hope, acting our way toward alternatives, keeping in mind Varoufakis’s admonition to “give the passions [behind economics] another stir” (374).

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Notes

1. Carlyle, a critic of laissez-faire and defender of paternalistic government, called free market economics a “dismal science” while arguing against the abolition of slavery in the West Indies:
   and the social science—not a “gay science,” but a rueful—which finds the secret of this universe in “supply and demand,” and reduces the duty of human governors to that of letting men alone, is also wonderful. Not a “gay science,” I should say, like some we have heard of; no, a dreary, desolate, and, indeed, quite abject and distressing one; what we might call, by way of eminence, the dismal science. (530-31)

   If the affect of economics was named “dismal” by an opponent of abolition, then it is surely high time to move beyond that culturally conditioned emotion, especially if doing so might also move us beyond finding “the secret of the universe” in free market capitalism.

2. See, for example, Weaver. Error analysis, popularized in the 1980s, is also a strategy for teaching grammar in context; Shaughnessy offers the classic example.

Works Cited


