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Teaching the Adjunct Experience

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As colleges and universities deepen their commitments to a corporate model that delivers an educational "product" to student "consumers," adjunct and other contingent faculty play a growing role enabling administrators to balance their budgets while swelling their own ranks (and pockets) and investing in programs that enhance the perceived competitiveness of their institutions in the educational marketplace: luxury dorms, sports complexes, and athletic teams, among others. The College of Staten Island (henceforth CSI), part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, is no different from most public (and the majority of private) schools in this regard (*sans* the high-ranking sports teams). I was poorly informed about this trend until hired in August 2010 to chair CSI's Department of Sociology and Anthropology after a dozen years of living and working in Mexico. For the next five years, during the days, I listened to administrators express concerns about the exorbitant adjunct budget; when I returned home in the evening, my partner, who had begun adjuncting at CSI, discussed her experiences with overcrowded classrooms, broken equipment, and the administration's endless reporting demands (attendance verification, mid-term grades, mandatory classroom observations, etc.).

During this period the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) union that represents both CUNY full-time and adjunct faculty entered into negotiations with the CUNY administration in an effort to arrive at a retroactive contract to replace one that had expired in October 2010! My partner was active for several years with a small group of adjuncts that met, shared experiences, drew up lists of demands, and devised strategies for pressuring both the union and the CSI administration. Activist adjuncts debated the question of remaining independent of the PSC or being good union brothers and sisters, but they did not include undergraduate students in their discussions, overlooking potentially valuable allies in the struggle.

I was scheduled to teach two sections of the Research Seminar in Sociology (SOC 400), required of every sociology-anthropology major. The theme is at the discretion of the instructor, and for the spring 2016 semester I decided to focus both sections of the class on the adjunct situation at CSI and undergraduate student understandings of that situation. I hoped that if students in the course gained an appreciation for the problems faced by the faculty that teach over half the courses in the college, they might support adjuncts' present and future struggles for social and economic justice. Departmental colleagues fully supported my choice of topic.

SOC 400: Adjuncts as precarious workers

Enrollment in the required Research Seminar in Sociology and Anthropology was capped at fifteen students per section. (For the fall 2016 semester the Dean of Social Science and Humanities raised the cap to twenty.) Both sections (one daytime section and one nighttime section) met in the same "smart" seminar room with students seated around a long, rectangular table; a podium at the front of the room housed a computer and DVD player, and an overhead projector channeled images to a retractable screen. The ragged carpet and torn cloth on the chairs evidenced the New York State legislature's slack commitment to public education for immigrant and working-class students, which make up a substantial proportion of the student body at CSI and the other eight senior colleges in the CUNY system.

I organized the course into four parts or sections. Part I consisted of a four-week introductory phase of readings, lectures, and discussions about globalization, Fordism and neoliberalism, and flexible and contingent work both outside and within higher education. We read a short article titled "What is Neoliberalism" (Thorsen and Amund n.d.) and several articles about the increasing precarity of work (Kalleberg 2008; Ross 2008; Arnold and Bongiovi 2012). In the third week of the course, the class read and discussed (and I lectured on) basic reference works on the changing structure of higher education and the transformation of work therein (Berry 2005, 1-16; Bousquet 2008, 1-51). Also for that week, students divided up, read, notated and presented in class articles that described and analyzed the conditions and struggles of contingent academic workers, as well as college and university administrations' endeavors, legal and otherwise, to stifle dissent (Gilbert 1998; Tirelli 2014; Johnson and McCarthy 2000; Merklein 2014; Marvit n.d.; Jesson 2010).

During the fourth and final week of introductory work, students read several articles by Ruth Wangerin (2016, 2014a & b), an activist adjunct faculty member at CSI, and brought in posts from the following blogs that they shared with their fellow classmates:

- http://adjunct.chronicle.com/
- http://adjunctfacultyassembly.blogspot.com/ (the CSI adjunct faculty blog)
- www.newfacultymajority.info (New Faculty Majority blog)
- ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/workplace (*Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*)

This part of the course drew heavily on the despised "banking approach" to knowledge acquisition on the premise that "dialogue and other elements of participative education not grounded in information and rigor would be detrimental to the working class" (Mayo 1999, 48).

Also during the fourth week, I lectured about the working conditions and remuneration of adjunct faculty at CSI and other schools in the CUNY system and gave a detailed explanation of full-time lines, the hiring process, and the tenure system. I noted that CSI contains 361 full-time tenured and tenure track faculty (TTTF) and 36 full-time lecturers, compared to 799 adjunct faculty (AF), and that full-timers receive health insurance, paid sick time, parental leave, pensions (through university contributions to TIAA-CREF), paid sabbatical leaves (TTTF only) and private (occasionally shared) offices—all of which are benefits denied or granted only in part to all or most adjunct faculty. Taking the Department of Sociology and Anthropology as an example, I explained that contingent faculty (adjuncts, graduate students, and fixed-term hires) were teaching courses accounting for 58 percent of credit

hours during the spring 2016 semester but that they taught a much higher percentage of students because they staffed introductory and lower division courses with caps of 45 to 50 persons. By contrast, full-time faculty taught all special topics courses and most core courses required for the major, which were capped at 35 (or fewer students in the case of the Research Seminar) but often ran with enrollments in the 15-25 range, which make for a more intimate and enjoyable classroom experience for all concerned. I did not have the exact figures on hand, but estimated that contingent faculty accounted for 70 to 75 percent of seats (students) overall. With one or two exceptions, the thirty students in the two sections of the Research Seminar—all seniors and on the cusp of graduation—were unaware that a significant percentage of courses they had taken at CSI had been taught by contingent faculty laboring in difficult conditions, at low pay and with few or no benefits.

In Part II students designed (with my assistance) and distributed a survey to learn about other undergraduate students' knowledge of and opinions about adjunct faculty. Students in the two sections of the seminar administered the survey to 329 students in 15 classes, coded the results and entered them into an SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) data base for basic analysis. The survey instrument was kept short and simple because we would be using valuable class time volunteered by instructors (both full-time and adjuncts) teaching classes that ranged from Theater Arts to Accounting, Chemistry to Sociology. The first section of the survey solicited basic demographic information from the anonymous respondents: sex, age, major, number of semesters attending college, estimated GPA, and whether or not they worked and if so how many hours. The second section consisted of 18 statements with the request that respondents indicate for each statement whether it "always," "usually," "sometimes," or "never" applied to adjunct faculty (e.g. "Adjunct faculty have private offices"; "Adjunct faculty earn less per course than full-timers"; "Adjunct faculty are unionized"; "Adjunct faculty are eligible for parental leave," and so on.). The third and last section of the survey contained eight questions, which included a request for respondents to estimate the average level of remuneration that adjunct faculty received for teaching a 4-credit course (with choices ranging from a high of $10,000 to a low of $1500), the maximum number of credits they were permitted to teach at CSI per semester (5 choices ranging from "6" to "as many as they want"), and the amount of work and grading standards of courses taught by adjuncts compared to those taught by full-time faculty. The survey concluded with the statement "This class is taught by an adjunct" and a request that subjects circle or underline "yes," "no," or "I have no idea."

In Part III the class collaborated in the design of a semi-structured interview schedule, which two-person teams of student researchers employed as a guide when they interviewed adjunct volunteers. Interviewers elicited information from adjunct faculty interviewees about their educational trajectories, work and family life, relations with full-time faculty in the department in which they worked, complaints and satisfactions regarding the job, and future plans. Each team interviewed two faculty members, trading off the roles of interviewer and note taker. Students did not tape interviews and they assigned volunteer subjects pseudonyms for purposes of anonymity. All interviewees were asked to read and sign a standard consent form that explained their rights as detailed in human subject research protocols. The class discussed research ethics on several occasions, and all students were required to present proof of having completed an on-line course on Human Subjects Research for Undergraduate Students, offered free by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program, before being allowed to administer surveys or conduct interviews . All statistical summaries from the analysis of surveys and notes from the semi-structured interviews were posted on Blackboard and made available to all students for purposes of their term papers.

I set aside roughly three weeks each for Parts II and III of the course. Students then had approximately a month in which to develop a global analysis and plan and write the final paper, worth 40 percent of the semester grade (Part IV). To summarize, Part I supplied background, Parts II and III involved collecting information, and Part IV required each class member to craft an essay based on her analysis of the survey and interview data, taking into account classroom discussion and the readings in Part I.

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That's "the skinny" on the course, though as usual the devil is in the details, a few of which merit brief mention here. Let us begin with the students. CSI is in New York City, one of nine senior colleges (in addition to the Graduate School, various community colleges, etc.) in the gargantuan CUNY system. Many parents of CSI students labor as police officers or firefighters in the public sector, in insurance or health care, as carpenters and plumbers, hairdressers and office assistants, and some own or manage one of Staten Island's countless small businesses: restaurants, hair dressing parlors, quick marts, and so on. Upwards of 70 percent of CSI students work, averaging 28 hours weekly in order to keep up with car notes and insurance, pay cell phone bills, purchase clothing, pay for entertainment, and/or cover tuitions, books, and school supplies. Portions (in a few cases, most) of the income of some, especially adult night students, go to rent, food, and utilities. Capstone courses like the one I was teaching are intended to provide students the opportunity to creatively utilize the skills and knowledge acquired and developed earlier in their college careers. However, in designing and implementing the course, I had to take into consideration the high demands that work and family make on students and the competition for their time between school, work, and family life.

Also, a significant percentage of Sociology-Anthropology students declare the major after having attempted something else, most commonly Psychology, Social Work, Nursing, Education, or Business, all majors that at CSI require students to maintain grade point averages of 2.5 to 3.0 (on a 4-point scale), which proves difficult for many working students. A summer 2014 study of more than 90 randomly selected transcripts revealed that 30 percent of Sociology-Anthropology majors had cumulative GPAs *under* 2.5. Given wide variation in background, preparation, and work and family obligations, many students found the course requirement of a 20-page final essay very challenging. Aware of this, I reserved a month at the end of the semester during which they were

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to work through the final paper section-by-section. Some students were surprised at how much they had to say and took discernible pride in the result. Others agonized over the task, especially when mental and physical exhaustion set in as the end of the semester—and the long-awaited graduation—approached. I recall a May evening when one student requested permission to have pizza delivered to the classroom during the break. That day she had worked an eleven-hour shift managing the accounts of three 7/11 stores and had not eaten before coming to school for the 6:30 PM class.

Learning about adjunct faculty

The students' relative maturity and high class standing led most students to take the interviews seriously. Every faculty interviewee who later contacted me praised the student research teams for their demonstrated professionalism. On their part, the students, for the first time in most cases, seemed to gain an appreciation for the dedication of adjunct faculty and the sacrifices they make in order to provide students a meaningful educational experience. During classroom discussion, many students expressed concern over the low pay, job insecurity, lack of office space, etc. that is the daily experience of adjunct faculty. However, most term papers employed a more "neutral" tone with the writers reticent to draw general conclusions.

I attribute such reticence in part to the results of the research, which demonstrated the vast range of human experiences, interests, and objectives that lay behind the "adjunct faculty" label. Only a few persons among thirty-three interviewees (between the two sections) claimed to survive exclusively on their adjunct teaching earnings, which provide a fraction of the income needed for a minimally dignified life in one of the world's most expensive cities. CUNY adjunct faculty are bound by a 9/6 rule that limits them to teaching 9 credit hours on any one CUNY campus and one additional course, with a maximum of 6 credit hours, elsewhere in the system during any single semester. Nine credits translate to $10,000 to $12,000 gross per semester, depending on adjunct faculty "rank" and the corresponding hourly pay. (Each credit hour is equivalent to 15 contact hours.) Some faculty would like to teach four or five courses each semester at CSI and complain more about the 9/6 rule than they do about the low pay, which at the time of the interview averaged $1050 per credit hour. Those who work in more than one institution chafe against a rule that forces them to travel as "Freeway Flyers" from school to school in order to string together a sufficient number of courses to cover the cost of rent, food, and other expenses. The Professional Staff Congress (PSC) union, which represents adjunct and full-time faculty before management, supports the 9/6 rule, reasoning that it impedes administrations from replacing full-time positions with adjuncts. Many part-time faculty at CSI use teaching to complement income from a day job, pension, and/or Social Security. A few stated that they were adjuncting "between jobs" after having been let go from a failing or downsizing business in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and that they were awaiting an upturn in the economy. The underpaid labor of others was subsidized by their partners' better-remunerated work. Indeed, in several cases, the non-academic income of spouses or partners freed up interviewees to do what they most loved—to teach. The pool of interviewees also included a few graduate students

working on doctoral dissertation projects, optimistic about their future academic job possibilities. They did not consider that soon after graduating they might be among the recent graduates who would become transformed into what Marc Bouquet referred to as "waste" in the academic system—sent to the provinces, recycled into another industry, or otherwise disposed of so as not to contaminate new cohorts of graduate students (2008, 21-27). Finally, the class learned that some contingent faculty work more for the health insurance than the pay. CUNY provides health insurance to adjunct faculty during any semester they teach 6 or more credit hours.

As students in the class learned about adjunct faculty, they also reflected on their pre-existing misconceptions, manifest in the similarity of the undergraduate survey responses to the perceptions and representations of the seminar students at the beginning of the class. I noted above that between the two sections, student-researchers surveyed 15 classes and collected 329 questionnaires. Only 15 percent of respondents thought that adjuncts "never" have a private office; half the respondents indicated that adjuncts "always" (16.4 percent) or "usually" (33.1 percent) enjoy job security; and only 1 in 5 (20 percent) understood (correctly) that they "always" earn less than full time faculty. Furthermore, over 40 percent of respondents thought that adjuncts "always" (9.1 percent) or "usually" (34.6 percent) move to full-time positions. In fact, seasoned adjuncts rarely obtain full-time faculty positions, and the few who do tend to be hired as "lecturers" at lower pay and with greater teaching responsibilities than FTTT faculty.

The 16.3 percent of student respondents that indicated (correctly) that adjunct faculty "never" get parental leave was slightly lower than the 17.3 percent that thought (incorrectly) that they "always" receive it. More than 1 in 3 respondents indicated, correctly, that adjunct faculty receive an average of $4,200 per 4-credit course. Roughly another third selected a higher figure, either $10,000 (9.3 percent) or $6,500 (25.3 percent). Many adjunct activists would be pleased with $5,000 per course, though others consider $7,500 a more reasonable figure. Finally, close to half the students thought that adjuncts taught 50 percent or less of CSI courses. The overall percentage of courses taught by adjuncts and other contingent faculty exceeds 60 percent, rising to 75 percent or more in the departments of English, Mathematics, and World Languages and Literature.

Many survey responses illustrated that most students are poorly informed about who teaches college courses and the remuneration, benefits, and working conditions of adjuncts, who represent more than two-thirds of the faculty overall. In their rush to abolish tenure and eliminate public sector unions, conservative politicians and consultants, drawing on the work of right-wing think tanks, ignore or understate the living and working conditions of contingent faculty. We should not be surprised that so many students have internalized these views, which are seldom challenged directly by the mainstream media and are regularly reproduced by Fox News and other conservative outlets. Adjunct faculty members are not in the habit of declaring their liminal status before the students in the classes they teach. Even some activist adjunct faculty express concern that they will not be assigned courses the following semester if they go public about the low pay, limited benefits, lack of job security, and occasionally demeaning treatment to which they have been subjected. Meanwhile, the CSI administration laments the "high" adjunct budget and regularly pressures departmental chairs to ensure that FTTT faculty "teach to the contract" (accrue the number of credit hours contractually mandated) as it simultaneously projects to the world outside the college an image of academic excellence that makes no mention of adjunct labor. Adjunct labor is a dirty little secret best kept hidden from the public!

Most students in the course gained a better understanding of adjuncts' situations at CSI, but it is less clear that they would share that knowledge widely or act on it in the future. For one, some students acknowledged the difficulties that adjuncts confront but treated their decisions to adjunct in terms of free choices with insufficient attention devoted to unpacking the contexts within which the "freedom" is exercised. One student researcher concluded that "most if not all adjuncts desire a full time position in the world of academia. Some adjuncts are happy doing part time work while others are continuously striving for tenured positions. We learned that adjuncts in general love teaching and find it rewarding, despite the uncertainty and insecurity of the field." The human costs of this "uncertainty and insecurity" did not come across in many essays and was understated in others. Adjuncts were older than the student researchers, and it was easy for the latter to consider the former as either satisfied with their situations (which they were in some cases—at least before the interviewers) or reaping the consequences of bad decisions—the kinds of decisions that students in the class were confident *they* would be able to avoid. The belief that the individual controls her destiny regardless of class and ethnic-racial origin and normative social circumstances runs deep in U.S. society. The course may have challenged that belief in a few circumstances but did little to dislodge it.

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Second, as graduating seniors most students in the course will have a limited on-campus presence in the future—though friends and younger siblings may. Sometimes I think that for political reasons this course should be moved back in the curriculum, so as to recruit students earlier in their college careers. I've also wondered about the potential for class solidarity between students, themselves mostly low-paid workers, and adjuncts. I did not press students as hard as I should have to draw comparisons between the work of adjuncts and the work

they (students) do, that is, to generalize from the contingent features of labor in the corporatized university to contingent labor in general. Most students in the class worked in some casualized capacity in the restaurant industry, in the service industry, or in commerce; few received health insurance, paid vacation, and other benefits. Only two or three were employed in union shops that provided basic protections against management abuses. If I teach this course again, I will consider splitting each section into two groups, with half the students focusing on adjunct faculty and the other half on another group of flexible workers, similar to class members themselves, in the private sector.

Connecting the course to adjunct struggles for better remuneration and working conditions should be one of the course's principal goals. To that end, offering the course in the fall semester and arranging public presentation of the results by the student-researchers, either in the spring undergraduate research symposium or a student government sponsored venue, would be one way of disseminating the results to a broader public. Students might also present to adjunct faculty or before the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) that represents all faculty before CUNY. The objective should for students to share their newfound knowledge with others and deepen and expand discussion and debate around the present and future of higher education in CUNY and elsewhere, and particularly the current and future educational role of adjunct and other contingent faculty.

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