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Commentary: Disempowerment of the Adjunct Online Instructor (AOI) in Educational Institutions

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Commentary:

The following essay is a summary of a much longer article by Batya Weinbaum. The editors thought the issues raised by Doctor Weinbaum were important and provocative in academia today. If any of our readers are interested in commenting to JIFT regarding these issues, your comments can be addressed to either of the editors: Virginia Walsh, walshv@salve.edu or Carol Shelton, cshelton@ric.edu.

Doctor Weinbaum, weinbaumbatya@gmail.com also welcomes inquiries and commentary from readers who may be interested in a book-in-process titled: *Adjuncts on the Edge: Invisible in Academe.*

Institutions structure how we think about ourselves and how we interact with one another. Hence, at numerous levels, institutions instigate powerful forces determining and regulating various behaviors, including the behavior of individuals in institutions of higher education. These institutions have considerable power in women's lives not only as learners, consumers, and users of services but also as instructors, workers, and deliverers of services both nationally and internationally.

In light of the call for papers for this issue, I wish to instigate exploration of the process by which powerful educational institutions limit and abuse the rights of contemporary women as service deliverers and as adjuncts in online higher education, including imposing severe limitations placed on participation in utilization of their education in curricular design. This in turn impacts consumers of educational services and the self-image of the American populace. I wish to highlight how the context of collegiate pedagogy is rapidly shifting to instruction through massively downloading poured courses which increasing numbers of women teach to a growing number of part-time students. These changes may be occurring for any number of reasons, among them: 1.) institutions of higher education are operating out of the profit motive, 2.) full-time faculty tend to resist online assignments which may be related to faculty overload because of cutbacks (Bedford 1), and 3.) universities are already relying on adjunct online instructors (AOI). These virtual adjuncts, or "cyber-faculty," are becoming an indispensible resource for distance learning, and advocacy-scholar and administrator Maria Puzziferro- Schnitze thinks the AOI should be treated accordingly (2005, 2). The cyber group is being groomed to accommodate the swelling ranks of online students, the majority of whom are also women. Yet instead of valuing AOI as a precious resource, the developing power structure steadily creates an army of insecure, underpaid, unsupported and tremendously exploited

primarily female instructors who are interacting with numerous women students. Dialogue has been emerging related to this issue but not with a gendered focus.

Discussion often centers around two poles: the relationship between these adjuncts and the universities in which they teach and the quality, rigor and consistency of the courses the AOI instructor teaches. This second pole stems from unfounded but generalized assumptions about the AOI's lack of preparedness (Shakeshaft, 2002).Universities, rather than recognizing the skills and level of achievement of AOI, uniformly demand that they teach courses designed by faceless others with whom the AOI engages in little or no dialogue, despite being pedigreed themselves. What is most reprehensible is that the institutions operate out of what they think are their own interests but completely without data supporting the myth that adjunct teaching is sub-standard and needs heavy-handed managerial quality control. This control masquerades, at times, as support. However, investing in managers to micromanage the instructors, rather than in encouraging AOI with the responsibility to develop courses as full-time colleagues would be doing, is rare. Often full-time instructors are compensated with release time to accomplish these tasks (Paloff 58). This in turn creates considerable power inequities as disempowered faculty teach without frequent collegial contact or sufficient depths of communication between themselves and others in the academic environment.

Nonetheless, AOI are interested in the chance to experiment pedagogically, as well as to find opportunities for career development as well as to share knowledge with colleagues. These academic goals have been found to be significant factors in any faculty retention strategy (Green *et. al.* 2). Yet AOI generally are marginalized, perceived with stereotypical assumptions including that they do not have much to offer. In fact, the reverse is true—institutions actually offer little to AOI, such as intrinsic rewards like personal/professional growth, career advancement, personal challenge, and/or personal satisfaction, which a survey of online distance education faculty across the United States discovered essential for faculty retention, whatever the person's rank. In fact, very few of the identified basic characteristics motivating faculty operate for AOI, such as a high level of administrative commitment and support; faculty involvement, shared values, and a sense of ownership; frequent interaction, collaboration, and community among faculty; and rigorous evaluation of teaching connected to tenure and promotion decisions. Policies are

generated that ossify stereotypes, and AOI work in conditions holding them down. This is compounded by the fact that, due to the nature of mass-course design, decisions are often made by course designers about what is best, and decisions are technology-based, determined by attendance by technical personnel at vendor-sponsored workshops (Palloff *et. al.,* 57). This is the case even though studies demonstrate AOI can synthesize the best ideas and curriculum practices, offering practical suggestions that may be valuable to the institution. Yet in fact, muted and rendered powerless within each institution, the opposite occurs. Without opportunities for further skill utilization with regard to curriculum improvement, learning as well as teaching becomes hampered.

As the NEA's *Higher Education Advocate* explained, more than 75% of American faculty work off the tenure track (2015). Many of these are part-time, insecure instructors. Other numerous legitimate (and here sometimes overlapping) reasons for feelings of disempowerment in academe have been thoroughly explored elsewhere as part of on-going conversation about the power structures determining, over-determining and dominating our intersecting professions. Now the growth of online education and pre-poured instruction taught by AOI can add another avenue of disempowerment within academe that can no longer be ignored. In the fall semester of 2013, about 5.5 million students took at least one online course (Olson 85). Eighty percent of public universities and 50% of private colleges offered at least one fully online program in the same time frame (*loc. cit.*). In 2011, over 65% of chief academic officers believed that online education was "critical to their long-term strategy" (Allen and Seaman 8). Within this picture, for-profits were more invested in the online growth strategy leading to 23% growth of that sector annually strategy than public and private nonprofit institutions. As one might surmise, as interest in online education within public and private institutions grows, those constructing programs look to the completely online institutions operating according to business models for inspiration. Why?

First, the business corporate model has invaded academic culture, with captains transferring over from industry to spearhead development of new programs. Second, tenured institutionally bound, traditionally trained, face-to-face instructors are often resistant or clueless when turning toward the opportunity to teach using the new technology, wanting to migrate their personal live classroom scenarios into online learning

systems which can often generate fiasco. They discover in the process of frustrating failed attempts that the new medium has become the message, and that juxtaposition of jazzed materials has become necessary to capture, entertain and sustain the fragmented student-body's severely decollectivized ADD mind. Thus, even those teaching in the "hallowed halls of academe" may have something to fear, as corporate models encroach and higher education erodes beyond regenerative recall. This situation is exacerbated with proliferating federal guidelines by which Congress dictates how instruction is conducted, by virtue of the fact that only institutions that follow Congressional guidelines are eligible for federal student loans, subsidies, and other forms of funding.

These are certainly challenges that disempowered holders of doctorates face in various institutional and political contexts, engaging in online instruction being one of them. With no course assignments guaranteed, being paid by the number of students who complete each course, or not even at all if having done all the required set-up the course is cancelled at the last minute because not enough students register, and being employed at will, these times seem too "anxious" to continue to raise concerns about how and what content is taught to students.

What AOI face in the tightly controlled classrooms may be bringing new challenges to their teaching at this particular moment. AOI need to consider where else to teach and instruct outside of these channels, in ways more aligned with an AOI's personal and political ethics. It has become nearly impossible to educate with constant surveillance inside higher education today, with less job security and income, and less ability to interact professionally with colleagues to stimulate discussion about curriculum issues and strategies.

How can AOI create alternative sites of education to independently self-manage? If administrations go down one path, can AOI create accredited ones? The identity of students wanting to march through, upward and onward, in pursuit of what has been promised--a better living, on the one hand, contrasted with that of the invisible, faceless, at times even nameless and always voiceless AOI on the other, creates many a dilemma. The AOL who need to keep minds numbed and dumbed as well as mouths shut, and begs month-by-month to receive hand-outs to get the next course assigned to make a meager living, thus putting off another month or two the need or ability to apply for heat subsidies

and food stamps, has led to severely malformed and dysfunctional pedagogical practices. This situation has no room for improvement other than calling for new measures to educate outside of the institutions in these anxious times, like the Mothers of the Disappeared who created their own free public university in Argentina still surviving after a a number of years.

Carolyn Shrewsbury in "What Is Feminist Pedagogy?" defined feminist pedagogy in terms of its propensity to enable community. Yet from such an institutionally disempowered position that AOI now occupy, how can AOI empower others? When operating out of a workplace that gravitates against the inclusion of AOI into community, where full-time faculty meetings and union meetings for onsite faculty are often held without including AOI, how can AOI empower and lead others in any educational practices? The conceptual frameworks within which many AOI now work no longer allow for expression of AOI pedagogical ethics and principles. The struggles to "walk the walk" (or even to "talk the talk") (Crabtree and Sapp) have been diminished by evolution of the steam-rolled curriculums of online institutions, or even, the poured courses in the regular academic institutions which are taught by non-campus AOI as well. Struggles have been waged to ensure first amendment rights to criticize the institutions in which adjuncts work (Flaherty) but not everyone who labors as an AOI has the ability to stand ready to go to court in order to even try to enforce such rulings.

At most all AOI have left is participation in the kind of education that Paolo Freire describes as that which integrates the next generation into the logic of the overarching system, as racist, sexist and capitalist as that system might be, encouraging those engaging as instructed participants to integrate the system's values as opposed to practicing education as liberation (Finke 7). Administrators would like AOI to remain in the position of socially-conditioned girls, remaining immobile, accepting whatever comes in or down, not putting the whole body or self into what the AOI does, but concentrating on just one body part, throwing like a girl as Iris Young would say, not tapping into our full force when we get up to play—but in this case, utilizing only the hands' fingers manipulating tiny buttons on a variety of devices as we sit, silenced, removed from colleagues, administrators and students, very far, far away.

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