

Neoliberal individualism in Dutch universities

Teaching and learning anthropology in an insecure environment

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on our own experiences and that of several of our colleagues teaching social and cultural anthropology in different Dutch institutions for higher learning. We focus in particular on teaching and learning in two small liberal arts and science (LAS) colleges, where anthropology makes up part of the social science curriculum and/or is part of the core curriculum. The data collected from our own critical reflections developed during informal discussion and from formal interviews with colleagues, together with literature on recent changes in academia, leads us to argue that neoliberal individualism, shaped by management tactics that constantly measure individual performance and output, is making academia an increasingly insecure place in which to work and study. The consequences of this insecurity include increasing mental health problems among both students and staff, intensifying competition at the expense of collegiality and collaboration and an overall decrease in the quality of academic jobs and teaching. Although the discipline of anthropology can help us better understand our own conditions, the personalisation of problems and the focus on success obscure the anthropological lens, which looks at social and cultural structures of power and depends on critical reflexivity.

KEYWORDS

anthropology, Dutch higher education, individualism, liberal arts and science, neoliberalism, student evaluations, teaching

The test of the mature ethnologist is the extent to which he can extend the axioms of his professional creed to cover cases in which he is emotionally involved. The pitfalls are innumerable, and hardly anyone will succeed





in avoiding all of them. But the ethnologist worthy of his salt will make a determined effort to rise above the partisan level, to project himself into the mind of others – even if they are his fellow-citizens – and to view his own culture from within (Lowie 1960: 159).

Introduction

In this article, we argue that new forms of neoliberal management, with a focus on individual performativity and output (Waring 2013), have increased individualisation in academia; academics and students are held personally responsible for their individual successes and failures and they must constantly choose between seemingly conflicting interests such as personal performances versus collegiality and research versus teaching. The entrepreneurial ethos of a neoliberal age, which values individual freedom to make choices that shape one's own destiny above all else, leads many to focus on their personal ambitions at the expense of professional solidarity and of 'commitment, judgement, and authenticity within practice' (Ball 2003: 219, 221). The neglect of social and individual security in such deliberations means that:

Whenever one has success, the range of options and the scope of personal freedom feel fantastic, but the moment one hits the wall, freedom is reinterpreted as insecurity and the choices as a kind of coercive compulsion. The entrepreneur becomes an anomaly the moment he fails to succeed (Eriksen 2010: 13).

Neoliberal freedom and marketisation in academia make it an insecure place for many. Although there is little hard data on the impact of these changes on university students and staff, one study in the United Kingdom conducted among 14,000 university employees suggests that perceived stress is higher and reported well-being lower for academics than for those working in other sectors (Kinman and Wray 2013: 3). While students' mental health issues seem to be gaining attention within a system that has increasingly conceptualised them as customers, staff problems are, as one colleague put it, 'the elephant in the room'. Moreover, many teachers are only allocated short-term contracts that do not cover the number of hours required to teach their courses. The acceptance of such conditions may stem from the internalised ideal that academics should be happy with what they

have, because they are ‘doing what they love’ (Shaw and Ward 2014). This ideal, along with the overwork it may stimulate, and a lack of membership in institutionalised labour collectives, means that the rights and health of many academics are neither respected by management nor by academics themselves. Although there is resistance, the precarious position of many academics makes them hesitant to make demands, or, in the words of one non-tenured colleague: ‘I don’t want to talk too much shit because I need my contract to be renewed.’

Anthropology has much to contribute to our understandings of our own condition within the neoliberal university and the broader world outside the ivory tower. At the same time, however, the nature of this new academic setting undermines the discipline’s potential and the wellbeing of both teachers and students. Together with anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, we believe that one of the basic values of anthropology is humanism: the idea that human life, in all its diversity, has value.¹ In a state of extreme individualism ‘successful’ human life is granted greater value. In the academic context, success is primarily marked by publications for professionals and grades for students. The competitive struggle for these markers of success means that one must argue ‘the rightness’ of one’s ideas (Schulz 2010). This obsession with being successful and therefore with ‘being right’ inhibits the anthropological power of reflexivity inherent in its interpretive epistemology. Moreover, an individual frame of reference along with post-modernist nihilism obscures the existence of cultural and social power structures influencing our own condition.

This article was conceived during the teaching of a mandatory course on ‘Identity and Diversity’ at a liberal arts college (LAS) in the Netherlands. This experience stimulated us to reflect critically on the kinds of changes that are taking place in contemporary universities, and on how they impact the environment in which we teach and learn. While we were very enthusiastic about the course, we were taken aback by the types of critique that we received from the majority of students; many seemed unwilling or unable to reflect on their own identities, to consider the value of qualitative data, or to move beyond grade-based incentives for learning. This attitude seemed to stem from the expectation and organisation of the liberal arts education in the institution at large. This encounter also made us aware of how changes in the ideological foundations of higher education have a profound impact on what we do and who we are as students and teachers of anthropology (Ball 2003: 215). Hence the article is a reflexive piece on being engaged



as professional academics in the context of a neoliberal Dutch university system. It draws on the anthropological method of critical reflexivity. The personal contemplations that we have used to illustrate our argument were developed during informal conversations between ourselves and with other colleagues, and refer to teaching and other work-related experiences spanning the last five years in four different institutions for higher learning in the Netherlands. These institutions include two university departments of anthropology and two liberal arts and science colleges, in which anthropology is taught as part of social sciences, or as part of the core curriculum. Over the past five years, we have taught over a thousand students in various settings. In order to provide a comparative framework for our own experiences, we have also interviewed five colleagues who have been involved in the course that inspired this article. This article also includes reflection on comments from anonymous student evaluations. In order to protect our own positions and to safeguard the position of our students and colleagues, we reflect on our own experiences in a depersonalised way and make use of pseudonyms when referring to others.

We will begin this article by situating our reflections theoretically and sketching the institutional context in which we work. Next, we will discuss the rise of liberal arts and science (LAS) colleges in the Netherlands as both a reaction to processes of massification in general universities, but also as the embodiment of other dimensions of the neoliberal university. Next, we discuss the devaluation of teaching that we believe is part and parcel of the neoliberal environment in universities. We will focus on the role and status of teaching within this environment, but also critically investigate our own contribution to it. In the last section of the article we will discuss our experiences with teaching students, who are increasingly pushed to be ‘excellent’ individual performers and gain good grades to produce successful futures, while at the same time being framed as customers who must be satisfied by teachers. We will discuss the power of evaluation, and by taking our experiences from teaching in LAS colleges, we will show that the resulting insecurities and commodification of knowledge undermine the great potential of anthropology as a liberal discipline.

Neoliberalism: theoretical and institutional context

Defining neoliberalism

Transformations in our work environment are part of a neoliberal turn, marked by the use of interrelated policy technologies: marketisation, performativity and managerialism (Ball 2003: 215). Neoliberal ideology holds that socio-economic development can only be optimised through market forces, operating according to immutable laws free from government intervention and the actions of social collectives (Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009: 50). As the term suggests, neoliberalism prescribes freedom. A freedom, however, that comes in a form of entrepreneurial performance, which paradoxically, requires a great deal of control (auditing) by managers. Both individual and institutional success is measured by an 'audit culture' within which performance can be made 'auditable' in terms of quantitative output (for example, Strathern 2000; Shore 2008, 2010). It goes without saying that local manifestations of the global phenomenon of neoliberalism are not the same everywhere; it is impossible to speak of a 'coherently bounded "ism", system or end state' (Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009: 50). The concept of neoliberalism as we use it here therefore refers to an 'uneven, contradictory and on-going process' (Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009: 50).

Dutch universities

In the Netherlands, there are thirteen universities, all of which are government funded. 'The main aims of the universities are the provision of teaching, research and community services' (De Boer, Enders and Leisyte 2007: 28). However, contemporary Dutch Universities are also understood to be 'corporate actors' (De Boer, Enders and Leisyte 2007) or 'knowledge companies'. They must not only aim to spread knowledge but also to make profit (Verhaeghe 2011). This new role of universities as economic actors was solidified and elucidated by the 1999 Bologna Accords in which European ministers of education agreed to form a standardised European system for higher education. The Accords were justified as a means to create a strong competitive position for European universities and a standard measure on which to judge 'quality' (Lorenz 2008: 44).

The second half of the twentieth century was marked by an increasing scale of Dutch universities because higher education became attainable for women and working-class students (De Jong 2012: 32). However, by the 1980s, the government began to cut funding while student numbers continued to rise. In the period from 1980–1995, government funding per student was halved (De Jong 2012: 32). Corporate funding could not compensate for



the reduction in government funding. Increased demand and pressure to be profitable have led Dutch universities to do more teaching with less money. Most universities have responded to these changes by increasing class sizes without increasing the number of hours allocated to teachers. This, along with the pressure on academic staff to prioritise research and publication over teaching, has created a situation in which the quality of education suffers and academic staff are overworked (De Jong 2012: 32).

In Dutch universities, like in many other universities around the world, teachers and researchers find themselves in increasingly precarious situations. Research in the United Kingdom found that academics and teachers were more likely than any other occupational group to do unpaid overtime (Gill 2009: 235). These eager workers – such as PhD students or new post-docs – are ‘charged with delivering mass undergraduate programs, with little training, inadequate support and rates of pay that when preparation and marking are taken into account – frequently fall (de facto) below the minimum wage’ (Gill 2009: 232–3). In the Netherlands, similar practices have contributed to a de-professionalisation of academic teaching and increasing work stress for the young academics who must accept short-term contracts without long-term prospects. For teachers and researchers who hold a tenured position, precarity takes a different form; increasing output demands (article publications, acquisition of research funds) cause feelings of insecurity and anxiety in a context of an increasingly heavy teaching load. For those who teach in small departments, output funding (based on the number of student diplomas awarded), budget cuts, the standardisation of education, mergers of departments and the recent government demand on universities to profile themselves vis-à-vis other Dutch universities, lead to a fear of losing their departments, study programmes and, possibly, their jobs.

While teachers and researchers struggle in precarious working conditions, the business of running the university moves full steam ahead. In some cases, entrepreneurial aspirations of managers are achieved at the expense of the traditional functions of academic institutions. In 2000, for example, top managers at a Dutch university approved of a plan for the fusion of the medical faculty and the university hospital. The plan did not include any mention of either research or teaching responsibilities. The Dutch historian Chris Lorenz argued that this mistake is symptomatic of the entrepreneurial ambitions of the neoliberal university.² The education reforms responsible for ‘mistakes’ such as this one are not unique to the Netherlands but part of a global ‘policy epidemic’ (Ball 2003: 215).

Several studies (for example, Ball 2003; Wright and Williams Ørberg 2008; Shore 2008, 2010) have demonstrated how recent reforms in various so-called developed countries have had a profound impact on academics. Academic life is increasingly being reduced to economics; both policy and individual action are judged according to their profitability and 'rationality' (Lentin and Titley 2011: 163). Teachers and researchers now find themselves 're-worked as producers/providers' (Ball 2003: 218) and are 'routinely judged not only on their academic credentials and skills but on their customer service skills and ability to satisfy the student consumer' (Waring 2013: 2). The underlying notion is that the university must function as a market actor and that individual academic entrepreneurship must be managed by seemingly objective and hyper-rational performance indicators (Ball 2003: 217). In this way, academic knowledge becomes an externalised and de-socialised commodity (Lyotard 1984: 4, cited in Ball 2003: 226).

The rise of liberal arts education in the Netherlands

Liberal arts and science (LAS) colleges or University Colleges, as they are generally called in the Netherlands, were established as a reaction to the 'massification' in education and the pre-eminence of research over education (De Jong 2012: 31). Dutch University Colleges, of which there are now several, are government funded and seen as a faculty or department within the mainstream universities.³ Although their small size tends to limit some aspects of managerialism, such as bureaucratisation, they are nevertheless susceptible to university-wide trends marked by the dominance of market thinking. As selective elite teaching colleges, their establishment, proliferation and respective cultures are typically characterised by a focus on so-called 'academic excellence'.

Programmes offered at these colleges differ from mainstream university undergraduate programmes in five important ways. First, LAS students can be selected on the basis of an application and interview. This allows university management to choose students with an impressive track record and to control the balance of the student population (in terms of gender, national and ethnic background, and academic discipline). With the exception of a limited number of courses such as medicine, general universities have to accept all applicants who have completed the highest level of secondary education. Furthermore, since 2011, LAS colleges along with other forms of intensive small-scale education may charge a tuition fee up to five times



higher than in a regular university (NVAO 2011). Hence, with the exception of those students who have a scholarship, many students tend to come from relatively affluent families. Several of the LAS programmes require students to live together in college dorms, also adding to their costs of living, compared to, for instance, costs for students who continue to live with their parents.

Second, in contrast to students from general universities, university college students are said to be highly motivated to perform to the best of their capacity (the 'A+' culture'). Their motivation is encouraged through a system of continuous feedback and the monitoring of individual performances. The image of motivation and exceptional intelligence seems to be stimulated by the process of selection. While many students are clever and motivated, this image can also fuel a culture of student expectation of high grades and grade inflation.

Third, all the colleges are characterised by a small classroom size (25–28 students maximum), facilitating personal attention from teachers. Fourth, university colleges offer multidisciplinary programmes in English, while many university bachelor programmes in the Netherlands continue to be focused on one field of study and are primarily taught in Dutch. The value of interdisciplinary education is understood by some to create well-rounded, creative thinkers who can be at the service of a neoliberal flexible labour market that requires workers to reinvent themselves as the demands of the market require.

Fifth, the first priority of most academic staff in the colleges is student related (teaching and tutoring) although career growth remains largely contingent on research (for which most staff are allowed little or no paid time). Similar to the mainstream universities, most early-career positions provide only precarious short-term contracts.

The different colleges have various interpretations of LAS. However, all seem to hold (or at least pay lip service to) the idea that the goal of liberal education is to produce free thinking individuals who are both critical and reflective about themselves and the societies in which they live (Nussbaum 2006: 267). Unfortunately, this ideal does not mesh well with the current neoliberal *zeitgeist* that 'values only an individualist, economic rationality and not only rejects contestation, but denies the validity of the normative basis of such contestations' (Lentin and Tittle 2011: 162). Thus, many of the colleges market themselves as institutions of 'excellence' that place students on the path to (economic/social) 'success'. A poster in one of the colleges

claims that ‘our students will be the CEOs of the future’; liberal arts has become synonymous with being successful and thus does not always attract students who are interested in liberal education per se, but also students who are drawn to the idea of ‘excellence’ with which the institutions market themselves. This kind of prescription about what is successful is symptomatic of neoliberalism, a form of ‘comprehensive liberalism’ that seeks to dictate how people should live their lives. Liberal education however – in the classical sense – should avoid such doctrines in the interest of respecting plurality (Nussbaum 2006: 303).

Teaching: academic work in the neoliberal university

The devaluation of teaching (anthropology)

He felt himself at last beginning to be a teacher, which was simply a man to whom his book is true, to whom is given a dignity of art that has little to do with his foolishness or weakness or inadequacy as a man (Williams 2012 [1965]: 113).

One of the most popular books in the Netherlands last year was a reprint of the novel *Stoner* by John Williams, first published in 1965 (Oomen 2013: 16). In its essence, it is about the unspectacular life of a man, who, despite countless professional and personal disappointments, found meaning and joy as a college professor. It seems that the Dutch are charmed by the person of a college professor, yet in Dutch universities today to focus on teaching is synonymous with career suicide (Oomen 2013: 16).

When I started working at the university as Assistant Professor, I took my task as teacher very seriously. I still feel committed to my role as teacher, but have to admit that something has changed. At one point my boss told me to ‘work on my research profile’ because it would be good for my academic career. Under pressure of output criteria, competition, perfectionism and ambition, and with my boss’s advice in the back of my head, teaching has slowly transformed from a core duty into one of the many tasks I perform. I would not mind taking a break from research and writing for a while, but I know it will harm my academic reputation, position and career perspectives (personal reflection of an academic with tenure, female).



While academic careers are primarily contingent upon individual research and research-related performances, the overall income of Dutch colleges and universities is primarily based on the number of bachelor and master diplomas issued. Nevertheless, the increasing pressure and the 'hyperinflation of demands of academics' (Gill 2009) often makes teaching the task we do 'on the side'.

Why has teaching become such a low priority both institutionally and personally? We believe this is another outcome of the prevailing idea that output matters more than input in the university today. Within the neoliberal university system, the number of articles published is more important for academic careers than the quality of the teaching; we try to escape teaching because we need time to do research and to generate output (Coleman 2011). As such, teaching is devalued by both institutions and teachers themselves; teaching becomes a de-professionalised task and knowledge a depersonalised commodity (Ball 2003: 226).⁴ One of the colleagues we interviewed mentioned a conversation with one of her managers in which she was told that the manager would have preferred to have 'workplace sensitivity' trainers from the corporate world to give the class that our colleague was teaching. The manager lamented that she had had to settle on the 'cheap labour' of beginning career academics because the high-flying consultants she had wished to hire were too expensive. Our colleague reported losing all motivation to improve or change her course after hearing that her own boss devalued her teaching to such an extent that she would rather outsource the knowledge she already had in-house.

The sociologist Robert van Krieken observes the emergence of three broad categories amongst the academic staff: (1) 'elite' or 'celebrity' researchers, with little or no teaching or administrative responsibilities; (2) 'middle class' teaching-and-research staff who have increasing problems meeting the standards of research set by the elite; and (3) 'proletariat' temporary teachers and researchers (Van Krieken 2012: 1).

As part of the 'proletariat' category, I asked one of my bosses for advice on improving my career. He pointed to a colleague who published widely and often went on lecture tours abroad during the summers as an example to follow. The 'middle-class' colleague in question often seems to be under considerable stress and has little grip on how to deal with his administrative duties. My boss made no mention of competent and emotionally balanced colleagues, who had given up research by choice or necessity,

yet nevertheless seemed to be the backbone of the organisation (personal reflection of a university teacher with tenure, female).

Institutional respect and reward in terms of career perspectives seem to be reserved for researchers, and we, academic professionals ourselves, have of course internalised this to a certain extent.

I was selected, despite steep competition, for a teaching appointment in a well-known anthropology department, but I felt like a 'loser' until I got actual research time. The teaching appointment was a tenure track, but the research is for five years. Should I risk losing my chance at a permanent contract? But what about my academic career? And I also want to combine teaching with research (personal reflection of a university teacher, non-tenured, female).

Tenure-track teaching positions such as those available at LAS colleges and increasingly found in other university departments were developed to improve the quality of education in universities. Although students may benefit from this idea, it is doubtful whether the quality of teaching in the university more generally does. As academic care work, teaching-only positions offer limited career prospects and teaching alone rarely opens the doors to the upper echelons of the university. This is particularly alarming because many teaching-only positions are held by women; gender equity and the valuing of care work are very closely intertwined (Daly 2002: 263).⁵ One of the colleagues we interviewed was told by her manager that 'we [the LAS management] don't want you here till you are 65', emphasising the expectation that teachers will leave after some time in order to hire younger and cheaper staff members.

In the Netherlands, only 15% of university professors are women, while 44% of successful PhD candidates in 2010/11 were women (Merens, Hartgers and Van den Brakel 2012: 132). One explanation of why so many qualified women never become professors is the prevalence of part-time jobs for women. Part-time work is often framed as a choice for women seeking a balance between paid work and domestic responsibilities, but its institutionalisation means that many university positions, especially in teaching, are only available part-time (Portegijs et al. 2008: 9). If a woman has young children, the high costs of childcare, coupled with cultural norms emphasising the role of a mother at home, can also be detrimental to an (academic) career (Portegijs et al. 2008: 128). Although in the Netherlands the situation



faced by women academics is particularly dire, it seems that the position of women, and particularly those with children, is also weak in other countries like the U.S. Research at Berkeley University has shown that '[a]mong tenured professors, only 44 per cent of women are married with children, compared with 77 per cent of men' (Mason 2011). Through the language of individual achievement, neoliberalism hides gender and other forms of inequality. Thus, the overrepresentation of women in the lower ranks of academic staff (or their underrepresentation in the highest echelons) can be easily attributed to talent, motivation and choice while structural constraints are ignored.

Being anthropology teachers does not make this situation easier. *Forbes* magazine has ranked anthropology together with archaeology as one of the 'worst' college majors on the basis of unemployment and starting salary rates of recent college graduates in the United States (Goudreau 2012). The pervasive message is that the value of a college degree can only be measured in earning potential, and the value of a department can be calculated solely in terms of profitability. This may signal to some the demise of our discipline, but it can also offer a new opportunity. For example, through comparison, ethnographic knowledge gives voice to a sense of the contingency and existential arbitrariness of Western lives and preoccupations and can provide alternative scenarios (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007: 192). Nevertheless, reactions against the neoliberal turn in the university even within anthropology are often labelled as conservative, reactive and unrealistic. The 'realist discourse' of neoliberalism claims that times are changing and that we need to respond to those changes. As academic staff, it seems we are almost forced to retreat into individualism; we need to compete with our colleagues for research funds and try to minimise our teaching time in order to produce more publications, often at the cost of others, and even of our own passion.

Reflection and resistance

The increasing workloads and lower quality jobs cause one to wonder why there is so little resistance. The answer might, first of all, lie in the fact that academics are ideal neoliberal subjects themselves. Neoliberal forms of management require individuals characterised by 'loyalty, belonging and acceptance compensated by the rewards of self-interest and marked by promotion of efficiency in the service of the inevitable' (Saul 2005: 13). If success is

achievable through rational action and hard work, failure can be considered an individual problem, resulting from choices made by free subjects (Dean 2010) or mere personal inadequacy. Combined with the idea that scholarship is a 'noble' calling, it may also contribute to the tendency to overwork and to the reluctance to demand monetary compensation for it (Gill 2009: 233). Within this context, collegiality, collaboration and dialogue seem to play second fiddle to individual ambitions. Moreover, worries and discontent among teaching staff are often framed as 'privatized anxieties that are understood to reflect on the value and worth of the individual, rather than the values of the institutions' (Gill 2009). This makes it even harder to resist taking part in the system.

The emphasis on individual performance, measured primarily in terms of peer reviewed articles and the acquisition of research funding, also fosters competition amongst colleagues and invites evasive behaviour. In a contribution to a Norwegian daily newspaper, Thomas Hylland Eriksen distinguishes two types of colleagues in the contemporary universities. The first concentrates on his or her personal aspirations, successfully so, and stays away from university business as much as he can.

Colleague B, on the other hand, is a sociable man, interested in what his colleagues are up to; he enjoys discussing the latest journal articles with colleagues, mentions relevant new books to doctoral students he happens to meet in the corridor, responds indiscriminately to any email that comes his way, encourages people and makes them feel significant, and generously shares his ideas with anyone who cares to listen (Eriksen 2006b).

Combining the two, he states, is becoming increasingly difficult and fewer people are ready or able to 'give for free'. Eriksen warns against the demise of the 'academic gift economy' and argues that any critique against contemporary academia is incomplete, 'unless it takes into account the profound disappointment experienced by many academics when they discover that the present regime does not encourage immeasurable contributions to the knowledge community (Eriksen 2006b).

Another explanation for the absence of protest is not related to increasing pressure, but rather to the reluctance of anthropologists to step out of their 'comfort zone' (Dominguez 2013) and to reflect on their own situation. This results in a situation in which anthropologists, many of whom are personally and professionally concerned with social inequality, and who approach peo-



ple as subjects who are co-responsible for creating their life worlds and not just responsive to larger structures, do not resist their own situation. Former president of the American Anthropological Association Virginia Dominguez warns us not to sit back in this ‘comfort zone’ of knowing we are ‘progressive (or liberal or left-of-center)’ and ‘committed to equality and social justice’ (2013: 395) while often ignoring injustices that are under our own noses. Many anthropologists have failed to examine the plight of their peers with the same concern. American anthropologist Sarah Kendzior reflected on this anomaly saying, ‘When I expressed doubt about the job market to a colleague, she advised me, with total seriousness, to “re-evaluate what work means and to consider ‘post-work imaginaries’”’ (Kendzior 2012).

This lack of reflection within the anthropological community on its own condition within neoliberal universities may, as James Carrier has argued, be attributed to the close relationship between neoliberal theory and the culturalist turn:

Economists were told that there is no economic system of the sort that the Keynesians were used to; there is only a mass of individual economic transactions and transactors. Anthropologists were told that there is no society or culture; there is only what increasingly came to look like a mass of individual human acts and actors (Carrier 2012: 125).

Limiting anthropology to a taxonomy of subjective experiences does not allow the discipline to consider the broader causes and consequences of social and cultural systems. Thus, as such anthropology is not in a position to question the individualist logics of neoliberalism (Carrier 2012: 125). Instead, it plays into the individualisation of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ without questioning the subjective basis and structural discursive power of such labels. Anthropology’s potential and viability are being stifled and anthropological resistance has been paralysed by its own dominant paradigms, which draw on neoliberal logics.

Students as customers: evaluations

Neoliberal education is geared to produce graduates for a competitive global economy while anthropology as a liberal science trains students to think critically and to empathise with social and cultural others. Time and again it has been argued that neoliberal universities turn professionals into ‘purveyors of commodities within a knowledge supermarket’ (Winter 1999: 190) and stu-

dents into consumers, customers or clients. This approach of students as customers has resulted in an ever-increasing emphasis on student evaluations. In one such evaluation of a course that one colleague taught, a student literally wrote that the classes were not intellectually inspiring and thus were ‘a waste of his/her tuition money’. This can lead to an environment where already underpaid and overworked teachers go beyond the call of duty to please their student customers. One of the colleagues we interviewed said that it had become standard practice in her institution for teachers to bring snacks to class for the students. She went on to tell us about students’ complaints that she did not answer her email or give feedback on essays during the weekends.

In some colleges and universities in which we have taught, the management had a particularly strong, positivistic take on quality control. In one college, figures and percentages shown in presentations during faculty meetings conveyed a fervent conviction in the value of quantification as a means to safeguard quality. Even though students often felt they were not taken seriously by the management (resulting in a near all-college strike that was prevented at the very last moment), their course evaluations and panel discussions were still used as the prime instrument to assess teachers and their courses. Some results of the course evaluations, such as ‘overall teacher quality’ were circulated publicly as part of the College Quality Report. The college management defended the circulation of individual teaching results on the basis that their ambition was to ‘make all (teaching) results as transparent as possible’ (personal correspondence).

In the Netherlands the importance of students’ opinions about their university and disciplines becomes very clear through the National Student Survey, which is published in a Dutch conservative weekly. Students are asked to fill out questionnaires about their bachelor and master programmes, and although these students are in no position to compare their own education with that at other universities, their evaluations result in powerful ranking lists, which give direction to university management plans. Universities have become increasingly worried about the results published in these rankings and we know of at least one university where the improvement of their NSE results has become one of the management’s official targets.

Besides giving negative feedback about courses, it seems that students often used the course evaluations to ventilate serious frustration, which resulted in, at times, painful and unanimous teacher bashing. Apparently students felt unable, unwilling or too insecure to discuss their criticism openly with their teachers. Paradoxically, a top-down management style combined



with a strong belief in positivist methods of quality control and so-called transparency has resulted in an insecure environment for both students and teachers.

Learning: excellence and diversity in an insecure environment

The emphasis on individual performance and excellence has not only transformed the work conditions and self-reflections of academic workers, it has also impacted on the (self-) evaluations and ambitions of students. These days, an increasing number of students ask us how they can get higher grades in our classes. In the Netherlands, this is understood to be a positive development. A culture of mediocrity (*zesjescultuur*) is being replaced by a meritocracy based on grades. We, however, shudder every time students ask us about how to get a certain grade, be it merely a pass or the highest possible. Grades and eventually diplomas seem to have become a goal in and of themselves and not simply a reflection of the learning done, just as academic publications have become the primary objective of academic research and not simply a means to communicate with other scholars. Sometimes we feel like we have become alienated day labourers churning out grades and publications.

Just as celebrity researchers with long publication lists, millions in grant money and television appearances command respect, so do ‘top students’ with ‘good’ grades. As such, academia has become a ‘machine for the production and distribution of attention ... and it is attention that is very often the resource at issue, not the scholarly value of what’s being produced’ (Van Krieken 2012: 2).⁶

After completing my grading one semester, I was contacted by a colleague who suggested that a group of my students had submitted a fabricated research report. Upon further inquiry I determined that the accusations were true. When I confronted the students, they were very sorry they had betrayed my trust and assured me it was ‘nothing personal’; they had ‘just been worried about their grade’. Concern about a grade had triumphed over ethics, their professional relationship with me, and the process of learning itself (personal reflection by tenured university teacher, female).

This emphasis on the importance of grades is particularly prevalent in LAS colleges, which advertise themselves as ‘excellent’. Excellence, a new buzzword in Dutch educational policy, highlights the exceptional nature of

students. In an attempt to move away from the so-called culture of mediocrity, special programmes for talented students (honour's programmes), and university colleges put emphasis on the fact that they provide education for top performers. Excellence is primarily defined in terms of high grades. This may invite cheating, like the experience above demonstrates, and more generally it can lead to a great deal of insecurity. Even very capable students often express doubts about their own intelligence and ability.

In one class I was teaching, a student who had been waiting to follow this class since she enrolled in the college said that she considered dropping it because 'everyone else was so much smarter than her' and 'she needed good grades for her final Grade Point Average' (personal reflection by university teacher, non-tenured, female).

The pressure to perform seems to have the power to triumph over intellectual interests and professional passions for both students and teachers. A colleague reflected on her institution's practice of publishing the best Grade Point Averages (GPAs), saying that some of her colleagues and the institution as a whole seem to believe that 'everyone can excel'. She disputed this idea of a level playing field by mentioning a student who has to work sixteen hours a week to pay her tuition; 'not everyone can win the race, but that is what the board of studies and management seem to think'. The neoliberal ideal of free and responsible individuals creates a competitive environment without regard for circumstantial or structural differences between students.

Teaching 'Identity and Diversity' at a LAS college

LAS colleges advertise themselves as 'diverse' in terms of both the disciplines offered and the international student and staff population.⁷ Liberal education has the potential to create self-aware, self-governing students capable of recognising and respecting other people regardless of class, race, gender or ethnic origin; as such students become fully human (Nussbaum 2003: 267). Social and cultural anthropology promises to be a liberal discipline par excellence; to study cultural and social anthropology is also to enter into a conversation about what it is to be human. It is 'about making sense of other people's worlds, translating their experiences and explaining what they are up to, how their societies work and why they believe in whatever it is that they believe in – including their whispered doubts and shouted heresies' (Eriksen 2006a: ix).



Ethnographic knowledge is both provocative and liberating; it undercuts 'common sense' assumptions about human nature and, as a sympathetic thought experiment, has the potential to emancipate us from mental habits (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007: 195). This 'great promise' of anthropology as a liberal discipline is being stifled by the comprehensive liberalism of the neoliberal university in which individual training for 'success' in the market economy triumphs over learning and the cultivation of critical reflective citizens.

With our faith in the potential of anthropology we, together with several other teachers, enthusiastically signed on to teach an intensive one month mandatory course about identity and diversity issues for all first-year students at a LAS college. At the time we taught the course it included 100 students per intensive period. These students were then divided into four groups of twenty-five each with their own instructor. Together we taught approximately 300 students. According to one long-term teacher of the course, college management has made the course compulsory for all students because: 'We believe students should be responsible citizens with the capability to be reflexive and challenge ideas'. Nevertheless, despite institutional dedication to the course, students were generally very negative about having to take it. One of our colleagues teaching the course explained this by saying that many students come to LAS colleges with the idea that that they will be free to choose the course they wish to take. The inability to choose goes against the neoliberal logic which turns students into 'customers' expected to make (free) choices just as they do in the rest of their lives in a consumer society (Clarke and Newman 2005). Another colleague observed that the students are often exhausted during the intensive course periods of January and June, after they have just completed a full semester of course work; one eighteen-year-old student we taught actually complained of 'burn-out'. This teacher also experienced students resisting 'talking about identity' by saying 'we just *are* diverse, isn't that enough?' A third colleague felt that the qualitative nature of the course met strong resistance, as the 'politics of science' in which quantitative methods are given more respect than qualitative methods weighs heavily on the students' evaluation of what they learn.

Technically speaking, the course was not purely 'anthropological' and our students came from various academic backgrounds. However, in practice, much of the content and approach was inspired by anthropological knowledge on diversity, reflexivity, knowledge production and qualitative research methodology. Our goals went beyond teaching our students about

identity and diversity; the general idea was to prepare them 'for citizenship in a complex world' (Nussbaum 2003: 265). We formulated different capacities that we believed to be necessary: our students would need to become acquainted with relevant theories and concepts that deal with identity and diversity; they would need to develop a capacity for 'critical examination of oneself and one's traditions' (Nussbaum 2003: 269), and they would need the ability to empathise with, and to learn from the so called 'other'. This capacity, which is referred to as 'narrative imagination' by Nussbaum, also requires the understanding that:

we always bring ourselves and our own judgments to the encounter with another, and when we identify with a character in a novel, or a distant person whose life story we imagine, we inevitably will not merely identify, but also judge that story in the light of our own goals and aspirations (Nussbaum 2003: 270).

At the outset, the course was divided into a theoretical component and a methodological one. Due in part to students' feedback after our first experiences, we reduced the theory and attempted to make the course more experience-based. We paid more attention to the process of interaction, reflection, the relevance of context (the city, the college) and of doing qualitative research. We also switched slowly but increasingly to an approach that included fewer lectures and more 'play', allowing our students to 'experience' theory rather than to learn it from books. We designed 'games' (card games, role games, etc.) that challenged them to reflect on their own place in the group/college/society, and to experience processes that occur on a large scale in the 'real world'. Although some students really seemed to enjoy the qualitative research group projects that were included in the course, no matter how hard we tried, we continued to meet indifference, resistance and in some cases (passive) aggression.

We believed we had prepared an interesting, challenging and fun course but time and again, and no matter what changes we incorporated into our curriculum, we faced a great amount of defiance and critique from our students, including very emotional reactions and feedback on evaluation forms, which took us by surprise. We perceive the resistance from our students as having different characteristics. The first was related to a resistance to talk about diversity. We intended to make the students aware of cultural differences between people around the world, and how (social) identities are constructed vis-à-vis many 'others' around us and thus to challenge them



to think about their own position and way of looking at those others. Many of our students referred to the fact that the student body consisted of young people from different parts of the world, who had lived and travelled a lot, and who therefore had already developed into 'world citizens' and 'knew all about identity'. They interpreted our approach as 'condescending' or 'patronising' as if they did not know how to deal with 'otherness'. One student for example wrote on his course evaluation form that:

Especially, the way how the identity teachers treat the students definitely has to be improved because we are studying at a university, the vast majority can be called 'adult' and it does not lead to a better atmosphere if adults are treated like kindergarten children who have never thought about issues concerning identity or diversity. Many ... students come from very diverse backgrounds, have been attending diverse schools and they have been in contact with those ideas for a long time which does not make the course useless for them, but the way it is taught at the moment cannot be called a benefit for the curriculum (student evaluation).

Although we tried to engage with the students and discuss their experiences with diversity, we also encouraged them to be more reflexive than many seemed comfortable with. Our challenges to their preconceptions were taken to be patronising, although this was by no means our intention. For instance some students conveyed a strong belief in 'self made' people and argued that 'if you work hard enough you can do whatever you want', thus principally believing in individual strength and the power of achievement. This made it difficult to talk to them about power differences between groups of people and different opportunities that come with different backgrounds. For example one student, who, when discussing different opportunities for men and women to take leave and/or care for children, stated that there was no inequality. As proof she related that she had been a nanny for two university professors who both worked fulltime. This student ignored our argument that not everyone is as privileged as her former employers. The internalisation of neoliberal understandings of society seemed to have closed off some students to many of the ideas we had hoped to discuss with them. Hence our attempts carefully to deconstruct fixed categories (such as gender, ethnicity, nationalism) often instigated fierce debates about the primacy of nature over nurture, the emphasis on individual responsibility for success and a fierce defence of national identities.

A second form of resistance we encountered was linked to dominant notions of what ‘real science’ and ‘real knowledge’ were all about. Unlike our expectations that our science students would be most critical, social science students shared the same ideas. The positivist take on science and on how research should be done seemed to be dominant in the institution as a whole despite its liberal arts philosophy. One colleague explained that the methods courses taught at the college are primarily based on methods used in the natural sciences and in quantitative social sciences.

Consequently the students labelled the ethnographic approach we followed and the knowledge it generated as ‘vague’, ‘not scientific’ and ‘common knowledge’. Used to being accused of pseudo-science by other disciplines, it still surprised us how deeply these notions were ingrained in the minds of students. Some described the course as ‘not academic enough’. As one student put it, ‘It sometimes felt like I was in the introduction week of high school’. Numbers seemed to provide some kind of security for our students (as we have also experienced during other teaching in other universities). As another teacher of the course told us, many of her students just cannot seem to understand the relevance of qualitative data. Despite detailed methodological instructions about, for instance, thick description, some still tried to base their research projects on quantitative data collected through, for example, counting the number of people interviewed with a certain perspective: ‘Some of them still count all sorts of things’. This perception was not limited to students from the ‘hard sciences’ such as chemistry and mathematics, but it was also shared by the social science and arts students. One colleague from the institution commented that all students seem to hold the belief that someone’s abilities in maths is a measure of intelligence. In such an environment anthropological knowledge is not considered ‘real’ knowledge. This reflects an institutional struggle to teach liberal arts and sciences within a scientific and social climate in which only one kind of knowledge is considered real or valuable.

Luckily, not all students resented our course. Some did indeed express their appreciation and admitted that the course had opened their eyes to processes they had been unaware of earlier. Colleagues currently teaching the course report that although resistance remains high, more and more students seem to express appreciation for what they have learned. This appreciation is often expressed months or even years after having taken the course, which can perhaps lead us to the argument that the complexity of what is being taught just needs time and the short intensive one-month course does not



lend itself to this requirement. Furthermore, research on adolescence and maturity suggests that until the age of twenty-five, young people's brains are still developing, making complex issues such as reflecting upon one's own opinions and position a difficult issue (Strauch 2004). Most of our students were eighteen or nineteen years old, some even seventeen. However, during the course one of our students wrote that:

I finally managed to open myself to the differences of other ethnicity and finally left the ignorance and prejudice I had (...) my biggest mistake is that I did not connect [to 'the other'].

Reading such a comment gave us all a glimmer of hope that our efforts were not all in vain.

Conclusions

In this article we have argued that anthropology in the neoliberal university is facing hard times for several reasons. By using our own experiences in the Dutch system, we explored the ways in which neoliberal ideas shape our students and ourselves as individualistic actors, responsible for our own failures and successes. The overvaluation of research output and devaluation of teaching, force academics to make difficult choices that often go against our own best interests and those of our students. Furthermore, the emphasis on excellence and the notion that universities produce knowledge and courses to be consumed by paying students, have transformed many students into calculating customers, who focus on grades and diplomas rather than on the process of learning as such.

Through a critical reflection on our own experiences, we have also tried to show that the increasing emphasis on audits, student evaluations and the devaluation of teaching have created an insecure environment for many; they have produced a form of insecurity that hampers a focus on sharing and exchange, but rather pushes people to work harder, to market themselves better and to engage in competition rather than collaboration and conversation. This is particularly the case amongst young colleagues who are working on temporary contracts, and among those students in institutions that market themselves and their students as excellent. This form of excellence is almost entirely understood in terms of quantitative criteria such as course evaluation scores, final grades and grade point averages.

Such individualism stands in stark contrast to what we believe anthropology should be; a discipline that shows empathy for 'the other', that looks at the complex relationship between abstract systems and individual experience, and that encourages self-reflection on the world as an integrated system, including our own life worlds. However, we have also described why anthropology, more than many other disciplines, is finding it hard to be taken as a serious academic discipline. The premise of positivism over subjectivism, and of numbers over qualitative data, renders our knowledge as pseudo-scientific and self-evident. Perhaps of greater concern however is the lack of anthropological critique on the system that is changing our work on so many levels. We too have incorporated the entrepreneurial ethos of a neoliberal age, which values individual freedom (ability to make choices) over professional solidarity and of commitment to and critical reflexion on our own professional practice. The personalisation of problems and the focus on individual success obscure the anthropological lens, which looks at social and cultural structures of power and depends on critical reflexivity.

Institutional changes are needed to create a more secure learning and teaching environment. These changes may be facilitated by a healthy dose of self-reflection. We hope that by keeping alive a discussion of the processes and circumstances described above, we will find other ways to rethink and reshape our position critically as anthropologists within this neoliberal environment.

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Notes

1. From an interview with Thomas Hylland Eriksen <<http://www.aibr.org/antropologia/netesp/numeros/0802/080202e.pdf>> (accessed 11 September 2013).
2. Contribution by Lorenz to the protest Symposium VU University Amsterdam: 'The managers' university is broke: It's time for change!', 25 April 2013.
3. The Amsterdam University College (AUC) is an initiative for both the VU University Amsterdam and The University of Amsterdam.
4. Even bachelor programmes are becoming increasingly focused on individual student research. All graduates have to complete a 'research' thesis in order to graduate from a LAS programme. This new emphasis on individual research also hides a money-saving agenda; supervision is poorly paid or not paid at all and students earn up to 30 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. The limited number of hours allocated for supervision seems to suggest that students can simply do what is highly professionalised work with very little training or assistance. The teacher becomes primarily an assessor as opposed to an instructor unless they choose to do pro-bono work for the university.
5. The dichotomy between celebrity researcher and teacher is neither gender neutral nor is it new. In the 1930s, British anthropologist Audrey Richards complained about her male celebrity colleague at the London School of Economics, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (E-P), in a letter to her mentor Bronislaw Malinowski 'Sligs [Seligma (Professor of Anthropology)] thought E-P got £50 more [a year] than me. He really has £100 more. I think EP ought to do a lecture or two. He doesn't do much work' (Gladstone 1992: 23).
6. Diederik Stapel, a Dutch social psychologist who was found guilty of multiple counts of fraud, has in fact since made plans for a book and a theatre show about his demise; attention and not science seems to continue to drive him.
7. Students (as consumers) often understand the benefit of disciplinary diversity as an opportunity for personal choice and not as an opportunity to expand the cultivation of knowledge beyond the constraints of disciplinary ontologies and epistemologies.

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