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## What Does Your Money Get You?: Active Learning as an Alternative to Consumerism in the Composition Classroom

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Faith Kurtyka

**Abstract:** This article offers a rigorous and researched look at how consumer rhetorics form first-year college students' understandings about life at the university. Examined in the context of consumer culture, students' narratives about university life illustrate how they marshal, appropriate, and deploy consumerist metaphors and to what ends. Using Fredric Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping," I argue that students rhetorically position themselves as consumer and as marketing strategist because these roles have significant standing in the contemporary capitalist culture, helping students adjust to a new place where they may feel powerless or disoriented. Following my analysis of these narratives, I suggest curricular methods that can be used in the classroom to question the meaning of an education. I advocate offering students the role of "active learner," a role comparable to that of "consumer" but which also offers students a vantage point from which they can shape their university experience.

Imagine going into a coffee shop on a crowded day. Customers have one goal, and that is to get their drink and go; however, at this very busy coffee shop, customers must buy several other expensive, low-quality, unwanted drinks. At [this university], students have to take general education requirements before they can start taking courses that apply to their major. Like the coffee shop scenario, this is completely unnecessary and quite ridiculous. Why should students have to pay for overcrowded classes that have nothing to do with their major? General education courses should be treated like samples at a coffee shop: if somebody doesn't want to indulge in a sample, then they should not be forced to.  
 —student essay, first-semester composition, fall 2009

*I hope Composition Forum isn't too hard to get into. The word count is only 8,000. Maybe I could just cut down this dissertation chapter and add in some more theoretical-sounding stuff. Do I have to read all of Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture? I hope there's a summary of that book online.*  
 —my thinking, spring 2012

"I just like the fact that there's competition. I like the fact that institutions of higher learning will compete with one another, whether they're for-profit or not-for-profit."  
 —Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, January 2012

In January 2012, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney offered a ringing endorsement of Full Sail University, a for-profit college in Florida offering degrees in the entertainment field. Romney lauded the school's ability to "hold down the cost of tuition" in an effort to compete with other colleges and universities. Romney was later taken to task in the media when it was revealed that Full Sail University costs far more than many colleges and universities (e.g., \$81,000 for a 21-month

“video game art” program) and that Full Sail’s chief executive was a major donor to Romney’s campaign (Lichtblau).

Romney’s comments point, however, to the influence of market rhetorics and consumerist logics in the realm of higher education. These play out on a national level as politicians offer market-based solutions to student debt and increasing tuition costs, on an institutional level as colleges and universities create campus spaces to please student-consumers, and on a classroom level, where students focus on the products rather than the process of learning. But while it’s easy to criticize Mitt Romney, a student union that looks like a shopping mall, and an entitled student, I also recognize how we as instructors are embedded in this consumerist framework. As demonstrated in the epigraph, I see the way *I* act with consumerist logics, even with respect to an article critiquing them.

Since at least the early 1990s, writing program administrators have spoken from their location within the university’s bureaucratic mechanisms to reveal how consumerist thinking plays out in various university practices. In a 2009 article for *Composition Forum*, Leah Schweitzer expresses concern that student-centered pedagogies have morphed into customer-service practices. Directed Self-Placement, a process by which students are given information about course offerings to choose their own composition placement, has the virtue of giving students responsibility for their educational paths but also puts students in a consumerist position where they can shop around for their best deal. James Zebroski illustrates how post-Fordist regimes of capital—unique products targeted to individual consumer tastes—determine the course offerings at Syracuse University, putting the writing program in a state of flux, always creating and shaping courses based on student demand. In addition to shaping writing program practices, Jeff Rice argues that universities and colleges purchase ready-to-use course management systems with little reflection on the functionality of these systems and what students and faculty actually need, buying into promises of “students and faculty working diligently in an idealized cyberfuture” (101). In reflecting on similar pre-packaged curricula for K-12 education, Kathryn Hibbert and Luigi Iannacci write that such products “ensure that teachers and learners are constructed as perpetual consumers instead of as agents engaged in relationships that allow curriculum to be negotiated rather than transmitted, and as such, they reinforce the idea that expertise is purchasable and can be found outside the context of the classroom” (725). Like Rice, Hibbert and Iannacci question the outsourcing of education because it devalues the work of teachers and locally constructed curricula.

Composition teacher-scholars have approached the issue of consumerism from a pedagogical standpoint, questioning how to critique consumerism within educational spaces that increasingly reflect consumer culture. Seeking methods of complicating the influence of consumerism, Erica Rand asks, “How can we build into our teaching a critique of commodity culture that offers alternatives beyond puritanical abstinence or a mode for the judicious consumption grounded in white, middle-class ideals?” (3) Bryan M. Kopp argues that because consumerism has become “the *default* mode for understanding the value exchanges that occur in higher education,” simply making consumerism transparent to students offers one method of critiquing it. Sean Murray suggests that students can combine their personal experiences as consumers with documentary films about consumption like *The Story of Stuff* “to unearth the . . . implications of our consumer culture in a way that is concrete and compelling” (74). In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, James Berlin offers a social-epistemic rhetoric that prepares students to be engaged citizens in a democracy; Berlin believes that by obtaining knowledge that serves the community, students will be less inclined to the individualism that characterizes consumerism (55-57). Russel Durst argues for “reflective instrumentalism” in the classroom, which asks students to critically reflect on the purposes of higher education. As Durst argues, this pedagogy “accepts students’ pragmatic goals, offers to help them achieve their goals, but adds a reflective dimension that, while itself useful in the work world, also helps students place their individual aspiration in the larger context necessary for critical analysis” (178).

While a good amount of composition scholarship related to consumerism has studied how it plays out in writing programs or pedagogical practices for confronting consumerism, what I find missing from this discussion is how consumer rhetorics form first-year college students' understandings about life at the university, as demonstrated in the student writing in the epigraph. This article offers a rigorous and researched look at these narratives—typically relegated to teacher-anecdote status—with the purpose of foregrounding them against the landscape of the consumer-driven university and consumer culture. These narratives complicate simplistic conceptions of college students as uniformly consumerist, describing how they marshal, appropriate, and deploy consumerist metaphors and to what ends. I focus on two rhetorical moves that demonstrate the students adopting the consumer role—placing value on consumer choice and viewing teachers as service-technicians for the product of education—and one where students appropriate the role of marketing strategist to determine the best means of appealing to a teacher-consumer. Using Fredric Jameson's concept of “cognitive mapping,” I argue that students position themselves as consumer and as marketing strategist because these roles have significant standing in the contemporary capitalist culture, helping students adjust to a new place where they may feel powerless or disoriented. Following my analysis of these narratives, I suggest curricular means that can be used in the classroom to question the meaning and value of an education. I advocate offering students the role of “active learner” in the place of “consumer” by re-connecting them to their original expectations in coming to college and giving them opportunities for becoming active learners. I argue that the identity of “active learner” is comparable to the identity of “consumer” in that it offers students an identity from which they can shape their university experience. I further recommend pedagogical action research as a way to further investigate the kinds of learning experiences students are having at the university.

The narratives I analyze here come from an assignment I gave in my first-year composition course in the fall of 2009 to write on injustices first-year students face in their everyday lives (see [Table 1 \[table 1\]](#)). This essay was preparation for a subsequent multi-genre argument where students actually created texts for their chosen audience to argue for changing the injustice.

**Table 1. The Everyday Injustices Essay.**

<p>The Everyday Injustices Essay</p> <p>Your job in this paper is to identify an injustice (or set of injustices) that affects you in your everyday life as a first-year student at this university. You should also identify the specific campus entity that has the power to change your injustice and pose several solutions to this injustice.</p> <p>To accomplish this, you must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify an injustice that directly affects your life at the university, as related to your position as a first-year student.</li> <li>• Explain why you believe this instance or situation is unjust.</li> <li>• Identify what you believe to be the cause of this injustice.</li> <li>• Identify the “other side” of this injustice. If, for example, the injustice is being brought about by a professor, see the situation through the professor's eyes. What are the professor's motivations? If this policy is unfair to you, to whom might it be fair?</li> <li>• Pose several ways that your injustice could be resolved.</li> <li>• Conduct research to select a specific audience—likely, a person, department, committee, or office at the university—who has the power to change your injustice.</li> </ul>
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Almost all of the injustices students chose to write on had to do with difficulties of finding one's place at the university—the exclusion of first-year students from leadership positions in student organizations, the late-semester course registration times for first-year students, or the requirement that first-year students take general education courses before they take courses in their major. To make the argument that these situations are unjust, students position themselves as consumers who must be pleased or as marketing strategists devising ad campaigns: both of which offer a powerful, active, and satisfying ethos in the complex and heavily bureaucratic university. I see this positioning as what Fredric Jameson calls “cognitive mapping.” As Jameson argues, contemporary capitalism creates a global economic infrastructure, which is too overwhelming, too disparate, and too diffuse for the average person to grasp fully. Jameson writes that this postmodern situation means that people confront “a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself” (“Cognitive” 280). Faced with the impossibility of using the lens of personal experience to interpret a globalized, heterogeneous world, people use what Jameson calls “cognitive mapping”—tools like art, theory, and political activity—to help us navigate the cultural and historical milieu by carving out a place for ourselves. Students use cognitive mapping to adopt two roles that have significant standing in the contemporary capitalist culture—the consumer and the marketing strategist.

## The University as a Setting for Consumption

Many students wrote complaints in their injustice papers about the various opportunities for consumption on campus. When students made an argument about these amenities, the root of their injustice was not so much that they did or did not like the options presented to them; it was that they didn't like that they didn't have *enough* options for where to spend their money. At the university, students expect a variety of choices because the university is a “setting for consumption,” a place that “offer[s] complex experiences, part play and part shopping, all brought together through a ‘theming’ of the environment, relations, [and] activity” (Sassatelli 167). The classic example of a setting for consumption is Disneyland, where the staff and animators of the space “coach” visitors in the way they should be interpreting their environment. Disneyland<sup>[1]</sup> [\[#note1\]](#) constantly reminds visitors that they are in “the happiest place on earth,” immersing them in what Steven Watts calls “a fantasy world where unique images and experiences evoke laughter, wonder, curiosity, and emotional warmth” (389). Choices for consumption abound at Disneyland—entertainment, shopping, eating—to contribute to the overall experience.

The university is also a setting for consumption: the student union is reminiscent of a mall, offering shopping for university-branded clothing, a movie theater, and a food court. The university book store has relegated textbooks to the basement, leaving the entry floor for commercial books, university apparel, a makeup counter, and office supplies (sponsored by Staples). We have a recreation center, residence halls resembling private apartments, and a plethora of student activities, including major sporting events. The university as setting for consumption coaches students to have positive associations with their college years, analogous to the way the rides and entertainment at Disneyland contribute to its status as “magic kingdom.” Working from the clues provided by the aspects of the university that resemble malls, theme parks, and sports arenas, students map themselves onto the unknown space as customers.

In the university setting for consumption, the students believe that greater individual consumer choice is the solution for an array of injustices because in a consumer culture, solutions to problems are framed as individual choices, regardless of whether or not the freedom of individual choice actually solves the problem. As Douglas Goodman and Mirelle Cohen write, “People do not agonize over

different government and community-based solutions, they agonize over whether they should use paper or plastic bags at the grocery store” (137). For example, “Rose”<sup>{2}</sup> [\[#note2\]](#) uses the words “selection,” “choices,” and “options” as central values of what the food offerings on campus should be:

The dining halls [have] only a selection of fast food, with very little healthy options. . . . As a result of this deficiency, the students are forced to eat off campus and go through their spending money or have no other choice but to eat the unhealthy food offered, having to deal with the consequences. The food at this school creates boredom and forces students to either spend too much money making their own salad at the salad restaurant or [choose] a burger or pizza at one of the less-expensive fast food options. . . . Having to worry about weight gain and money issues resulting from the defects of campus food, on top of handling new classes and a new social aspect, is not an ideal way to spend the first year of college. [PAGE #?]

In a customer-service rhetorical practice, Rose argues that sub-par services detract from the setting for consumption, adding stress to students’ lives. The consumer metaphor, however, doesn’t entirely capture the cognitive-mapping mechanism at work. Significantly, Rose is not just arguing that she wants the easiest path to a degree: I also read her saying that she wants to be supported in her learning experience, and she believes that on-campus amenities should contribute to that goal. Instead of the typical consumer role which might focus on the product of education, Rose’s argument about the lack of healthy food options indicates that she wants the university to help her in the process of learning, which necessitates healthy food and low stress.

Another student, Ali, writes her essay on the various “fees” added to students’ tuition bills. Again note that her argument is less that students should not have to pay the fees and more that students should have a *choice* about paying the fees. She analyzes parts of the university environment and determines whether or not she wants to pay for them:

Due to budget cuts, college attendees are no longer students, they are personal piggy banks for universities. . . . I have never taken the time to listen to the student radio station though I am still paying for it. . . . Those new plasma screen televisions look great in the main library, but I did not ask to have them [and] I am funding these kinds of unnecessary purchases. . . . Students pay a total amount of \$115 a year for information technology and library upkeep. . . . While students flock to the library to cram for finals, they are not the only ones with free use of the technology at hand. Homeless persons also use the library as a haven, but do they have to pay to use the new Mac computers or watch those plasma televisions? NO! Why should students have a mandatory fee added to the already sky-high tuition cost when just about anyone can walk into the library and use their resources? Since students are the ones who fund the maintenance of these resources, we should be the one to decide what our money is spent on.

Ali goes on to discuss the fees for using the student recreation center, the high cost of textbooks, and a fee for dropping a class after the first week of school. She locates the injustice of this system in the fact that the fees are “mandatory” and believes the solution is that students should be able to “decide” where their money is spent. Like Rose, Ali wants the university to provide a full-service setting for consumption, and she is able to identify visually and spatially the elements that detract from this mission. At the same time, however, Ali’s argument about fees shows that the various options for consumption at the university mean that the student is framed as consumer, an identity that obscures their identity as learner. Ali resents that the university sees her and her fellow students as “personal piggy banks” as opposed to students, job seekers, learners, or any other identity. Ali actually *dislikes*

that she is seen only in terms of her consumer value. In this way, she strategically adopts the consumer identity to argue that her demands should be met, but rejects it to deny the university the opportunity to see her only in terms of the money she pays.

## The Teacher as Service Technician

University marketing materials play a large role in shaping students' expectations for college. Mailings sent to students' homes during their last year of high school, the university's website, in-person and virtual tours, and first-year orientation construct a picture of a high-quality education that will prepare them for future careers. At the university where I conducted this research, for example, the website for new students advertises that students can "learn from Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning faculty in any of 20 colleges with over 160 degrees" in a "small community" setting. As a research university, the quality of achievement of the faculty plays a major role in recruiting students alongside a promise that the students will work personally with such faculty. Consequently, while students buy the product of a college degree, the faculty have the primary responsibility for delivery and upkeep of the product. In K-12 education, the public discourse surrounding teacher accountability also highlights the teacher as the central figure in the educational system responsible for successful outcomes, precluding other elements like institutions, administrations, communities, and of course, students themselves. Movies about inspirational teachers like *Stand and Deliver* and *Dangerous Minds* focus on how one teacher single-handedly "reaches" underprivileged students to reverse their attitudes about school, up their test scores, and overcome endemic problems ranging from drug use to poverty to racial segregation. One of the most popular documentaries of 2010, *Waiting for "Superman,"* portrays teachers as the hinge on which education turns: good teachers mean students learn, bad teachers mean they do not, "learning" being defined as success on standardized tests. All of this is to say that in the marketing of education as well as the popular discourse, the teacher is constructed as "service technician" for the many promises of education, pre-kindergarten through post-secondary. If the university is Best Buy, the major corporation marketing consumer products, instructors are the Geek Squad, zooming around town installing wifi, saving virus-ridden hard drives, and patiently explaining the difference between modems and routers.<sup>{3}</sup> [#note3]

This framework—the teacher as the service technician of education—explains why students see it as an injustice when teaching assistants (TAs) rather than professors teach their courses. Students believe that professors have special skills in the classroom that directly contribute to the educational product and so teaching assistants cannot provide adequate service. Steven writes:

Sometimes, the TA is not an expert in their field and they are in graduate classes themselves. Students do not get the full experience of a functional classroom from them. TAs commanding a classroom is unjust because the students at the University are paying for an education taught by professionals and are actually being taught by unqualified teaching assistants. . . . A lot of the times the TA will not know how to connect with students and this can cause students to misinterpret information as well as provide no motivation to try harder in class. This in turn will have a direct (possibly negative) effect on the role of the student in the classroom.

Steven's complaint here is less about *what* he is learning than about *how* he is learning from teaching assistants. In contrast to TAs, he assumes all professors are "professionals" who can "connect with students" and are "experts in their field," capable of providing "the full experience of a functional classroom." Steven positions himself as a consumer who has been promised a quality experience and has found the service staff lacking. His injustice reads the way a restaurant patron might write a letter to a manager to complain about rude waitstaff, or the way someone speaking to tech support on the phone might demand to speak to a manager who can actually fix the problem. In this instance of

cognitive mapping, Steven believes in a hierarchy of service technicians with varying degrees of skill in successfully delivering the educational product. His own role is that of a consumer trying to get the best service possible for his education.

When we storm into a place of business and demand to speak to a manager, however, we are really only guessing that this mythical, catch-all “manager” can solve our problems. Similarly, I see Steven’s complaint reflecting this same hopeful guessing. Seeking a solution for the disengagement that he feels, Steven pegs responsibility on “the professor”—a wise, fabled creature who holds the secret key to a quality college education. Because power flows through layers of bureaucracy, particularly at large institutions like the one studied here, students like Steven were often confused about tracing the sources of power at the university. Many thought “the President” was the appropriate audience for everything from campus dining options to general education requirements, without using the president’s name and often getting his gender wrong. One student, Jeremy, wanted lower tuition, and guessed that the people responsible for this were “the Bursar’s office and the Financial Aid office,” confusing the administrative tasks of these offices with the decision-making power of setting tuition. In an interesting conflation of high school and college worlds, Nora writes that “the university school board” is responsible for the cost of on-campus housing. While students’ inability to name a specific campus entity responsible for their injustices may reflect a lack of thorough research, it also reflects the lack of accessibility but felt presence of “corporate power” in our everyday lives. In discussing postmodern capitalism, Jameson writes of the “presence/absence of corporate power, all-shaping and omnipotent and yet rarely accessible in figurable terms, that is to say, in the representable form of individual actors or agents” (“Class” 856). Unsure of whom to hold accountable for the injustices of their university lives much less how to orient themselves towards this faceless entity, students establish an authoritative and familiar stance for their injustices by positioning themselves as consumers who must be satisfied.

## The Student As Marketing Strategist

In the previous example, the university was the marketer, offering a specific product to student-consumers. Once students enter the classroom, however, the consumerist metaphor can shift to where students see the teacher as a consumer and themselves as marketing strategists concocting the perfect advertising campaign—an aggregation of behaviors and practices they deploy in the classroom to create the impression they believe will win them a satisfactory grade.

As products need unique advertising campaigns to appeal to specific consumer groups, students feel they must perform differently for each instructor. Megan explains how this works with teaching assistants:

[Teaching assistants] do the ‘busy work’ that a professor does not want to do themselves such as grade papers and score tests. How do students know if what they are writing about is what they should be writing about? Even if [students] do manage to write about what is expected of them, different students have different teaching assistants which means one could write a paper with the same topic as a friend, however one might receive an A while the other receives a C- because the teaching assistants . . . have different grading qualities and expectations for their papers.

Megan’s frustration stems from the experience of playing a game with illogical rules. To gain the upper hand at this game, students learn the teacher’s “tastes”—what’s on the test, what you have to read, what the teacher likes to see in your essay, how often you have to speak in class, and so on.<sup>[4]</sup> [\[#note4\]](#) Erving Goffman’s theory of “face” provides some explanation for these student behaviors. Goffman writes that individuals analyze social situations to determine how they should act in a way

that will offer them positive value (“Face-Work” 213). When these performances—the sum of which Goffman calls a “face”—are rewarded, the behavior is reinforced. To maintain a certain face, an individual needs access to structural resources and knowledge of what behaviors are validated by the present culture. Goffman’s model is implicitly an economic exchange, where an individual offers a “face” that will help him or her acquire social capital. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman suggests,

Instead of allowing an impression of their activity to arise as an incidental by-product of their activity, [people] can . . . devote their efforts to the creation of desired impressions. Instead of attempting to achieve certain ends by acceptable means, they can attempt to achieve the impression that they are achieving certain ends by acceptable means. (250)

In some cases, then, the performance of the Good Student Face becomes more important than doing the work of the “good student,” just as a marketing campaign for a product tends to be more important than what the product can actually be used for. Students certainly take pride in successfully learning the correct face to present in the class, and in popular culture, advertising is represented as a game of competition, creativity, and skill at reading an audience. The TV show *The Apprentice*, for example, pits contestants against each other to market products in interesting ways. Reality show *The Pitch* features ad agencies competing for one company’s business by pitching different marketing campaigns, and the fictional show *Mad Men* brings to life the glamorous world of ad executives in the 1950s and 1960s. Nicholas’s (somewhat hyperbolic) writing below, however, reflects an ultimate disappointment with merely presenting the correct face for each class because learning the correct “face” is not necessarily the right or best way to learn.

A good example of an inane class would be the first class I had my freshmen year. The curriculum consists of random factoids that you are expected to memorize for an exam that range from being exclusively about the relationship between humans and animals to being entirely unrelated to the real world making them useful for nothing. The high-speed reiteration of slide show information never seems to end and on the first day I was forced to question my beliefs in the university. I contemplated dropping the class immediately, but [I thought] to myself “It might be a horrendously stupid class but it’ll be an easy A.”

In addition to the “random factoids” to memorize, Nicholas goes on to detail the behaviors required of him in the course to earn his easy A. Facing the confusion of different instructor expectations, students gain a foothold by setting out to learn each instructor’s preferences and act as marketing strategists so as to not feel like a victim to arbitrary rules in the class. But as Nicholas’s writing illustrates, at the same time that they are willing to adopt the marketing strategist identity as a means of feeling in control of instructors’ whims, they are aware of the absurdity of this role for the purposes of actually learning something.

Students’ marketing strategies, I would argue, are one way they stake out the university space as their own because they carve out their own unique path of success. Sometimes, students’ marketing strategies can interject and question the marketing narratives perpetuated by the university. In my class, this became apparent via a service-learning partnership I had established with a local high school teacher to increase the college-going rates at her school, where the majority of students identify as Latino/a and receive free and reduced lunch. The high school teacher and I received a grant to bring her students to the university campus for tours designed by students in my first-year writing class and to sit in on classes with first-year students. The college students had freedom to design the tours as they saw fit, and I stressed that they should offer the high school students their own, unique experience of the university.

Listening to the students give the tours, I was concerned that the way the college students were talking about the university reflected a view that college was only a game to play, as they shared the kinds of marketing strategies previously described (“Take Art and Architecture 101 to fulfill the humanities requirement because you never have to go to class”). In my conversations with the high school students and their teacher following the tours, however, I found the high school students perceived these narratives as a refreshing and honest critique of the college narrative that they had been offered so far: the oversimplified story perpetuated by colleges, universities, parents, and teachers that all one has to do is work hard at college and one can have a meaningful educational experience. The students’ marketing strategies interrupted this narrative by showing how college does not always meet one’s expectations, how it is not instantly gratifying like other consumer purchases, and most importantly, how students manipulate the college experience to make it personally meaningful and useful. For me, this moment reflects the larger point I am trying to make here: while students’ consumerist mindsets can be frustrating, they reveal exciting insights into how students make sense of the university experience, and while consumerist thinking may be part of the dominant culture, their consumerist narratives are deployed in complex and even subversive ways.

## Repurposing Consumer Narratives

I have argued that students hold complex views on consumerism. As much as they are frustrated that the university situates them as consumers before learners, they adopt the consumer ethos to complain about the lack of options provided to them as consumers in the university setting. They argue they are receiving low-quality, teacher-centered education while recognizing the capricious nature of that kind of education. They adopt various roles within the consumer metaphor from consumer to marketing strategist in often unexpected ways.

Because the metaphor of consumerism is a means of cognitive-mapping that makes students feel secure in a space they find overwhelming, a critique of consumerism in a student-centered classroom must be careful not to critique this power away. Such critique should seek alternate forms of power for students, like being active learners. Active learning has become somewhat of a Burkean god-term in both composition as well as the scholarship on teaching and learning, so I want to take a moment to define it for my purposes here. In 1991, Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison defined “active learning” as “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (iii). Bonwell and Eison argue that active learning connotes students doing more than just listening. They must “read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems” using “higher-order thinking tasks” like “analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (iii). Elizabeth F. Barkley identifies ownership as central to active learning: “to truly learn, we need to make an idea, concept, or a solution our own by working it into our personal knowledge and experience” (16). The “ownership” aspect of active learning means that students are able to fit new information into existing schema. In *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, John Bean presents strategies for “problem-based critical thinking tasks” that lead students to take responsibility for their own learning (5). As an alternative to creating exigencies for active learning in *my* classroom, I want to think about offering students identities as active learners in ways that carry on outside of my classroom. Because I am offering students an identity as an active learner, I want to discuss how instructors might be able to shape this identity to the extent that students can use it in other contexts.

For students, the identity of an active learner preserves many of the same functions as being a consumer—students have a role in the university and an ethos that means that they can ask for something from their education—as well as the functions of being a marketing strategist—they have the power to shape their educational experiences as opposed to feeling like victims to whatever the university or their instructors want to do. The students’ critiques mentioned earlier overwhelmingly

reflect a lack of power and control over their university experience; active learning offers students agency in the classroom and can thus be a means to overcoming some of the disorientation they feel in the new space. Active learning is also better for instructors because it alleviates some of the tensions caused by consumerist thinking like grade complaints, passivity, and a sense of entitlement. [Table 2 \[#table2\]](#) describes how active learning offers comparable power to students and how it changes their orientation to instructors and the university.

**Table 2. Consumerism vs. Active Learning.**

	<b>Consumerism</b>	<b>Active Learning</b>
<b>Ethos/Source of Power</b>	Have paid money, entitled to a product in return	Stakeholder in educational outcomes
<b>Orientation to University</b>	Seller of goods, setting for consumption	University experience is co-constructed, students take ownership over the experience
<b>Orientation to Instructor(s)</b>	Service Technician of education, Market a Good Student Face to receive a certain grade	Students are responsible for their own learning; Instructor is coach who guides students in learning

One way to stimulate active learning is to re-connect students to their original expectations in coming to college. I found that many students said that they *entered* college expecting to be active and engaged learners, but the structure of university life eventually made them give up on those expectations. Stephanie, for example, writes:

Upon entering my freshman year at [State University], I had high expectations. I was finally going to be able to study what I wanted to and was going to have teachers and classmates who were motivated like I was. So one can only imagine my surprise when I walked into my first class and saw five hundred other students all seated in one giant auditorium. It only took one fifty-minute period to realize how difficult adjusting to this large class size was going to be. No longer could I raise my hand to ask a question or make commentary on what I was supposed to be learning. Instead, I was expected to sit and listen quietly to the lecture my professor presented and hope it had all sunk in by the time our test over the material came around.

Stephanie has high hopes coming to college, but the new learning arrangements are confusing and overwhelming. Lacking a frame of reference for active learning in a large lecture course, Stephanie and other students fall silent. Another student, Sharon, argues that required general education courses create a strict path students must follow; as a result, they aren't required to think about what they are genuinely interested in. And even if they did consider what they want to learn, class selection is so limited by the time they register, they have to take what they can get. Sharon writes that when students sign up for whatever credits they need just to graduate, it begins an "initiating factor that starts the cycle of the 'I can just slip by' mindset."

Many come to college expecting to participate in class, get to know their instructors, and feel like a part of a classroom community. Even though these expectations change as they confront the realities of university classes, students still believe that the university should provide meaningful learning experiences, as illustrated in Rose's argument about the importance of healthy food, Ali's argument about being perceived as a student rather than a piggy bank, and Steven's argument about connecting to professors. To amplify this mindset and constructively confront consumer culture, students can be re-connected to their original expectations and think about what *they* can do to change their university experience, re-mapping themselves onto the university space as active learners. In my class, we talk about what students thought college would be like and watch clips from movies and TV shows about college life. [\[5\]](#) [\[#note5\]](#) In-class learning is often portrayed as students falling over each other to raise their hands, challenging or outsmarting the professor, and arguing with each other. In these texts, students are empowered not through consumerist stances but through engagement with learning. In my class, we discuss why none of their classes are like this, and we brainstorm some ways students can be active learners. To practice, I give a lecture on contemporary first-year college students, using many negative generalizations about the millennial generation, and I ask them to challenge my claims. We have an ensuing class discussion where they can also practice challenging their classmates. As a kind of homework assignment, I encourage them to "challenge" a professor that week, see what happens, and report back to the class. In line with Barkley's definition of active learning as moments when students fit new information into existing schema, we discuss how these active learning experiences fit or do not fit with the classroom expectations to which they are accustomed and discuss why being an active learner often makes one an anomaly in a lecture class.

I also observed that students' consumerist complaints were about receiving an inferior product, meaning they were getting an experience they did *not* want to pay for—the recreation center, teaching assistants, being the last group to register for classes, etc. They had difficulty, however, articulating what they *were* paying for, beyond the vague notion of a "degree that will get me a job." Students have paid some money for something, so they are in a position to argue that they want something in return, using the consumer ethos. Parsing out what they actually *do* want is an excellent way to talk about what getting an education really entails. The following are some questions we discussed to think about the disconnections between their expectations for college and the reality they've encountered.

1. What does your money get you? You say you want a degree that makes you employable, but how does that play out in the everyday matters of being a student?
2. What kind of a person do you want to be as a result of your college experience? What can you do to make that happen?
3. What is the goal of these general education classes? Do you believe in that goal? What can you do to help achieve that goal?

At this point, consumer metaphors break down because the model for education is no longer a clear-cut consumer exchange. In answering these questions and especially by brainstorming some concrete actions, the students effectively generate their own meaning of active learning, defining it in terms of the local and specific contexts of their other classes. For homework, I ask them to attempt these behaviors in at least one class and come back and tell us how it went. Our classroom becomes a space where they can reflect on the rest of their college careers and begin to shape their future identity as a college student.

Finally, active learning is characterized by creative and self-motivated problem solving. One reason students' complaints sometimes sounded like rants was that the students didn't really understand their audience. While students had some great solutions to the injustices, on a practical level, they needed to know more about how the university worked to find an audience for their injustices. This is

certainly more difficult than just searching on the university website. In class, we discussed some of the power dynamics that were new to students: tenure vs. tenure-track vs. adjunct vs. TAs, how high schools function differently than universities, public vs. private colleges, and so forth. They had the assignment to interview a university official with whom they had had contact so far—a department administrator, an academic advisor, an instructor—and learn more about the job. While it may feel hopeless to fully understand complicated bureaucracies, understanding that the bureaucracy is complex and is still made up of human beings trying to do their jobs is an important step for students to feel more power in the university space.

As I have argued, students use the consumerist ethos to create a powerful and familiar stance in a place where they feel powerless and disoriented. The consumer narrative provides a means of cognitive mapping where they feel they can, as Jameson writes, “insert” themselves “into an ever more massive and impersonal or transpersonal reality” (“Class” 858). Approaching this consumerism in the classroom must factor in the power it offers students and account for other ways students can feel powerful in the classroom. Rather than only identifying the ways that consumerism has infiltrated the discourses and practices of the university, I would call for greater attention to why and how students use consumerist narratives in the first place and how we might be able to help students appropriate alternate identities. Pedagogical action research, like what I’ve done here, provides one means of doing so.

While pedagogical action research typically concerns modifying classroom practices and reflecting on how learning improves, it can also analyze more broadly the functioning of disciplinary knowledge and epistemologies. In arguing for this latter approach, Carolin Kreber writes that “within the discourse on the scholarship of teaching, we read, hear and certainly learn much about *how to teach certain concepts better*, but relatively little about the kinds of learning experiences we hope students will have during their college and university years, and why we believe certain experiences are more valuable than others” (391; emphasis in original). Kreber believes that pedagogical action research, in addition to improving learning, can lead to a fundamental re-thinking of the goals of higher education. Similarly, while composition pedagogy may typically focus on how to help students compose, an alternate track might look at the contexts in which students compose and the overall learning experiences students are having at the university. This may mean interviewing students about active learning experiences they are having outside of the classroom—their participation in student organizations, or what they are learning at a job or an internship—and comparing these learning experiences to classroom learning. Investigating how and why students appropriate consumerism in their college experience is one way teacher-scholars can better understand the contexts for learning in the classroom and how we approach and address those contexts.

## Notes

1. Throughout, I will be discussing the pop-culture origins of the consumer metaphors. I want to be clear that I see students appropriating shifting roles in the consumerist metaphor with thoughtfulness and purpose. The references to popular culture are meant to illustrate the wide rhetorical availability of certain narratives and not to represent students as products of these narratives. ([Return to text.](#)) [[#note1-ref](#)]
2. All names are pseudonyms. ([Return to text.](#)) [[#note2-ref](#)]
3. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer who suggested this helpful metaphor. ([Return to text.](#)) [[#note3-ref](#)]
4. David Russell and Arturo Yañez show that when an instructor asks students to complete a writing assignment that is unfamiliar to them, students are likely to think that the assignment reflects the instructor’s “personal” tastes, even if the assignment represents a move common to the instructor’s field. So even though the assignment may reflect a common way of thinking,

writing, or performing in the instructor's field, it is new to the students, and so they think it is only a preference of that individual instructor. [\(Return to text.\)](#) [\[#note4-ref\]](#)

5. I use the movie *Legally Blonde* and the TV shows *Community* and *Gilmore Girls*. [\(Return to text.\)](#) [\[#note5-ref\]](#)

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