

BOOK REVIEW

JUGGLING RHYTHMS: WORKING-STUDENT LIFE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

REVIEWED BY:

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Taylor, Alison (2025). *Juggling Rhythms: Working-Student Life in the 21st Century*. Brill. Pages: 260. Price: 92.00 USD (hardcover).

Alison Taylor provides an in-depth look into the grim realities faced by postsecondary students in contemporary Canadian higher education. Through analyses of mainly qualitative data from a multi-year study following cohorts of undergraduate students in British Columbia from the late 2010s to the early 2020s, Taylor challenges consumeristic conceptions of higher education students by proposing new frames that attempt to encapsulate the struggles faced by students who work while studying. These four frames, student as juggler, high-wire walker, contortionist, and sword swallower, are used to illustrate the lengths students go to survive their degrees and compete in increasingly precarious Canadian job markets. This book is relevant to higher education leaders and faculty in Canada who are interested in postsecondary student success, because it spells out key obstacles working students face and provides a foundation from which ideas for improvement can be theorized.

The book contains seven chapters. Chapter 1 discusses how Canadian higher education and graduates' job prospects have evolved over the past four decades since Taylor was an undergraduate student, noting growing and increasingly diversifying student populations. Increasing tuition and student debt have prompted more students to work during their studies, take longer to complete their degrees, and do more unpaid work to build experience portfolios for

optimal job market competitiveness (pp. 1-11). Taylor argues that conventional discourse places too much of the blame for failure on students and not enough on "the myriad factors that are beyond their control" (p. 12). To incorporate both internal and external influences on student success, the book foregrounds temporalities, including but not limited to how students spend time, how time is lost due to setbacks, and the tolls of prolonged overwork, as lenses through which to view the working student experience (pp. 11-21).

Chapter 2 applies temporalities to counter neoliberal views of students as education consumers and investors. These conventional views reduce the student experience to commodified, marketized transactions that students must accumulate to survive (pp. 22-42). Student participants expressed opposition to the extent to which these views are embedded within universities, with one participant likening Canadian higher education to "processing meat" (p. 31). As an alternative to students as consumers and investors, Taylor proposes the idea of education as a gift, a concept drawing from Indigenous ways of knowing that foregrounds mutually beneficial social relationships inherent in knowledge sharing. Education as a gift is presented as a basis from which Taylor introduces the concept of student as a juggler to illustrate how working students must constantly

assess competing temporal commitments' value and risk to determine when and how much effort should be exerted to keep each commitment airborne (pp. 42-51).

Chapter 3 situates the study within literature on working students. Taylor challenges prominent strands of scholarship that focus primarily on how work during studies impacts academic and job market success. Taylor argues that these literature strands tend to conclude that students should simply manage their time better or find better jobs, actions which are not always feasible in contemporary Canadian higher education, and ignore external factors beyond students' control (pp. 52-75). Instead, Taylor draws from lived time literature that views time as non-linear amid multifaceted, competing student commitments impacted by systemic inequities. The lived time of participants who reported spending over one hundred hours per week on school, work, and other commitments is explored, with notable observations being that these students struggled to find enough time for school and sometimes tried to blend work and home life commitments together to cope, especially during the pandemic (pp. 75-87).

Chapter 4 analyzes cases where working students juggled various commitments at different rhythms and paces in attempts to achieve job market success. Many of these students had to work multiple jobs while studying, trying to gain volunteer experience and, in some cases, caring for family members. The students were often forced to stack multiple part-time jobs not relevant to their degrees to stay afloat. A couple of the students in Taylor's study came from wealthy families with multiple generations of university degree-holders who were able to provide them with the financial supports, networks, and cultural capital necessary to secure coveted campus positions and breeze through their studies (pp. 87-119). Regarding how universities can improve conditions for working students, Taylor argues that "[s]ocial markers of difference (social class, racialized identity, gender, disability, and citizenship), coupled with diversity of programs and prior experiences make 'one size fits all' solutions very difficult" (p. 122-123).

Chapter 5 likens the ways students balance their commitments to high-wire walking. This involves reorganizing priorities to adapt to changing realities and developing safety nets to restore equilibrium in the event of failure. Students with lower socioeconomic status, international students, racialized students, and students with disabilities expressed increased difficulties recovering their balance. Some students had to endure poor working conditions and housing insecurity that threatened to send them tumbling off the wire (pp. 126-168).

Chapter 6 conveys examples of how students maintain flexibility in their higher education journeys, sometimes even to the point of contortion to reinvent themselves following setbacks that interrupt their goals. Taylor combines contortion with sword swallowing, a metaphor for the suffering students must endure during their studies. Students reported that factors such as burnout, financial hardship, mental health challenges, and competing inflexible commitments hindered success in other areas and forced them to abandon initial plans (pp. 170-210).

In Chapter 7, Taylor reflects on the increasing precarity of Canadian higher education and job markets since her own days as a university student in the 1980s. She recommends more uniquely catered university supports that acknowledge students' backgrounds and struggles through the education as gift perspective instead of blanket solutions (pp. 212-230). She also encourages universities to recognize how campus employment can help students overcome success obstacles, suggesting that universities can "provide models for student employment" that set examples beyond the academy (p. 228).

Taylor's work is a wake-up call for Canadian higher education that advances the discourse away from viewing students as education consumers. While this book is a step forward, I feel that the circus arts conceptions do not go far enough to convey the realities of current higher education students. Having recently completed a decade of undergraduate and graduate studies in Canada, plus having endured the academic job market, I see that many of my peers who

pursued higher education were unable to find jobs in their fields, became homeless or housing insecure, dropped out, died, and/or developed severe mental health wounds. These classmates' lives were ruined because of institutional and systemic failures out of their control. Such sentiments are echoed by Taylor's participants, with one summing it up by remarking, "We're just like a collective group of tortured souls" (p. 188). I survived and found a tenure-track position, the only one in my PhD cohort to do so, because I was willing to risk everything by moving to mainland China, which poses its own set of challenges. Instead of metaphors of circus performances to amuse and entertain spectators, I would rather liken contemporary Canadian higher education to a war, because there are casualties, or, if a spectacle metaphor must be kept, gladiators fighting, competing, for socioeconomic freedom.