Out of the Ruins: The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces

Edited by Robert H. Haworth & John M. Elmore
CHAPTER 11

What Is Horizontal Pedagogy?
A Discussion on Dandelions

Authors: David I. Backer, Matthew Bissen, Jacques Laroche, Aleksandra Perisic, and Jason Wozniak
Participants: Christopher Casuccio (“Winter”), Zane D.R. Mackin, Joe North, and Chelsea Szendi Schieder

Introduction

Horizontal pedagogy is an approach to learning with roots in the work of many activists, scholars, and educators through their various encounters within teaching and learning (Freire, 1972/2000, Guattari 2005). This chapter presents horizontal pedagogy as a prefigurative educational experiment that emerged from the Occupy University in New York City’s General Assembly. This experiment drew together several traditions of facilitation practice in order to work against neoliberal-capitalist relations of production, but also to learn what other kinds of relations of knowledge production might be possible. The following chapter offers one description of the pedagogy’s history and practice during 2011–2012. The chapter first outlines the emergence of the horizontal pedagogy (HP) group in the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS), followed by an annotated dialogue from a horizontal pedagogy session which occurred in 2014. Through this history and dialogue, the chapter addresses the question:

What Is Horizontal Pedagogy?
This particular approach to horizontal pedagogy emerged from the initial call to action of OWS. It then moved swiftly to meet the concerns of OWS’s Empowerment and Education Working Group, out of which formed a group that would explore pedagogical issues during more than two years of workshops. To understand the formation of this group, a minimal amount of OWS context is necessary. An event description published in Adbusters in July 2011 read “#OCCUPYWALLSTREET: On September 17th, flood into lower
Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, and peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street.” This initial call continued with the following description:

A worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics is underway right now that bodes well for the future. . . . The beauty of this new formula, and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity: we talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people’s assemblies . . . we zero in on what our one demand will be, a demand that awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future . . . and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen.

The time has come to deploy this emerging stratagem against the greatest corrupter of our democracy: Wall Street, the financial Gomorrah of America.2

On September 17, the occupiers established a community through a complex organization of working groups, which used direct-democratic facilitation procedures centered on the daily meeting of a general assembly. The nascent community considered proposals brought to its general assembly, moving forward with actions after its members expressed consent. Hundreds of working groups emerged from the activists’ interests in this way, including a group called Empowerment and Education (E&E). E&E became the main working group for those interested in educational issues. A number of subcommittees formed within E&E, including Open Forum, Occupy the DOE, and the Occupy Student Debt Campaign. Another subcommittee, formed early in the occupation, was known as the Nomadic University.

Nomadic University (which changed its name to Occupy University in January 2012) drew artists, intellectuals, professors, students, and workers to its meetings. Members of this subcommittee formed task forces devoted to particular organizational goals for creating a university. There was a task force devoted to curriculum (what subjects, themes, or ideas would the university address?), a task force devoted to outreach, and another task force to analyze particular concepts and definitions necessary for the creation of an educational institution consistent with the Occupy movement. In addition to the larger working group meetings and the smaller Nomadic University subcommittee meetings, these task forces met weekly. The Concepts and Definitions Task Force (C&D) of the Nomadic University subcommittee of the Empowerment and Education working group held meetings to discuss the meaning and significance of words like “nomadism,” “university,” “hospitality,” and “emancipation.”

In an effort to stay true to the movement’s habit of occupying public space at symbolic centers of Wall Street and financial power, C&D met in
privately owned public spaces around midtown Manhattan. The task force eventually made Trump Tower on 57th Street and 7th Avenue its home. The group read texts and composed its own writings to create satisfactory understandings of the above terms, which it then presented to the larger Nomadic University. After a month of thinking through these concepts and definitions, C&D became interested in ways of practicing the ideas it had discussed. As one reflective arm of a project devoted to creating an educational institution, the group wanted to experiment with ways of learning, studying, and teaching consistent with its social and political values and those of the Occupy movement. The group agreed that different members of C&D would facilitate a series of interactions, using whatever techniques each member saw fit. Members drew from student-centered facilitation practices such as Harkness pedagogy, from the community of inquiry model of philosophy for children (in particular a model practiced by Walter O. Kohan in Brazil3), techniques used in Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as the direct-democratic consensus-oriented procedures widely practiced in Zuccotti Park. On the first night of the experiment, the group examined a passage from Sen. Carl Levin’s report (2011) on the 2008 financial crisis.4 At the end of the experiment, another member volunteered to facilitate the following week. The group did not describe this pedagogical activity as “horizontal” until later.

Pedagogy was first described as “horizontal” in the body of an e-mail summarizing Nomadic University’s first series of foundational proposals. Describing a pedagogical proposal, the author of the e-mail (North, J., personal communication, November 20, 2011) wrote: “Nomadic University classes would follow many different pedagogies—we wouldn’t try to impose one ‘correct’ pedagogy on every class. But in line with OWS’s general commitment to horizontal and consensual processes, we would encourage/stipulate that NU classes try to adopt a more horizontal and non-hierarchical pedagogy than conventional education offers.”

C&D used its Levin experiment as a model for this proposal. The group attempted to practice education that was “in line with OWS’s general commitment to horizontal and consensual processes” which it took to be “more . . . non-hierarchical than conventional education.” After this proposal passed, members of the newly formed horizontal pedagogy workshop facilitated interactions over the course of a month. Each encounter resulted in a new question, topic, or text that the group would study the following week with a different facilitator. These horizontal pedagogy workshops had two functions. First, Horizontal Pedagogy was an ongoing course offered by Nomadic University. Second, members of this workshop facilitated other courses that Nomadic University offered such as: Studying May Day, Poetry and Political Feeling, Radical Economics, Critical Walking, and Occupied Algebra.5 While members of the horizontal pedagogy workshop wrote down certain proce-
dures and habitually used them during Occupy University’s courses, “horizon
tal pedagogy” came to refer not only to the procedures themselves, but
also to the way in which the group had come to them, since the basic impetus
of the pedagogy, as practiced, is to learn, teach, and study in line with a
general commitment to non-hierarchical conventions and procedures, such
as those used by the occupiers in Zuccotti Park. Though the pedagogy itself
is contested and provisional (as the following dialogue demonstrates), before
describing its procedures, we may say some general things about its history.

First, members of the HP workshop mostly identified as belonging to
the Occupy movement. This sense of belonging created a shared sense of
purpose: protesting, demonstrating against, and manifesting discontent
with the “financial Gomorrah of America.” Second, the group believed that
creating an educational institution, with its own pedagogy and curriculum,
was a critical and necessary project for OWS. These two conditions would
eventually inspire “horizontal pedagogy,” a way of learning, teaching, and
studying that is committed to non-conventional, non-hierarchical educa-
tional approaches.

Procedures
These are the routines and procedures HP facilitators would follow during
workshops.

- **Introduction**: The facilitator or participants begin by describing the
group, the purpose of the meeting, and what has happened at previous
meetings. We answer the questions: **who we are, what we are doing, why
we are doing it, what we have done thus far**.

- **Check-in**: Each participant says their name and how they feel at the
moment.

- **Physical Education**: The facilitator asks participants to propose some
form of movement. Most occasions of formal learning require the body
be a certain way: sitting, hunched, tensed, generally still. This proce-
dure is meant to draw participants more into their bodies than they
might otherwise be.

- **Examination**: The group looks at a text. “Text,” however, is a very flex-
ible term referring to anything interpretable: the room, a poem, a piece
of clothing, a memory, etc.

- **Collective Questioning**: After examining the text, the group asks ques-
tions about it (and only questions, no comments). The facilitator writes
these questions down and reviews them aloud after the group cannot
think of any other questions.

- **Discussion**: Discussion requires that participants address the questions
with one another, ideally with an equality and variety in the sequence
of turn-taking so no one lectures or leads a recitation.
WHAT IS HORIZONTAL PEDAGOGY?

- **Final Remarks**: Final remarks are closing thoughts. Though the group might not have reached a definite conclusion, participants report whether any ideas congealed for them, or what understandings/questions they might take away from the interaction.
- **Debrief**: Participants do their best to discuss the discussion itself. They reflect on the dynamic of the interaction, who spoke, how it felt, and what it was like. Also, the group may find certain habits of speech that worked well or did not. Finally, during debrief, the group plans for the next interaction.
- **Check-out**: Each member of the group reports how they feel at the end of the interaction.

What follows is an annotated transcript of an HP session from 2014, held both as a celebration of the group’s friendship and camaraderie as well as to ask the group the question, *What is horizontal pedagogy?* As the discussion unfolds, themes of consent, ritual, process, ideology, collectives, community, capitalism, listening, and questioning emerge. However, the group arrives at the following critical position:

> It seems important that as we represent it, we don’t fix it. That it is this constant movement, and it’s a constant fight to preserve the right to have this kind of movement. And the best we can do is offer others a glimpse or a taste, so that they can bring that to whatever they’re doing.

**Check-in**

The “check-in” for horizontal pedagogy sessions situates participants in the space, acknowledging participants’ emotions and states of beings at the start of the interaction. This moment prior to examining the text recognizes that everyone approaches the process from different perspectives and states of mind. This may seem like a minor point of beginning, but it works to establish that everyone’s state of mind is of value and worthy of expression within the group. This moment also moves the center of expression and knowledge from the facilitator and the text to the gathered participants as a whole. This experience is expressed by Chris during this session’s check-in:

> Winter/Chris: I’m sometimes Winter, sometimes Chris. This can be very confusing, to know which one I am. In contrast to Jason, I love this part of the practice; I think it’s crucial for people to acknowledge where they’re at when they come into a space.* There are very few spaces in our lives that create that, and in my last few months of doing experimental forms of education with teenagers I’ve found that that piece was actually very powerful for them. It gave me some new ideas
and concepts about this form of education that we do, so hopefully I’ll try to weave them into the conversation. In terms of how I’m actually doing, I’m kind of a wreck [chuckles]. Um, I’m extremely disoriented. I’m feeling like I’m having layers of existential crises all at the same time, at the level of life, career, love, like, sanity . . . all at the same time. It’s actually hard to stay focused and present with you guys, but all the things you’ve said resonate with me, and so parts of me feel all the things that you’ve been saying.

The perspectives of nostalgia, excitement, joy, and sadness emerged during this check-in due to the fact that many of the participants were leaving New York City soon. The emotions that resonated through what was termed a developing HP “diaspora” can be heard in the following exchange between Jacques and Chelsea:

Jacques: Okay, which way? Okay I’ll go. This is Jacques. I’m really excited that everyone is here, the assortment of people that are here, it sucks that we’re all leaving, but I’m also not really sad about it. It’s just the new chapter, the way I’m looking at it. It’s as if there’s pollen being blown across the wind . . .
Chelsea: Like the dandelion?
Jacques: Yeah, like we’re all going to different places and we’re going to see things in different areas and I’m feeling a bit sad about my perceived drop in momentum for certain things, but, that’s about it. Feeling good in general.

Inclusion and the position of the other has been a continual topic during these horizontal pedagogy sessions and its relevance is present here in Joe’s check-in.

Joe: But it’s also odd to have these two different things happening at the same time, which is that everyone is moving away and so it feels like it’s a little bit of a moving-away feeling, which isn’t the same thing as an HP-feeling at all, but it seems really relevant, and that’s very much what I’m thinking about. And it’s also odd to not be moving away, given that I don’t feel like . . . I still feel very foreign in New York, like I’ve just moved here even though I’ve been living here for eight years, and I’ll be here for at least one more, and other people are moving away and it feels odd, like I should be the one moving away, but I’m not.

**Physical Education**

*For this session, physical education entailed sharing a meal prior to and during the discussion.*
Examination

Examination is time spent looking at something together, closely, as a group. Looking was focused upon a “text”—conceived broadly to include the written word, spaces, images, movements, experiments, etc. The text for this session would be the reactions of each member to the question: “What is horizontal pedagogy?” Each participant was asked to respond to that question briefly, after which, the group would collectively question the responses as a whole. We include each response in full.

Matthew: I guess I will start. The strength I got over the last two years, the empowerment I felt to come together to struggle through concepts, as a young teacher, as a student, as a person. I think that the HP approach was one of the few times I could struggle in the open and struggle with support. And whether that’s the people or the structure, I don’t know, the approach to HP or you all, I don’t know, but I ended up coming back. I’m curious how movement in and out of space, in and out of classes—classroom classes, not class class—how HP can support the ability to transfer in and out productively in a supportive way, and I’ll stop there since this isn’t a novel, but a distilled statement.

Jason: Yeah, the question of horizontality is important. It’s been critiqued in some interesting ways, defended in some interesting ways. And I kind of mentioned this in my presentation that David said he had recorded, but I like the metaphor of the horizon. One walks towards the horizon but as you walk towards it, it keeps getting farther away. Nevertheless, what matters is that you walk towards it even though you never really reach it. And I think this is an important aspect of the idea of HP: I’ve never thought that it is horizontal, but that’s okay. Because I think the attempt to try and reach horizontality is what changes the practice in some pretty radical ways. The only other thing I’ll say is that I really think it’s very important that there are attempts to get together and collectively question, then collectively think about these questions, with no particular ends in sight. The openness to create collective concepts that come out of these questions is an absolutely vital part of HP. One of the space-times that HP opens up is the space-time of collective questioning, collective thinking, and possible collective conceptualizing.

Aleks: I can go. There are a few things that I really appreciate about this process. One of them is that I, like Winter, actually like the check-in, which moves the process beyond the purely intellectual discussion. It leaves room to look at oneself and others, and that’s why I also liked the physical education part of it, there is an attention to different aspects of ourselves. I also like that it pushes the idea of what a text is, what a text can be, and what can
be used as a text. I, however, have a few questions. I’ve tried to use different parts of the process in the classroom, and one of the things I saw was that the check-in was important, because students have a lot of trouble saying how they’re feeling. Even though you specifically say that’s the question—and I think we all do this—they revert to recounting what they’ve done the previous day. So I think that’s important work. But I did have questions about horizontality and direction. Collective questioning is important as it opens up various avenues, but then I’m not sure that’s enough. Maybe it is, but sometimes it does feel like it’s a constant opening with a lack of direction. I’ve been struggling with that a little bit.

Jason: Just a footnote, because this is the second time someone has mentioned that they like something I don’t like—can we address this at some point? [Laughter]

David: We can get to that in the questions . . . [Chuckling]

Chelsea: When Aleks brought up the classroom, I was thinking about an anecdote, or what I was going to say. I’ve been thinking a lot about the classroom since I just got finished writing syllabi that I’ll use with students in Japan next year and I’m not sure how—it’ll be English language courses, but I’m not sure how good their English language will be. And I want to have challenging discussions, I mean they’ll be challenging since they’ll be speaking in a language that’s not their native language already, but I want to be able to have debates and discussions about things that might be difficult for them to talk about, and I want to create a safe space for this where I’m not directing the conversation, where I’m decentered, and so, for me, a question has always been facility, with language, not just a mastery of the subject but: how can I decenter myself when students will always be questioning themselves in terms of expression? That’s something I’ve been thinking about and that’s my big question for HP: when students have trouble talking about how they feel, that’s one thing, but when there’s this other gap in expression . . .

I mean I think even native English speakers feel this, the gap between their ability to express something in language that they’re thinking and feeling, so, how do we think about that gap in the classroom specifically?

Winter/Chris: I never liked the phrase “horizontal pedagogy.” I’m not sure I’ve said that before. When we started using it, I went along with it because it seemed to fit some of the things we were trying to do. But when I hear the phrase “informal learning” I kind of like it, or maybe “informal unlearning” seems more like what we were doing. And I think we run into trouble when we try to formalize it, and when we try to institutionalize it, I think that’s
when we run into trouble, when things get ugly, or tricky. But, um, you know I never really thought of myself as much of an education person when we started doing this, still didn’t seem like pedagogy to me—it just felt like people coming together about how they were feeling and then questioning the hell out of everything, and making that the basis for a certain unraveling and untangling of all the ways that we’ve been unable to see each other and hear each other and be with each other in a real way, so for me, it was always just about coming to a place where I knew I’d be in a group, in a collective, where I’d be seen and heard in a way that never felt possible before. And that felt like a certain kind of unlearning. And there was a phrase that Joe once said to me after we were finished, like there was all this talk about empowerment in Occupy—we came out of the Education and Empowerment Working Group—but it feels much more like disempowerment to me, in a really productive way, in the way that maybe, you know, maybe sometimes you just need to shut up and listen, and I think half of what I got out of this process is just having to listen to people and see and hear people in ways that we’re not taught to, and that we had to teach ourselves. Towards the end, it really became clear to me that the learning we were doing was learning how to be in a community, how to hear and see each other and feel each other, and not necessarily have to know where that was going to go. And I think that was scary. I think that was scary when people came in, I think it was very unclear what we were doing, we had trouble articulating it—I think we still do—but that’s what I think is the beauty of it. And I still think there’s a ton of potential to be unraveled in it, and a bunch of different directions to go with it.

David: It’s important for me to think about the history of HP. And I don’t want to say that it’s a new thing, but certainly something emerged, out of a task force of the Nomadic University subcommittee of the Empowerment and Education Working Group of the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City. And it was originally the concepts and definitions task force, I think. That feels important to me because something that people say, when I tell them I was involved in Occupy, they say, “Oh you know, I’m not really down with the whole disorganization thing.” But we were so organized! [Laughter] So, I like to repeat that as frequently as possible. And I think HP is a way of teaching, learning, and studying wherein the people who are teaching, learning, and studying have a share in the administration and deliberation of whatever it is they’re going to learn. It turned out that when we got together to learn, the procedures looked like what we’re doing now, but I think HP could look differently depending on whomever got together. What I mean is that the process of HP isn’t necessarily the Intro, Check-in, etc., but rather what happens when people get together and they are committed to collec-
Jacques: I feel a little strange weighing in on this because I feel like you all have been doing so much more work on HP formally, and at the same time, I kind of like when Jason and others talk about it. Right now, your definition, it feels natural—you know on the one hand I feel unnatural, like, “What do I have to say about this?” but on the other it’s like, this is what we’ve been doing since Occupy and, like we’ve said, people from way before us have been doing this. What I like about this is the ability to create a space where people of all levels are being really heard and everybody has a say in the conversation without pushing anyone else out, and that’s really important. But figuring out the best means of speaking to each other and learning from one another and disseminating information to others depends on the configuration of the group. So then, yeah, echoing what’s been said before, it just depends on who is there, and asking the right questions in that context seems to be the most important thing for me. Instead of yammering on, there’s a tendency for people to get together and throw out their experiences into a vacuum and then think that that’s magically going to disseminate knowledge to other people. Instilling a sense of self-awakening is probably more effective and the “asking questions” seems to get to that—the right questions at the right time. Those are my thoughts.

Zane: In my experience, HP was always inherently radical and political because it’s horizontal. The subject of study in HP, at least as we practiced it, was really itself. I think it was, as Jason or David said already, it was learning how to be together. I found that to be a really valuable exercise: how to be with other people and listen radically, and how to be honest with yourself with other people. I overheard, when I just came in, people talking about whether HP can help destroy capitalism.¹¹ I don’t think that HP is inherently directed towards destroying capitalism. It can’t be because destroying capitalism, or the desire to destroy capitalism, is really an ideology. And HP is inherently anti-ideological. It’s very real. It may turn out to do so, which would be cool, but I don’t see it directed towards that particular idea. You guys talked a little bit about inheritance, and I think there’s two sides to that coin. I think that in Occupy we tended to neglect our inheritances, and it has something to do with, you know, this idea of “everybody’s voice has value.” So we make David Graeber sit in silence down on Beaver Street just because, you know . . . which to me seemed a little strange.¹² But at the same time, I think there was a pedagogical value to reinventing the wheel. We built a lot of stuff from the ground up that other people probably had models for, but
we just kind of did it. And that was a really wonderful way to own things. Of course, when you build something like HP, and new people come in that somehow don’t like the structure or whatever, and want to change it, we can’t go back to reinventing the wheel all the time. So we developed something of a culture. Sorry, I’ve already talked a lot. I’ll leave it there.

Joe: I’m the last one but I don’t really know what to say. I really found the whole process very moving, but to say something more conceptual and not just nostalgic, I felt that . . . I like what David was saying about it being a way of different people getting together and all consenting to the means by which they were going to learn. But it seems to me also that there are all sorts of groups that get together and, because consent is a really problematic thing, and that individuals feel that they’re consenting to things that they don’t in fact consent to, and volition is a really complicated thing. . . . I wonder, it seemed to me that there would be a lot of cases where people get together and all feel that they’re consenting to something that’s oppressing them pretty badly. And I wouldn’t want to think of that as being horizontal, if by horizontal, we mean, a lot of the time, that it has something to do with the leveling off of power relations. And there’s an aspiration at least, as Jason was saying, there’s a direction towards equality as a value. So, if we all consented to being unequal, that wouldn’t seem very horizontal to me. But then it seemed to me also, since we had that emphasis on equality that I really value, there’s also an emphasis on freedom and the sort of openness towards, you know, questions that haven’t arisen yet, or answers that haven’t arisen yet, and I really value that too. But one of the things I think we got to sometimes, though not always, was not just not oppressing each other, which can sometimes feel like community-building, but often it can feel like community-dissolving, it can be a kind of libertarian thing that I’m always paranoid about, where we’re all just individuals consenting and never entering into any relationship that we don’t consent to, which actually doesn’t seem right because people are always in relationships that they don’t get to consent to, like being in the world . . .

[Laughter] Anyway, so it seems as if one of the things that was really good about HP, and that the phrase “horizontal” doesn’t really catch, but something that the word “pedagogy” catches, is that there is some commitment to trying to help each other in an active way, and that getting together might be a good thing. Not just getting together in a way that doesn’t oppress each other, but actually getting together in such a way as to help one another learn something about the world. Somehow that’s how the Occupy sense of mutual aid, or whatever you want to call it, or the older revolutionary thing of the brotherhood of man—getting into very gendered terms—but that there’s a sense, not only of liberty and equality, but the sense of actually trying to help each other, which seemed very important.
Collective Questioning

The typical educational encounter gives priority to resolution: as soon as the unfamiliar is presented there is a rush to escape it by resolving it, and this often prematurely closes questions off from deep exploration. It could be said, however, that HP prioritizes questions, and the process of questioning over answers and answering. Questions (if they are genuine and not merely rhetorical) put into doubt the familiar, they create fissures in the familiar, thus opening up an unfamiliar space of thinking and feeling to be explored. Importantly, however, it is not merely the asking of questions that HP prioritizes. HP, by carving out space-time in the educational encounter, a space-time that cannot be measured chronologically, nor geographically, but is situational and has a logic of its own, encourages learners and teachers to develop relationships with questions/questioning. Of this relationship, little can be stated in the space allotted here. Perhaps, Rilke said it best. To paraphrase: one must learn to live questions. But, we can also suggest that questioning in a collective manner is a type of collective poetics: it provokes the process of collective creative thinking about new ways of being, and in a political sense, such questioning often provokes people to begin thinking together about new ways of creating culture. What follows is a diagram depicting the questions the group asked during this session.

Discussion

Below we include a large excerpt of the discussion, which addressed the questions depicted above. The transition between questioning and discussion is typically fluid and opaque, so we include the transcript here at the moment when comments first emerged:

Matthew: The concept of idea-thing-entity-individual, keeps coming back, but I’m wondering: isn’t this a process? Is all this a process? We didn’t produce a thing. This is a community coming together, and that’s where the issues of inclusion and exclusion are because we think, or people think, it’s a thing. But it’s a process. It’s learning, it’s being together. Shifting that thought, we might be able to maintain open some of these other issues. And so, Jason, I’m reading Mr. Horton and Mr. Freire’s book . . .

David: We Make the Road by Walking? I love that book.14

Matthew: It’s basically a book of them talking to each other. So I thought this was a way to, that writing isn’t about . . . writing is talking. It’s not fixing an idea to a page, but a record of conversations.

Jason: This might be one of the ways in which it’s [HP] anti-capitalistic, in that—what Zane said and what you just said—it’s a way to prevent reifica-
Consent
To what extent do the steps (Intro, Check-in, etc.) represent the value that we all consented to? Does that go out the window if we accept the definition of perpetual consent, or is there something more universal about what we do? About consent: what does it mean to think about freedom as a collective rather than an individual? Do we fetishize the individual rather than compromising when thinking about collective consent? We made a thing at a certain moment, but we didn’t perpetually consent to it over and over again, and that’s a problem with democratic theory in general, did we fall prey to that? Is perpetual consent a fantasy?

Capital
What does HP really have to do with capitalism? Is community building a counterweight to capitalism?

Inheritance
There were all kinds of pedagogies and thinking about education from before, but why wouldn’t we acknowledge those? Why wouldn’t we recognize our inheritances? If we’re reluctant to acknowledge our inheritances, does this have something to do with individualism in terms of temporality?

Community
We were originally accountable to others, that’s why we named it, but we also wanted to share it with others, so how does a collective thing get represented and does that representation change the thing itself? Question about the process of naming: How does naming HP form HP, and how has that happened over time? Given that our experience with one another was to keep meeting with one another, when does a group become exclusive, inhospitable, and develop barriers to entry? Certain people didn’t come back to HP when we were doing it, and why was that? How important is it that HP be repeated with the same people? How do we use HP to build community? Are those even related? Helping—what does it mean exactly when Joe says “in HP you help people”?

Purpose
Education in institutions has a telos, but does HP work with a telos? Does it have many teloses?

Collective
People organize collective learnings in a politically-charged environment, but could you do it in a non-politically-charged environment—could you do HP outside of a movement like OWS? Does collective learning depend on a large-scale political movement? What is the relation between HP and collective writing? Is there an HP for writing, as in the first DROM—was that horizontal (or just collective) writing? Where’s the balance between including everyone’s individual desire and compromise? Is an equal and various sequence in the turns taken during interaction a minimum of sufficient experience for horizontality in pedagogy? How does the attempt to come up with collective learning like HP serve to bring down capitalism, what role does it play? Is collectivity something other than the fetishization of including every individual?

Space
With conscious decisions to work in certain spaces, how is HP concerned with the individual—but not just the community, what does it mean for the individual to go through this process? About communication: what is a text and what are the key components of the space necessary to develop HP?

Structure
How do we apply what we are doing here? How do you move beyond the informal context to formal spaces with HP? Adapting HP to existing structures: What about higher education specifically? Can it be adapted to university without losing its radical anticapitalist edge, if that is what it has? In the context of university students who have to take a class, but what if someone gets turned off to HP, what does that mean about the process? Will HP meet resistance in the classroom?

Consent
To what extent do the steps (Intro, Check-in, etc.) represent the value that we all consented to? Does that go out the window if we accept the definition of perpetual consent, or is there something more universal about what we do? About consent: what does it mean to think about freedom as a collective rather than an individual? Do we fetishize the individual rather than compromising when thinking about collective consent? We made a thing at a certain moment, but we didn’t perpetually consent to it over and over again, and that’s a problem with democratic theory in general, did we fall prey to that? Is perpetual consent a fantasy?

Capital
What does HP really have to do with capitalism? Is community building a counterweight to capitalism?

Inheritance
There were all kinds of pedagogies and thinking about education from before, but why wouldn’t we acknowledge those? Why wouldn’t we recognize our inheritances? If we’re reluctant to acknowledge our inheritances, does this have something to do with individualism in terms of temporality?

Community
We were originally accountable to others, that’s why we named it, but we also wanted to share it with others, so how does a collective thing get represented and does that representation change the thing itself? Question about the process of naming: How does naming HP form HP, and how has that happened over time? Given that our experience with one another was to keep meeting with one another, when does a group become exclusive, inhospitable, and develop barriers to entry? Certain people didn’t come back to HP when we were doing it, and why was that? How important is it that HP be repeated with the same people? How do we use HP to build community? Are those even related? Helping—what does it mean exactly when Joe says “in HP you help people”?

Purpose
Education in institutions has a telos, but does HP work with a telos? Does it have many teloses?

Collective
People organize collective learnings in a politically-charged environment, but could you do it in a non-politically-charged environment—could you do HP outside of a movement like OWS? Does collective learning depend on a large-scale political movement? What is the relation between HP and collective writing? Is there an HP for writing, as in the first DROM—was that horizontal (or just collective) writing? Where’s the balance between including everyone’s individual desire and compromise? Is an equal and various sequence in the turns taken during interaction a minimum of sufficient experience for horizontality in pedagogy? How does the attempt to come up with collective learning like HP serve to bring down capitalism, what role does it play? Is collectivity something other than the fetishization of including every individual?

Space
With conscious decisions to work in certain spaces, how is HP concerned with the individual—but not just the community, what does it mean for the individual to go through this process? About communication: what is a text and what are the key components of the space necessary to develop HP?

Structure
How do we apply what we are doing here? How do you move beyond the informal context to formal spaces with HP? Adapting HP to existing structures: What about higher education specifically? Can it be adapted to university without losing its radical anticapitalist edge, if that is what it has? In the context of university students who have to take a class, but what if someone gets turned off to HP, what does that mean about the process? Will HP meet resistance in the classroom?
tion. And, in another sense, when Zane was talking, I wonder if this is an eternal process of deconstructing, we’re always just deconstructing . . .

Chelsea: I wonder if this list [of questions] just represents our own obsessions. I don’t know if it’s because we are who we are that the C-word (capitalism) comes up, I don’t know if, this idea of the individual and the collective, there’s no way to guarantee that collectives are radical also, right? Collective behavior can be inherently antithetical to certain forms of liberalism or neoliberalism, but that doesn’t mean they’ll be radical. They can be really reactionary. So hearing the words that are brought up here: individual, consent, community, capitalism, collective, representation . . . there’s a question: is the quality or content of HP caused by this particular group that’s getting together and talking, or is it something about what we’re doing that these words come up?

David: I think it’s a really fascinating tension, Chelsea. In some way, we all think or thought HP has something to do with the fight against capitalism that we’re all engaged with, but it seems like at the same time, that it doesn’t necessarily have to be. If people were living in some other kind of arrangement, whatever it was, and they were getting together to think about what they didn’t know and new ways of being together, it could be the complete reverse. So, then there’s this question of “anti-ideology.” Are we just confronting our ideologies, and it just so happens contingently that we’re confronting capitalism, but if we were living in communism or feudalism, or whatever, and we got together and did this, would we be confronting those things? There’s something appealing about both of these options, but it would have to be one or the other, wouldn’t it?

Jacques: It seems to go right back to what Jason was saying, whether there’s a telos, right? So there’s definitely also the question about the repeating group or the exclusion or inclusion . . . yeah, this might be because of who we are, but it’s hard to tell. I don’t know.

Joe: I’d like to think there’s something anti-capitalist about it, but now I’m going back to this “it” language and that might not work because it’s a process not a thing. But it seems like this is a good moment for it to be a thing rather than a process, which is that: at least everyone who regularly turned up to HP meetings had anti-capitalist aspirations, and seemed to be part of the OWS movement, because they were in some way frustrated or resistant to or looking to challenge something like capitalism, or like “Wall Street,” or like “money in politics,” or these various things that we can express in this way, and it does seem as if in that context, at least the insistence on a certain
kind of collectivity, that’s not a rightist or conservative or fascist collectivity, but a more kind of different collective, a less hierarchical one, as if it had a political emphasis that was anti-capitalist, but that doesn’t really . . .

Jason: Yeah, I just want to say though that capitalists love this stuff. It’s so easy for capital to appropriate a lot of what we are talking about and practicing. Now I will say that the response to this appropriation, what maybe keeps HP from being appropriated by capitalism, and this to me is vital, is the non-productive element of constant questioning. This goes back to the point of what you were saying Zane, and to what you just said, Jacques, regarding telos. The capitalist might view HP as a great way to get questions on the table, questions which ultimately might lead to the creation of some creative thinking about new products or new ideas or whatever can be sold and bought, whereas what we were thinking and practicing placed the emphasis always on the questions, questioning. Constant questioning and questioning again, a questioning without end that might not ever lead to a “final” product. And I think that this might actually be a move against capitalism.

Winter/Chris: But I think again, that question I raised before about form and content seems really important to me here. Because the form of HP, clearly, capital would love. Absolutely, why not? But there’s the form of it, the content, which is the principles, the questioning, listening, recognizing the body, for instance, there’s a whole lot of it that productivity and capital would have a hard time appropriating. There’s also the context of it, which is that it was a direct action. We were in a public space talking about capitalism. So I think that there’s a danger that we’ve slipped into as we formalize it, just looking at the form of it, people coming together to form a community, and consenting . . . but we have to go with form, content, and context and take that all as one. Seems like we’re skirting around that, but it seems like a good moment to re-tangle those pieces together. So, in a sense, HP is a thing, it is a process, it is an experience, it’s all of those things, and if we just take one angle, and only one angle, we lose the radical elements of it.

David: So that was one of Matt’s earlier questions: what are the things that we need to make it? It sounded like you were almost gesturing towards the . . . what would be needed.

Winter/Chris: That’s what you were asking too, right, what’s the minimum?

David: Yeah, what’s sufficient for an HP experience? It seemed like you were saying form, content, space, direct action. Maybe the same people over and over again like Chelsea was saying?
Chelsea: Well, okay, just the space thing. I don’t know why it hasn’t been brought up, it seems so obvious from what you said, Winter. The public spaces, claiming the public spaces, and spaces that were porous where people could just come in. Now we’re in a private space, invitation only, nobody could just wander in and say something. Also, just the visibility of it, we’ve all had the same experiences, during a certain point of Occupy you felt reinforced by seeing things all over the city, even if you weren’t involved in planning them, so there’s a sense of things like this having gone into people’s private spaces, and then in a university, which of course is a space that has its own baggage, so I think that point about the public space was quite important.

Winter/Chris: It was free, it was open . . .

Jacques: There’s something that I’m really trying to figure out, and it goes directly to the point we’re talking about here, and that’s the question about the equal and various sequence in turns: Is that a minimum or sufficient condition? I’d remember times where you’d see clearly someone just walk in that doesn’t know the general assembly process, but they really want to say something. And they start to speak, and someone, very kindly, will say “Hey, this isn’t the time or place for that,” or “we’ll put you on stack” or “you can come back next Thursday at 7:45 am,” or some shit like that. The point is, and that’s happened to me too, the point is there’s a certain intuition in HP that I don’t know how it can be formalized, where you have to “read” people and understand like, this person gets a little leeway in this way, because of whatever their experience is—which is difficult, because how do you formalize that? Or this person gets, like, one of you said something about David Graeber not speaking? I don’t know anything about that, but it just sounds so perfect. It just sounds like people hyper-focusing on privilege, and then excluding him unnecessarily and saying, “You’ve gotten too much speaking time. You have all this experience, but shut the fuck up!” You know, those intuitive unsaid things need to be somehow acknowledged, if not slightly formalized, at least, given credence in these sorts of engagements.

Chelsea: Does the HP process help those things come out? Because if we say that we feel like we’re in danger of ignoring our inheritances, but is there something about this process that makes it possible for those things to come up? Things maybe otherwise would not have come up at all, so we can leave and be like “Hmm, maybe I need to think about my inheritances, or moments when I need to listen, or moments when I exclude someone because I think they have power in another context” or something like that.
Joe: I feel like, I really—those two comments seem really rich and interesting for me. It seems like what we’re talking about, in a way, is a kind of habit, or skills or capabilities, or habits of being sensitive, sensitivities, sensibilities, whatever you want to call them, that exist or don’t exist in the social body. If you want to talk about HP that way, that does seem to me what we were trying to do, one of the good things we were trying to do, which was—and this comes back to your point about reiteration—you can’t change a habit by doing something once, by getting new people, you have to go and practice it again and again and again. When DR was talking about learning to listen more, I realized I felt strongly that way myself: that I was learning to listen more than I had before, and learning to cultivate those kinds of habits that seem really worthwhile. I guess what I’m trying to say is that as a mode of radical action—or if you want to call it resistance to capitalism, coming up with anti-capitalist alternatives, whatever, however one conceptualizes it—cultivating a sense of how that’s done in a group, that is, for being sensitive to what everyone in the group needs and what the group needs, seems like a really valuable thing, and in any case a necessary thing no matter what else is also required, which hasn’t got quite captured with the sequence of turns thing, because it’s not about something that can be quite formalized, nor an effable thing, it’s just a set of habits and practices that actually have to exist in a certain mode.

Matthew: That’s my distinguishing between thing and process. When we had general assemblies, for instance, the process became a religion. Which then makes the process a thing. It’s no longer a social formation. That’s when I feel like we lose social formation. We lose the habit-forming ability in our process when all of a sudden we fix it and say, and I think we did have this in HP at some point, we fixed our process, and it became “the HP way,” or whatever. That is a tricky threshold for me. That’s where I struggle with it. And whenever I’m critically questioning, I’m always looking for those shifts—when we try to make something a thing and not a process, and I think that’s a very important place where we stop the ability to question. One of the values of this group is that we’ve not yet reached the point where we’ve stopped questioning ourselves. Sorry, not ourselves—this social formation. We’ve not stopped questioning this social formation.

Jason: I want to say though that I’m not sure we settled on a process, but we did decide there were certain elements that had to be included if it was going to resemble anything we were calling at the time “HP.” I think there’s a difference, because to say that there are certain elements doesn’t guarantee that there will be a certain outcome or certain processes to be followed. We said that there are questions, we said there is discussion. But it seems to me
that you could take those elements and mix them up in a multitude of ways that almost seem without end. To me that doesn’t seem like a process. Yes it’s clear that we determined elements that had to be included in order for something to happen, but I’m not sure that’s the same thing as determining how things should happen.

DR: Jason, do you remember talking about rituals of hospitality?

Jason: Yeah, that goes back to the question that Chelsea just brought up. I don’t know why we just don’t come out and say, for example, that we’re heavily influenced by Derrida and Rancière. Hospitality and the equality of intelligence. I don’t know why we haven’t said that yet.16

DR: Yes there’s hospitality, but there’s also ritual. Ritual is a codified form of behaving: check-in is a ritual process. You know, to say this is a fixed thing, we’re going to question it, that’s sort of undermining the whole mood that we set through ritual action. My influences of course are ecclesiastical rather than theoretical,17 but they work, you know? We need to go through, we need to pass through a threshold from the regular, everyday world, the sort of demotic, into a space that we could call a sacred space, in which hospitality is ritualized and radicalized. For me then, the check-in is one of the most important parts of HP.

Aleks: So then I want to go back to the question of how do you, and can you, bring that into an institution? Or, can it only exist outside the institution? You were talking about ritual and Winter was insisting on form and contact and space. Being in the classroom, I’ve always felt like I can only bring in one or two, but never all of those at the same time. What do you do at that point? Is that a lost cause?

David: I’ve had good experiences over the last couple years doing some of the things we do in institutional settings. Now there’s a class that I teach where I let the check-in go for half an hour. And students come in and they talk about what’s going on, but in terms of the purpose of the course, which has a lot to do with what it means to be a student, that ritual is a little more relevant. But it creates, and this is the second part of what I was going to say—theoretically it feels to me like what happens is, if you do HP in the institution, what won’t happen is a situation where the structures of dominance just dissolve and there’s emancipation or whatever. [Laughter] Rather, the moment of liberation is ephemeral, or evanescent, such that there is a kind of opening where the group has an ability to see the institution anew in some way. It’s almost more powerful when you bring it into an institution, I think. Because
when you get into this sacred space, that quality allows you to see what’s around you, and in other people in a different way, and that’s what it means to change institutions, right? An institution to me is just a bunch of language and architecture,

Aleks: And money, of course.

David: Yes, and money, but you can change the language and the buildings. Certainly, different kinds of things happen in the same buildings, even when the same money is available, and it’s because people start talking and thinking differently. It seems to me you can do that with HP. It’s really hard. Students don’t really like it, at first. I remember, when we went to Karen’s classroom at SUNY-Purchase, and all her students had a big problem with HP. But I think it can.18

Matthew: I came at this not necessarily, I mean we talk about the critique of capitalism, I think this would get into the universality of the classroom—that’s when the real sharp critique of capitalism comes, because as much as I want to horizontalize my classrooms, I still have to grade students, and that’s the space where the commodity enters, that they need to get a grade which gets them into their job. And that’s where my struggle is. And they know that the grades are there too. So it feels like lip service in a lot of ways. They say, “Well, bullshit. You know that and we know that, so don’t say otherwise.” So that’s where my view is: where capitalism comes in really harshly is the grades. Because that three credits is a commodity that is traded, and profited from in various ways. The way I bring HP in, particularly in spatial theory classes, is we constantly question the space over and over and over again.19 We’ll diagram the power balance, and how that room is designed around power over and over again. We won’t come together as a group necessarily, but every time we come into a classroom we will question that classroom: how it’s influencing our space. That’s how I’ve been able to bring it into the classroom—really question the space we’re sitting in. And getting them to see space. But that’s relevant to how I’m teaching spatial theory classes, which goes back to David’s point, where sometimes it fits more into the context of the class and sometimes it doesn’t.

Chelsea: How’s that just different from what we call “critical thinking skills”? Or something like that? Because teaching students how to ask questions, I mean, I guess that’s another way of thinking about that question: Silicon Valley loves doing something physical while they’re trying to brainstorm—all ideas are saved, until you’re on track to make the amazing product. But it’s a culture of late capitalism. But also in the classroom, what would distinguish
a process we would call HP or informal pedagogy, from teaching “critical thinking skills”?

Winter/Chris: That’s why the takeaway is the action piece for me. The idea of practicing the thing that I was involved with in a classroom doesn’t work, because what I was doing there was certainly not a process that can be brought into a classroom. It is a problem of naming: you name something and you want to reproduce it, but you can’t, so is it then that HP is something we suggest that other people should do? If so, do we then expect that they do all the things we were requiring once we’ve named it? It’s this big quagmire. And even challenging teleology, bringing in the body, all that stuff is particularly incompatible with capitalism, one by one. Really, when we bring it all together . . . we learned to listen to each other and be with each other. Once you start taking them apart it becomes problematic. And so, I’m having a hard time thinking about how this goes beyond even our experience: which goes back to the question of whether we can do it with other people, at other times, in other spaces, and if so, should it just get a different name? I don’t know. Tricky questions.

Jason: There’s an anecdote that I want to offer with regard to this question about the institution that for me provides hope, and also addresses the issue of inheritances. And that is: I was involved in work that is very similar to this in a different context in Brazil, everyone knows about this because I’ve talked about it before. And we were basically doing very very similar things, though maybe not explicitly addressing capitalism, with young students in marginalized communities outside of Rio. Long story short, we were doing this for about four years and the municipal government decided they were going to cancel what it is that we are doing. But the students themselves had gotten a taste of doing whatever it is we’re doing, and they said, “No, we’re not going to let that happen.” So what they did was they organized themselves outside the classrooms and got their teacher to do what they were doing inside of school, outside of school. And they would meet. But they went beyond meeting and they said, “No, we’re going to complain about this.” So they told their parents that their classes were cancelled. And then their parents went to the school board and the school board said, “Huh, maybe we should put that back in there.” So they put it back in there and then other students started to say, “Why can’t we do what they’re doing?” [Laughter] Other students started to say, “We want to do what they’re doing!” We called this philosophy, but maybe it wasn’t philosophy. So, then the school board said, “Yeah, okay, you guys can do this too.” And then one school heard about it from this school, and asked, “Well, why can’t we do what they’re doing?” And so in this area, Duque de Caxias, which has a few hundred thousand people in it, the school board and the city decided, okay, yeah, we’re going to allow
what’s going on at this one school to happen at a multiplicity of schools. And we’ll even have public events where anyone can come and do this. To me, this provides a gesture of hope, in the sense that: you get a taste of doing something like this, and once you do, you don’t want to go back to doing things the other way. This is obviously very idealistic, but whatever, we need idealism. It’s kind of all we can hope for: at some point if you get a taste of whatever it is that we’re doing, you fight to preserve that space.

Matthew: I don’t see that as idealistic. Because we have a particular space at a particular time in a particular culture that keeps us trying to do things differently, because we really like what we’ve been doing for the last three years. You just explained a particular place and time and culture that has done the same. That’s not idealism: that’s practice. And we’re a part of that. I teach differently now than I did two years ago because of this group. Not because of, well, for other reasons too, but that’s practice. It’s not idealism. I’m pushing back a little bit. You just explained two real examples of this working.

Jacques: Winning isn’t idealism.

David: We’ve set up conferences differently so that people at conferences can interact this way. Then other people at the conference, they say “this is great” and they take that back to wherever they’re going. It’s an interesting way to see the thing propagate. If it is a thing, the way that you were talking about Jason, the “whatever it is that we’re doing.” It’s like it’s there but, “I know not what.”

Winter/Chris: That seems important though, going back to your question about fixing. It seems important that as we represent it, that we don’t fix it. That it is this constant movement, and it’s a constant fight to preserve the right to have this kind of movement. And the best we can do is offer others a glimpse or a taste, so that they can bring that to whatever they’re doing.

Jason: The word “taste” is fundamental. I think this is a feeling. I think this is very important. It’s a feeling of doing something differently. We’re not just talking about ideas and concepts here. It’s a lived experience that’s felt; it cuts deep inside you, and it feels good, and you think, “Yeah, I want to keep doing that,” and I think that’s essential, to talk about the feeling behind it. Because I think in the end, that’s what’s going to motivate you to defend it, like I was saying. The idea won’t motivate you. It’s emotion.

David: What is that feeling, though? And it starts to sound a little religious. Like, some people might find this culty . . .
Jacques: Culty?

David: I don’t know . . .

Joe: I really like the emphasis on pleasure. [Laughter] No, because there’s something, if you like: the revolutionary value of pleasure is highly underrated. [Multiple voices say “yes!”] And people commit to things when they learn a new mode of pleasurable experience, and then they’re denied it. That’s really, that’s one of the ways in which people become radicalized. I mean they become radicalized through disappointment, but so often disappointment is not just “I was going to get this money and then didn’t” but rather “I have these capabilities that aren’t being exercised, that I could once exercise, and it was good.” So I feel like the emphasis on that is good.

Jason: Joe, that’s a great line: “The revolutionary value of pleasure is highly underrated.”

Debrief

Debrief establishes, at the first possible moment, a feedback loop of our session and a focus back toward process. The session does not end without a reflection upon how the discussion occurred, issues of process which emerged, and other concerns which may inform our horizontal pedagogy. This is not a reflection on the content of the questioning and the discussion, but a debrief on how we are practicing our particular horizontal pedagogy. Out of this debrief emerged the importance of pace and pause. The reflection ebbed and flowed, but throughout the debrief statements, the importance of pace and pauses can be seen in the following excerpts.

David: So let’s go to debrief. How did that go? It felt so quiet and civil and reserved to me. I’ve been noticing the differences between conversation and discussion a lot more since I’ve been thinking about it, and during conversation, particularly when I lived in South America, everyone is interrupting each other and breaking up, there’s a very dramatic shifting. And when it’s like that, there are moments when one person talks really loudly and everyone listens, and then it breaks apart again into two-by-twos and three-by-threes. But when we do HP, and I remember this too, it’s very quiet, with an intense focus on who is going to speak next . . .

Chelsea: I like that . . . trying to get away from the words like and don’t like . . . but for example if you do meditation or something like that, you just sit in silence for a certain period of time and you don’t do anything, but it really does color your day afterward. Yes, in conversation we’re not thinking about how we’re talking with each other, and in this space I’m really thinking about
it, and in particular at the beginning, with the recorder on, which we can talk about with the writing, I was very conscious of that. So maybe you can think of it in that way: it’s this extra, hyper-conscious space, but it probably seeps out in colors, perceptions of conversations beyond this space.

Aleks: I agree, one of my favorite things about OccU meetings was that everyone would take twenty or thirty seconds before beginning to speak and I really love that. First of all, there’s a moment for everyone to process. A lot of times conversations feel like a race to talk, and weirdly, I can notice that in certain spaces I start feeling anxious, pressured to talk. So I really appreciate the slowness and time in between people talking.

Jacques: Yeah, I’m going to double down on that. I feel like we don’t have many spaces to discuss or dissect what a conversation is or should be, or for what reason, what do you want to get out of it, and that kind of stuff. I feel like I’ve always wanted to have conversations like this, because they just seem to be the best in terms of getting everyone who is participating to get something out of it. For those reasons. I mean there are so many times where you’re with people and the loud person dominates, and people get left out of the conversation, or it’s the race, and even if you do race and get your point in, is anyone even digesting it? There’s all that kind of stuff. I feel like one thing I can throw in there that’s a little more helpful is: the problem with this kind of mode of conversation is, with HP, in a sense, getting people to do it. Because people’s first nature is not to sit and listen to other people. When I was in Detroit there were some meetings that I went to and remarkably, if all you do is write things on a board and then ask people, “What are the polite modes of conversation?” and people give responses and you write it down [chuckling], everybody follows it. It’s really weird. You get those kinds of conversations just by doing that.

Winter/Chris: There’s also an assertion of a certain type of culture. I have very strong memories when we were doing HP in Trump Towers where new people would come in, and they’d be really assertive, be loud, or speak too much, and there was a certain kind of normalizing that went on. I could see all of us who were veterans rolling our eyes, and they could see us rolling our eyes, you know, and facilitators would gently shut them up. There’s a normalizing process when you come into this space, which isn’t to say it’s bad, but it’s intense for sure, as much as I love it, I wonder, well, if it’s a space that I want, is it therefore, a space that others want?

Joe: I’ve really enjoyed this process at various points, and the waiting between people talking, that’s the vast bulk of my feeling about it, but sometimes it
can be a bit somber . . . [others say: Hmmm] . . . And I’m wondering if we could find the way to have the same “listen-y” kind of rhythm, that nevertheless was able to be punctuated by another livelier rhythm; a way of enlivening it somehow?

Aleks: I’m still going back to Joe’s question about how you can be slow and jovial at the same time! [Laughter] And I feel like I’ve been struggling with this a lot, with every kind of meeting, or being at a party or a get together with activists and radicals: like there’s always a certain kind of weight, and intensity, and I think for a lot of people that intensity is not always easy to handle. And I don’t know, I don’t think intensity is necessarily bad, but I do appreciate jovialness. I’m not always sure how to bring it into a certain space, but . . .

Joe: Oh really? I would be interested to see how long it took us to establish this slow rhythm. Because I’d be interested to see how the people involved had to learn it, and over what time period. My sense is that we learned it as a group slowly, under various circumstances, some of which were probably good and others of which were bad. Some of them were just being quite afraid of jumping in over anyone else, because in Occupy this was so frowned upon, the whole movement was really into everyone having their chance to speak and not talking over other people. There’s a little bit of a tension about it, which is in some ways quite productive because we say: let’s pay much more attention to this than we normally do, because normally we’d fuck it up all the time. I’m just really interested, and I wonder if other people. . . . We often think about the people who have been doing this for six months and then people who come in and experience this normalizing, but if we are talking about the benefit of learning different habits of being and modes of interaction, then that seems like a good thing: that a new person is not down to speed yet. That seems like a sign that the group is learning something, and though it might be bad because it might mean we become inhospitable, nevertheless there should be a gap between the group that has practiced something and a new person that hasn’t practiced that thing—that’s a sign that your educational process is proceeding.

**Check-out**

We end this chapter with the final procedure: check-out. Each participant says how they feel after the interaction has taken place.

David: I feel really good and this is a great feeling. This is just really nice.

Joe: I feel great, that was really great. I’m really pleased that it happened. And I’m almost pleased that David expressed it as a diaspora. I was like, yeah,
WHAT IS HORIZONTAL PEDAGOGY?

that’s a really nice way to think about it, it’s not like everything has ended, and it’s not like a wake or a nostalgia-fest. Let’s just meet one more time before spreading outwards.

Chelsea: I seem to remember in the winter, or something, there was, going back in my memory, there was an OccU iconography and it was a dandelion, with the little sprouts going. When Jacques said it was like pollen disseminating. . . . Maybe we can think about that, not in a cultish way where we’re all going to be dandelions, but maybe we’ll be like the kind of dandelions that disperse and become other kinds of weeds. [Laughter] I feel pretty good about that.

Aleks: You know for a really long time I thought that a dandelion was a live thing that was actually a happy lion [Laughter], never really understood why this image of a dandelion is such a prevalent image in the U.S., and like . . . [Laughter again]

Matthew: I think we found the title to our article: “The Dandelion.”

Jacques: I’ll check out. I’m just, there was a moment toward the end where I was thinking about other groups that I was involved with during Occupy, and there’s this prevailing thought that, “Man, I just wish we could’ve communicated better with one another.” And then I thought, “Wow, that’s what HP is.” Somebody said earlier “cultivating a set of habits that account for the needs of the group via its participants.” I’m paraphrasing, but that’s really important. I felt like the groups that I was a part of that did really good work, the moments when the good work was getting done, that was its apex. . . . And then the moments where things didn’t get done, where that was at the low point. I’m just really glad that I was a part of this in a tangential form through groups that practiced HP.

DR: I’d like to check out. I think that obviously HP works because it can get a bunch of people who used to talk, back together after two years. I was really looking forward to seeing everyone’s faces. And the conversation picked up just as easily as it ever did on any Thursday. So, on that front, I think it was a clamorous success. And I would hope that further experiments would be similarly successful. Also, in some reflection, as we’re all talking, I realized how much HP has changed my own ways of discussing ideas. And in really interesting, deep-seated ways. For example, I went to a conference, an academic conference, while we were still doing HP, and I decided not to read a paper. Everyone’s seen conferences where we read from papers and we’re wanting to shoot ourselves from boredom. I realized that the boredom or
stultification, the term we used to use, is counter-revolutionary, to quote some other guy. I remember I refused to read a paper. I talked. I had an idea of what I was saying, but I talked. So there are all kinds of ways, really interesting, and far-reaching effects that HP had on my own pedagogical methods that sometimes were not really directly related to what we were actually doing there, but it was really about militating against boredom, which is important. So it was deeply effective, and maybe sometimes in subterranean ways that we don’t even realize. The end.

Matthew: This is very comfortable, which I have to admit that, in the eight years I’ve been here, I haven’t been comfortable a lot. To be honest. And you guys, I’m very comfortable with . . .

[Significant pause]

Aleks: I would like to propose that we do this again in Miami. [Laughter] In the wintertime. Jacques and I promise to bring a hammock. And tropical fruit! [Laughter]

Joe: I second that!

Matthew: A yearly conference? I love it!

Winter: I was going to check out non-verbally with one of these. [Tips his hat]

DR: Does that mean we’re done? All right.

Jason: Opa!

[Clapping]

Aleks: Can I just say one thing that’s tangential, David, to what you were saying . . .

Notes
1 The term “horizontal” in reference to pedagogy has at least two precedents in the history of philosophy and education. The first is in Paulo Freire’s (1972/2000) Pedagogy of the oppressed, who utters it in a very different sense than we intend. Freire uses the word “horizontal” to refer to a kind of violence which occurs among the oppressed: when the oppressed oppress one another. However, Freirian dialogical pedagogy, in its attempt to revolutionize oppressive relations, does seek to “equalize” the roles of teacher and student in a way that may bring the concept of horizontality to mind. For example, Freire calls for “teachers-students” to learn
 WHAT IS HORIZONTAL PEDAGOGY? 

With “students-teachers” in dialogue, rather than teachers talking to students in a banking model of education. We also understand horizontality in education as a pedagogical approach which counters oppressive relations, though we do not mean the term exactly the way Freire did. The other usage is in Felix Guattari’s (2004) *Three ecologies*, which includes a concept of “tranversality” very close in kind to “horizontality.” The way in which we mean the term may be found in two recent articles on educational practices of the Occupy Wall Street movement: Beery, T., Fischer, N., Greenberg, A., & Polendo, A. (2013). “Occupy museums as public pedagogy and justice work.” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 29(2); and DiSalvo, J. (2013). “Political education—Occupy Wall Street’s first year.” *Radical Teacher*, (96), 6–15. For further research on horizontalism generally see the work of Marina Sitrin, particularly: *Horizontalism: Voices of popular power in Argentina*. AK Press, 2006; *Everyday revolutions: Horizontalism and autonomy in Argentina*. Zed Books, 2012; “Horizontalism and the Occupy movements.” *Dissent* 59.2 (2012): 74–75.


For an archive of courses offered by the Occupy University, see http://university.nycga.net.

The following is taken from a document written in 2012 for use during workshops.


Earlier in the process, Wozniak expressed some misgivings about the check-in procedure, as well as the physical education procedure. In both cases, he takes issue with compelling, or putting pressure on, members of a group to say how they’re feeling or to do things with their bodies, which recalls the forced participation of schooling.

Wozniak spoke briefly at a StrikeDebt meeting about HP, which Backer recorded. StrikeDebt is an offshoot organization of OWS groups devoted to the politicization of debt.

This phrase “share in the administration and deliberation” is a paraphrase of one of Aristotle’s articulations of democracy in *Politics*, 1261b.

Mackin came late to the discussion and is responding, in this comment, to a moment of the dialogue that happened as he entered. Though he came during the discussion, we asked him to describe HP as we had done earlier, and we have inserted his remarks in the examination section to keep the flow of the written document.

Anthropologist David Graeber was involved in many aspects of OWS, including Occupy University events and discussions.


The discussion took place at one of the participants’ apartments in New York City.


Zane/Sage is a scholar of medieval Italian literature.

“Karen” is Dr. Karen Baird, a professor of political science at SUNY–Purchase. Dr. Baird was a co-founder of Occupy University and a participant in many HP sessions. On the occasion referred to here, Dr. Baird dedicated a day at the beginning of a course on race and politics to pedagogy and communication. Backer and Emily Coralayne, a graduate of Purchase who had studied with Dr. Baird, facilitated an HP session with students at Purchase’s campus. This session was part of a “fall campaign” in 2012 where members of the HP workshop facilitated discussions at universities in the New York area, including Bard College and Teachers College.

Bissen is an architect and the courses referred to were taught at the Parsons School for Design.