CHAPTER 9

Teaching Anarchism by Practicing Anarchy: Reflections on Facilitating the Student-Creation of a College Course

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Introduction

What would happen if a college instructor asked students to design their own syllabus, figure out what they wanted to learn, and run a class on their own? In other words, how would a classroom work if established on anarchist principles? I conducted my own socio-pedagogical experiment within a class on the subject of anarchism to answer these very questions.¹ I wanted to know if the daily practice of anarchy within a course could actually help students to learn more about anarchism (and even become anarchist).

Much teaching scholarship has focused on student learning through service learning projects outside the classroom that make course subject matter “come alive,” but very little research has been done on how students learn when the course structure is designed to help them learn about a particular subject. This paper presents preliminary findings and reflections on one attempt to do this at a large research-level university in the U.S. Midwest. I conclude that while most students expressed a favorable opinion of the class structure, they also had many concerns and frustrations with its many challenges (e.g., lack of direction and the challenge of making collective decisions).

In 2010, I taught a student-requested course, called the Sociology of Anarchism. Some students I knew from a local bike ride called Critical Mass, with whom I had occasionally discussed anarchism, approached me about teaching a class on the subject. Since no similar class existed at the university, I agreed. The interim chair of the Department of Sociology generously offered to host the class as a special topics course. The students’ request indicates that anarchism has been a relatively “hot” subject during the last decade, due
to the anarchist movement’s growing prominence throughout the world and increased visibility in the mass media.

I identify as an anarchist and as a public sociologist, and I sought to share the many ideas and practices of anarchism with my students. To do this, I wanted students to experience anarchism firsthand in a challenging learning environment. There have undoubtedly been university-level classes that have included or even focused explicitly on anarchism, but to my knowledge none have attempted to practice anarchism in the classroom. To rectify this gaping chasm between knowledge and experience, this paper discusses the possibilities for alternative, anarchist learning techniques in college classrooms. What are the opportunities for creating an empowered, self-managed learning environment for students? Specifically, I analyze the varied results and outcomes of this experiential learning course on anarchism. First, I situate the anarchist tradition in respect to sociology (my professional discipline), society, higher education, and learning.

**Anarchist Theories and Anarchist Education**

Anarchism and sociology share common origins in the modernism of the Enlightenment (Purkis, 2004). Although the two share some common roots, anarchism and sociology have had starkly different domains of influence and objectives. Whereas post-Durkheim sociology mainly sought to understand and manage society, anarchism sought to transform society through the maximization of human freedom (both individual and collective). Like sociology, anarchism has been founded upon both classical liberal and radical aspirations. But modern sociology has been driven by the scientific method and academic interests, while anarchism—in its classical and modern versions—has been led by certain key values, which guide movement participants (Williams & Shantz, 2011).

The values of anarchism stand in opposition to the major institutions that dominated social life during the mid-nineteenth century including hierarchically organized religions, the centralized nation-state, and industrial capitalism (see Dolgoff, 1996; Goldman, 1969; Malatesta, 1995). The traditional aspirations of classical anarchists from this time period have been broadened, and contemporary anarchists seek alternatives to structures and manifestations of patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, bureaucratization, ecological destruction, and other relations that they argue inhibit human freedom (Ward, 1996; Ehrlich, 1996; Milstein, 2010).

In the place of domination, authority, and centralization, anarchists sought (and continue to seek) to transform the social order to create horizontal, decentralized, cooperative, and egalitarian relationships. These values are represented in several key ideas. Anarchism is premised upon a strong form of anti-authoritarianism: no one should be able to tell others what to
do or be able to coerce others (e.g., employers, government officials, religious leaders, teachers and principals, military officers, and police). In place of authority figures, anarchists value self-management. People are capable of determining, and should determine, for themselves what they do and when. Individuals should be able to reserve the ultimate authority to decide something for themselves, and not have to rely on bosses or experts. Since individual freedom requires others’ help, anarchists also value egalitarian cooperation. People are born equals and should be able to help each other for the common good (i.e., “mutual aid”). Such cooperation requires direct democracy, where people can participate together in such a way that individual and collective needs and responsibilities are satisfied. It is more efficient, empowering, and practical to do something yourself (and collectively with others) than ask or wait for someone else in a higher rank to do it for you. Thus, anarchism prioritizes the worth of direct action, as opposed to indirect, representative action taken on behalf of others.

Most major institutions, including education, have found themselves in anarchism’s analytical crosshairs. Anarchists believe that the formal institutions of education tend to be premised upon domination and do not serve the interests of students or learners but rather those of elites. For example, Paul Goodman (1960) argued that the American education system trains students for ends determined by the dominant social system, not the students’ own interests. Anarchist educators William Godwin, Francisco Ferrer, and Ivan Illich argued that compulsory, mass education has generally served the purposes of societal elites. Thus, the intention and structural result of such education is to instill obedience to capitalists within the labor market and patriotism toward nation-states (Spring, 1998). While most criticism has targeted primary and secondary education, anarchists have also focused upon universities: Martin (1998) has described the ways in which higher education acts as a complex system of interlocking forms of domination, each resulting in constrained, stunted, and non-free participants.

Anarchist responses to the authoritarian character of standard education do not preclude their agreement with valuing learning, socialization, and knowledge acquisition. Instead, education ought to be motivated and driven by different logics, while being conducted in far different, more liberatory ways. Deschooling has been one prominent position for anarchists: thus Illich (1970) argued for avoiding formal education altogether, perhaps instead pursuing homeschooling or learning in freer environments. Anarchists have experimented with many different types of environments. For example, teach-ins and “skill share” sessions allow people to directly interact with other interested learners and share ideas, without a hierarchical authority figure, while focused on a topic of practical concern. Radical study groups are another space for learning to take place (Rouhani, 2012). Others have organ-
ized more permanent projects called “free skools” where learning takes place in a non-hierarchical environment away from official education sites, among learners who want to be there (not have to be there) and want knowledge rather than a degree or a job (Antliff, 2006). Classical-era anarchists actually developed sizable school systems of this character. The “Modern Schools,” which provided secular education for working-class children in a liberal and class-conscious environment, are an example from the U.S. (Avrich, 2006).

Anarchist influence can also be found in U.S. universities. During the late 1960s and 1970s, anarchists projected radical New Left ideas into the student movement, influencing both the occupations of university buildings and the foundation of alternative education institutions, such as the anarchist Tolstoy College within the State University of New York at Buffalo. Of particular relevance in this history is the tradition of anarcho-syndicalism which argues that workers ought to try to gain control over their own labor and workplaces (Rocker, 2004). These syndicalist ideas were promoted by non-anarchist New Leftist Carl Davidson (1990) in his essay “Student Syndicalism.” According to student syndicalism, learners should control university decision-making, abolish the grading system, and thoroughly incorporate the ideology of participatory democracy. Anarcho-syndicalist ideas applied to an educational setting suggest that students ought to be in control: learning is their responsibility, their project, and done for their own reasons. In other words, learning needs to be controlled, executed, and inspired by students themselves.²

Anarchist activists have developed practical techniques for working collaboratively. By prioritizing direct democracy, anarchists value the need for large numbers of people to be empowered to collectively clarify ideas, stake out positions, and work with each other. When many people are involved in direct democracy, anarchists prefer “popular assemblies” that are run by popular will, not by the direction or manipulation of leaders. Preferably, people can find ways of coming to a consensus in decision-making. To practice consensus decision-making, activists have created processes and techniques that help make the decision-making time and space as egalitarian, group-centered, empowering, and effective as possible. A key contribution here is the structural process of consensus-building, spatial tactics (like sitting in circles), small “break-out” groups, a reconciliation method for dealing with minority dissent, and the creation of formal (yet non-authoritarian and rotating) roles including facilitators, timekeepers, and scribes (see Butler & Rothstein, 1991; Cornell, 2011; Gelderloos, 2006). The types of organization desired by anarchists are those that deliberately create such egalitarian, non-coercive, and participatory structures and processes. The anarchistic traditions of student syndicalism and direct democracy were intentionally employed in the aforementioned course that I describe next.
Planning For and Preparing Anarchy

With the ideas and values of anarchism in mind, I realized almost immediately that it would be disingenuous to teach about anarchism in a hierarchically organized classroom. Typically, my teaching is pretty standard-fare for American college classes—complete with PowerPoint lectures, quizzes on assigned readings, and periodic exams composed of multi-choice and essay questions. I understand all the critiques of such a pedagogical approach—and how I am often guilty of perpetuating what Freire (1970) famously called the “banking method”—but I still retain the pedagogical practices that I was educated with during my college experience. I was and remain very uncomfortable with this paradox, thus I wanted to expand my repertoire and test new class formats.

I decided to turn the Sociology of Anarchism class into a mini-laboratory, a social experiment on how to learn without authority figures (i.e., students acting as anarchists to learn about anarchism). I first had to establish some ground rules that would facilitate the experiment. Although I was still responsible for giving a grade to the students at the end of the semester, and the Sociology department required that 25 percent of the grade be based on out-of-class writing, I decided that students should be responsible for deciding how the rest of that grade was to be assigned. For the purposes of the class, I considered anarchism to exist at the intersection between individual freedom and collective responsibility, and that the class structure should reflect that insight. Thus, I followed Students for a Democratic Society’s advocacy of student syndicalism (Davidson, 1990); since students were the ones who (hypothetically) wanted to learn about anarchism, they should be in control of that learning. And, since they were going to be sharing the experience with each other, the class needed to be democratically managed. After initially creating some basic course infrastructure and ground rules (see below), I attempted to “turn over the reins” to the students. It wasn’t perfect, and all our hierarchical socialization got in the way of the project more than once (Williams 2011), but the class was an amazing experience.

I hoped learning about anarchism by doing anarchism was a novel approach. One of the major conditions that determine whether we “learn” something the first time we encounter it is the extent to which we interact with it, appreciate it, reflect on it, and have to take responsibility for learning it. Thus, experiential learning—learning that occurs via our experiences, physical actions, and our own choices—is bound to be more thorough, long-lasting, and hopefully powerful learning. I took for granted that learning through intimate, practical, and firsthand experience was a form of learning more effective than traditional approaches. While my approach was akin to experiential learning, it did not necessitate leaving the classroom envi-
environment, thus differentiating it from service learning, field trips, or other simulations.

The class roster filled up immediately, including many students who were not sociology majors. The course overflowed with students, as I continued to sign override requests for students who wanted access to the packed class; I did this on the principle that I should not turn away interested persons simply because of an arbitrary class “cap.” Then, most surprisingly of all, three others showed up regularly to the class who weren’t even signed up and some who were not even students. Curiously, most of these students attended more consistently than some who were officially enrolled. Apparently, there was a healthy interest in anarchism among students. But, apart from a very small handful of knowledgeable students, very few were aware of what anarchism actually was.

Working on the principle elegantly articulated by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker, that “we must make the kind of society in which it is easier for people to be good” (cited in Day, 1954, p. 217), I decided the most important design imperative for this class was to consider what structure and social norms would allow students to be the best possible learners. The structure of a class determines how things work on a daily basis and influences what the general outcomes may be. The social norms of class are what create inertia and establish typical social relations. Thus, by creating a classroom infrastructure that encouraged non-coerciveness, popular democracy, and free will, I hoped students would become empowered learners. With these cultural values in place, students could then focus on the task of addressing the substantive design questions of class objectives and requirements—and thus the true experiment began.

From the beginning of the course, I developed various strategies to accomplish these goals. My first effort was non-interactive: I created a twenty-page, single-spaced syllabus that was packed with ideas for what the course could include. I had a lengthy multi-page description of the course’s design and just as many suggestions of what I considered useful strategies to have a successful course. There were two sizable blank spaces—course objectives and course requirements—for students to fill in once they had collectively made their decisions regarding these crucial components. Most of the remaining section headings in the syllabus were qualified by the word “possible” (possible readings, films, topics, assignments/projects, etc.) The daily class schedule was completely blank after the first week. On the first day of class, I handed out this lengthy “syllabus” and asked students to study it and use whatever they found useful.

My one imposition of instructor authority was to begin each class period with a short “this day in anarchist history” presentation. For example, on January 12, I presented information about the reading of the “Anarchist
Declaration” during the 1883 Lyon Trial (which included Peter Kropotkin) and the 1996 police raid of the Jacksonville Anarchist Black Cross. My objective was to generate interest in various issues, events, and persons related to anarchism, as well as to inform the students. I asked the students early on if they wanted me to continue this practice and they did.

During the first week of the semester I give a presentation about myself and my history as an anarchist. Then, I gave another presentation critiquing educational systems and different specific pedagogical strategies, which I ended with a description of various alternate strategies used by anarchists in the past. In subsequent weeks, with student permission, I gave other presentations about what anarchism was not, presented different models for understanding anarchism, and even a PowerPoint presentation complete with dozens of photographs depicting anarchist protest banners. Later, after class discussion and voting, students requested additional lectures from me, which I happily presented, although I remain unsure of their benefit. Some students were able to listen to a lecture on a subject they were interested in and were able to “soak it up,” but what about the uninterested students? Even for interested students, being lectured to can cause them to turn off their critical faculties (being passive is, in many respects, antithetical to anarchist principles of self-determination). And who is to say that I have a definitive interpretation of anarchism that is better than what students might read about, that they may organically develop on their own by acting as anarchists, and so forth?

Perhaps the two most crucial decisions I made to accomplish the goal of “self-empowered students learning about anarchism” was to (1) “require” all students to continue their discussions and decision-making after class time, and (2) utilize the same kinds of decision-making practices that the anarchist movement does. First, I set up a website for the class that used a groupware software system designed by the radical technology collective Riseup.net, called CrabGrass.⁴ Via CrabGrass, students were able to (productively, I hope) interact online and further their decision-making processes. CrabGrass allows for discussions, wikis (universally editable documents), and a wide variety of decision-making tools, including surveys, approval votes (“is this good, OK, or bad?”), and ranked votes (where many options can be prioritized at once). Many students were enthusiastic about this software—which is a more interactive and collaborative form of social networking than something like Facebook or course management software like Blackboard—and took it upon themselves to work intensively with the discussions and activities occurring online. For some, online discussions of this nature may be less intimidating than those in a face-to-face setting.

Second, during the first week I discussed the various justifications and strategies for anarchist decision-making in organizations, particularly direct
democracy and consensus decision-making. I introduced activist practices, such as the rotating meeting roles (e.g., facilitator, scribes, and timekeepers), sitting in a circle, and even the idea of nonverbally showing agreement by “twinkling” one’s fingers. Students widely adopted these strategies in class meetings and justified these adoptions on the basis of utility to addressing the challenges of making decisions among forty-five individuals. I expect it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for students to meet my challenge of making collective decisions without having such strategies and tricks in their repertoires. The students eventually settled upon a super-majority model (two-thirds consent required), where the minority’s sentiments would have to be addressed somehow while the majority would still be able to move ahead with their decision.

Students were given all the necessary rope to pull themselves almost all the way clear of the quicksand of academia. Of course, the more rope, the greater the possibility of “hanging themselves” with it, too. I frequently found myself having existential experiences: it was challenging to trust students to do “the right thing” for their learning, even in ways that fly in the face of well-established pedagogical research. More than once, I sat on my hands and bit my tongue when students wandered down paths that I knew would be fruitless and frustrating. I regularly felt the impulse of a hierarchically trained instructor to interrupt and forcibly redirect students in a “better” direction. To the extent that I remained silent,⁵ I hoped students would be able to discover on their own practical ways of collective problem solving. When I did intervene, it was only to do one or both of the following tasks: to summarize the overall discussion and thereby illuminate the general sentiment and to make pointed (and often multiple) suggestions that were meant to show possible ways forward. In doing so, I tried to never make my “informed” opinions known and to instead emphasize that the decisions they faced were theirs.

Students designed their own syllabus.⁶ They spent the first six weeks of the semester determining the learning objectives, what they would require of themselves and each other, and how I should give out grades. They did all of this democratically, while achieving a near-consensus (with a class of over forty students)! In doing so, they acted completely different from any other collection of students I have ever taught. Students acted as if they were in charge of the class and they took seriously my promise to not act as their boss. Consequently, most students were excited, active, engaged, reflexive, and creative.

Critics might argue that a month and a half is an incredibly long time to dedicate to accomplishing this “preliminary” task, and even that it was a reckless waste of valuable class time.⁷ I disagree. My objective was different from the average college instructor: to empower students to have the kind of
class they wanted. While, surely some students would have preferred to avoid this front-end work, they were in control of it all. Other critics will note that I asked students to do (in an intensive and democratic environment) what a trained instructor does in an essentially authoritarian environment (i.e., decide their own course parameters). Although students may have an intuitive appreciation of course structure from their own classroom experiences, they are unlikely to have any prior experience designing courses. Students’ lack of experience and pedagogical theory deficit likely made the whole exercise a bit unfair. Of course, many situations in life are “unfair,” yet people find impressive collective solutions to problems and thus learn in the process. I wanted my students’ learning experiences to be liberatory: knowing they could actually do this work (create and govern a course as well as learn), and, most impressively, they could do it in a collaborative environment. I next analyze the outcomes of this pedagogical experiment and present evidence that supports my conclusions.

**Anarchy in Action**

My pseudo-experiment in classroom anarchy was fascinating, exhilarating, frustrating, and more than a little scary. My own reactions often mirrored some of the varied impressions, feelings, and conclusions of my students. There are several important observations that I made from the experience, and I think that these observations illustrate some of the strengths of my approach, as well as some of the predictable weaknesses.

Before describing the course’s outcomes, I need to explain the sources upon which I base my observations, arguments, and conclusions. As a participant observer (of a kind) in the course, I watched closely how students responded to stimuli, including each other, and took note of daily activities and notable responses in a detailed diary. I also administered surveys to students at the beginning and end of the course, which addressed a variety of attitudes, opinions, and experiences—the two data points allowed me to track changes in students over the course of the semester. Finally, my own critical and reflexive analyses about this experience, over the course of the last few years, have also been included in the descriptions that follow.

The conscious attempt to decenter my authority was a curious experience. I asked for students to call me by my first name and all did (at least those who addressed me by name). Although this is only a symbolic example of decentering my instructor authority, I think it is important: symbols do have meaning and the prestige attached to a formal label like “doctor” would have modified the classroom environment considerably due to the implications of that word “Dr.,” regardless of how much I would insist that it was just a formality. Thus, emphasizing my first name only, (at least) symbolically placed me on a more level playing field with my students. I encouraged students to
only use me as a resource and not the final arbiter when they were having class discussions," so I was pleased when students would reference me as “Dana” when I was sitting in a circle with students. They usually did not attach any greater significance to my role, except to acknowledge the fact that I was generally more knowledgeable about anarchism and was the person who would ultimately assign grades (based on their instructions, of course).

From the beginning of classwide decision-making, I encouraged students to form their desks into a circle—a very large, almost unwieldy circle. After a few times doing it, it became the norm and no one even had to encourage others to do it—students simply created a circle on their own. However, few people contributed during these early discussions, so one day I suggested breaking the class into smaller groups. While ostensibly done at random, I encouraged them to count off by traversing the room in such a way as to collect students who do not usually sit next to each other (thus: in groups an equal number of students who chose to sit close to the front who are generally more enthusiastic students and those who isolated themselves in the rear, i.e., often less interested). As soon as students formed these smaller groups, they became useful. Students expressed feeling more empowered in the small groups and they subsequently chose to break the larger class “assembly” into the smaller groups to work out certain problems more intensively, and then reaggregating those groups back into the assembly again.¹⁰ The small groups generated an impressive diversity of ideas that was often helpful for the large assembly, although some ideas would occasionally conflict with other groups’ ideas.

My assigned classroom could have held another dozen students. Since students with lower levels of engagement tended to sit toward the back of the room and more engaged students toward the front, there were many empty chairs spread through the room. The students in the rear used their distance from the front of the room (from me, but also from the more talkative students) as a means to “free-ride” during class discussions. In doing so, they were left out and probably deliberately left themselves out more often.¹¹ This is what Shor (1996) referred to as the Siberia Effect—the isolating geography of classrooms that generates hostile relations simply by their spatial configurations. The assembly’s circle helped a bit, as students were all facing each other, but most of the Siberian students were sitting next to each other (silently) and were thus easily ignored. Had the room been more compact and if students had been more interspersed, the free-riding dynamics of the Siberian Effect could have been somewhat mitigated.

I considered calling on students sometimes, to integrate them into class discussions, but I held back, deciding that to do so would have been coercive. If they did not want to participate, why should I force them? In retrospect, I believe I made a mistake. I (or others) could have easily posed questions
towards students who had not spoken much, asking if they wished to contribute anything.¹² This is an old facilitator trick (to “spread out” the discussion and allow those remaining quiet to talk), but I tried to act too “principled” in my role of a non-authoritarian instructor. I am afraid my inaction backfired and I compromised my principles of making an empowering classroom for all students. Instead of standing back and relinquishing all obligations, I could have actively used my authority to help create more egalitarianism.¹³

I realized early on, and I understand even more clearly in retrospect, that it is important to give people access to a lot of useful “tools.” It is expecting too much of people for them to accidentally develop strategies that took activists generations to perfect. However, it was not enough to simply introduce a “tool” once and expect that it is obvious to use. I sometimes forgot that my own experiences in the anarchist movement took place over many years and that I developed a certain anarchist instinct about things that could not be simply “taught” on a one-time basis. I should have also done a more in-depth tutorial about meeting facilitation, including the values behind it, various strategies to help the group come to consensus, and so on. Yet I expected people to learn facilitation skills easily. I instructed people on how to facilitate and I even modeled it twice, but people usually need many opportunities to experience facilitation—people often need to experience meeting facilitation that works well and experience getting stuck and frustrated. Not enough people in the class were able to become facilitators for the large assembly and thus were not able to have those experiences.

Many people joined the course with the desire to learn about anarchism and were ready to engage with the assumptions that undergird anarchist thought. Such students had satisfactory levels of curiosity, but most still had preconceptions that got in the way of them getting as much out of the experience as I had hoped. In educational theory language, students had previously designed “schema” that already had information hanging on their “anarchism” hooks, likely involving popular misconceptions related to “chaos,” “disorder,” “craziness,” and maybe even “violence.” Some of these misconceptions were particularly interesting. For example, I had several criminology and criminal justice students in the class, who I feared would have a hostile orientation towards the course content from the beginning, since surveys suggest that police have abnormally high levels of right-wing authoritarianism (Haley & Sidanius, 2005; Gatto, Dambrun, Kerbrat & de Oliveira, 2010). Surprisingly, many of these students found the subject matter and the course challenges to be stimulating, and even recoiled at instances of extreme police brutality in a film on European squatters that was shown in the class (essentially, the opposite of the reaction I had expected). Another student had Libertarian values (which in the U.S. means something very different than much of the rest of the world), while another was very inter-
ested in the so-called Zeitgeist movement. I wonder what conclusions such students acquired about anarchism. I expect that some probably decided that “anarchism” was all about “do your own thing,” “anything goes,” or even DIY (do-it-yourself) politics.

As mentioned above, I administered surveys to students in my class and I discovered that many had very unique and curious definitions of anarchism by the end of the course. Due to my objective of creating an almost completely non-authoritarian setting, I never told students exactly what anarchism was or even gave them a basic definition. In retrospect, I wonder if I eventually should have, after they had spent part of the course mulling over the things they were learning and experiencing. I could have helped put the course into broader context and helped tie together many of the disparate threads that I helped to orchestrate, but that they may have never understood, perceived, or took to their logical conclusion. By dancing around definitions throughout the semester, I succeeded in decentering my voice and in allowing students to come to their own conclusions. But, ultimately, there are certain core values and tenets to most strains of anarchist thought, and I’m not convinced that students were able to figure this out or learn what those key ideas were.

**Constraints of “Anarchy” in a Classroom**

Few college classes have likely been entitled the Sociology of Anarchism. In fact, I have never heard of such a class at an established university. Consequently, the experiences in this class can only be characterized idiosyncratically. But, even idiosyncratic observations are revealing and can point the way towards more liberatory methods in other, more widely offered courses.

A universal constraint present in any course that tries putting student syndicalism into practice, regardless of the course’s official subject matter, is the hierarchical nature of the university. All college classes offered at tuition-based universities are, on one level, at least, concerned with financial matters. In order for most instructors to spend their time teaching classes, they expect some kind of remuneration (unless they have other employment or economic support). This need tethers most instructors to traditional pedagogical paradigms. They (reasonably) expect that if they are too “unconventional” they will lose their employment. This is particularly true for contingent/adjunct/part-time faculty members, as I was for this course. Such instructors teach only by the good graces of people in power.

When I first received permission to teach the course, I expected to receive some kind of blowback from other university employees, especially administrators. The course was listed with the word “anarchism” in the course catalog, where thousands of students could (and likely did) see it. Surprisingly, most of my colleagues or people with whom I discussed
the course had a liberal attitude about it and expressed a certain intellectual curiosity about how I planned to design it. I only received one critical warning, delivered to me in a joking manner. I laughed at the joke (which cautioned me to be careful with teaching student “anarchy” and having them get “out of control,”) but I also realized that this joke was, in fact, an actual warning, too, and this colleague was probing me to see what my plans were and whether or not they should be concerned.

Since I ultimately had to assign some sort of grades to the students (only the officially enrolled students who would be receiving college credit), hierarchy had already intruded into an otherwise egalitarian classroom. Even if I decentered my role, I still had to be responsible for assigning grades and would be in trouble with students and administrators if I did not. I was also putting myself in a position to create inequality within the classroom if I gave different grades to students. Even though I entrusted this question to my students, their solution was surprising. Before the class began, I strongly expected the students to decide that they would ask me to give them all A grades, something I was willing and prepared to do, if that was what they decided. But, I never mentioned that possibility and—even though I’m certain many thought of it—no one ever seriously raised it during class discussions. Instead, they decided to design a conventional course based around a minimal level of meritocracy and student performance. Students assigned requirements to themselves, including a final project that each individual would choose. I asked students to direct me (in writing) on how to grade each of these projects. While many students did not really know how to do this (and gave me vague direction like “If I do a good job, I should get a good grade,”) many established rigorous standards for themselves. But this was still rather arbitrary: one enthusiastic student wrote at the end of their final project report that they felt their work in the class deserved a C only, while another student wrote an almost embarrassingly brief and poor paper and simply stated they should be awarded an A. As the executor of my student’s will, I did exactly what was requested in both instances, but I personally felt the grades should have been reversed. Upon reflection, I am not sure what end this unfairness served: the free-riding A student likely learned they could exploit an open situation to their advantages without consequences, while the harder-working C-student perhaps learned the same lesson after realizing the negative consequences for their honesty.¹⁴

The trouble students had establishing standards for themselves illustrates a broader constraint the entire class faced throughout designing the course: most students have nearly no experience or knowledge about how to do these kinds of tasks. Even though students have taken college courses, they have not designed them and do not always possess an understanding of pedagogical reasons for doing certain activities. Thus, my mandate to
design the course was more than a bit unfair to the students, since I was asking them to do something independently that they had never done before. Combined with the lack of experience with other sorts of skills, like consensus decision-making, this challenge put students outside their comfort zones—for some this might have inadvertently generated a self-fulfilling prophecy about how they are not good at collectivity. American culture tends to value individualism, although it is usually conceptualized as consumerist independence.¹⁵ When it is time to do other tasks, such as work, pray, or make decisions, many Americans turn to authority figures. Thus, except for already radicalized or anti-authoritarian students, the culture they had been socialized into repeatedly created barriers and inhibited quicker progression.

A lot of time was spent trying to solve problems and address issues, all within confines to which many people normally wouldn’t want to be subjected (such as designing a syllabus or figuring out how to grade). The tedium of working under these circumstances exasperated many students, as did the radicalness of their endeavor (designing the entire framework of their course). In this respect, the course differed from Ingalsbee’s (1992) “design-a-utopia” course, in which students focused their semester-long efforts on theorizing and planning a more perfect society. In my class, students designed the very “society” they were presently part of, but within strict limits (the room, the grades, a writing requirement, etc.). In this respect, I regret not more thoroughly presenting my lengthy syllabus, which was filled with ideas, on the first day of class. I hesitated because I did not want to unduly influence students with my ideas or preferences, but I now believe that in a situation that has a vacuum of ideas, any ideas (even from authority figures) are good for reacting to. I fear the open-endedness I created paralyzed some of the students.

Another constraint centers on the issue of free will. Before the semester began, I sent all enrolled students an e-mail, describing in detail my plans for the course. I expected some to drop the class (a few did); because of this, I assumed the remainder were, in essence, submitting themselves to these terms and the challenge of designing the course.¹⁶ But, this assumption deserves to be more closely examined. Did the students all really want to be there? Judging by the responses of some (especially those in Siberia), they did not. I assume that some were taking the class because they need more elective hours for their degrees and my class fit into their schedule. Thus, were they taking this class because they wanted to or because they “had” to? I would like to assume that all the students took the class in preference to other electives offered at the same time, but I cannot know this for certain. Even more fundamentally, we could debate whether all students in college even want to be enrolled. Many students during my years of teaching have
told me that they dislike being students in college, but they feel like they must and that college is today required to get even entry-level jobs.¹⁷ Thus, in an unequal, capitalist economy where there is severe labor market competition and where education attainment is a principal way of differentiating between workers, how much free will do college students really have?¹⁸

Students experienced a sentiment different from having no personal control, as many began to interpret “anarchism” as a form of extreme individualism, which could not and should not compel people to contribute to the overall class. Many students resisted assigning themselves things to read for the class (even though I proposed many pages worth of interesting and pivotal readings in the syllabus) and I suspect that had a two-thirds majority ever been obtained many would still have not read the assignments. I was dismayed to witness this, since so many important things about anarchism can be learned from the countless readings (scholarly or activist) written on the subject. By absolving themselves of collective responsibility to raise the level of class discourse, students were also cheating themselves of resources that would have aided their individual learning (had they wanted to). This illustrates a paradoxical situation between individualism and collectivism, and how limiting or exaggerating one can adversely affect the other.

One final constraint of the class has led me to a troubling political conclusion. I gave students as much power and control as I felt I could, yet not all took or even accepted this power. It was difficult to have a robust direct democracy and, thus, an empowered class of students, if not all were active participants. Unlike the majority of anarchist collectives and affinity groups where there is at least minimal participation or contribution from all members, my class had numerous entirely passive members who never spoke in class. This raises the troubling issue of whether or not to force people to be collectivist, radical, or participatory if they choose not to be. Presumably, people in a future liberatory society could choose not to participate regularly in matters that affect their daily lives; but, there would also seem to be a breaking-point at which too many non-participants would threaten the liberatory character of that society. I have wondered many times about whether things that I said or did somehow dissuaded greater participation from some of my students, or whether there was an honest lack of desire to participate?¹⁹ If the latter was the case, what are the sources of this deficit (e.g., half the students were first-generation college students with lower levels of cultural capital), and what could be done to raise the desire for additional responsibility and collective power? However, this criticism may also be unfair since, in a more realistic situation, students would self-select their presence in such a classroom and would have intrinsic motivations for being there and for participating in a framework outside of a meritocratic institution such as a university.
Further Reflections and Future Aspirations
My little pseudo-experiment was not perfect, and there are lots of things I would do differently next time. But it changed my perspective on what is possible (and, judging from exit surveys the students filled out, it changed them, too): students can be trusted with control over their educations. At the end of the semester, students reported believing that student involvement in course design was both practical and empowering (both 94 percent affirmative).²⁰ My experiences also validated many of the anarchist assumptions about human nature and potential that I hold dear. But such experiments can also be scary, since teachers are placed outside of their safe space. I found myself in a learning environment that all my professionalization told me shouldn’t be allowed to exist. I haven’t designed a class like that since, although I’ve thought seriously about how to democratize many aspects of certain classes. It turns out that I am, like most of my colleagues (and higher education itself), presently too invested in hierarchical social order. But, as an anarchist-sociologist, I’m trying my best to mature my pedagogical approach and teach more anarchistically more regularly.

If most sociologists are using their “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959) to help them teach (and I think the good ones do this), then anarchism definitely has a lot to offer in the classroom. Transparency in the classroom is essential for students to be informed and brought in to the mechanics of a course structure. It is important to give students opportunities to practice new, liberatory skills, especially those they can use later, outside the academy. Students used all sorts of anarchistic organizing models to accomplish formidable, complex tasks: from small/affinity groups and large assemblies to formal consensus decision-making techniques as well as the CrabGrass software to help prioritize projects, rank preferences, debate options, and so on. Exposing students to alternative forms of social order and new ideas is crucial.²¹ As a feminist colleague of mine tells her classes, her job is not to make students feel comfortable in their old beliefs, but rather to provoke critical thought, reflection, and action. A sizable minority of my students were often visibly uncomfortable with the control they were given (45 percent reported experiencing frustration during the semester, according to the survey)—a few times throughout the semester there were subtle requests to end all the democracy and revert back to a typical, predictable course with me making all the decisions. But, in the midst of those discomforting moments, students expressed learning a lot about education, the subject of anarchism, and even themselves and their own collective potential.

Creating a memorable class is important. Just as anarchist artists have introduced giant puppets, stencil graffiti, or guerrilla theater into stagnant protest, anarchist teachers need to create novel environments that will create lasting impressions. Doing something anarchistic (or democratic, or
justice-oriented) is going to leave a stronger mark upon students and influence them to think differently in the future than just learning about subjects like anarchism (or democracy or justice). To follow this logic, civics or political science classes would be better organized as active democracies, just like most sociology classes would be best structured as practical exercises in creating social justice.

One last, crucially important point for teachers seems to be finding ways to decenter their own roles and voices, especially as “bosses” and “experts.” This doesn’t mean pushing volumes of empirical research aside (although being critical of academically produced knowledge ought to be permissible) or allowing an “anything goes” environment. The best way for a teacher to self-decenter would be to create a more horizontal, democratic course framework. It seems sensible to allow students (within the reasonable confines of the course subject, I suppose) to select topics that they find more interesting, pick or create projects or assignments that interest them most, and when there are discussions in the classroom, especially among students, a teacher ought to play more of a “facilitator” role than that of a “final arbitrator” (Atwater, 1991). The amazing thing is that any of these things can be done without even mentioning the word “anarchism,” although talking about anarchism wouldn’t necessarily hurt either. In other words, acting anarchistically is often as important to anarchists as self-identifying as such.

Despite its flaws, the course described here was still a wonderful and important social experiment, one that I would relish the opportunity to replicate. After the semester, I held a potluck at my house. (What could be more anarchist, I asked my students, than a potluck meal?) Students and I then started an anarchist reading group, reading and discussing Cindy Milstein’s Anarchism and Its Aspirations, and I still hear from my former students to this day. As my first experiment with such a course design I am pleased with many of the positive outcomes and have thought much about how to improve upon the experience. Anarchism is a creative, flexible intellectual framework that can illuminate various pathways to collective liberation, inside and outside the college classroom.

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References


Notes
1 This is not an experiment in the classic sense, since there is no explicit control group. Instead, I compare outcomes from this class to the typical outcomes of college classes, generally.
2 Student syndicalism and student-controlled learning environments are not simply hypothetical—for example, Janer (2013) describes his positive experience with this kind of situation.
3 Students were also disproportionately male (67 percent), white (over 90 percent), and half were first-generation college-students (i.e., lacked college-graduate parents).
4 The software is currently being used by countless radical social movement organizations throughout the world to facilitate decision-making.
5 I usually did remain silent during class discussions, but I was only physically absent from class one day, when students executed plans (successfully, I was told) they made the class period prior.
6 A few scholars have written about their experiences allowing students to compose parts of course syllabi (Hudd, 2003; Saines, 2002) or even curriculum design (Bovill, Bulley & Morss, 2011). However, none were as far-reaching and democratic as my students’ experience, nor did these other classes synergize the act of composition with the course subject matter.
7 Some of my more conventional academic colleagues expressed alarm about how “long” this took and for how long students were “without” a syllabus.
8 Other skeptics might suspect students were trying to stall the inevitable work that awaited them once course design matters were decided. While possible, my anecdotal observations in class suggest this is unlikely: after even three weeks of discussions there was noticeable apprehension and impatience on the part of
many students. Even those who advocated for prudence and patience seemed sincerely motivated to find the best and most democratic solutions.

Mikhail Bakunin (1970) argued that one could consider the intellectual “authority” of a bootmaker when it came to the task of creating footwear, but that final decisions about one’s own footwear rested with the wearer of the boots.

This process, of course, reflects classic anarchist principles of federation, wherein multiple working-groups or collectivities hash-out specific details that are then channeled back to the overall whole. Incidentally, these efforts seemed to have had an impact: 85 percent of students reported experiencing feelings of liberation during the semester and 88 percent experiencing excitement, according to the survey.

While this was clear from body language and posture, it was also shown by my observations of low levels of participation from students in the rear. This should not be interpreted to mean disinterest, however, as only one student indicated experiencing boredom on the survey, while the rest experienced interest.

I was pleased that less-participatory students from class tended to contribute more online.

This has a more Marxist-Leninist feel to it, however, but it may have been immediately practical if only done once or twice.

But I strongly suspect the “C-student” still learned more in class and had a more empowering experience, and thus the impact of the average grade may be less important than other lessons learned.

Reddiford (1993) claims that an [individualist] anarchist priority in the classroom or curriculum ought to be autonomy; while not unimportant, this prioritizes individual action over collective creativity and collaboration.

Rancourt (2007) describes how his students came “on board” to his project of “academic squatting” a physics course (and then treating it as an activism course). Squat “occupants” had to consent with his project and with mine.

Anecdotally, an amazing 93 percent of survey respondents indicated that they felt knowing more about anarchism would be useful in their life after college.

See Greenfield (2011) for a critical discussion of “choice.”

I have suspicions that the former was true, as most of the non-participatory students also regularly attended class; it is not that they do not care about the class. Instead, I think their interest was only in receiving a grade and not learning. But, I have no empirical evidence to prove this.

Empowerment is important, since it is linked to commitment for future participation (Knapp et al., 2010).

According to survey responses, 95 percent of students agreed that participating in designing the course gave them familiarity with methods that “could be used to create a more democratic society.”

One final observation of note: 95 percent of my students stated they had a more favorable view of anarchism after the course than before and 69 percent even said they had learned things during the semester that made them interested in identifying as anarchists.