

It's Our Academy: Transforming Education through Self-organized Autonomous Universities

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For a brief time there was and continues to be a relief from capital's tyranny of specialization that forces us to perform as if we are a fixed set of relationships and characteristics, and to repress or strictly manage all other forms of desire and expression.

Critical Art Ensemble, *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media*, New York, Autonomedia, 2001

From these schools will be absolutely eliminated the smallest applications or manifestations of the principle of authority. They will not be schools in the accepted meaning, but popular academies, in which neither pupils nor master will be known, but where the people come freely to get, if they find it necessary, free instruction, and in which, rich in experience, they will teach many things to their professors who shall bring them the knowledge that they lack.

M. Bakunin, *God and the State*, London, Freedom Press, 1910

The educational crisis faced by many university students in Australia today requires that we begin to move from contemplation and conceptualization to action and experimentation. Particular fiscal wheels have long been set into motion, policy re-structurations have been implemented and bureaucratic apparatuses have already made apparent the future progression of their effects. The university has become a highly elitist, commercial and managerial enterprise. And we are left chanting, dissenting, arguing into a void, our agencies, individualities and creativities reduced to our capital value as manufactured by the university juggernaut. Our unions are being dissolved; corporate sponsorship has permeated campuses; we are losing HECs places, academic resources, options for courses and degrees; staff positions are becoming increasingly more precarious; and the demands of cognitive labour production are further straining already excessive workloads. In conjunction with educational institutions' accelerating economic prerogatives come more economically driven privileges and exclusions (accompanied by a neo-liberal rhetoric of equality), with the resulting value-conferring goals of education (diplomas, degrees) increasing the cultural and economic capital of intellectual specialisation and elitism. The person invested with the (both metaphorical and literal) 'currency' (certification) of academic intelligence, is valued above

someone who does not possess it. These systems of value blindly uphold the abstract position of the intellectual as 'expert' without analysing the class and fiscal hierarchies enabling and underpinning the formation of such categories.

On the flipside, the majority of academics and intellectual labourers are under more pressure than ever: producing specialist academic publications, participating in Australian Research Council projects, enduring heavier marking and lecturing demands than ever before. With decreases in staff positions (especially in Arts faculties), and high numbers of qualified graduates vying for limited work opportunities, intellectual labourers are both exploited by and exploitative of the capitalisation of the university: 'exploited', by being dependent on the university for labour; 'exploitative', by participating in and perpetuating the hierarchical (educational and economic) organisation of the university. This is not to say that the economics of education can be conflated with the institutional hierarchisation of knowledge. They are associated, not necessarily mutually inclusive. Knowledge institutions have always been a platform through which to vertically operate and manipulate value judgements and their confluent flows of power. This is in part played out in the relationship between teacher and student typified by Paulo Freire as the teacher 'depositing' knowledge into the student, who is subjugated in the role of passive receptacle. The integration of knowledge hierarchies into the general dynamics of capitalism has meant even more encroachment of capitalist ontologies into the organisation of daily life. When 'who knows' is subsumed into 'who pays', when the calibre of a university or academic reflects of its/ their economic prestige, and when access to education becomes contingent on private and commercial sponsorship, then the alliances between economic and knowledge hierarchies cannot be overlooked.

So what is to be done? If the task of reversing or reinventing present conditions seems Sisyphean, then we have to experiment more militantly with molecular resistance activities, those that we can easily facilitate and maintain ourselves to transform the relationships between knowledge, education and capitalism. This is not necessarily with the intention to reconstruct the educational system or to replace the university, but to establish additional means of exploring different organisational dynamics and developing new tactics, both for resistance and, more importantly, for our own creative processes by which we might constitute alternatives. These alternatives could include processes to emancipate knowledge and learning from hierarchy, processes that do not immediately equate qualifications with 'legitimate' knowledge or perpetuate the culture of an intellectual elite or vanguard. That do not privilege the voice of one person over another based on their economic capacity for educational participation. One of the many emerging possibilities, one that has, to this point, not yet been sustainably mobilised in Australia, is micro-level self-organised autonomous or

free universities and classes. In this article I will give a preliminary outline of a few small, primarily student-run initiatives that, informed by a considerable legacy, have emerged over the past decade in Europe. I will examine how they function, and why we might consider re-contextualizing and appropriating some of these practices for our own strategies of intervention and construction.¹

The word ‘autonomous’ is derived from the Greek *autos-nomos*, meaning self-legislation. Autonomy has had a long history as a political and social strategy, most visibly in Italian workers and student struggles of anti-capitalist refusal from the 1960s to the 1980s. Many of the current autonomous discourses and practices resonate within these post-Autonomist Marxist or even anarcho-syndicalist paradigms. According to George Katsiaficas,² some of the key principles that define current European autonomous movements like the free university projects include collectivism and collaboration; self-determination; horizontal organizing and consensus decision making; non-alignment with political parties, unions and other entities complicit with representative politics; diversity and multiplicity; internationalism; concern with revolutionizing the everyday; and ‘conscious spontaneity, militancy and confrontation as tactics’.³

The category of initiatives I am examining here under the definition of autonomous or free universities cannot be classified alongside conventional independent universities or classes as such. They bare little resemblance to institutions like the National Autonomous University in Mexico or the Freie (Free) University in Berlin, which developed along the same transparently hierarchical lines as state-private universities, and which are vulnerable to similar economic conditions. Nor can they be conflated with the self-organized education projects of the EZLN such as Other Education, which was designed to ‘teach the youth the history, language and culture of the people and educate them to provide for their community’, although they do share sentiments about the necessity for the redistribution of power, common access to resources and knowledge, mutuality, and the importance of open dialogue and communication across diverse communities.⁴ While such complex and ongoing

¹ These have been chosen based on personal and public access I have had to such projects. This article does not claim to represent the full spectrum of past or present autonomous universities in Europe or elsewhere.

² G. Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*, New Jersey, Humanities Press, 1997.

³ J. Pickerall and P. Chatterton, ‘Notes Towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self-Management as Survival Tactics’, *Progress in Human Geography*, vol 30, no. 6, 2006, p. 735.

⁴ A. Howard, ‘Zapatistas Showcase their Autonomous School System to the Nation and the World’, *The Narco News Bulletin*, no. 44, 2007, <www.narconews.com/Issue44/article2487.html>, accessed 6 August 2007.

institutions and projects are interesting, and could well be used to inspire new developments in our own situation, they are difficult to establish viably with the minimal finances, administrative capacities and experience we presently have.

However, experimental initiatives taken by student collectives — initiatives such as Meine Akademie (My Academy), the Freie Klasse (Free Class), the EB 104 and the Informelle Universität in Gründung (Informal University in Foundation) in Berlin, the Manoa Free University in Vienna, the Copenhagen Free University and the Free Floating Faculty in Copenhagen, and the University of Openness in London — have constructed autonomous platforms dedicated to creative DIY methodologies for students and the wider public. These collectives share a number of characteristics. For example, they predominantly comprise current or recently graduated student activists and often have an ambivalent relationship with a host university or institution (given the institutional provision of resources, sometime financial or spatial, or through access granted to libraries and information technologies). Unlike the traditional faculty or course, they function through an interdisciplinary approach to education and skill-sharing; they have an anti-elitist, open attitude to the production, reception and dissemination of knowledge; and maintain a focus on process over terminus (qualifications, exams, diplomas etc). They are conceived not as an official replacement to the normative degree-generating university but as an anti-capitalist alternative, and as such they are critical of the neo-liberal privatisation and corporatisation of education and the academy, and reject the instrumentalization and economization of immaterial labour workers.

Illustrating these characteristics, the Manoa Free University, founded in 2003 as a project to enable collaborative political art, defined the free university as

an antagonism to the ongoing total subordination of education and science by neoliberalist imperatives. On the other hand it also refers to historic examples of self-organized anti-institutions of the 1960s and 70s. We do not translate ‘university’ with ‘professors’, ‘students’ or traditional ‘empirical objectivity’, because we take it serious [sic] as an open place for the construction of subjects and collective knowledge production in postfordist times.⁵

This definition indicates the rogue and potentially agitational role the autonomous or free university can play, as it throws into question the apparently immanent nature of the

⁵ Manoa Free University, ‘About’, 2003, <manoafreeuniversity.org/about_engl.html>, accessed 6 August 2007.

university: its functions, dynamics and operations. Negating the mechanisms of what Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis⁶ see as the university-as-factory by denying the capitalistic endgame of the stratification of specialisation and intellectual labour, the free university can create radical heterotopic spaces,⁷ simultaneously virtual, imaginary and actual, in which to conceive, discuss and implement different modalities of knowledge. In providing a space for the open interrogation and re-conceptualization of student agency, education, cognitive production and learning, the free university also offers alternatives to dominant discourses and narratives propagated in the classroom. This allows for the exchange of different types and levels of knowledge, for active questioning and responding, that does not need to turn into one knowledge being valued over another — the present state of most teacher–student relationships. In a situation where everyone can teach and be taught, the breadth for learning encounters is massively expanded. This is not to say that one person knows as much, in the same way, as the next, but to appreciate and acknowledge the proliferation of diverse types of knowledges and skills held within a collective of people that might be otherwise neglected. Unlike the neo-liberal appropriation of discourses that pay lip service to horizontality, equality and common advantage but mask a capitalist and entrepreneurial agenda, what makes the free or autonomous university or class radically different is a genuine disengagement with commercial interests and authority figures. In circumnavigating the power of the intellectual specialist, or the power of class and capital, in favour of reciprocity and solidarity, such initiatives threaten to destabilize established university systems, acting as an axis for dialogue between student, employee and staff bodies.

A substantial part of this renegade element arises from a principle of self-governance. This involves a shifting agency and the capacity for regulation from state apparatuses by the individual or collective. As Cornelius Castoriadis argues, this does not necessitate the collapse of organisational infrastructures into disorder, rather autonomy is more related to the rejection of a sovereign demand for obedience.⁸ This is why although traditional forms of hierarchical or vertical models of decision making have been discarded, they have been replaced with experimentation around horizontal techniques that attempt to take into consideration the desires and needs of all participants. This has not equated the negation of structure itself, but rather it has opened it up to experimentation. Because they are decentralized, organizational logistics are malleable enough to allow activities to be deconstructed and reformed as required, as seen in the administrative procedures of the

⁶ S. Federici and G. Caffentzis, 'Notes on the Edu-Factory and Cognitive Capitalism', *The Commoner* no. 12, 2007, pp. 63–70.

⁷ M. Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–7.

⁸ C. Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991.

University of Openness, which retains a 'board with a floating Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer and self-elected members of various denominations' in which the quorum for decision making is calculated as a majority consensus dependent on how many members are present.⁹ Intention, action and politics are collaboratively and consensually composed. As the collective is usually reasonably small, any disjunctive processes are likely to be able to be resolved through negotiation. For larger assemblies, organization may occur in a manner akin to the affinity group/spokes-council model, however this is also open to transformation.

This principle of openness to diversity and to suggestion is also present in the approach to participation and to knowledge production. These two aspects intertwine in practice when we consider that the terrain of the free university or class is not defined by economics or prior educational advantage. This manifests itself through the abolition of entry requirements. While participation is often constrained by the ability to make the project known outside student or subcultural (activist, artist etc) networks, it is not impossible to extend the invitation to a wider public. What must be navigated, however, is the relevance, applicability and attraction of the project to such a broader audience, if that is the intention. As the intention or shared objective varies from project to project the scope of the educational program needs be left to each collective to decide.

If the shared objective includes a broader use of the initiative, then certain techniques have already been used to generate visibility. The University of Openness, for instance, has constructed an online presence with mailing lists and a wikipedia that acts as a linking platform for the various faculties associated with the project (such as the Faculty of Security Studies, the Faculty of Cartography, the Faculty of Problem Solving, the Faculty of Politics, the Faculty of Basic Skills, the Faculty of Education, and the Faculty for the Interpretation of Images). These faculties are flexible and the university encourages individuals or groups to solicit new faculties to accommodate any gaps in research interest. This is facilitated by a wikipedia entry giving clear instructions on how to set up a faculty. Some such faculties have organised reading groups and meetings, while others remain more ambiguous, depending on the level of self-management.¹⁰ Like the University of Openness, The Copenhagen Free University also provides an online library and access to texts and resources.¹¹ These two projects, as well as Meine Akademie, also offer links to transnational sister autonomous

⁹ University of Openness, 'About', 2007 <uo.twentiethcentury.com/index.php/AboutUo>, accessed 6 August 2007.

¹⁰ University of Openness, 'Main Page', 2007, <uo.twentiethcentury.com/index.php/Main_Page>, accessed 6 August 2007.

¹¹ Copenhagen Free University, 'Library', 2007, <www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/library.html>, accessed 1 June 2007.

universities and projects.¹² The maintenance of an online presence appears to be a decisive tactic for these initiatives and can assist in the further diffusion of the aims of free universities and classes beyond the usual audience. Of course the sustainability of such universities is also aided by a physical location or ‘campus’, such as a social or community centre, whether temporary or permanent, housing facilities such as libraries, media-labs, meeting and safe spaces, technological tools and so on. Publicly accessible resources such as these are unequivocally useful to enacting any campaign that takes as its aim an inclusive anti-capitalist approach to knowledge.

As stated previously, the accessibility of such campaigns is played out through the particular non-hierarchical approach to knowledge articulated by these types of collectives. Knowledge production is a key concern of many of these initiatives because, as the Free Floating Faculty asserts,

Knowledge in its multiplicity of forms is a decisive element in terms of the lines of production, communication and exchange that make a difference in society, contribute to a positive situation and create alternatives.¹³

The concern with knowledge moves from questions around the constitution of knowledge (especially canonical or dominant knowledges), the ‘kinetics’ between knowledge creation and power, access to knowledge, and the production of knowledge or intellect as labour. While the projects outlined here all transparently draw on and inevitably perpetuate particular models of discursive engagement (aesthetic, political and social, philosophical, scientific), they attempt to produce alternative methods of knowledge sharing and reciprocity by using techniques of dialogue and conversation, hosting workshops and classes, and often using creative commons/non-commercial licensing for the publication and distribution of textual and multimedia materials. Such techniques (dialogue/conversation) are integral to any conception of non-hierarchical learning, as Paulo Freire points out, as they pay attention to and allow for the desires and needs of participants to inform the direction of interest rather than claiming to represent them.¹⁴ While the autonomous university curriculum or program may not always be able to attend to all of these desires and needs, remaining aware of the relevance of the discourse (and its presentation) for the potential audience, and encouraging

¹² Meine Akademie, ‘Partner Academies’, 2005, <www.meineakademie.tk/>, accessed 19 June 2006.

¹³ Free Floating Faculty, ‘About’, 2004, <www.freefloatingfaculty.org/ABOUT>, accessed 6 August 2007.

¹⁴ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, Continuum Publishing Co., 1970.

response and exchange, means that a platform for addressing such concerns may emerge in the future.

In conjunction with this, many of the thematics of learning are focused on material circumstances, and existential situations are often taken as the basis of discursive exploration and practice. Meine Akademie, an affiliate group of the Freie Klasse at the University of Art in Berlin, exemplified the potential for such projects to act creatively and directly when it intervened in processes affecting education with their Volkswagen campaign in 2004. This campaign arose as a response to the partial corporate sponsorship and rebranding of the library of the Polytechnical University and the University of Art by Volkswagen, and neo-liberal reforms to education and knowledge more generally. The campaign involved a research phase (including pamphleting and student feedback) and was unveiled in an action that coincided with the anniversary of the public–private partnership in 2005. Activists posed as representatives of the company, setting up an official stand in the foyer of the library with buttons, a zine and champagne on offer to ‘celebrate’ the jubilee. One group of activists engaged passing students in a questionnaire designed simultaneously to uncover their opinions about the takeover and to expose the detrimental changes that had occurred as a result of the deal with Volkswagen. A second group, posing as labourers, erected a billboard on the facade of the library calling attention to the economic relationship between the university and Volkswagen.¹⁵ The action drew significant public attention to the situation and was instrumental in furthering debate about the outcomes of privatisation in German educational institutions.

Of course an action like this may not be as applicable in the Australian context, where public–private funding partnerships in universities has been a standard practice over the past decade. However, it does show how experimental methods like these can help to invigorate our own struggles and provide us with new scope for resistance. The formation of autonomous classes or universities is also the formation of ongoing working groups and collectives, which, united around a shared ideological trajectory or issue, have the capacity to act and continue acting on an everyday terrain, such as seen in community and union actions, or the anti-military and anti-nuclear movements. These models of campaigning obviously have some possible downsides, as was seen in the attempt to organise a free university by activists and students in Sydney in 2005: it collapsed under the pressure of tensions between activists and academics and logistical and administrative issues.¹⁶ However, this does not signify the exhaustion of

¹⁵ Meine Akademie, ‘Factivism’, 2005, <www.meineakademie.tk/>, accessed 28 July 2007.

¹⁶ I. Vanni, ‘re: autonomous university’, email to A. Kanngieser, 15 August 2007.

such a strategy for dissent in Australia. We find ourselves in a time when any imagining of education in the state university system appears hermetic, explicitly economically motivated, increasingly entrepreneurial, and elitist. While we may not be able to effectively terminate this process, we can at least conceive of ways to disrupt or interfere in its mechanisms, however marginally. This is not a proposition about an immediate replacement to the university, but rather an argument for the viability of a short-term addition. It is also not to argue for the immanent dissolution of more formal structures of learning. It is, though, a proposal for what we might do to create molecular revolutions within our everyday movements. The autonomous format for knowledge and education illustrated by these European initiatives illuminates some tactics that we can incorporate into our theorisations and practices, initiatives we can facilitate and govern ourselves, which reflect the politics we embrace and can cultivate and embody the changes we want to effect.

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