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Postanarchism as a framework for educational authority in higher education

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ABSTRACT

When considering anarchist contributions to educational theory and practice, one of the most difficult issues is the presence and use of authority in classroom spaces. The debates focus on how anarchist educators might navigate the tension of a commitment to dismantling assumed authorities while working in environments in which their authority as an educator is constantly reinforced at various levels, be that in the expectations of the students they work with and the institution they work in, the expectations wider society has about their role, and their own expectations and assumptions about what it means to be an educator. This paper explores a possible response for anarchist educators by introducing postanarchist understandings of power and authority to argue for an understanding of authority not as negative *per se* and thus wholly unjustifiable, but as a particular deployment of a *potentially* problematic relationship between educators and students, one which can also be enacted differently.

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Introduction

When considering anarchist contributions to educational theory and practice, one of the most difficult issues is the presence and use of authority in classroom spaces. The debates focus on how anarchist educators might navigate the tension of a commitment to dismantling assumed authorities while working in environments in which their authority as an educator is constantly reinforced at various levels, be that in the expectations of the students they work with and the institution they work in, the expectations wider society has about their role, and their own expectations and assumptions about what it means to be an educator. In higher education, this tension for anarchist educators is thrust to the fore through the increasing move towards student-centred teaching and learning. On the surface, student-centred teaching and learning aligns with anarchist principles of decentring the assumed authority of educators, and yet the move itself is dependent on the educator continuing to exercise

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their authority at the level of module design and assignment practices (Harju & Åkerblom, 2017). This paper explores a possible response for anarchist educators working in the context of student-centred education by introducing postanarchist understandings of power and authority to argue for an understanding of authority not as negative *per se* and thus wholly unjustifiable, but as a particular deployment of a *potentially* problematic relationship between educators and students, one which can also be enacted differently.

This paper starts by laying out the turn towards student-centred teaching and learning as the broader context of European higher education. This provides an important reference point for exploring the distinction between student-centred educational practices and anarchist educational practices later in the paper. Following this, the paper introduces (post)anarchist theory and practice and its treatment of power (May, 1994; Newman, 2007, 2016). The paper explores current approaches to anarchist educator authority in educational spaces and the critique of these interventions through the remaining tension between the educators' anarchist principles and the expectations of educator authority from students, colleagues, the institution, society, and themselves. With the theoretical framework outlined the paper turns its attention to the context of student-centred teaching and learning through the specific example of a final-semester module of a liberal arts programme at a German university and explores the attempts of the author to navigate the tensions of authority present in the relationship between students and educators.

While the argument and practice outlined here focus on authority in relations, it is by no means the only challenge anarchist educators face in their decision to stay in established educational institutions. Authority is present in any number of facets of our work: the judgment of assignments, the surveillance of attendance, and the policing of institutional rules and regulations, among others. However, it is student-educator relations that take centre stage in this paper as the classroom offers particularly fertile ground for postanarchist practices which emphasise the radical possibilities of everyday relationships and encounters within and despite dominant institutional practices.

Student-centred teaching and learning

There is a growing demand from universities and students that students should be more actively engaged in their educational journeys. This push often takes place against the backdrop of student-centred education and wants to shift the focus of higher education from the educator to the student (Hoidn, 2017; Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020). The student-centred approach is thought to encourage students' critical thinking, independence, and collaborative working skills as they become self-directed learners addressing problems they have identified themselves (Bremner, 2021; Frambach et al., 2014; Harju & Åkerblom, 2017; Kinuthia, 2024; Lea et al., 2003; Li, 2021; Sadler, 2012). According to Hoidn and Klemenčič (2020), this shift in educational approach requires a rethink of content, pedagogy, the students, and the educators, asking the question of what is taught, to whom, by whom, and how? It is accompanied by a wide range of considerations and challenges, including the gap between "rhetoric and reality" (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020, p. 1), which points to the need for teaching

approaches to account for issues of power, the role of the educator, and questions about who is responsible for students' learning. These questions point to the politics of our roles as educators. The political in this context refers to the decisions that are made about what is taught, to whom, etc., as the decisions that we make in response to these questions, or in our lack of consideration about the questions in the first place, reveals our stance towards the world around us. Drawing on Freire's work, when we make decisions like this about our teaching, we are taking a political stance that either aims for the maintenance of the status quo, or challenges all involved to change the world (Freire, 1996).

The literature on student-centred teaching and learning touches on the question of what is taught, to whom, by whom, and how either directly or implicitly (Frambach et al., 2014; Harju & Åkerblom, 2017; Hoidn, 2017; Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2016), but focuses largely on the 'how' portion of these questions, suggesting a range of pedagogical tools which can be deployed in different situational contexts (Hoidn, 2017; Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2016). For example, in Hoidn's work, she outlines a series of research questions all aimed at the implementation of student-centred teaching and learning, takes the reader through the constructivist underpinnings of student-centred approaches, and explores various established frameworks for implementing student-centred environments (Hoidn, 2017). Similarly, Sadler's work focuses on the implementation of student-centred teaching and learning and the difficulties faced by early-career academics, highlighting the context-dependent challenges primarily concerning the subject being taught. When the subject and content were oriented to the physical sciences and factual learning, or dealt with more contentious issues, academics found it harder to integrate student-centred approaches (Sadler, 2012).

What is less present from this engagement is a consideration of the political underpinnings and ramifications of these questions. and the exploration of the ways in which this politics plays out in the relationship between educator and student. Harju and Åkerblom argue that although there are explicit attempts to establish student-centred spaces in higher education these can often revert back to teacher-centred teaching and learning practices through the imbalance of knowledge between the educator and the students, and the continuing role of the educator in framing and validating knowledge (Harju & Åkerblom, 2017). As we shall see later in this paper this dynamic is echoed in a particular rationally-based anarchist approach to authority in educational spaces. Among others who do consider these political implications, it is suggested that this student-centred approach is an extension of Western individualist, humanist, and democratic values that cannot or do not account for different cultural expectations, particularly around authority (Frambach et al., 2014; Kinuthia, Kinuthia, 2024). Frambach highlights that while there is a gradual change in student behaviour, in many Asian and Middle-Eastern institutions there is a general reluctance to question or challenge the authority of the educator, meaning there is an obstacle to the encouragement of student-centred education (Frambach et al., 2014).

In the broader context of student-centred teaching and learning in higher education, how are anarchist educators to frame and respond to issues of educator authority, and how might these responses be distinct from student-centred teaching and learning? I argue that specifically postanarchist contributions to educational theory and

practice can help anarchist educators explore issues of educator authority in productive and creative ways. Fretwell captures the tension anarchist educators face when considering the political implications of their practice, "It seems that anarchist educators are forced to deny coercive authority in principle, whilst at the same time affirming it in practice" (Fretwell, 2020, p. 55). Addressing this tension in more personal terms, Spoto writes, "I wonder if my efforts to abolish hierarchies within a state institution are being coopted by those structural hierarchies themselves, reinforcing them by offering the illusion of intellectual and, therefore, personal freedom" (Spoto, 2018, p. 83). In both cases, the authors point to the difficulties anarchist educators face when working in positions with are imbued with authority from society, the institution, colleagues, students, and themselves.

Liberty, equality, solidarity

Unlike other areas of political theory there is no single author or foundational document for anarchism (Brogan, 2018), and as a result anarchism has been described variously as an ideology, a discourse, a culture, and a philosophy (Heckert, 2010); a collection of theories and practices which share some common ground and can be referred to as anarchisms (J. Mueller, 2012); as fluid, depending on the needs of those who use it (Armaline, 2009). The common ground in anarchist works can be understood as an anti-authoritarian streak which is motivated by the desire to "critically interrogate, refuse, transform and overthrow all relations of authority" (Newman, 2016, pp. 1–2). This anti-authoritarian stance is rooted in three central values: liberty, equality, and solidarity (J. Mueller, 2012), and understanding these concepts is central to examining anarchist approaches to power and authority as they establish the form and practice of relationships between and within individuals and communities (Brogan, 2018).

Liberty, or freedom, as the terms are often used interchangeably in anarchist literature—is conceived of as freedom from coercion and the freedom to live how best suits you (Berkman, 1980). Importantly, this freedom does not mean limiting the freedom of others, because others' freedom is a necessary condition of the freedom of an individual (Brogan, 2018). As Bakunin explains: "I am free only when all human beings surrounding me—men and women alike—are equally free" (Bakunin, 1964). Anarchist notions of equality are grounded in a position that pursues an equality of opportunity for individuals' activity and development, acknowledging that people have different interests and tastes and are best approached as equivalent rather than uniformly equal (Bakunin, 1869; Berkman, 1980). The third value, solidarity, is based on ideas of mutual aid: that individuals and communities can work together to provide what everyone needs without establishing exploitative and oppressive relationships. This is grounded in the belief that humans are capable of managing themselves and their affairs without the need of a top–down social structure (DeLeon, 2004). In each of these three values is the looming presence of authority: be that in the freedom from coercion, the equality of all, or the preference for mutual aid over imposed social structures (Brogan, 2018).

While the three values of liberty, equality and solidarity, along with anti-authoritarian drives, hold across various anarchisms, different strands of anarchy bring these ideas

to bear in slightly different ways and with slightly different focuses. One such strand is postanarchism, an area of anarchist thought and practice that integrates the approaches of poststructural thought from authors such as Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze, and Jean-François Lyotard (May, 1994; Newman & Foucault, 2007). Postanarchism adopts the understanding of power as developed by these poststructuralist thinkers to posit power not as an absolute 'power over', but a broader network in which we are all involved. In this understanding we are all subject to, and subjects of power, recasting power as a creative force which forms us while also being formed by us (Burchell et al., 1991; Foucault, 2007; May, 1994; Newman & Foucault, 2007). The move away from power as 'power over' removes singular, if multiple, loci of power such as the state, the university, etc., and instead introduces power as a diffuse network of interacting and overlapping concerns.

Such an understanding reinserts the possibility of autonomy for the subject as they are recognised as influencing networks of power in ways that can transform themselves and society. Through this understanding, postanarchism argues for an approach to anarchism as ontology, where autonomous thought and action are freed from predetermined ends (Newman, 2016). This shifts postanarchism's focus to questions of autonomy based on the ever-present possibility of freedom and the practice of alternative relationships that are not predetermined externally to the relationship itself (Brogan, 2018). This is distinct from understandings of power that maintain foci of 'power over' which impose already-established relationship forms and roles upon subjects. Importantly, this autonomous thought and action, this interrogation of and playing with power in the context of relationships, is always contingent and changes with the context of the subjects involved. If there is no static understanding of 'power over', there can be no static understanding of autonomous thought and action which seeks to challenge authority (Newman, 2016). In the context of this paper, this refers to relationships between educators and students that highlight the ever-present possibility of not being predetermined by the expected authority of the educator as emanating from students, the educator, colleagues, the institution and society, while allowing for the specific contexts and contingencies of those relationships in impacting their practice.

Anarchist pedagogies

With this broader understanding of anarchisms and the specifics of postanarchism, this article now turns its attention to existing literature on anarchist interventions in educational spaces. It should be noted that for some anarchist educators, the only option is to leave the already-flawed established educational institutions. As above, anarchism is a broad house, and the response to leave established educational institutions is one I wholeheartedly support, although it is not my path. Differing responses to educational institutions only serve to strengthen the plurality that is central to anarchist theory and practice, they are not either/or options. In light of this, I propose that academic work can be a form of radical activism in itself (Choudry, 2020; Dunn, 2016) and that retaining a position in the academy, despite the tensions of that position, provides another avenue for the playful experimentation and experience of anarchisms. Simultaneously, it introduces anarchisms to a range of people who may

not encounter it otherwise, demonstrating the everyday possibilities of other forms of social and political organisation *even in* institutions which are not designed to accommodate it, or are outright hostile. This demonstration of everyday possibility works to counter the still-prevailing narratives and social imaginary of anarchisms as chaotic, naïve, and utopian (Suissa, 2024).

There have been various accounts of anarchist approaches to educational theory and practice in recent decades, some of the most prominent being Judith Suissa's work on an anarchist philosophy of education (Suissa, 2001, 2006). Suissa lays out core values of anarchism in conversation with other branches of political theory, before exploring specific anarchist educational philosophy and contributions. This includes an analysis of the centrality of education to anarchist thought through a belief in the contextual basis of human nature, as well as social anarchism's close relationship to many ideals also found in liberalism and socialism. Suissa highlights what she understands to be anarchism's utopian vision which necessitates a non-authoritarian, and yet directed, educational form (Suissa, 2006). Suissa's analysis largely draws on historical anarchist writings and educational experiments, for work dealing with more contemporary considerations and contexts, Amster and colleagues' work addresses the presence and role of various forms of anarchism in the academy (Amster et al., 2009). Here, we find contributions ranging from the development of anarchist theory to explorations of anarchist pedagogies and praxis. Of particular relevance to this paper, a treatment of authority in Armaline's chapter outlines a critique of authority as an external organising force in educational spaces but does not offer a positive formulation for anarchist action (Armaline, 2009).

Of particular interest in the context of this paper are those pieces dealing directly with questions of authority in anarchist educational theory and practice. The work by Moorman (Moormann, 2020), Spoto (Spoto, 2018), and Fretwell (Fretwell, 2020) forms the backbone of this paper's investigation into anarchist educators' attempts to deal with the problems of authority in educational spaces. These three articles offer three different approaches to anarchist understandings of authority. The first addresses the notion of rational authority (Moormann, 2020), the second suggests a position of no authority (Spoto, 2018), and the third argues that the paradox of anarchist educational authority is irreconcilable, and it is in this irreconcilability that the question of authority is taken seriously (Fretwell, 2020).

Moorman argues in favour of a deployment of "rational authority," which she understands as an authority that someone has in a specific domain based on the individual's expertise in that domain. This expertise justifies the individual's authority in certain situations related to the expertise and does not extend beyond it and does not mean an "authority based on an institutionalised, artificial power relation" (Moormann, 2020, p. 566). In outlining this approach to authority, Moorman draws primarily on Bakunin and Kropotkin (Moormann, 2020), two early European anarchist thinkers who were strong believers in the neutral positive strength of scientific thought and rational thinking. Taking this understanding of authority into educational spaces results in situations in which an anarchist educator can claim and deploy authority based on expertise within the confines of their academic discipline. A logical extension of this argument would see the anarchist educator holding authority in decisions on a range of areas connected to their teaching of their expertise, from pedagogical

choices regarding in-session tasks, to session, module, and even programme-wide design, all under the remit of their rational authority of expertise. It is this approach to authority which most closely aligns with that found in student-centred education, with the educator taking a role which intends to create space for student knowledges and input, but in which the educator still holds the position as the ultimate arbiter of that knowledge. The uncritical bias towards the claim to neutrally scientific rationality as foundation for authority is not without its problems and is critiqued in the second of the three approaches to authority in anarchist education.

The second approach criticises claims to rational authority by drawing on the concept of intersectionality as developed by Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw wrote about the intersecting oppressions faced by black women within the legal system in the United States, arguing that they face barriers not because they are women, or because they are black, but specifically because they are black women. Two forms of oppressive practice, racism and sexism, interact in the oppressive experiences of these women. The notion of intersectionality has since been used to explore the multiple and overlapping oppressions certain members of society face. Spoto argues that the alleged neutrality and rationality that is used as the norm by which all other knowledges are measured is in fact rooted in a very specific perspective of a white, heterosexual, European or North American male (Spoto, 2018). An anarchist educator who uncritically claims a rational authority of expertise in the classroom does not account for the broader social contexts by which that rational expertise is claimed and validated, and can reinforce underlying inequalities in the educational space. A social context that includes a network of power that deploys authority across various intersecting elements of the subject: race, gender, sexuality, class, and the like.

In the place of rational authority which establishes a rather rigid vision of educator authority, it is suggested instead that anarchist educators should embrace a position of having no authority in relation to content (Spoto, 2018). This argument starts from Feyerabend's call to epistemological anarchism in *Against Method* (Feyerabend, 1993) which challenges scientific orthodoxy by encouraging an always-plural approach to knowledge, rather than a fixed epistemological model like that of rational authority. This approach shifts pedagogy from a concern with fixed content, to embracing a spontaneity derived from a more fluid understandings of 'educator' and 'student' and the different knowledges they bring to the classroom. Here, the anarchist educator is not a knowledgeable authority in their specific discipline but a facilitator in the students' own pursuit of knowledge, one who removes themselves as a figure of authority in the classroom. This approach is closely related to Ranciere's Ranciere (1999) work on the ignorant schoolmaster and his argument that content knowledge is not necessary in teaching and learning scenarios (Spoto, 2018). Such an approach to educator authority certainly aligns with the anarchist anti-authoritarianism described above, and the use of Feyerabend's epistemological anarchy brings such a position close to that of postanarchism through the recognition of plural knowledges operating as part of a broader network of sense-making. It would also seem to align with the postanarchist concentration on autonomous action, with the educator taking a position against the prevailing expectations of their role and relationship with students. However, as with the rational authority of the first approach, there are limitations to the 'no authority' approach outlined here.

One such issue is that the 'no authority' approach, while closely aligning with the core anarchist tenets of anti-authoritarianism, freedom, equality, and solidarity, cannot account for the entanglement of various expectations of authority on the educator from themselves, students, peers, the institution and society. The conclusion is by no means that the attempt is not worth pursuing, nor that it is not interesting and productive to do so, but it means the 'no authority' approach cannot necessarily equip or assist the anarchist educator in navigating the tensions of their position. A second issue which arises in this approach to authority is that it predetermines the relationship between the educator and the students from beyond the relationship itself. It is possible to read the action of the educator through the lens of autonomous action as proposed in postanarchism, however in doing so it must be acknowledged that in such an approach to authority, the educator has already decided on the form of their relationship with the students before the relationship itself. While taking a different approach, the result is a similarly rigid understanding of educator authority as that found in the rational authority argument.

The final treatment of authority in anarchist education brings the discussion closer to the postanarchist position. Fretwell argues through the notion of coercive authority that anarchist educators find themselves in a paradox in which they must exercise authority despite their commitment to dismantle it. Indeed, it is in facing this paradox head on that questions of educational authority can be given the consideration they deserve, and demand that anarchist educators take responsibility for the choices they might make in this regard (Fretwell, 2020). Coercive authority refers to the power or right to make others comply to the expectations of authority whether that concerns thought, action, or both. This power of compulsion is based on an arbitrary claim to authority which is presented as binding for all involved (Jun, 2012). In the contemporary context directly coercive forms of authority in educational spaces through overt punishment and discipline have largely been replaced by a more covert form of governmentality (Foucault, 2007), the "conduct of conduct" (Burchell et al., 1991, p. 48) through which expected behaviours and relationships are established and reinforced through a network of power which operates across and through individuals, social groups, institutions, and more. The authority of the educator is constructed through their position as an educator and the various expectations of authority they are imbued with by students, peers, the institution, society, and indeed, themselves. This understanding of educational authority moves close to postanarchist positions by drawing on the same poststructural insights regarding power and the contingent condition of authority.

In contrast to explicit or implicit coercive authority is an understanding of authority which treads a line between that of rational authority, without staking any sort of permanent claim, while not going as far a rejection of authority as characterised by the no authority position. Here authority and freedom are considered in a relationship of tension: "To redress the violence of an injustice, or to prevent injustice arising, it may be necessary to impose punitive sanctions. This is the aporetic moment in anarchism. Freedom and authority reject and require one another" (Fretwell, 2020, p. 63). Drawing on the examples of two anarchist educational spaces in Spain, La Escuela Moderna from the early twentieth century, and the contemporary Paideia, Fretwell demonstrates this flexible, tension-ridden authority in practice. In Paideia, the focus is on collaboration, self-government, autonomy, and responsibility, placing the anarchist

values of liberty, equality and solidarity at the core and making them central to the lived experience of all those involved with the school (Fremeaux & Jordan, 2012). However, even in what could be considered ideal conditions of a separate, specifically anarchist-oriented school there are times and conditions in which a temporary state of authority is deemed to be required. Staff at the school often find that as students return from the longer summer break, they have lost their sense of self-government, autonomy and responsibility and return to the school expecting the staff to take an authoritative role. In these situations, a state of *Mandado*, or command, is introduced as a temporary state in which staff take on the role of telling students what to do until a point in time that the students collectively decide that they have regained their sense of autonomy and responsibility. This is the imposition of a particular, authoritative, pre-determined relationship between the staff and students that echoes more traditional educational institutions in which student autonomy is curtailed. While this state of exception does not last for long, there is a recognition that students require a period of time to rediscover their anarchist values (Fremeaux & Jordan, 2012).

The transition in to and out of the state of *Mandado* presents the anarchist difficulties with authority in a microcosm. It also acts to demonstrate a particular, contextual, postanarchist informed response to the challenge. In Paideia, authority in educational spaces is understood in its complexities through the attempt to remove or distance educator authority and the recognition of moments when it is necessary. The presence of authority in the continually negotiated student and staff relationship reflects the flexibility of authority found in postanarchist understandings and provides an example of an approach in an educational setting which can be the starting point for an exploration of postanarchism in higher education spaces.

Postanarchism and authority in higher education

In the first instance, postanarchism can help us understand the power networks we are embedded and complicit in, in our positions as educators in higher education. Postanarchism enables us to acknowledge the complex interplay of expectations of educator authority, and that there are instances when we make use of the authority we are imbued with. This is consistent with postanarchist readings which acknowledge that while the use of authority is arbitrary, it is rooted in a commitment to diffusing its very presence (T. Mueller, 2011). We design programmes, modules, sessions, and tasks, and even when we attempt to distance our authority within and across all those moments, claiming that we can refuse authority entirely is disingenuous. Instead postanarchist approaches start from the position of ontological anarchy and allow us to say: yes, we are implicated within authority in these instances, and yes, we use that authority to design potential educational experiences (even anti-authoritarian ones), and yes, we can respond to our positions within the network of power creatively and constructively. Jamie Heckert's work captures this approach as he writes about the difficulties many people face when guided by anarchist principles, and the all-too-real possibility of not always enacting these principles:

> This is why I invite you to consider the very queer notion of an anarchism not based on opposition, but a politics that starts off accepting everything just as it is. From the basis of acceptance, we might then ask, what service can be offered? How can anarchy be

> nurtured, rather than demanded, forced? What ways of living and relating can we practice that are even more effective at meeting the needs of everyone for life, love, and freedom? (Heckert, 2012, p. 71)

Although written concerning anarchist thought and action more broadly, Heckert's invitation is equally applicable to the tensions faced by anarchist educators. Rather than find ourselves frozen in our practice by our inability to immediately refuse all authority while working in an institution which imbues us with authority, Heckert invites us to start from the everyday position we find ourselves in, and then do what we can to enact our principles where and how we can. In this postanarchist position we find an acknowledgment of the unavoidable presence of authority in the networks of power we are part of, and a modesty about our attempts to create spaces where domination and oppression through the arbitrary use of authority are kept to a minimum (T. Mueller, 2011).

In the second instance, postanarchist approaches to educational authority free us from predetermined relationships between educators and students. Educator authority is not an inert thing to be given away, but a manifestation of a relationship which arises in the moments of interaction and encounter, allowing for the fact that the space for those moments has been created through the authority of the educator. There is a famous passage from Bakunin who writes that if he wants to know about fixing shoes, he speaks to the cobbler, and if he wants to know about building houses, canals, or railroads he speaks to an architect or an engineer, but how in all cases he retains the right to ignore them if he so chooses (Bakunin, 1869). This passage from Bakunin is often used as part of the argument for rational authority, and indeed Bakunin himself appears to have taken a similar approach in the essay by refusing institutionalised authority, while claiming the positive authority of rational scientific exploration and education. However, this passage can also be read through a postanarchist lens. As Bakunin seeks the insights of others, he leaves space for the relationship of authority to develop in the moment itself: he does not presume the authority of the other, nor does he deny it. In the same moment he does not assume his own authority, but approaches the other openly, allowing for the possibility of a productive relationship developing. This reading captures some of the flexibility of the postanarchist understandings of educator authority as something that can shift according to context and the relationships between those involved. Much like the temporary state of *Mandado* in Paideia, yes, I might use my authority to set up a particular task, and, yes that task can then distance my authority through the recognition of student knowledges and insights. If my authority ultimately lacks a predetermined principle, it is contingent, flexible, and negotiable, meaning that it can be changed, challenged, and distanced as part of an on-going process with all involved in that particular relationship.

Theory and practice

We can now move from the theoretical discussion to an example of a postanarchist approach to educator authority in higher education. This task takes place in the opening session of a final semester module in a liberal arts programme in a medium-sized German university. The module is about analysing contemporary social

issues and acts as the final compulsory module for each cohort of the liberal arts programme. Due to the design of the degree programme each student comes to the module with a unique academic path and areas of expertise as they have built their own curriculum from across the modules on offer at the university. This includes philosophy, cultural studies, sustainability science, psychology, business, and law, among others. This final module provides a space to celebrate that diversity of knowledges and interests through the examination of student-selected topics and student-designed sessions.

The first session starts with an exercise deliberately designed to highlight the variety of knowledges present in the classroom, to decentre my authority as the arbiter of knowledgeable, to demonstrate the importance of contingency in the production of knowledge, and to emphasise the creative role we all play in establishing a classroom relationship with one another. In short, it is driven by a postanarchist commitment to undermining the assumed and predetermined authority of the educator in terms of both content and pedagogical practice.

Before the session the seating is arranged to make a U shape so all participants can see one another, with the open end facing the board so everyone can see the instructions easily. The participants are asked to individually write a list of three areas of academic interest, three scholars who have been important in their own development, and three formal or informal educational experiences they have had. Once these are ready a volunteer is handed a ball of string, asked to hold the loose end, and start reading their list of nine items. The moment another participant sees a connection to the list they raise their hands and explain what the connection is. The ball of string is then unwound and passed to this participant, and they begin to read their list of nine items, with the process continuing from there. We repeat this process until everyone who wants to contribute, has. By the end of the exercise there is a web of string stretching across the room from participant to participant.

This string web provides a visual representation of one version of the myriad connections of knowledge and experience which exist among the participants. I then suggest to the students that if we did the exercise again the web would look different and different connections would be drawn, highlighting the contingency of the form this web of knowledge takes, as well as the creative processes involved in the acknowledgement of each other's knowledge. Furthermore, it demonstrates that breadth and depth of knowledge present in the room without any interference or arbitration by me as the educator: beyond setting up the task and physically carrying the ball of string from one participant to another I play no role in the contribution of knowledge. This effectively decentres my authority as *the* knowledgeable other in the space from the first moments of the module. In addition, it establishes a form of relationship between all involved in which all who wish to contribute can, and their contributions are taken seriously in a process of listening and response, building an environment of interaction and interchange.

Broader context

What remains in this article is to draw out the distinction between the educator in student-centred teaching and learning, and the educator inspired by postanarchist

approaches. In student-centred teaching and learning the educator is recast not as a provider of content, but as a "guide on the side," helping students through their own educational journey by designing session tasks, sessions, modules, and programmes that put student interests and concerns at the centre (Bremner, 2021; Frambach et al., 2014; Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Sadler, 2012). In the context of anarchist educational theory and practice, this closely aligns with the rational authority approach in which the educator plays an authoritative role based on their expertise, using their content knowledge to guide the students learning. On the surface the student-centred approach would also appear to be a similar position to that taken in postanarchist approaches to education in which the students play an active role in the creation of knowledge and classroom practice. In both cases, assumptions about educator authority are implicitly and explicitly challenged.

However, there is an important difference between the student-centred approach and the postanarchist approach which can be found in their political commitments and how educator authority is then deployed. The aim of student-centred education is pedagogically derived: student-centred education is understood as a more effective pedagogical approach, and it therefore worth pursuing. While there are some considerations of the broader social and institutional contexts in work on student-centred education in the form of reflexive question of who teaches what, to whom, and how, these are approached as areas of interest rather than fundamental questions of the pursuit itself. As a result, engagements with student-centred teaching and learning tend to become technical considerations through which educator authority is shifted from the specific content developed in the classroom to the higher-level concerns of module design, etc. What occurs here is a similar shift in authority to that of the anarchist position of rational authority, with the accompanying drawbacks this brings.

In contrast to this, postanarchist approaches to education start from a political position which is driven by an anti-authoritarian stance and a commitment to liberty, equality, and solidarity. Such an approach places the reflexive questions of who teaches what, to whom, and how at the centre of educator considerations, and pedagogy then develops from that point. For an observer looking in, and even for the participants themselves, this subtle distinction may not be apparent, which begs two questions: does the distinction need to be clear? And, if yes, how do we achieve that?

My answer to the first question is a resounding yes. The distinction needs to be clear precisely because there is a larger political set of questions and concerns driving postanarchist approaches and these need to be articulated to all those involved. To either actively deny or avoid the politics of postanarchist approaches to educator authority is to attempt to hide behind a veil of neutrality in our pedagogical practice, reminiscent of the disingenuous claim that we can simply deny our authority. And to the second question, how do we acknowledge the politics of our pedagogical practice without predetermining classroom relationships? While it is important to be upfront about our politics, the timing of that moment can impact the development of the relationships of authority in the classroom. In the case of the opening task described above, it is only following the completion of the task that we then explore the underlying motivations and politics. I do this through a reference to the post-structural thought of Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, and then through the introduction of Bakunin's passage on shoemakers and architects. The students

themselves then make the connections to the 'web' task and can then evaluate and re-evaluate their experience on that basis. Importantly, in the introduction of the politics of the task, and by extension the module, this is presented very much as my own starting point and inspiration and not a position that I expect the students to also take on. Instead, it provides the basis for an invitation into a relationship that can be determined by those involved. The creation of such 'exilic spaces' (Brogan, 2017) provide no guarantees of success and are just as prone to collapsing into previously expected authoritarian relationships as they are developing in-the-moment into a form of educational relationship which has successfully distanced predetermined expectations of its practice. What remains to be seen, and continually experimented with is, the extent to which these postanarchist educational relationships and approaches to authority can be formed and reformed over the course of entire sessions, modules, and degree programmes without establishing a new, all-be-it different, set of predetermined understandings and practices of authority in the student-educator relationship.

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