

An Experiment in ‘Radical’ Pedagogy and Study

On the Subtle Infiltrations of ‘Normal’ Education

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‘*WHAT SHOULD LEARNING BE FOR?*’ Why do we so rarely hear that question asked in schools and universities? The possibility for raising the question is perpetually pre-empted within the education system, which prescribes a trajectory of teaching and learning within a modernist, meritocratic, and individualizing worldview. As an antidote to the continual burying of questions about the purposes of learning, we created an alternative study situation where grappling with such questions was the main focus: a class on ‘Radical Pedagogy’ in an anarchistic free school called Experimental Community Education of the Twin Cities (EXCO). Our paper is based on a co-research project with this class and, more broadly, with EXCO.

EXCO began as the Experimental College of the Twin Cities in 2006, emerging from students’ struggles at Macalester College, in St. Paul, MN, to fight against unequal access at their school and in higher education more broadly.² When the protesters failed in their attempt to stop a policy change of the end of need-blind admissions (which they framed as “affirmative action for rich people”), they channeled their energies into creating an alternative infrastructure for study that was completely free and open to all, which became EXCO. Over the years, EXCO’s mission sharpened as it became integrated with more movements around education—from workers’ struggles at the University of Minnesota for a living wage, unions, and campus democracy to Latino immigrants’ struggles for culturally, linguistically, and economically accessible resources for study in South Minneapolis. Through engaging in these struggles, new people became involved, including ourselves, and the organizing group expanded to three semi-autonomous collectives located across the Twin Cities metropolitan area. With this greater capacity, EXCO grew from hosting six classes in its first semester to as many as eighty classes. The types of classes offered change from semester to semester depending on what people are interested in teaching or taking, and our callouts for facilitators often include our tagline: “Anyone can teach or take a class, and they are all free!” The all-volunteer organizers share responsibilities for finding class facilitators, approving classes, budgeting money for facilitators’

honoraria and supplies, putting on facilitator orientations, trainings, and support, publicizing classes, and hosting community-building events.³

At the same time that we have been EXCO organizers, we have also worked as academics—as graduate students—in the University of Minnesota. Our dual positions have given us critical insights into the politics of higher education. Within the university, we have simultaneously felt the pressures of teaching within classrooms, researching, and building our CVs, while organizing with student-worker coalitions and a graduate student union to transform the oppressive, exploitative characteristics of our institution and of higher education in general—from its direct roles in creating a ‘new majority’ of precarious, casualized faculty and increasingly indenturing students, with student debt exploding to over \$1 trillion in 2012, to its indirect role as the top of the pyramid of an education system that pushes out millions of students, heavily along class and racial lines, into the ‘schools-to-prisons’ pipeline.

Depending on their situations, different people understand these negative effects differently, and take up varying positions of critique of, and resistance to, their sources. Being simultaneously *within and against* the education system, everyone has a kind of ‘ambivalent educational self’—ambivalent between taking critical, resistant perspectives on the education system and seeing one’s life and work as bound up with the status quo. We who call ourselves ‘critical’ or ‘radical’ educators grapple with the tensions between these impulses. However, when we explore these tensions so deeply that they start to challenge our institutional positions, we tend to pull back and make compromises out of fear of repression, ostracism, or slipping in the academic capitalist rat race. Against the pressures toward these compromises, our experience with EXCO has provided a bulwark. Since EXCO enacts a miniature version of an alternative vision of what higher education could become, it provides places both for unsubscribing from the sense of necessity of the given education system and for experimenting with modes of study that grapple with the tensions of being *within, against, and beyond* that system.

We focus on the EXCO free school as a place of aspirationally ‘radical’ pedagogy and study that is simultaneously outside of and interconnected with the education system. Critical education research can easily pass over subtle modes of thinking and interacting, expectations and dispositions that we acquire through education and that we carry with us into the rest of our lives. In fact, we can find opportunities to study them outside of universities as well, particularly in situations that are called ones of ‘education,’ which call on our bodies’ habits and expectations for such spaces to click on. In different conditions from those we find in the ‘normal’ education institutions, we can *experiment* with our habits and expectations. Particularly, in a space that aspires to be one of ‘radical’ education—in which there are no grades, tests, credits, wage labor, tuition, bureaucracy—we can experiment with the different possible modes of association between, on the one hand, various aspirationally ‘radical’ conditions, and on the other hand, the habits and expectations that participants bring into the situation. Thereby, we make an experimental lab in which the more obvious limits to radical study are reduced.

Drawing on our experiences and reflections from the class, in this paper we investigate how subtle modes of thinking from so-called ‘normal’ education infiltrate activities of aspirationally ‘radical’ situations of pedagogy and study. We theorize our practices of grappling with these tensions as a kind of ‘playful work,’ centered around four themes: *the geo- and body-political situatedness of knowledge, space-time, a/effective relationships, and pedagogy and study*. Within these themes, we take up and trouble modernist and colonial dichotomies—representations and reality, space and time, society and nature, individual and collective, primitive and civilized, uneducated and educated—which we view as subtle sources of obstacles we experienced in our class and, more broadly, in our free school and other aspirationally ‘radical’ organizations. Subscribing to these conceptual separations, and coming to take them for

granted, both happens through and serves to legitimate the institutions of education, or the processes of making people “ready” for adulthood, work, and governance.

Militant Co-Research: Within and Against / With and For

Ostensibly ‘critical’ and ‘radical’ approaches to education often fall back on the dominant education system’s limited imagined trajectories for students’ learning; for example, by seeing students as ‘individuals’ who merely need to increase their ‘critical consciousness’ or ‘self-reflexivity’ about the world, while still advancing up the developmental stages of the education system with the ideal end being the university. Because traditional K-12-focused education research and higher education research can be separated so easily, scholars often make it seem as if the university is not, or only incidentally, a part of the reproduction of dominant education in schools (Kliebard, 2004). Both educators’ and students’ subscriptions to these individualizing modes are enforced by mechanisms of discipline, exclusion, and marginalization—and they are often reproduced in the solutions offered by critical education scholars.

Freirean notions of critical pedagogy tend to privilege educational situations of study organized by teachers with pedagogical expertise, emphasizing “an ontological vocation of progressive humanization through praxis” (Lewis, 2011a, p. 254). Prakash and Esteva (2008) argue that this delegitimizes the everyday, community-embedded places of study that contribute alternative perspectives to modernity and coloniality. The ways in which critical consciousness often gets mobilized as a progression toward ‘humanness’ perpetuates the dichotomy and hierarchy of civilized/educated/critical over primitive/uneducated/uncritical. By insisting people need help and empowerment to learn how to live, critical pedagogues position education as the primary means of humanization and liberation (as in McLaren, 2010; Freire, 1970).

Rather than presuppose that we already know the answer to the question of what ‘critical’ or ‘radical’ study should be, that is precisely the question we are exploring through this research. To avoid a simplistic dichotomy of ‘radical’ vs. ‘normal’ education, we emphasize how aspirationally ‘radical’ study spaces can never be fully disconnected from the intersecting systems of domination, exploitation, and oppression that are bound up with the so-called ‘normal’ education system. At the same time, the term ‘within’ is relative; the ‘normal’ institutions of schools and universities tend to be relatively more enmeshed ‘within’ the education system than are some ‘radical’ institutions, such as free schools. The education system is composed with mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization, such as testing, grading, tracking, tuition, and hierarchies within and across levels. Although everyone is affected by the education system in some way, some people are more negatively affected by these mechanisms, strongly dependent on class, race, gender, nationality, and other factors. Some are pushed out, marginalized, or excluded, while some rise through the system’s ranks and have greater influence and access within it and in the capitalist world of work. For the creation and maintenance of any collectively resistant subjects, it is necessary to build relationships *with* those who are marginalized from the education system and to organize movements with them *for* changing and/or abolishing the capitalist-colonial-patriarchal-education system and promoting alternatives.

These questions—how to organize *within and against* the education system, while organizing *with and for* those who are excluded and marginalized from it—compose the problematic with which we frame our militant co-research project. To explain what we mean by this term, “militant co-research,” we will describe each of its components in relation to our context (Malo de Molina, 2006). It is ‘militant’ in the sense that we situate the project as

embedded in the history and political purposes of an organization, EXCO, to which we are committed. Although EXCO has become one of the largest anarchistic free schools in the US,⁴ it has been a very rocky road and, unfortunately, the past year has seen a down-swing in organizer capacity. As a project of ‘research,’ our paper aims to offer guidance for EXCO’s participants to expand our constituent power—i.e., for enacting critically constructive improvements within EXCO and wider movements. The basis of our research for this paper is an EXCO class on ‘Radical Pedagogy’ that we co-facilitated in the summer of 2012. Since one of EXCO’s organizing challenges has been around equipping facilitators with capacities to make their own classes successful—on their and the participants’ terms, and in harmony with EXCO’s anti-oppressive, anti-authoritarian values—one of our goals with this class was to help improve EXCO’s facilitator support practices.⁵ Not only were we taking on the roles of researchers and organizers in this class but also facilitators and participants, aiming to create a situation in which we and the other participants could improve our skills and knowledge with radical pedagogy.

Before the class, we met several times to plan out seven class meetings, including readings—on pedagogy generally, on political education and radical pedagogy, and then a class each on colonialism, race, and gender and sexuality. About 18 participants came to the first class, and attendance dwindled afterwards, fluctuating between 8 and 12 participants. Most had attended or were attending college or university; they were mostly white, came from various backgrounds and experiences, and less than half were teachers in ‘normal’ schools or universities. About half were friends of ours through organizing EXCO or other projects, a few were former or current class facilitators, and others heard about the class through the EXCO website or by word of mouth. We encouraged participants to take on their own research projects throughout and beyond the course—becoming co-researchers along with us. We took thorough notes on each class and sent them to the class email list. After each class, we met to reflect on how the class went, both for the purposes of our research and for planning the following class. After the course, we performed follow-up interviews with six participants.

Rather than having a set research agenda as in a traditional methodology, we interpret the ‘co-research’ aspect of our approach as an imperative to see our research methods as recursively intertwined in a “messy,” endlessly controversial process of mutual transformation with our theories, values, and “group formations” of our ‘selves,’ ‘communities,’ ‘relationships,’ etc. (Law, 2004; Latour, 2005). It is co-research not merely in the sense that we are co-planning, co-analyzing, and co-writing with each other, transgressing the normal individualization of research, but also we are collaborating with others in the class and wider movements.

In this collaborative study, we take on the Zapatista principle, ‘walking together, we ask questions.’ A central one has been: *how can we create situations of radical movement- and community-embedded study?* Considering the dominance of normal education, superficially it would seem that the response should be that creating alternatives requires a great deal of work. Yet, considering that within capitalism the idea of ‘work’ is almost inextricably associated with wage labor, what we mean by ‘work’ must itself be treated as an object of critique. A key starting point is to consider what activities are opposed to ‘work’ in dominant discourses and then to trouble those dichotomies. One central dichotomy is between work and play. In dominant modes of understanding education, particularly ‘stage developmentalism,’ play is often associated with earlier, ‘childhood’ stages and is opposed with qualities of an individual that are associated with the endpoint of this trajectory: independence, invulnerability, and devotion to and readiness for work (Lesko, 2001; Katz, 2011). In opposition to developmentalist valorization of an individualized subject, play destabilizes assumed boundaries of ‘individuals’ through joyful affective relations between people. Thereby, it enables “received meanings and relations [to be] refused or reworked” (Katz, 2011, p. 56). Against framings that trivialize play as childish,

unproductive, and a waste of time, in our class we tried to study through playing, including with games, role playing (or playing ‘pretend’), drawing/making art, among other ways in order to “toy with the meanings and practices” of radical pedagogy (p. 56).

Rather than continue to circulate the dichotomy of ‘work’ and ‘play,’ we use the ambivalent concepts of ‘playful work’ and ‘work-ful play,’ and we investigate in what ways these complex practices could be involved in creating radical study situations. We identify different themes of this playful work—that is, sets of conceptual ‘toys’ and ‘tools’—and in each of these we talk about grappling with various dichotomies, boundaries, dispositions, and expectations that participants bring into the aspirationally ‘radical’ situation. A key theoretical move in this playful work is to take a decolonial perspective on these dichotomies by recognizing them as “colonial differences” that are part of the assumptions of modernity/coloniality used to de-legitimate alternative modes of living (Mignolo, 2011). We highlight the ways in which these assumptions are intertwined with those of ‘normal’ education, and we present alternative concepts for describing the phenomena associated with those dichotomies and for composing decolonial, communal futures. In the following analysis, we draw out how the infiltration of these assumptions into our actions limited our collaborative study.

Geo- and Body-Political Situatedness of Knowledge

Normal schools maintain their borders by creating a kind of mini “state effect” (Mitchell, 1999). The zone of legitimate ‘education’ is demarcated with the territories of the school and classroom, and it is seen as homologous with the areas of the school administrator’s and teacher’s authority over the community of people in those territories. The legitimation of these territory-authority relations relies on a dualistic view of reality: the political being of the school (or university or classroom) is taken as an abstract, unified representation *separate* from the material, socio-economic world (the places of the school and surroundings and the bodies of people in them). The perpetuation of these mini-states depends on modernist, territorial thinking with a “zero point epistemology,” which has its historical origin with maps of the territories of European colonialism, indicating the lines of imperial control of international law, from the 16th century and on, in which the observer sees planet Earth ‘from above’ and with the Atlantic Ocean at its center (Mignolo, 2011, p. 79). This epistemology uses the assumption of the zero point as “always in the present of time and the center of space” to hide its own localness—the particularity of the geo- and body-historical location in which it is made—while simultaneously “assuming to be universal and thus managing the universality to which everyone has to submit” (p. 80). From the site of this zero point, “the epistemic colonial differences and the epistemic imperial differences are mapped out”—from the difference of ‘primitive’ vs. ‘civilized’ that was, and still is used, to disqualify the ways of knowing and living of non-Western peoples and to legitimize the colonization of their lands, to the difference of ‘educational’ vs. ‘non-educational’ that is used to legitimize the boundaries and norms of schools and universities.

In opposition to this modernist/colonialist epistemology, we take inspiration from the countless peoples who have resisted colonization and affirmed decolonial modes of thinking that dwell in the borders between the colonial differences. Learning from decolonial struggles, we can draw a simple but systematically useful heuristic: *‘I am where I think,’* which “is one basic epistemic principle that legitimizes all ways of thinking and de-legitimizes the pretense of a singular particular epistemology, geo-historical and bio-graphically located, to be universal” (p. 81). From the perspective of colonial subjects, now including migrants in Western Europe and

the U.S., the affirmation of ‘I am where I think’ “implies ‘And you too,’ addressed to believers in the epistemology of the zero point.” Examining the history of EXCO, although its organizers have not used quite these terms to think of the ‘decolonial imperative’ to attend to the ways in which our knowledge comes from particular geo- and body-political situations, we have enacted this principle in our organizing, particularly through aiming to de-center the University.

After the first year of classes, EXCO organizers noticed that most of the participants and facilitators were class, race, and education privileged, thereby basically reproducing the exclusive demographics of University classes. Realizing that we were not living up to EXCO’s mission to make access to resources for study more equitable, organizers embarked on a strategy to build relationships with people who are marginalized from the University, focusing first on the Latin@ immigrant community in South Minneapolis. After holding classes in Spanish at a community center, some class participants enjoyed the classes so much that they were motivated to create their own organizing collective, Academia Comunitaria, through which they found facilitators and created support for more Latin@ community-embedded classes. With hundreds of participants in several dozen classes put on through Academia over three years, they enacted a new decolonial option not only for EXCO but for contemporary anarchistic free schools across North America. Compared to most University classes and the many EXCO classes that were embedded in the modes of knowing and living of white Euro-Americans, the Academia classes (e.g., Zumba, cooking, Latin@ labor politics) were more embedded in the everyday lives and informal networks of cooperation in Latin@ immigrant communities. Thereby, in contrast with the territorial and chronological boundedness of education activities (‘mini state effect’), Academia’s participants had diverse flows of connections, overlappings, and border-crossings between their places of more concentrated study and of everyday life.

Despite our appreciation of the powerful decolonial projects created through Academia, we failed to connect with them well in our planning and carrying out of our class on ‘radical pedagogy.’ Due to a complex variety of factors, the organizing capacity of Academia had dwindled to such a low point that their community of facilitators became disconnected and no classes in Spanish were put on in the semesters before and during our class. In addition to considering Academia’s organizational breakdown as a barrier to participation in our class for Academia facilitators, we also take some responsibility through our role as facilitators in our planning of the class. Although we tried to avoid reproducing elements of ‘normal’ education, we unintentionally created its ‘mini state effect’ to a certain extent, because we created ‘borders’ in the sense of barriers of language (not offering bilingual translation in Spanish), geography (locating the class in a mostly white, non-Latin@ neighborhood), transportation (not explicitly offering carpools), relationships (neglecting to do outreach with Latin@ networks of cooperation), and epistemology (using some academic jargon in our class description and assigning readings mostly produced by academics, with a few exceptions). Part of the reason for our failing to be more critical of such ‘bordering’ was our falling back on subscriptions to a modernist/colonialist assumption about ‘space’ and ‘time’—that is, limiting our responsibilities for the space-time of the class to merely setting a place and time. This limited view relies on an abstraction of ‘space’ and ‘time’ from lived experiences, neglecting the geo- and body-politics of knowledge of both ourselves and our potential participants, especially those who could offer richer decolonial perspectives.

Composing Space-Time

Ideas about space and time are produced from particular embodied, historical, geographic places and for particular purposes. We understand space and time as intertwined, as opposed to a modernist/colonialist view that sees them as distinct and that frames them within a dichotomous view of representations vs. the material world. This goes against seeing ‘clock time’ as if it were a representation of a linear scale with which a separate material world should be measured, separated from the lived, “cosmological experience of time” (e.g., of the four seasons, time of the harvest), and against the view of space as a homogeneous grid to be laid upon the surface of a material world, a visualization detached from lived experience for management of the bodies and places on that grid (Massey, 2005; Mignolo, 2011, p. 159).

Dominant education discourses include these modernist/colonialist orientations to space-time as taken-for-granted representations with which our growth and change as people should be measured and managed. The modernist/colonialist project draws one of its key sources of legitimation from the dichotomy of ‘modernity’ vs. ‘tradition,’ a distinction which is based on the concept of ‘time’ as a line of successive moments—and through this concept differences between different ‘cultures’ in different geographic places are “classified according to their proximity to modernity or to tradition” (Mignolo 2011, p. 160). Likewise, in the modernist/colonialist institutions of education, these concepts of space and time are deployed in the institutional authorities’ determinations of how human bodies should be moved, classified, and managed. Discourses with these concepts give an air of non-controversiality to Taylorist ways of moving students from classroom to classroom in lines, the divisions between subjects and disciplines into different classrooms and buildings, students grouped according to age, ‘tracking,’ the achievement gap ‘crisis,’ and the stage developmentalist understandings of how people linearly progress toward an ideal ‘civilized’ subjectivity (Lesko, 2001).

In our EXCO class, with the absence of coercive pressures on participants—of grades, credits, tuition, truancy laws—to travel through space-time to arrive at the class, the conditions of their travel could no longer be taken for granted. The relations of participants’ bodies with the places from, through, and to which they travel entail different conditions for *collecting* the participants together into the place of teaching and learning, which is a precondition for having them *compose* situations of collective study (Latour, 2005). The space-time of their bodies’ travel through the places of the city to and from the class, and how this relates with their motivation to get to the class, should be an object of reflection and planning for facilitators. This reflection should include consideration of the material circulation of participants’ subscriptions to their views of ‘space-time’ in relation to their own desiring, imagining, and planning of activities and goals in their place- and community-embedded lives.

In our EXCO class, we attempted to anticipate participants’ conditions getting to and from the class, and the extent to which we did this successfully, can partially be judged by the number of participants that regularly showed up for each class. In order to make the class more accessible, we attempted to be inclusive of participants’ different schedules by using an online scheduling tool (Doodle poll) to find a regular class time that worked best for everyone. We chose a space that was relatively central to where most people were coming from, and accessible by multiple bus routes. To address family needs, in our initial communications with participants, we offered childcare, though no one took us up on this offer. Considering that normal, patriarchal schooling normatively frowns upon caregivers bringing their children into classrooms, we are aware that our offer might not have been enough, and that there is more at work in this limitation than merely offering childcare. The tension between caregivers’ desires to participate in EXCO classes and the norm that children are not welcome in ‘adult’ classes is a broader issue that

EXCO could address to some extent through better communication that children are welcome and will be well-cared for during all classes.⁶

We also adopted practices in order to account for the variability and precariousness of people’s lives. To help participants stay connected with the class, we shared print and electronic copies of the readings and detailed notes for each class via a free Wordpress website and an email listserv. We were flexible about people coming late to class, and filled each other in through various pedagogical strategies, such as narrative retellings, when some of us were unable to do the readings for the week. In normal schooling, ‘lateness’ and ‘unpreparedness’ are tropes by which the classroom authority shames and disciplines students—a practice we actively tried to avoid.

A/effective Relationships

By attending to the space-time-place-body conditions of participants’ daily lives and travels, we addressed some of the broader issues that can limit the ability or motivation for people to come to class. Just because participants are collected in the same room together, however, does not mean that they are fully present or feel motivated to bring into the classroom discussion their own narratives about different parts of their lives. In order to create a sense of collective investment in composing the class, we attempted to use work-ful play to foster affective, loving, friendly, supportive relationships. The positive *affectiveness* of these relationships constitutes collective subjectivities for *effectively* radical pedagogy (Shukaitis, 2009). The creation of such relationships is not only a necessary enabling condition for enacting the desired content of study in the class but also—with a kind of figure-ground perspective shift—they can become the most important aspect of the class, seeing them as the webs of lived connections that continue on beyond the class. The discourse of the education system circulates modernist/colonialist dichotomies of ‘nature’ vs. ‘society’ that de-legitimize the such relationships for their ‘wild’ unsettling of the boundaries of ‘individuals.’ Thus, we drop these dichotomies in favor of an alternative way of describing these relationships, seeing them as “movements of association” that compose shifting, lived connections of desiring and “imagining machines” (Latour, 2005; Shukaitis, 2009).

In the ‘mini states’ of schools and universities, the relationships of teachers, administrators, and students remain crystallized in factory-like perpetual motion regardless of what happens in classes. By contrast, in EXCO and other anarchistic free schools the development of relationships through collective study in classes is a crucial process for maintaining and expanding their infrastructure. Whether and how such relationships form determines if participants continue taking other courses or facilitate their own courses—as many of the members of our class have done in the following semester, including in a Popular Education class—or they could even become EXCO organizers, as happened with one member of our class. In all these ways, the relationships formed through classes are constitutive not only of the sustainability of EXCO but also—as a decolonial alternative to the education system’s centralizing of power—they enable a continual “dispensing of power,” with EXCO’s visioning, planning, and organizing as an always-in-process, directly democratic project (Zibechi, 2010).

In recognizing the mutual implication of such *a/effective* relationships with movement- and community-embedded study, we see that different modes of thinking and interacting can either limit or enable these relationships. Some of the biggest obstacles are from participants subscribing to the individualizing perspectives that they carry from normal education and its interrelations with the world of waged work, consumerism, majoritarian politics, and

heteronormativity. As a counter-force, we take a decolonial perspective on the modernist ‘society’/‘nature’ dichotomy and the connected view of ‘society’ as made up of distinct ‘individuals.’ We see ‘individuals’ not in contrast with ‘social groups’ but as themselves a kind of “group formation,” with potentially unlimited controversies about its description—e.g., whether to call it an ‘individual self’ or an ‘assemblage of organs, neurons, desires, water, bacteria, etc.’ (Latour, 2005). These controversies over group formations are (un)settled in particular ways through movements of association, such as through the disciplinary practices of schools that enforce subscriptions to ‘individualizing’ frames of the valued imaginal trajectory of becoming a ‘graduate’ in opposition to becoming a ‘dropout’ (Fine, 1991). Using this non-modernist language, we remind ourselves that our bodies are always already caught up in movements of association with other bodies and the places we inhabit, and that individualizing subject forms merely short-circuit our movements in order to recuperate the common products of our collectivities for boring life trajectories. Thus, in our classes, to try to de-stabilize participants’ subscriptions to such subject forms, we take their relationships with others—both outside and inside the class—as the preconditions, means, and ends for our pedagogy. One way we tried this was through discussions, activities, and projects that draw on class participants’ relationships with people and projects from outside of the class; e.g., brainstorming about what practical issues they cared about in their lives and, then, about what research projects could be useful for strengthening their capacities to engage better with those issues.

What constitutes a ‘negative’ or a ‘positive’ aspect of a relationship is open to multiple interpretations. Starting with participants’ own evaluations of relationships, activities must also be planned in the class to grapple with differences across participants’ understandings. Some of the key ethical-political tensions around relationships come from controversies regarding constructions of identity—such as class, race, sexuality, gender, age, ability, etc.—that can be subscribed to in ways that create borders and friction between people and/or lines of solidarity across them.

One crucial way that this came up was with race. Ideally, we would have shaped the activities in ways that would enable participants to grapple with the tensions involved in combatting racism in both its explicit and implicit, ‘colorblind’ forms—the racialization of bodies and the institutional, structural effects of white supremacy as well as the cultures and movements that have re-appropriated representations of race, such as around Blackness and Indigeneity, as markers for solidarity and resistance. Despite our attempting to avoid colorblind racism in the facilitation of the EXCO class through our reading and discussing critical articles about race and colonialism, we fell into this problem in some ways. Related with EXCO’s broader organizational problem of being stuck in mostly white activist and academic networks, the initial attendance of our class included only 3 people of color out of 18 participants. Two of these three did not return for further classes, which might not have had anything to do with issues of race, but based on our follow-up interview with the one person of color who followed through with all of the classes, the fact that the class was overwhelmingly majority white certainly created barriers to their participation. She said:

I feel like I had a harder time connecting to other people in the class (not because I didn’t like them or anything) but because a lot of my engagements with radical pedagogy have to do with being a brown woman in front of a class of mostly white students and having to negotiate discussions of race and white privilege and other such issues while being the only non-white body in the room. This, unfortunately, is the case in many circumstances, including this radical pedagogy class - while I am sure people would have been open to talking about such issues, I myself was not comfortable with it in these circumstances.

As she suggested, we failed to structure and promote the class in a way that would have made it more appealing to people of color and allowed us to enter into such discussions for collectively problematizing the complex tensions around racism, while avoiding individualizing approaches that make white people feel guilty and that make people of color feel spotlighted or pressured to teach white people about race. For the person of color who continued with our class, one reason she kept coming back was that she already had strong relationships with the facilitators and some of the participants. Thus, rather than relying on a disembodied approach to discussing race based on readings, we should make sure to ground our discussions in embodied experiences and to pay attention to the possibilities and limits for building on existing relationships.

Pedagogy and Study

On the normal assumptions of education, historically constructed in tandem with the rise of the capitalist, colonial state, there is a tendency to accept the monopolization of the legitimate means for teaching and learning by professionalized teachers and administrators (Prakash & Esteva, 2008). This claimed authority is legitimated through the discourses of modernity/coloniality; e.g., in the contemporary ‘developmental stages’ frame of education, one’s being ‘uneducated’ on a linear understanding of ‘time’ is equated with being “behind in time,” and “if you believe so, you are more likely to want to catch up with modernity” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 161 & 172). Also, the figure of the ‘dropout’ stands for the ‘wild,’ ‘primitive’ Other to the ‘graduate’ of the education system’s ‘civilizing,’ ‘socializing’ process. These discourses reinforce the assumptions that guide particular ways of figuring authority relations and value-making practices in the classroom—fixed hierarchical relations between teachers and students and the ‘banking model’ with its borders between legitimate and illegitimate forms of knowledge and study. These relations legitimate the professional teachers’ authoritarian control of the value practices of grades and credits that plug the common products of collective study into capitalist circuits of value. By contrast, the anti-authoritarian principles of EXCO and other free schools present facilitators with the *challenge* of creating the best conditions for enabling all participants to navigate a messy, always-in-process, horizontalist mode of grappling with their different relationships and value practices. For helping facilitators approach this complex, context-relative challenge, we offer some tips on limiting conditions along with some tactics for approaching them.

One of the most subtle ways that dispositions acquired from the education system infiltrated our EXCO class was through the language that we used to frame the class and our activities in it. Both facilitators and participants continually used the modernist language of ‘education’ while often trying to introduce distinctions between what happens in ‘normal’ education and the kind of activity we wanted to happen in EXCO classes by qualifying ‘education’ with adjectives of ‘critical,’ ‘radical,’ ‘popular,’ or ‘anarchist.’ Another rhetorical tactic we tried was to substitute ‘teaching and learning’ for ‘education,’ but then we had to qualify this phrase with similar adjectives or by saying ‘where everyone is a teacher and a learner.’ During our class, we neglected to seriously trouble what can constitute a study situation by using these terms without specifying our meanings of them. Thus, we tended to fall back on and privilege ‘normal’ and formal organizations of study (i.e., classrooms - whether in EXCO or ‘normal’ schools). This had the effect of delegitimizing participants’ motivations and goals for studying pedagogy in everyday interactions and relationships and for situations not traditionally deemed ‘educational’ (e.g., two participants who worked with people with disabilities in group

care situations). One of these participants said during an interview: “The content was in a different direction, so it kind of felt like what I wanted to work on wasn’t a hugely productive conversation for most people’s goals for being there [...] Most everyone who was there was either working in education or wanted to, whether it was higher education or working with youth, in that way, that’s a very focused conversation.” In fact, many participants were in the class to study pedagogy for political organizing, everyday relationships, among other situations that were not ‘normal education’ situations.

Reflecting on this problem of reinscribing borders around legitimate ‘education,’ we now have a recommendation for how to address this through more conceptual specificity: keep the terms ‘education’ and ‘teaching and learning’ for describing the activities in ‘normal’ schools and universities, but additionally use the term ‘study’ for describing parts of these activities as well as for activities outside of those institutions, whether in alternative kinds of schools such as EXCO or in the course of everyday life. We are using the term ‘study’ not in exclusive distinction from ‘education’ and ‘teaching and learning,’ but rather we see the latter as including activities of study in addition to some other elements, particularly the modernist assumptions of ‘individuals’ who, as students, at the completion of their study can be tested with ‘exams’ administered by ‘individual’ teachers who possess ‘expertise’ and who can commodify their expert knowledge for sale in textbooks and curricula.⁷ By recognizing the historical construction of this figuration of study within modernist/colonial ‘education’ and ‘teaching and learning,’ we can open possibilities for figurations of ‘study’ that are de-linked from modernity/coloniality and connected instead with decolonial, communal futures.

For a generic view of study, we draw on Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s notion of study as “not being ready for governance” (Moten, Harney, & Bousquet, 2009, p. 160).⁸ They describe ‘study’ as a “relational term,” in complementary relations of “a kind of circle of knowledge—teaching—study, as that set of relations that never really leaves prematurity,” and also in relations of opposition to both ‘exam’ and ‘expertise,’ which imply the completion of study, as well as in opposition to ‘governance’ as “a kind of prospecting of mass intellectuality” (p. 170-1). This relationality leaves the threads of many controversies open, thereby calling for asking many questions, such as: ‘why study?’; ‘study for composing what kind of world?’; and ‘what are the geo- and body-politically situated relations of the knowledges with which one studies?’ Such investigation could include the limiting and enabling conditions of study for composing a modernist/colonialist world if situated in education’s disciplinary practices—*or* study for decolonial, abolitionist resistances and for creating alternative, communal worlds.

This line of inquiry resonates with Moten and Harney’s “undercommons” approach, which asks questions about “what one’s relationship ought to be to a place [the University] which is, on the one hand, a refuge for study, but on the other, an institution that exerts a quite vicious and brutal—however much it is comfortable and gentle—control over study,” and questions about how one can “escape *within* that institution,” to take up a kind of “refugee status within the University” in “surreptitious underground zones,” grappling with questions of selective in/visibility and im/perceptibility through relations of “criminality” and “maroon community” (Moten, Harney, & Bousquet, 2009, p. 166). Addressing questions about study *within and against* dominant institutions and *with and for* marginal communities and radical movements makes questions around pedagogy even more important. Against developmentalist approaches to study, “how can we begin to imagine a pedagogy that is not predicated on the readiness for governance of the student?” (p. 169). De-linking ‘pedagogy’ from ‘education’ and associating it with ‘study’ more generally, we define ‘pedagogy’ as reflection, planning, and design of situations for study. In our EXCO class, all participants engaged in both pedagogy and

study to varying extents, with those of us who took on the role of ‘facilitator’ having more responsibility for pedagogy in relation to the class.

This more explicit pedagogical responsibility for facilitators, however, should be an object of collective and continuous reflection in order to avoid slipping into positions of authority inherited from teacher-student relations in normal schools. As an attempt at this reflection, we collectively created expectations for each other and the class during our first meeting. We later recognized that this activity only scratched the surface of the potential for constituting our class as a self-organizing study collectivity. By imposing our initial curriculum, we accidentally made barriers to connecting the study in our class with the ongoing study in our participants’ lives—neglecting to explore controversies over curriculum *with* the participants, drawing on their knowledge, desires, and imaginations.

We re-evaluated our class’s collective expectations, our (the facilitators’) pedagogy and the curriculum only once, during a later session, and realized we had been avoiding many controversies. Some participants said they were not being challenged or pulled out of their comfort zones enough, and others had hoped for more activities to create and practice radical pedagogy strategies. In an interview after the class was over, a participant expressed resistance to the ways in which we tended to situate academic readings as the objects of our analysis. She commented: “I was actually a little surprised by how similar many of the conversations were in the two [‘normal’ and ‘radical’] contexts. I guess I suspected that because there would be fewer professional academics in the EXCO class, conversations wouldn’t be so mired in theory.” In focusing our study of pedagogy on mostly academic readings and spending less time sharing the playful work of pedagogy with participants through continuous re-evaluation of the curriculum’s relevancy to our everyday lives, we sometimes fell back onto dichotomies that separated theory from our situated knowledges.

By facilitating the class in this way, we tended to assume we should be able to read and discuss theories of pedagogy, and then later, apply the theories we learned to various future study situations. Instead of masking our own localness, we should have attended to the geo- and body political situatedness of our past, current, and future study situations. By more explicitly positioning our class, relationships, and lived experiences as the focus of our study on pedagogy, we could have better grappled with the tensions that only appeared as such upon post-class reflection. Doing so, we might have found more effective ways to interrogate and transform the borders we inadvertently created and/or subtly perpetuated through language (English-only), geography and transportation, academic and activist jargon, and constructions of identity through race, class, sexuality, nationality, etc.

The work-ful play and playful work necessary for attending to the precariousness and variability of people’s lives within capitalism, building a/effective relationships, and collectively composing a curriculum with movement- and community-embedded pedagogy and study is a complex and controversy-ridden process. The tensions arising from our desires for aspirationally ‘radical’ pedagogy and study should not be prematurely settled in classes or in the wider EXCO organization. During and after our class, we have been in the process of restructuring EXCO’s organization, in part because we realized that we were operating on a myth that power in EXCO was decentralized and distributed equally among our three organizing collectives. In reality, the collectives most closely associated with universities and their institutional resources had more power than Academia Comunitaria, and we had neglected to seriously interrogate our subtle modes of reproducing normal school/bureaucratic relationships. By taking up the challenge to engage with controversies and interrogate these infiltrations, we can increase our capacities to work with and for those of us who are most marginalized and excluded by the system of

education, and who are already enacting decolonial options for pedagogy and study in our everyday lives.

Notes

¹ The authors contributed equally to this paper.

² The organizers later decided to change the name to Experimental Community Education of the Twin Cities in response to threats from a Minnesota state government official that, if we had ‘college’ (or ‘academy’ or ‘university’) in EXCO’s name, we would be legally required to pay an annual licensing fee (which would have been over a quarter of our annual budget).

³ For more information on EXCO, see <http://excote.org>.

⁴ On anarchistic free skools more generally, and for a directory of over fifty of them across North America, see The Free Skools Project website at <http://freeskoolsproject.wikispaces.com/>.

⁵ The main practices through which organizers have attempted to address these challenges have been facilitator orientations at the beginning of each semester as well as connecting facilitators with a support person for the semester.

⁶ Some other accessibility issues came up during the class that we were able to work through, such as a participant needing to move to separate rooms during small group work to be able to concentrate, and others that we are still unsure about how to support, including a participant who had self-identified anxiety issues who did not come back after the first class. Dominant schooling often creates ability differences as sources of shame for students, individualizing and marginalizing them as not ‘normal,’ decontextualizing difference and situating it within a binary of less able/more able. Building relationships before we gather for class, such as through more personal communication rather than mass emails, might make participants feel more comfortable sharing needs that, if collectively met, would better ensure their ability to fully participate.

⁷ The word ‘education’ emerged along with other concepts of modernity, tied with the imaginaries of the so-called ‘modern’ political-economic system of capitalism, the state, and the nature/society dichotomy. Its first uses in French and English were in the 15th century, and in Spanish, “in 1632 Lope de Vega still refers to ‘education’ as a novelty” (Illich, 1977, p. 75). Practices of study, under various names, could be dated back millions of years, to the birth of human cultures. Study within the institutional situation of schooling are seen emerging at various times in different cultures, such as around 3000 BC in Egypt. In the Western world, practices of study occurred in schools and universities for centuries prior to the birth of the modern concept of ‘education,’ dating the first universities to the 11th century AD and the first monastic schools to the 6th century AD (Riché, 1978). The original sense of ‘university’ was the totality of a group of students who organized together as a kind of union to study together, manage their own affairs, and protect themselves from the price-gouging activities of the townspeople and teachers (Hearn, 2003, p. 3). Under the reign of education, study becomes reformulated as a scarce commodity, and knowing becomes further homogenized and commoditized through textbooks, which were first developed in the mid-16th century, while “knowledge as intellectual property expressed in written text, owned by the individual author and alienable as commodity, was to be found in incipient form as early as in fifteenth-century Venice” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009, p. 522).

⁸ For our conception of study, we also take inspiration from Tyson Lewis’s use of the concept of study as a critique of the ‘learning society’ of neoliberal capitalist democracy in which the child is viewed “as an infinite potentiality that *can* and *must* be actualized through constant performance testing,” thereby sacrificing “our *impotentiality*, our ability *not to be*” (Lewis, 2011b, p. 587). Although we pick up on his turn to the concept of ‘study,’ we diverge from his conception of it, because he builds some normative element into it, making it an ideal, ‘emancipatory’ form of study, such as by positing “the radical separation of studying from labor” and instead seeing study as “a form of play,” “when we *play with learning*, decoupling learning from instrumental economic usages in relation to entrepreneurship, and thus find within learning an impotent opening to freedom” (p. 595-6). While these normative features are provocative, they make his conception of ‘study’ too narrow for how we would like to use it, particularly for seeing how practices of study exist in normal education institutions as well as outside them, embedded in informal community and radical movement situations.

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