# International Teaching and Learning Workshop, Sciences Po

## Uncertain Education: Anarchism as a Framework for Rethinking Educational Authority

This talk focuses on the uncertainty educators face when opening modules to student input and suggests anarchism as way to rethink educator authority.

Anarchism offers a way to approach student input through an understanding of authority as always flexible and questionable. Bakunin does not deny the productive role that authority can play: if I want to know how to mend a shoe, I can listen to the knowledge and authority of the shoemaker. However, that authority is never absolute and I always retain the possibility of rejecting their knowledge. Authority here is re-thought not as an absolute, nor as a negative, but as a constituent part of the relationship of knowledge production and exchange.

For educational spaces this presents us with a challenge to engage with authority as a pedagogical tool which invites students to enter into a relationship of collaborative knowledge production and exchange. For educators to let go of the authority we hold requires us to take a leap into the uncertain. In understanding our authority of knowledge as something that is contingent and flexible, we invite students to bring their own knowledge into educational spaces, knowledge which we are often unprepared for.

A final semester module I convene is a chance for students come together to analyse contemporary social issues with the perspectives and methodological tools of the expertise they have developed throughout their degree. The students select 5 broader topic areas and then use their existing knowledge to decide on specific examples. My role is to provide a connecting thread from one week to the next, navigating student choices on a largely *ad hoc* basis. This necessitates an approach to my authority of knowledge which embraces the uncertain and acknowledges my areas of strength and weakness as part of a larger collaborative project with the students.

## Short Biography:

Dr. Andrew Brogan is a Lecturer on Studium Individuale, an innovative liberal arts programme at Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany. He has a background in political theory and education, and his research interests lie at the intersection of anarchism, resistance, and higher education teaching and learning.

He currently teaches on two modules in the Studium Individuale programme, a first semester module called *Freedom and the Transformation of Modern Europe*, and a final semester module titled *Analysing Contemporary Societies.* In both cases the modules serve as frameworks for the exploration of ideas and content close to the students’ interests and experiences, providing a space for interdisciplinary exchange.

## Paper (10 mins) – 1626:

The Call for Papers for this conference asked a series of questions which hinged on the relationship between staff, students, and knowledge production. My talk takes the second of these questions as its focus point: *How can professors embrace complexity and uncertainty in a classroom environment?* but it also contains relevance for the other two: when educators embrace complexity and uncertainty, they create space for students’ ideas and action, and simultaneously demonstrate a broader position of faculty which is dedicated to the meaningful and purposeful input of students.

The posing of the questions themselves are indicative of a challenge we’re facing. There is a growing demand from universities and students alike that students should be more actively engaged in their educational journeys. This push often takes place against the backdrop of student-centred education which wants to shift the focus of higher education away from the educator and to the student. This approach is thought to encourage students’ critical thinking, independence, and collaborative working skills as they become self-directed learners addressing problems that they themselves have identified (Frambach, *et al*, 2014; Harju & Åkerblom, 2017; Kinuthia, 2023; Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003; Li, 2021; Sadler, 2012). Some have argued that this student-centred approach is an extension of Western individualist, humanist, and democratic values (Frambach, *et al*, 2014; Kinuthia 2023), and this is certainly reflected in my own institution’s claims to offer a “humanist, sustainable and action-focused university” (Leuphana, 2023), which places dialog- and experienced-based teaching at its core, alongside a recognition of the importance of inter- and transdisciplinary teaching.

Arguably, such an approach changes the role of the educator from one in which we hold an authority of content knowledge around which modules are designed, to one in which we are attempting to create educational spaces that embrace student input, pre-existing experiences and knowledges, and concerns about the world they live in. This can introduce a great deal of uncertainty for educators, as opening educational spaces to student input can leave educators in a position of knowing little, if anything, about the specific concerns students bring to the classroom. In more traditional disciplinary academic settings this uncertainty can be partly addressed through module design which is aligned with a disciplinary field within which students articulate their interests and concerns, and so are still operating within the educator’s broader field of knowledge. This retains, all-be-it in a modified form, the authority of knowledge of the educator in these spaces. However, within the context of the programme I work on this is not possible.

I am a lecturer in a medium sized German public university, Leuphana University Lüneburg, and I teach on a liberal education programme called *Studium Individuale*. Liberal education programmes are built upon a commitment to a breadth and depth of study across disciplinary boundaries, with students often taking modules from the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. *Studium Individuale* requires the students to take only seven Core Modules across the three years of their Bachelor’s degree, leaving the students free to design the rest of their own academic study programme from the full range of modules available across the university.

The Core Module students take in their final semester is *Analysing Contemporary Societies.* The stated purpose of the module is to examine a series of contemporary social issues. Being new to the programme and teaching the module for the first time, I wanted to incorporate students’ desire for their greater involvement in the design and the running of their modules, and couple this with my interest in anarchist education. To this end, rather than provide a ready-made set of contemporary issues and an over-arching analytical framework, I have redesigned the module to celebrate and build from the varied academic pathways and knowledges the students have developed throughout their degree programme. To do this, the module starts with a ‘long-list’ of ten broad topic areas and the students then select five to base the module on. From there the module spends two weeks on each of these topic areas and student groups design and run 60 minutes of each 90-minute session, deciding by themselves on the exact issue they wish to discuss. While I support the student groups in the design of the session and the pedagogical considerations they might want to take into account, these conversations happen only one week in advance of the session itself.

This module design places student interests and knowledges at the centre and establishes a situation in which I have to navigate a great deal of uncertainty. This uncertainty is not only connected to not knowing any more than the rough outline of the module, but also that the student groups can, and do, select specific topics that I know nothing about. This places me in a position in which the usual certainty that comes with an authority of content knowledge is removed. I make it clear to students that the module is a collaborative project specifically designed around their input, and that as a consequence of this there will be many areas I know little about. Being upfront about the limits of my own authority of knowledge simultaneously creates the space for students to engage with their own expertise. For example, students have run sessions on the legality of strike actions in Germany, self-organised refugee groups, and the gendered aspects of micro-finance, none of which I have prior knowledge of.

For me, re-thinking my authority as an educator helps me to deal with the uncertainty arising from student-centred education in modules like *Analysing Contemporary Societies*. Rather than an authority of knowledge, or the authority which comes with designing particular educational spaces that validate student knowledges within the confines of an established discipline (Harju & Åkerblom, 2017) - both of which rest on the assumption that authority is to be centralised and held by the educator - I propose re-thinking authority as a flexible pedagogical tool in educational spaces of knowledge production and exchange. To help do this I turn to anarchism.

Those unfamiliar with anarchism might expect a wholesale rejection of authority that is bound up with a rejection of the state, governments, and imposed forms of behaviour. However, there is a more nuanced approach which does not reject authority in its entirety, but rejects assumed, unquestioned, and centralised authority. Mikhail Bakunin had the following to say:

“When it is a question of boots, I refer the matter to the authority of the cobbler; when it is a question of houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or engineer. For each special area of knowledge I speak to the appropriate expert. But I allow neither the cobbler nor the architect nor the scientist to impose upon me. I listen to them freely and with all the respect merited by their intelligence, their character, their knowledge, reserving always my incontestable right of criticism and verification.” (Bakunin, 1870, 5).

This is not a rejection of authority outright, but a recognition of authority that is flexible, temporary, and exchangeable among those engaged in the relationship itself. We can read Bakunin’s interactions with the shoemaker, architect, or engineer as educational moments of knowledge production and exchange in which one can learn from another, and place this in the context of student-centred education.

Taking this understanding of authority into educational spaces reframes authority as a pedagogical tool. It invites us as educators to understand our authority of knowledge as one element in the relationship of knowledge production with students: a relationship in which we can offer certain knowledge in certain conditions of expertise while also acknowledging and creating space for student knowledge too. To embrace this approach to authority of knowledge in educational spaces requires me as an educator to recognise and be at ease with situations in which students are the appropriate experts.

It is tempting to suggest that we read Bakunin in this passage as being the student, and educators as shoemakers, architects, and engineers, but to do so is to place educators back in a position of a certainty of content knowledge. Instead, I propose that in the framework of the module *Analysing Contemporary Societies* it is more fruitful to understand students and myself alike as both Bakunin *and* shoemakers, architects, and engineers. Like the understanding of authority itself, these positions are flexible, temporary, and exchangeable depending on the context, and all of us involved move continually between positions of certainty and uncertainty.

A specific example can help to illustrate the point. When students come to speak to me about their session plans they are entering that space as the appropriate experts on the content and topic, and having already had discussions in their group about how they want the session to go. At the same time, they come and speak to me on the basis of my pedagogical knowledge: I can help them to think through the pedagogical choices they are making and help them refine their ideas. This leads to a situation in which authority shifts and changes as the conversation evolves and moves back and forth between content and pedagogy as we work together to refine their plans. This requires me to acknowledge the limits of my knowledge on their chosen topic areas, an area of authority traditionally held by an educator, while also committing to a process in which I help them to refine *their* ideas, rather than impose mine. This approach to authority and session design establishes a situation in which we all listen freely with respect to each other’s intelligence, character, and knowledge, and still all reserving the right of criticism and verification. I contend that this is an approach to authority in student-centred education which equips me to deal with the uncertainty of a student led interdisciplinary module like *Analysing Contemporary Societies.*

Q&A:

The content in all of our projects becomes a tool for the development of other skills.

Eval: SHIFT! and team teaching, prep-sessons. 3 relationships at work here: institution, peers, students

References:

Bakunin, Mikhail. (1870) ‘What is Authority’ (trans: Shaun P. Wilber, 2020). Available at: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mikhail-bakunin-what-is-authority> (last accessed 23.05.23)

Frambach, Janneke M. Driessen, Erik W. Beh, Philip. van der Vleuten, Cees P.M. (2014) ‘Quiet or Questioning? Students’ discussion behaviours in student-centred education across cultures.’ *Studies in Higher Education.* Vol.39, No.6, pp.1001-1021

Harju, Anne. Åkerblom, Annika. (2017) ‘Colliding Collaboration in Student-Centred Learning in Higher Education.’ *Studies in Higher Education.* Vol.42, No.8, pp.1532-1544

Kinuthia, Heather. (2023) ‘The Recontextualisation and Cultural Compatibility of Student-Centred Education: the case of the United Arab Emirates.’ *Higher Education.* Online

Lea, Susan J. Stephenson, David. Troy, Juliette. (2003) ‘Higher Education Student’ Attitudes to Student-Centred Learning: beyond “educational bulimia”?’ *Studies in Higher Education.* Vol.23, No.3, pp.321-334

Leuphana (2023) ‘Teaching Profile’ Available at: <https://www.leuphana.de/en/teaching/teaching-profile.html> (last accessed 23.05.23)

Li, Junmin. (2021) ‘Learner-Centred Learning Tasks in Higher Education: a study on perception among students.’ *Education Sciences*. Vol.11

Sadler, Ian. (2012) ‘The Challenges for New Academics in Adopting Student-Centred Approaches to Teaching.’ *Studies in Higher Education*. Vol.37, No.6, pp.731-745