# #EURA Summit 2023:

## Stream 1: Internationalizing universities? Global and local effects on research and teaching

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

**1.**

**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. These 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, the institution they work in, or wider society. In higher education, this tension 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 their authority at the level of module design and assignment practices. Today, I explore a possible response for anarchist educators working in the context of student-centred education by introducing postanarchist understandings of power and authority.

I start with the broader context of student-centred education which is increasingly present in European higher education. Then an introduction to anarchist theory and practice, particularly that of postanarchism. From there I introduce some of the questions about anarchist educator authority, and how postanarchism can help us. I finish with a specific example from my own practice.

**2.**

**Student-Centred Learning and Teaching**

There is a growing demand from universities and students alike that students should be more actively engaged in their educational journeys. This 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. Such a shift in educational approach brings a wide range of considerations and challenges, including a gap between **“rhetoric and reality”** (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020, 1) which points to the need for teaching approaches to account for issues of power, the role of the educator, and questions regarding who is responsible for learning. Some authors suggest that a student-centred approach requires a rethink of content, the students, and the educators, asking the question of what is taught, to whom, by whom, and how?

Such questions are indeed important, and while literature on student-centred teaching and learning touches on these either directly or implicitly, few consider the question of educator authority, the relationship with students, and the broader social framework in which this relationship is practiced. This leaves educators, anarchist educators in particular, in a position of having to address these questions themselves and navigate the tensions they find themselves in.

**3.**

These two quotes are from recent pieces addressing the issue of anarchist educator authority, and while they are not specifically about student-centred education, they are applicable here:

* **“It seems that anarchist educators are forced to deny coercive authority in principle, whilst at the same time affirming it in practice.” (Fretwell, 2020, 55)**
* **“…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, 83)**

**4.**

**Liberty, Equality, Solidarity**

Unlike other areas of political theory there is no single author or foundational document for anarchism, and as a result it has been presented as a collection of theories and practices which share some common ground and can be referred to as anarchisms. This common ground 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.

**5.**

Liberty, or freedom – they are often used interchangeably in anarchist literature – is conceived of as freedom from coercion and the freedom to live how best suits you. Importantly, this freedom does not mean limiting the freedom of others, because others’ freedom is a necessary condition of the freedom of the individual. As Bakunin writes: **“I am free only when all human beings surrounding me – men and women alike – are equally free”** (Bakunin, 1964, p. 276). Building from this are anarchist notions of equality. These begin from a position that pursues an equality of opportunity for activity and development, acknowledging that people have different interests and tastes and that people are best approached as equivalent rather than uniformly equal. The final value, solidarity, is based on ideas of mutual aid. This understanding of solidarity is closely associated with free association and the belief that people cannot live in isolation and are able to choose their communities without external compulsion or coercion.

**6.**

The three values of liberty, equality and solidarity, along with anti-authoritarian drives, hold across various anarchisms, with different strands of anarchy bring these ideas to bear in slightly different ways. One such strand is postanarchism, an area of anarchist thought and practice that integrates the approaches of poststructural thought from scholars such as Foucault and Deleuze. Postanarchism adopts the understanding of power as developed by these 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.

Such an understanding reinserts the possibility of autonomy for the subject as they are recognised as being able to influence the network of power in ways that can transform it. Postanarchism argues for an approach to anarchism as ontology, where thought and action are freed from predetermined ends. 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 or established externally to the relationship itself. This places the emphasis on the everyday possibility of anarchy.

Importantly, this autonomous thought and action 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. In the context of this talk, this is of interest to the relationships between educators and students that highlight the ever-present possibility of not being determined by the expected authority of the educator as established by themselves, students, colleagues, the institution and society, while allowing for the specific contexts and contingencies of those relationships in impacting their practice.

**7.**

**Anarchist Pedagogies**

With this broader understanding of anarchisms, and the specifics of postanarchism, we can now turn our attention to existing literature on anarchist interventions in educational spaces. Of the most recent articles dealing with authority in anarchist education there are two treatments I would like to highlight here.

One of these argues in favour of a deployment of **“rational authority”** (Moormann, 2020, p. 566): an authority that can exist in a certain domain based on expertise in that domain. In this approach someone is **“justified to be an authority in certain situations, but not to have authority based on an institutionalised, artificial power relation”** (Moormann, 2020, p. 566). 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.

Although it is not explicitly stated it would be a logical extension of this argument that would see the anarchist educator holding authority in decisions on a range of areas then connected to their teaching and 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. The issue with this approach is that by basing a claim to authority in rationality, it assumes scientific neutrality, and it is this critique which is the starting point of the second approach to anarchist educator authority.

In the second approach, which I’m referring to here as the ‘no authority’ position, the argument is put forward that it is not possible to detach educational practice from societal structures. It is this interrelatedness of education and society which offers us a critique of rational authority. Building on the notion of intersectionality, the argument is made that the claimed neutrality of scientific rationality as the basis of knowledge is in fact rooted in the perspective of a white, heterosexual, European or North American male. This perspective is then used as the norm by which all other knowledges are measured and, by definition, found lacking. This argument troubles the notion of a rationally based anarchist educational authority, as it highlights the underlying social power which is then reinforced in educational spaces.

In the place of rational authority, it is suggested that anarchist educators embrace a position of having no authority in relation to content, starting from Feyerabend’s call to epistemological anarchism in *Against Method* which challenges scientific orthodoxy through the encouragement of an always plural approach to knowledge. From this position, pedagogy shifts from a concern with fixed content to embracing a spontaneity derived from the more fluid understandings of ‘educator’ and ‘student’ and the different knowledges they bring to the classroom. In such an approach, the anarchist educator is recast not as a knowledgeable authority in their specific discipline, but as a facilitator in the students’ own pursuit of knowledge, one who removes themselves as a figure of authority in the classroom. Such an approach to educator authority certainly aligns with the anarchist anti-authoritarianism described earlier. 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 rational authority, there are limitations to the ‘no authority’ approach.

One issue is that this approach cannot account for the weight of various expectations of authority placed on the educator from themselves, students, peers, the institution and society. The conclusion is by no means that the attempt is not worth pursuing, 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 is that it predetermines the relationship between the educator and the students. While taking a different path, the result is a similarly predetermined understanding of educator authority and the relationship between educators and students as that found in the rational authority argument.

**8.**

**Postanarchism and Authority in Higher Education**

These two treatments of anarchist educator authority each offer an important area of consideration, although not without their issues. This begs the question what can a postanarchist approach to educator authority offer us instead?

In the first instance, postanarchism can help us to understand the power networks we are embedded, and complicit in, in our positions as educators in HE. 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. We design programmes, modules, sessions, and specific tasks, and even when we then 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**, I am imbued with authority in these instances, and **yes** I use that authority to design potential educational experiences (even anti-authoritarian ones), **and**, **yes** I can respond to my position within the network of power creatively and constructively and do something different. It is the ever-present, everyday possibility of freedom in thought and action which is important here.

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 says that if he wants to know about fixing shoes, he speaks to the cobbler, and if he wants to know about building bridges he speaks to an architect or an engineer, but how in all cases he retains the right to ignore them if he so chooses. This 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. **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.

Ultimately, what I think postanarchism helps me to do is play with the tensions between anarchist principles and educator authority rather than collapse into a position of solidifying that authority through a claim to rationality, claiming to reject that authority outright, or being immobilised in my practice because of the tensions I experience.

**9.**

**An Example from Practice**

To bring this discussion into contact with concrete practice and experience, I would like to share the example of *Analysing Contemporary Societies*, a final-semester module I teach in a liberal arts programme. Our programme requires students to take only 7 core modules across the three years of their bachelors degree, leaving the students free to design the rest of their academic study programme from the full range of modules available across the university. The module *Analysing Contemporary Societies* is based on the examination of a series of contemporary social issues selected by the students in the opening session, and is built on the diverse knowledges the students will bring to the module as a result of their unique academic paths until that point.

Carrying my own commitment to anarchist education into this module, 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* knowledgeable other, 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. Rather than explain the task in detail, I invite you to take part in a shortened version of it.

First, please think about the following: 2 academic areas you have experience in, 2 scholars who were key to your development, and finally 2 important educational experiences, these don’t have to be from formal education.

Second, someone take this twine and start reading their list. For the others, when you see a connection raise your hand and tell us about that connection. The first person will pass you the twine. And we continue.

Rather than provide my own analysis of the task, I will stop the talk there and leave the space open for discussion and your own feedback, ideas, and questions.