

Fairer Universities are Possible

Author

Margherita Huntley

I have over 20 essays to mark. Each one is 3000 words long. If I am not to work over the seven hours that I am being paid to complete the task, I need to read each one and write useful comments for the student's improvement within 19 minutes. These are essays for a Master's course, for which students pay over £11,000 (nearly £23,000 for international students).

Nationwide University and Colleges Union (UCU) strikes, which ended just before lockdown began, brought a number of issues in academic work to an awkward fore. 14 days of strike action highlighted how individualised our work burdens have become, as well as the cognitive dissonance that is on display at art colleges specifically – one lecturer crossed the picket to give a talk on 'resistance', for example. Many students were surprised at their institutions; that despite proclaiming not to discriminate against anyone, they have not closed gender and ethnic minority pay gaps; that so many of their tutors are employed on casual contracts, and as a result experience problems with their mental health and struggle to get by; that their fees are being funnelled into developments that amount to artwashing and social cleansing; that questioning the Vice Chancellor's £250,000+ salary is perceived touchily as a personal attack.

Institutional learning and its accreditation can be said to instil a sense of 'cruel optimism' within students – a phrase that was formulated by Lauren Berlant:

'Optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and doubly, it is cruel in so far as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining, regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world find itself bound to a situation of profound threat, that is at the same time, profoundly confirming.'¹

¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

Graduating art and design students soon realise that the conditions for producing ideas (and the atmospheres within which they can grow) are poor. Studio space for non-commercial activities is non-existent, funding applications are lengthy and competitive, rents are expensive, commutes are long.

In short, art school pedagogies extol the virtues of a design that not everyone can practice. Having made the investment in one's professional identity through the completion of higher education, students are already in a sense 'at work'. As Silvio Lorusso writes:

'most highly-trained designers are too educated to find gratification in the average freelance commission, so they compete for the few spots that ensure them a semi-autonomous freedom of professional expression.'²

² Silvio Lorusso, 'The Designer Without Qualities – Notes On Ornamental Politics, Ironic Attachment, Bureaucreativity and Emotional Counterculture', *Institute of Network Cultures*, 19 January 2018.

Those who are able to remain invested in the discipline as an academic, intellectual or artistic activity are likely to have the money to set up a studio, the emotional resilience to pivot or negotiate away from certain positions, the confidence to 'self-initiate'. This means that those who are societally privileged and live

in urban centres are in the most viable position to explore what design should look like, and to alter the conditions of its production. And the cycle continues.

Furthermore, the hegemonic modern university absorbs the critiques it receives. Roderick A. Ferguson explains that ‘networks of power [...] redirect originally insurgent formations and deliver them to the normative ideals and protocols of state, capital, and academy’. Disruptions and alternatives thus become ‘sites of calculation and strategy’, and ‘institutions [begin] to see minority difference and culture as positivities that could be part of their own series of ‘aims and objectives’’. In turn, he argues, this results in an ‘abstract promotion of minority representation without fully satisfying the social and material redistribution of minoritized subjects, particularly where people of colour are concerned’.³

Still, it is possible to collectively rethink and imagine what the university could be. The fundamental paradox of education, and perhaps specifically ‘art school’ education, is that despite itself, it can still be a place of unlearning, movement, transgression, ‘mutual illumination’;⁴ a place in which to reconfigure oneself. But as Fred Moten writes, education is ‘not about the achievement of freedom’ but rather ‘about escape’, because ‘that which is called freedom is not, nor could it ever correspond to, the completion or the achievement of an assignment’.⁵ In another of his works, the author, together with Stefano Harney, famously posited that the only tenable relation to have with the institution is one of piracy and subterfuge.⁶

In 2016, a group of students re-published a pamphlet from 1975 entitled *Wages for Students*. ‘We are fed up with working for free’, it stated.



A banner at the Camberwell College of Art during the University and Colleges Union (UCU) strikes, 2020.



Zoe Leonard poem, rewritten by University of the Arts London (UAL) students, 2020.

‘We demand real money now for the school-work we do. We must force capital, which profits from our work, to pay for our schoolwork. Only then can we stop depending on financial aid, our parents, working second and third jobs, or working during summer vacations for our existence. **NO MORE UNPAID SCHOOLWORK!**’⁷

Moreover, in response to Covid-19, a group of 4000 academics from around the world have signed a compelling document that calls for the reorganisation of power in educational institutions and other workplaces. It is based on the simple

3 Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 8.

4 Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 10.

5 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life: consent not to be a single being* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 227.

6 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

7 See The ‘Wages for Students’ Students, *Wages for Students* (A pamphlet in the form of a blue book, 1975).

principle that worker groups should be afforded double-majority voting rights on company decisions, as well as those taken by shareholder groups and executive management teams. At university, both students and workers make ‘a personal investment of labor; that is, of one’s mind and body, one’s health – one’s very life’. That, they suggest ‘ought to come with the collective right to validate or veto decisions’, because ‘issues such as the choice of a CEO, setting major strategies, and profit distribution are too important to be left to shareholders alone.’⁸

The university could indeed be an ideal model for a ‘multi-stakeholder’ co-operative, owned as a shared asset by students and staff. This framework would not only allow decisions about the hiring of staff and legal structures to be democratically determined, but also the implementation of non-expansionist financial models, reciprocal teaching methods and lifelong learning to be possible. But would it diminish the perpetual interest for educational ‘alternatives’ in the form of unaccredited, self-organised, ‘spare time’ schools, which can (on occasion) function more like much-needed support or solidarity groups? Perhaps not entirely, though it might at least reduce the reciprocal tension that exists between a professional system that continuously expands, co-opts and contains,⁹ and the hundreds of undergraduate dissertations that are written about such educational schemes.

8
‘Work: Democratize, Decommodify, Remediate’, Democratizing Work, accessed 27 May 2020.

9
Bloomberg New Contemporaries, for example, is now accepting participants of alternative education collectives, but still on an individual basis.

PLAN DE TRAVAIL N° 30 du 11/5/81 au 16/5/81

Je m'occupe de l'atelier et de l'atelier état NOM. Bibliothèque Courbevoie

liste des activités gérées collectivement (C) / groupe ou seul		travail	lecture	1/2 heures libres
Les pourcentages aux élections (recherche)	sp	✓	✓	✓
Bibliothèque. J'ai choisi les vents dans les sables	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Présentation du plan de Sévigny (pour le vent) ateliers de musique avec Catherine (melodies)	sp	✓	✓	✓
Chant alla d'audou	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Exposé Bismarck-Louis 1890-1900 à Troyes	sp	✓	✓	✓
Brevet sur la conjugaison. Les temps simples	sp	✓	✓	✓
Théâtre avec Valérie et Catherine "3 filles au paradis"	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Utilisation des modes non conjugués	sp	✓	✓	✓
Problèmes de volume $c = \pi r^2 h$	sp	✓	✓	✓
T Divisions - conversions. Livre LD 75	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Récits et phrases observations avec domes	sp	✓	✓	✓
Debat: Les domages	sp	✓	✓	✓
Exposé sur les sermons/recherche de documents	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Grammaire - le groupe conj. et objet direct	sp	✓	✓	✓
T Lettre pour répondre au journal "histoire d'adultes"	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Athlétisme j'ai installé un banc de balles	sp	✓	✓	✓
T J'ai rangé l'atelier art et accroché les peintures	sp	✓	✓	✓
T Correction. Impression du livre de fabrication d'ateliers	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Révision - pourcentage après la sortie	sp	✓	✓	✓
T J'ai passé mon brevet d'opérations et fait les 400. 102. 100. 100	sp	✓	✓	✓
C Matchs de hockey en 2 équipes de 8	sp	✓	✓	✓

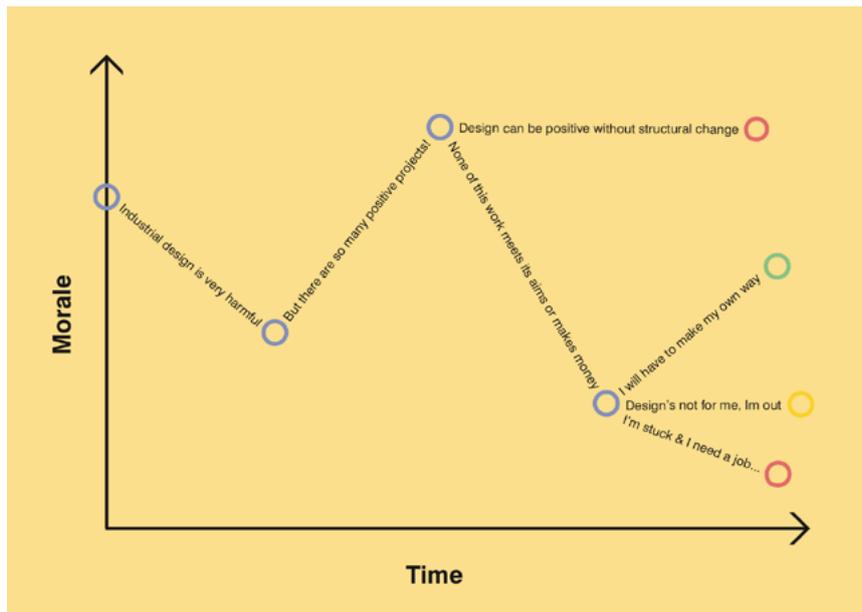
Signatures: enfant: [signature] maître: [signature] Parents: [signature]

School schedule, from Cooperative Learning and Social Change: Selected Writings of Célestin Freinet, 1990.

Célestin Freinet, a French school educator and reformist, ran schools in rural France in the 1940s on a co-operative basis. Pupils arranged their own classroom and set their own schedules for the day, the week and the year collectively. They held a ‘co-op meeting’ each week, at which an exhibition of their work would take place and a structured space would be provided for students to congratulate or criticise each other. They were encouraged to communicate with other schools using magazines that were written, edited, composited and printed by the class. The teacher could not be expected to know everything, and so local tradespeople, such as cabinet makers, came in to show the children what they

did.¹⁰ This model is not beyond the bounds of reason for the contemporary institution. Such structures have been employed before, and successfully. Yet even today it sounds like a novel proposition.

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See David Clandfield and John Sivell (eds), *Cooperative Learning and Social Change: Selected Writings of Célestin Freinet* (Toronto: Our Schools/OurSelves, 1990).



Student Morale Journey, Andrew Marsh, 2020.

David Cross writes that ‘in the time of Climate Emergency, Covid-19, and the resulting financial crisis, this is a crucial opportunity to begin remaking the university more ecologically regenerative, more socially equitable and more financially sustainable.’¹¹ Perhaps it will be the last opportunity that we have to swerve away from the continued proliferation of student debt; from the financially-driven forces of the conservative executive; from the bypassing of trade unions; from the surveillance of students; from the exploitation of international students; in short, from the terminal stage of the neoliberalisation of the whole damn sector.

11
David Cross, conversation with Margherita Huntley, 5 May 2020.

Margherita Huntley is a graphic designer, lecturer in design and theory, trade union representative and part-time bookseller. She is part of Evening Class – a self-organised educational group – the Sun Housing Co-operative – which is trying to develop a mutual home ownership society in London – and Designers and Cultural Workers – a new branch of the United Voices of the World (UVW) trade union.