

A ZINE BY RADICAL SUNDAY SCHOOL

# HOW TO TEACH LIKE AN ANARCHIST

SCHOOLS  
ARE  
PRISONS





# WHAT IS THIS ZINE?

The zine you're reading is our first attempt as a collective to bring together some of the ideas and experiences we've had since starting our very own free skool in Amsterdam: Radical Sunday School. We hope that these might be helpful to other people trying to do anarchist pedagogy in their own communities. This zine is in some parts a practical guide to starting your own free skool, and in others, it's a kind of running conversation we've been having within our collective, with other educators we meet along the way, and just in our own heads as to what we think is important about learning in a free skool.

As anarchists, we believe that freedom means always being able to ask more questions and look for more understanding, and never having to sit quietly and accept whatever it is you're being told. And that applies absolutely to what you're reading now. We hope we've learned something in the last year, but we're not experts on anarchist pedagogy, and we don't pretend to always know the right answers. If we ever start acting like that, then we'll need some help finding our way back to reality. This zine, like all of our learning, is an ongoing process, but we hope it's a process we can all go through together, sharing tactics, do's and don't's, laughs and frustrations, and a good deal of joy.

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# BUILDING ON SAND: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY KNOWLEDGE?



In the 7th Century BCE, nearby what is now the city of Mosul, the last great King of Assyria, Ashurbanipal, ordered the collection of all known knowledge of the world in his city of Nineveh.

Information, stories, complaints, disputes, epics, sagas, cooking recipes, writings of all kinds were collected, written on clay tablets in Akkadian, Sumerian and other regional languages, all gathered at this great library.

Among them, stories such as the epic of Gilgamesh, written a further one and a half thousand years before Ashurbanipal's edict, demonstrating the vast reach into history the Assyrians could accomplish. It may have seemed to the Assyrians at the time that they had collected all the knowledge known to anyone.

And you can see how they would think it so. At the time, Assyria's borders extended to all edges of their known world, boxed in by the Sahara and Arabian desert in the South, and the mountains of Anatolia and Iran in the North.

**When there appears nothing more to know, then how can you say you do not know all there is?**

Knowledge as a concept is something which itself evades description. Like all terms in a language, it is defined in part by its usage and applicability, but knowledge is not restricted to a specific task.

The world we live in embodies an incredibly complex patchwork of knowledge, skill and information. The very technological item I write this text on is built up of hundreds of parts of intersecting pieces of information, thousands of lines of computer code, hours of mining for the metals that are grafted onto plastic motherboards, and coordinated construction of infrastructure to make my internet connection work.

To think that a second library of Nineveh can ever be constructed will remain forever a dream. When a single person cannot understand all aspects of the operation of a smart-phone, let alone the social or ethical or economic implications, how can it be stored in any central location?

And though it's tempting to try to use the making of a phone as a good analogy for how knowledge can be communal and intersect, after all it is made by none who know the greater whole, but rather pool their knowledge, this is also unfortunately not really the case.

While obviously those who construct the phone know their parts to play, dubious myths and superstitions about phones and their usage persist, in the placing of them in microwaves as so "not to be listen to", in the notion that typing "seggs" or "unaliving" will not engage censors, to say nothing of the murky and misunderstood world of what's termed "planned obsolescence".

Then there is the genuine harmful side-effect of smart-phones, the societally disruptive manner in which they can be used and abused. Would we be so eager to create these technologies if we knew what lack of protections against predatory information theft and addictive, self-image destroying apps there would be? Likely not, and we would be all the swifter to act if collectively we truly understood the negative depth and impact that these profitable creations manifested.

There is, of course, the predictable rebuttle that those who craft and engineer these devices, as with most technological items, as a refrain when unpopular decisions are made with "harsh realistic pragmatism and practicality" that these are made by "experts".

But the term itself is a tautology. In Ancient Assyria, it was easy to ascertain who the expert was; Deny Ashurbanipal, and likely you would find your head hanging in the gardens of Nimrud while he dines on dates with his wife.



Thankfully these days we can afford to scrutinise the term a little further. The most apparent component of an expert for me is the trust required for the unacquainted of a field. This is where I see it most used in common speech. While it's obvious that a doctor considered a good doctor among doctors fits nicely with an idea of collective knowledge and understanding, that leaves the rest of us non-doctors at a bit of a disadvantage.

Necessarily we must trust that those given the title are up to a scratch. It is a huge justification for the "medical license", and at least seems a sound argument. But holes do appear.

In Ireland, 2018, it emerged that doctors had been dismissing patients' cervical cancer results. 162 women had had tests that confirmed that though initial tests told them they did not have cancer, subsequent checks revealed they indeed did have cervical cancer, but were not informed by their doctors. Through a mixture of misogyny, neglect and a fatal breach of trust, numerous women who may have lived longer now found themselves with terminal cancer.

In some cases, women had been living with continuing strains regarding the developing cancer for years, not acting as they regarded the doctors' words with trust. And it is not enough to merely cry that this is a "failure" of the system. This issue only occurred because of how the system treats the acquisition and practicing of knowledge.

I don't mean to bring this example to single-handedly dismiss the entire field of medical science. I still would feel better about going under anaesthetic with someone trained at Cambridge than some guy who read a bunch of wikihows, but instead I want to highlight what occurred afterwards.

The head of the HSE stepped down, and further arrangements for more public scrutiny appeared. New methods of access for records, and broader transparency were introduced, and this was a step in the right direction.

### **Trust in expertise cannot come from blind faith. Even the least medically discerning of us deserve the right to question and try to understand to the best of our capacity.**

There is another blade of this two-sided sword. The mystique and power that "experts" can hold over society can be weaponised. How many of us have seen unethical and heinous acts carefully and academically explained by "experts" in order to legitimise or justify terrible things that have no right to exist in our world? The Economists Thomas Sowell and Friedrich Hayek come to mind.

When former doctor Andrew Wakefield spoke about the danger of the Measels, Mumps and Rubella vaccine, he did so using the societal weight that having such a position of authority and prestige is given to "holders" of knowledge. Though his paper was since revoked, and his medical license rescinded, the damage he has done and continues to do has been extensive. We must ask ourselves, if we encouraged people themselves to engage and be engaged by information, rather than leaving it to the "experts" who claim whole domains for themselves, would his power be so potent?

Collective knowledge and understanding is the informer of our morals and decisions. No one person can truly be an expert, but rather hold more of an impression of parts of a greater whole. Instead of calling for "better education" we need better channels of communication, better ways of conferring practice, skill and information in a way we can build off each other. No matter the scale, we must work to break the rigidity with which we approach trust, treat it as something that is earned.

Those clay tablets of Nineveh yet survived. But Nineveh is dead. The library holds much knowledge which cannot be decoded, and the few "protectors" of knowledge have had their very bones ground to dust so fine it blends with the surrounding sands.

Let us not build temples to information for the sakes of Kings or gnostic knowledge keepers!

Let us instead understand things together, build within each other living and breathing understanding, that shifts, and adapts, and accomodates. For the library of Nineveh lies dead and abandoned, but our humanity lives forever.

# LEARNING LIKE WE'RE ALREADY FREE: HOW DO WE FACILITATE CLASSES?



As anarchists, we spend our time working to create a world of freedom, equality, and solidarity. At our most basic level, these goals drive what we're doing at Radical Sunday School. What unites our collective, specifically, though, is a love for learning, and a belief that learning how to be anarchist students is an essential part of building the better world we want to live in. When we learn together, we make our communities better at taking care of ourselves and each other, we become better able to fight against the State and Capital, and we form the kinds of connections that make our lives even more worth living.

In this section, we will introduce a number of practices and concepts that we have using to ensure that learning at Radical Sunday School is as free as possible, both for ourselves and for the community of students around it.

## **SPOOKS: HOW BAD IDEAS RUIN OUR LEARNING**

One of the biggest tasks for any anarchist group, let alone an educational group, is ironically, unlearning.

We want to live in a free, equal world where everyone helps each other to thrive, but none of us have experience living there. All of us have been raised, to one degree or another, in pretty toxic social environments, and they've narrowed our minds to what is possible in our world. Growing up, we "learn" in our families that conflict is always bad, so it's better to just bottle up our emotions than express them. We "learn" that work is good and natural, and anyone who doesn't agree is just lazy. We've been taught to fear the racialized, the "insane", the disabled, and the foreign. We've "learned" how to be a "real man" and not the "wrong kind of woman", and we've learned that those are our only two options. Maybe most centrally, we've learned that power feels good and that the powerless deserve our scorn. The German philosopher Max Stirner called these kinds of beliefs "spooks" or "wheels in our heads", and he pointed out that so long as they live in our heads unchallenged, these "wheels" will control how we behave, even when our bosses, parents, and policemen aren't watching. If we really want to live in a freer world, we need to break the spell they have over us. (If you want to learn more about how Stirner's ideas can apply to education, I recommend the Joel Spring book in the "References" section!)

How do we get rid of spooks? Much of the work that we anarchists do in our organizing is about showing people that we've all been lied to about how the world really is, and then building institutions that reinforce healthier behaviors. So we can follow the same two-step strategy here. In this section, I'll directly call out some of the wrong assumptions I've had about what "knowledge," "learning," and "expertise" are. Then, later on in this zine, we'll talk about how we've tried to build up social practices in our communities which can help us correct some of the toxic behaviors that spring up from those assumptions.

Even though I've been learning about and trying to practice anarchist approaches to education for a little while now, I still have plenty of spooks in my head that I have to remind myself aren't really real. Over the past six or so months, I've come up with a list of little slogans, or mantras, that I try to remind myself of whenever I start to slip into old habits. These certainly aren't universal rules or holy commandments, but I've found them useful in my own practice.

Think for a second about what it means to "know" some fact (like when you know that the Earth revolves around the Sun), or what it means to "understand" a concept (like "I understand French"). I've never met you, but if you grew up in a Western educational environment, I can safely assume that these words bring to mind an image of a person, and maybe some ideas about what's going on inside their head. Our go-to way of thinking about knowledge is that it's a bit like "being tall" or "wanting ice cream". Knowledge is the kind of thing that exists inside your head (rather than in your legs) and only inside individuals' heads (if a group of people knows something, that just means that all the individuals in the group do). Traditional Western schooling is so invested in this individualistic, mentalistic way of looking at knowledge that it's not even up for discussion; it's just a basic operating assumption that structures what school even is. What, for example, is an exam? It's a kind of individual activity where you show the teacher (and to the education system in general) that you, individually, understand the information you're supposed to. You can't take a traditional exam with help from your friends, and after you're done writing an exam, each individual gets their own grade back.

But do we really know things as individuals? Let's say you hear your friend Tom say something controversial. "Cows live on the moon," he says. What would it take for us to say that he's right? First, we'd probably ask him to explain why he thinks cows are on the moon. Maybe he shows us his evidence: it could be some articles about the moon written by a famous scientist, or maybe it's more of a philosophical argument about the odds of cows learning how to build rocket ships. If we don't trust the famous scientist, or if our parents taught us never to believe philosophical arguments, then we'll ask Tom for more reasons to trust him. We'll ask him to convince us that this scientist is really trustworthy, or that our parents were wrong about philosophy. This kind of question-and-answer, critique-and-reply game will continue until one of two endings: either Tom reaches some kind of bedrock of sources we trust (at which point we say that Tom knows what he's talking about) or he fails to reach that bedrock of trust, and we'll say he's wrong. So we treat Tom like he's right only after we stop feeling like asking more questions.

I hope we can see how the process of looking for truth never involves only one person. We rely on our communities to decide when it's time to stop asking further questions, and when it's time to act. This is how "expertise" works: in theory, an expert is the kind of person who has spent time with people who our community trusts (you know, he went to a good school), and because those people think that he's trustworthy (he's "respected in his field"), we should. In theory, teachers in school, academics in academic journals, and journalists in newsrooms are all supposed to be good representatives of what their communities have discovered through their own experiences, and because of that, we should trust them and not ask follow up questions when they give us their professional opinions. As you might guess, though, this system of who ought to be questioned and who we should just shut up and listen to is exactly what makes "knowledge" political: when a policeman points a gun at you and tells you it's time to stop asking questions, he's basically forcing you to treat him as "trustworthy". (If you want to read more about these ideas, I'd read "Beyond Power/Knowledge" by David Graeber).

All knowledge works like this, growing out of personal experiences, then backed up by systems of trust.

**"Even the most wretched individual of our present society could not exist and develop without the cumulative social efforts of countless generations. Thus the individual, his freedom and reason, are the products of society, and not vice versa: society is not the product of individuals comprising it; and the higher, the more fully the individual is developed, the greater his freedom — and the more he is the product of society, the more does he receive from society and the greater his debt to it."**

**Mikhail Bakunin**



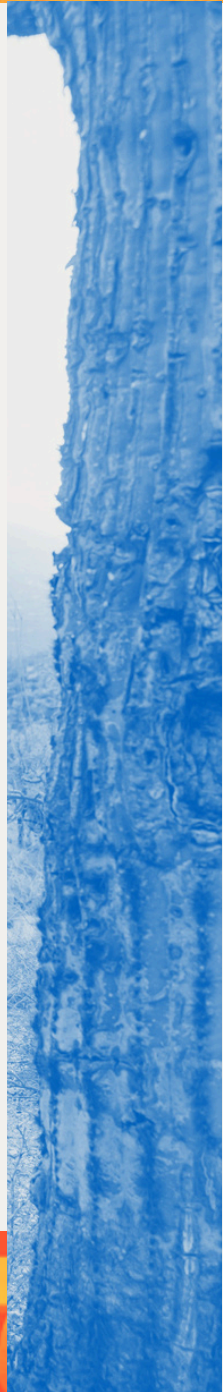
## MAKE YOURSELF REPLACEABLE

So then, we can see that knowledge is not the kind of thing that you or I can "have" on our own, but instead, it's a social phenomenon, the kind of thing that communities create by living and exploring their world together. But thinking of knowledge as private property isn't just wrong: it can be really harmful. When we treat knowledge like money, like a kind of scarce resource that we need to jealously hoard away from other people, it creates all sorts of anti-social behaviors.

The first big problem that comes out of individualizing knowledge is gatekeeping. If knowledge is something like property, then some people can have more than others, and because it's valuable, people might not want to share it. We can quickly start to think that our value as a member of our community comes from what we know, rather than who we are. And if sharing your knowledge makes it less scarce, and therefore less valuable, you might keep information to yourself to make sure you're still important. As you can imagine, a group where no one shares any knowledge is going to be a pretty ineffective one - what happens if the one person who knows how to work on the collective's website is sick? Or if the one member who has good contacts with the local labor union decides to quit your group?

The second big issue we run into when we treat knowledge like property is competition. Critique is an essential part of our toolkit as leftists: we see the problems in our world, and we want to fight against them by showing the powers that be that they're wrong about world, and that another, more humane world is possible. But as anybody who's ever gotten dragged into an overly aggressive debate knows, we don't always fight each other just to find out the truth. Sometimes, we fight to get clout: if you feel like your value comes from being right about things, you have to make sure everyone in the group sees that you're right about things. This is exactly the kind of intellectual posturing we always see when university people come together to talk about something - everybody always has to use the biggest words and show off that they've read all the right books. They don't do this just to be anti-social, of course, but it's the culture of the educational world. Professors keep their jobs by proving to the marketplace that their knowledge is more valuable than other academics' knowledge. Given that academics are more or less our culture's definition of "smart people", it really should come as no surprise that aggressively winning debates is seen as a mark of intelligence.

For all these reasons, I think it's important that we strive to follow a saying I first heard from Margaret Killjoy, on her podcast "Cool People Who Did Cool Stuff": we should strive to make ourselves replaceable. The point isn't for any one of us to "have" more knowledge, but to make sure that the whole group is more capable because everyone is contributing. If we focus on making ourselves replaceable, then we're making the choice to selflessly share knowledge with each. We're choosing to share responsibilities as well, so that no one person has to take on too much by themselves. And we're choosing to understand each other better, because if you want to teach someone, you have to know how they learn best. This is the spirit of collaborative learning we should strive for.





## THINKING CAN'T BE SEPARATED FROM LIVING

So far, we've talked about how an individualistic view of knowledge is bad, but a similar, related assumption about knowledge can also wreak havoc: the idea that theory and thinking are separate from action and living. Just like we've all learned a stereotype of "knowing" that involves a single person with individual thoughts in their heads, we're all aware of the idea of "the intellectual" as a serious, intelligent person (almost always assumed to be a man) who spends their life constantly reading and living in the world of ideas. They never have to get their hands dirty, and they live somehow "above" the messy world of emotions and other "irrational" behaviors.

This image of an almost holy "intellectual" floating above us mere mortals has some troubling undertones. Firstly, it's extremely elitist: who exactly has the time or the social position to sit and think all day long, completely unworried about paying bills, and completely indifferent to the real problems going on all around them. Secondly, all this talk of "clear thinking" and "rationality" reeks of the range rhetoric that has been used for years to describe racialized, gendered and otherwise Othered populations: think about who we describe as hysterical, overly emotional, or intuitive.

There's certainly something appealing about using theory as an escape from the world. Sometimes, when faced with intense emotions we don't want to deal with, we use a defense mechanism called "intellectualization", where we focus on abstractions we can control, rather than the messy realities of life. In our heads, in our theories, everything is simpler and cleaner, and exceptions don't happen. Even more, most of us have been raised in environments that praise that kind of simple, clean answer to messy problems – that's how you get a good grade on a test, isn't it?

carla bergman and Nicholas Montgomery point out that "rigid radicalism" often drifts towards these simplifications, which they call "ideology", because they help us deal with the fear of facing an uncertain world. In an interview with their friend Richard Day, they have this to say:

*Day: If someone is working ideologically, they will have a pat answer to any question that might be asked, without having to do much in the way of thinking or analysis. If you ask a liberal about smashing bank windows in a protest, they will probably say it's violent and bad; if you ask an anarchist, they will probably say it's not violence, it's destruction of stolen property and quite a valid thing to do. This is similar to working morally, in that you need only consult a tablet, ask a functionary such as a priest, and they will tell you what to do and not do.*

*In a critical, analytic—ethical—way of relating, it is impossible to know what one might think or feel ahead of time; that will be contingent upon many circumstances of the situation. There is likely to be much more complexity, much more nuance, less dogmatism, certainty, and purity. In general, I think it's safe to associate ideological ways of relating with rigid radicalism, and that's why you find that so many people, all over the world, who are actually involved in the most powerful social movements and upheavals, tend to steer away from ideology, and orient more to shared values, practices, and goals.*

*Nick & carla: And not being ideological means being uncertain, as well, right?*

*Day: Yeah. Working non-ideologically definitely involves an element of openness, a vulnerability, not only at the level of emotion, but also at the level of thought, and of political relationships. There is a certain sort of safety in having an answer for everything."*

Uncertainty can be scary, but we can't hide in books. We need to remember that theories are only good insofar as they are useful tools to help us live better lives. Ultimately, they need to answer to our own lived experiences, because that's the world we're trying to make better. So however we do our learning, we should remember that it can't be kept separate from our messy, emotional, living, breathing lives. We need to embrace the unknown, stay in touch with our emotions, and remember that theories are there to help us, not the other way around.



## SAFE SPACE OR BRAVER SPACES?

What kind of space lets people reflect on the things they've learned in the process of growing up? What does it take to help one another scrutinize our "bad habits" without judgement or condemnation? The crux of what we do relies on sitting with these questions and sharing them continuously.

"Safe spaces" invoke ideas of comfort, support and freedom from restriction. It is a place where marginalized communities can come together and express themselves without having to worry about being exposed to discrimination, criticism, and physical or emotional harm. This term grew out of the LGBTQ movement, and it is an understatement to say there is a lot to unpack when it is used (especially in the context of its co-optation by neoliberal institutions).

So what kind of space do we try and foster? This is a tricky question. These "classes" function outside of society at large (or at least, we try to). What does that mean when so much of "the system" is already inside of us? Capitalist thinking clouds our perceptions, just like racism and sexism. The socialization process moulds us to adapt or stagnate to the gamified realities of life under capitalism, to social inequality and oppression – this has implications for the political act of learning. Do we learn to become masters and authorities? Do we rise to unseat the expert only to then become the expert?

Assata Shakur said, "No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free." At Radical Sunday School, we must learn as if the revolution has already come – as if we have already been set free. But this is not possible without radically reimagining what learning is.

Learning ties to ideas of self-worth, and it is often conceived of as a straight line going from novice to master. No one here is an expert. And nor do we want to be experts. The whole point of radical Sunday school is to rise above the sort of thinking which delineates peoples into plebians and intellectuals. Under a capitalist society, learning is a minefield and every classroom is an arena. At Radical Sunday School, it's a gentle room full of people having a political discussion, and working out how to unlearn what the university, school and society at large have taught us.

But if the goal is to unlearn, and to sit with critical thought, how do we go about accomplishing it without reproducing the oppressive attitudes ingrained in us? The answer to this question is difficult – but it relates to how RSS is meant to be a "brave space". I don't know anything about the term "brave space" but in so far as I've seen it mobilized in our spaces, it seems to be a term used to declare the space as an area where people are encouraged to speak, to voice their opinions without hesitating (even if their opinions or takes are half-formed). The point of this is to engage with what you say, to reflect on it through group discussion.

It is unavoidable to regurgitate insensitive or thoughtless content when having these discussions. The medley of oppressions meted out by the systems which govern us, control our bodies, our lives and position us in hierarchies based on arbitrary privilege colour our attitudes and perceptions. It is inevitable to reckon with them if we are to productively unlearn their biases.

But the way to do this is not to restrict access to a space (especially when the goal is to learn and discuss), and nor is it to create a situation where marginalized people have to continually bear the burden of educating those who have never had to look beyond their invisible privilege(s). The goal is to open a discussion, engage with one another and facilitate with gentleness and sensitivity. More than this, the point is to engage with trust and meaningfully reflect on previously hidden biases.

Don't hesitate, speak up! You will be called to order, your various (micro)aggressions will be laid before your eyes, but the conversation will move on. Because critical thinking requires patience, space and time. More importantly, it requires a commitment to the act of unlearning, and a receptiveness to criticism. In a group setting, this commitment is not an abstract thing: it means speaking up so marginalized people don't have to bear the burden of educating others, and acknowledging historical inequalities and their manifestations in the present.

# FACILITATING FOR UNLEARNING

We've pointed out some of the "spooks" that cause problems for us in classrooms, and we've talked about how to address them without judgement. But just like how teaching someone about the history of white supremacy doesn't spontaneously get rid of their unconscious racist biases, simply reading about the "spooks" of education doesn't make our learning communities freer by itself. We also need some best practices that can help us thrive whenever we come together to hold a session!

There is always a bit of a conflict between setting formal rules for how to run sessions of Radical Sunday School and leaving the environment open for experimentation and community control. Too much structure, and we're no better than the authoritarian schools we complain about. But at the same time, if there's too little structure, then strong personalities can end up effectively running the classes themselves, all while pretending that we're studying in a non-hierarchical school. In this section, we'll reflect a little on the practices we've been trying to use here at RSS in order to make our classrooms as anti-hierarchical as possible.



## ROLES FOR FACILITATION

Most of the members of our collective have some experience in anarchist and other activist spaces, and so it was pretty natural for us to think of facilitating class sessions like we do consensus-based decision-making meetings. We have tried at various times over the months to divide up the responsibility of facilitating classes by assigning roles like the following:

**FACILITATOR:** This person leads the discussion about the topic of that week's class. This means giving people the background they need to engage in the conversation, bringing along texts, videos, or other resources about the topic, but it also means sharing your personal experiences, and encouraging people to participate.

**NOTE KEEPER:** This person tries to take down the points being made to make it easier to write a summary of the class afterwards.

**TIME KEEPER:** This person keeps track of how much time the facilitator has left before the end of the session.

**FACILITATOR OF CARE (aka Vibes Checker):** This person keeps an eye out for the emotional energy of the room, and can call for a break if the energy level is too low

We've tried (and often failed) to vary who plays which role each time so that we don't have anyone gathering too much power in any one role, so that no one gets stuck doing the same job every time, and so that we don't end up specializing in particular roles ("make yourself replaceable", remember?).

Learning spaces where we can thrive are built on recognition, not on permission. No one person's perspective or position should define any conversation. It's the combination of all of our experiences and knowledge that allows us to meaningfully learn, like rain droplets gathering in a bucket! This involves noticing both the new and old faces at our free skool sessions who listen intently but, for some reason, do not speak up. It means recognising who jumps at gaps in conversation and who waits to make sure there is nobody else in line. In what order, and with what tone and authority, do we speak? How much do we share? How long do we each wait to take up space?

A free skool does not mean a free-for-all. While speaking when one wants to may reject traditional classroom hierarchies and be enjoyable for some, it is not free for everyone. It can amplify the effort of speaking up. It makes me question, more and more every second, if a thought deserves the space and time it would take up. What if I speak up and the thought fizzles out halfway through? And how does this blunder "dampen" my voice, ruin my point, or squander any chance to seem coherent, or clever, or good at grappling for the podium within the group?

These worries are rooted in experiences of conversation as competition, where knowledge is not for sharing and gaining but, as we already spoke about, a tool for establishing authority or intellectual posturing. We already talked about "spooks" - and it is so easy to reinforce toxic ideas of how we "should behave" through how we use language and share a space. I will often volunteer as note-taker because it feels like the role I should have. Or if I want to speak, it's now or never - so I ignore the current speaker while lining up my thoughts and waiting to jump in whenever they pause. The free-for-all plays into all the behaviours we want to unlearn. It makes us play the game how the powers-that-be want us to, instead of recognising the importance of every voice in the room as well as those not present.

Part of our work is taking the competition out of discussions. We try to do this in each of our sessions by using check-ins and the Stack system.

## CHECK INS

Check-ins are what made me feel comfortable speaking up at Radical Sunday School in the first place. So often, in school and in work, we are expected to operate at 100 per cent. Anything that makes visible the exhausting tolls of labour, bureaucracy and strict forms of learning must be suppressed. But check-ins invite these experiences and feelings back into the room by addressing each person in the discussion, inviting (but not demanding) their openness, and giving space to how they are feeling on a given day.

The day I first visited our free skool, I had been up since dawn at work, running on no lunch and little sleep. I did not have the energy to be social or presentable. But when the session started, and we went around in the circle to see how people were doing, they were tired. Hungover. Happy, but stressed. If someone wanted to just sit and listen this session, they announced that openly. They felt safe to talk, sometimes at length, about the funny or frustrating parts of their week. Because of this I felt comfortable communicating my feelings to the group too, and was met with no judgement when I stated I would listen but not really speak. It was so different from all the times I went to school and felt like I was performing, for the benefit of others, for seven hours.

How we do check-ins has also changed over time. We first tried to respond to each check-in, and then moved to summarising the general vibe after the round is done. We find that summaries work best, so that people do not feel like their check-in has to be externally "valuable" and something people can comment on.

**"During the go-around, we spoke to the fact that we resisted the need to reinsert ourselves as experts, to sum things up, or to interpret the go-around through academic frames. Despite the intention to unsettle this performance of academic expertise, we felt conflicting pressures because of the feeling that as anarchist, feminist, female presenters, there was already a structural assumption that we were not experts, and because of this, we would need to assert our knowledge all the more explicitly to be deemed legitimate by participants."**

**Sandra Jeppesen and Joanna Adamiak, in "Street Theory: Grassroots Activist Interventions in Regimes of Knowledge"**

The most important thing is to ensure everyone feels valued, and that whatever capacity they have to contribute that day is accounted for. This way, check-ins can be a tool for acknowledging the broadness of experience that leads anyone to visit a free skool, limiting the anxiety of joining an event for the first time, and establishing foundations for the larger conversation.

## HAND SIGNS AND THE STACK

To ensure that everyone has the space and opportunity to speak at our free skool, we facilitate our lessons using various hand signs – formerly called the Stack. This system can track who wishes to speak more easily than simply raising one’s hand, and is fundamental to unlearning the competitive discussion models so many of us were raised with. Here’s how it works.



- If a person wants to speak, they raise one finger. If someone else does too, they will see the first person’s finger and instead raise two. Another person raises three, and on and on. With each person who speaks, the others drop a finger until they are first in line.
- The group-appointed Stack keeper will keep an eye on this order and prompt the next speaker when the current one is done.
- People can wait in the Stack to reply to someone’s contribution, but they can also jump the queue with a direct point to what has just been said by doing finger guns. (It’s important to recognise the power in doing this, especially if you have been speaking a lot!)
- If you are unsure of a word’s meaning, the date of the next lesson, or there is something you just don’t understand, make a C with your hand to ask for clarification.
- Make a P to propose something (usually when planning an event or suggesting we move on from a topic).
- When taking consensus, wiggle your fingers to indicate your opinion. Wiggling them up means you agree, down means you disagree, and in the middle means you are unsure or undecided.

There is always flexibility here. If someone wants to make a point but needs to leave early, the group can ensure they speak before they go. If someone has been missed in the stack by accident, anyone can point this out. Or if someone is far down in the Stack but has spoken far less than the others waiting, it can be good to give way and let them go first.

And even with the Stack, everyone should remember (and remind others of) the space they are taking. Sessions at our free skool can only be two hours long, and limited time means that some contributions may not be heard if any one person takes up a lot of space. These methods must also belong to the community and up to change: is the same person always facilitating? How do we navigate needing to cut someone off if their contribution is running too long? Is the conversation led by a particular gender, by white people, by cis people, by those with university background?

These tools are important, but they alone can’t take down the systems of communication we have been raised within. That requires constantly checking ourselves, listening to the perspectives of others, and implementing changes when the group calls for it.

An anarchist learning space should be an equitable one. Acknowledge who is and is not in the mix, lay down ground rules that do not limit conversation but actually make the space wider, and maintain a collective reception of how the space, and the rules you follow, can shift to make people feel both welcome and safe.

# SCHOOL'S OUT: HOW DO WE ORGANIZE OUR FREE SKOOL

Now that we have talked about the kind of space we want to create and the ideas and practices underpinning it, how have we tried to put these ideas into practice. None of the members of the Radical Sunday School collective have much experience in political organizing, or in running a free skool, so the last few months have been a process of learning on the fly. We've tried to learn by reading about how other free skools have operated in the past (in particular, the book "Out of the Ruins" is a great collection of essays on the topic!), but for the most part, we've spent more time responding to conditions on the ground than trying to come up with some kind of universal theory of free skools.

This section of the zine will be laid out as a series of questions that might come up for a group who wants to start their own free skool, as well as the best answers we've come up with from our own experiences.

## WHERE DO YOU HOLD CLASSES?

We believe that where you choose to hold classes is a political choice. You're sending a message to your students about what is a legitimate place to do learning. So if you only hold meetings in university buildings, you send the message that universities are all there is. That's one of the reasons that we only hold sessions in squatted social centers in Amsterdam (in particular, we're mostly based at Joe's Garage). Every time a new student comes into a space like Joe's, they learn about not just the topic of that week's session, but also about what it's like to spend time in a free space. They learn about how much work it takes to keep one running, as well as the wonderful community that it's possible to build once you don't have to worry about spending money just to exist in public. We're very fortunate to live in a city with a strong squatters movement, and as an anarchist collective, we think it's important to show up in solidarity for similarly-minded groups.

If you don't know about squatted social centres in your city, check out sites like [radar.squat.net](http://radar.squat.net), or reach out to us, and we'll see if we can find anything ourselves. And if it's absolutely impossible to find one, try to find somewhere with a sympathetic staff, where you can meet without having to worry about, for example, paying in order to sit and take up space.

## HOW MANY CLASSES PER WEEK DO YOU TEACH

We usually hold a session every Sunday if we have the capacity, and from time to time, we branch out and hold a special event on a weekday. We are an all-volunteer collective, which means that every member balances the amount of time they can spend on RSS with their other obligations, their jobs, and their own self-care. We also know that the people attending our sessions have their own lives outside of our classroom, so we don't expect them to keep up with multiple classes a week.



## WHO PICKS WHICH CLASSES ARE TAUGHT?

This question has led to plenty of discussion within our collective. For the first few months, while we were still a very small group, it was easy enough for one or another of us to come up with a topic we thought was interesting, and just Google around a bit before the session. We effectively treated sessions as two-hour discussion groups, trying to open up conversations within our community about the traditional education system and how to work outside it.

As we've gotten a bit bigger, we've reached out to local groups doing interesting work, and invited them to come spread awareness about their own efforts regarding issues like migrant rights, the genocide in Gaza, police tactics, and others. This both keeps the curriculum interesting, and helps us with our second goal: building solidarity in our community.

We're still trying out different ways of getting input from our community: currently on our website, we have a bulletin board where anyone can list classes they'd like to see taught, as well as volunteer their own abilities and expertise to see if anyone is interested in

## WHAT DOES A TYPICAL CLASS LOOKS LIKE?

Over the time that we've been meeting for sessions, we've tried out a number of formats for our classes, reading up on how other collectives have done it, and also just experimenting with what works for the people who come into our classes. We don't pretend that this is a perfect system, but at the moment, we follow a pretty simple format:

1. Intro to Collective (5 min)
  - a. "We are an anarchist educational collective, formed in the spring of 2023."
  - b. We are interested in how we can learn as communities without authority – that means we're not experts, we don't want to be unquestioned authorities, and we want everyone to have a place to speak here."
  - c. We want to make sure that everything here is actionable, meaning:
    - i. Not some abstract uni conversation
    - ii. Connected to the learners' actual lived experience
    - iii. Gives us tools we didn't have in order to take action"
2. Disclaimers/info (5 min)
  - a. "We are a safer space"
  - b. "We are a brave space" (describe)– we want to be open to people from every background, giving people grace if they say or do something wrong. (For a more in-depth discussion of what this means, check out page 8)
  - c. "Be aware of the space you're taking up"
  - d. "We use a "stack" system" (Check out page 11 to learn how a "stack" works!)
  - e. Please invite your friends – we want this to be open to everyone, regardless of their political stuff
  - f. Promote the squat we're holding our class in, and invite people to become more involved in local squatting culture. This means providing ways for people to get active in the scene. For example, be sure to spread the word about upcoming actions, local initiatives, and where volunteers are needed! This can also be a great opportunity for collective knowledge sharing: everyone gets the chance to promote the events going on all around!

**"People do go from womb to tomb without ever realising their human potential, precisely because the power to initiate, to participate in innovating, choosing, judging, and deciding is reserved for the top men. [...]"**

**Creativity is for the gifted few; the rest of us are compelled to live in the environments constructed by the gifted few, listen to the gifted few's music, use the gifted few's inventions and art, and read the poems, fantasies and plays by the gifted few. This is what our education and culture condition us to believe, and this is a culturally induced and perpetuated lie.**

**The system makes its morons, then despises them for their ineptitude, and rewards its "gifted few" for their rarity."**

**- Colin Ward, Anarchy in Action**



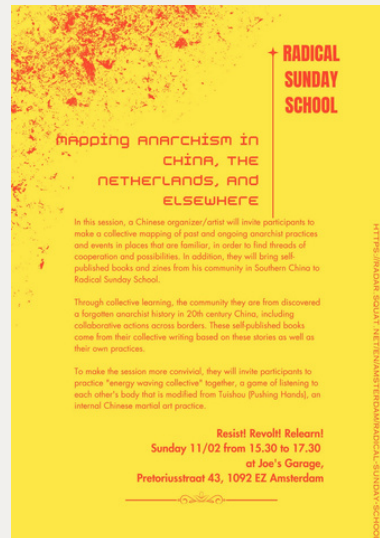
3. Introduction to the subject (<10 min)
  - a. Define all the big words you use – We want to keep the conversation accessible to anyone walking in the door. If the session is full of sophisticated terminology that no one takes the time to explain, then instead of increasing the knowledge in the room, it'll quickly devolve into a game of showing off who's read the most and this might scare off some people from raising their voice.
  - b. Check for collective buy-in: do most people in the room see how this topic connects to their own lived experience?
4. First section of class time: the class is handed over to the facilitator, who brings the content prepared for the class.
5. Short break – The decision of when to take a break is very much dependent on the vibes in the room, and we recommend asking participants about their energy levels ("taking a temperature check") to find out when is a good time.
6. Second section of class time: as above, the class prepared by the facilitator continues.
7. Outro:
  - a. Thank people for their time
  - b. Share Signal group chat QR code
  - c. Share website name
  - d. Encourage to look out for events on radar.squat.net or to directly inform the people present about actions and events going on in the city
  - e. "Invite your friends! We love word of mouth, and we want new people from outside the bubble"

## HOW DO YOU ADVERTISE YOUR CLASSES?

We've tried email lists, discord servers, Signal group chats, alternative social media (like radar.squat.net) and paper flyers as ways to tell people about the work we're doing (as well as relying on word-of-mouth), and each have their strengths and weaknesses. Our collective has decided that we aren't interested in advertising over social media platforms that perpetuate surveillance capitalism. While it would be nice to get our message out to a broader audience, and to experiment with anarchist pedagogy with more and more people, we have a few concerns:

First, we only have limited capacity for students – most of the time, a session will involve around 10 people, and this gives us the opportunity to really connect with each other as we learn together. On the few occasions when we've had upwards of 40 people in the room, we've seen how people don't feel as free to speak up, as the average time for contribution naturally goes down, and how we end up reproducing the traditional classroom environment of one teacher speaking while all the students sit silently.

Second, where do we get the idea that RSS needs to expand as much as possible, as quickly as possible? Capitalism isn't just an economic system, but also an ideology that shapes how we look at the world, producing desires we wouldn't normally have. Radical Sunday School isn't a corporation that needs to grow in order to compete in the marketplace. If something like Radical Sunday School is going to spread, and be a part of many more people's lives, then it should do so on the initiative of the learners themselves: we don't want to serve as the only free skool for all of Noord Holland, we want to see each local community make up their own free skools, responsive to their own needs. We're excited to see that Radical Evening School has started in Delft (the school is connected to the End Fossil campaign, so you can reach out at [endfossil.lu.tud@protonmail.com](mailto:endfossil.lu.tud@protonmail.com)), and we've heard of an autonomous space at Utrecht University ([efo.utrecht@systemli.org](mailto:efo.utrecht@systemli.org))! This zine is part of the project of spreading the free skool idea – we of course would love to have you join us for a session if you're in the area, but we'd be even happier to chat with you as you build up your own free skool with your neighbors! This of course can limit our reach as a group, but we've decided that the trade-off is worth it.



## HOW DO YOU MAKE SURE PEOPLE KEEP COMING BACK TO CLASS?

One of the biggest problems we've faced with Radical Sunday School is attendance. Traditional schools are often made obligatory by the State (as in the case of primary schools), or they're tied tightly into the capitalist economy (higher education nowadays is for the most part a certification program that gives students access to better-paid, more technocratic jobs). At RSS, we reject both the coercive powers of the State, and the false promises of capitalist "personal development", and so the only way we can get students to return to our classroom is to make ours the kind of space people want to spend their time in. Part of this comes from making our space as free as possible (see step II above), and part of it comes from making the topics we hold sessions on as relevant as possible to the community (see above).

## WHO SHOWS UP TO CLASSES?

We want Radical Sunday School to be open to anyone from any background, to truly be a free place for learning, where everyone of every identity can come together to learn as equals. Unfortunately, we've had a hard time making this a reality yet. As with many activist spaces in Amsterdam (and perhaps the West more generally), Radical Sunday School has been an overwhelmingly white, middle class, and university-educated space. Being a collective who has serious issues with how the university as an institution influences society, we obviously don't want to recreate its same demographics. One of our major goals, as laid out in our mission statement, is to burst the university bubble, and we continue to try to make that happen.

These questions of diversity and outreach don't just apply to questions of class, race, and gender, either. We want to be able to bring even ordinary Amsterdammers into the world of radical politics. The radical scene isn't always so welcoming to newcomers, but we want to be able to be the friendly face that makes them feel at home there. We truly believe that almost everyone is seeing the same problems we are - they just don't know that another world is possible.

We're sure that part of the problem with getting outsiders to join is simply advertising: most people come to RSS because a friend recommended it, and most people spend time with people who are already very similar to them.

## HOW DO YOU STAY ORGANIZED/WHICH TOOLS DO YOU USE?

There are a number of great online tools that can help make running a free skool easier:

- riseup.net - a digital collective specializing in secure web services for activist groups
  - Email client
  - Collaborative text documents (like Google docs)
  - Community wikis, for collaborative knowledge production
- noblogs.org - a digital collective that can help you make a website that doesn't track its users
- Signal - a secure messaging app (like WhatsApp)
- cryptpad.fr - secure open source tools for collaborative work
  - Collaborative text documents
  - Kanban boards (for organizing workflows)
  - File sharing
- radar.squat.net - secure bulletin board for advertising radical projects in your area
- canva.com - easy to use zine designer, can be used collaboratively!

The logo for NOBLOGS, featuring the word "NOBLOGS" in white, bold, uppercase letters on a red rectangular background.The CryptPad logo, featuring a blue shield with a white keyhole and a white document icon.

CryptPad

The RiseUp logo, featuring a red and black star above the word "RISEUP" in large, colorful, block letters (R: red, I: orange, S: yellow, E: green, U: blue, P: purple).

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