

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

#occupyoureducation

By Cathy Borck, Jesse Goldstein,  
Steve McFarland, and Alyson Spurgas

In the fall of 2011, Jesse was invited to teach an Occupy Wall Street-inspired course in the Political Science Department at Brooklyn College, a campus of The City University of New York (CUNY). In the spirit of Occupy's horizontalism, self-organization, and de-centering of authority, Jesse reached out to people in his political-academic networks, asking if anyone wanted to join him in team-teaching the course. A handful of doctoral students from the CUNY Graduate Center responded with interest, and six of us moved forward as the instructors, or "Team Taught," as we referred to ourselves.

***Our commitments to radical pedagogy have also been inspired by an array of radical teachers, educational critics, and educational experiments.***

In all honesty, we never quite knew what exactly it was that we were doing, but that was part of the project. We tried to make consensus-based decisions and when consensus was unreachable, we tried to make sure that all of our political and academic commitments were represented by aspects of the course curriculum and structure. Looking back, we can say that the course was incredibly time- and labor-intensive. We read, we lectured, we facilitated, we played games, we argued, we laughed, we cried, we sat through many hours-long meetings, and often we taught and inspired each other and our students, and in turn they taught and inspired us. During our final class, some students expressed hopes that a similar course

would be offered next year, prompting us to consider: should we do something like this again? What are the benefits of presenting and exploring material like this in a less formal and more participatory pedagogical environment, as opposed to a traditional classroom setting? What are the drawbacks? Over the last few years, we have each independently taken part in a range of educational experiments designed to challenge or offer an alternative to traditional classroom experiences. As students, some of us have organized or participated in research collectives and collaboratively designed courses and study groups, both for credit and not-for-credit. Outside of the university, we have organized reading groups, teach-ins, and discussions in public spaces such as Zuccotti Park, art galleries, community centers and even a local archive. During the semester that we team taught together, several of the instructors and students helped organize the Free University held at Madison Square Park on May Day 2012, in which some 2,000 people took part in dozens of classes, discussions, lectures, and workshops.

Our commitments to radical pedagogy have also been inspired by an array of radical teachers, educational critics, and educational experiments. It would be impossible to list them all, from the anarchist Modern School Movement, Rudolf Steiner, Paul Goodman, Myles Horton, and SNCC's Mississippi Freedom Schools to Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, 1970s feminist consciousness raising groups, Ivan Illich, Grace Llewellyn, John Taylor Gatto, and even projects closer to home, such as the Brooklyn Free School. All together then, our engagements with both the history and

practice of radical and non-traditional pedagogy give us a variety of perspectives from which to evaluate the pros and cons of the #occupyoureducation experience.

### Designing the Course

The class that we were asked to teach is a regular offering in the Political Science Department at Brooklyn College, officially called "Protest and Revolution." Typically, instructors provide a survey of case studies dealing with historic social movements and corresponding theoretical work that tries to make sense of them. A class about OWS seemed appropriate. However, during our initial meetings Team Taught decided to rename the class "#occupyoureducation." This was a deliberate move away from teaching a class "about" Occupy, and towards a more experimental, egalitarian, and future-oriented approach that was true to our understanding of the prefigurative spirit and vision of Occupy. We did not want the active social movement we were all, in various ways, participating in to become an ossified "object" of social scientific inquiry. We felt that Occupy was not a place or a specific set of institutions or even a determinant group of people; it was an idea and a practice, an injunction to challenge—socially, politically, and economically—the everyday patterns that routinized and naturalized our precarious lives.

***At the outset we envisioned a fairly unstructured, democratic classroom space. The syllabus we drew up was presented to the class as a suggestion.***

We tried to develop a curriculum that translated this expansive, inclusive, process-based idea of Occupy into a college classroom. We wanted to "occupy" our classroom: we wanted to create a learning environment that would embody the social and political imaginary of the Occupy movement; if we could do it on Wall Street, why not at Brooklyn College?

Early on, we met to lay out a skeleton of the syllabus. That meeting lasted four hours. We each came to the table with a diverse range of political and academic backgrounds and commitments. We had different but overlapping visions for the course. We went around and around voicing our ideas. The energy was high; we were excited. We decided to each write down on small scraps of paper three different class-session topics that we wanted to teach, in general terms. Then we arranged the small pieces of paper

on the table, pairing up topics that could be taught together and organizing the arc of the course to begin with the most basic or foundational material, conceptually building out from there. When we were done, a bird's-eye view of the table looked like this:



PHOTO BY CATHY BORCK

We then used this as the basic skeleton to draft a syllabus. For each class period, the facilitators of the session chose readings to assign and collaborated on designing the session. On some days two of us co-taught; on other days all of us participated. Regardless of who was "teaching" that day, we all did our best to attend every class. Where we identified over-participation or under-participation among us, we tried to correct it. Along these lines, we tried to facilitate class discussions with a "progressive stack," calling on those who had not spoken (or rarely spoke), women, queer-identified students, and students of color before we called on regular talkers, white, straight, and/or male students.

At the outset we envisioned a fairly unstructured, democratic classroom space. The syllabus we drew up was presented to the class as a suggestion. As instructors, we decided on material that would take us through the first half of the semester, at which point we planned to hold a

class-wide General Assembly, or “GA,” where the remainder of the semester’s readings, lessons, and activities would be collectively decided upon. Typically, the semester was structured like this:

**Pre-determined classes:**

Week 1 – Introduction to the class, Introduction to Radical Pedagogy

Week 2 – Explaining the Economic Crisis; A Global History of Occupations

Week 3 – Creativity and Cooperation For and Against Capitalism

Week 4 – Whiteness, Race in #Occupy, Limits of Identity Politics/Intersectionality

Week 5 – Ideological Assumptions of Political Action (how people think they can change the world), First Class General Assembly

**Proposed classes:**

Week 6 – Social Movements and the State, Organizational Forms, and Prefigurative Politics

Week 7 – Politics of Space, Social Reproduction, Feminist Herstories, Tactics and Strategies

Week 8 – Occupied Bodies/Occupying Our Bodies in Social Movements and Spaces

Week 9 – Occupy/Decolonize Language/Imagination, Social Movement Art vs. Branding and Cultural Enclosures

Week 10 – Surveillance, Security, and Ontologies of Risk and Threat

Week 11 – Bio/Psycho/Affective-Politics: Intimacy, Witnessing, Ethics, Desire, Erotics, and the F\*\$%ing Revolution

Week 12 – Reflections on the Current Economic Conuncture

(the final two weeks were reserved for student presentations)

**Course Demographics**

The group teaching the course originally included three women and three men. One woman dropped out early on and one of the men was unable to participate in the writing of this essay. All of us are white and between the ages of 30 and 35. Our class backgrounds span working-class to upper-middle-class. We have attended public and private schools—elite, traditional, alternative, and ivy league. One

of us is a lesbian, one is bi-sexual and the rest are straight. One of us is Jewish and the others were raised loosely Christian.

Twenty-two students enrolled in our class. Two-thirds were between 18 and 24 years old, a few students were between 29 and 35 (our ages), and two students were older than all of us. Our class was in the evening—6:30pm to 9:15pm—which allowed a number of students with full-time work schedules to participate.

As is usually the case in the CUNY system, most of the students had spent a majority of their lives living in New York City. Only three of our students were immigrants (a small proportion compared to most other CUNY classes), and the remainder had grown up in the five boroughs. A handful of students came from middle-class families, but the majority came from working-class backgrounds. Two-thirds identified as women and one-third identified as men. About a quarter of the students identified as queer with regard to both sexual orientation and gender presentation. The class was predominantly white—only one-third of the students were people of color, which is unusual at CUNY, where only forty percent of the student body is white.

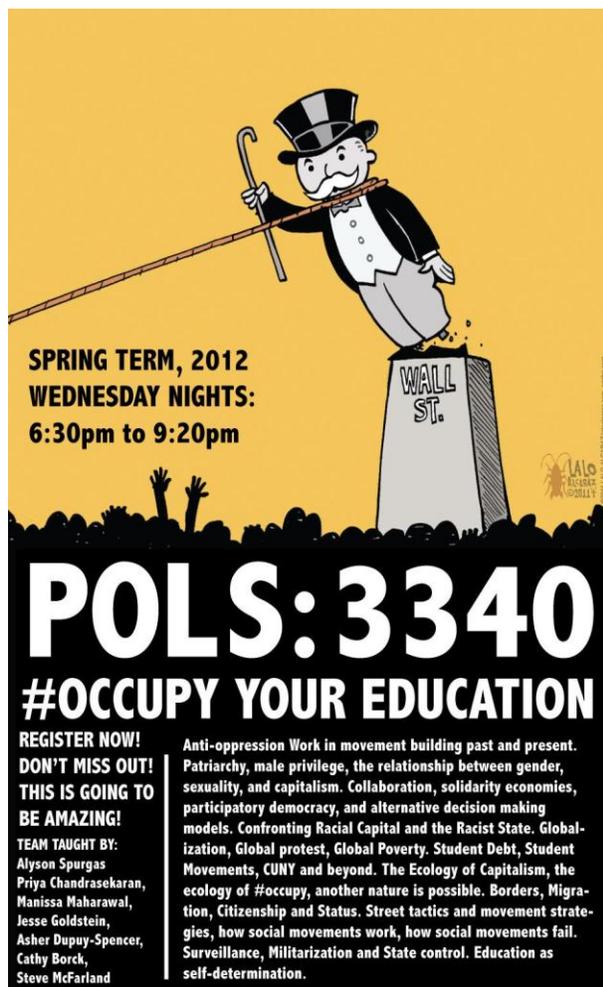
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As far as we know, every one of our students worked in addition to attending school full-time. Most of them had part-time jobs in the service industry. A few had full-time jobs, including a United Parcel Service truck driver and a self-employed computer technician. Four of the students were parents.

**Challenges**

Teaching a college course with a large team of graduate student adjunct instructors presented some serious hurdles. Immediately, we came up against the programmed rhythms and expectations of a standardized classroom. No matter how experimental we wanted to be, the class would still be housed within the confines of a degree-granting institution, within the life trajectories of students who were paying more than they could afford in tuition, working low-wage jobs to make ends meet, and who quite simply needed our grades, and their diplomas.

One of the biggest challenges we faced stemmed from our own internal dynamics as instructors, and our differing pedagogies, epistemologies, and personalities. Though all of us are “social scientists,” we all arrived with different academic backgrounds and political commitments. We each come from different disciplines and sub-disciplines (critical ethnography, economic sociology, historical geography, etc.) and from different activist and organizing backgrounds (student movement, labor movement, political artmaking, etc.). While on the one hand, this diversity was a clear strength of our team, it also posed some difficulties. Early on, we saw how small differences could easily escalate into intractable problems when trying to integrate our pedagogical styles and course content, a problem that was exacerbated by our busy work, school, and organizing schedules, which left far too little time to hash things out between us.



POSTER FOR “OCCUPYYOUREUCATION” COURSE

When it came to teaching about “revolution(s),” what some of us thought to be radical others saw as distraction or “fluff,” or alternately, paternalistic and patronizing. We

also had to deal with the implicit question of how we should come across to our students—should we pose as a “united front” of instructors, who are all on the same page, even if we really are not? How do we navigate our personal/political differences when we are in front of the classroom? Should we even be in front of the classroom? How should the room itself be set up? Should we use consensus-based decision-making with the entire class? How can we make this class truly revolutionary, and what does that even mean?

The discrepancy in our individual answers to these questions came to a head a couple of times. The most serious crisis we faced occurred early in the semester, when some instructors felt that another instructor had disrespected them (and their pedagogical techniques, epistemological orientation, and lesson plan) in front of the class. This influenced one member of our group’s decision to leave Team Taught. Throughout the semester, we had to work very hard to ensure that hierarchies did not become concretized, and that course content and teaching styles were not pigeonholed as more or less legitimate forms of scholarship. Despite our best intentions, over the course of the semester hierarchies did develop in regards to how the students viewed each of us, and how they viewed the material we were each “experts” on.

The issue was made more complicated and exciting by the fact that many of the students were already or became our friends and fellow activists. Some of us personally knew almost half the class through student and adjunct organizing at CUNY and through OWS-related activities before the semester started. Many of these students expected a very radical pedagogical style from the course, and some of the instructors hoped to implement this in a very serious way. But it was difficult to make everyone happy. While several of the less politically engaged students expressed excitement at being exposed to new processes and ideas, other students expressed a sense of alienation, feeling left out of the shared political culture, assumptions, language, and acronyms that those with more organizing experience brought to the classroom.

Given our egalitarian and horizontalist commitments, we tried to make room for students to take on some of the traditional roles of the teacher—shaping the syllabus, deciding on classroom activities, lecturing or facilitating discussion on topics they chose. But it was very hard to break the mold of the traditional authoritarian classroom from within. In fact, early in the course a few students

expressed a desire for more structure. Their basic feedback was: “You are our teachers, teach us!” They appreciated our efforts at horizontalism but felt that too much “participation” in coordinating decisions made our class time disorganized and unproductive. Ultimately we decided to provide them with more of what they wanted and adjusted our approach to be slightly more traditional, instructive, and directive.

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We had not expected student resistance to non-traditional forms of pedagogy and classroom organization to impact us as much as it did. For instance, most of the weeks we had selected a Theatre of the Oppressed game to complement the material. Early in the class, however, a few individuals cast doubt upon the “seriousness” of these exercises, and unfortunately, we capitulated to the vocal minority and did not play as many of these games as some of us would have liked.

Some students were so unhappy with the direction the course was taking that they went to the chair of the department to air their grievances. About halfway through the semester, we received an email from the department chair. He had received a complaint from one of our students, and in the following weeks, received complaints from two other students. They felt that our progressive stack policy silenced straight white male students on the basis of their identities, and that more broadly, students who did not share our left/progressive views were being silenced because their views were not that of the (radical) majority. They also felt that the class was disorganized and that criteria for assignments were not being evenly applied or clearly explained. All five of us were called to meet with the chair, and we took this opportunity to clear up some misconceptions about the class and to talk about how best to address the needs of these frustrated students.

After the meeting, we made an effort individually to reach out to the students we suspected of lobbying the complaints, engaging them more on a one-on-one basis. We also went over our assignments on the syllabus more

clearly and in greater depth, to make sure there were no misconceptions about the quantity, quality, or deadlines of the work we were expecting. In general, this strategy seemed to work, as we did not get any further complaints, and there were only one or two students who seemed to regularly miss class or were otherwise “checked out” for the remainder of the semester.

During Week Five we held our General Assembly (GA). This meeting was to be held like an Occupy Wall Street GA (following consensus process) and our only agenda item was to decide on the curriculum for the remainder of the semester. A full syllabus had been written, but from that point on, it was provisional.

The GA turned out to be somewhat of a failure. We struggled throughout the semester with the students’ wildly differing familiarities with and orientations to Occupy, radical politics, feminisms, the social sciences, social theory, political structures, and history. Half the class knew exactly what a GA was and were using GAs on a regular basis in their own organizing, a few members of the class knew that they did not like GAs on principle, and the other half of the class sincerely did not know what was going on or how to participate. Furthermore, most of the students felt that the syllabus was fine the way that it was. Students did express interest in learning more about the Occupy movement and we worked more of that material into the syllabus, but by and large the syllabus remained as it had been written before the class began.

### **Class Work**

The emotional work that must be done in and outside of a space like this was significant. By this we mean the work of actively challenging our own beliefs about how a classroom space should be run, challenging ourselves to allow space for others’ teaching styles and political orientations, checking in with each other and ourselves when a class had not gone as well as we would have liked, and making sure all of our individual voices—and those of our students—were being heard.

The time and energy commitments required to teach this course were more than any other course we had ever taught. It was a challenge to make sufficient time for collaborative decision making and regular debriefings, both amongst us as instructors and with students. Further, implementing alternative pedagogies, feminist and anti-racist epistemologies, and challenging power relations

between the instructors ourselves and between instructors and students was an emotionally charged process.

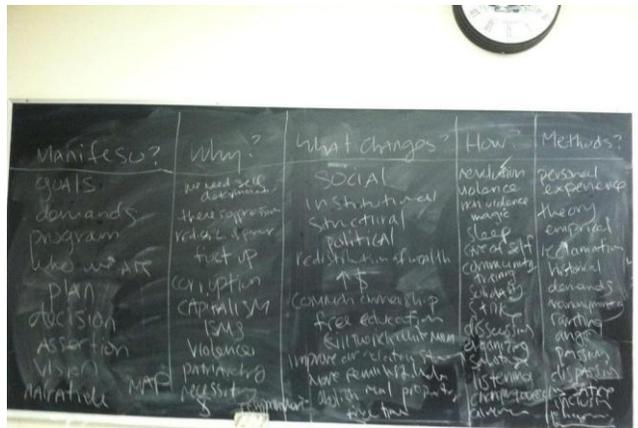
***The time and energy commitments required to teach this course were more than any other course we had ever taught.***

Logistically, this class was very difficult to manage. Throughout the semester, students were required to write eight response papers that put the readings in dialogue with each other. Each student was assigned a contact-instructor who was responsible for keeping all of their material and grades in order (i.e. each one of the instructors had a handful of students that we kept track of, so to speak). This got tricky because it became clear early on that only some of us were “qualified” or “had the expertise” to grade specific weeks’ papers. For example, some of us were much more prepared to grade papers on the labor movement whereas others of us were more prepared to grade papers on black feminisms. As a result, we decided that those instructors who facilitated a certain class would grade papers about those readings.

The reading load tended to be 50-90 pages per week. Readings included quite dense social, political, and economic theory, as well as more accessible capsule narratives of historic social movements and some contemporary journalism on the Occupy movement. The readings were diverse, challenging, and in some cases felt more appropriate for a graduate level course. Each week we also included suggested additional readings on the syllabus for those interested in going into further depth with the topics. Students engaged closely with the readings, though there was some expression in the early weeks that the reading load was too heavy. For many of the students, this was complicated by the fact that they wanted to do all the reading, but simply did not have the time. (On one occasion when students were divided into groups, with each assigned different readings, several students asked for copies of the readings their group had not been assigned.)

As a midterm, students had to write a longer paper discussing several political manifestos. The way we went about grading the midterms was that we all met one evening at one of our homes and read through the papers. It went something like this: one of us would pick up a few papers and say, “So-and-so wrote about the Black

Panthers, Marx, and Mao. And such-and-such wrote about Maria Mies, The Combahee River Collective, and the Zapatistas. Who wants these?” We then engaged in a collective process in which each of us was assigned papers to grade that we felt met with our own qualifications as instructors.



BRAINSTORMING "OCCUPYYOUREUCATION"  
PHOTO BY CATHY BORCK

As a final project, students were required to design and carry out a research project. Students could work as individuals or in groups and had a large degree of freedom in constructing their projects (the most central requirement for the final projects was that they had to have a research component, i.e., students had to find something out and this required them to interact with prior scholarship). As instructors, we divvied up final projects like we divvied up midterms. Students who wanted to write feminist zines went with some of us, whereas students who wanted to write twenty-page papers on Leninism went with others. This worked out so that each of us “mentored” a handful of projects and were substantially involved in helping our students through the process. Early on in the semester students had to propose projects and as a group the instructors gave feedback on the proposals and assigned mentors.

The students produced impressive final projects. They made zines, documentaries and CDs, they wrote research papers and funding proposals for non-profits, and they reflected on political actions that they organized. In the last few weeks of class the students presented their work and this was highly rewarding; we got to see some of the fruits of our hard, collective work and overall we were really quite proud. Many of the students expanded their interest in projects or subjects that they were already working on. For instance, one of our students who plays

Capoeira (a Brazilian martial art that combines elements of dance and music) was able to use the final project assignment to learn more about the political history of her art, and to begin experimenting with public capoeira sessions at weekly OWS events.

### Reflections

Toward the end of the semester we began to process the class with our students. One of the activist students in the final round of discussion of how the class went said enthusiastically: "This class was like the reading group I never had time for." In making this observation, she highlighted how difficult it can be for student organizers juggling classes, jobs, and activism to make time for collective study and reflection. By taking space on the course calendar for a class like this, we can make room for student organizers to build political education into their course schedule. Tying a grade to the outcome of the class also gives a greater weight to the reading—we have all taken part in informal reading groups that started off with great enthusiasm and dwindled to a small handful of people actually doing the reading and showing up as more pressing demands on our time, with more immediate consequences, intervened between us and our best intentions. Though many of us would hope to find internal motivation to study and write on radical social change, often it is external expectations, like those of a teacher or student, that spur us to take the time to tackle projects like we did in teaching the course or that our students did with the final projects they completed for the course.

Some of the other benefits we identified in offering a course like this through conventional college channels included use of university infrastructure, the ability to draw participants from beyond the "activist ghetto," and the tendency for people to put more effort into official, for-credit classes for which a grade will be assigned. Another benefit was the personal connections that were made between the undergraduate student organizers taking the class and the graduate students offering the class, which led to closer collaboration in the student movement across campuses.

The university resources that accompany an official class are considerable, and not readily duplicated: a large, quiet, well-lit, climate-controlled room with desks, tables, and chairs for thirty people in a location reasonably accessible to public transportation, and available for three hours at a consistent evening time every week for several

months. These luxuries are not something to scoff at for those of us who have caged space for reading groups in cafes, parks, and public atriums. There are several spaces in New York City—including The Brecht Forum, Bluestockings Bookstore, Atlantic Commons, The Public School, and 16 Beaver, among others—which are designed for political discussion and education, but they are often not readily available for weekly evening sessions due to other scheduling demands. Space within the CUNY Graduate Center for these sorts of unofficial pursuits is similarly at a premium.

***Through these many reflections, it has become clear to us that #occupyoueducation really was a shared experiment in horizontalism: as much as we had to manage our students, they had to manage us. Despite some of the rougher edges of our course, the overwhelming sense was that we had all participated in a collaboration, and were better off for it***

At the end of the semester, it was really heartening to hear the students reflect on the shortcomings of the class and the difficulties of managing a multiple-instructor teaching team. Still, at that point, the feedback we received about the course was overwhelmingly positive, in part because it is much more socially acceptable to give your teachers positive feedback than it is to give them negative feedback. As such, in writing this article, we emailed our students saying, "Grades were submitted long ago, give us the dirt." Many students wrote back, which seems to demonstrate their continued commitment to the legacy of the course. One strongly-identified feminist queer student wrote, "There were moments when the male energy and tone of conversation were super strong and made me personally shut down and lose interest." Another student wrote:

*Some of the drawbacks were that the professors had different teaching styles, which could be cool, but tended to hinder the progress of the lesson and the class because it seemed like sometimes the professors were having ideological battles via the reading material and what it meant to them. I also think that material we learned could have been a bit more cohesive—most of the lessons seemed like separate material that didn't coincide with the previous ones. If they had been connected it would have*

created a more cohesive understanding of the studies and how they interact together.

In a similar vein, another student wrote:

*One thing that was kind of a double-edged sword was that because all the instructors had different backgrounds, interests, priorities and teaching styles, sometimes I felt as if I was watching mom and dad fight. It was awkward sometimes when we were talking about male privilege let's say and a male instructor would blatantly use power to his benefit within the classroom. Sometimes watching different methods duke it out was really interesting and dynamic, but it also led to sometimes feeling like I couldn't say some things in class when a certain instructor was speaking for fear of sounding un-academic, or misinformed.*

Through these many reflections, it has become clear to us that #occupyeducation really was a shared experiment in horizontalism: as much as we had to manage our students, they had to manage us. Despite some of the rougher edges of our course, the overwhelming sense was that we had all participated in a collaboration, and were better off for it. We did not need to produce the perfect class, or realize some Hollywood notion of a transformative pedagogical experience created by the genius of a charismatic teacher-leader. In some ways, the end result is a good reflection of the Occupy movement: an imperfect, collaborative creation, and a messy experiment in creating viable—even if temporary—alternatives to the alienating and immiserating rhythms of our global economy. Our students learned as much with us as they did from us; we all matured through the process of tearing down the structures of a “normal” college class and then trying to rebuild them, together, on our own terms.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The instructors and students in this course all had very different desires around how the course should be run and how social change should happen, and we all had different ways we imagined these desires being satisfied. These notions were influenced by the disciplining we have experienced in the past, through our political educations, through our academic disciplines, through our embodied experiences, and through the practices we engage in in other parts of our lives, including ideological practices that become routinized and habitual. Although it was a challenge, the class was ultimately an amazing experience, as the energy in the room and outside of it was tangible,

palpable, sometimes untapped, and never fully harnessed or directed.

In the face of the simultaneous disciplining and boundary-crossing that was attempted in the space—by instructors, students, and at the institutional and bureaucratic levels that we cannot remove ourselves from as teachers and students within the CUNY system—the class developed as an organism with a life of its own. It was firmly and insatiably political, and the attractions, alliances, allegiances, intimacies, vitriol, vendettas, and utter strangeness that took shape in the few months during which we taught the course were exciting and beautiful. As much as we all regretted being involved at moments, ultimately we knew that we would never have a chance like this again, with this particular moment at our fingertips, and we know now that we are better teachers, students, and organizers from participating in this unforgettable experience.

In closing, we include an informal course evaluation that one of our students posted on her blog at the end of the class:

### **What would you tell other students about this course?**

*I would tell other students that this Protest and Revolution class that we lovingly dubbed Occupy Your Education is a successful and ever-evolving experiment with what a classroom can look like, with what our relationship to academia, to our instructors and to one another can look like. It is a democratic classroom, set up in a way where students' voices are valued and encouraged. The teachers treat you like a person they are sharing information with and who are helping you reach your own personal understanding of the material—they help you feel the relevance of academic work to your personal life, not like someone they need to control and punish. This class will change your life.*

### **What are the strengths of the course?**

*Anti-capitalist, feminist, queer, anti-oppression all around, mutual aid, caring, conversation, creativity, passion, humor, being pushed to write and synthesize a lot of information in a limited amount of time, which is amazing because it made me ask myself “do you really want a PhD?!” and the answer is hell yeah. Also, we're going to change the world, so I'd say that's pretty strong.*

### How can the course be improved?

*It can continue to grow. It can be an example for other courses. Our dynamics can be transmitted into each and every discipline, every CUNY department, we can have a fair, peaceful and democratic school system. It could also be improved by providing a space that has more natural light, plants and other living things, and comfortable seating. It could be EXPONENTIALLY improved by paying adjuncts living wages.*



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