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## *Pedagogies of Resistance* *Reclaiming Student Autonomy through Student-Led* *Teaching in Higher Education*

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### Abstract

*This article explores student-led teaching as a counter-hegemonic educational practice in response to the neoliberal restructuring of higher education. Drawing on critical pedagogy, we reflect on the co-development and facilitation of a student-led course at a university in Austria. Guided by a practice-based approach informed by reflexive thematic analysis, we used our field notes to reveal the many ways in which students co-created and shaped the course. The findings indicate that student-led teaching can foster meaningful engagement, a sense of ownership, and the development of critical political agency. At the same time, uneven participation revealed challenges, with more confident or experienced students at times dominating discussions. These dynamics underscore the need for attentiveness to power relations and inclusive facilitation. The most transformative moments emerged when classroom discussions connected with lived experience, especially when they involved collective social engagement beyond the university walls, affirming the value of linking higher education to collective action.*



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## Introduction

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.”

— Alice Walker

The title of this article, “Pedagogies of Resistance”, is derived from Armin Bernhard’s (2017) book of the same name. The term resistance not only implies critique but also a clear reference to action against oppressive, violent structures. By violent structures, we mean the modern/colonial, imperial, capitalist, neoliberal and patriarchal logics in which we see the societies and universities in which we work and live (Hall, 1992; Andreotti, 2011; Delgado & Ross, 2016; paperson, 2017; Brand & Wissen, 2021; Steiner, 2022; Stein et al., 2022; Brooks & Mueller, 2025). Capitalist and neoliberal logics have created individualized, separative, competitive and exhausting learning environments that leave little space for democratic co-learning, critical thinking, community building, or care (hooks, 1994; Czejkowska, 2006; Giroux, 2014; Mayo, 2015; Morley, 2023; Jones & Ball, 2024). The neoliberal university is an institution shaped by market-driven logics, performance metrics and managerial governance structures. It is increasingly defined by its alignment with economic imperatives, where knowledge is commodified, students are positioned as entrepreneurial subjects and education is oriented towards productivity and competitiveness rather than critical inquiry or democratic engagement (Giroux, 2003; Foucault, 2008; Spooner & McNinch, 2018; Themelis, 2021; Mintz, 2021; Hark & Hofbauer, 2023; Jones & Ball, 2024; Brooks & Mueller, 2025; Spooner & McNinch, 2026).

In this context, we seek opportunities—or “cracks”—to create transformative change through small steps and from below within the university. Catherine E. Walsh (2023) uses the metaphor of cracks to describe spaces where resistance and alternative forms of existence emerge within oppressive systems. These cracks are not merely individual acts of defiance but are deeply connected to long-standing social struggles from below, “that strive to rupture the system from its margins and outside” (p. 54). Thus, we ask: How can we create counter-hegemonic educational practices—cracks through which democratic citizenship might be cultivated, even within the neoliberal university? Who are we? We are a student and a university lecturer, working together to explore educational practices that enhance student autonomy through student-led teaching. We aim to make education more engaging, redistribute power within the university and foster spaces of critical, caring and participatory learning. Student-led teaching is increasingly recognized as a transformative pedagogical practice that challenges traditional power hierarchies in higher education. Drawing from critical and participatory pedagogies, student-led approaches seek to reframe the role of learners as active co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients, and to foster a sense of ownership over the learning process (Rowley et al., 2018; Shakil & Shakil, 2024; Holen et al., 2025).

This paper outlines our collaboratively designed student-led university course, titled *Protest in the Context of Multiple Crises*. The course followed a reflexive and practice-based methodology, drawing on reflexive thematic analysis. This involved capturing field notes during and after each session and reflecting on the pedagogical process, group dynamics, and decision-making, as well as on moments of irritation and insight that emerged from students’ contributions during the reflection rounds, as described in detail in the methodology section. We begin by analyzing the neoliberal restructuring of universities and its consequences for democratic and critical forms of learning. We then introduce the theoretical foundations of our approach to student-led teaching, drawing on traditions of critical education. Next, we provide contextual and

methodological insights into our student-led course, highlighting our practice-based and reflexive research approach. We go on to describe how the course unfolded in practice, focusing on group dynamics, content co-creation, and place-based learning experiences. Finally, we reflect on the potentials and limitations of student-led teaching, discussing its implications for power, participation, and future directions in critical educational research.

### **Education as a Commodity: Neoliberal Restructuring of Universities**

Contemporary higher education is marked by tensions that shape institutions as well as those who work and study within them. Universities are increasingly experienced as spaces of exhaustion—sites of performance pressure, restless acceleration, and systemic overwork (Hall, 2021; Hark & Hofbauer, 2023; Vang, 2024). This aligns with Brooks and Mueller’s (2025) analysis of neoliberal logics permeating education and everyday life, enforcing market-oriented thinking across the academic landscape. The emotional and relational costs of such competitive cultures have become ever more visible (Morley, 2023). Building on this scholarship, our position is that neoliberalism does not merely reorganize institutional procedures; it reconfigures language, subjectivities, and power relations within the university. Students are reframed as consumers and education as a commodified service (Themelis, 2021; Mintz, 2021). Even initiatives that appear critical and inclusive may reproduce competitive market logics when they are forced to “speak” the language of metrics, credits, entrepreneurship, and impact (Sharma et al., 2022; Brooks & Mueller, 2025).

The university has increasingly become a contested space—not only in terms of its role in society, but also in relation to the very concept of the institution itself. It is evolving into an all-encompassing entrepreneurial entity of excellence, driven by market forces and neoliberal imperatives, more concerned with profit margins than with critical thought, and at the same time a fragile institution at risk of erosion (Readings, 1996; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Barnacle, 2016). In practice, contemporary universities look increasingly like corporations: educational processes are aligned with market demands and the cultivation of marketable skills (Giroux, 2014; Lohmann, 2014; Bernhard, 2018; Wendling, 2018).

The 21st-century university finds itself torn between state interests, market pressures and academic values, caught in the illusion of excellence, driven by incommensurable demands and afflicted by neoliberal breathlessness (Hark & Hofbauer, 2023, p. 12). This development creates a strong contrast between the ideals of critical education, which seeks to foster a just and meaningful life for all and the reality of constant performance evaluation and competitive self-optimization. Students are increasingly objectified and encouraged to compete for scarce and commodified resources such as credits and grades. As Henry Giroux (2003) argues, neoliberalization installs a “corporate culture” that reshapes pedagogy and politics, tending to produce “compliant workers, depoliticized consumers, and passive citizens” (Giroux, 2003, p. 181). As managerial logics replace traditional academic leadership, the subordination of learning to market imperatives is no longer a hidden curriculum but a guiding principle (Giroux, 2003, p. 185). This analysis resonates with our experience in our dual roles as lecturer and student. Education is increasingly structured as a marketable product, positioning students as consumers. Such structuring risks undermining intrinsic motivation—an ambivalence that our student-led course sought both to engage with and to question.

To critically engage with contemporary education policies, neoliberalism must be understood not merely as an economic theory but as an ideological and cultural project that normalizes market-based thinking (Cole & Heinecke, 2020, p. 93). Neoliberalization has not only reshaped the structural fabric of universities but also transformed their fundamental purpose. Rather than serving as spaces for critical inquiry and democratic engagement, universities are increasingly reimagined as service providers for the labor market. By prioritizing efficiency, marketable skills, and entrepreneurial logics, academic life becomes more and more governed by metrics and market imperatives, eroding spaces for reflection and critical thinking and displacing democratic engagement and collective forms of knowledge production (Vang, 2024; Jones & Ball, 2024).

Under these conditions, individuals are no longer simply seen as learners or citizens, but are increasingly expected to market, manage and optimize themselves as competitive units. This shift speaks to a broader transformation in how subjectivity is shaped within the neoliberal university, where personal responsibility, flexibility and constant self-improvement are framed as necessary virtues. Neoliberalism produces a new form of governmentality that organizes human behavior and social order according to the logics of the market (Sennett, 1998; Sennett, 2006; Foucault, 2008). Rather than being encouraged to act in relation to collective concerns or the common good, people are driven by imperatives of survival, competition and achievement (Lipman & Hursh, 2007; McCarthy et al., 2009; Gair et al., 2021). This individualizing logic is also mirrored in the very structures of academic life. As Bourdieu (1988) points out, the university operates as a field in which different forms of capital, particularly academic and cultural capital, are unequally distributed and strategically mobilized. Academic capital (e.g. degrees, publications, reputations) functions as a form of symbolic power, used to maintain status and influence both within the institution and beyond (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 76ff). In such a context, even politically committed individuals can end up being positioned primarily as consumers of education as collective agency gives way to self-discipline and individual competition (Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2014; Schneider-Bertan, 2024). This shift not only reshapes the roles and identities of academic staff, but also has profound implications for how students are positioned, governed, and expected to perform within the neoliberal university. Student autonomy and opportunities for participation are restricted by the commercialization of higher education as well as by the expectations and norms imposed on the so-called 'good students' (Readings, 1996; Grant, 1997; Giroux, 2014; Hark & Hofbauer, 2023). Grant (1997) views the university as an institution of power that disciplines students through technologies of domination and technologies of the self. The technologies of domination refer to administrative and pedagogical structures that limit students' agency and aim to produce a compliant student body—without the need for direct coercion. The technologies of the self, on the other hand, are practices students employ to construct themselves as 'good students', which, in turn, are rewarded by the institution. Students who do not conform to the ideal of the 'good student' are disciplined either by the institution or by themselves. While we emphasize neoliberal logics as reshaping the university, it is important to acknowledge that these dynamics do not emerge from a vacuum. Hierarchical relations of power, disciplinary traditions, and state-centered forms of governance have long structured academic life. What neoliberalism does, however, is to reconfigure and intensify these older dynamics by reframing them through the language of markets, metrics, and entrepreneurial subjectivity. Thus, the contemporary student's restricted autonomy stems not only from neoliberal rationalities but also from the sedimented traditions of academic governance—traditions that neoliberalism both exploits and transforms.

While neoliberal forces threaten the core values of education, they also prompt us to question and rethink what universities could be: spaces of social transformation, dialogical engagement and critical inquiry. Critical educational thinkers such as bell hooks, Paulo Freire or Henry Giroux argue that education is political, tied to questions of empowerment, oppression and liberation (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1977; hooks, 1994; hooks, 2003; Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2014) and have thus strongly inspired our vision of a student-led university course, not as a form of self-directed learning but as one deeply connected to issues of power, agency, social justice and resistance to oppressive educational structures, as we will highlight in the next chapter.

### **Reimagining the University: Critical Pedagogies and Spaces of Resistance**

While we critically engage with the neoliberal logics embedded in academic institutions, we also experienced the university as a space of possibility, transformation and emancipation, which underscores our conviction that the struggle for democratic and critical education must include efforts to reimagine pedagogical spaces. Inspired by traditions of critical education, we understand learning as a collective and transformative process deeply rooted in the struggle for democracy and social justice. Paulo Freire's (1977) concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness) articulates a process in which learners, through dialogue and reflection linked to action, uncover the structural causes of oppression and develop the capacity to transform them. It reminds us that education is never neutral and can either reproduce social hierarchies or empower learners to recognize and challenge the socio-political forces that shape their lives. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) offers an important critique of hierarchical educational structures that treat students as passive recipients of knowledge, what he called the "banking model" of education. In this model, teachers act as depositors of knowledge, determining what content is valid, while students are reduced to silent containers. Freire proposes a dialogical model in its place: one in which teachers and students enter into a horizontal relationship, co-creating knowledge through dialogue, reflection and shared inquiry (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1977). bell hooks further develops this idea, grounding her pedagogy in the lived experiences of marginalization and in resistance to white supremacist, capitalist, and colonial-patriarchal systems. In her conception of engaged pedagogy, learning is understood not only as a means of fostering critical thinking but also as an act of healing, care, and hope. It requires vulnerability and courage from both students and teachers, who are called upon to take risks together (hooks, 1994; hooks, 2003).

These visions of education as resistance and transformation are powerfully echoed in the work of Henry Giroux, who argues that education must serve democratic life by empowering individuals to think critically and engage in collective action. For Giroux, teaching is a civic and ethical responsibility, situated within broader social and political struggles (Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2014; Schneider-Bertan, 2024). This perspective closely aligns with Gruenewald's (2003) concept of a critical pedagogy of place, which brings Freirean and Girouxian thought into dialogue with place-based, ecological, and contextual education. Within this framework, learning is grounded in lived realities, in local struggles and in meaningful relationships with communities, social movements, artists, activists, farmers or ecosystems. It is through these engagements that learners begin to see themselves as participants in shaping more just and sustainable futures. In this sense, place-based learning emerges as a site of critical consciousness and democratic possibility, aligning with our vision of education as a practice of freedom, a vision that also finds expression in numerous student movements.

Around the world, students are refusing to accept the neoliberal transformation of education and continue to fight for fair, affordable and critical education (Giroux, 2014; Porta, et al., 2020; Cini et al., 2021). For instance, the Chilean student protests for free education in 2011, which led to a free tuition expansion (Donoso, et al., 2023); the #FeesMustFall movement starting in 2015 in South Africa, a protest against tuition fees that addressed systemic inequalities in post-apartheid education, calling for a decolonial curriculum and an end to institutional racism (Langa, 2017); or the 2012 student protest in Quebec, which revealed a deeper ideological conflict rooted in the liberal managerial transformation of academic institutions in Canada (Laurin-Lamothe & Ratté, 2015). All over the world, students have mobilized against tuition, student debt, unequal policies and neoliberal reforms that undermine education as a public good (Cini et al., 2021). In this spirit, we believe that students must be supported in developing strategic agency, claiming co-determination, autonomy and meaningful participation in shaping the institutions that educate them. This means not only contesting tuition hikes and debt but also reimagining what, how and why we learn.

We envision knowledge practices that are entangled with social practices, where learning is inseparable from action and reflection. Student-led teaching is one such practice we have engaged in to support both personal and collective empowerment. In these contexts, the educator's role transforms into that of a co-learner and facilitator, working alongside students rather than above them. Learners can co-create knowledge through experience, reflection, social interaction and connect theory with lived experience and critical reflection (Rowley et al., 2018; Shakil & Shakil, 2024; Holen et al., 2025). From a socio-political perspective, student-led teaching is not merely a pedagogical choice but a political act. It challenges the dominant, instructor-centered paradigm of higher education and repositions students as co-agents of their own learning. This shift is particularly meaningful for historically marginalized students, who may otherwise struggle to see themselves reflected in the curriculum or the classroom hierarchy. Empowering students to co-create learning experiences is thus a means of countering the alienation and disengagement often found in neoliberal academic structures (Nalongo, 2024).

However, the literature also highlights challenges. Without adequate support, students may feel overwhelmed by the responsibility placed on them. Learners might need guidance, especially at the beginning of their student-led journey to navigate the tension between autonomy and structure (Shakil & Shakil, 2024). Some students may initially resist the pedagogical shift due to internalized expectations of passive learning. What emerges from the literature is a model of education as partnership. Rather than reinforcing neoliberal individualism, student-led teaching/learning promotes collaboration, critical engagement and shared responsibility (Rowley et al., 2018). Student-teacher partnerships can transform institutional cultures by flattening hierarchies and fostering co-ownership of critical knowledge creation (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Matthews, 2017). When students co-create the content, methods and assessments of a course, they not only deepen their engagement with knowledge but begin to democratize the curriculum itself. As Björn's experience with our student-led course on protest and multiple crises illustrates, students are already generating knowledge that is socially relevant and politically engaged. The task is to make space for such initiatives and to cultivate a university that belongs to those who learn, teach and struggle within it. In the next section, we will elaborate on our methodological considerations concerning our student-led course experience.

## *Methodological Considerations*

Our research employed a qualitative, reflexive, and practice-based methodology, rooted in the understanding of teaching as both a pedagogical act and a site of knowledge co-creation. This approach resonates with Lather's (1986) notion of "research as praxis" as well as more recent calls for practice-based educational inquiry (Vear, 2022). In line with these perspectives, we adopted an open and situated mode of inquiry that privileges lived experience, collective reflection, and the dynamic interplay between teaching and research.

Our research was conducted within the framework of a university seminar on student-led teaching. The seminar comprised five half-day sessions and one full-day excursion over a ten-week period, with 25 students participating. The teaching was organized around collaborative activities, including a Future Workshop (Jungk & Müller, 1989), which served as a starting participatory exercise. Documentation was created in the form of flipcharts, reflective notes, and student contributions during group work. Each of us kept individual field notes during and after every session, documenting student contributions, group dynamics, decision-making processes, and critical moments that shaped the unfolding of the teaching. Notes were initially written in German and later translated into English. Written documentation from the workshop (flipcharts, written notes, and reflective discussions) provided insights into students' initial visions and expectations. At the end of the seminar, we engaged in structured dialogical reflection sessions, in which we revisited field notes and collaboratively reconstructed key teaching and learning moments.

Our analysis followed a reflexive and interpretive process, drawing inspiration from reflexive thematic analysis, which foregrounds the researcher's active role in knowledge production. Reflexive thematic analysis is conceptualised as the researcher's interpretive engagement with experiences, shaped by the intersection of three elements: (1) the dataset, (2) the theoretical assumptions, and (3) the researcher's reflexive skills. Consequently, there is no expectation that themes interpreted by one researcher will necessarily be reproduced by another, although such convergence may occur (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022, p. 1393).

We engaged in iterative dialogical reflection, identifying recurrent themes that emerged across the field notes, workshop materials, and our own pedagogical experiences. This process can be described in three steps: (1) Initial Reading: We individually revisited the field notes and session documentation, highlighting meaningful passages. (2) Dialogical Exchange: In joint sessions, we compared observations and experiences, discussed interpretations, and explored resonances and tensions between our perspectives. (3) Theme Development: Through these exchanges, we formulated key themes grounded in both student voices and our own reflexive engagement. These themes are portrayed in a descriptive way in this paper. With our approach, we aim to acknowledge the relational and situated nature of the research context. Rather than striving for universalizable findings, we emphasize the co-construction of meaning within a specific pedagogical setting. Our goal is to provide a contextualized and critically situated exploration of a pedagogical alternative, with the intention of inspiring further student-led teaching initiatives. In the following section, we share these experiences.

## **Student-Led Teaching in Higher Education: Our Experience in Practice**

While the idea of a student-led university course felt new in its current form, it built upon an earlier initiative by a student who had previously organized and conducted such a course at the

university. This initiative came to an end when his student affiliation with the university ceased upon graduation. Today, however, the initiative is anchored at the institute, primarily through the commitment of the program director, which makes it possible to envision student-led teaching not as an exception but as a recurring practice. At the same time, the initiative remains fragile, as it still depends on goodwill. If funding is withdrawn or faculty resistance emerges, it may no longer continue. Since it is not embedded in university regulations or legal frameworks, it cannot be formally demanded.

From the very beginning, as we started to think about the student-led course, many questions came to our minds. How could a critical course be aligned with the neoliberal university structures it seeks to critique? Should we create an informal course outside the regular course system, without credits and grades, to make it more intrinsic and less commodified? On the other hand, moving the course outside the formal curriculum would mean that students in precarious situations—balancing studies, paid work and care responsibilities—would struggle to participate, as it would add an additional burden. We decided that it was crucial to formally integrate the course into the curriculum and grant credits so that all students could attend. We made this decision with full awareness that we were working within the constraints of the existing neoliberal educational structures, but with the goal of providing as much student autonomy as possible. Yet we have to say that, due to the progressive student program director, we were very free in the choice of topics, title and aims of the course. In that regard, we did not face any restrictions. We titled the course *Protest in the Context of Multiple Crises*, providing a basic first idea of the course to interested students. The course description was as open as possible and emphasized self-organization and autonomy as core characteristics, stating that the content and methods of the course would be created by the students themselves.

When the inscription phase was over and we had 25 students from educational science, psychology and cultural studies, ranging from first-year to final-year Bachelor students, signed in, we already knew that for half of the students the course was an elective, while only for the educational science students it counted as a compulsory subject. Yet what we realized later was that we had quite a diverse student group, especially in terms of biographies, class, first-generation academics, the city/country divide and care responsibilities. Some students were full-time students, while others already worked part-time or even full-time or had children to take care of. There was also variation within the group, as some students joined the course because of their existing activist background, while others participated mainly for the credits. So, we were wondering: how could we structure the student-led process of defining the course content, methods and forms of assessment in the most autonomous, participatory and emancipatory way, while creating a beneficial learning environment for a heterogeneous group of students?

For the first session, we chose the Future Workshop (Jungk & Müller, 1989) as a participatory method to collaboratively design the whole course structure. This method which consists of a critique, utopia, and realization phase, created a horizontal, dialogical space where students could reflect on their experiences with conventional academic structures and envision alternative pedagogical futures. While we initially felt uncertain if we can design a whole course collaboratively, this moment also embodied Freire's (1970) rejection of the "banking model" of education and his call for co-created praxis-oriented learning spaces. Rather than depositing a pre-defined syllabus, we invited students to articulate both their dissatisfaction with current university practices and their visions of emancipatory learning. The Future Workshop's participatory design disrupted the usual structures of curriculum planning, allowing students to move from passive

recipients to active co-creators and temporarily shifted power towards collective imagination and co-design. We chose this method to give all participants, regardless of their academic background or level of experience, a shared space to express concerns, contribute ideas and actively shape the structure and direction of the course. This process took place in small groups, going through the various phases and presenting the results after every phase in plenary sessions.

During the critique phase, with the task to criticize the current style of university courses and learning, the main issues raised about university courses included hierarchical structures, lack of feedback on submitted work, insufficient flexibility, lack of practical relevance and experience-based learning, insufficient reflection and a lack of critical discourse at eye level. As utopian visions, what would be the best university course if everything were possible, students suggested respectful collaboration, creativity, methods and content with added value, more practical relevance, greater participation and general structural changes within the university. In the realization phase, where the goal was to plan the next sessions of the course based on the critique and vision phases, students expressed a desire to invite experts and practitioners to discuss various topics, visit a climate camp, create a simulation game about an ecological conflict related to the new university building (the location of which had been criticized by Fridays for Future and Scientists for Future), learn how to plan a protest, explore civil disobedience and discuss the psychological impact of multiple crises (such as eco-anxiety). The students were eager to learn about alternatives and bring them into the university. The group also proposed creating a shared platform where everyone could upload interesting readings and materials. There were various discussions regarding forms of assessments. For all students it was meaningful to receive grades for their transcript of records. While some suggested grading themselves and choosing their own form of assessment, others preferred to be graded and have a predetermined assessment format. We proposed an individualized option, allowing students to decide whether they wanted to choose their own assignment or follow a given one.

The course began with a block session, where students invited four different local actors and initiatives to discuss protest and multiple crises while engaging in dialogue. Given the diverse backgrounds within the student group regarding protest and activism, it was crucial to establish a shared foundation of knowledge. One of the students' primary interests was gaining more practical and concrete knowledge about protest strategies and civil disobedience. To address this, a human rights activist was invited to share his experiences, providing firsthand insights into the dynamics, risks and ethical considerations of activism. His talk highlighted real-world examples of resistance movements, emphasizing both their successes and challenges, as well as the importance of care within movements and protest camps. Student voices regarding the session: "I had never attended a course where we invited our own guests. Hearing from activists and practitioners about their experience made the theory become very real." "What stuck with me most was how much background work goes into protests and activism. The structure and strategy, which you usually don't see from the outside, were particularly striking".

In the second session, action trainers, recommended by a student, introduced the organization, planning and techniques of political action. This session aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, giving students hands-on exposure to tactics such as strategic campaigning, direct action and legal aspects of protest. Students reacted very differently to this session, some had prior experience with protests or civil disobedience, while others had never engaged with the topic before. Recognizing these differences, we ensured that there was enough space for discussion, allowing for questions, critical reflections and concerns. Some students were

enthusiastic and eager to learn activist skills, while others expressed hesitation about the implications and potential risks of civil disobedience. These diverse perspectives enriched the debate, prompting students to reflect on the ethical, legal and societal dimensions of resistance. One student reflected: “It was exciting, but I also realized that I didn’t feel entirely comfortable with everything. I appreciated that there was space to say that and that my concerns were heard and considered”.

The next session focused on a current and polarizing topic at the university: the planned location of a new university building. While the project aimed to create more learning spaces which are really needed, it faced strong criticism from climate activists and university members. Concerns centered around land sealing and deforestation, leading to protests on campus (Plattner, 2023). The new building and the protests sparked campus-wide debates. The connection between land sealing and the climate crisis was discussed with activists and students. We attempted to engage with various perspectives: activists, students, university board members and faculty. Our debates on this issue extended beyond the immediate issue of the building itself, touching on the broader implications of land use, climate responsibility and institutional decision-making. Activists and students voiced concerns over the ecological footprint of expansion, questioning whether alternative solutions had been sufficiently explored. One student reflected at the end: “It was quite interesting but also shocking to see how our university, the place we study in, is part of the same ecological contradictions we’re learning about.”

The final session was a visit to the climate camp near Vienna, where students engaged with local initiatives and activists on the ground. Climate camps are at the heart of the climate justice movement, serving as spaces for networking and education among various political and social groups committed to ecological sustainability and social justice. They also provide a space to experiment with alternatives to the current capitalist system and a hollowed-out democracy, while reinforcing protest through direct action and civil disobedience. Climate camps are built on four pillars: Education, Networking, Living Alternatives and Direct Action (Verein zur Umsetzung von Klimacamps in Österreich / Association for the Implementation of Climate Camps in Austria, n.d., own translation).

We could truly feel the difference when the learning space shifted from the university building to the protest camp. Even though we had tried our best to create a non-hierarchical and dialogical learning environment, it was only when we physically left the university space that students became noticeably more open. In some ways, the relational aspect was much stronger. During the train ride, sitting together in a completely different setting than the university, the atmosphere already felt looser. It was as if leaving the university building meant leaving behind our roles as lecturers and students. One student expressed exactly what we were feeling: “It was only when we physically left the university that something changed. On the train, we were just people, thinking and learning together.” Some students had prepared arts-based workshops for the climate camp, such as creating zines related to the current multiple crises. We think creating one’s own workshop for other people was even more empowering for the students. Knowledge about multiple crises, such as climate change and the imperial mode of living (Brand & Wissen, 2021), suddenly became tangible and embodied. After the climate camp, the students expressed: “Even though I was skeptical about activism, the camp made me reflect.” It wasn’t what I expected, but it still shifted something in me.” “When we left the camp, I actually felt a bit disappointed that we couldn’t stay longer. I really see the benefit of such climate camps and would definitely consider joining similar actions in the future.” “I didn’t take much content from the camp, but it helped me

rethink how I position myself towards activism and society.” This shift in relationality, from the classroom to the climate camp, reflects a pedagogical orientation grounded in both bell hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy and Freire’s (1970) pedagogy of freedom. By stepping outside the physical and symbolic space of the university, we were able to co-create a learning environment rooted in care, co-presence, and mutual transformation. Here, hooks’ emphasis on relational learning and vulnerability converges with Freire’s call for dialogical, emancipatory education. Together, they offer a framework that resists hierarchical modes of knowledge transmission and centers lived experience, collective agency and critical reflection.

At the end of the course, students shared their reflections, expressing a deep sense of inspiration and motivation. Many felt empowered to take action, whether through activism, advocacy or further engagement with university politics. The diverse insights and perspectives offered throughout the course were highly appreciated, with the word empowered frequently surfacing in the sharing circle. Some voices from the circle: “This seminar stood out because we could really co-create it. It wasn’t monotonous. We could bring in our own ideas and that made it so much more engaging.” “We need more courses like this. More democracy. More voice. I wish this had existed earlier in my studies.” “I never thought I’d feel empowered by a university seminar, but this one did just that.” “I thought it was great that, for once, I could choose how I wanted to do something and that this was not in opposition to the course but a part of it.” “This seminar was the most intense and significant one of my studies so far. I was able to experience an entirely new way of learning. I felt seen, heard, respected and challenged and that was incredibly empowering.” “I experienced learning not as sitting still and listening, but as doing something together.”

Initially, some students were uncertain about whether a student-organized course could work out, as they had no clear expectations. However, as the course progressed, their doubts gave way to enthusiasm and they recognized the value of more autonomous learning: “At first, I wasn’t sure a student-led course could really work. But over time, it became clear that this format allowed us to engage so much more deeply. I felt more comfortable to voice my thoughts.” Some students also felt overwhelmed with the open structure: “Sometimes I felt a bit lost in the open structure. There were so many ideas but not everything felt equally relevant to me.”

Many highlighted that the interactive and discussion-based format allowed them to engage more deeply than in traditional lecture settings. Several students mentioned that they now felt more confident in voicing their opinions and taking an active role in shaping classes. Others were inspired to explore activism further, recognizing their potential to effect change. “I felt that this seminar was deeply relevant to real life — it didn’t feel detached from what is actually happening in the world.” “I was excited to learn things that weren’t just theoretical but actually relevant for my life. And I realized: I can shape things. That’s not something I usually feel at university.”

. Approximately half of the students chose their own assessment method and grading, while the other half wanted us to decide. “I chose the ‘classical’ way of writing a paper, even though we were offered more freedom. That structure just felt safer for me.” The students who chose their own assessment often used creative methods. The students who made the zine workshop for the protest camp used their zines to connect emotions with multiple crises and reflected on this. One student did a poetry slam on the topic of the course. Others chose to start a trash clean-up campaign, a clothes swap, or to show an ecologically aware movie with an afterward discussion in their neighborhood. Most of the students wrote reflection papers on the course and many of the students argued that due to their active and engaged involvement, they should receive the best grades. Students expressed: “Being able to decide for ourselves how we wanted to be graded was

something completely new and honestly, empowering.” The students that wanted to be graded by us also received the best grade.

In relation to the group dynamics, some felt that the climate topic was too dominant, leaving little room for other socially relevant issues that also deserved attention. One student expressed: “The climate topic was definitely dominant and although important, I would have liked more space for other crises, such as social injustice or educational inequality.” We realized that there were also some dominant voices in the student group, particularly those who already had experience in social action and protest. This imbalance became evident, as some students were much more vocal, thereby having greater influence over the course content. For us, it also became evident that group dynamics played a significant role in shaping discussions, sometimes unintentionally discouraging less experienced voices. Students expressed it: “There were a few people who clearly had a lot of experience and very strong opinions. At times, I found it difficult to get a word in, or I felt that my contributions were not equally valued.” “There were some who were very dominant in discussions. If you’re more introverted, it was hard to get your voice heard.” “I felt a bit overwhelmed at times. Some classmates were clearly very experienced in activism and I wasn’t sure if my own perspective really belonged.”

### **Concluding Thoughts: Reflections on Power, Participation and Ambivalences in Student-Led Teaching**

This research explored student-led teaching as a counter-hegemonic practice within the neoliberal university and showed that, when given institutional space, students co-create their learning environments. Working with a reflexive, practice-based methodology and drawing on reflexive thematic analysis, we documented how forms of autonomy enabled students to shape course content, assessment pathways, and forms of participation. The most transformative moments emerged through participation in a climate activist camp. This form of place-based learning intensified relationality, loosened role rigidity, and deepened dialogic exchange.

At the same time, we also realized limitations and constraints. Participation and voice were unevenly distributed, often correlating with prior activist experience, topic-specific knowledge, and confidence. Although the course was collaboratively designed and emphasized shared responsibility, some students expressed during the final reflection round that they experienced an imbalance. For some, the strong contributions of experienced students were inspiring; for others, they represented a form of hierarchy. This dynamic revealed how participatory formats can unintentionally privilege the confident, the knowledgeable, the experienced, or the extroverted. Facilitating student-led spaces, therefore, requires more than handing over responsibility. It demands an ongoing and collective reflection on group dynamics and power, as well as a commitment to the question of how participation can work for all. Questions of who speaks, who participates, and whose voices are heard inevitably intersect with the political dimensions of student-led teaching. Following Freire’s view that education is never neutral, our course engaged with political practices—yet always through dialogue rather than prescription, which might otherwise be experienced as indoctrination. In this sense, disagreement was understood as a productive resource for learning rather than a disruption. For us, empowerment did not mean directing students toward a particular political stance but rather creating conditions in which they could critically reflect, experiment, and articulate their own positions—while our pedagogical ethos was nonetheless grounded in the vision of a good life for all. The pedagogical challenge,

therefore, was to ensure that its political–educational dimensions remained dialogical, contested, and open-ended.

Power dynamics were also present in our roles as a student and a university lecturer. Institutional structures and expectations, both explicit and implicit, shaped our positions. We did not feel that these dynamics were very visible in our work together, but more in the way the students approached us. There were also other compromises due to working within the university system. All students wanted to receive credits and grades, maybe due to the economic pressure of needing enough credits to complete their studies. Whether the course was taken as an elective or a compulsory subject also seemed to influence some students' engagement. These reflections reveal how neoliberal logics, despite being critiqued, continue to condition the space of possibility and the importance of negotiating within its constraints. Our experience affirms that student-led teaching happens within neoliberal logics but creates a pedagogical practice of “cracking” them, which means to create temporary, relationally grounded spaces for alternative ways of being, knowing and learning. It underscores the need to understand critical pedagogy as a set of practices that reconfigure agency, power, and community from within. As universities around the world face not only neoliberal restructuring but also a growing shift toward neoconservatism, the need to create critical and democratic educational spaces is even more important and at the same time increasingly at risk.

Against this backdrop, we plan to create more student-led courses in the future. Building on our experiences from the first one, we will incorporate more intentional reflection on participation and group dynamics, along with expanded opportunities for non-verbal and artistic forms of expression—such as the zines created during the climate camp, through which students conveyed their emotions in relation to multiple crises using images and cut-out words. To support more equitable participation, methods such as sociocracy and deep democracy could also be helpful. Sociocracy emphasizes consent-based decision-making and role rotation to balance power dynamics and amplify less dominant voices (Buck & Villines, 2007). Similarly, deep democracy (Mindell, 2002) encourages the inclusion of marginal perspectives and emotional dynamics in group processes, offering tools to address underlying tensions and power imbalances. These reflections also point to a broader horizon: how can student-led practices not only be made more inclusive within a single course, but also sustained and protected in the face of systemic pressures? Future research could explore how practices like student-led teaching can persist and resist within increasingly restrictive environments. Key questions include what forms of solidarity and support are needed to protect student-led initiatives on socially and politically relevant topics, and how such initiatives might both strengthen and be strengthened by civil society engagement.

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